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The Dialectics of Formation and Conformation: the Politics of Fiction
in Brazil and Argentina

by

Brenno Kenji Kaneyasu Maranhao

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Hispanic Languages and Literatures

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Anthony J. Cascardi, Chair

Professor Natalia Brizuela

Professor Martin Jay

Fall 2013

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in Brazil and Argentina

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Brenno Kenji Kaneyasu Maranhao

Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

with a Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Anthony J. Cascardi, Chair

In both Argentina and Brazil, the emergence of fiction was linked to a central contradiction. At the heart of fiction in nineteenth-century Argentina and Brazil there was a resistance to fiction. Fiction's defining trait was, precisely, its displaced use: in the impossibility of autonomous existence, its presence was highlighted by its forced absence; fiction became the *negative* condition of possibility of the written word both in the politically charged climate of national self-assertion following post-independence Argentina and in the early years of the Brazilian First Republic. As a result of this negative or residual formation, fiction —the non-authoritative discourse *par excellence*— was both able and forced to engage with other —authoritative— discourses, such as those of philosophy, law, science, and political theory. At the same time, owing to its non-committal to pre-established categories of thought and theoretical frameworks, fiction was able to open up a discursive space from within which a critical examination of both the authority and the legitimizing mechanisms of such discourses became possible.

In this dissertation, I focus on the Brazilian and Argentine contexts to examine two key moments of the intersection of between fiction, aesthetics, and the theoretical triad of philosophy, law, and political theory, tracing a critical genealogy in which the rise of autonomous fiction and discourses of authority are seen as mutually determinant. I begin, in Chapter 1, by analyzing the ambiguities surrounding two founding figures in the canon of each country: Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, in Argentina, and Euclides da Cunha, in Brazil. Not the least among these ambiguities is that, from the start, the discursive canon of which they occupy the center cannot be clearly defined. It is a canon that is both literary and socio-political, tellingly oscillating between the boundaries of the fictional and the non-fictional. Sarmiento and da Cunha, I contend, are located, each in their respective contexts, at a historical crossroad that offers a privileged glimpse into the mechanisms of formation of discursive authority. Writing at a time when received models

and existent criteria proved insufficient and new ones were yet to be formed, they found themselves at a transitional moment in which the urgency of judgment was all the more pressing in light of the absence of criteria by which to judge. Examined from this perspective, new light is cast on the difficulty of generic classification which has marked the reception of Sarmiento's *Facundo* and da Cunha's *Os Sertões* to this day. I bring critical theory into dialogue with aesthetic theory and law studies to suggest that the aesthetic dimension in their works lies in the fact that in both texts we see a discourse at work in which the productive moment is emphasized over its doctrinary, legislative moment. In them, form, not yet crystallized into the formulas and formalities of categories and genres, is witnessed at its moment of formation, which is also the moment in which the authority of discourse, not yet having covered the tracks of its own genesis, reveals itself at its most fragile and contingent.

It is the aesthetic dimension understood in this critical and productive relationship to pre-established categories of thought that I take up in the second and final part of the dissertation, encompassing Chapter 2 and 3, where I focus on the works of João Guimarães Rosa and Jorge Luis Borges, in Brazil and Argentina, respectively. In Chapter 2, dedicated to Rosa, I offer a reading of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* which emphasizes the book's allegorical dimension and the connection between allegory's interplay of identity and difference, presence and absence, with fiction's own *modus operandi* vis-à-vis the authoritative discourses of political and legal theory. I also offer a reading of a central episode in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* — the trial of Zé Bebelo at the Sempre-Verde ranch — in which fictional representation and political representation — the problematic history of political representation in Brazil — are played against each other.

In the final chapter, I examine the work of Jorge Luis Borges to show how fiction, understood as a discourse that does not conceal its moment of artifice, plays a mediating function between the production of authority and its legislating role, and in so doing opens up the possibility of a critical examination of its own validating assumptions and epistemic frameworks. I first examine how Borges problematizes the question of tradition and national identity through a discussion of his essay “El Escritor Argentino y la Tradición”. In that essay, Borges offers as an alternative to a substantive national identity an identity that is relational and adjectival. This notion of an “adjectival identity” — an identity that defines itself contextually, by means of the interplay of similarity and difference with all other identities, will guide Borges's own aesthetic project and his own insertion within the literary tradition with which he is, from the start, always already in dialogue. I then offer a close-reading of an essay and two fictional short stories of Borges's in which the genesis of authority is thematized — namely, *Una vindicación del Falso Basíledes*, *Los Teólogos*, and *Tres Versiones de Judas*, in which the violent consolidation of the religious canon is set against the greater plausibility of heretic alternatives. I go on to examine how Borges's fictions find their counterpart in his essayistic work so as to constitute a coherent critique of philosophical authority. It is a critique in which the non-apodictic logic of fiction, by means of a semblance that mirrors the structural plausibility of philosophical discourse yet replaces philosophy's quest for the unity of truth with the forking paths of discursive possibility, denounces the

contingency that underlies the categorical postulates of philosophy. To the extent that acknowledging the contingency of its own postulates poses a threat to the authority of a philosophical system, Borges's aesthetic critique of philosophical authority seems to suggest that philosophical logic ultimately resides on a fundamental denial, one in which what is at stake is precisely its categorical distinction from fictional discourse: the denial of its own moment of artifice.

A Theresa, aos meus amigos, e aos meus pais.

A Milton Azevedo e a Natalia Brizuela, pelo apoio e pela confiança sempre presentes,
ainda que nem sempre merecidos.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	iii
Chapter 1: The Emergency of Fiction and the Emergency of Politics in Domingo F. Sarmiento’s <i>Facundo</i> and Euclides da Cunha’s <i>Os Sertões</i>	1
1.1.Sarmiento’s <i>Facundo</i>	1
1.1.1. The dialectics of formation and conformation.	1
1.1.2. “Formas gauchas”and the limits of authority	18
1.2.Euclides da Cunha’s <i>Os Sertões</i>	34
1.2.1. Writing <i>contre la lettre</i> : the reception of <i>Os Sertões</i>	34
1.2.2. The consortium between art and science and the aesthetics of conflict.....	45
Chapter 2: Allegory and the Trial of Fiction in João Guimarães Rosa’s <i>Grande Sertão: Veredas</i>	62
2.1. The trial of fiction	66
2.2. An allegorical trail in <i>Grande Sertão: Veredas</i>	72
2.2.1. The “diabo” and the “sertão”	73
2.2.2. “Os homens antigos”	80
2.2.3. “O mundo à revelia”	84
2.2.4. Riobaldo between two worlds	90
Chapter 3: Jorge Luis Borges: Fiction and the Rhetoric of Artifice	93
3.1. Reframing the Argentine writer and the tradition.....	94
3.2. Fiction and the rhetoric of artifice	110
References.....	126

INTRODUCTION

In an interview during the Congress of Latin American Writers held in Genoa in 1965, the German literary critic Günter Lorenz asked Brazilian writer João Guimarães Rosa to explain the concept of “Brazilianness” — a concept which, in his words, was “very important to the entirety of Brazilian literature”, and therefore also to Rosa’s work. Lorenz added that, in the many years he had spent studying Brazilian literature, his attempts to clarify the concept had been all but futile, and that no definition he had heard satisfied him, despite the fact that Brazilian writers themselves always made use of it (Lorenz 90). Rosa, reiterating the importance of the topic and stressing at length and not without some irony the difficulty of coming up with a proper definition, finally remarked, as if settling the question: “‘Brazilianness’ is perhaps a feeling-thinking. Yes, I believe we could say that”, to which his interlocutor, with visible exasperation, retorted: “With that we did not progress very far, for now we could ask, I and everybody else: What the devil is a feeling-thinking?” (Lorenz 91) Two other statements by Rosa seem to anticipate, with yet another paradox, the oxymoron that so exasperated his interviewer. The first dates from two years earlier, in a letter addressed to Edoardo Bizzarri, his Italian translator. There Rosa writes that his books, “in essence, are ‘anti-intellectual’ — they defend the highest primacy of intuition, of revelation, of inspiration over the presumptuous flickering of reflexive intelligence, of reason, the Cartesian hag” (Rosa, *Correspondência com seu tradutor italiano* 90). The second statement was made to Lorenz himself, in that same interview, moments earlier. Praised by his German interlocutor as “the greatest novelist in Brazil”, Rosa replied: “No, I am not a novelist; I am a narrator of critical narratives. My novels and cycles of novels are in reality narratives that bring together poetic fiction and reality.” (Lorenz 70). Feeling-thinking: an oxymoron that houses the disavowal of Cartesian reflexive intelligence in the name of intuition and revelation, on the one hand, and insists on critique as the narrative site where reality and poetic fiction meet, on the other. Narrative appears for Rosa as a site of confrontation; or, perhaps more accurately, rather than a *site*, which implies a homogeneous ground pre-existing the confrontation, his critical narratives are themselves that tension-riddled *encounter* of “reality” and “poetic fiction”, the emergence of a new discursive congruence by means of an original discursive incongruence.

Fiction as a theatre of confrontation; novels that challenge and transgress generic boundaries by asserting themselves as critical narratives; narratives which, inhabiting a discursive ground that moves across the institutional demarcations of creation and critique, intuition and concept, problematize not only those demarcations but the instituting gesture itself: in Rosa’s reply to Lorenz we find condensed the contradictory elements that pervade an intellectual and cultural tradition which began *in media res*, with no exclusive original tradition of its own, no clear pre-existing blueprint which it could unproblematically follow or from which it could unproblematically deviate. Lacking a pre-given overarching narrative and a strong foundational myth (having, in fact, in the wake of political independence, disavowed the one it had inherited, searching

for one at a time when both foundations and myths were eyed with suspicion), it is a tradition in which the particular was to some degree forced to precede the generic, the individual work the genre, exception be made rule, and critical reflection, not yet differentiated from conceptual creation, precede subsumption to institutional and institutionalized categories of thought that had not yet fully taken shape.

This undifferentiated scenario is not, to be sure, the one in which Rosa was writing and giving shape to his aesthetic project. A professional writer interviewed at an international congress for Latin American professional writers, Rosa wrote at a time when the institutionalization of literature had already gone a long way, and the boundaries distinguishing it from other discursive practices such as philosophy, politics or history had already been enforced. Yet, Rosa's paradoxical reply to his interviewer points to a tradition that appropriates a lack of unequivocal foundation as its own foundational gesture. Indeed, it is as a gesture, as a way of relating, that this tradition can be defined. A tradition that brings together disparate elements into a whole that, incoherent from the point of view of pre-formed criteria to which it does not fully belong, and yet which it cannot ignore, forges nonetheless a coherence out of incoherence; a patchwork whole in which the relation between the elements, the clash and contact of individual parts, the boundaries that unite them and keep them apart, possess greater protagonism than both the parts themselves and the seemingly *ad hoc* whole which they form. Antinomy is the root, the generative principle of the tradition, as well as its organizing law. In the Brazilian context, it is an antinomic tradition whose first forceful, explicit articulation¹ can be found in Euclides da Cunha's 1902 book *Os Sertões*, with which Rosa's major work, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, is in constant if implicit dialogue.

A *tour de force* whose generic indeterminacy crosses the discursive boundaries of science, literature, anthropology, history, and sociology², in its search for the "very core of a nationality", for "the bedrock of our race"³, Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* can be

¹ Implicitly, however, by way of highly refined irony, it can be traced back to Machado de Assis. The best example of such a reading of Machado can be found in Roberto Schwarz's critical essays, especially in his studies *Ao Vencedor as Batatas* and *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo*.

² As early as 3rd December 1902 (only a few days after Euclides's book had been published), José Veríssimo writes in a review that would set the standard for most others to follow: "O livro, por tantos títulos notáveis, do Sr. Euclides da Cunha, é ao mesmo tempo o livro de um homem de ciência, um geógrafo, um geólogo, um etnógrafo; de um homem de pensamento, um filósofo, um sociólogo, um historiador; e de um homem de sentimento, um poeta, um romancista, um artista..." [Mr. Euclides da Cunha's book, remarkable for several reasons, is at the same time a book by a man of science, a geographer, a geologist, an ethnographer; by a man of thought, a philosopher, a sociologist, a historian; and by a man of feeling, a poet, a novelist, an artist...]. (Juízos Críticos 46)

³ "o cerne de uma nacionalidade... a rocha viva da nossa raça" (Cunha, *Os Sertões* 766 [464]) are the well-known expressions with which Euclides refers to the "sertanejo", the inhabitant of the Brazilian backlands. In rendering the second expression --which literally reads "the living rock of our race"-- as "the bedrock of our race", Samuel Putnam, responsible for the first translation of Euclides's book into English, chose to emphasize the solidity of the foundations on which to build the nation, yet by doing

regarded as a foundational text not so much because, like others before it, it proposed a definitive answer to the question of what the key to “Brazilianness” might be, but rather because, perhaps against its own stated purpose, it problematized the search, pointed, in its will to systematization, to the limits of overarching schemes of explanation, and offered keys that were incompatible both with themselves and with their objects, an incompatibility which in turn became the pervading subject of the book and the source of its lasting appeal. The structure of the book is itself worth noting. *Os Sertões*, whose tripartite division was loosely inspired by Hippolyte Taine’s triad of “race”, “milieu”, and “moment”⁴, opens with a section titled “the Land”, which offers an anthropomorphized description of the tormented Brazilian backlands, the “sertões” of its title; it then moves to a section called “the Man”, an account of the “sertanejo”, the inhabitant of the backlands, a tectonized figure which in its struggle to survive mirrors the tormented land, followed by the closing section, “the Struggle”, which narrates the government-led war against the community of Canudos, the ostensive subject of the book. It is significant, however, that rather than being explained by both land and man, as the book proposed to do, it is the struggle that, in a movement which is at once proleptic and retrospective⁵, contaminates and conditions the terms in which both man and land are described. The struggle, which closes Euclides’s narrative and grants intelligibility to the preceding descriptions of the “sertão” and the “sertanejo”, announces itself from the very beginning of the book in the tortuous anatomy of both land and man, pervaded each by what a recent commentator called “the metaphor of conflict” (Bernucci, Prefácio a *Os Sertões* 18), and in so doing it furnishes the substance to the explanatory devices that should account for it in the first place. In this twofold movement, it undermines at the same time as it aims to reinforce the scientific determinism which is the ostensive model of Euclides’s, counterpoising the seeming teleology of its proleptic march with a dynamic model in which the event is not merely the outcome, but also, as it were, the root of its own conditions. It is in this model that lies the foundation—a gesture that is as “seismic” as it is “foundational”—of the antinomial tradition which Rosa condensed in his cryptic

so he missed the expressive oxymoron which Euclides employs and which stands here as a metonym for the antithetical quality of the entire book.

⁴ See the introduction to Taine’s *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*. (Taine, 1864) Cf Maria Alzira Brum Lemos’s *O doutor e o jagunço*, where she claims that the conflict in *Os Sertões* is one between the race and the environment, and which is “metaphorized” in the battle. (Lemos 47-8). In *Os Sertões*, Euclides da Cunha writes: “Conhecemos, deste modo, os três elementos essenciais, e, imperfeitamente embora, o meio físico diferenciador e ainda, sob todas as suas formas, as condições históricas adversas ou favoráveis que sobre elas reagiram. No considerer, porém, todas as alternativas e todas as fases intermédias desse entrelaçamento de tipos antropológicos de graus díspares nos atributos físicos e psíquicos, sob os influxos de um meio variável, capaz de diversos climas, tendo discordantes aspectos e opostas condições de vida, pode afirmar-se que pouco nos temos avantajado. Escrevemos sobre as variáveis de uma fórmula intrincada, traduzindo um sério problema; mas não desvendamos todas as incógnitas” (Cunha, *Os Sertões* 153)

⁵ Or, perhaps more accurately, *metaleptic*, since it performs the legitimating figural operation per excellence: the inversion of cause and effect.

definition of Brazilianness as “feeling-thinking”, a Janus-faced expression which brings together in one single idea two antagonistic modes of relating to the world.

In the Argentine context, the emergence of fiction was also linked to a central contradiction. As Ricardo Piglia has pointed out writing about Sarmiento’s place as a writer, at the heart of fiction in nineteenth-century Argentina there was a resistance to fiction (Piglia, *Sarmiento the Writer* 130). Fiction’s defining trait was, precisely, its displaced use: in the impossibility of autonomous existence, its presence was highlighted by its forced absence; fiction became the *negative* condition of possibility of the written word in the politically charged climate of national self-assertion of post-independence Argentina. Sarmiento, the writer, had to negotiate between the expressive freedom of writing and the necessity of political efficacy; imagination and nation — a nation that was yet to be imagined— were at odds: at the root of language there was a tension between its means of expression and the truth it strived to express. As Piglia writes, “the effectiveness of the written word is bound to truth in all its forms: responsibility, necessity, seriousness, the morality of deeds, the weight of reality. Fiction becomes associated with idleness, gratuitousness, a squandering of the senses, that which cannot be shown” (Piglia, *Sarmiento the Writer* 130). And even though Sarmiento’s *Facundo* will problematize this distinction against its own explicit project — as Piglia notes, “criticism tends to agree that the book fails to obey the norms of truth that it posits” (136)—, Sarmiento himself, on other occasions, takes pain to stress this separation. In a letter written from Paris, and which he decided to publish during his lifetime, he mentions the “mob” of novelists who “possess those agitated spirits which make a childish society out of Paris, as they listen with gaping mouths to those tellers of tales to entertain children, Dumas, Balzac, Sue, Scribe, Soulié, Paul Feval”, with which, of course, he did not wish to be confused. (Sarmiento, *Viajes* 102). Fiction playing a double role — enacting on the level of its own articulation, as it were (and to draw an analogy with the characters that Sarmiento will portray in *Facundo*), the roles of both the *baqueano* [path finder] and the *rastreador* [track finder], on the one hand, and of the runaway outlaw who must at all costs foil their efforts, on the other⁶—, was necessary in order both to map and order one’s way in the endless extension of the Argentine pampas, and to cover the tracks that in the process fiction left behind.

It was by means of the disavowal of fiction that political discourse grounded its authority and asserted its legitimacy⁷. However, within political language itself fiction found — or rather, one could say, to avoid surreptitiously positing a pre-existing

⁶ See the description that Sarmiento gives of each of the gaucho types below.

⁷ In a similar vein, Julio Ramos has noted: “La escisión entre ‘poesía’ (y ficción) y ‘verdadera historia social’ es históricamente significativa. La dicotomía revela, ya a mediados del siglo, cierta *tendencia* a la autonomización de las funciones discursivas. Asimismo registra una notable jerarquización, en el interior de una economía utilitaria del sentido, en la cual la literatura figura como un modelo devaluado de representación, subordinado a la autoridad política de las formas más ‘modernas’ y ‘eficientes’ de la ‘verdad’.” (Ramos 28)

homogeneous discursive space that fiction would simply “occupy”, fiction *founded* — its place. The autonomy of political discourse at a time when discursive differentiation was still incipient was only possible when the language of politics, itself a matrix of discursive polarization⁸, fashioned its own outside, conceived of its self against an other. In the absence of a fundamental norm in which to ground the authority of discourse, discourse becomes creative and self-assertive: writing, for Sarmiento, answered the need to fill the void of discourse that the internal wars of post-independent Argentina had left in their wake. In order however to legitimize this initial creative gesture, authoritative discourse must distinguish itself from that which has created it, thereby denying its status as creation; and yet, in order to disavow the original creative moment it must incur in another creative moment: the creation, this time, of a schism, an other which will help displace the original creative moment and de-historicize it. Thus the fundamental norm of discourse is posited. Authority reverts itself as ontology in the same gesture whereby it divests itself of fiction. The emergence of fiction as a category of its own is thus coterminous with the emergence of the authority of (political) language: distancing itself from any claim to authority, the former (i.e. fiction) is precisely what the latter must refuse to be. Fiction thus functions as the conceptual matrix of difference that grants non-fictional language its authority by displacing unto itself the creative moment and in the same gesture divesting itself of any claim to authority. If, in Sarmiento, the language of politics identified itself with the civilizing project of modernization, fiction, on the other hand, both a threat to the authority of language and one of its unacknowledged conditions, was, not surprisingly, cast as one of the manifestations of civilization’s self-fashioned other, the other of authoritative discourse, barbarism.⁹

⁸ An insightful examination of the implications of this polarization to the formation of Argentina as a nation can be found in Nicolas Shumway’s *The Invention of Argentina*. In his book Shumway devotes his attention to “the peculiarly divisive mind-set created by the country’s nineteenth-century intellectuals who first framed the idea of Argentina... an ideological legacy [which] is in some sense a mythology of exclusion rather than a unifying national ideal, a recipe for divisiveness rather than consensual pluralism.” (Shumway x)

⁹ Before Sarmiento, eight years prior to the publication of *Facundo*, an eloquent and significant example of this displacement of fiction related to the context of post-independence Argentina could already be found in the speech delivered by Marcos de Sastre in the inauguration of the *Salón Literario* of 1837 in Buenos Aires*; here, the identification of fiction with barbarism in the eyes of politics is strikingly explicit: “It would have been simple for me to have gathered together a great number of those books which so praise the youth”, writes Sastre. “That multitude of useless novels piling up daily in the European presses. Books that should be viewed as a truly barbaric invasion in the midst of civilization. Vandalism that seizes from the light of progress an immense number of virginal intellects and perverts a thousand pure hearts.” (Weinberg 119)

*The “*Salón Literario*”, founded in 1837, was a group around which the young Argentine intellectuals of what would be known as the “*Generación de 1837*” would gather. With the rise of Juan Manuel Rosas to power, most of them would go into exile, and from abroad would play a significant role not only in combating Rosa’s dictatorship but also in imagining, planning and consolidating post-Rosist Argentina. Among their most prominent members were Esteban Echeverría, Juan Bautista Alberdi, Juan María Gutiérrez, and, to some extent, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento.

“Civilization” and “barbarism”. Commentators have, since the appearance of Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, undertaken a critique of each of the opposing poles of the Sarmentinean dichotomy in relation to his own stated project. Sometimes this critique took the form of a critique of the persistence of barbaric elements in Sarmiento’s modernizing project (a project marked by the same excess which it criticizes), sometimes the form of a critique of modernization’s violence towards otherness— sometimes, even, the form of a critique of the binary logic which underpins the dichotomy itself, reminding us that, rather than a disjunctive, the real crux posed by the Sarmentinean model is that it presents us with a tension-riddled juxtaposition, a contradictory co-existence expressed in the syndeton which appeared as the original title of the book, *Civilización y Barbarie*: from this perspective it is not simply a matter of choosing between civilization *or* barbarism, but of understanding the dialectical complicity that ties civilization *and* barbarism inextricably together.¹⁰ However, in all these cases, whether in the critique of each of the extremes or in the critique of the either/or logic that allegedly presides over them, what is absent is a critique of that first positing moment, the moment of normative fiction that generated the poles and made the antithetical model possible in the first place. This critique has been both eluded and elusive in part because this normative fiction, to which the dichotomy civilization-barbarism (and therefore the authority of discourse, here understood as the language of politics) owes its existence, *precedes* the authoritative differentiated discourse that should carry this critique forward, and thus remains there as a blind or forcefully ignored spot at the root of discourse. This first fictional moment, source of normativity, has been displaced into the “idle”, “gratuitous” fiction, to use Piglia’s words, which Marcos de Sastre condemned in the opening speech of the Literary Salon of 1837 quoted above. This displaced fiction is indeed, to continue using Piglia’s words, a language of that “which cannot be shown”, but, as I will argue, it is so in another, less gratuitous sense. Its displacement and its association with that “which is not true”, casting it as the other of authoritative discourse, preserves in itself the awareness of the original “as-if” moment that lies at the root of the authority it makes possible by means of its self-negation. It is this repressed as-if moment at the root of non-fictional discourse—the repressed fictional moment at the root of non-fiction—that, nearly a century later, will come to the foreground in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, who will work within the space delimited by Sarmiento only to problematize its limits, thematizing, in the process, the very idea of limit. His texts will inhabit the internal thresholds of discourse while flaunting, in an ambiguous movement oscillating between fiction and non-fiction, story and essay, the ostensive label of “ficciones” and “artificios”, openly acknowledging its moment of self-reflection.

¹⁰ This is Piglia’s contention in his excellent essay “Sarmiento the writer”.

CHAPTER 1

The emergence of fiction and the emergency of politics in Domingo F. Sarmiento's *Facundo* and Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*

The novel establishes its birthright as a lie that is the foundation of truth.

(Carlos Fuentes, "In Praise of the Novel")

"Las herejías que debemos temer son las que pueden confundirse con la ortodoxia"

(Jorge Luis Borges, "Los teólogos")

In the present chapter I will explore some of the aspects of the antinomic tradition which Sarmiento's *Facundo* and Euclides's *Os Sertões* helped found, a tradition which seems to contradict the very concept of tradition, at the root of which the tension between production and legislation, creation and criteria, the invisibility of which is one of the requisites for an authoritative tradition, can scarcely conceal itself.

1.1 Sarmiento's *Facundo*

1.1.1 The dialectics of formation and conformation

A la América del Sud en general, y a la República Argentina sobre todo, ha hecho falta un Tocqueville, que premunido del conocimiento de las teorías sociales, como el viajero científico de barómetros, octantes y brújulas, viniera a penetrar en el interior de nuestra vida política, como en un campo vastísimo y aún no explorado ni descrito por la ciencia, y revélase a la Europa, a la Francia, tan ávida de fases nuevas en la vida de las diversas porciones de la humanidad, este nuevo modo de ser que no tiene antecedentes bien marcados y conocidos.

(*Facundo*, "Introducción")

Doy tanta importancia a estos pormenores, porque ellos servirán a explicar todos nuestros fenómenos sociales, y la revolución que se ha estado obrando en la República Argentina; revolución que está desfigurada por palabras del diccionario civil, que la disfrazan y ocultan creando ideas erróneas; de la misma manera que los españoles al desembarcar en América, daban un nombre europeo conocido a un animal nuevo que encontraban...

(*Facundo* 103)

He escrito, pues, *lo que he escrito*, porque no sabría cómo clasificarlo de otro modo, obedeciendo a instintos i a impulsos que vienen de adentro, i que a veces la razón misma no es parte a refrenar.

(*Viajes* 5)

From the time of its appearance, Sarmiento's *Facundo* has called the attention of critics and supporters alike to its generic indeterminacy, to the way in which it operates in a multiplicity of registers and across a number of discursive boundaries. Even its supporters were ambivalent with respect to this lack of clear definition: pre-disposed in its defense for the sake of a common political cause (their resistance against the Rosist regime in Argentina, which had forced them into exile), it was not always an easy task to know on which grounds to base this defense. What kind of book, exactly, was Sarmiento's *Facundo*? On which criteria to judge its merits? Esteban Echeverría, one of the central figures of the Generation of 1837, a gathering of young Argentine intellectuals who, influenced by the Romantic ideals, opposed the dictatorship of Juan Manuel Rosas, wrote in the *Dogma Socialista*, a document which summarized the ideas of the group, that "los apuntes biográficos de Fr. Aldao y la vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga son en concepto nuestro lo más completo y original que haya salido de la pluma de los jóvenes proscriptos argentinos" [the biographical notes on the Friar Aldao and the life of Juan Facundo Quiroga are in our opinion the most complete and original products of the pen of the young Argentine exiles] (Goodrich 39). Yet, the same Echeverría, in a private letter to Juan Bautista Alberdi, expressed his disapproval: "¿Qué cosa ha escrito él que no sean cuentos y novelas según su propia confesión? ¿Dónde está en sus obras la fuerza de raciocinio y las concepciones profundas? Yo no veo en ellas más que lucubraciones fantásticas, descripciones y raudal de cháchara infecunda." [What has he written other than short stories and novels even by his own account? Where in his works lie the power of reason and the deep conceptions? I see nothing in them beyond fantastic lucubrations, descriptions and useless chatter] (Goodrich 39). Juan María Gutiérrez, another member of the Generation of 1837, had in the eyes of Sarmiento a key role to play in the mission of spreading the word about *Facundo* to the civilized world, as the latter put it unceremoniously in a letter of 22 August 1845: "Pero volvamos a su misión de derramar la Odisea por toda la redondez del orbe. ¿A que no ha mandado un ejemplar al Times?"

¿A que no ha escrito una palabra a sus amigos de Francia, al Nacional, a la Democracia Pacífica, Revista de Paris y de Ambos Mundos, etc., etc.? Vamos, hágalo.” [But let’s return to your mission of spreading the *Odyssey* throughout the world. So, you have not yet sent a copy to the Times? Not a word to your friends in France, to the National, to the Pacific Democracy, the Paris Review and the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, etc., etc.? Come on, do it.] (Moglia 9)¹¹ Yet, in another private letter to Alberdi, Gutiérrez was just as unceremonious in voicing his criticisms of *Facundo*:

Lo que dije sobre el *Facundo* en el *El Mercurio*, no lo siento, escribí antes de leer el libro: estoy convencido de que hará mal efecto en la República Argentina, y que todo hombre sensato verá en él una caricatura: es este libro como las pinturas que de nuestra sociedad hacen a veces los viajeros por decir cosas raras: el *matadero*, la mulata en intimidad con la niña, el cigarro en boca de la señora mayor, etc., etc. La República Argentina no es una charca de sangre...

[What I said regarding *Facundo* in *El Mercurio* I do not regret; I wrote before having read the book: I am convinced that it will have a negative effect on the Argentine Republic, and that every sensible will see it as a caricature: this book is like the pictures made of our society by those travelers who report strange things: the *slaughterhouse*, the *mulata* intimate of the little girl, the cigar in the mouth of an older woman, etc., etc. The Argentine Republic is not a pool of blood....] (Gutiérrez 56-7)

Alberdi himself, another central figure of the Generation of 1837 and later responsible for the juridical bases of the post-Rosist Argentine Republic, would become one of Sarmiento’s most perspicacious critics. During his polemic with Sarmiento after the fall of Rosas, he remarks—

Cuando Vd. servía a los intereses de todos atacando a Rosas, el mayor tirano que haya existido, todos lo ayudamos, todos lo aplaudimos. A todo lo que aparecía de su pluma, nuestra palabra de orden era “bravo, estupendo!”. Lo aplaudíamos sin leerlo. A mí me sucedió eso de ordinario. Había en ello una de esas injusticias del espíritu de secta y propaganda.

[When you served everyone’s interests by attacking Rosas, the greatest tyrant that ever existed, we all helped you, we all applauded you. To everything that came out of your feather, our word of order was “bravo,

¹¹ The letter begins with a considerable request to Gutiérrez: “Le remito un cajón que le entregará Peña, el cual contiene 170 ejemplares de mi *Odisea*, como ha complacido en llamarla Vd. por una admirable mezcla de afecto, convencimiento e inofensiva ironía. Pero no importa, yo también la llamaré desde ahora mi *Odisea*, con más títulos a ella que Homero...” [I send your way a box that Peña will take to you, which contains 170 copies of my *Odyssey*, as you have taken pleasure in calling it, by an admirable mixture of affection, pride, and inoffensive irony. But it doesn’t matter, I will also call it from this moment on my *Odyssey*, with more right to it than Homer...] (Moglia 9)

splendid!”. We applauded you without having read you. To me that happened often. There was in this one of those injustices of the spirit of sect and propaganda.] (Alberdi, *Cartas Quillotanas* 86)

—only afterwards to reiterate the question of generic indeterminacy, which, posing difficulties to the grounding of defense and critique alike —on which criteria to criticize it? What norms, exactly, did it *claim* to follow so that one could finally say that it *failed* to conform to?—, became itself one of the favorite targets of critique: “El *Facundo* no es un libro de política, ni de historia. Es una biografía, como Vd. mismo lo llama; casi un romance por lo que tiene de ideal, a pesar de su dosis de filosofía que no falta hoy ni a los dramas.” [*Facundo* is not a book on politics, nor a book of history. It is a biography, as you yourself call it; almost a romance for what it possesses of ideal, despite its dose of philosophy which today is not absent even in dramas.] (Alberdi, *Cartas Quillotanas* 119) The difficulty of grounding a critique against Sarmiento’s *Facundo*’s generic status, even when such a critique chooses as its target the text’s elusiveness and resilience to pointed critique, becomes all the more evident in the above passage if we note the fundamental incommensurability of the terms arrayed by Alberdi: “biography”, to the extent that it can be seen as category of discourse¹², is not situated on the same level as, let alone on an exclusive relationship to, “history” or “politics”; nor is the twofold leap that takes us nearly without transition from a “biography” to “almost a romance” to “dramas” as straightforward as the facile rhetorical juxtaposition employed by Alberdi would lead us to believe. In forcefully distinguishing between books on “history” and “politics”, on the one hand, and “biography”, “romance”, and “drama”, on the other, as well as in the distinctions he refrains from making, Alberdi tells us perhaps more about his own conception of political and historical discourses, caught as it is in a framework of postulated discursive and disciplinary purity, than he does about the ways in which Sarmiento’s *Facundo* fails to fit either of these categories by dint of crossing their boundaries and relating to them all. Later, among his posthumous writings, unable to find a self-defining claim on the part of Sarmiento’s book, Alberdi decides to frame *Facundo* in the category of “history books”, only then to “demonstrate” that it does not fit the bill: “Es el primer libro de historia que no tiene ni fecha ni data para los acontecimientos que refiere. Es verdad que esa omisión procura al autor una libertad de movimientos muy comfortable, por la cual avanza, retrocede, se detiene, va para un lado, vuelve al lado opuesto, todo con el movimiento lógico con que un pescado rompe la onda

¹² What Paul de Man writes of the difficulty of subsuming “autobiography” under generic categories can also be said, I believe, of Sarmiento’s “biography” of *Facundo Quiroga* (of which Alberdi famously remarked: “Instead of writing *Facundo*, as he had intended, [Sarmiento] has written *El Faustino*”, an allusion to Sarmiento’s middle name.[En lugar de escribir *El Facundo*, como pretende,[Sarmiento] ha escrito *El Faustino*” (*Escritos póstumos* 295): “Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps most revealing of all, generic discussions, which can have such powerful heuristic value in the case of tragedy or of the novel, remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake” (De Man, *Autobiography as de-facement* 68)

del mar.” [It is the first history book that has neither date nor place for the events it refers. It is true that such an omission provides the author with the comfort of great freedom of movement, by virtue of which it moves forward, backward, stops, goes from one side to its opposite, all this with the logical motion with which a fish breaks the wave.] (Alberdi, *La barbarie histórica de Sarmiento* 11) On a similar vein, Valentín Alsina, in the well-known notes wherein he suggested corrections to be made for a second edition of *Facundo*, remarked: “Ud. no se propone escribir un romance, ni una epopeya, sino una verdadera *historia* social, política, y hasta militar a veces, de un periodo interesantísimo de la época contemporánea. Siendo así, forzoso es no separarse un ápice... de la exactitud y rigidez histórica” (Appendix to *Facundo* 381). Though, as Diana Goodrich has perceptibly pointed out, “the correction has the double edge so characteristic of its own claims to authority: it both points to *Facundo*’s distance from historical discourse and, at the same time, inserts it within the parameters of that very discourse.” (Goodrich 43)

This indeterminacy, the difficulty of finding and adjusting to the appropriate categories, of matching names and things, did not escape Sarmiento, who was well aware of the patchwork character of his “obra tan informe”, as he himself called it.¹³ And yet, it was less as an external aspect, a readymade mould to which the textual production was supposed to conform, that the problem of form obsessed him. Form, Sarmiento came to realize as he confronted his own discourse in the making with those already available and with which he at all times engaged, could not, lest it crystallized into formalities and formulas, be dissociated from the process of its own formation. This was particularly so in light of the political circumstances in which Sarmiento wrote *Facundo*. “Hecho de prisa”, “lejos del teatro de los acontecimientos”, but, most importantly, “sobre un asunto de que no se había escrito nada hasta el presente” (*Facundo*, “Advertencia al lector” 33), *Facundo* had not merely to find, but also to create, the form with which to speak of a

¹³ “He usado con parsimonia de sus preciosas notas guardando las más sustanciales para tiempos mejores y más meditados trabajos, temeroso de que por retocar obra tan informe, desapareciese su fisionomía primitiva y la lozana y voluntaria audacia de la mal disciplinada concepción” [I have made parsimonious use of your precious notes, saving the more substantial ones for better days and more carefully meditated works, for I have feared that the result of retouching such a formless work might be the loss of its primitive appearance and of the vigorous and voluntary audacity of its ill-disciplined conception.], wrote Sarmiento in his dedication of the second edition of *Facundo* (1851) to Valentín Alsina (*Facundo* 51). Tulio Halperín Donghi links the problem of locating and classifying *Facundo* to the rise of positivism in the second half of the nineteenth-century: “Este problema surge, no por casualidad, en momento en que el positivismo triunfa, y nace con él la exigencia de una especialización en la vida intelectual argentina. La historia toca al historiador, la sociología al sociólogo, la psicología al psicólogo; han pasado ya los tiempos ingenuos en que todo eso podía mezclarse confusamente. Frente a esa exigencia imperiosamente manifestada, Sarmiento mostró alguna timidez: sabía muy bien que la había ignorado a lo largo de toda su obra. Pero no por eso la rechazaba: su actitud era más bien la del pecador contrito. Aducía disculpas en cada caso variables, desde las necesidades de la lucha política hasta las urgencias de la vida periodística, que devora implacablemente los pensamientos apenas surgen, aun informes, de la mente”. (Halperín Donghi 17-8)

reality that had not yet been fully catalogued or articulated, and for the understanding of which the available forms—the language and the concepts of European science and political theory—, Sarmiento seemed to suggest in the same gesture whereby he resorted to them, did not suffice. If it is true that the problem of form, and the dialectics of formation and conformation which informs it, is one of the obsessions of *Facundo*, time and again bringing form and content together at the book's thematic level, it is no less true that the problem of form, for Sarmiento, was at the same time the problem of the form that would make it possible to conceive (and to conceive of) the Argentine Republic, giving shape to an Argentina torn to pieces¹⁴; a form that was to do justice to the republic's contradictory elements, embodying without defacement the mark of its own production, the tension between chaos and order at the root of order, the productive moment that institutes the legislating gesture and lies, as its other, at the origin of law.

Despite his future role as the president of Argentina and “author of a nation”, to quote the title used by Francine Masiello and Tulio Halperín Donghi in their collectively edited volume of essays on Sarmiento, at the time of writing *Facundo* Sarmiento's own position vis-à-vis law and authority was itself a significantly ambivalent one. Not only was his authority as an author derived, as we will have the opportunity to examine in greater detail, from opposition to law, from the fact that, in relation to the Argentina of Rosas, he was himself an outlaw, banned from his country and writing in exile, but unauthorized was also the use he made of the paradigm “civilization and barbarism”, central to the structure of *Facundo*. What happens, one must ask, when a set of ideas, a system, is employed from the perspective of that which is other to that very system, from the perspective of that which should define the outside boundaries of that system? What happens when the one that had been identified as the barbarian, the non-European, the one not belonging to the center of civilization (to the center that is civilization), speaks in the name of civilization against barbarism? Making use of the enlightened paradigm par excellence, and yet doing so while speaking from its other, unauthorized extreme, Sarmiento subverts the binarism of its logic, finding a third, in-between locus of enunciation that the paradigm itself had not predicted; a locus that the paradigm, in order to assert itself as such, had to suppress and replace by the seeming symmetrical stability of its binary structure. This other place of enunciation, however, was not, as it were, a merely analytic, arithmetic mean standing between the extremes of civilization and barbarism. Its role was an active one, leaving a visible imprint on the logic that it subverted. The paradigm was refracted, “barbarism” and “civilization” acquired a meaning and a mode of operation different from the ones they possessed when used in their original context. Their universal status was relativized. Sarmiento, a barbarian in the eyes of civilized Europe, resorted to European tools in order to denounce the barbarism of the

¹⁴ “Nosotros, al día siguiente de la revolución debíamos volver los ojos a todas partes buscando con qué llenar el vacío que debían dejar la inquisición destruida, el poder absoluto vencido, la exclusión religiosa ensanchada”. [The next day after the revolution we had to turn our eyes to all sides looking for that with which to fill the void left by the destroyed inquisition, by the vanquished absolute power, by the widened religious exclusion] (Sarmiento, *Recuerdos de provincia* 92)(92)

caudillo Juan Manuel Rosas. And yet, as a further level of subversion added to an already subverted paradigm, the leaders of the civilized nations, Palmerston in England, Guizot and Louis Napoleón in France, the *Times*, *La Presse*, they had all compacted with Rosas, recognized his authority, “llamando a la estupidez energia, a la ceguera talento, virtud a la crápula e intriga y diplomacia a los más groseros ardiles”, as Sarmiento writes in his dedication of *Facundo* to Valentín Alsina. There seemed to be, Sarmiento seems to suggest, a blind-spot that afflicted even these great men and these great nations. And it is at this point, when expressing his astonishment and confusion at the complicity between the most civilized men and the most barbaric Rosas that Sarmiento makes explicit reference to his “literary ambition”; it is at this point that the tension between authority and authorship that lies at the core of Sarmiento’s project comes to the fore, highlighting his growing awareness that the formation of the Argentine nation must first take into account the problem of form.

The problem of form is indeed an obsession for Sarmiento, one that urges him incessantly to look up the dictionary of existing cultures (which is to say, mainly Europe and Europe’s nineteenth-century Other, the “Orient”, with occasional glances to the North America of Fenimore Cooper —which is to say, the United States and the United States’ nineteenth-century Other, the “West”¹⁵) for names with which to fill the desert of Argentine reality, with its uncharted Pampas, indians, and gauchos. Hence, for Sarmiento, the insistent recourse to comparisons: were it not for the natural obstacles that the vast expanses of the Pampas posed, Argentina would be on its way to become “la babilonia Americana” [the American Babylon] (59 [47]); the endless extension of the Argentine terrain imprints on the life of the interior “cierta tintura asiática” [a certain Asiatic tinge] (61[49]); indeed, one may find that

hay algo en las soledades argentinas que trae a la memoria las soledades asiáticas; alguna analogía encuentra el espíritu entre la Pampa y las

¹⁵ For the argument that Fenimore Cooper was in fact Sarmiento’s “literary model”, which Sarmiento went on to appropriate and make his own in a tactical inversion not so far removed from the way in which Borges’s Pierre Menard became the author of the *Quijote*, see Sommer, Doris. *Foundational Fictions*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991: “But after Sarmiento’s playful remark about plagiarism, after noting that it is he who makes Cooper a landmark in South American literature, we should wonder whose text is originary. Is it Cooper’s, or is it Sarmiento’s appropriation? Is it the father who makes the son, or is it thanks to the son that the father recognizes himself as such? ... Sarmiento’s rivalry with adoptive mentors allowed for something different from denial, something that must have been an inspiration for other national authors. It allowed him to subordinate the master, gently and without eliminating him, so as not to lose the legitimacy of the master’s approval that Sarmiento attributes to himself. This difference ... suggests a pattern for the strategy that I have been trailing here. It may be parallel to parricide, but it is cunningly restrained. I mean Sarmiento’s practice of making plagiarism count for the most efficient originality by inverting the priority between model and revision.” (Sommer 81-2). For a less totalizing claim of the importance of Fenimore Cooper for the genesis of Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, see Raul Orgaz’s important 1940 study, *Sarmiento y el naturalismo histórico*, chapter IV: “Un ensueño literario: ‘El Cooper de la pampa’” (297-303).

llanuras que median entre el Tigris y el Eúfrates; algún parentesco en la tropa de carretas solitaria que cruza nuestras soledades para llegar, al fin de una marcha de meses, a Buenos Aires y la caravana de camellos que se dirige hacia Bagdad o Esmirna.

[there is something in the Argentine solitudes that brings to memory the Asian solitudes; there is some analogy to be found by the spirit between the Pampas and the plains that lie between the Tigris and the Euphrates; some relation between the troop of solitary wagons crossing our solitudes to arrive, after a march of months, in Buenos Aires, and the caravan of camels heading for Baghdad or Smyrna.] (61 [49, trans. amended])

—a recollection and a series of analogies that are all the more remarkable once we learn that, at the time of writing *Facundo*, Sarmiento, a native of the provincial town of San Juan, had set foot neither in the Pampas nor in Asia, neither in Europe nor in Buenos Aires. Analogy, the [figural/rhetorical/discursive] leap from one particular to another, is, for Sarmiento, the means to escape the tautology of ostensive definitions¹⁶ and the more fundamentally irreducible tautology of the linguistic sign. How to explain, to one who has never seen it, this “campo vastísimo y aún no explorado ni descrito por la ciencia” (Facundo 40)? How to show “a los ojos atónitos de la Europa” (for, as Sarmiento makes clear at various moments, Europeans, as much as if not more than Argentines, were among *Facundo*’s ideal readers¹⁷) “this “nuevo modo de ser que no tiene antecedentes bien marcados y conocidos” (Facundo 40-1)? “Si Sarmiento se excede en su pasión, un poco salvaje, por la cultura”, writes Ricardo Piglia in an insightful reflection on the uses and abuses of borrowed erudition in *Facundo*, “es porque para él conocer es comparar. Todo adquiere sentido si es posible reconstruir las analogías entre lo que se quiere explicar y otra cosa que ya está juzgada y escrita.” [If Sarmiento exceeds himself in his passion, somewhat savage, for culture, it is because for him to know is to compare. Everything acquires meaning if it is possible to reconstruct the analogies between that which one wants to explain and another thing which is already judged and written.] (Piglia, *Notas sobre Facundo* 17) To write that the Pampas are the Pampas are the Pampas, although perhaps accurate enough, would certainly not suffice.

¹⁶ Cf. (Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, §§28-34). An ostensive definition will fail in its purpose unless the person who receives the definition already knows in advance what is *meant* by it, or knows in advance the thing (or aspect of the thing) the definition refers to. In other words, an ostensive definition will fail in its explanatory purpose unless it is tautological, i.e., unless it follows the pattern “*This is X*”, where one knows in advance what the function of “*This*” and meaning of “*X*” are. See, also, Derrida: [analogy] *gathers together* without-concept and concept, universality *without* concept and universality *with concept*, the *without* and the *with*; it thus legitimates the violence, the occupation of a nonconceptual field by the grid of a conceptual force (Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* 76). For Derrida, Kant’s appeal to analogy is a legitimation of the violence of the *logos* against that which is different.

¹⁷ Cf. Sarmiento’s letter to Juan María Gutierrez of 22 August 1845, in which he requests that copies of the book be sent to several periodicals of learned Europe. (Moglia 9). See note 10, above.

Sarmiento is aware of the self-referential nature of accuracy, and of the irreconcilable tension between self-reference and the relational mode of knowledge he pursues, a knowledge of the other that is also *an other* knowledge.¹⁸ It is in his tenacious flights from tautology — a flight in the two senses of the word: a soaring escape— that Sarmiento becomes most vulnerable to his critics’ charges of deviation from the path of serious, reliable discourse. And yet, Sarmiento is aware of both this vulnerability and of its necessity. After all, he asks in *Facundo*, “Cómo ponerle rienda al vuelo de la fantasía del habitante de una llanura sin límites, dando frente a un río sin ribera opuesta, a un paso de la Europa sin conciencia de sus propias tradiciones, sin tenerlas en realidad; pueblo nuevo, improvisado...?” [How to rein in the flight of fantasy of the inhabitant of a limitless plain, looking toward a river with no facing banks, a step away from Europe, unaware of its own traditions, in reality with none; a new, improvised people...?] (177 [123])¹⁹. As if offering his own text and his own practice of writing as a reply, Sarmiento resorts throughout *Facundo* to a system of analogies in which Europe is sometimes the pole of comparison, sometimes the implicit mediator between the Pampas and the Orient, between Sarmiento and his attempt to orient himself in the desert of discourse.²⁰ Hence the proliferation of analogies with Asia, the Arab world, the Middle Ages, Rome, Sparta, the times of Abraham:

¹⁸ Cf. Julio Ramos’s “Saber del *otro*: escritura y oralidad en el *Facundo* de D. F. Sarmiento”. (Ramos 24). Ramos examines the presence of the *other’s* knowledge [“saber del *otro*”] as *an other* knowledge [el *otro* saber] in Sarmiento’s *Facundo*. However, the *other’s knowledge* is necessarily mediated by the knowing subject and its attempt, ever so partial, to know the other. Cf. also Halperín Donghi: “para Sarmiento barbarie no es tan sólo ignorancia de lo que el civilizado sabe; es también sabiduría de lo que el civilizado ignora” (Halperín Donghi 21)

¹⁹ Noé Jitrik, taking for granted the prior existence of the categories which *Facundo* would then challenge and transgress, and focusing instead on how *Facundo* manages their “diversity” and “complexity”, notes in a bare language not nearly as self-enacting as Sarmiento’s: “Como Sarmiento se mueve simultáneamente en diversos planos intencionales, necesita transmitir nociones complejas para las cuales el lenguaje desnudo del dato o la interpretación no bastan.” [Since Sarmiento moves simultaneously in diverse intentional planes, he needs to transmit complex notions to which the bare language of data or interpretation are not enough.] (Jitrik, *Muerte y resurrección de Facundo* 13)

²⁰ Two years after the publication of *Facundo*, Sarmiento would write with great insight in a letter from Algeria, during a trip in which he was finally able to catch a glimpse of Europe and its other firsthand: “Nuestro Oriente es la Europa, i si alguna luz brilla mas allá, nuestros ojos no están preparados para recibirla, sino al traves del prisma europeo” [Our Orient is Europe, and if any light shines beyond it, our eyes are not ready to receive it, except through the prism of Europe.]. (Sarmiento, *Viajes* 172). With respect to the structural role of comparison in *Facundo*, albeit emphasizing its tropological rather than logical dimensions, Noé Jitrik writes: “[The models] represent points on a circuit whose other extreme is marked by the event or object to be described, that unknown or concealed truth, the ‘secret’ evoked on the first page of *Facundo*... Between ‘models’ and ‘total or partial ignorance’ (the secret), a metaphorical relationship is virtually established that has general consequences for the text. The known, in this movement, is postulated; the unknown is brought forth as a problem; and even the formulation of this tension is metaphorized by means of comparisons that constantly traverse the text but never stop referring to the secret that the reader wants to reach. (Jitrik, *The Riches of Poverty* 185)

La vida pastoril nos vuelve impensadamente a traer a la imaginación el recuerdo del Asia, cuyas llanuras nos imaginamos siempre cubiertas aquí y allá de las tiendas del kalmuko, del cosaco o del árabe. La vida primitiva de los pueblos, la vida eminentemente bárbara y estacionaria, la vida de Abraham, aunque modificada por la civilización de un modo extraño.... Se asemeja a la antigua sloboda esclavona, con la diferencia que aquella era agrícola, y por tanto, más susceptible de gobierno: el desparramo de la población no era tan extenso como este. Se diferencia de la tribu nómada, en que aquella anda en sociedad siquiera ya que no se posesiona del suelo. Es, en fin, algo parecido a la feudalidad de la edad media, en que los barones residían en el campo, y desde allí hostilizaban a las ciudades y asolaban las campanas, pero aquí faltan el barón y el castillo feudal.... Pero lo que presenta de notable esta sociedad en cuanto a su aspecto social, es su afinidad con la vida antigua, con la vida espartana o romana, si por otra parte no tuviese una desemejanza radical.... no hay *res pública*.

[Once again, pastoral life unexpectedly brings to mind the recollection of Asia, whose plains we always imagine to be covered, here and there, with the tents of Kalmyks, Cosacks, and Arabs. The primitive life of the settlers, the eminently barbaric and unchanging life, the life of Abraham, although modified by civilization in a strange way.... It is similar to the old Slavonic *soloboda*, with the difference that the latter was agricultural and therefore more easily governed; the spreading out of the population was not as extensive as it is here. It is different from the nomad tribe, in that the latter hardly even passes as a society since it does not own the land. It is, finally, somewhat similar to the feudal system of the Middle Ages, where barons resided in the country and from there made wars on cities and devastated the countryside; but here, the baron and his feudal castle are missing.... But what is noteworthy in this society, in terms of its social aspects, is its affinity with ancient life, with Spartan or Roman life, were it not for a radical difference.... there is no *res pública*.] (67-70 [53-5, trans. amended])

Replacing the accurate insufficiency of tautology with this proliferating chain of analogies, however, has its cost and its own kind of insufficiency. Life in the Pampas, Sarmiento tells us, is like the primitive life of the settlers, *although modified by civilization in a strange way*... It brings to mind the Middle Ages with its barons and castles as domineering presences in the countryside, *only that in the Pampas, the Argentine countryside, barons and castles are missing*... It resembles life in Sparta or Rome, *except for the absence of its central feature, res pública*. These are analogies with a remainder, analogies with a radical difference. In attempting to escape the insufficiency of tautology, bridging by means of analogy the gap between one particular and the other, Sarmiento came across, and acknowledged, its counterpart: the irreducibility of difference. The “desert” of Argentine reality, which sets the stage for the barbarism

whose understanding and explanation is one of the goals of *Facundo*, was not, for Sarmiento, a desert in a merely negative sense, a political and discursive hiatus named only to grant the intelligibility that its opposing term, “civilization”, considered by itself, lacked. Seen from this perspective, what Sarmiento’s analogies failed to account for was precisely what his recourse to analogy aimed to account for in the first place: the difference which distinguished the Argentine Pampas from the available (European) models, so as to justify the writing of *Facundo* to a reading public that was to a large extent already familiar with these very models. Sarmiento’s acknowledgement is, however, an ambivalent one. He takes notice of these irreducible remainders while at the same time wishing it were possible to find a place for them in the scheme of things. “A la América del Sud en general, y a la República Argentina sobre todo”, he writes between hopeful, programmatic, and wistful, “ha hecho falta un Tocqueville, que premunido del conocimiento de las teorías sociales, como el viajero científico de barómetros, octantes, y brújulas, viniera a penetrar en el interior de nuestra vida política, como en un campo vastísimo y aún no explorado ni descrito por la ciencia...” [South America in general, and the Argentine Republic above all, has lacked a Tocqueville who, previously equipped with a knowledge of social theory just as a scientist travels with barometer, compass, and octant, would have penetrated the interior of our political life as a vast field still unexplored and undescribed by science...] (40 [32]) This way it would be possible to give each contradictory element, each unreconciled aspect its allotted space, its rightful place in the pre-established order of things:

Hubiérase entonces explicado el misterio de la lucha obstinada que despedaza a aquella República: hubiéranse clasificado distintamente los elementos contrarios, invencibles, que se chocan; hubiéranse asignado su parte a la configuración del terreno y a los hábitos que ella engendra; su parte a las tradiciones españolas, y a la conciencia nacional, inicua plebeya, que han dejado la Inquisición y el absolutismo hispano; su parte a la influencia de las ideas opuestas que han trastornado el mundo político; su parte a la barbarie indígena; su parte a la civilización europea; su parte, en fin, a la democracia consagrada por la revolución de 1810, a la igualdad, cuyo dogma ha penetrado hasta las capas inferiores de la sociedad.

[Then the mystery of the obstinate struggle tearing that Republic to pieces would have been explained; the opposing, invincible elements crashing into one another would have been distinctly classified; the configuration of the land and the customs it engenders would have been assigned their proper part; the Spanish traditions and the iniquitous, plebeian national consciousness that the Inquisition and Hispanic absolutism have left, their part; the influence of the opposite ideas that have disturbed the political world, its part; indigenous barbarism, its part; European civilization, its part; and finally, the democracy consecrated by the 1810 revolution, and

equality, whose dogma has penetrated down to the lowest level of society, their part.] (40-1 [33])²¹

Sarmiento's obsession with the problem of form —with its genesis, the origin of its authority, its moment of production (in the twofold sense of its being both produced and productive)— transcends the particularity of the American context and points to a philosophical and aesthetic problem that is deeply rooted in the European tradition with which Sarmiento is in constant dialogue; it points to a blind spot common to, and requisite of, the production and productivity of form itself. Sarmiento himself seems to be aware of that, and he sees in his attempt to formulate a “science of the desert” not only a derivative enterprise, in which one must adopt European ideas and adapt them to a strange environment, but also an enterprise that is ultimately a critical one: by revealing the limits of the grid of European thought, one becomes aware of the grid as grid, with its network of meanings and the gaps between them. Despite his wish for a Tocqueville “*previously equipped* with a knowledge of social theory” that would make sense of the Argentine chaos and impose limits on its barbarian excess the same way a scientist with measuring instruments and a systematizing will assigns everything its proper part; and yet consistent with his own contradictory feelings and his attempt to do justice to the dialectics of formation and conformation, creation and restraint, Sarmiento makes a point of guarding against the lure of pre-conceived theories, wary, even when unwittingly substituting new such theories — “studies of constitutions, races, beliefs”, “the spirit of history” (176-77 [123])— for old ones²², of the sacrifice they often demand from an empirical reality that resists the mandates of symmetry and systematic consistency:

²¹ In 1844, a year before the appearance of *Facundo*, Sarmiento wrote a review of a work by the naturalist Claudio Gay, in which he expresses a similar view regarding the connection between history and science: “Los estudios históricos están en Francia tan popularizados, que bastaría, a nuestro juicio, que ojos peritos viesan hacinados los preciosos documentos históricos que lleva de América el señor Gay, para que, sin temor de equivocarse, no sólo los coordinasen en su orden de sucesión, sino que también pudiesen explicar el oficio particular, el sentido histórico de cada uno de ellos, a la manera que los naturalistas, inspeccionando un montón de fragmentos de huesos fósiles, saben decidir a qué animal antediluviano pertenecieron, cuál era el oficio y colocación de cada uno, con más el género de vida, costumbres y el mérito especial del ser que sostenían” (“Historia física y política de Chile, por Don Claudio Gay. *Progreso*, 20 August 1844. Quoted in Orgaz 275-6)

²² In the second edition of *Facundo*, Sarmiento included a note from Valentín Alsina in which the latter warned against Sarmiento's “propensity to systems”. The fact that Sarmiento himself decided to include the note, and that already in the first edition of the book there were passages that were critical of this systematizing will even when Sarmiento at times was guilty of it, is a sign of his ambivalent stance within a dialectics of formation and conformation. The following passage from Alsina's note is worth quoting at length: “Muéstrase Vd. propenso a los sistemas y éstos, en las ciencias sociales, no son el mejor medio de arribar al descubrimiento de la verdad. Desde que el espíritu está ocupado de una idea anterior y se proponga hacerla triunfar en la demostración, se expone a equivocaciones notables sin percibirlo. Entonces el escritor, en vez de este proceder analíticamente... emplea el sintético, esto es, sentada una idea jefe recorre cuantos hechos se le presentan no para examinarlos filosóficamente y en sí mismos sino para alegarlos en prueba de su idea favorita para formar con ellos el edificio de su sistema.... De aquí nacen las analogías y

Hoy los estudios sobre las constituciones, las razas, las creencias, la historia, en fin, han hecho vulgares ciertos conocimientos prácticos que nos aleccionan contra el brillo de las teorías concebidas *a priori*; pero antes de 1820, nada de esto había trascendido por el mundo europeo. Con las paradojas del *Contrato Social* se sublevó la Francia; Buenos Aires hizo lo mismo: Montesquieu distinguió tres poderes; y al punto tres poderes tuvimos nosotros: Benjamin Constant y Bentham anulaban el ejecutivo; nulo de nacimiento se le constituyó allí: Say y Smith predicaban el comercio libre; comercio libre se repitió: Buenos Aires confesaba y creía todo lo que el mundo sabio de Europa creía y confesaba. Sólo después de la Revolución de 1830 en Francia y de sus resultados incompletos, las ciencias sociales toman nueva dirección, y se comienzan a desvanecer las ilusiones.

[Today, studies of constitutions, races, beliefs —history, in a word— have made common a certain practical knowledge that instructs us against the glitter of theories conceived *a priori*; but before 1820, none of this had spread through the European world. With the paradoxes of the *Social Contract*, France rose up; Buenos Aires did the same; Montesquieu separated three distinct powers, and at once we had three powers; Benjamin Constant and Bentham annulled the executive, here it was constituted null at birth; Say and Smith preached free trade, and free trade, we repeated. Buenos Aires professed and believed everything that the learned European world believed and professed. Only after the revolution of 1830 in France, and its incomplete results, did the social sciences take a new direction and illusions begin to vanish.] (176 [123])

The reification of form, the oblivion of the moment of its production (its historical, man-made origin) followed by its hypostatization, was, Sarmiento seemed to suggest, the mistake shared both by “the great men of Europe” (176 [123]) and the Argentine Unitarists of the generation prior to his own, who were ousted from power by the

aplicaciones forzadas; de aquí los juicios inexactos o parciales acerca de los hombres y sucesos; de aquí la generalización con que de un hecho individual y tal vez casual o insignificante en sí mismo el escritor deduce una regla o doctrina general. Todo eso es una necesidad en los sistemas; hay que tributarles muchos sacrificios.” [You show yourself inclined towards systems, and these, in the social sciences, are not the best means to arrive at the discovery of truth. Once the spirit is occupied with a prior idea and sets itself the task of making it triumph in the demonstration, it exposes itself to remarkable mistakes without being aware of it. Then the writer, instead of proceeding analytically... employs the synthetic, that is to say, given a main idea he resorts to as many events present themselves to him not so much to examine them philosophically and in themselves, but rather to claim them as evidences of his favorite idea, to form with them the edifice of his system... From this spring the far-fetched analogies and applications; from this the inexact or partial judgments regarding men and events; from this the generalization with which from an individual event, perhaps casual or insignificant in itself, the writer deduces a rule or general doctrine. All this is a necessity in systems; one has to pay them many sacrifices.] (185)

Federalists of whom Rosas's dictatorship was the culmination.²³ Sarmiento's ambivalent depiction of the Unitarists, oscillating between admiration and criticism, is nonetheless clear in its point of contention. In chapter VII of *Facundo*, having begun what promised to be more than a panegyric to the Unitarist party — “No es el elogio sino la apoteosis que hago de Rivadavia y su partido” [I make not an eulogy, but rather an apotheosis of Rivadavia and his party] (179 [124]), we are told—, Sarmiento nevertheless follows this promise by a sarcastic account of the Unitarists and their shortcomings:

El unitario tipo marcha derecho, la cabeza alta; no da vuelta, aunque sienta desplomarse un edificio; habla con arrogancia; completa la frase con gestos desdeñosos y ademanes concluyentes; tiene ideas fijas, invariables; y a la víspera de una batalla se ocupará todavía de discutir en toda forma un reglamento, o de establecer una nueva formalidad legal, porque las fórmulas legales son el culto exterior que rinde a sus ídolos, la Constitución, las garantías individuales.

[The Unitarist type marches straight forward, head high; does not turn back, although he hears a building fall down; speaks arrogantly; completes sentences with disdainful gestures and conclusive motions; has set, invariable ideas; and on the eve of battle will still be involved in arguing about all the aspects of a regulation, or establishing a new legal formality, because legal formulas are the external worship he pays to his idols: the Constitution, individual rights]. (179-80[125])

This worship of form (which, the moment it turns into worship, becomes the worship of formalities and formulas) erases, Sarmiento goes on to suggest, the distinction between past and future (erases, that is, the sense of its historicity) and diverts the Unitarist's attention away from the present moment, away from the moment of its actuality:

Su religión es el porvenir de la República, cuya imagen colosal, indefinible, pero grandiosa y sublime, se le aparece a todas horas cubierta con el manto de las pasadas historias, y no le deja ocuparse de los hechos que presencia. Es imposible imaginarse una generación más razonadora,

²³ “¿Qué había de suceder, cuando las bases de Gobierno, la fe política que le había dado la Europa, estaban plagadas de errores, de teorías absurdas y engañosas, de malos principios; porque sus hombres políticos no tenían la obligación de saber más que los grandes hombres de la Europa, que hasta entonces no sabían nada definitivo, en materia de organización política? ... ¿De qué culpan, pues, a Rivadavia y a Buenos Aires? ¿De no tener más saber que los sabios europeos que los extraviaban?” [How could it have been otherwise, when the bases of government, the political faith given to it by Europe, were plagued with error, with absurd and deceptive theories, with bad principles? Because its politicians could not be expected to know more than the great men of Europe, who at that time knew nothing definitive about political organization. ... For what, then, do they blame Rivadavia and Buenos Aires? For not knowing more than the knowledgeable Europeans who led them astray?] (*Facundo* 176-7 [123])

más *deductiva*, más emprendedora y que haya carecido en más alto grado de sentido práctico.

[His religion is the future of the Republic, whose image —colossal, indefinable, but grand and noble— appears to him at all times covered with the mantle of past glories and doesn't allow him to think about the events he is witnessing. It is impossible to imagine a generation more given to reasoning, more *deductive*, with more initiative, and more lacking in practical sense.] (179-80 [125, trans. amended], emphasis in original).

The problem of form, the circular relation between its production and its productivity, always threatened to fall into the worship of formulas and formalities the moment the historicity of form is forgotten, lies at the root of the conflict between civilization and barbarism. For what is at stake in the Sarmentinean dichotomy is the problem of the production of order: political and discursive organization, the establishment of boundaries, legislation. In *Facundo*, the problem of form is a problem to the extent that the formative principle in the Argentina of Rosas seems, for Sarmiento, to be lacking: the form that would regulate and shape the production of forms is yet to be formed, or is to be formed anew, and the result of this conceptual and political “desert” is that which, within the economy of meaning of *Facundo*, is one of the most remarkable yet least remarked oxymora in Sarmiento's oxymoronic book, striking one, the moment that the logic appearing to preside the dichotomical premise of the book is fully accepted, as a veritable contradiction in terms: the forging of “formas gauchas”. Rosas's “estrategia indisciplinada”, his “undisciplined strategy”, Sarmiento writes, penning the first in a stream of antitheses that articulate and complicate in some of its most suggestive variations the theme of civilization and barbarism, consisted in “making the brutal instincts of the ignorant masses into a coldly planned and coordinated system”, in replacing “formas *legales* y admitidas en las sociedades cultas” by “formas gauchas”, “[formas] que él llama americanas.” (111-12 [81-2]). In the absence of a regulating formative principle that stands beyond and prior to its own formation, one is faced with the conflation of production and legislation, creation and order, authorship and authority²⁴, the formation of form, in which means and origins reveal their reciprocal *petitio principii*, their grounding tautology. For that which is to be created — the principle of form, the founding norm, the constitutive legislation— is at the same time the means through which creation is legitimized and effected.

This conflation appears with striking clarity in an image employed by Sarmiento in his description of Rosas's rise to the seat of power after the ousting of the Unitarist party. As in so many other passages in his book, Sarmiento will attempt an analogy

²⁴ Tracing the etymology of the word “author” to the Romans, Ortega y Gasset points to a link between authorship and authority, between the charting and expansion of the territory of discourse and that of politics: “Autor viene de *auctor*, el que aumenta. Los latinos llamaban así al general que ganaba para la patria un nuevo territorio” [Author comes from *auctor*, the one who expands. The Latins thus called the general that won to the country a new territory.] (Ortega y Gasset 35)

between his specific subject (in this case, Rosas's rise to power) and received, pre-established knowledge (here, the figure of Plato as a legislator). Yet by resorting to analogy he will subvert and radically change the original example, tacitly problematizing both its claim to originality and its role as an example, to the point that what seemed to be a well-known term of comparison from which to grant stability to the new term is itself rendered unstable and unfamiliar; analogy, then—the finding of resemblance in difference—, appears, as a result of this operation, as the other of itself, the index through which the insufficiency and internal contradictions of the logic that binds the two terms together are brought forth, the articulation by means of which a radical difference is made visible in the very attempt to overcome it.

Sarmiento begins by setting up the context: “El 13 de abril de 1835 se recibió Rosas del Gobierno... Facundo ha muerto un mes antes; la ciudad se ha entregado a su discreción; el pueblo ha confirmado del modo más auténtico esta entrega de toda garantía y de toda institución” [On April 13, 1835, Rosas was invested into government office... Facundo died a month earlier; the city surrendered of its own will; the people confirmed, in the most authentic way, this surrender of all rights and every institution.]. It is then that Sarmiento resorts to the analogy in question, one in which the legislator who banished the poets from the ideal Republic appears himself, surprisingly, as a poet; production and legislation appear for a moment as one: “Es el Estado una tabla rasa en que él va a escribir una cosa nueva, original; es él un poeta; un Platón que va a realizar su República ideal, según él la ha concebido” [The state was a *tabula rasa* upon which he would write something new, original; he was a poet, a Plato who would realize his ideal republic, according to how he had conceived it.] (314 [208-9]). The finding of resemblance in difference becomes here the encounter of difference through semblance; analogy, rather than closing the gap, opens it, giving way to dialectics. Fiction (poetry) grants authority to law in the same gesture whereby it divests itself of authority, banishing itself from the nation it has imagined so that imagination, ostracized to the realm of fancy and fiction, can give way to authoritative —and, at least in Rosas's case, authoritarian— knowledge.²⁵

The statesman turned poet, the poet turned statesman: Sarmiento's conflation of production and legislation, formation and form, in the figure of Plato —the poet-turned-philosopher *par excellence*, forced to deny the production of form for the sake of its authority²⁶— finds a surprising parallel in Sarmiento's own predicament. If it is well

²⁵ We may remember here Derrida's words with regard to the origin of law and the source of its authority: “Instead of ‘just’, we could say legal or legitimate, in conformity with a state of law, with the rules and conventions that authorize calculation but whose founding origin only defers the problem of justice. For in the founding of law or in its institution, the same problem of justice will have been posed and violently resolved, that is to say buried, dissimulated, repressed. Here the best paradigm is the founding of the nation-states or the institutive act of a constitution that establishes what one calls in French *l'état de droit*.” (Derrida, *Force of Law* 963)

²⁶ George Steiner has noted the “contiguity between the acts of creating in philosophy and in the arts, their uncanny kinship”, asserting that “No philosopher has been more vulnerably aware than

known —as Alberdi made it more than clear in his *Cartas Quillotanas*— that Sarmiento had political aspirations that he hoped *Facundo* would help him achieve (the same Alberdi was quick to point out with characteristic incisiveness, however, “literary glory” was hardly “antecedent for government anywhere”),²⁷ the parallel between the analogy employed by Sarmiento and Sarmiento himself does not stop at the affinities between Plato the poet-legislator and Sarmiento the writer-statesman. Perhaps even more surprising, given the programmatic dimension of the book and the political context in which it appears, is the affinity to be found on the second level of the analogy, this time between Sarmiento and Rosas, the gaucho poet-legislator against whom the book is written: a common tie binds together the Rosas-Plato whose political project is to forge

Plato of the poet within himself” (*Grammars of Creation* 54). This formal kinship, which imbues Plato’s quarrel with the poets with a deeply ironical dimension and informs the structural paradox present throughout the Platonic project, is brought to stronger light by a biographical component. Tradition has it that Plato wrote poems in his youth. According to Diogenes Laertius, who was quoting other, unnamed sources, when Plato was preparing to compete with a tragedy for the prize in an *agon*, he listened to Socrates in front of the theater of Dionysius, who supposedly convinced him of philosophy’s superiority to poetry, after which he decided to throw his verses to the flames, going on to become Socrates’s pupil. (*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Book III). Contrary to this tradition, Alice Swift Riginos has argued that this wide-spread anecdote possesses no reliable biographic evidence, actually having its origin in interpretations of Plato’s well-known critique of poetry in the *Republic*. (Riginos 43-48). In books II, III, and X of Plato’s *Republic*, poetry was regarded as a danger to the Republic due to its unreliable and often misleading relationship to truth. This critique leads Plato (through the voice of Socrates) to argue for the banishment of poets from his ideal republic.

As a side remark further suggestive of the tension between production (authorship) and authority, it is interesting to note that the young Karl Marx underwent a similar process of conversion, burning his poems after having discovered the philosophy of Hegel in Berlin, as we learn from a letter he wrote to his father on November 10th 1837: “In accordance with my state of mind at the time, lyrical poetry was bound to be my first subject, at least the most pleasant and immediate one... Poetry, however, could be and had to be only an accompaniment; I had to study law and above all felt the urge to wrestle with philosophy. ... Owing to being upset over Jenny’s illness and my vain, fruitless intellectual labours, and as the result of nagging annoyance at having had to make an idol of a view that I hated, I became ill, as I have already written to you, dear Father. When I got better I burnt all the poems and outlines of stories, etc, imagining that I could give them up completely, of which so far at any rate I have not given any proofs to the contrary”. (The Marx-Engels Reader 8)

²⁷ “¿Por qué se considera Vd. un mito político, o un candidato al gobierno argentino? ¿Por haber escrito diez años contra Rosas? ... Por haber escrito diez volúmenes ¿sería Vd. ‘mito’ político en su país? – Alejandro Dumas ha escrito 700 volúmenes, y si se pretendiese ‘mito’ por esa causa, excitaría la risa de sus paisanos. ¿Ha disputado por eso el gobierno de la Francia a Luis Napoleón, que apenas es autor de una o dos malas obras contra la monarquía? El nombre de un escritor puede ser un mito en la imaginación del pueblo; pero ¿la gloria literaria es antecedente de gobierno en ninguna parte?” [Why do you consider yourself a political myth, or a candidate to the Argentine government? For having written for ten years against Rosas? ... For having written ten volumes, would you be a political ‘myth’ in your country? —Alejandro Dumas has written 700 volumes, and if he believed himself a ‘myth’ for this reason, he would bring about laughter among his countrymen. Has he for this reason fought for the government of France over Luis Napoleón, who is author of only one or two poor works against monarchy? The name of a writer might be a myth in the imagination of the people; but is literary glory antecedent for government anywhere?] (Alberdi 89)

“formas gauchas” and Sarmiento’s attempt, with the writing of *Facundo*, to lay out the basis for a “science of the desert”, a science of barbarism— in both cases projects which are built on a fundamental contradiction in terms.

In all these cases we are faced with instances of the conflation between production and legislation, and it is this conflation which helps to account for the tension, at the heart of *Facundo*, between its means of expression and the truth it strives to express. If, as Ricardo Piglia has noted, “*Facundo* fails to obey the norms of truth it posits” (Sarmiento the Writer 136), my suggestion is that something was to be gained from this failure, a failure to which the book owes its “formless” shape (and is, to this extent, a kind of accomplishment), and which, in failing to obey its own norms of truth, does not leave the notions of “norm” and “truth” —and with them the very notion of “obeyance”— untouched.

1.1.2 “Formas gauchas” and the limits of authority: between the idle and the militant word.

Si de las condiciones de la vida pastoral tal como la ha constituido la colonización y la incuria, nacen graves dificultades para una organización política cualquiera, y muchas más para el triunfo de la civilización europea, de sus instituciones y de la riqueza y libertad, que son sus consecuencias, no puede por otra parte negarse que esta situación tiene su costado poético, y faces dignas de la pluma del romancista.

(*Facundo* 75)

Tengo una ambición literaria, mi caro amigo, y a satisfacerla consagro muchas vigilijs, investigaciones prolijas y estudios meditados.

(*Facundo* 52, Dedication of the 2nd edition to Valentín Alsina)

Yo no soy sino periodista a sueldo, un *gaucho malo* de la prensa.

(Sarmiento, *Las Ciento y Una* 2)

We have already seen that Sarmiento's book resists generic conformation and adjustment to pre-established categories of discourse. In fact, to speak of *Facundo's* "posited" norms of truth—which would in principle seem to contradict the claim that the book makes no generic claim—is to speak of norms of truth that are less *Facundo's* than Sarmiento's; they bear relation to the political circumstances within which Sarmiento wrote the book and are tied to the political cause informing the book's programmatic purpose.²⁸ From a programmatic point of view, indeed, the dichotomy which appeared as the original title of the book—*Civilization and Barbarism*—amounted to a pledge of allegiance to "civilization" and an indictment of "barbarism". As already noted, it was this program that allowed its supporters publicly to commend Sarmiento's book while at the same time expressing their reservations in the privacy of letters. The book itself, however, grew *against* this programmatic purpose, developing from this contradiction. As political circumstances changed favorably, lessening the urgency of what Alberdi called the "spirit of sect and propaganda" (Alberdi, *Cartas Quillotanas* 86), so did the book's title and content: the first two years of the 1850's marked both the beginning of the decline of Rosas as his relationship with Urquiza grew in hostility, culminating in Rosa's fall in 1852 at the Battle of Caseros²⁹, and the second edition of Sarmiento's book, which appeared in 1851, now titled after the *caudillo* of which it was, in part, a biography: *Vida de Facundo Quiroga*, shortened in subsequent editions to simply *Facundo*. The second edition also differed from the first by the suppression of the last two chapters, precisely those of strongest programmatic content, titled respectively "Gobierno Unitario" [Unitarist Government] and "Presente y porvenir" [Present and future]. With the suppression of the most programmatic elements in *Facundo*, the semantic constellation which gave unity to the book was rearticulated, its teleological thrust—the explanation of how and why barbarism took control of Argentina, and how civilization was in the end to triumph—diminished, its elements rearranged, and its weight displaced, redirected if only subtly from the Anti-Rosist campaign to the life of the gaucho Facundo Quiroga, the conditions that made it possible, and what, as a symbol

²⁸ In the dedication to Valentín Alsina, published in the second edition of *Facundo*, Sarmiento writes: "Ensayo y revelación para mi mismo de mis ideas, El *Facundo* adoleció de los defectos de todo fruto de la inspiración del momento, sin el auxilio de documentos a la mano, y ejecutada no bien era concebida, lejos del teatro de los sucesos y con propósitos de acción inmediata y militante." [Essay and revelation of my own ideas to myself, *Facundo* suffered from the deffects of every fruit of the inspiration of the moment, without the aid of documents at hand, executed no sooner than it was conceived, away from the theater of events and with the purpose of immediate and militant action.] (51)

²⁹ On May 1st, 1851, the general Justo José Urquiza, governor of the Argentine province of Entre Ríos, announced what became known as his Pronouncement, by means of which he accepted the periodical renouncements of Rosas to the Sum of Public Power and put himself in charge of the foreign relations pertaining to his province. Rosas's periodical renouncements to the Sum of Public Power (and with it to the representation of all provinces abroad) were a formality meant to ratify his power. Each year Rosas presented his renouncement knowing that it would not be accepted. Rosas did not accept Urquiza's pronouncement and kept himself in power, which made public the hostility between the two provinces and their rulers.

of social and natural circumstances, it embodied. The second edition of *Facundo* seemed to some extent to shift the emphasis of the text from its political, militant program to what could be called, borrowing Sarmiento's own words, its "literary ambition".³⁰ The moment the programmatic elements of the book are de-emphasized (precisely those elements which fueled the "spirit of sect and propaganda" and justified its supporters' applause in the name of the anti-Rosist cause), *Facundo's* other elements —its generic indeterminacy, its lack of rigor vis-à-vis pre-formed standards, its "fantastic lucubrations", its many "descriptions" and "useless chatter" (to repeat Echeverría's criticisms of *Facundo*)— come closer to the center of attention. As they do so, however, they also make themselves more vulnerable to a criticism that insists on the urgency of the militant word, of a politics that asserts itself *in contrast to* literature, which in turn is either subsumed under the sphere of politics, accepting the spirit of sect and propaganda to which it owes its social acceptance, or is relegated to the realm of the gratuitous, idle word.³¹

In the already mentioned dedication of the second edition of *Facundo* to Valentín Alsina, Sarmiento apologizes for the many "gaps" which "disfigured"³² his "poor little book" (51), yet insists on the importance of the book, which, he seems to suggest, despite its many gaps was meant to fill another, perhaps more fundamental gap. For, even though "Los hechos [estén] ahí consignados, clasificados, probados, documentados", he

³⁰ In the dedication of the second edition of *Facundo* to Valentín Alsina, he makes explicit reference to it: "Tengo una ambición literaria, mi caro amigo, y a satisfacerla consagro muchas vigiliass, investigaciones prolijas y estudios meditados. Facundo murió corporalmente en Barranca Yaco, pero su nombre podía escaparse y sobrevivir algunos años sin castigo ejemplar como era merecido." [I have a literary ambition, my dear friend, and to satisfy it I devote many a waking night, prolix investigations and careful studies. Facundo has died corporally in Barranca Yaco, but his name might as well escape and survive a few years without the exemplary punishment it deserves.] (52) It might be worth noting that, at the time of writing *Facundo* (which appeared initially in installments, as a *folletín*), Sarmiento decided to publish it in the new section dedicated to serialized novels, in *El Progreso*, the newspaper he edited during his exile in Santiago, Chile, between 1842 and 1845. By contrast, he opted to publish his previous biography (*Vida de Aldao*, of the General Fray Felix Aldao), just a few months earlier, in the "Sección Correspondencia" of the same newspaper. (Garrels 419-447)

³¹ It was in this spirit that Mr. Monguillot, the Secretary of the Argentine Embassy in Chile around 1852, would bluntly remark: "En Sarmiento no vemos sino un *gaucho malo*. Escriba el señor Sarmiento un tratado de legislación y de administración... y entonces lo apreciaremos; pero mientras escriba folletos lo hemos de calificar de infames y a él lo hemos de despreciar." [In Sarmiento we see only a *bad gaucho*. Should Mr. Sarmiento write a treatise of legislation and administration..., then we would appreciate him; but as long as he writes pamphlets, we shall qualify him as infamous and he shall deserve our scorn.], as quoted in Sarmiento *Las Ciento y Una* (69). Alberdi, more than any other of Sarmiento's critics, was well aware of this vulnerability. See in particular his third letter in *Cartas Quillotanas*, 85-126. See also note 27, above. For an analysis of the dispute between Sarmiento and Alberdi on this and related points, see Adolfo Prieto (*Las Ciento y Una. El escritor como mito político* 477-489).

³² The word Sarmiento uses is "afeaban". Literally: made ugly; uglified.

explained, “fáltales empero el hilo que ha de ligarlos en un solo hecho, el soplo de vida que ha de hacerlos enderezarse todos a un tiempo a la vista del espectador y convertirlos en cuadro vivo con primeros planos palpables y lontananzas necesarias; fáltales el colorido que dan el paisaje, los rayos de sol de la patria.” [The events are available, consigned, classified, proved, documented; they lack however the thread that will connect them into one event only, the breath of life that will align them all at once in front of the spectator’s eyes and convert them into a lively picture (or, in another possible translation: *tableau vivant*) with its palpable foregrounds and necessary backgrounds; they lack the color that comes from the landscape, from the sun-rays of the homeland.] (52-3). The “thread” that Sarmiento’s text was to provide did not stand in contrast, in its organizing role, to the raw data of a supposedly formless objectivity – the events, we are told, were *already* classified, consigned, proved, documented. Instead, Sarmiento stresses the need for selective, deliberate emphasis, for purposeful synthesis over objective analysis. The contrast, then, seems to be one between a scientific order —one whose events are already “available, consigned, classified, proved, documented”— and an order that one may call aesthetic, in which not only the classification of events, but also their “availability”, cannot be unproblematically taken as givens. From this perspective, the reference to “cuadros vivos”, with its tangible foregrounds and colorful backgrounds, is no mere passing metaphor. It marks a deliberate gesture that draws attention to the initial chapters of *Facundo*, in which Sarmiento describes, in an expressive language tributary to European Romanticism, the sublime extension of the Pampas and the four types of gauchos that give Argentina its “originality”³³: the *rastreador* [pathfinder], the *baqueano* [guide], the *gaucho malo* [bad gaucho], and the *cantor* [singer/poet]. In these chapters Sarmiento’s “literary ambition” is at its most explicit. However, their importance goes beyond their obvious role in showing that in Sarmiento one could indeed witness a conflict between the writer and the statesman. They point to some of the ways in which Sarmiento, caught between a will to systematization and a reality antagonistic to this will, appropriated existing discourses, mainly of European origin, and, rearticulating them to fit an Argentine reality that in its excess seemed characterized by its imperviousness to discourse, brought to light some of their own internal limitations. For our purposes, it is worth noting one recurring preoccupation that these two initial chapters of *Facundo* share, sometimes explicitly, sometimes only negatively so, and which will form the axis around which the later chapters on *Facundo* and *Rosas* will turn: the problem of limits. It is also here, in their approach to the question of limits, that the contrast between the aesthetic and the scientific orders is most evident: the former presupposing and asserting limits, the latter questioning and transgressing them.

³³ The reference is to the two first chapters of *Facundo*, titled respectively “Aspecto físico de la República Argentina y caracteres, hábitos e ideas que engendra” [Physical Aspect of the Argentine Republic, and the Ideas, Customs, and Characters it Engenders] and “Originalidad y caracteres argentinos” [Argentine Originality and Characters].

The first chapter of *Facundo* opens with a geographic depiction of the circumscribing limits of the American Continent, in a sort of bird's eye view, and then dives down, closing in to describe the Argentine Pampas:

El Continente Americano termina al Sud en una punta en cuya extremidad se forma el Estrecho de Magallanes. Al Oeste, y a cierta distancia del Pacífico, se extienden paralelos a la costa los Andes chilenos. La tierra que queda al Oriente de aquella cadena de montañas, y al Occidente del Atlántico, siguiendo el Río de la Plata hacia el interior por el Uruguay arriba, es el territorio que se llamó Provincias Unidas del Río de la Plata, y en el que aún se derrama sangre por denominarlo República Argentina o Confederación Argentina. Al norte están el Paraguay, el Gran Chaco y Bolivia, sus límites presuntos.

La inmensa extensión del país que está en sus extremos, es enteramente despoblada, y ríos navegables posee que no ha surcado aún el frágil barquichuelo.

[The American continent ends to the south in a point, at whose extreme end the Strait of Magellan is formed. To the west, and at a short distance from the Pacific, the Chilean Andes run parallel to the coast. The land that lies to the east of that chain of mountains and to the west of the Atlantic, following the Río de la Plata toward the interior upstream along the Uruguay, is the territory formerly called the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, and there, blood is still being shed in order to name it either the Argentine Republic, or the Argentine Confederation. To the north are Paraguay, the Gran Chaco, and Bolivia, its alleged borders.

The immense expanse of land is entirely unpopulated at its extreme limits, and it possesses navigable rivers that the fragile little boat has yet to plow.] (55-6 [45, trans. amended])

As soon as the description of the Pampas begins, however, the preoccupation with limits increases to the point of obsession, but it does so this time as a marked *absence*. Concrete boundaries give way to unpopulated expanses, vast deserts become “the unquestionable limits between one province and another”, and clear demarcations give way to confusion, blurred lines, uncertainty:

El mal que aqueja a la República Argentina es la extensión: el desierto la rodea por todas partes y se le insinúa en las entrañas: la soledad, el despoblado sin una habitación humana, son, por lo general, los límites incuestionables entre unas y otras provincias. Allí la inmensidad por todas partes: inmensa la llanura, inmensos los bosques, inmensos los ríos, el horizonte siempre incierto, siempre confundiéndose con la tierra, entre celajes y vapores tenues, que no dejan, en la lejana perspectiva, señalar el punto en que el mundo acaba y principia el cielo.

[The disease from which the Argentine Republic suffers is its extension: the desert surrounds it on all sides and insinuates into its bowels; solitude, a barren land with no human habitation, in general are the unquestionable borders between one province and another. There, immensity is everywhere: immense plains, immense forests, immense rivers, the horizon always uncertain, always confused with the earth amid swift-moving clouds and tenuous mists, which do not allow, in the far-off perspective, to mark the point where the world ends and the sky begins.] (56 [45-6, trans. amended])

The boundlessness which defines the Pampas —the juxtaposition of “boundlessness” and “definition” is already quite telling: like the Kantian sublime, the means to apprehend the Pampas seem to depend on allusion to the very excess that defies one’s ability to apprehend it — contaminates Sarmiento’s language. One is surprised, for instance, at the contrast resulting from the confrontation between the promise of scientific rigor and objectivity embodied in the title Sarmiento gave to the first chapter of *Facundo* and its actual content. The passages quoted above can hardly conceal the incongruity of belonging to a chapter named, in the tradition of a scientific naturalism that was already preparing the ground for the positivism that would be dominant in late-nineteenth century Latin America, “Aspecto físico de la República Argentina y caracteres, hábitos e ideas que engendra” [Physical Aspect of the Argentine Republic, and the Ideas, Customs, and Characters it Engenders]. It is, however, in the description of the “Argentine originality and characters”, as the second chapter of *Facundo* is titled, that Sarmiento’s obsession with the problem of limits —already manifest in the central place he grants the boundlessness of the Pampas as an explanatory factor— takes control of his language, marking the limits of his own discourse. As he attempts to account for the “originality” of Argentina, Sarmiento comes closest to what, precisely owing to the conditions that set Argentina apart, he was not allowed to be. It is then that his book, written in the heat of the moment under pressing political circumstances, suddenly appears to halt, contemplating in what seems to be a digression when confronted with its declared purpose of “immediate and militant action” (51), the “literary ambition” (52) which, by definition, given the antipodal relation between literature and politics in Rosist Argentina, it was not allowed to fulfill. As he goes on to remark,

Si de las condiciones de la vida pastoril tal como la ha constituido la colonización y la incuria, nacen graves dificultades para una organización política cualquiera, y muchas más para el triunfo de la civilización europea, de sus instituciones y de la riqueza y libertad, que son sus consecuencias, no puede por otra parte negarse que esta situación tiene su costado poético, y faces dignas de la pluma del romancista.”

[Although the conditions of pastoral life, as constituted by colonization and negligence, give rise to grave difficulties for any sort of political organization and many more for the triumph of European civilization, its institutions, and the wealth and liberty that come from it, it cannot be

denied that this situation also has a poetic side, and aspects worthy of the novelist's pen.] (75 [59]).

Ricardo Piglia has noted that “to speak of Sarmiento the writer is to speak of the impossibility of being a writer in nineteenth-century Argentina” (Sarmiento the Writer 127). This is so because the scenario in which Sarmiento writes *Facundo* is one dictated by the urgency of politics. At a first glance, the passage quoted above might tempt one to suppose that for Sarmiento the boundaries that separate politics, on the one hand —the colonial legacy, the problem of social and administrative organization, the institution of institutions—, from literature, on the other, are as clearly marked as both his critics and his supporters seemed to believe. Literature, Sarmiento seems to suggest, pertained not so much to the organization of life and the institutions that make it possible — this being the urgent business of politics—, but rather was to draw its inspiration from, and find its role in the expression of, the magnificent natural scenes and the picturesque uses and customs to which the vast extension of the Pampas provided the stage— the very symbols of the barbarism against which the Anti-Rosist political cause directed its thrust. “Existe, pues”, Sarmiento tells us, “un fondo de poesía que nace de los accidentes naturales del país y de las costumbres excepcionales que engendra.” [There exists, then, an underlying poetry, born of the natural features of the country and the unique customs it engenders.] And whereas politics is inextricably tied to immediate action and the militant word, literature would seem to presuppose contemplation, a spectator distant enough from the theater of events so that the events might present themselves as a spectacle to the imaginative eye: “La poesía, para despertarse (porque la poesía es como el sentimiento religioso, una facultad del espíritu humano), necesita el espectáculo de lo bello, del poder terrible, de la inmensidad, de la extensión, de lo vago, de lo incomprensible; porque sólo donde acaba lo palpable y vulgar, empiezan las mentiras de la imaginación, el mundo ideal.” [Poetry, in order to awaken (for poetry is like religious feeling, a faculty of the human spirit), needs the spectacle of beauty, of terrible power, of immensity, of expanse, of vagueness, of incomprehensibility, because only where the palpable and vulgar ends, can the lies of imagination, the ideal world, begin.] (78[60-1]) Indeed, if the realm of politics is that of organization, institutions, legislation —civilization in short—, poetry, occupying what seems to be the opposite pole, is related to uncertainty, fantasy, danger, barbarism:

Ahora, yo pregunto: ¿Qué impresiones ha de dejar en el habitante de la República Argentina el simple acto de clavar los ojos en el horizonte, y ver... no ver nada; porque cuanto más hunde los ojos en aquel horizonte incierto, vaporoso, indefinido, más se le aleja, más lo fascina, lo confunde, y lo sume en la contemplación y la duda? ¿Dónde termina aquel mundo que quiere en vano penetrar? ¡No lo sabe! ¿Qué hay más allá de lo que ve? ¡La soledad, el peligro, el salvaje, la muerte! He aquí ya la poesía: el hombre que se mueve en estas escenas se siente asaltado de temores e incertidumbres fantásticas, de sueños que le preocupan despierto.

[Now I ask: what impression must be left on the inhabitant of the Argentine Republic by the simple act of fixing his eyes on the horizon and

seeing... seeing nothing; because the more he sinks his eyes into that uncertain, vaporous, indefinite horizon, the farther away it gets from him, the more it fascinates him, confuses him, and plunges him into contemplation and doubt? Where does the world end that, in vain, he wishes to penetrate? He does not know! What is out there beyond what he can see? Solitude, danger, savages, death! This then is poetry: the man who moves among these scenes feels assaulted by fears and fantastic uncertainties, by dreams that disturb him while he is awake] (78 [61, trans. amended])

Embodied in this description of the untamed boundlessness of the Pampas are the main challenges of the anti-Rosist political program: the vast extension that stands as an obstacle to, rather than the space for, productive forms of association; the “savages” which inhabit the unpopulated expanses and which appear indeed as the very antithesis of a population; the indecision and idleness that come from contemplation and doubt, standing on the way of industry and political action. The opposition between literature and politics, in short, could not be here any clearer. Yet Sarmiento, possessing a literary ambition, refused to abide by this unequivocal polarization. He seemed to be aware that reading the relationship between fiction and politics as one of antipodal opposition and clearly marked boundaries *was already to read this relationship from the standpoint of politics*; it was, in other words, to subordinate in advance one of the poles to the other, thereby begging the question of authority in favor of the latter, bringing to a resolution, by decree and with a sleight of hand, the undecidable dialectics of production (the production of forms, including the form that will ground authority, the production of which precedes both authority and its legislating power) and legislation, the question — which legislation, by definition and for definition’s sake, must at all costs decide³⁴ — of where production ends and where legislation begins. And it was precisely the question of authority —of the relationship between production and legislation, its origins, grounds, and the mechanisms of its perpetuation— that Sarmiento was not willing to beg. Authority was for him a problem to be dealt with and understood rather than merely the premise on which the resolution of problems, judgment, depended. The problem of authority —the authority of Rosas, its genesis and perpetuation— was the enigma whose secret he hoped the “terrible ghost of Facundo” would help him unravel.³⁵ It is in its

³⁴ Abhorring the possibility of the *non liquet* —law’s version of the *horror vacui*—, legislation’s motto seems to be the Latin sentence “*fiat justitia, pereat mundus*”, which it, indifferent to the moralizing scruples still to be found in Kant, translates simply as: “let justice be done, even if the world should perish”. (Kant, with a moral license that can only come from rigorous moral scruples, decided to ignore the adversative syntax of the sentence, translating it instead as: “Let justice reign, even if all the rogues in the world should perish”, in which the “even if” reads as “so that”. (Perpetual Peace, and other essays on politics, history, and moral practice 133)

³⁵ The reference is to the well-known opening paragraph of *Facundo*: “¡Sombra terrible de Facundo voy a evocarte, para que sacudiendo el ensangrentado polvo que cubre tus cenizas, te levantes a explicarnos la vida secreta y las convulsiones internas que desgarran las entrañas de un noble pueblo! Tú posees el secreto: revélanoslo. Diez años aún después de tu trágica muerte, el hombre de

resistance to resolution—in its reluctance to see in the problem of authority a key rather than a problem—, in its obsession with limits rather than with the divisions that take limits for granted, and in the consequent refusal to clearly choose one side or the other of the dividing line *despite its programmatic claims otherwise*, that Sarmiento’s *Facundo* fails to obey the norms of truth it posits. Giving voice to his literary ambition while situating literature explicitly at an intersection that resists being fully subsumed to the circle of ideas that defines his political program, Sarmiento writes, alluding to the vastness of the Pampas he has just described and at the same time prefacing the account of the original characters and scenes that he himself is about to undertake:

las ciudades y el gaucho de los llanos argentinos, al tomar diversos senderos en el desierto, decían: ‘¡No! ¡no ha muerto!; ¡Vive aún! Él vendrá!’ —Cierto” Facundo no ha muerto; está vivo en las tradiciones populares, en la política y revoluciones argentinas; en Rosas, su heredero, su complemento: su alma ha pasado en este otro molde más acabado, más perfecto; y lo que en él era sólo instinto, iniciación, tendencia, convirtiéndose en Rosas en sistema, efecto y fin; la naturaleza campestre, colonial y bárbara, cambióse en esta metamorfosis en arte, en sistema y en política regular capaz de presentarse a la faz del mundo como el modo de ser de un pueblo encarnado en un hombre que ha aspirado a tomar los aires de un genio que domina los acontecimientos, los hombres y las cosas. Facundo, provinciano, bárbaro, valiente, audaz, fue remplazado por Rosas, hijo de la culta Buenos Aires, sin serlo él; por Rosas falso, corazón helado, espíritu calculador, que hace el mal sin pasión, y organiza lentamente el despotismo con toda la inteligencia de un Maquiavelo. Tirano sin rival hoy en la tierra, ¿por qué sus enemigos quieren disputarle el título de *Grande* que le prodigan sus cortesanos? Sí; grande y muy grande es para gloria y vergüenza de su patria; porque si ha encontrado millares de seres degradados que se unzan a su carro para arrastrarlo por encima de cadáveres, también se hallan a millares las almas generosas que en quince años de lid sangrienta no han desesperado de vencer al monstruo que nos propone el enigma de la organización política de la República.”

[Terrible specter of Facundo, I will evoke you, so that you may rise, shaking off the bloody dust covering your ashes, and explain the hidden life and the inner convulsions that tear at the bowels of a noble people! You possess the secret: reveal it to us! Even ten years after your tragic death, the men of the cities and the gauchos of the Argentine plains, following different paths in the desert, were saying: “No! he has not died! He still lives! He will return!” True! Facundo has not died. He lives on in popular traditions, in Argentine politics and revolutions, in Rosas, his heir, his complement; his soul has moved into that new mold, one more perfect and finished, and what in him was only instinct, impulse, and a tendency, in Rosas became a system, means, and end. Rural nature, colonial and barbarous, was changed through this metamorphosis into art, into a system, and into regular policy, able to present itself to the world as the way of being of a people, incarnated in one man who has aspired to take on the airs of a genius dominating events, men, and things. Facundo—provincial, barbarous, brave, bold—was replaced by Rosas, son of culture Buenos Aires without being so himself; by Rosas, traitorous, cold-hearted, calculating soul, who does evil without passion, and slowly organizes despotism with all the intelligence of a Machiavelli. Tyrant without rival today on earth, why would his enemies dispute the title of “Great One” proclaimed by his courtiers? Yes, great and very great he is, to the glory and shame of his homeland; for, though he has found thousands of degraded beings willing to yoke themselves to his cart and drag it over dead bodies, there are also generous souls by the thousand who, in fifteen years of bloody battle, have not despaired of vanquishing the monster that presents to us the enigma of the political organization of the Republic.] (37-9 [31-2, translation amended])

Si un destello de literatura nacional puede brillar momentáneamente en las nuevas sociedades americanas es el que resultará de la descripción de las grandiosas escenas naturales, y sobre todo, de la lucha entre la civilización europea y la barbarie indígena, entre la inteligencia y la materia: lucha imponente en América, y que da lugar a escenas tan peculiares, tan características y tan fuera del círculo de ideas en que se ha educado el espíritu europeo.

[If a glimmer of a national literature may momentarily shine in the new American societies, it will come from the descriptions of grand scenes of nature, and above all, from the struggle between European civilization and indigenous barbarism, between intelligence and matter: an imponent struggle in America, which gives rise to scenes that are very peculiar, very characteristic, and very alien to the circle of ideas within which the European spirit is educated.] (75-6 [59])

Significantly, it is also in this context that Sarmiento will make a reference to Fenimore Cooper, “el único romancista norteamericano que haya logrado hacerse un nombre europeo” [the only North American novelist who has succeeded in making a name for himself in Europe], and whose success was owing precisely to his insistence on inhabiting and exploring the limits, the in-between space that the binary logic of civilization and barbarism failed to account for. Fenimore Cooper was able to make a name in Europe, according to Sarmiento, “porque transportó la escena de sus descripciones fuera del círculo ocupado por los plantadores, *al límite entre la vida bárbara y la civilizada*, al teatro de la Guerra en que las razas indígenas y la raza sajona están combatiendo por la posesión del terreno” [this is because he transported the scene of his descriptions outside the sphere occupied by the settlers, *to the borderland between barbarous and civilized life*, to the theater of war where the indigenous races and the Saxon race are fighting for possession of the territory.] (76 [59], emphasis added) It is with these observations in sight that Piglia will remind us that *Facundo* is a book “written on the border” between the worlds of civilization and barbarism; that Sarmiento’s writing “unites heterogeneity”; that “to situate oneself at the limit”, as Sarmiento, as *Facundo* insistently does, “is to be able to represent one world from the vantage point of another, to be able to narrate the passage and the crossing” (Sarmiento the Writer 134). What Piglia does not mention, however, is that in *Facundo* it is not an easy task to tell the whence from the whereto in this crossing. To situate oneself at the limit, to inhabit precisely that mark that marks the separation from one habitation, one entity, to the other, would seem to preclude the very idea of crossing it is supposed to enable; it would seem to freeze the motion of passage to the extent that the notion of “limit” seems to be no more than a mark of difference, a necessary concession to the abstract and the unsubstantial for the sake of substance, the intangible *between* that makes it possible to conceive of crossings and passages, of tangible origins and concrete destinations. It is in this central aporia, in its refusal to choose one pole over the other of the dichotomy around which it organizes its economy of meaning— its refusal, in other words, to give

full voice to the polarizing discourse of politics whose urgency is one of its conditions of production — that *Facundo* gives a productive turn to its failure to obey the norms of truth it posits.

Nevertheless, this central aporia is not restricted to the structural and meta-structural aspects of the book. On the one hand, it possesses a constitutive function in the rhetorical fabric of the text, weaving together the threads that give substance to the authorial voice of the book. On the other hand —and here a surprising connection between voice and subject is to be found—, it is given form at the book’s thematic level, articulating in ambivalent movements and by means of an unexpected and not immediately evident identification the characterizations of two of the gaucho types described by Sarmiento —the *gaucho malo* and the *cantor*— with the authorial voice, the strong biographical “I” that stands for Sarmiento himself; a voice whose authority, like that of the *gaucho malo*, like that of the *cantor*, stands in an ambiguous and often antagonistic relationship to law.

It all begins with an anecdote. Sarmiento prefaces *Facundo* with an account of his flight into exile, inscribing the initial mark of the authorial voice — the source of its authority— in its antagonism to law:

A fines del año 1840 salía yo de mi patria desterrado por lástima, estropeado, lleno de cardenales, puntazos y golpes recibidos el día anterior en una de esas bacanales sangrientas de soldadesca y mazorqueros. Al pasar por los baños de Zonda, bajo las armas de la Patria que en días más alegres había pintado en una sala, escribí con carbón estas palabras: *On ne tue point les idées*.

El gobierno, a quien se comunicó el hecho, mandó una comisión encargada de descifrar el jeroglífico, que se decía contener desahogos innobles, insultos y amenazas. Oída la traducción, “¡Y bien!”, dijeron, “¿qué significa esto?”

[Toward the end of 1840 I was leaving my homeland, pitifully exiled, broken, covered with bruises, kicks, and blows received the day before in one of those bloody bacchanals of unruly soldiers and *mazorqueros*. Passing the Baths of Zonda, beneath a national coat of arms that in happier days I had painted in a room, I wrote these words with charcoal: *On ne tue point les idées*.

The government, informed of this deed, sent a commission in charge of deciphering the hieroglyph, which was said to contain base venting, insults, and threats. Upon hearing the translation, “So!” they said, “what does this mean?”] (35-6 [30])

The author introduces himself as an outcast, an outlaw. This is the ambiguous scene of authority —this is the original scene of authority— out of which *Facundo* develops. From the beginning —and the tension between law and authority that opens the

book is always present whenever it is a matter of beginnings—, the antagonism between literature and politics, literature and power, between the voice that presents and the voice that banishes, greets the reader. Seen from this point of view, the irony —whether intentional or dramatic it is difficult to tell— that connects Sarmiento’s presentation of himself to his presentation of the gaucho types in the book is hardly to be missed. That which from the point of view of politics appears as an opposition established well in advance of the text—barbarism, by definition, as Otherness; the gaucho, as the barbarian type, as the typical Other—, from the perspective of the authorial voice appears, rather, the moment the voice speaks, as the object of an ambivalent identification. Although the first two gaucho types which Sarmiento describes — the *rastreador* [the pathfinder] and the *baqueano* [the guide]— are examples of “good” gauchos, who are able to move within the law owing to the “good use” to which their skills might be put (who can, in other words, be instrumentalized for the sake of the political cause³⁶), the *gaucho malo*

³⁶ Not only are the *rastreador* and the *baqueano* able to move within the law, but, to the extent that their skills can be put to use and instrumentalized, they also work *for* the law. Sarmiento’s choice of words and selection of examples when describing the *rastreador* are telling: “El *rastreador* es un personaje grave, circunspecto, *cuyas aseveraciones hacen fe en los tribunales inferiores*. Todos le tratan con consideración: el pobre porque puede hacerle mal, *calumniándolo o denunciándolo*; el propietario, *porque su testimonio puede fallarle*. Un robo se ha ejecutado durante la noche: no bien se nota, corren a buscar pisada del ladrón, y encontrada, se cubre con algo para que el viento no la disipe. Se llama en seguida al *Rastreador*, que ve el rastro, y lo sigue sin mirar sino de tarde en tarde el suelo, como si sus ojos vieran de relieve esta pisada que para otros es imperceptible. Sigue el curso de las calles, atraviesa huertos, entra en una casa, y señalando un hombre que encuentra, dice fríamente: ‘jeste es!’. *El delito está probado, y raro es el delincuente que resiste a esta acusación.*” [The *rastreador* is a serious, circumspect person, *whose pronouncements are accepted as evidence in the lower courts*. The awareness of the knowledge he possesses gives him a certain reserved and mysterious dignity. Everyone treats him with consideration: the poor man, because the *rastreador* can do him harm *by slandering him or denouncing him*; the landowner, *because the rastreador’s testimony can decide a judgment for or against him*. A theft has been committed during the night: scarcely is it discovered, they run to search for a footprint made by the thief, and this found, cover it over with something so the wind will not fade it. The *rastreador* is called in immediately; he looks at the tracks and follows them, only looking at the ground from time to time, as if his eyes were seeing a relief of that footprint, imperceptible to others. He follows along the streets, crosses through gardens, enters a home, and coldly says, pointing out a man he finds there: ‘He’s the one!’ *The crime is proven, and rare is the criminal who protests the accusation.*] (83 [64-5], my emphasis)

Like the *rastreador*, the *baqueano* too deserves the respect of the law, working within it and for it. No general, no army, Sarmiento tells us, could do without his knowledge and skills: “Después del *rastreador*, viene el *Baqueano*, personaje eminente, y que tiene en sus manos la suerte de los particulares y la de las provincias. El *baqueano* es un gaucho grave y reservado que conoce a palmos veinte mil leguas cuadradas de llanuras, bosques y montañas. Es el topógrafo más completo, es el único mapa que lleva un general para dirigir los movimientos de su campaña. El *Baqueano* va siempre a su lado. Modesto y reservado como una tapia, está en todos los secretos de la campaña; la suerte del ejército, el éxito de una batalla, la conquista de una provincia, todo depende de él.” [After the *rastreador* comes the *Baqueano*, an eminent personage who holds in his hands the fate of individuals and of provinces. The *baqueano* is a reserved, serious gaucho, who knows twenty thousand square leagues of plains, forests, and mountains like the palm of his hand. He is the most complete topographer, the only map a general takes along to direct the movements of his campaign. The *baqueano* is always at his side. As modest and reserved as a mud wall, he is in on all the secrets

[the bad gaucho] and the *cantor* [the singer/poet], on the other hand, embodying delinquency and vagrancy (which, in the eyes of the instrumental rationality of the emerging state, are hardly distinguishable), stand in explicit antagonism to law. Having described the “good gauchos”, Sarmiento introduces us to the *gaucho malo*:

Este es un tipo de ciertas localidades, un *outlaw*, un *squatter*, un misántropo particular. Es el *Ojo de Halcón*, el *Trampero* de Cooper, con toda su ciencia del desierto, con toda su aversión a las poblaciones de los blancos, pero sin su moral natural, y sin sus conexiones con los salvajes. Llámánle el *gaucho malo*, sin que este epíteto le desfavorezca del todo. La justicia lo persigue desde muchos años; su nombre es temido, pronunciado en voz baja, pero sin odio y casi con respeto.

[He is a type of certain localities, an *outlaw*, a *squatter*, a particular sort of misanthrope. He is Cooper’s Hawkeye or Trapper, with all his science of the desert, with all his aversion to white settlements, but without his natural morality and without his connection to the savages. They call him the *bad gaucho*, this epithet not totally disfavoring him. Justice has pursued him for many years; his name is feared, pronounced in a low voice, but without hatred and almost with respect.] (88 [68, translation amended])

The *gaucho malo* is, by definition (i.e. by law), an outlaw. Not only that: the respect he “almost” deserves, the fear his name arouses, his authority, in short, come from this very opposition to law. And, unlike law, which defines by exclusion, which affirms itself—the law— by excluding its other—the *outlaw*—, the *gaucho malo* can claim to know, to comprehend that which in the eyes of the law is a void, an outside that marks the limits of knowledge and the beginning of non-knowledge, the boundaries of civilization’s territory and the wasteland of barbarism: the *gaucho malo*, too, we are told, has his science, a “science of the desert”. Despite being an outlaw —“un hombre divorciado con la sociedad, proscripto por las leyes”—, the *gaucho malo*, “este salvaje de color blanco”, is not a bandit, Sarmiento clarifies. (89[69]) It is true that he steals— but, Sarmiento is quick to add, “esta es su profesión, su tráfico, su ciencia.” [“He steals, that is true, but this is his profession, his trade, his science”] (89[69]). To know the barbarous desert, to have a science of barbarism — the very task Sarmiento set for himself in writing *Facundo*— is, in the eyes of the law, a contradiction in terms, one which can only be resolved by recourse to an either/or logic of sameness and otherness in which barbarism must either become civilization, in which case knowledge of it *as* barbarism would be precluded, or else it must remain civilization’s other, in which case it would remain impervious to any knowledge at all; an either/or logic of subsumption and exclusion which reinstates the very polarization that politics presupposes and literature resists.

of the campaign; the fate of the army, the success of the battle, the conquest of a province, all depend on him.] (85 [66])

Like the *gaucho malo*, who finds in the Pampas his “morada sin limites” [his limitless abode] (89 [69]), the *cantor* “no tiene residencia fija: su morada está donde la noche le sorprende: su fortuna en sus versos y en su voz.” [the cantor has no permanent residence: his abode is wherever the night finds him; his assets are his verses and his voice.] (91 [70]) The *cantor* “anda de pago en pago, ‘de tapera en galpón’, cantando sus héroes de la Pampa, perseguidos por la justicia, los llantos de la viuda a quien los indios robaron sus hijos en un *malón* reciente, la derrota y la muerte del valiente Rauch, la catástrofe de Facundo Quiroga, y la suerte que cupo a Santos Pérez” [The cantor wanders from place to place, ‘from shacks to storehouses’, singing of his heroes of the Pampas pursued by the law, the sobs of the widow whose children were carried off by wild Indians during a recent raid, the defeat and death of the valiant Rauch, the catastrophe of Facundo Quiroga, and the fate that befell Santos Pérez.]. Together with the *gaucho malo*, the *cantor* embodies the rootlessness which Sarmiento deems an obstacle for progress³⁷. He, too, makes of the intersection between civilization and barbarism (despite civilization’s insistence on sameness and otherness, despite its resistance to intersections) the subject of his songs: “Aquí”, Sarmiento tells us, “tenéis la idealización de aquella vida de revueltas, de civilización, de barbarie y de peligros. El *gaucho cantor* es el mismo bardo, el vate, el trovador de la edad media, que se mueve en la misma escena, entre las luchas de las ciudades y del feudalismo de los campos, entre la vida que se va y la vida que se acerca.” [Here you have the ideal image of that life of revolt, civilization, barbarism, and danger. The *gaucho cantor* is the very same bard, poet, or troubadour of the Middle Ages, who moves in the same scenes, between the struggles of the city and the feudalism of the countryside, between the life that ends and the life that begins.] (90 [69-70, trans. amended]). Moreover —and here Sarmiento points to a direct link between the *gaucho malo* and the *cantor*, between delinquency and vagrancy, which stand in stark contrast to the instrumentality of the *rastreador* and the *baqueano*—, the *cantor*, “desgraciadamente, ... con ser el bardo argentino, no está libre de tener que habérsele con la justicia. También tiene que dar cuenta de sendas puñaladas que ha distribuido, una o dos desgracias (¡muertes!) que tuvo, y algún caballo o muchacha que robó.” [unfortunately, the cantor, despite being the Argentine bard, is not freed from having to deal with the law. He, too, has to own up to some stabbings he has dealt out, one or two *desgracias* (killings!) of his own, and some horse or girl he stole.] (92 [70]).

This antagonism to law —which is also to say, this intimate relationship to law— is at the root of the notion of “gaucho”. The gaucho is defined in opposition to discipline, rules, government, organized society. But, most importantly: he is also defined *by* them. The opposition is an asymmetrical one; there is no third man, no outside arbiter according to which the opposition can be articulated on even ground. The criteria around which the opposition revolves, the relative meaning of its terms, the very role that contradiction plays within it— tying them together and keeping them apart, revealing itself in the assertion of the dichotomy yet concealing itself so that each of the opposing terms might

³⁷ “...no puede haber progreso sin la posesión permanente de del suelo...” [there can be no progress without permanent possession of the land] (68 [54, trans. amended])

appear to stand on its own, identical to itself—, and the legislation of what counts as a contradiction in terms, and which of the terms it counts against — all this is the prerogative of *one* of the terms alone, which functions as one of the poles and simultaneously as the center of the relationship of which it is both part and legislator. The moment one begins to speak of a “science of the desert”, however, the economy around which this relationship is organized is subverted. As Josefina Ludmer has argued in her now classic study on the gaucho genre, the law, the appropriation of his voice by learned culture, the uses he is put to by the emerging nation (the gaucho is either a delinquent and a vagrant —a *gaucho malo*—, or is useful for the patriotic cause and suitable to enter as a popular myth in the national imaginary or as expendable material in the national army), all concur to define the gaucho. (Ludmer 5-8)³⁸ “The gaucho genre”, Ludmer writes, “situates itself in choice itself” (10-11), yet given the alternatives, which are determined by a binary structure of sameness and otherness, subsumption and exclusion, it is a choice dictated from the outside of the outside which the gaucho occupies, from that which the gaucho *is not*. If the gaucho is not to be a *gaucho malo* — if he is not, in other words, to “choose” exclusion—, he must lend his body to the army for the sake of a civilizing project hostile to the material conditions which make the gauchos possible in the first place, and, through the mediation of the written word performed by the gauchesque genre, he must lend his voice to the authorizing fiction of the emerging nation, which institutes itself as a separate sphere (the heroic past, a national mythology, a national literature) to the extent that the nation consolidates itself at the expense of the gaucho on which, and against which, it thrives.

To be sure, Sarmiento the man, after his return to Argentina and the fall of Rosas, will in due time clearly distinguish the poet from the statesman. He will, unlike the Rosas-Plato of his analogy, perform the move from poet to statesman in such a way as to

³⁸ “Even the use of the word ‘gaucho’ was ambiguous in Rosist terminology. It had two meanings, depending on the situation. In public, it was used as a term of esteem, and perpetuated the idea that the gaucho, like the rancher, was a model of native virtues and that the interests of the two groups were identical.... In private, however, especially in police use, ‘gaucho’ meant vagrant, ill-kempt, delinquent. The first usage represented political propaganda. The pejorative sense expressed class distinction, social prejudices and economic attitudes; the land-owner, in need of workers, used it to confront the man of the country who wanted to remain free.” (Lynch, John. *Argentine Dictator: Juan Manuel de Rosas* 212. Quoted in Ludmer 18-19). This ambivalent attitude towards the gaucho —split between instrumentalization and criminalization— was not limited to the period of Rosas, though. According to Tulio Halperín Donghi, the revolutionary forces of 1810 (the year of the May Revolution, which marks the first victories of the Argentine War of Independence) limited the obligation to join the army to the marginal population, while explicitly ordering a rigorous conscription of vagrants and men with no known occupation: “Desde que advierte que debe prepararse para una guerra larga, el poder revolucionario limita la obligación de las armas a la población marginal: el 29 de mayo de 1810 la Junta ordenaba el retorno al servicio activo de todos los soldados dados de baja pero admitía de inmediato excepción en favor de los que ejerciesen ‘algún arte mecánico o servicio público’; del mismo modo, al ordenar simultáneamente ‘una rigurosa leva’ declaraba comprendidos en ella solo a ‘los vagos y hombres sin ocupación conocida, desde la edad de 18 hasta la de 40 años’.

leave no doubt about the ostensive separation between the two— and in so doing he will leave his “literary ambition” behind. Ricardo Piglia has remarked that Sarmiento’s literary writing can be dated: it ranges from 1838, the year he and some friends founded a “literary society” in his native San Juan, to 1852, the year that marks the fall of Rosas. After that, Piglia says, “Sarmiento can no longer write. He turns to other fields, as his fifty-two volumes of *Obras Completas* cannot fail to show.” Piglia then points to a symbolic scene that marks this move from literature to politics, the subsumption of the former to the latter:

There is a particular scene in which Sarmiento narrates this termination: ‘That night I went to Palermo and, taking pen and paper from the desk of Rosas, I wrote four words to my friends in Chile with this date, *Palermo de San Benito, February 4, 1852.*’ A decisive moment, a symbolic gesture: his writing has reached the plateau of power, and from this moment on there will be almost no room, separation, or place for literature. (Sarmiento the Writer 127-8)³⁹

Sarmiento, poet become statesman, will eventually reach the highest seat of power, the presidency of the Argentine Republic, at which occasion he will have the opportunity to make sure that the political program underlying *Facundo* is thrown against *Facundo* itself. Yet Sarmiento the writer, the authority of whose voice, speaking from

³⁹ 1852 also marks the publication of Sarmiento’s *Campaña en el Ejército Grande*, in which, among other things, Sarmiento narrates the military campaign under Justo José de Urquiza that would defeat Rosas in the battle of Caseros. It marks the shift from literature to politics in the *oeuvre* of Sarmiento (which, as I have been trying to argue, is actually a shift from the *conflation* of literature and politics (which is also the conflation of production and legislation, of which *Facundo* is a prime example, to the *differentiation* between the two, performed from the standpoint of the latter, in which politics asserts its authority and literature is relegated to its own, autonomous sphere). Piglia comments: “There is a close contemporaneity between Flaubert’s well-known letter to Louise Colet, written in January of 1852, in which he expresses his desire to write a book about nothing, and Sarmiento’s writing of *Campaña en el Ejército Grande*. Flaubert’s desire synthesizes the highest point in the independence of literature: to write a book about nothing, a book that searches for absolute autonomy and pure form. And it is within that private letter from Flaubert to his lover that we find contemporary literature’s manifesto. A historical process is condensed: “Marx and Flaubert are the first writers to speak of the opposition between art and capitalism. The unproductive character of literature is antagonistic toward bourgeois reasoning, and Flaubert’s artistic conscience is an extreme case of this opposition. He creates a book about nothing, a book that would be good for nothing, that would be beyond the register of bourgeois utility: the maximum autonomy of art is at the same time the most acute moment in its rejection of society” (“Sarmiento the Writer” 128). Given that this society is organized according to the very bourgeois reasoning which literature seems to oppose, one could speak of a relative rejection of literature by society. Piglia continues: “Quite the contrary, in January of 1852 Sarmiento searches within the effectiveness and utility of the written word. In *Campaña en el Ejército* he argues with Justo José de Urquiza (who neither listens, nor recognizes him, nor answers much, and who finally intimidates him with his dog, Purvis) and futilely attempts to convince him of the importance and social power of the written word. *Campaña* narrates this conflict and in truth represents an explicit debate (a campaign) about the function and utility of writing.” (128-9)

exile, depends on its antagonism to instituted law, is the Sarmiento on which a certain tradition of national literature will be founded.

1.2. Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*

1.2.1. Writing *contre la lettre*: the reception of *Os Sertões*

... demarcar nesta esfera literária um domínio comum da fantasia e da razão, destinado aos eleitos que sejam ao mesmo passo filósofos e poetas; -- porque se tivemos um Porto Seguro e um Roberto Southey para relacionarem causas e efeitos e respigarem nos velhos acontecimentos algumas regras de sabedoria política, certo ainda não tivemos um Domingo Sarmiento ou um Herculano para que nos abreviasse a distância do passado e, num evocar surpreendente, trouxesse aos nossos dias os nossos maiores com seus caracteres dominantes, fazendo-nos compartilhar um pouco as suas existências imortais...

(Euclides da Cunha, Discurso de Recepção à Academia Brasileira de Letras 208)

...aquele livro bárbaro da minha mocidade — monstruoso poema da brutalidade e da força — é tão destoante da maneira tranquila pela qual considero hoje a vida, que eu mesmo às vezes custo a entendê-lo.

(Euclides da Cunha, *Obra Completa*, vol. II, 698, Carta a Augustín de Vedia)

Like Sarmiento in Argentina before him, Euclides da Cunha, an engineer by formation and a Republican by persuasion, would also be caught half a century later in Brazil between the emergency of discourses of authority — those of politics in the young Brazilian Republic and of the scientificism that provided its ideological scaffolding — and the emergence of another kind of discourse, one whose identity was as yet undefined, or was rather in the process of being defined by contrast with and in opposition to those authoritative discourses with which it nonetheless was always already in dialogue.

When da Cunha's book *Os Sertões* was published, it was precisely this undefined quality of his text that stood out in the eyes of its first reviewers. Because the discursive

field seemed to pay little attention to established genres and their respective formal and conceptual boundaries, it was perhaps not surprising that its first critics would try to make use of familiar terms in order to describe and circumscribe it, mixing and matching available categories in an interpretative effort that would have as a result the portrayal of da Cunha's book as a motley discursive arrangement, a strange, oxymoronic composite entity, not unlike the "Hercules-Quasímodo" figure da Cunha had himself forged to describe the inhabitants of the Brazilian backlands that were among the protagonists of his book. Thus, on the 3rd of December, 1902, merely a day after the book's publication, José Veríssimo, the most respected Brazilian literary critic of those years, published a review in the *Correio da Manhã* describing *Os Sertões* as "ao mesmo tempo o livro de um homem de ciência, um geógrafo, um geólogo, um etnógrafo; de um homem de pensamento, um filósofo, um sociólogo, um historiador; e de um homem de sentimento, um poeta, um romancista, um artista" [at the same time a book of a man of science, a geographer, a geologist, an ethnographer; of a man thought, a philosopher, a sociologist, a historian; and of a man of feelings, a poet, a novelist, an artist] (Juízos Críticos 46). Veríssimo's motley picture of da Cunha's *Os Sertões* would provide the standard through which the book was to be seen, dissected, admired, and criticized both by his contemporaries and by later scholars and critics alike: it articulated and gave expression to a radical resistance to confront the book in its own terms and according to its own unfamiliar logic, while at the same time giving shape to the corresponding tendency to talk about it by borrowing precisely those pre-established terms and categories that the book seemed so often to resist and to transgress. Thus, Leopoldo Freitas, writing for the *Diário Popular* of São Paulo on the 16th of December, 1902, would assert, channeling Veríssimo's review, what seemed to be by then already a shared view of da Cunha's "scientific-literary production": "Opiniões diversas mostraram que o autor conjuntou no seu livro os mais profundos conhecimentos de geografia do interior brasileiro, da geologia, da etnologia e também da sociologia, cujas teorias ele expõe numa linguagem fluente e formosa" [Diverse opinions have shown that the author conjoined in his book the most profound knowledge of geography of the Brazilian backlands, of geology, ethnology, and also of sociology, whose theories he expounds in a language both fluent and beautiful.] (Juízos Críticos 35) Araripe Júnior, another well regarded literary critic, after calling da Cunha's book, in a telling though possibly unintended oxymoronic phrase, one that is "unique in its genre", wrote that *Os Sertões* "reúne a uma forma artística superior e original, uma elevação histórico-filosófica impressionante e um talento épico-dramático, um gênio trágico como muito dificilmente se nos deparará em outro psicologista nacional" [it brings together in an artistic form that is superior and original, impressive historico-philosophical heights, and an epic-dramatic talent; a tragic genius that one is hard-pressed to find in another national psychologist.] (Juízos Críticos 56). In the same vein, Múcio Teixeira, employing the same categories, noted that *Os Sertões* "é uma obra histórica, uma obra científica e uma obra de arte" [it is a historical work, a work of science, and a work of art], taking pains, however, to point out that, "analisado sob quaisquer destes pontos, [o livro] resiste vitorioso às exigências da crítica" [analyzed from any of these points of view, the book resists victoriously the demands of criticism] (Juízos Críticos 42). Despite the unparalleled editorial success of Euclides da

Cunha's book, which in three years reached its third edition, the first edition being sold out in less than two months, an event which one of his biographers referred to as unprecedented in the editorial market of the country (Rabelo 215), it owed its unexpected success not to *satisfying* the demands of the critical establishment, but rather to *resisting* them. How are we to understand this resistance, and what are we to make of this success that took place, as it were, *contre la lettre*?

One way to approach the question is to start by noting that the "resistance to the demands of criticism" signaled by Múcio Teixeira's review is pervasive in the critical literature dedicated to *Os Sertões*; it has been a defining mark of this literature from the very beginning and remains as such to the present day. It is tempting to claim that the relationship between da Cunha's book's resistance to the demands of criticism and that very criticism is a symbiotic one; that, on the one hand, *Os Sertões* owes its lasting critical relevance to not yielding, or not fully yielding, to the demands of criticism, whereas on the other hand that criticism owes its endless productivity (not to mention its own relevance and *raison d'être*⁴⁰) precisely to the fact that it deals with an object that resists subjection to its demands and therefore avoids being exhausted. (Institutionalized criticism thrives in the maintenance of the gap between itself and its object — a gap that it, nonetheless, vocally proclaims as its function to reduce or eliminate.) But this apparent symbiotic relationship conceals, in fact, a radical problem. Much of the secondary literature on *Os Sertões* has taken as its subject this very resistance *without realizing, however, that its own critical tools and vocabulary, built as they are around the fundamental methodological assumption that an object can be translated into the idiom of the critic without suffering in the process the loss of precisely those unfamiliar aspects that have justified and enticed the interest of critical activity in the first place, are partly responsible for the very resistance that they now take as the object and theme of their critical discourse.* This secondary literature has taken as its critical starting point a series of *distinctions* ("science" vs. "thought" vs. "art") that it had accepted *before the fact*, distinctions that come with their own organizing principles and clearly defined limits, and has employed these pre-conceived categories in the examination of a book *whose structure was built precisely as a radical challenge to the very distinctions and limits that its readers —and in particular its professional readers— took for granted.*

That the background and unexamined assumptions of its readers, and in particular those derived from their professional conditioning, were determinant in the reception of da Cunha's *Os Sertões* can be seen when one reads the book's reviews while taking into account the place of enunciation in which they were formulated and from which they derived their authority. While its early reviewers were unanimous in highlighting the

⁴⁰ The relevance and *raison d'être* of criticism are often left unmentioned, taken for granted by the series of practices that occupy the relative center of discursive production, *which in critical activity is criticism and the secondary literature it produces, and not the primary sources with which it is concerned.* Given that criticism (including, but not limited to, the criticism produced in academia) is the center of its own discursive activity, its own relevance and *raison d'être* is, for the most part, a non issue to itself.

plurality of the spheres of knowledge that were brought together in the fabric of *Os Sertões*, their analysis invariably betrayed the lack of plurality typical of readings that operate from within the confines of previously defined frameworks corresponding to particular professional specializations.

The early reviews of *Os Sertões*, published in the major newspapers of the time, were in their vast majority written by men of letters, *letrados* and professional literary critics who had in common the fact of being the product of what in the context of the Brazilian social sciences has come to be known as the “tradição bacharelesca” — a tradition of education and of social validation built around the hypertrophied importance of a higher education diploma (which in the years in question amounted mostly to those issued by Law schools) and the social status derived from it. Although the tradition was brought to Brazil in the 16th century by the Jesuits, it was however in the 19th century, with the institution of the first national Law schools and the decline of a rural patriarchy increasingly seen as archaic by the more urbanized, cosmopolitan younger generations, that it reached its height (Castro 55). Embodying a deeply rooted aversion to technical and manual labor typical of a slave society such as was Brazil until the end of the 19th century, this tradition emphasized the received knowledge of erudition and the ornamental use of rhetoric at the expense of the empirical sciences and the technical and productive labor associated with it (Freyre 830-3).

Among the best-known representatives of this tradition in late 19th century Brazil was José Veríssimo, writer, literary critic⁴¹, educator, and one of the founders of and the main idealizer behind the Brazilian Academy of Letters, an institution which he envisioned as dedicated exclusively to literature, and from which he departed after that initial conception was broadened by the acceptance of non-writer members. It is therefore telling, though not at all surprising, that when writing his review of *Os Sertões* —the first one to appear and the one responsible for the book’s immediate editorial success— José Veríssimo should characterize da Cunha first and foremost as a “writer”, which he defined as one possessing the stylistic qualities of “strength, energy, eloquence, verve, colorfulness, elegance” (Juízos Críticos 46). It was from within the boundaries of this characterization that Veríssimo’s criticism of da Cunha, in what was an otherwise positive appraisal of his work, was launched:

Pena é que conhecendo a língua, como a conhece, esforçando-se evidentemente por escrevê-la bem, possuindo reais qualidades de escritor, força, energia, eloquência, nervo, colorido, elegância, tenha o Sr. Euclides da Cunha viciado o seu estilo, já pessoal e próprio, não obstante de um primeiro livro, sobrecarregando a sua linguagem de termos técnicos, de

⁴¹ Veríssimo was responsible for writing the first systematic account of the history of Brazilian literature from an aesthetic point of view. In that sense his critical method can be seen as contrasting with that of Silvio Romero, a contemporary literary critic, who tended to examine the works from a more sociological and historical point of view. (Vargas, Suzana. “Breve introdução explicativa ao ideário crítico da época.” In José Veríssimo. *História da Literatura Brasileira* 1998)

um boleio de frase como quer que seja arrevesado, de arcaísmos e sobretudo de neologismos, de expressões obsoletas ou raras, abusando frequentemente contra a índole da língua, e contra a gramática das formas oblíquas em *lhe* em vez do possessivo direto, do relativo *cujo* e, copiosamente, de verbos por ele formados, e de outros modos de dizer, que, ainda quando filologicamente se possam justificar, não são, de fato, nem necessários, nem belos, antes, a meu ver, dão ao seu estilo um tom de gongorismo, de artificialidade, que certo não estava na sua intenção. Em uma palavra, o maior defeito do seu estilo e da sua linguagem é a falta de simplicidade; ora, a simplicidade que não exclui a força, a eloquência, a comoção, é a principal virtude de qualquer estilo. Mas este defeito é de quase todos os nossos cientistas que fazem literatura.... é quase um vício de raça, o qual no sr. Euclides da Cunha, por grande que seja, não consegue destruir as qualidades de escritor nervosa e vibrante, nem sobretudo, o valor grande do seu livro.

[It is a pity that, knowing the language as he does, taking evident pains to write it well, possessing the real qualities of a writer, strength, energy, eloquence, verve, colorfulness, elegance, Mr. Euclides da Cunha should have vitiated his style, already his own despite this being his first book, overloading his language with technical terms; with a turn of phrase oftentimes difficult; with archaisms and above all with neologisms; with obsolete or rare expressions; frequently abusing against the nature of the language, and against the grammar of oblique forms in *lhe* instead of the direct possessive pronoun, of the relative pronoun *cujo* and, copiously, of verbs he himself has formed, and of other ways of saying which, even when philologically justifiable, are in fact neither necessary nor beautiful, but rather, in my view, grant his style a note of gongorism, of artificiality, that surely were not among his intentions. In one word, the greatest defect of his style and of his language is lack of simplicity; and the simplicity that does not exclude strength, eloquence, commotion, is the main virtue of any style. But this is a defect of practically all of our scientists who make literature.... It is almost a vice of race, one which in Mr. Euclides da Cunha, as great as it might be, is not enough to destroy the qualities of nervous and vibrant writer, nor above all the great worth of his book.]
(*Juízos Críticos* 47)

It is illuminating to take a brief moment to look closer at the above passage, in particular because, as we will see in more detail, it was precisely this passage of Veríssimo's review with which da Cunha explicitly disagreed and to which he chose to respond. Veríssimo begins by offering an appraisal of da Cunha's book from the point of view of literary style without, however, taking the time to show his readers why that point of view would be of particular relevance to the understanding of the work in question. Da Cunha's book was, after all, a book that drew its complex formal structure from a variety of discursive fields, each possessing its own stylistic standards, each

responding to its own formal demands. Veríssimo, however, insisted on turning a blind eye to that discursive hybridism, in spite of having been the first one to note, in the beginning of his review, the plurivocal and polymathic dimensions of *Os Sertões*, which, as will be recalled, he claimed to be “at the same time a book of a man of science, a geographer, a geologist, an ethnographer; of a man thought, a philosopher, a sociologist, a historian; and of a man of feelings, a poet, a novelist, an artist” (46). Once in place, this initial recognition of plurivocality on the part of Veríssimo is however no longer taken into account, and, as the review advances, when reference is made to the “scientist” in da Cunha’s book, it is done so in such a way as immediately to place the term within a framework—that of the “tradição bacharelesca”—that saw itself not merely as alien or external to that of the empirical sciences, but as standing in a position of fundamental antagonism to it.

The “scientist” deserves mention in Veríssimo’s review only to the extent to which he (the scientist) fails to comply with the standards set forth by the rhetorical and stylistic conventions of a tradition that eyed with hostility the very qualities that made up scientific language: confronted with such standards, da Cunha’s language is said to be guilty of an excess of “technical terms”, of “artificiality” and “lack of simplicity”, “defects” it shared with the language of those “scientists who make literature”. This emphasis on style, on rhetoric taken as the ornamental understanding and use of the figural dimension of language, is, together with reverence for erudition (understood as the accumulation and reproduction of received learning, in particular that learning connected to the classical tradition), a defining trait of the “tradição bacharelesca” of which Veríssimo was both a product and an illustrious representative. As the intellectual historian João da Cruz Costa pointed out, “our system of education continued, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, to perpetuate the ‘ornamental tradition’ destined to produce ‘humanists’ for the two Faculties of Law, whence they issued to enter the field of administration or imperial politics” (Cruz Costa 86).⁴² Veríssimo’s remark, moreover, contains a telling qualification that has to this moment, to the best of my knowledge, passed unnoticed in the critical bibliography dedicated to da Cunha’s work, and which suggests a defense of a discursive-disciplinary purism which, as we will have the opportunity to see, stands in stark contrast to da Cunha’s hybrid scientific-aesthetic project. Veríssimo, in effect, asserts that the “defects” he is highlighting belong not to the language of scientists per se, but to that of those “scientists *who make literature*” (my emphasis). It would be unlikely that by this he meant that the language of scientists who do *not* make literature does not suffer from an excess of technical terms, or that their language would, in the eyes of a man of letters such as Veríssimo himself, appear less

⁴² In the words of Teixeira Mendes, one of the first to bring the Positivism of Auguste Comte to Brazil, “As for intellectual culture, it was at this time more literary than scientific, because of the aesthetic rather than theoretic predisposition of the Brazilian people, as of their historic antecedents. The ruling classes usually entered the legal professions. Only the military classes of the army and navy on the one hand, and the engineers and doctors on the other, made any attempt to undertake scientific studies. Nearly all competed to draw near to the monarch, and began to form about him the pedantic atmosphere that was the greatest delight of his life”. (Teixeira Mendes 22)

artificial or show greater simplicity than that of any other scientist. A more likely interpretation, and the one I want to advance here, hinges on the evaluative dimension of Veríssimo's statement: the characteristics of scientific language that he lists — excess of technical terms, artificiality, lack of simplicity — are only regarded as “defects” once the scientist ventures beyond his or her sphere of competence, where those linguistic features are expected and are in fact the norm, into that other sphere — literature — in which he/she and his/her practices are not only not welcome, but pose the threat of a fundamental incompatibility.

The problem is compounded when one takes into account the other side of what a commentator has termed the “opposition between the scientific youth and the ‘bacharéis’” (Castro 52) that dominated the first years of the Brazilian Republic (an opposition which, incidentally, not by chance brings to mind other, more ancient quarrels): it was precisely against the traits that defined the “tradição bacharelesca” — rhetoric as ornament, reverence for erudition and for the authority of textual tradition⁴³ — that the young “científicos”, most of whom trained in the Military School of Praia Vermelha where da Cunha also studied, claimed to turn their efforts.

Among the early reviewers of da Cunha's *Os Sertões*, whose articles were collected in 1904 in the volume *Juízos Críticos* by the publisher Laemmert (a volume which, in addition to Veríssimo, included other leading men of Brazilian letters such as Araripe Júnior, Coelho Neto, and Medeiros de Albuquerque), only one could not be said to be a product and a representative of the “tradição bacharelesca”. Moreira Guimarães, a military engineer, army officer, and former colleague of da Cunha at the Military School, wrote and published, in February and March of 1903, a series of four articles on *Os Sertões* in which the reference to the “scientist” and the “poet”, also present, appears nonetheless in a different light. This difference owes its existence, I want to suggest, to the different place of enunciation which Moreira Guimarães occupies and from which he addresses da Cunha's book. If in the reviews by professional literary critics and writers such as José Veríssimo and Coelho Neto “science” was the alien term, the term in face of which the only possible attitudes were either hostile distance or superficial praise, in the case of Moreira Guimarães's review, it was the poet, the artist, and not the scientist, who would fill the role of the alien, unwelcome term.

⁴³ These characteristics of the “tradição bacharelesca” appear with almost caricatural clarity in Coelho Neto's review of da Cunha's book. Coelho Neto, a highly respected writer in his time, occupied the chair number 2 in the Brazilian Academy of Letters and was known among his peers as the “Prince of Brazilian Prosists”, according to a poll carried by the magazine *O Malho*. Published in 1903 in *O Estado de São Paulo*, his review of da Cunha's book contains passages such as the following, in which classical references and intricate, ornamental metaphors abound: “Euclides da Cunha é engenheiro. Estudou naquela escola solitária, posta entre um penhasco e o mar, onde, como em Crótona, no tempo de Pitágoras, os alunos, ao fim das aulas, passeando lentamente ao longo das muralhas, deslindam problemas com o ardente desejo de penetrar a verdade abscondida. Espírito disciplinado pelo rigor das matemáticas, aplicando a tudo o método positivo, iniciando-se na Poesia — porque é um poeta e dos que mais louvores merecem — não abjurou a ciência e foi como pensador, à maneira de lucrécio, que tomou um lugar entre os iluminadores” (*Juízos Críticos* 104).

Moreira Guimarães begins his review by acknowledging in a sweeping statement not divested of irony the previous reviewers of *Os Sertões*, whose reception of the book was, according to him, “festiva, jubilosa” [festive, jubilant] (*Juízos Críticos* 87). Right afterwards, however, alluding to the review of Veríssimo, who had seen in *Os Sertões* the book of both the scientist and the artist, Moreira Guimarães writes what could be seen as a parody of the words of his fellow reviewer, while at the same time inverting their assessment:

Mas, ao que me lembra, ainda não se afirmou que esse belo trabalho é mais produto do poeta e do artista que do observador e do filósofo. Por igual não se encontram nesse livro as virtudes da imaginação e os atributos da reflexão. Porque nem sempre, lado a lado, marcham pelas páginas emocionantes dessa encantadora obra o delicado cultor da palavra e o destemido pensador brasileiro.

[However, as far as I can remember, it has not yet been said that this beautiful work is more the product of the poet and the artist than that of the observer and the philosopher. In equal measure cannot be found in this book the virtues of imagination and the attributes of reflection. For one does not always find, marching side by side in the exciting pages of this charming work, the delicate artificer of the word and the fearless Brazilian thinker.] (*Juízos Críticos* 87)

If according to Veríssimo’s review the scientist in Euclides da Cunha had tainted the language of an otherwise powerful writer, in Moreira Guimarães’s assessment it would have been the writer in Euclides da Cunha —“the delicate artificer of the word”— who had got on the way of the account that the scientist should have offered with both logical rigor and systematic accuracy. Throughout his review of *Os Sertões*, Moreira Guimarães will in effect intercalate the analysis of what he sees as the shortcomings of the scientific dimension of da Cunha’s book with laudatory remarks aimed at its aesthetic dimension; laudatory remarks, in fact, that serve a double function: they comply with the stylistic conventions of the genre of literary criticism as practised in late 19th century Brazil⁴⁴, while at the same time preparing and emphasizing, by means of contrast, the core of his critique. “Não sei se *Os Sertões* representam o melhor livro que, até hoje, veio a publicar-se com o novo regime político. Certo afirmou Euclides, com essa obra de fôlego, a valentia do seu talento, o fulgor da sua imaginação, a amplitude das suas

⁴⁴ Conventions that were in line with the “tradição bacharelesca” and its ornamental use of rhetoric. The same conventions can be seen in the passage quoted from Veríssimo’s review above. In Moreira Guimarães’s review, their sheer frequency attests his ironic/parodic intent. Always prefacing his criticisms of the contradictions and lack of factual accuracy in *Os Sertões*, Moreira Guimarães refers to da Cunha in various passages of the review as “distintíssima cerebração” [most distinguished cerebration] (89), “ilustre escritor” [illustrious writer] (91), “o talentoso Euclides” [the talented Euclides] (92), “o ousado pensador” [the daring thinker] (93), “um talento robusto” [a robust talent] (93) etc.

qualidades de escritor.” [I am not sure if *Os Sertões* represents the best book published to this day with the new political regime. It is however certain that Euclides has proven, with this tour de force, the valor of his talent, the splendor of his imagination, the amplitude of his qualities as a writer] (99). Moreira Guimarães is thus able to assert that da Cunha was, indeed, “a powerful writer, a soul touched by the harmonies of the verses” who had been able to compose his account of Canudos “of such dramatic moments that it stands there, intriguing and admirable, gaining the sympathies of all those who read it. The energy of its sentences is breathtaking, the color of its scenes arresting and suggestive”⁴⁵(88) — only then to fault da Cunha’s literary inclinations for the inaccuracies and contradictions in which he incurs: “E, nas suas fantasias de artista que sabe fazer romance, figura, Euclides, ‘uma carga de cavalaria em Canudos!’” [And in his fantasies of an artist who knows how to write novels, Euclides imagines ‘a cavalry charge in Canudos’!](99)

To Moreira Guimarães, da Cunha’s assertions amount to “belas frases de efeito em que a verdade prima pela ausência” [beautiful sentences in which truth stands out through its absence] (92), a verdict whose unintended Benjaminian undertone, will be taken up, half a century later, by Guimarães Rosa’s allegorical dialogue with da Cunha’s work in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. Of special interest to the present study are the moments in his review in which Moreira Guimarães turns the writer against the scientist in *Os Sertões* in order to bring into focus the distortions and contradictions that traverse da Cunha’s text, and, emphasizing their literary dimension at the expense of their factual accuracy, undermine the authority of da Cunha’s assertions. As he himself puts it,

Tanto se recomenda o notável livro *Os Sertões (campanha de Canudos)*, que não é lícito, braços cruzados ou em meio de palmas, consentir no emaranhado de contradições e exageros que lhe deturpam a beleza da linguagem, do mesmo passo exageros e contradições desfigurando-lhe o grandioso do quadro em que se avulta, em seriação lógica, toda a história da campanha de Canudos.

[So often is the notable book *Os Sertões (campanha de Canudos)* commended, that one is not allowed, with folded arms, to consent to the tangle of contradictions and exaggerations that distort the beauty of its language, and in the same gesture disfigure the magnificent picture in which looms, in logical succession, the entire history of the Canudos campaign.](100)

Referring, for instance, to the second part of *Os Sertões*, in which da Cunha engages in study of “The Man” (i.e. the backlander, having turned his efforts in the first part of the book to an analysis of “The Land”, i.e. the backlands), Moreira Guimarães

⁴⁵ “E, escritor de pulso, alma tingida pelas harmonias dos versos, ele compôs a sua história de Canudos, de tais lances dramáticos, que ela aí está, curiosa, admirável, conquistando as simpatias de quantos a lêem. O vigor da frase é empolgante. O colorido dos quadros domina, sugestiona.”

picks a passage in which da Cunha states that “a morfologia da terra viola as leis gerais dos climas” [the morphology of the land violates the general laws of the climates] (Cunha, *Os Sertões* 137) to point out the contradiction present in the idea that one should speak of “violence” in this context. After all, Moreira Guimarães explains, it is the same agent —nature— that is responsible both for altering the environmental conditions and for the establishment of its general laws. How could one, therefore, speak of violence here? For one trained in the tenets of Comtean Positivism —that curious systematic conflation of nature, history, and law— as was Moreira Guimarães, “natural violence” must have appeared as an untenable contradiction in terms. Having signaled what he regarded as a basic logical inconsistency in da Cunha’s reasoning, he then saw himself in a position to write peremptorily: “Se violência importa modificação, violar seria desobedecer ao preestabelecido. Assim, não há violação contra as leis gerais dos climas, eis o que não padece dúvida.” [If violence implies modification, to violate would be to disobey that which had been preestablished. Therefore, there is no violation against the general laws of the climates, this is beyond doubt] (88).

A few pages later, Moreira Guimarães proceeds to disqualify the well-known oxymoronic image that da Cunha employed to refer to the supporters of the Republic and the army officers sent by the republican government to quell the upheaval of Canudos. At the end of a now famous passage in which he articulated some of the deep-rooted ironies that underlay the civilizing project of the young Brazilian republic and the campaign of Canudos, da Cunha concluded with the assertion that “tivemos na ação um papel singular de mercenários inconscientes.” [we played in this action the singular role of unconscious mercenaries] (66)⁴⁶. Moreira Guimarães, resorting to the dictionary definition of the word “mercenary”, goes on to denounce the twofold contradiction in the use of both the vocabulary, which should be employed to refer to foreign soldiers only (and therefore not to “us”), and its oxymoronic adjectivation:

Mercenários... A palavra está, à p. VI, e eu quisera acreditar que ela não fora escrita pelo antigo militar, temperamento de artista, organização republicana. Porque, bastante lido em coisas da guerra, deve saber o ex-companheiro de armas que mercenários são os soldados estrangeiros estipendiários. Dir-se-á: mas o Euclides não emprega tão só o feio vocábulo *mercenário*; para ele, que não ignora que tropas do gênero

⁴⁶ The full passage reads: “A campanha de Canudos tem por isto a significação inegável de um primeiro assalto, em luta talvez longa. Nem enfraquece o asserto o termo-la realizado nós, filhos do mesmo solo, porque, etnologicamente indefinidos, sem tradições nacionais uniformes, vivendo parasitariamente à beira do Atlântico dos princípios civilizadores elaborados na Europa, e armados pela indústria alemã — tivemos na ação um papel singular de mercenários inconscientes.” [The Campaign of Canudos has, therefore, the undeniable significance of a first assault in a struggle that may be a long one. Nor is this assertion weakened by the fact that it was we, the children of the same soil, who staged this campaign. For, being ethnologically undefined, without uniform traditions, living parasitically on the shore of the Atlantic of the civilizing principles elaborated in Europe, and armed by German industry, we played in this action the role singular role of unconscious mercenaries.] (*Os Sertões* 66)

jamais significam verdadeiros exércitos, foram, nos combates dos sertões da Bahia, mercenários inconscientes os brasileiros. E aqui é o caso memorável do dito de Voltaire: “*Ces mots hurlent de se trouver ensemble*”. Realmente: a inconsciência do mercenarismo orça pelo absurdo.

[Mercenaries... The word is there, on page VI, and I would have liked to believe that it had not been written by the former army officer, possessor of the temperament of an artist, member of the republican organization. For, well-read in matters of war, my ex-fellow of arms should know that mercenaries are foreign stipendiary soldiers. One could add: but Euclides does not employ merely the ugly vocabulary *mercenary*; to him, who is not unaware that troops of that kind never amount to real armies, the Brazilians were, in the battles that took place in the backlands of Bahia, unconscious mercenaries. And here the memorable line of Voltaire is appropriate: “*Ces mots hurlent de se trouver ensemble*”. Indeed: the unconsciousness of mercenarism verges on the absurd.] (93)

The above passage is doubly revealing. We see, first of all, the professional framework which circumscribes the working assumptions of Moreira Guimarães coming to the surface in the form of undisguised vested interest: this passage leaves no doubt, as Luis Costa Lima has noted, that Moreira Guimarães’s manifest purpose in his review was the defense of the republican army, of which he was a member, against da Cunha’s critical remarks. (Costa Lima 16). As Moreira Guimarães writes disparagingly of da Cunha a few pages later, once again laying bare his own intent to safeguard and rescue the honor of the military institution: “E sempre tem uma frase ou ao menos uma palavra para empanar o brilho das glórias militares!...” [He is always in possession of a sentence or at least a word with which to besmirch the shine of the military glories!...] (100) But yet even more revealing for the purpose of the present study is Moreira Guimarães’s recourse to the dictionary in order to disqualify da Cunha’s assertions and refute his conclusions. Appealing to the authority of the lexically codified meaning of the word “mercenary”, Moreira Guimarães ignores the particular dynamics of the semantic constellation brought forth by da Cunha’s work and, yet again, enforces upon his reading of *Os Sertões* precisely those pre-defined boundaries and pre-established set of categories that da Cunha’s book had set forth to challenge.

The dictionary contains no tropes; they exist only in discourse, in the production of discourse as a work⁴⁷. In unquestioningly accepting the codified language of the dictionary as the final court of appeal for the semantic legitimacy of the word at the

⁴⁷ I follow Ricoeur here: “With the work, as the word implies, new categories enter the field of discourse. Essentially these are pragmatic categories, categories of production and of labour. To begin with, discourse is the arena of a work of composition or arrangement, ‘disposition’ (to echo *disposition*, the term in ancient rhetoric), which makes of a poem or novel a totality irreducible to a simple sum of sentences.” (The Rule of Metaphor 219)

expense of its contextualized use in the particular work at hand, Moreira Guimarães hypostatizes both authorship and authority by subsuming the former under the latter. In so doing, he confines in characteristically positivistic fashion the horizon of possible meanings of the word to that which already is, casting a blind eye to its productive dimension and therefore foreclosing the creation of a new semantic pertinence by means of literal impertinence—precisely that which da Cunha, working within the logic of what could be called an aesthetics of conflict, will undertake in *Os Sertões*.

1.2.2. The consortium between science and art and the aesthetics of conflict

O quinquênio de 1875-1880 é o da nossa investidura um tanto temporã na filosofia contemporânea, com os seus vários matizes, do positivismo ortodoxo ao evolucionismo no sentido mais amplo, e com as várias modalidades artísticas, decorrentes, nascidas de idéias e sentimentos elaborados fora e muito longe de nós... Começamos a aprender de cor a civilização... Os novos princípios que chegavam não tinham o abrigo da cultura, e ficavam no ar, inúteis, como forças admiráveis, mas sem pontos de apoio; e tornaram-se frases decorativas sem sentido, ou capazes de todos os sentidos; e reduziram-se a fórmulas irritantes de uma caturrice doutrinária inaturável; e acabaram-se fazendo-se palavras, meras palavras, rijas, secas, desfibradas...

(Euclides da Cunha, “Discurso de Recepção à Academia Brasileira de Letras” 210)

On December 3, 1902, the day José Veríssimo’s review of *Os Sertões* appeared in the newspaper *Correio da Manhã*, Euclides da Cunha responded to it in a letter addressed to its author. After expressing his excitement for the overall positive assessment of his book, da Cunha wrote, referring to Veríssimo’s critique of the influence of the scientist on the style of the writer:

Num ponto apenas vacilo —o que se refere ao emprego de termos técnicos. Aí, a meu ver, a crítica não foi justa. Sagrados pela ciência e sendo de algum modo, permita-me a expressão, os aristocratas da linguagem, nada justifica o sistemático desprezo que lhes votam os homens de letras —sobretudo se consideramos que o consórcio da ciência e da arte, sob qualquer de seus aspectos, é hoje a tendência mais elevada do pensamento humano. ... O escritor do futuro sera forçosamente um polígrafo. ... Eu estou convencido que a verdadeira impressão artística exige, fundamentalmente, a noção científica do caso que a desperta, e é

justo desde que se não exagere ao ponto de dar um aspecto de compêndio ao livro que se escreve, mesmo porque em tal caso a feição sintética desapareceria e com a ela a obra de arte. Desejo muito conhecer o seu pensamento acerca desta questão; e comprometo-me desde já a defender, na medida das minhas forças, a tese acima esboçada.

[I hesitate in one point only—the one that concerns the use of technical terms. There, in my view, the criticism was unfair. Respected by science and being, in a sense, allow me the expression, the aristocrats of language, there is nothing to justify the systematic disdain that the men of letters turn against it—in particular if we consider that the consortium between science and art, under any of its aspects, is today the highest tendency of human thought. . . . The future writer will necessarily be a polymath. . . . I am convinced that the true artistic impression demands, fundamentally, the scientific notion of the case that brings it about, and that is fair as long as one does not incur in exaggerations to the point of giving an aspect of treatise to the book one is writing, because in such a case the synthetic dimension would be gone, and with it the work of art. I greatly wish to hear your thoughts on this question; and I promise right away to defend, to the best extent of my capabilities, the thesis above.] (Cunha, Epistolário. 621)

Veríssimo never shared his thoughts on the question with da Cunha, at least no more than what can be discerned from his review of the book (though we know that he believed, until later in his life, da Cunha's literary reputation to be undeserved). Da Cunha, however, defended the thesis of the necessity of the consortium between science and art at several occasions throughout his relatively short life. In the passage above, the first thing to note is that, unlike Veríssimo, da Cunha refuses to confine the relationship between art and science to the level of "style" alone. In da Cunha's response, art is linked to the synthetic dimension of the work, an assertion which immediately suggests an implicit opposition between that dimension and the analytical counterpart associated with the "scientific notion" of the case. Yet, he tells us, it is an opposition that goes on to form a "consortium": art and science, synthesis and analysis, appear in da Cunha's response as complementary opposites, in the same way that, in the realm of color theory, one speaks of opposite colors as being complementary to each other; for da Cunha, the artistic impression "demands" the scientific notion of the case, as for Goethe, that other great polymath, "yellow *demands* purple; orange, blue; red, green; and vice-versa" (Theory of Colours 21, emphasis added). Immediately we discern, in da Cunha's way of formulating the question, a dialectical mode of thinking that stands in stark contrast to the one-sided pronouncements of his reviewer.

Da Cunha's refusal to adopt a one-sided point of view on the question of the relationship between art and science, synthesis and analysis, is evident when one compares his response to Veríssimo with the "Preliminary Note" he wrote as a preface to *Os Sertões*. If in his response to Veríssimo he engaged in a defense of the role of

“science” in the consortium between science and art, in the “Preliminary Note”, a response *avant la lettre* to many of Moreira Guimarães’s criticisms, da Cunha brings Hippolyte Taine to his aid in order to defend the role of “art” against a scientific positivism that, enthralled by factual accuracy, ignores the importance of the synthesis that binds facts together and grants them meaning:

E tanto quanto o permitir a firmeza do nosso espírito, façamos jus ao admirável conceito de Taine sobre o narrador sincere que encara a história como ela o merece:

‘...il s’irrite contre les demi-vérités que sont des demi-faussetés, contre les auteurs qui n’altèrent ni une date, ni une généalogie, mais dénaturant les sentiments et les moeurs, qui gardent le dessin des événements et en changent la couleur, qui copient les faits et défigurent l’âme: il veut sentir en barbare, parmi les barbares, et, parmi les anciens, en ancien.’

[And to the extent that the strength of our spirit allows, let us do justice to the admirable concept of Taine of the sincere narrator who confronts history the way it deserves:

‘... he gets irritated against the half-truths that are half-falsehoods; against the authors who do not alter a single date, nor a single genealogy, but denature feelings and mores, who preserve the scheme of events changing their color, who copy the facts disfiguring their soul: he wants to feel like a barbarian among the barbarians, and like a ancient among the ancients.] (Os Sertões 67)

The question of the adequacy or inadequacy of the work of Taine in support of da Cunha’s *Os Sertões* is here less important than the operations that fuel the discrepancy between the sources da Cunha resorts to and the uses he makes of them. Da Cunha, refusing to accept the disjunctive alternative posed by the opposing camps in the rivalry between the “tradição bacharelesca” and the scientific youth, neither uncritically embraces the latest scientific fashions of Europe nor rejects *tout court* the use of erudition and the figural dimension of language in the composition of *Os Sertões*. It would be possible, for instance, to argue that Taine’s emphasis on synthesis ends up by privileging a totalizing unity that comes at the expense of precisely those traits that, in their particularity, stand in dialectical opposition to any final attempt at totalization. This is, for instance, the understanding of Edmund Wilson, who claims that

...Taine [practises] systematizations which, in ordering the confusion of human life, seem always to keep it at a distance.... Taine feeds history into a machine which automatically sorts out the phenomena, so that all the examples of one kind of thing turn up in one section or chapter and all the examples of another kind in another, and the things which do not easily lend themselves to Taine’s large and simple generalizations do not turn up at all. The thesis is the prime consideration, and he will allow only

a moderate variety in the phenomena that go to fill it in. (*To the Finland Station* 48)

In da Cunha's work, in contrast, this dialectical tension is maintained throughout, and a final, totalizing synthesis is never attained. These incompatibilities between the sources enlisted by da Cunha and his own project, however, do not invalidate the gesture by which da Cunha resorts to Taine—as well as several others European authorities, in a variety of fields—in order tentatively to ground his own position. To make this point clear, it is important to understand what is at stake in this gesture, as well as the context that makes it both possible and necessary. For that, a historical detour and a summary account of the content of *Os Sertões* are in order.

The campaign of Canudos, the ostensive subject of Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*,⁴⁸ took place from November 1896 to October 1897, less than ten years after the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic. The first years of the Republic, the period going from its proclamation in 1889 to the presidency of Campos Sales in 1898, make up a period in Brazilian history which political scientist Renato Lessa has dubbed the “entropic years” (Lessa 49). Those years reveal a set of social and political circumstances deeply marked by the idea of *absence*. Absence, first of all, of a clear institutional blueprint to be followed in the adventure that was the Republican experiment in Brazil. Absence exacerbated by the lack of administrative and political experience on the part of those responsible for conducting it. The historian José Maria Bello writes, for instance, that, with the exception of Quintino Bocaiúva, “who had some notice of the difficulties of Argentine politics”, and of Rui Barbosa, who possessed “theoretical knowledge” of the federalist republic of the United States of America, all the others “ignored the workings and the practical details of the regime, whether in its European, North American or Spanish American variety” (Bello 84). The Brazilian Republican experiment, in its first years, led, as it were, a negative existence: its impact was felt much more strongly by the ways in which it vetoed and denied the centralist policies of

⁴⁸*Os Sertões* has been translated twice into English. Once, in 1944, as *Rebellion in the Backlands (Os Sertões)*, by Samuel Putnam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944; and *Backlands*), and then again in 2010 as *The Campaign of Canudos*, trans. Elizabeth Lowe. New York: Penguin, 2010. Even though I have access to both translations and have checked them constantly in the elaboration of the present study, the translations of passages from da Cunha's *Os Sertões* herein are my own, unless otherwise noted. Given the difficulty presented to the translator by da Cunha's highly complex prose, each translation has shortcomings. Samuel Putnam's translation attempts to preserve something of the cadence of da Cunha's rhythmical prose, while sacrificing factual and semantic accuracy. Lowe's translation, on the other hand, attempts to remedy the inaccuracies of Putnam's translation by resorting to a more descriptive and explanatory approach, but the result is a prose that, although more factually accurate, bears little resemblance to the feel and cadence of the original, and does little to recreate the experience of reading and engaging with da Cunha's original text. Claude Lévi-Strauss's strongly negative assessment of Putnam's translation would in great part still apply to Lowe's standardizing rendering of da Cunha's idiosyncratic Portuguese. (Lévi-Strauss, *South America: Rebellion in the Backlands*)

the Empire than by the rather erratic, unplanned federalism that it proclaimed yet did not quite know how to implement.

The most remarkable absence in the new Republican regime, however, was one that stood in stark contrast to its ideological justification: the absence of popular participation. The remark by Aristides Lobo, published in his column on the newspaper *Diário Popular* on the 18th of November 1889, only three days after the proclamation of the new regime, is well known: “O povo assistiu àquilo bestializado, atônito, surpreso, sem conhecer o que significava. Muitos acreditavam sinceramente estar vendo uma parada” [The people watched everything dumbstruck, astonished, surprised, not knowing what it meant. Many sincerely believed they were seeing a parade]. He was, of course, referring to the people in Rio de Janeiro, urban citizens in the capital of the country. In the backlands of Brazil, the exclusion of the rural contingent, of those who sociologist Oliveira Vianna referred to as “plebe rural” [the rural rabble] (Vianna 74. 245. 250) — consisting of all those who, neither masters nor slaves, were excluded from the main productive processes— was to such an extent a given that it hardly ever made its way into the reflections of the Brazilian intellectuals during those entropic years. Despite the speeches of radical Republican propagandists such as Silva Jardim and Lopes Trovão, who presented the Republic, in the image of the French Revolution, as the irruption of the people in politics, the relationship between the new regime and the people, and in particular the rural people of the backlands, was marked above all by the sheer absence of dialogue. It was precisely this lack of dialogue that Euclides da Cunha would denounce and bring to the public eye in 1902, when he published *Os Sertões*, his indictment of the direction taken by the Brazilian Republic, in which the conflict between civilization and barbarism took the absence of dialogue to its most extreme form: the undisguised bloodshed that resulted in the total annihilation of the rural settlement of Canudos by the progressive, civilized forces of the Republic.

It is in response to this set of circumstances that Euclides da Cunha writes *Os Sertões*, a book that is itself the embodied response to a pervading series of absences. Its reader will quickly notice it is an unusual book. In spite of having as its ostensive subject the campaign of Canudos, only the last half of the book— the third of three parts, titled “The Struggle”— is dedicated to the actual campaign. The first two parts, “The Land” and “The Man”, are, respectively, in-depth studies of the geography, geology, vegetation, and climate of the Brazilian backlands, and of the customs, culture, and racial constitution of the “sertanejos”, the inhabitants of the Brazilian backlands, with a section dedicated to Antônio Conselheiro, their religious leader. Between the end of the campaign of Canudos, on October 5, 1897, and the publication of *Os Sertões*, on December 2, 1902, five years had passed. Da Cunha, who had covered the last weeks of the campaign *in loco* as a journalist sent by the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, and had witnessed firsthand the last days of the bloodshed into which the campaign had turned, spends this time collecting information about the events in Canudos, as well as delving deeper in the study of theories that might help him understand the implications of what had taken place. After five years, the campaign of Canudos—the “war” of Canudos, as the official vehicles insisted on calling it— was no longer the burning center of public

attention it once had been. The original idea for the book, whose conception had been justified by the urgency of the subject matter, had become, as it were, untimely, as da Cunha himself recognized in the note that opened the book:

Escrito nos raros intervalos de folga de uma carreira fatigante, este livro, que a princípio se resumia à história da Campanha de Canudos, perdeu toda a atualidade, remorada a sua publicação em virtude de causas que temos por escusado apontar. Demos-lhe, por isso, outra feição, tornando apenas variante de assunto geral o tema, a princípio dominante, que o sugeriu.

[Written in the rare intervals of leisure afforded by an active and fatiguing life, this book, which originally was meant to be the story of the Campaign of Canudos, has since then lost its timeliness when, for reasons which I shall not go into here, its publication was delayed. We have accordingly given it another form, the theme which was the dominant one in the beginning and which inspired the work being now but a variation on the general subject here treated.] (65)

What was this general subject? It had become nothing less than the attempt to understand and give form to a Brazil hitherto unknown both to the world and to Brazilians themselves. A Brazil, moreover, in which da Cunha believed to have found a more authentic ground on which national identity could have been built — the backlands and its inhabitants were, da Cunha wrote, “o cerne de uma nacionalidade. A rocha viva da nossa raça” [The core of a nationality. The bedrock of our race] (*Os Sertões* 766). It was an unknown Brazil that put in evidence a set of deeply entrenched paradoxes at the root of the formation of national identity; paradoxes that came to full light the moment one realized that the other, known Brazil, the “civilization of the coast” as da Cunha dubbed it, ignorant of the Brazil of the backlands and of the “rural rabble” that made up the vast majority of the population, the Brazil where the recognized centers of national culture and intellectual production were situated, included among its representatives none other than Euclides da Cunha himself. It was the *other* Brazil, where the “bedrock of *our* race” was to be found, that against which the Republican government had turned its forces in order to assert its legitimacy and ground its authority. A problematic, deeply paradoxical grounding gesture, as da Cunha himself had noted in the preliminary note to *Os Sertões*, in a passage already referred to:

A campanha de Canudos tem por isto a significação inegável de um primeiro assalto, em luta talvez longa. Nem enfraquece o asserto o termo-la realizado nós, filhos do mesmo solo, porque, etnologicamente indefinidos, sem tradições nacionais uniformes, vivendo parasitariamente à beira do Atlântico dos princípios civilizadores elaborados na Europa, e armados pela indústria alemã— tivemos na ação um papel singular de mercenários inconscientes.

[The Campaign of Canudos has, therefore, the undeniable significance of a first assault in a struggle that may be a long one. Nor is this assertion weakened by the fact that it was we, the children of the same soil, who staged this campaign. For, being ethnologically undefined, without uniform traditions, living parasitically on the shore of the Atlantic of the civilizing principles elaborated in Europe, and armed by German industry, we played in this action the role singular role of unconscious mercenaries.]

A deeply self-critical assessment of the inorganic “civilização de empréstimo” [borrowed civilization] to which he belonged, which he would echo well into the main text of *Os Sertões*:

Vivendo quatrocentos anos no litoral vastíssimo, em que palejam reflexos da vida civilizada, tivemos de improviso, como herança inesperada, a República. Ascendemos, de chofre, arrebatados na caudal dos ideias modernos, deixando na penumbra secular em que jazem, no âmago do país, um terço da nossa gente. Iludidos por uma civilização de empréstimo; respigando, em faina cega de copistas, tudo o que de melhor existe nos códigos orgânicos de outras nações, tornamos, revolucionariamente, fugindo ao transigir mais ligeiro com as exigências da nossa própria nacionalidade, mais fundo o contraste entre o nosso modo de viver e o daqueles rudes patrícios mais estrangeiros nesta terra do que os imigrantes da Europa. Porque não no-los separa um mar, separam-nos três séculos...

[Having lived for four hundred years on a vast stretch of seaboard where we enjoyed the pale reflections of civilized life, we were given, as if by improvisation, the unexpected inheritance of the Republic. Swept up in the current of modern ideas, we abruptly mounted the ladder, leaving behind us in a centuries-old state of darkness a third of our people in the heart of the country. Deluded by a borrowed civilization which came to us second hand; merely compiling, blind copyists that we are, all that was best in the organic codes of other nations, and shunning, in our revolutionary zeal, the slightest compromise with the exigencies of our national interests, we merely succeeded in deepening the contrast between our mode of life and that of our rude native sons, who are more strangers to this land than are the immigrants who came from Europe. For it is not an ocean that separates us from them but three centuries...] (317)

Da Cunha was well aware of the paradoxical situation in which he found himself. Like Sarmiento in Argentina, he too had not merely to find, but also to create, the form with which to speak of a reality that had not yet been fully catalogued or articulated, and for the understanding of which the available forms and categories—those of European science—, da Cunha seemed to suggest in the same paradoxical gesture whereby he resorted to them, did not suffice:

O quinquênio de 1875-1880 [the period of da Cunha's own formation as an engineer at the Military School of Praia Vermelha] é o da nossa investidura um tanto temporã na filosofia contemporânea, com os seus vários matizes, do positivismo ortodoxo ao evolucionismo no sentido mais amplo, e com as várias modalidades artísticas, decorrentes, nascidas de idéias e sentimentos elaborados fora e muito longe de nós... Começamos a aprender de cor a cvilização... Os novos princípios que chegavam não tinham o abrigo da cultura, e ficavam no ar, inúteis, como forças admiráveis, mas sem pontos de apoio; e tornaram-se frases decorativas sem sentido, ou capazes de todos os sentidos; e reduziram-se a fórmulas irritantes de uma caturrice doutrinária inaturável; e acabaram-se fazendo-se palavras, meras palavras, rijas, secas, desfibradas...

[The years between 1875-1880 [the period of da Cunha's own formation as an engineer at the Military School of Praia Vermelha] is the period of our rather premature entrance in contemporary philosophy, with its various shades, from orthodox positivism to evolutionism in the broadest sense, and in the various artistic modalities, originating from ideas and intuitions elaborated far and away from us... We began to learn the civilization by heart... The new principles that arrived did not possess the shelter of culture, and floated in the air, useless, as so many admirable forces deprived of points of support; and they became ornamental phrases destitute of meaning, or capable of having any meaning; and were reduced to annoying formulas of an unbearable doctrinaire stubbornness; and ended up becoming words, mere words, rigid, dry, lifeless.] (Cunha, Discurso de recepção à Academia Brasileira de Letras 210)

Like Sarmiento, da Cunha came to realize, as he confronted his own discourse in the making with those discourses that were already available, that in order to prevent the crystallization of form into rigid formalities and formulas, form could not be dissociated from the process of its own formation. Categories, the available categories of European science, were no longer to be taken as so many ready-made objects that could unproblematically be applied to circumstances that were foreign to them —and yet, being the only categories available, neither could they be simply discarded if discourse were to be at all possible. Da Cunha's task in *Os Sertões* had become that of the production of a new discourse that would not repeat the ornamental gestures of the “borrowed civilization” to which he belonged and which he criticized. But how is the production of a new discourse possible if the only available tools — the available vocabulary, the available categories, the available logic and syntax— were precisely those whose prescribed use one had to distance oneself from for the circle of ornamental formalities and formulas to be broken and the formation of form to take place? It is in response to this question that the aesthetics of conflict that structures *Os Sertões* was forged and will now be examined.

In the same gesture whereby it alludes to da Cunha's notion of a consortium between science and art, the vast critical bibliography dedicated to da Cunha's book is virtually unanimous in referring to the book's aesthetic and scientific dimensions along clearly defined parameters. These parameters operate within the assumption that the words "science" and "art" are the stable holders of an undisputed meaning that pre-exists their consortium and remains unaltered once that consortium is in effect. The result is that "science" and "art" are defined along mutually exclusive lines: science is that which is not art; art, that which is not science. The scientific dimension of *Os Sertões* is, accordingly, associated with the use of a descriptive language characterized by an objectivity that is the product of direct observation, whereas to art are reserved the domains of "imagination" and "feelings". In the words of the literary critic Afrânio Coutinho, the scientific dimension is concerned with "an impartial narration of facts, the serious history of dramatic events" (Coutinho 57). Yet, the same critic writes, "what looms in the work [of da Cunha]... is its character of narrative, fiction, imagination... What stands out in the work is without doubt the contribution of Euclides's imagination, the artistic labor of transfiguration at work in the mind of the author" (57). Lourival Holanda, following the idea present in the title of his book, *Fato e Fábula*, reserves for science the sphere of *fact*, which he regards as "passível de definição científica" [capable of scientific definition], whereas to the artist is allotted the privileged sphere of "imagens e sensações" [images and feelings] (Holanda 113). While Leopoldo Bernucci, in his turn, contrasts the book's scientific and sociological references with the "inserções providas do imaginário" [contributions originated in the realm of imagination], concluding that "Euclides se inclina definitivamente para o lado do imaginário" [Euclides definitely leans towards the side of imagination] (A imitação dos sentidos 20-21).

This separation, in which science is associated with observation and facts by means of descriptive language, whereas art, residually, is left with the domain of imagination and emotions through a language that is, at its root, figurative, betrays the hidden presupposition that underlies the criticism devoted to *Os Sertões* from the beginning to the present day. Paul Ricoeur traces to the school of logical positivism the distinction between a "descriptive" language concerned with giving factual information, and an "emotional" language unrelated to empirical observation and housed purely within the subject. "Critiques shaped by the school of logical positivism state that all language that is not *descriptive*, in the sense of giving information about *facts*, must be *emotional*." It is, he writes, a postulate that "decides on the meaning of truth and reality. It says that there is no truth beyond the pale of possible verification (or falsification), and that in the last analysis all verification is empirical, as defined by scientific procedure." (The Rule of Metaphor 226). It would, of course, be an irresponsible anachronism on our part unqualifiedly to apply Ricoeur's genealogy regarding the distinction between descriptive and emotional languages to the present study, given that the first reviews of *Os Sertões*, in which such a distinction can already be found, predate the advent of logical positivism by at least three decades. Yet, as Cascardi has shown, the roots of such a distinction go much further back, and can be found as early as the 17th century in the philosophy of Descartes, i.e. at the root of the modern scientific method as we know it. On the one

hand, Cascardi argues, the culture inaugurated with the Cartesian program of self-criticism (which, in its call for the rejection of the wisdom of the ancients resembles the attitude of the scientific youth against the “tradição bacharelesca” in Brazil) “invokes a conception of reason which resembles that of the mathematical sciences; it begins, as in Galileo and Descartes, with the geometrization of the natural world. Yet it concludes, as in Nietzsche, in a movement which leaves inaccessible to rational judgment the entire range of phenomena associate with values, desires, and the will” (*Genealogies of Modernism* 208)—and, we can add for the purposes of the present study, leaving equally inaccessible to reason, while granting it its own privileged sphere (that of art or the aesthetics) that which pertains to affects and the imagination.

If for the critics of *Os Sertões*, interested as they are in the notion of a “consortium between science and literature”, the terms “science” and “art” are themselves not problematic, the same cannot be said for da Cunha’s view of these terms. To him, the distinction between a discursive sphere concerned with “objectivity”, “facts”, and “observation” that one could refer to as “science”, on the one hand, and a discursive sphere concerned with “imagination” and “feelings” that would receive the name of “art”, on the other, was by no means beyond dispute. In a preface written in 1907 for a book of verses by the poet Vicente de Carvalho, da Cunha outlined in greater detail his view of the relationship between science and art. In this text, we can see that “science” and “art” are not static categories; their content and meaning are not set in stone, nor are they defined in advance of the discursive arrangement in which they are put, as it were, in semantic motion. The passage, although long, deserves to be quoted at length:

Aos que se surpreendem de ver a prosa do engenheiro antes dos versos do poeta, direi que nem tudo é golpeantemente decisivo nesta profissão de números e diagramas. É ilusório o rigorismo matemático imposto pelo critério vulgar às formas irreduzíveis da verdade. Baste atender-se em que o objetivo das nossas vistas teóricas está no descobrir uma simplicidade que não existe na natureza; e que desta nos abeiramos, sempre indecisos, já tateantes, por meio de aproximações sucessivas, já precipitadamente, fascinados pelas miragens das hipóteses. A própria unidade das nossas mais abstratas construções é enganadora. Nos últimos trinta anos —nesta matemática tão, ao parecer, definitiva— idearam-se não sei quantas algebras, através de complicados silogismos; e o número de geometrias elementares, como no-lo mostra H. Poincaré, é hoje, logicamente, incalculável. Ainda mais: na mesma geometria clássica, sabe-se como se definem pontos, retas e planos, que não existem ou se reduzem a conceitos preestabelecidos sobre que se formulam postulados arbitrários. Continuando: vemos a mecânica basear-se, paradoxalmente, no princípio da inércia universal, e instituir a noção idealista do espaço absolute, em contradição com tudo quanto vemos e sentimos. ... Prosseguimos, idealizando flagrantemente a física, com a estrutura subjetiva de sólidos e fluidos perfeitos e sistemas isolados, e até singularíssimos fios inextensíveis, de todo em todo inexistentes; e romanceando a química,

definida pelo simbolismo imaginoso da arquitetura atômica de seus corpos simples, irreais...

[To those who are surprised to see the prose of the engineer prefacing the verses of the poet, I will say that not everything is strikingly decisive in this profession of numbers and diagrams. The mathematical rigorism imposed by the vulgar criterion on the irreducible forms of truth is illusory. One needs only realize that the goal of our theoretical views is the discovery of a simplicity that does not exist in nature; and that we approach nature, always indecisively, oftentimes gropingly, by means of successive approximations, fascinated by the mirages of our hypotheses. The very unity of our most abstract constructions is deceiving. In the past thirty years — within this mathematics so, it would seem, definitive— countless algebras were devised, by means of complicated syllogisms; and the number of elementary geometries, as H. Poincaré has shown, is today, logically, incalculable. And there is more: within classical geometry itself, one knows how to define points, straights, and planes that either do not exist or are reduced to pre-established concepts upon which arbitrary postulates are formulated. And even more: we see mechanics base itself, paradoxically, on the principle of universal inertia, and introduce the idealist notion of absolute space, in contradiction with everything we see and feel.... We thus continue, flagrantly idealizing physics, with the subjective structure of perfect solids and fluids, with isolated systems, and even with the most singular inextensible strings, all of which are, all in all, non-existent; and romanticizing chemistry, defined by the imaginative symbolism of the atomic architecture of its simple and unreal bodies.] (Cunha, Antes dos Versos 437-8)

It is thus the case that the aesthetic dimension in *Os Sertões* does *not*, as studies have traditionally claimed, pertain merely to “emotions” and the “imagination” in contrast to the factual objectivity of its scientific dimension. The aesthetic dimension of *Os Sertões* — what I am calling its aesthetics of conflict— must be understood in relationship to the many absences that pervade the book, absences in response to which the book was conceived.

The backlands themselves appear, in da Cunha’s text, as an absence. We are introduced to it, in a way that resembles Sarmiento’s presentation of the Argentine Pampas (and that will later resonate, in a different textual key, in Borges’s description of the fantastic land of Uqbar) by way of its limits, as if they lacked positive, substantive existence, as if determinate negation were the only way to approach and circumscribe them:

Demarca-o de uma banda, abrangendo dois quadrantes, em semi-círculo, o rio São Francisco; e de outra, encurvando também para sudeste, numa normal à direção primitiva, o curso flexuoso do Itapicuruçu. Segundo a

mediana, correndo quase paralelo entre aqueles, com o mesmo descambar expressivo para a costa, vê-se o traço de um outro rio, o Vaza-Barris, o *Irapiranga* dos tapuias, cujo trecho de Jeremoabo para as cabeceiras é uma fantasia de cartógrafo.

[Demarcating it from one side, the São Francisco River forms a semi-circle about it, embracing two quadrants; and, on the other side, likewise curving to the southeast, in a normal line to the original direction, is the sinuous course of the Itapicurúacu. Following a median running almost parallel between these two streams, with the same significant drop to the coast, may be seen the outline of another river, the Vaza-Barris, the *Irapiranga* of the Tapuias, of which the initial Jeremoabo segment is a cartographer's fantasy.] (*Os Sertões* 80)

And even then there is something profoundly unsettling about these boundaries: only one of the rivers listed—the São Francisco—can be said to have a perennial body of water. The Itapicurúacu, although present during most of the year, is known to disappear in periods of great drought—periods which, as da Cunha himself tells us, are all but uncommon in the region (109). And the Vaza-Barris, whose source is dry for most of the year, is “uma fantasia de cartógrafo”, a cartographer's fantasy⁴⁹, da Cunha writes, making use of a telling expression that, by having the cartographer—i.e. the scientist—as the one to harbor fantasies, once again subverts the positivistic dualism that decrees fantasy to be the within the sphere of the artist alone.

Not only are the backlands circumscribed by ephemeral boundaries; when these boundaries are finally crossed, the very body of the backlands presents itself as the embodiment of an absence:

Abordando-o, compreende-se que até hoje escasseiem sobre tão grande trato de território, que quase abarcaria a Holanda... , notícias exatas ou pormenorizadas. As nossas melhores cartas, enfeixando informes escassos, lá têm um claro expressivo, um hiato, *terra ignota*, em que se aventura o rabisco de um rio problemático ou idealização de uma corda de serras.

[As one approaches it, one begins to understand why it is that, until now, the data or exact details concerning this vast piece of territory, which

⁴⁹ The official website of the Jeremoabo municipality, where the Vaza-Barris river is located, states the following about the river: “O Vaza-Barris é uma realidade quase virtual. Um fenômeno de hidrografia e imaginação. Esse rio, feito de chuva, de mar, de fé e de história, nasce seco, no pé da Serra dos Macacos, em pleno sertão baiano, perto do município de Uauá, um dos principais criatórios de bode do país. Menos que uma nascente, o que se tem aqui na realidade é uma probabilidade líquida.” [The Vaza-Barris is an almost virtual reality. It is a unique blend of hydrography and imagination. This river, made of rain, sea, faith and history, is born dry, at the foot of the Serra dos Macacos, in the midst of the backlands of Bahia, near the municipality of Uauá. Less than a spring, what one finds there is liquid probability] (<http://portaljv.com.br/jeremoabo/hidrografia.htm>)

could almost take in all of Holland... have been so very scarce. Our best maps, conveying but scant information, show here an expressive blank, a hiatus, *terra incognita*, in which a mere scrawl of a dubious river or an idealized mountain string ventures from the pen of the cartographer] (80)

The ephemeral boundaries of a hiatus, “as lindes de um deserto” [the confines of a desert] (84)— we are confronted, from the beginning of *Os Sertões*, with a blank. Yet it is not any kind of blank. It is, we are told, “an expressive blank”, a significant desert. But what does it express, this blank? What idiom, what language would have the ability to render intelligible an expressive blank, what language would have the ability to articulate a significant desert?

The available languages, to be sure, have done a poor job at it. Even that matrix of civilized languages, that quasi-Ur language to which scientists —those engineers-*bricoleurs*⁵⁰— have constantly gone back to in their Adamic quest of naming the natural world, even Latin, we are told, was not able to bridge the gap that separated expression from meaning:

Nenhum pioneiro da ciência suportou ainda as agruras daquele rincão sertanejo, em prazo suficiente para o definir. Martius por lá passou... Rompendo, porém, a região selvagem, *desertus australis*, como a batizou, mal atentou para a terra recamada de uma flora extravagante, *silva horrida*, no seu latim alarmado.

[No scientific pioneer has as yet endured the harshness of this corner of the backlands for sufficient time to come up with any definitions. Von Martius came this way... Forging through the wild tract, *desertus australis*, as he christened it, he paid little attention to the land covered by an extravagant flora, *silva horrida*, in his alarmed Latin.] (102)⁵¹

Hegel himself, da Cunha tells us, in spite of the all-encompassing ambition of his dialectical synthesis, seemed to overlook the Brazilian backlands in his totalizing system.

⁵⁰ I am using, with some freedom, the terms in the sense developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*. “The *bricoleur* is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’.” (Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* 17) The *bricoleur*, in other words, must put preexisting things together in new ways, adapting his project to a limited, finite stock of materials and tools.

⁵¹ “Foreign words”, writes Adorno, “demonstrate the impossibility of an ontology of language; they confront even concepts that try to pass off as origin itself with their mediatedness, their moment of being subjectively constructed, their arbitrariness. Terminology, the quintessence of foreign words in the individual disciplines, and especially in philosophy, is not only thing-like rigidification but also its opposite: critique of concepts’ claim to exist in themselves when in fact language has inscribed in them something posited, something that could be otherwise.” (Adorno, *Words from Abroad* 189)

In a chapter suggestively titled “Uma Categoria Geográfica que Hegel não Citou” [A Geographical Category that Hegel does not Mention], da Cunha writes that Hegel outlined three geographic categories in his system: “as estepes de vegetação tolhiça, ou vastas planícies áridas; os vales férteis, profusamente irrigados; os litorais e as ilhas” [the steppes, or vast arid plains, with their stunted vegetation; the fertile valleys, abundantly irrigated; and the coastlands and islands] (133). Having taken pains to describe the steppes, which at first sight could seem to account for the backlands, da Cunha goes on to show how the Brazilian backlands in fact problematize the Hegelian grid, laying bare its insufficiency:

Aos sertões do Norte, porém, que à primeira vista se lhes equiparam, falta um lugar no quadro do pensador germânico. Ao atravessá-los no estio, crê-se que entram, de molde, naquela primeira subdivisão [i.e. the steppes]; ao atravessá-los no inverno, acredita-se que são parte essencial da segunda [i.e. the fertile valleys]. Barbaramente estéreis; maravilhosamente exuberantes... Na plenitude das secas são positivamente o deserto. Mas quando estas não se prolongam ao ponto de originarem penosíssimos êxodos, o homem luta como as árvores, com as reservas armazenadas nos dias de abundância, e neste combate feroz, anônimo, terrivelmente obscuro, afogado na solidão das chapadas, a natureza não o abandona de todo. Ampara-o muito além das horas de desesperança, que acompanham o esgotamento das últimas cacimbas.

[As for our own northern backlands, which may at first sight appear to resemble these other regions, a place for them is lacking in the German thinker’s conceptual grid. Upon traversing them in summer, one would believe that they fell within the first subdivision [i.e. the steppes], but in wintertime he would feel that they belonged essentially to the second [i.e. the fertile valleys]. They are barbarously sterile, marvelously exuberant] (134-5)

It is then that we begin to see at work one of the fundamental strategies by which da Cunha attempts to articulate and render intelligible the form whose production he set as his task to accomplish with the writing of *Os Sertões*:

Ao sobrevir das chuvas, a terra transfigura-se em mutações fantásticas, contrastando com a desolação anterior. Os vales secos fazem-se rios. Insulam-se os cômodos escavados, repentinamente verdejantes.... Dilatam-se os horizontes. O firmamento, sem o azul carregado dos desertos, alteia-se, mais profundo, ante o expandir revivescente da terra. E o sertão é um vale fértil. É um pomar vastíssimo, sem dono. Depois tudo isto se acaba. Voltam os dias torturantes; a atmosfera asfixiadora; o empedramento do solo; a nudez da flora; e nas ocasiões em que os estios se ligam sem a intermitência das chuvas— o espasmo assombrador da seca. A natureza compraz-se em um jogo de antíteses. Eles impõem por isto uma divisão

especial naquele quadro. A mais interessante e expressiva de todas—posta, como mediadora, entre os vales nimiamente férteis e as estepes mais áridas.

[When the rains come on, the land, as we have seen, becomes transfigured, undergoes fantastic mutations, in contrast to the desolation that has gone before. The parched valleys now become rivers and the barren hills islands of green.... The horizons expand, and the sky, lacking the desert's heavy-laden blue, is at once higher and deeper in the presence of the new-unfolding life of the land. And the backlands are a fertile valley. It is one vast garden, without an owner. Then, all this comes to an end. The days of torture return; the atmosphere is asphyxiating; the soil is hard as rock; the flora is stripped bare; and on those occasions when summer meets summer without the intermittency of rain—the dreadful spasm of the drought. Nature here rejoices in a play of antitheses. And the backlands call, for this reason, for a special division in the Hegelian conceptual grid. The most interesting and expressive of them all—placed as a mediator between the overfertile valleys and the most arid of the steppes.] (135)

The Brazilian backlands, consisting of an interplay of extremes, absent as they are from the Hegelian categorial grid, are in fact, da Cunha tells us, the most interesting and expressive of categories. Comprised as they are of an interplay of extremes, the backlands are nonetheless the ideal mediator — or *precisely* because they are comprised of the most uncompromising extremes they make an ideal mediator⁵²— between the fertile valleys and the arid steppes.

Here we have, in a nutshell, presented as it were metonymically, the antithetical dynamics underlying the aesthetics of conflict on which *Os Sertões* is built. Confronted with a series of categorial and conceptual absences, da Cunha, engineer-*bricoleur* that he is, makes use of those categories and concepts that *are* available, however precarious or inadequate, in order to put together his own discourse, his own language, his own semantic constellation. In his attempt not to repeat the same mistakes typical of the representatives of the “borrowed civilization” from which however he does not exclude himself; in order not to repeat, that is, the same ornamental gestures that transform dynamic form into rigid formulas and formalities, da Cunha rejects the positivistic methodological postulate by which categories are posited as givens, as static starting points for analysis. Instead, he dramatizes them through a particular use of the figural dimension of language⁵³, in an operation that could perhaps be called conceptual

⁵² Cf. Adorno's *Minima Moralia*: “The Echternach dancing procession is not the march of the World Spirit; limitation and reservation are no way to represent the dialectic. Rather, the dialectic advances by way of extremes, driving thoughts with the utmost consequentiality to the point where they turn back on themselves, instead of qualifying them.” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 86)

⁵³ In doing so, he at the same time distinguishes his own use of rhetoric, which plays a structural role in his work, from the ornamental rhetoric prevalent in the “tradição bacharelesca”.

catachresis. If catachresis is the rhetorical operation by means of which an absent term is replaced by a borrowed term — and if this substitution is mandated by an actual gap in the vocabulary⁵⁴ — then we may say that, given the conceptual gaps in the vocabulary which da Cunha has at his disposal, and given the practical necessity of making do with whatever is available —i.e. given the necessity of mediating the engineer that one ultimately aims to be through the *bricoleur* that one always already is—, underlying da Cunha’s response to the pervading absences on which *Os Sertões* is erected, there is to be found the constant operation of conceptual catachresis.

The operation of conceptual catachresis provides the necessary condition, the groundwork that makes da Cunha’s aesthetics of conflict possible as a response to the pervading absences on which *Os Sertões* is constructed. There is, however, one further aspect of his scientific-aesthetic project — of the tension-riddled “consortium” between science and art— that I would like to mention briefly here, since it will be taken up in greater detail on the second section of Chapter 2, which focuses on Guimarães Rosa’s *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. It concerns the role of synthesis in the consortium between science and art.

In *Os Sertões*, the recourse to conceptual catachresis —a system of production of meaning that, founded on the notion of substitution, depends on an on-going interplay of identity within difference and difference within identity— as the groundwork for the consortium of science and art has as its central corollary that meaning, in da Cunha’s text, is by necessity contextual. It was for this reason that, as we saw in the previous section, Moreira Guimarães’s attempts to disqualify da Cunha’s arguments by recourse to the dictionary and by targeting individual oxymoronic expressions in isolation (in the case discussed, the expression “unconscious mercenaries”) were of no consequence. As a result of the contextual nature of meaning within the semantic constellation that is da Cunha’s text, isolated words or expressions have no proper meaning. The critique of any of the various oxymoronic expressions in *Os Sertões*⁵⁵, taken by themselves and without regard to the whole textual network in which they are inserted and from which they derive their semantic pertinence, is bound to failure. To quote the English rhetorician I. A. Richards, we could say that, in *Os Sertões*, the conceptual catachresis on which the production of meaning is grounded has as its consequence that there are no fixed

⁵⁴ “The borrowed term, taken in its figurative sense, is substituted for an absent word (which is lacking, or which one does not wish to use) that, in its proper meaning, could be used in that place. This substitution is a matter of preference; one is not forced into it, when the proper word exists. In that case we speak of trope in its strict sense. When the substitution corresponds to a real gap in vocabulary, when it is forced, one speaks of catachresis.” (Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* 46)

⁵⁵ These expressions abound throughout the book. Some of the best-known are: “unconscious mercenaries”, to refer to the supporters of the Republic against the settlement of Canudos; “Hercules-Quasímodo” to refer to the ungracious heroism of the Brazilian backlander; the “Troy of Mud”, in reference to the settlement of Canudos.

meanings, and no meaning can be grasped outside the “*movement* among meanings” (Richards 48) which holds together the semantic constellation of da Cunha’s text, in a dynamic and necessarily fragile equilibrium. Half a century later, João Guimarães Rosa will take up in his *Grande Sertão: Veredas* many of the central questions that occupied Euclides da Cunha in his project of a consortium between science and art. But in Rosa the network of absences on which *Os Sertões* was built will be seen through the lens of allegory; and the fragile equilibrium attained by da Cunha’s book as a result of its self-contained semantic constellation will, in Rosa’s work, give way to an open-ended dialogical whole constantly re-enacted and actualized by an equally dialogical act of reading.

CHAPTER 2

Allegory and the trial of fiction in João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas*

Deus existe mesmo quando não há
(*Grande Sertão: Veredas*)

In a letter to his Italian translator, Guimarães Rosa, referring to one of the aspects of his compositional technique, claims to aim for “uma possível e ampliada ressonância universal, isto é,... ao que já disse a V. a respeito de acorde, cacho, multiplicidade de conotações, empastamento semântico...” [a possible and amplified universal resonance, that is to say.... what I have already mentioned to you concerning a combination of divergent notes, a chord-like operation, a multiplicity of connotations, a semantic *impasto*...] (*Correspondência com o tradutor italiano* 85). This chord-like operation, in which two or more notes sound simultaneously and, without breaking the unity that encompasses them, are each enriched and amplified in their play of identity and difference, will also tentatively inform the method I will adopt in this chapter's section. The idea is to carry through to the level of analysis this technique of resonance and to investigate, even if only in a partial manner, one of the many ways through which it manifests itself: allegory. The investigation of certain allegorical aspects of Rosa's book will allow me to perform an interpretation of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* that situates it thematically in a particular moment in the history of ideas: a moment marked by the loss of faith in grand narratives and the corresponding loss of privileged centers of meaning. Starting from an etymological analysis of the terms “diabo” [devil] and “sertão” [backlands], which are central motifs in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*⁵⁶, I will argue that the clash between dispersion and order suggested by them runs through the entire text, from the linguistic to the structural level, and from there to the thematic level. It appears with striking clarity in the confrontation between two distinct cultural and socio-political orders: the world of the great *jagunço* leaders, on the one hand, guided by more rigid and more stable values, and on the other hand the world of the young Brazilian Republic, of the city and of progress, of the borrowed, second hand civilization (to use Euclides da Cunha's expression), in which the old value scales, having had their central premises challenged, enter into dispersion and, as it were, rebel themselves.⁵⁷ One of the questions,

⁵⁶ So central that the English edition of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, choosing direct emphasis over the indirect and diffuse logic with which both motifs operate in Rosa's book, was published under the title *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*.

⁵⁷ The use of the verb “rebel”, here, like the expression “out of joint” below, is a reference to the Portuguese term “à revelia”. Like so many terms in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, it is a polysemic term and its polysemy is central to a fuller understanding of the text. (This is also why approaching the book in

then, that will come to the surface is the following: between an archaic world in which a fixed order and a hierarchy of values was still possible and a modernizing world set out of joint⁵⁸, where does Riobaldo, the narrator and protagonist of the book, situate himself?

Yet, prior to investigating the allegorical dimension of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, we must first take a look at a particular inaugural scene in the book. This scene is the moment when allegory, in its will to abstraction, intersects with the concretion of history, namely, in the particular case of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, the problematic history of political representation in Brazil. Inaugural though it is, this particular inaugural scene is located, like all imaginable beginnings, *in media res*, and it divides the book in two perfect halves. I say “imaginable” beginnings because, of course, of *unimaginable* beginnings nothing can be said. The question of beginnings, and the related question of the possibility (or impossibility) of originality given Brazil’s (and Argentina’s) own *in media res* historical situation is once again at work here. It is a question, as we have seen, that is at the heart both of Sarmiento’s recourse to imperfect analogy and of Euclides da Cunha’s constant recourse to conceptual catachresis; it will also be taken up and turned upside-down by Borges’s adjectival understanding of both identity and fictional practice, as we will have the opportunity to see in the next chapter. In Rosa’s *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, the problematic question of beginnings and endings is already manifest in the way the book begins and ends. *Grande Sertão: Veredas* opens with the word “nonada”, which in the context of the book becomes polysemically charged: “nonada” literally means “trifle”, “a thing of little importance”, yet it contains in its body an allusion to the Latin expression “ex nihilo”, while at the same time negating the possibility of a beginning from nothingness. And the book ends, as it were, twice. Its last word is the term “travessia”, which carries the meaning of both a “crossing” and a “journey”, and is also present, as a *Leitmotiv* and a theme, throughout the book in the many crossroads of Riobaldo’s own *Bildung* (the crossroads of the Veredas-Mortas, where Riobaldo suggests a pact between himself and the devil might have taken place, splits Riobaldo’s life into two halves in the same way that the crossing of the river São Francisco, where the young Riobaldo had first met the “Menino” Diadorim, is said by Riobaldo himself to have done so⁵⁹). However, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* does not end with a word. Following the word

translation is such a daunting task, inevitably bound to failure.)” “À revelia” literally means “in rebellion”. In the particular context of “o mundo à revelia” [the world in rebellion], which will be discussed in greater detail further ahead, it has the meaning of a world, or a time “out of joint”, to use the Hamletian expression, itself admittedly polysemic and open to a wide-array of interpretations. “À revelia” is also the expression used, in a juridical context, to refer to the absence of a defendant from a trial (meaning, thus, “in absentia”). All these meanings reverberate simultaneously—a chord-like operation or a semantic *impasto*, to use Rosa’s own words—in the use of the expression in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*.

⁵⁸ This is also a reference to the Portuguese term “à revelia”. See previous note.

⁵⁹ “Voltei com Diadorim. Não voltei? Travessias... Diadorim, os rios verdes... O São Francisco partiu minha vida em duas partes.” [I came back with Diadorim. Didn’t I? Ah, the crossings... Diadorim, the green rivers... The São Francisco divided my life into two parts] (Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* 325-6)

“travessia”, the graphic symbol of infinity, the lemniscate, suggests another layer of contrast, one in which the open-ended infinity of Riobaldo’s narrative is counterpoised to the self-contained totality of a book that must come to an end.

The inaugural scene that we will take a look at is, as already said, the moment in which allegory and history intersect. For this reason, a word about Rosa’s understanding of the relationship between fiction and history —between, in his own words, “story” and “history”— is in order before we advance any further.

*

Rosa formulates his view of the relationship between fiction and history in “Aletria e Hermenêutica”, the first of four prefaces included in the collection of stories *Tutaméia*. There, Rosa calls attention to the fact that “A estória não quer ser história. A estória, em rigor, deve ser contra a História” [The story does not want to be history. The story, strictly speaking, must be against History.] (Rosa, *Tutaméia* 29) Commentators have often seen in this passage a binary opposition between fictional discourse (“estória”, story) and a discourse concerned with the account of causal relations among objective facts (“história”, history). Luiz Fernando Valente, for instance, remarks that Rosa’s enigmatic claim suggests two fundamentally distinct modes of recording human experience. *História*, History, writes Valente, “stands for the attempt to explain the past by means of a logical analysis of objective data and hard facts”. This positivistic conception of history, to be sure, runs the risk of reducing, and I quote Valente, “unique human events to cogs in a cycle of endless repetition” (Valente 351) It is, thus, the *estória* (in which Valente sees the equivalent of the English “story”, or “fiction”) that, resisting the adoption of an objective stance, “is better able to represent the singularity of all human experience while at the same time providing the links between what would otherwise be inert facts” (351).

This reading, however, overlooks what seems to me a fundamental detail, one that makes Rosa’s view of story, or fiction, more complex and also more ambiguous: the distinction Rosa puts forward is not a binary one. “Estória”, “Story”, in the quoted passage, is contrasted not with one, but with *two* different “histórias”, with two different “histories”, distinguished from one another by the use of a capitalized initial: “A estória não quer ser *história*. A estória, em rigor, deve ser contra a *História*”. The story does not want to be *history*. The story, strictly speaking, must be against *History*. (*Tutaméia* 29, emphasis added). The first “history” in the passage, I want to suggest, refers to the succession and multiplicity of events in their concrete, material existence. Story, “fiction”, does not want to *be* history in the precise sense that it does not want to *pass as* history, even though it may often resemble it by means of representational and narrative devices: one of fiction’s defining traits is precisely that, from the start, as soon as it invites us to the fictional pact, it acknowledges its “immateriality”, its discursive nature,

its existence as artifice. On the other hand, the second, capitalized “History” in Rosas’s distinction refers, instead, to History as that master narrative which, in its unifying, totalizing will to coherence and systemization, stands against the multiplicity and proliferation of different perspectives, different versions, different “stories”. Inasmuch as “story”, “fiction”, is always already the product of a particular, contextually circumscribed site of enunciation, it must stand against the totalizing pretension of a narrative that, in attempting to encompass all voices, ultimately silences their difference in a single unison.

If we were then to attempt a paraphrase of Rosa’s statement, it could perhaps be something like this: “Fiction” does not want to pass as non-fiction; even amid all make-believe, it does not ignore its moment of artifice: it instead presupposes it. “Fiction”, moreover, strictly speaking, being artifice, must resist the idea of a single overarching narrative that would encompass and subsume all points of views, all versions, all possible stories. The logic of fiction, a hypothetical logic of the “as-if”, of the “what-if”, is one that is necessarily open to otherness and to the possibility of alternatives, of which it takes itself to be one.

*

The inaugural scene that we will now examine brings together and reformulates as it were dramatically — that is to say, in a *mise-en-scène* that takes the form of a simulated dialogue— this interplay between history and story that lies at the heart of allegory. In doing so, it dramatizes the absences which were present (the oxymoron is as intentional as it is unavoidable) in Euclides da Cunha’s *Os Sertões*. It offers as it were a performative reflection on the problem of political representation (and the central absence of the people in the theater of representation in Brazil), as well as a reflection on the origins (again *in media res*) of authority by means of the tautological (because self-assertive) force of law. It also establishes *in media res* (to the extent that it does so only halfway through the text) the fictional pact that is nonetheless at work *from the beginning* of the book, playing out as it were in the book’s own compositional arrangement the dialectics of inauguration and continuity present in any imaginable (i.e. relative) beginnings. In this passage, authorship and authority, the non-authoritative discourse of fiction and the authoritative discourses of political theory, history, and law are played against each other, within each other, chord-like — like an illustration of what Rosa himself called his chord-like compositional method, his deliberate attempt at achieving the effect of a semantic *impasto*. (But should one really speak here of an illustration? Which comes first, the authoritative formulation of a practice, or the as yet unformulated, tentative practice itself?) The fact that all this takes place from within the fictional pact, and through the medium of fiction, must not escape us. In this inaugural scene, in the trial of fiction that lies at the heart of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, the possibilities as well as the limits of fiction will be played out.

2.1. The Trial of Fiction

At the center of Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, dividing the book in two perfect halves, a trial takes place. It is an unusual trial. In the middle of the sertão, the Brazilian backlands, far from the reach of the central government and the rule of law, a group of jagunços led by Joca Ramiro, armed hands in the service of the local rural oligarchy, social bandits of sorts, get together to try Zé Bebelo, whom they have just captured in battle. Himself a jagunço of sorts, Zé Bebelo is unusual however in his modernizing political aspirations towards the sertão and in his openly proclaimed sympathy for the central government. (In the war between the zé-bebelos and the ramiros one can catch a glimpse of the tension between the centralist and the federalist principles that threatened to tear the First Brazilian Republic apart).

It was an unusual trial for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its sheer un-precedence. The idea of an impromptu trial in the sertão brought together, in one single mise-en-scène, two paradigms that had until then been thought of as irreconcilably antithetical in the intellectual and political tradition of early twentieth century Brazil; paradigms that have by now a relatively long history in Latin American thought, and which one could call, perhaps, making use of a shorthand that we now know is problematic, those of civilization and barbarism. The trial came as a surprise to the very jagunços who accepted it as a viable resolution for the conflict; it came as a surprise to Joca Ramiro and to his men, among whom Riobaldo, the protagonist and narrator of the story, who refers to it as “uma extração estúrdia e destrambelhada, doideira acontecida sem senso, neste meio do sertão” [an absurd and disorderly performance, a senseless piece of madness that took place in the middle of the sertão]⁶⁰ (Rosa, *Grande Sertão:*

⁶⁰ Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own, in consultation with those already available. In my renderings of passages from *Grande Sertão: Veredas* I will, whenever possible, strive for literal accuracy. Yet “literal” must here be defined: it does not mean the lexical literal, the literal according to the dictionary. It means literal in the sense as attempting to do justice to the polysemy with which the words in Rosa's text are charged. This kind of polysemic fidelity (which includes fidelity to the very strangeness of Rosa's Portuguese in the ears of a native speaker) is, of course, rarely possible. Owing to that, I will attempt to resort whenever necessary to explanatory footnotes showing how the translation —either mine or that of others— falls short. Due to Rosa's highly idiosyncratic and experimental Portuguese, which consists of a deliberate mixture of the popular language of the backlands with the etymological and lexical logic of the many languages which Rosa spoke* (he has often been compared to James Joyce, though I believe that his linguistic proficiency and his linguistic inventiveness are the only grounds in which the comparison, often extrapolated, might be justified), the task of translating *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956) to English is doomed to failure, a statement that finds strong support in the only English translation of the book available (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, 1965, by Harriet de Onís). Translations to Spanish (*Gran Sertón: Veredas*, first translated by Angel Crespo, in 1975, followed by Florencia Gararmuño and Gonzalo Aguilar's translation, in 2009), given the closer proximity of both languages and their similar syntactical logic, have fared considerably better, as have translations to German (*Grande Sertão*, 1966, by Meyer-Clason) and Dutch (*Diepe wildernis: de wegen*, 1993, by August Willemsen), idioms which are much more sympathetic to the creation of neologisms, to which Rosa often resorts, even though his linguistic inventiveness is not limited to the lexical unit.

Veredas 301). For, indeed, how could a trial take place with no pre-established rules and conventions, no pre-established system of laws to regulate it, to subsume it, and to provide it with the criteria by which conviction and judgment were to be possible? What did Zé Bebelo, the supposed defendant, mean when, having been captured by the ramiros, he claimed that his capture and his trial were, in fact, “o mundo à revelia”, an ambiguous expression that could be translated, in one of its senses, as the world *in absentia*?⁶¹ (Grande Sertão: Veredas 271)

In order to reflect on these questions it is necessary, I think, to take a brief look at the larger historical context in which the story of Riobaldo, the narrative of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, takes place. This scenario, this *theater* of law (in a sense that manages, significantly, to be both literal and literary), points, metonymically, to the first years of the Brazilian Republic, the period going from its proclamation in 1889 to the presidency of Campos Sales in 1898, a period which historian Renato Lessa has dubbed the “entropic years” (Lessa 49). Those years, which coincide with the time of the narrated events in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, reveal a set of social and political circumstances deeply marked by the idea of *absence*.

If it is true that from its early days modern political thought has shared, in the category of representation, a common ground with fiction (and here one can think, for instance, of Thomas Hobbes and the emphasis he places on the notion of *artifice* in politics)⁶², in Brazil, and in particular during the early, rather chaotic years of the First

*In an interview, Rosa himself claimed to speak eight languages; Günter Lorenz, his interviewer and a scholar of Brazilian literature, claimed to have found evidence that Rosa was in fact being modest: “Por um artigo publicado no Brasil em 1967, após a morte de Guimarães Rosa, eu soube que ele falava português, espanhol, francês, inglês, alemão e italiano. Além disso, possuía conhecimentos suficientes para ler livros em latim, grego clássico, grego moderno, sueco, dinamarquês, servo-croata, russo, húngaro, persa, chinês, japonês, hindu, árabe e malaio.” [Through an article published in Brazil in 1967, after Guimarães Rosa’s death, I learned that he spoke Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, German, and Italian. In addition to that, he possessed enough knowledge so as to read books in Latin, Classical Greek, Modern Greek, Swedish, Danish, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, Hungarian, Persian, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi, Arabic, and Malay”. (Lorenz 87)

⁶¹ This is the juridical meaning of the expression. But the English translation has the power to fork out the literal meaning of the expression in two: the “world in rebellion” — as a literal rendering of the Portuguese would read—, and the “world in absence”— as a literal rendering of the juridical Latin of the English version would read. Both meanings have their bearing in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, as we will have the opportunity to see later in the chapter when we discuss the expression “mundo à revelia” in greater detail.

⁶² The role of artifice in Hobbes becomes particularly clear in his description of the process by means of which a “multitude” becomes a “person” — by means of which, that is to say, the state embodies the people it represents, as visually represented by the engraved frontispiece to the original edition of his *Leviathan*, in which the dispersed individuals are brought together and united in the body of the monarch, while at the same time constituting its body. In *De Homine*, in the opening of a chapter tellingly entitled “Of Artificial Man”, after describing the uses of the theatrical mask (the *persona*) in Greek theater, Hobbes writes that “such artifices are no less necessary in the state than in the theatre. Moreover, because the concept of person is of use in civil affairs, it can be defined as follows: *a person*

Brazilian Republic, the theater of politics seemed disturbingly close to that other, less metaphorical theater. Politics became in a crucial sense theatrical. Political representation, which was in theory supposed to bridge the gap between the imagined community of the republic and those who represented them, seemed instead, in those years, to increase that gap, turning politics into a spectacle, and the people, who were declared by the Republican propaganda to be the actual political actors, more often than not were assigned no role to play, appearing instead as distant, alien, uninterested spectators. In addition to the absence of a clear institutional blueprint to be followed and the absence of administrative and political experience on the part of those responsible for conducting the adventure that was the Republican experiment in Brazil, the most remarkable absence in the new Republican regime was, thus, one that stood in stark contrast to its ideological justification: the absence of popular participation. The remark by Aristides Lobo, published three days after the proclamation of the new regime, is well known and worth repeating: “The people”, he wrote, “watched everything dumbstruck, astonished, surprised, not knowing what it meant. Many sincerely believed they were seeing a parade”. He had in mind, of course, the people in Rio de Janeiro, urban citizens in the capital of the country. In the backlands of Brazil, the exclusion of the rural contingent was to such an extent a *fait accompli* that it hardly ever made its way into the reflections of the Brazilian intellectuals during those years. Despite the speeches of radical Republican propagandists such as Silva Jardim and Lopes Trovão, who presented the Republic, in the image of the French Revolution, as the irruption of the people in politics, the relationship between the new regime and the people, and in particular the rural people of the backlands, was marked, above all, by the sheer absence of dialogue.

One can see, then, how radical the trial in the middle of the sertão imagined by Guimarães Rosa appears to be. That “absurd performance”, to quote Riobaldo again, in which the theater of law was at one and the same time conceived, rehearsed, and enacted, made room, it would seem, for the dialogue that had been missing in the social and political relations in Brazil, the dire consequences of whose absence Euclides da Cunha

is he to whom the words and actions of men are attributed, either his own or another's: if his own, the person is natural, if another's, it is artificial". (Hobbes 83) Discussing the artifice of political representation as it appears in Hobbes, Howard Caygill writes: “We shall see Hobbes finds in the theatre the same logic of illusion he found in catoptric art. In the theatre the audience produce the spectacle by its gaze, and are united by it into an audience. Should their gaze turn away from the spectacle and toward each other then the illusion on stage would be destroyed along with their unity as an audience. The unification of diversity follows from individuals in the audience producing the illusion which constitutes them as an audience...The individuals, all gazing in rapt silence at the mask, at this moment constitute the spectacle which constitutes them as a single body or audience.” (Caygill 24-25) Svetlana Boym seems to be following Caygill’s reading when she writes that “Such a baroque image represents a curious double figure of the body of the sovereign, made of his people. It/he is at once an artificial animal and the people who created him and obey him. Moreover, in the emblem the men greeting the sovereign happen to be wearing hats, less a sign of prostration before the divine monarch than a behavior of spectators, suggesting a peculiar form of political theatricality.” (Boym 19)

had eloquently denounced in *Os Sertões*, his indictment of the direction taken by the Brazilian Republic, in which the conflict between civilization and barbarism took the absence of dialogue to its most extreme form: the undisguised bloodshed that resulted in the total annihilation of the rural settlement of Canudos by the progressive, civilized forces of the Republic.

Yet what kind of dialogue can an impromptu trial within a fictional text provide? Is Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, as literary critic Willi Bolle claimed, perhaps too hastily overlooking its fictional dimension, a "re-writing of Euclides's *Os Sertões*" (Bolle 8)? Can we, ignoring Rosa's own words of caution regarding the twofold resistance of story vis-à-vis history both as materiality and as theory, read his novel as a sociological work comparable to those belonging to the genre of "retratos do Brasil" [the portraits of Brazil], which includes, among others, Sergio Buarque de Holanda's *Raízes do Brasil*, Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande & Senzala*, and Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões* itself? Rather, I would like to suggest instead that it is precisely due to fiction's freedom vis-à-vis the two kinds of history mentioned by Rosa, as well as to its non-committal relationship to posited facts and pre-established categories of thought and theoretical frameworks, that the dialogical situation of the trial in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* can tell us something that Euclides's *Os Sertões*, and the other sociological treatises with which it is in one way or another in dialogue, cannot.

This is one of the reasons why we must approach Riobaldo's insistent comparison between trial and theater with caution. (As already pointed out, Riobaldo refers to Zé Bebelo's trial, in more than one point, as a performance — though, tellingly, and I will come back to this point later, never as a spectacle). To be sure, the approximation between trial and theater is not new, and one may in fact be linked to the other at their origins. Walter Benjamin, for instance, reminds us, and I quote, that "athletic contests, law, and tragedy constituted the great agonal trinity of Greek life". In antiquity, the trial, in particular the criminal trial, not only had its chorus, consisting of the witnesses and the assembled citizens, but was also a dialogue. The trial by ordeal, or by prescribed, religious formulas, or the resolution of conflicts by combat with weapons were disrupted, Benjamin tells us, by the freedom of *logos*. (Benjamin 115-116). In theater, too, the *agon* took place not only among different poets competing against each other, but also within each and every play through the medium of dialogue. Like the juridical principle of *audi alteram partem*, the principle according to which each party is given the opportunity to respond to the evidence against them and to put forward their own arguments to do so, so in the tragic dialogue "the heroes learn not to speak... but to debate". (Benjamin 116)

In the trial of Zé Bebelo, the initial, overall impression was one of bafflement and disorientation among those present: "Estavam escutando sem entender, estavam ouvindo missa" [They listened but they did not understand, they were hearing Mass], notes Riobaldo.⁶³ Uncertainty reigned regarding what the judgment consisted of and what the

⁶³ Riobaldo's comparison between the disorientation of those present at the trial ("they listened but they did not understand") and the act of hearing Mass stresses the distance between the rigidified

accusation really was: there was, after all, no pre-established typology under which to subsume Zé Bebelo's conduct as a crime; as a judgment without a precedent — an inaugural scene of sorts—, it had to move from the particular to the universal, producing in the very act of judging its own grounds for legitimation.

And yet eventually everyone was given the opportunity to speak and to be heard. There was, strictly speaking, no separate audience in the trial of Zé Bebelo, there were no mere spectators. If it is true that in the theater the audience produces the spectacle by its gaze, and is in turn united by it into an audience; and if, moreover, the illusion of the spectacle can only persist as long as their gaze is not turned away from the stage and toward each other (Caygill 24) — and if, finally, this theatrical metaphor, which has been used to describe the illusion of political representation from Hobbes on, can also be used to describe, on a significantly more farcical key, the spectacle of politics and popular representation in the early years of the Brazilian republic, then, perhaps, it can be said that the trial of Zé Bebelo in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* was a *trial* in yet another sense of the word: an experiment, an essay in an alternative mode of political and institutional representation, one in which the people would cease to be merely an audience for the alien spectacle of politics and would become, themselves, active voices in the process of its social and political construction.

And yet, once again, we need to remind ourselves that story does not want to be history; we must take into account the limits of the fictional pact. In the case of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, however, this means that things get *more*, rather the less complex.

We cannot speak of dialogue in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* without, first, calling attention to the peculiar structure of the narrative voice through which the novel takes shape.

formulas of rituals and the audience that partakes in them, often moved by the heteronomous force of habit or tradition. (It should be noted that the Mass, at the time in which the book was written, was still traditionally celebrated in Latin in Brazil — and, in the Brazilian backlands, a Latin moreover that as often as not neither preacher nor audience understood). Yet this comparison is at a first glance only partially accurate, since the disorientation felt by those present at Zé Bebelo's trial was less akin to the disorientation caused by a rigid formula no longer understood than to the disorientation felt by those who witness a portentous event for the first time. The comparison regains its pertinence once we realize, at a second glance, that a second reference is being made simultaneously by Riobaldo (or, at the level of a second degree reference such as this, it is perhaps safe to say: by Guimarães Rosa): it is a reference to the First Mass in Brazil, as reported by Pero Vaz de Caminha in his letter to the King Don Manuel and depicted by Victor Meirelles's 1861 painting, "Primeira Missa no Brasil" [First Mass in Brazil], in which we see the Portuguese and indigenous Brazilians celebrating Mass on 26th April 1500, only one day after the arrival of the Portuguese at what would become Brazilian ground. The Mass, performed dutifully in Latin by Friar Henrique, was, according to Caminha, "ouvida por todos com muito prazer e devoção" [heard by all present with great pleasure and devotion]. The pleasure needs not be doubted, as for the native Brazilians the pompous ritual was probably a sight to behold; the devotion, on the other hand, can perhaps only be asserted or ascertained as a matter of faith.

We must first recognize the peculiar dramatic situation established by the dash with which the novel begins: we know, then, from the start, that we are before a dialogic situation. As we move along, however, we realize that not a single voice escapes this dialogue, instituted by the lonely, inaugural dash. The whole novel consists of one long, continuous dialogue of which we only hear Riobaldo's voice; it is what Roberto Schwarz has called a "dialogue in half", "diálogo pela metade, ou diálogo visto por uma face." (Schwarz 379) Very often Riobaldo addresses the unheard interlocutor; very often Riobaldo asks him questions, hesitates, agrees with him. And yet, even though we never hear the interlocutor's voice during the more than six hundred pages of which the novel consists, we understand that the dialogue would not be possible without him, against whom Riobaldo's story takes shape and receives tacit confirmation. In a very important sense, the unheard interlocutor is the necessary other, the second actor without whom no dialogue would be possible.

If we now go back to the scene of the judgment, we will notice that, despite its dialogic nature and the seeming plurality of voices and contradictory points of view that give shape to its performance, the whole structure of the trial — the whole structure of a trial, in fact — turns around the limiting option of a binary opposition established beforehand: the either/or proposition of guilty or not guilty. Though in the trial imagined by Rosa this limitation is to some extent mitigated by allowing the plurality of voices to state their case independently (unlike, say, a modern jury system, in which the plurality of voices, whatever the degree of dissonance prior to their expression, must state their view in unison), despite that, Rosa's most important attempt to circumvent this limitation can be seen in the internal polyphony that both defines and explodes the narrative voice of the novel: the myriad of voices and opinions, doubts and convictions, the many often contradictory perspectives on events, people, and ideas that are presented to us — the interlocutor, the reader — through the mask, through the persona of a single voice, the sole voice we hear from beginning to end, Riobaldo's.

This solution, however, comes at a price. Even though the dialogic monologue of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* allows for —and indeed requires— the participation of the silent interlocutor for the construction of meaning, we cannot forget that Rosa's solution, despite the sophistication of its illusion, is, fundamentally, as it were, an exercise in ventriloquism. An exercise in which one single voice, in a sort of dazzlingly varied one-man show, attempts to encompass and stand for all the others, in an imaginative effort to take them into account. In this sense, perhaps, one could argue that Rosa's dialogic experiment is not *that* different from the many brands of populism and populist rhetoric that have been present throughout the often problematic history of political representation in Brazil, and have, indeed, been at the root of the problem we are touching on here. Or perhaps a different conclusion, a different verdict, could be drawn. Perhaps —and I want to suggest that Rosa's book can be read in this way not in spite of, but *because* of its fictional status— perhaps *Grande Sertão: Veredas* suggests that the dialogue — the *real* dialogue, not the make-believe one— is always a work in progress, to which no one single final solution can or should be offered.

This is, after all, another fundamental difference between the trial of the court and the trial of fiction, between the theater of the court and the theater of fiction. Unlike law and the discourse of law, unlike, let us say, actual court proceedings, which are marked by the prohibition of *non liquet* —the prohibition of claiming that there are no clear grounds for decision (and which therefore entails the obligation to decide and settle the question)— unlike that, fiction is always qualified by a *non liquet*, by the open admission that there might not be enough evidence; that, even when a judgment is pronounced, it might as well be only tentative, only temporary. Fiction, which in this sense stands against History with a capital H —the so-called tribunal of History — fiction cannot escape the awareness that other, alternative judgments are, perhaps, always possible. In the logic of fiction, the *need* for judgment exists hand-in-hand with the equally necessary *suspension* of judgment; the radical *epokhé* that justifies fiction is always already the counterpart of the willing suspension of disbelief that makes the fictional pact possible.

2.2. An allegorical trail⁶⁴ in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*

⁶⁴ “Trail” is used here in reference to the Portuguese term “vereda”, which not only appears in the title of Rosa’s *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, but plays a key semantic and thematic role in the economy of the text. It is a polysemic term, and in his book Rosa will take advantage of its polysemy as well as expand its field. On its most general, literal use, “vereda” refers to a narrow, often sinuous path. It can also be used to refer to paths that are secondary or lesser known and lesser used, in contrast to the main road or thoroughfare, to which they serve as alternatives or shortcuts. (In this sense, it is possible to see a dialectical contrast expressed in the very title of the book, where the “Grande Sertão” — the Great Backlands — is played against the the minor “veredas”, the minor, secondary trails within it.) In the particular context of the backlands of Minas Gerais and Bahia, where the plot of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* takes place, “vereda” also refers to patches of wetland bordering small streams and covered with vegetation; thus they stand out, like so many meandering oases, in stark contrast against the parched landscape of the backlands that surrounds them and of which they are, also, a part. As the reading of Rosa’s book advances — and as the narration of Riobaldo advances— “vereda” also comes to hint at the many shortcuts or deviations, the many meandering digressions and the sudden shortcuts that the narrative takes and in which the reader, as the co-active other of the narrator, partakes.

Vilém Flüsser, the Czech-born philosopher radicated in Brazil and a personal friend of Rosa’s (and who became better known outside of Brazil owing to his work on media theory), chose to stress the connection between Rosa’s “veredas” and Heidegger’s “Holzwege”. Accordingly, he wrote: “Traduzo *Grande Sertão: Veredas* para o alemão por *Grosses Holz: Holzwege* para reforçar uma ligação entre Heidegger e Guimarães Rosa. ‘Holz’ é uma palavra antiga alemã que significa ‘floresta’, mas também ‘madeira’ e, com pequeno salto, ‘matéria-prima’. ‘Holzwege’ são veredas sem rumo, veredas frustradas. E retraduzo *Grande Sertão: Veredas* para o português por: ‘Grande matéria-prima: esforço frustrado’. A partir dessa retradução é possível construir toda uma ontologia que estaria, conforme creio, dentro do espírito de Guimarães Rosa.” [I translate *Grande Sertão: Veredas* to the German as *Grosses Holz: Holzwege*, to reinforce a link between Heidegger and Guimarães Rosa. ‘Holz’ is a word from Old German which means ‘forest’, but also ‘wood’ and, with a small leap, ‘raw material’. ‘Holzwege’ are the *veredas* without a clear direction, they are frustrated *veredas*. I then re-translate *Grande Sertão: Veredas* to Portuguese as ‘Great raw-material: frustrated effort’. From this re-

2.2.1. The “diabo” and the “sertão”

Grande Sertão: Veredas is a book built around dualities. These dualities appear as oppositions that permeate at the same time as they constitute the many dimensions of the book: in addition to the dualisms examined in the previous section, on the symbolic and thematic dimension of the text we find the God-Devil dualism; on its formal-structural dimension, the clash between dispersion and order, the tension between attraction and repulsion that plagues Riobaldo in relation to his fellow jagunço Diadorim; and finally the dualism that is the very figure of Diadorim, an androgynous figure embodying grace and mercilessness, beauty and strength—to name only some of the many significant examples of dualisms in Rosa’s book. These dualities, however, do not submit themselves to a final redeeming synthesis: it is the insoluble and continuous tension between these opposite poles as well as the continuous slippages of meaning from one to the other that serve as the foundation and the structuring principle of the book.

The constant tension between dispersion and order, to which perhaps all other dualities in the book could be reduced, manifests itself first of all in the linguistic fabric through which and in which Riobaldo narrates his story. A closer look at two of the main *Leitmotifs* of the book — the devil and the backlands, the “diabo” and the “sertão”— will not only make it clearer how this duality is effected but will also provide the conditions for a reading of the role of allegory in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*.

The motif of the devil opens the book, though in an oblique, roundabout way. The dialogue that starts the book — and that starts Riobaldo’s voice, which starts the book, which consists in its entirety of the dialogue thus started by Riobaldo’s voice— begins with a mistake. Prior to the diegesis, a series of shots was heard. The book begins with a denial: “Nonada”, “it was nothing” —or, in the double negative structure which is so common in Portuguese and which is still visible in the body of the word *nonada*, “it was not nothing”, “não foi nada”. Riobaldo then explains that the “tiros que o senhor ouviu” (“the shots that you heard”: and “you”, here, is the listener, the man from the city as contrasted to the *sertanejo* Riobaldo; but it is also, and no less importantly, “you”, the reader) were not aimed at a man, they were not “briga de homem”; what had been shot was a “bezerro branco, erroso, os olhos de nem ser— se viu—; e com máscara de cachorro.” [a calf, a stray⁶⁵ white one, with the queerest eyes⁶⁶— just imagine—, and a

translation it is possible to construct an entire ontology that would be, I believe, in accordance with the spirit of Guimarães Rosa] (Flusser 159)

⁶⁵ “Erroso”, a neologism, can be derived from the verb “errar”, which in turn can mean either “to make a mistake” or to “wander”, to “roam”, to “stray”. Harriet de Onís’s English translation (from which I got the rendering above) chooses the second meaning and renders “erroso” as “stray”. In so doing, she misses the constellation of connotations that surrounds the first meaning, “to make a mistake”, to “fall in error”, a constellation which reverberates in the coming association of the figure of the disfigured calf with that of the devil.

muzzle⁶⁷ like a dog.] (Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* 23) A few moments later, Riobaldo, apparently provoked by his interlocutor (we only hear Riobaldo's voice, so any interference by the second person can only be inferred from Riobaldo's words), makes a direct reference to the devil, probably in connection with the uncanny description of the misshapen white calf and the startled reaction of those who decided to shot it dead. Yet, once again, Riobaldo's reference to the devil, in an echo of the double negative with which the book begins⁶⁸, takes the form of negation:

Do demo? Não glosa. Senhor pergunte aos moradores. Em falso receio, desfalam no nome dele — dizem só: o *Que-Diga*. Vote! Não... Quem muito se evita, se convive.... Então? *Que-Diga?* Doideira. A fantasiação. E, o respeito de dar a ele assim esses nomes de rebuço, é que é mesmo um querer invocar que ele forme forma, com as presenças!

[About the devil? I have nothing to say. Ask the others here. In false fear, they un-speak his name— they say only: the You-Know-Who, the What-You-May-Call-Him. Bah! Not me. Over-avoiding a thing is a way of living with it... Then? TheYou-Know-Who? Nonsense. Fantasy. And then this business of respectfully calling him these dissimulated names, this is the same as inviting him to take shape, to give form to presence!] (Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* 24-5)

If it is true that Riobaldo's constant questioning regarding the Devil configures, on the thematic level, an important aspect of that which Proença, in his classical study of Rosa's book, referred to as the subjective thread of the novel (*Trilhas no Grande Sertão*. 6), it is no less true that the reach of the diabolic motif in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* does

⁶⁶ Once again, Onís's solution, adopted above, leaves much to be desired. The original, "[com] os olhos de nem ser", can be rendered literally (though admittedly awkwardly — an awkwardness, nonetheless, that is present to some degree in the original Portuguese) as "with eyes of non-being". By choosing to translate it as "with the queerest eyes", a whole layer of connotations, all of which enforcing the coming association with the figure of the devil, is lost.

⁶⁷ Once again, Onís's *de*-defamiliarizing translation choice (which I adopted in the present example) is a poor one. Instead of "muzzle" (which fits perfectly well with "dog"), a literal rendition of the original would be "mask": with a mask like a dog, a rendition which preserves the strangeness of its original formulation and, once again, emphasizes the overall un-fit-ness, the overall disfigurement of the white calf being described, which the English translation insists in taming and rendering familiar.

⁶⁸ A double negative is perhaps the only logical way out of the logical impasse in which logic places itself the moment it states that *ex nihilo nihil fit*, that nothing comes from nothing. The moment, that is to say, that it accepts the principle of sufficient reason as sufficient. At any rate it certainly is dialectics' way out of the impasse imposed on logic by the acceptance of such a principle: for according to dialectics reason proceeds by means of negation. The only way out of a negation is by means of another negation. In *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, the motif of the devil — the Naysayer — gradually begins to saturate the fabric of its discourse as well as its dialogic logic of negation.

not end there. Its roots are deeper and go back to the very body of the word⁶⁹. The Portuguese word *diabo*, devil, has its etymological root in the Greek *diabolos*, from which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the English “devil” is also derived. In its body one finds, on the one hand, the prefix *dia-*, which indicates separation, schism, split; on the other hand one finds *bolos*, formed from the verb *bállein*: to cast, to throw. *Diabolos* is, thus, he who (or that which) separates or divides. In the body of the word *diabo* one finds already present, therefore, the element of dispersion that will leave its mark in the many dimensions of the text of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*: the apparent disorder of the plot (which abounds in meanders and digressions), the heterodox syntax always on the verge of rupture, and a protagonist-narrator split between contradictory, irreconcilable feelings.

Yet, in opposition to this element of dispersion there is another, one that we could perhaps call a “unifying” element. Without it, the tension between unresolved dualities could not possibly exist: in its place, there would be merely chaos. The unifying element, like its dispersive contrary, is also embodied in a key word in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, but the path that leads to the discovery of such an embodiment depends less on philological rigour than on the expressive potential and the associative possibilities of a hypothetical etymology.⁷⁰ Before we investigate this etymology, however, it would be useful to highlight some passages in the text in which the unifying element presents itself with greater clarity.

At various moments in his narration, Riobaldo calls his interlocutor’s attention (which is also to say, his reader’s attention, *our* attention) to the effort involved in the act

⁶⁹ The declaration in which Rosa confesses the importance he gives to the “metaphysical aspect of language” is well known (Lorenz 83). Quite suggestively, however, in the same interview where that declaration was made Rosa insists on the fact that his relationship to language is one that is “familiar, amoroso” [it is a familiar, amorous relationship]. “A língua e eu”, he says, “somos um casal de amantes que juntos procriam apaixonadamente” [Language and I are a couple of lovers that together procreate passionately.] (Lorenz 83) To which he adds: “Amo a língua, realmente a amo como se ama uma pessoa” [I love language, I love it like one loves a person] (Lorenz 87). This almost carnal relationship with language, reinforced by the statement that he, Rosa, is “um escritor que cultiva a idéia antiga, porém sempre moderna, de que o som e o sentido de uma palavra pertencem um ao outro” [a writer that cultivates the ancient yet always modern idea that the sound and the meaning of a word belong to one to the other] (Lorenz 88), takes us from the metaphysical aspect of language to its physical, corporal aspect. This metaphysics of language embodied in language’s own bodily aspects finds its parallel in the metaphysics of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* itself, which takes place, this-worldly and concrete, as Riobaldo states in his own idiosyncratic way, in the “o homem humano”, the “human man”, that is to say, in man himself.

⁷⁰ The method I am employing finds support in Rosa’s own compositional method. The genesis of his texts, as Walnice Nogueira Galvão has shown in a recent essay on the lexicogenesis of Rosa’s work, goes through a stage in which the author directs his attention to the linguistic code and does not dispense with the use of dictionaries; a compositional stage in which the etymological associations—visible, for instance, in the unfamiliar use of familiar words or in the creation of neologisms— play a fundamental role. (Rapsodo do Sertão: da lexicogênese à mitopoese 146-156)

of telling a story. Things of the past, we are told, have a way of changing about, switching places (Grande Sertão: Veredas 200); they escape and disperse, and this is precisely why both narrator and listener/reader must, first of all, establish a bond of mutual trust: “Ai, arre, mas: que esta boca não tem ordem nenhuma. Estou contando fora, coisas divagadas. No senhor me fio?” [Ah, arg, but this mouth of mine cannot keep to any kind of order. I am rambling, telling things out of order. Do I trust⁷¹ you?] (37) “O que eu descosturava era medo de errar — ... Medo de errar é que é a minha paciência. Mal. O senhor fia?” [What unraveled me was the fear of making a mistake—... Fear of making a mistake is what holds me back. That’s bad. Do you tie things together]⁷²? (201) But, most importantly, narrator and interlocutor must join forces in a synthetic effort that will allow them to mend the various patches of life into a whole that is minimally intelligible and coherent: it is necessary that the narrator weave a story from the events that have taken place — for, as Riobaldo says, “o viver da gente não é tão cerzidinho assim” [our lives are not so well sewn together](126) —, and that the reader, in turn, help him in this task: “O senhor tece?” [Can you weave it?] (201); “O senhor ponha enredo” [You, sir, please weave things together⁷³] (325); “Eu conto; o senhor me ponha ponto” [I narrate, and you, sir, please stitch it together] (546)⁷⁴. Should this not be possible, the story would go awry and unravel itself: “Sei que estou contando errado, pelos altos. Desemendo” [I know I am telling this badly, superficially. The plot frays]. (114)⁷⁵.

An imagetic pattern can immediately be discerned in the above passages. It consists of acts of weaving, sewing, mending, and their repetition in the text is so striking that even the necessary trust for the efficacy of a story — the *fiança* [trust, but also threadwork] that the narrator requires on the part of the reader/listener— seems to semantically contaminate itself, revealing through the opening of its meshes another kind

⁷¹ As will become evident shortly, the Portuguese word “fiar” has both the meaning of to “trust” and to “darn”. The English translation, not surprisingly, only manages to capture one of these meanings, as a result losing sight precisely of the etymological connection I will focus on in my analysis.

⁷² As noted above, the Portuguese “fiar” carries the meanings of to “trust” and to “darn” or to “sew”. In the original passage, the second meaning is emphasized, as can be seen from the choice of the previous verb: “unravel”. (The Portuguese “descosturar”, in the original, leaves no room for doubting the sartorial reverberations of the passage.) Perhaps not surprisingly, Onís’s solution in the published English translation — “Do you follow me, do you understand my figure of speech?” — completely misses the figure of speech at work in the passage under consideration.

⁷³ Or: “You, sir, please, give it a plot.” The word “enredo” in Portuguese (like the word “trama” in both Portuguese and Spanish) contains sartorial or textile connotations that seem to be lost in the English “plot” (though these connotations are still to be seen in the English word “text”).

⁷⁴ The Portuguese “ponto” can mean either “period” (as in the punctuation sign that ends a sentence) or “stitch”. English, as far as I can tell, cannot convey both meanings at once.

⁷⁵ The literal rendering of the Portuguese “desemendar” would have to be something like to “un-darn”, to “un-sow”, to “un-mend”. The image is that of a plot (a text— the fabric or tessiture of a text) fraying or unraveling (unraveling in the sense of coming apart, and not in the sense that a mystery is unraveled)

of *fiar* [trust, but also the act of threading]. Even the protagonist-narrator himself cannot escape this semantic transference: Riobaldo Tatarana, master rifleman, carries as his first nickname that of *Cerzidor*...⁷⁶ Moved perhaps by a ludic impulse, at a given moment in the text Riobaldo calls the attention of the listener/reader to this play of meanings in an explicit, direct reference, as if begging him not to miss the importance of these images which insist in reappearing over and over again in the course of the story:

Acho que eu não tinha conciso medo dos perigos: o que eu *descosturava* era medo de errar — de cair na boca dos perigos por minha culpa. Hoje, sei: medo meditado — foi isto. Medo de errar. Sempre tive. Medo de errar é que é a minha paciência. Mal. O senhor *fia*? Pudesse tirar de si esse medo-de-errar, a gente estava salva. O senhor *tece*? *Entenda meu figurado*.

[I think I was not afraid of particular dangers: what *unraveled* me was the fear of making a mistake— of falling into the mouth of danger through my own fault. Today I know: fear that comes from thinking too much— that was it. Fear of making mistakes. I've always had it. Fear of making mistakes is my patience⁷⁷. That's bad. Do you *tie* things together? If we could get rid of that fear of making a mistake, we would be saved. Do you *weave* things together? *Understand my figure of speech*.] (Grande Sertão: Veredas 301, emphases added)

And right afterwards, as if the semantic contamination also reverberated in the choice of events to be narrated, Riobaldo, in what seems at first to be a digression, resorts once again to the same set of sartorial imagery:

Conforme lhe conto: será que eu mesmo já estava pegado no costume conjunto de ajagunçado? Será, sei. Gostar ou não gostar, isso é coisa diferente. O sinal é outro. Um ainda não é um: quando ainda faz parte com todos. Eu nem sabia. Assim que o Paspé tinha *agulhas, fio e sovela: consertou* minhas alpercatas.

⁷⁶ Mender, darning; from the verb “cerzir”, identical in meaning to the Spanish “zurcir”.

⁷⁷ This is a literal rendering of the original passage: “Medo de errar é que é a minha paciência”. “Fear of making mistakes is my patience”. The construction is as powerful as it is unusual, even in Portuguese. Fear of making mistakes is what holds Riobaldo back. The same contrast between thought and action, the same connection between fear and patience (the deferment that comes with patience) is found in the well known lines of Hamlet’s soliloquy in Act 3, Scene 1, though “conscience”, referred by Hamlet, stands in less of an oxymoronic relationship to fear than does the apparent self-control suggested by “patience”: “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, /And thus the native hue of resolution /Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, And enterprises of great pitch and moment /With this regard their currents turn awry /And lose the name of action.” (Act III, scene 1, lines 83-88)

[Accordingly I tell you: could it be that I was already falling in with the ways of the jagunços? Could it be, I wonder. Whether I like it or not, that's another story. One is not yet one as long as one is part of a whole. I did not even know it. Thus, Paspé had *big needles, thread and an awl: he mended* my sandals. (201, emphases added)

“Understand my figure of speech”, Riobaldo insists. Yes, it is safe to say that we do understand it; it would indeed be hard to miss it, even though no study of Rosa’s book has, to this day, as far as I can tell, pointed it out. The allusion is, evidently, to the work of weaving indissociable from every narrative. (Although the English “plot” fails to show the connection at the level of the word, in other languages its presence is hard to miss: *enredo, trama, tessitura*, not to mention the textile texture of the word “text” itself). The plot after all is, as suggested by Ricoeur, a “synthesis of the heterogeneous”, comprehending “in one intelligible whole, circumstances, goals, interactions, chance happenings and unintended results (Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 142) which otherwise would lay dispersed and indifferent to each other. Yet the textual allusions—the *textile* allusions—in Riobaldo’s narrative do not limit themselves to what is most evident. If we turn our eyes to the body of another key word in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*—no less than the word *sertão*, “backlands”—we will see that the semantic reverberation is here at work with even greater intensity. Possessing a contested etymology, the word nonetheless houses in its body the interpositive particle *-ser(t)-*, which comes from the Latin verb *sĕro, serĕre*, meaning “to tie with a thread, to weave, to mend, to join, to bind”, and which, according to the *Dicionário Houaiss da Língua Portuguesa*⁷⁸, is present in the noun *desertum*, desert, a strong candidate for the origin of the word *sertão*⁷⁹. Connected with the interpositive *-ser(t)-* is also the Latin noun *sartor*, “tailor” (as in Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, the fictional biography of the philosopher Diogenes Teufelsdröckh—*Teufel*, incidentally, being the German word for “devil”). Still according to the *Houaiss*, in connection with the interpositive *-ser(t)-* one also finds *sermo, ōnis*, “mode of expression, language, conversation (from which both the Portuguese “sermão” and the English “sermon” come). Lastly, related to the particle *-ser(t)-* and to the Latin verb *sĕro* one also finds *sors, sortis*, which the *Houaiss* defines as “leaving [throwing] to chance things that are tied to each other, luck (good or bad), chance, occurrence (good or bad)”.

In the body of the word “sertão”, then, the ideas of weaving, language, conversation, and chance reverberate simultaneously, chord-like. It is not hard to notice that these various semantic connections have a prominent place in Rosa’s book, often becoming the explicit object of Riobaldo’s musings. One should also not ignore the thread that ties them together: language—Riobaldo’s language, which, marked by a great

⁷⁸ The Dictionary Houaiss of the Portuguese Language is currently the most authoritative lexicographic reference in the Portuguese language. From now on referred simply as *Houaiss*.

⁷⁹ According to the Houaiss, “[José Pedro Machado, in *Dicionário etimológico da língua portuguesa*], records that, ‘according to the opinion of certain authors, the word *sertão* is the evolution of the Latin *desertānu-*, through phonetic operations not yet sufficiently clarified”.

degree of orality, is also the language of *conversation*— is the medium through which Riobaldo addresses an other; the medium with which he struggles to weave in a coherent whole the various occurrences that constitute his life and that chance has played a crucial role in linking together.

These are, in general lines, the two elements that, acting together, play the role of the structuring principles of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*: the dispersive element, identified with the diabolic motif (*diabolos*), and the unifying element, identified with the *sertão* and its numerous semantic resonances and ramifications. The permanent tension in which they find themselves and the irresolution and the ambivalence derived from such a tension should alert us for another important detail: *diabolos*, the principle of schism and division, appears in the textual economy of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* as the opposite of the symbol⁸⁰. The intuition of the whole, the final synthesis that brings together in a single, harmonic instant the totality of experience, the particular and the universal, is absent from Riobaldo's narrative. The world that Riobaldo narrates to us—and the world from which he narrates it—is not an organic unity in which contradictions are merely apparent. Its boundaries, it is true, as Riobaldo observes, are not clearly demarcated. But what results from this lack of demarcation is not a holistic unity or synthesis, but ambiguity, uncertainty, confusion:

Que isso foi o que sempre me invocou, o senhor sabe: eu careço de que o bom seja bom e o ruim ruim, que dum lado esteja o preto e do outro o branco, que o feio fique bem apartado do bonito e a alegria longe da tristeza! Quero todos os pastos demarcados... Como é que posso com este mundo? A vida é ingrata no macio de si; mas transtroz a esperança mesmo do meio do fel do desespero. Ao que, este mundo é muito misturado... (*GS* 237)

[It was this that has always upset me, as you, sir, know it: I need that what is good be good and what is bad, bad; that black be on one side and white on the other; that ugliness be well apart from beauty, and happiness far from sadness! I want all the pastures clearly demarcated... How can I stand this world? Life is ungrateful at its soft core; but it brings us hope out of the very bitterness of despair. This is a very mixed-up world...] (237)

Constitutive of Riobaldo's narrative, this ambiguity is precisely what the synthesis effected by the symbol, engendering what Walter Benjamin called a "false appearance of totality" (Benjamin 176), cannot accept. In the tension between the *diabolo* and the *sertão*, in the confrontation between the centripetal force of the latter and the centrifuge force of the former, represented with plastic concision by the recurring image of the dust devil—to quote the book's epigraph: "*O diabo na rua, no meio do redemunho...*" [The devil in the street, in the middle of the whirlwind]—, in this tension

⁸⁰ From the Greek: *sym* + *bállein*. The prefix *sym* indicates union, synchrony, similarity. *Diabolos*, as already seen, comes from the Greek *dia* + *balléin*.

and in this confrontation the dialectical dimension of the book stands out. It is, however, a dialectics that points towards no synthesis. And it is precisely this dialectics without synthesis, marked by the continuous tension between dispersion and order, that will introduce us into the space of allegory.

2.2.2. “Os homens antigos” [The archaic men]

Joca Ramiro, “grande homem príncipe” [great prince of a man] (Grande Sertão: Veredas 33), one of the great jagunço leaders in the story (the other being Medeiro Vaz), appears, in Riobaldo’s narrative, surrounded by a distinguished aura that takes the form of an honorable cohort of telling similes. He is an “astro-rei” [king-star], at the same time sun —center around which an entire system gravitates— and divinity:

Como que brilhava ele todo. Porque Joca Ramiro era mesmo assim sobre os homens, ele tinha uma luz, rei da natureza.... Joca Ramiro sabia o ser, governava; nem o nome dele não podia atôa se babujar”

[All of him seemed to glow. For that is how Joca Ramiro affected other men, he had an inner light, he was the king of nature... Joca Ramiro knew how to be himself, how to rule; nor could his name be taken in vain] (54; 195).

Together with Medeiro Vaz, “rei dos gerais” [king of the Gerais]⁸¹ (80), “homem de outras idades” [a man of another age](52), Joca Ramiro embodies a social and political order in which truth is still inseparable from certainty, in which the rule of justice is still indissociable from the rule of law; a social and political order in which the world, compatible with truth, certainty, and justice, still turns around a stable set of values and lets itself be governed by them. The epithet used by Riobaldo to refer to Medeiro Vaz is significant and applies also to Joca Ramiro: both are “homens antigos” [archaic men] (33), both belong to “another age”, and the story that is narrated to us is also the history of an attempted transition: the transition from of an “archaic”, oligarchic order to another, “modern” order that nonetheless bears a strange, never expressly assumed familiarity to the old one it claims or strives to replace.

As Rosenfield observes, Joca Ramiro appears in the eyes of Riobaldo “como uma figura sagrada— entre mítica e religiosa —, recebendo frequentemente os títulos do Salvador judeu-cristão (Messias) ou dos seus substitutos temporais na terra (imperador, rei, etc.)” [Joca Ramiro appears as a sacred figure— between mythical and religious—, frequently receiving the titles of the Judeo-Christian Savior (the Messiah) or of one of his secular substitutes on Earth (emperor, king, etc.)] (Rosenfield, Grande sertão: veredas: roteiro de leitura 28). Together with Medeiro Vaz, Joca Ramiro embodies, in effect, an

⁸¹ Gerais: Minas Gerais, Brazil. More specifically, the backlands of Minas Gerais.

ordering principle founded simultaneously on charisma and tradition: “Esses homens! Todos puxavam o mundo para si, para o concertar concertado” [Those men! All were pulling the world to themselves, to concertedly set it aright⁸²] (Rosa, Grande Sertão: Veredas 32-33). In this expression — “concertar concertado”⁸³ — we find yet again, in one of its many variations, the unifying motif of the *sertão*: the *consertar* [the act of mending] indicates the restoration of a form or a unity effected by the hand of man. Yet the motif of the *sertão*, and the artificial, man-made, patchwork unity it implies, appears here juxtaposed to another kind of unity, one that attempts to go beyond the artifice and the precariousness indissociable from the act of mending: in the *concertar* [the act of concerting] an order is still visible in which plurality is resolved into a still imaginable harmony, a harmony still capable of redeeming the fragile precariousness of the all too human “consertar”.

The name that “cannot be taken in vain”; his abode at a estate called “São João do Paraíso” [Saint John of Paradise]; his bearing, in which goodness and beauty shone (in which, indeed, in the manner of the Platonic synthesis of values, goodness and beauty were one), all these attributes reinforce the sacred aura that surrounds Joca Ramiro’s presence:

Naquela mesma da hora, Joca Ramiro dava partida também, de volta para o São João do Paraíso. Lá ia ele, deveras, em seu cavalo branco, ginete — ladeado por Sô Candelário e o Ricardão, igual iguais galopavam. Saíam os chefes todos — assim o desenrolar dos bandos, em caracol, aos gritos de vozear. Ao que reluzia o bem belo. Diadorim olhou, e fez o sinal-da-cruz, cordial. — “Assim, ele me botou a benção...” — foi o que disse.

[At that same moment, Joca Ramiro was leaving too, headed back to São João do Paraíso. There he was, in truth, on his great white charger, flanked by Sô Candelário and Ricardão: they all galloped off together. All the other chieftains were leaving too, their bands slowly separating in a widening gyre, their voices shouting. And there he shone good and beautiful. Diadorim looked at him and cordially made the sign of the cross. — “And thus he gave me his blessing...” — he said.] (Rosa, Grande Sertão: Veredas 302)

And yet, Riobaldo’s gaze, before which the figure of Joca Ramiro appears and through the mediation of which it reaches us, his readers and listeners, is from the beginning marked by doubt. Riobaldo is a man split between two worlds: on the one hand, subjected to the cultural code of the backlands, he is part of a world in which strong religious

⁸² The original Portuguese expression is “para o concertar concertado”, and it involves an untranslatable wordplay. “Concertar” (spelled with a “c”) means to concert: to bring to agreement or unity; to act in harmony with. “Consertado” is the past participle of “consertar” (spelled with an “s”), and it means to repair, to fix, to mend.

⁸³ See previous footnote.

beliefs and rigid moral rules dictate the conduct and the opinion of men; a world in which, resembling heroes of a mythical past, there still wandered men to whom absolute certainty was not only possible but necessary; men like Medeiro Vaz, who “andava por este mundo com mão leal, não variava nunca, não fraquejava” [who went through the world with loyal hand, he never equivocated, never weakened] (52), men like Joca Ramiro himself: “E, quando ele saía, o que ficava mais, na gente, como agrado em lembrança, era a voz. Uma voz sem pingo de dúvida, nem tristeza. Uma voz que continuava” [And, whenever he was gone, what remained in us, above everything else, was the memory of his voice. It was a voice without a trace of doubt or sadness. A voice that lingered.](265). On the other hand, however, Riobaldo knows he does not belong fully to that world: “Eu sou de onde nasci. Sou de outros lugares” [I am from where I was born. I am from other places.] (306). Despite the respect he feels for the inherited tradition, at no moment in his narrative are this respect and this tradition safe from doubt:

Eu gosto muito de moral. Raciocinar, exortar os outros para o bom caminho, aconselhar a justo. Minha mulher, que o senhor sabe, zela por mim: muito reza. Ela é uma abençoável. Compadre meu Quelemém sempre diz que eu posso aquietar meu temor de consciência, que sendo bem-assistido, terríveis bons-espíritos me protegem. Ipe! Com gosto... Como é de são efeito, ajudo com meu querer acreditar. Mas nem sempre posso. O senhor saiba: eu toda a minha vida pensei por mim, forro, sou nascido diferente. Eu sou é eu mesmo. Divêrjo de todo o mundo... Eu quase que nada não sei. Mas desconfio de muita coisa.

[I am very fond of morality. To reason, to exort others to follow the right path, to give just counsel. My wife, as you know, watches out for me: she prays a lot. She could be blessed. My compadre Quelemém always says that I have nothing to worry about, that with my good backing, terrible good spirits protect me. Yessir! That suits me fine... As it is for the better, I help out with wanting to believe. But I am not always able to. I want you to know: all my life I have thought for myself. I was born different. I am what I am. I diverge from everyone else... I know almost nothing. But I suspect⁸⁴ many things.] (31)

This tense relationship that Riobaldo maintains with the world of tradition — a world in which there is still a center capable of gathering around itself, in harmonious fashion, a plurality of other worlds — can be best observed in Riobaldo’s contradictory attitude towards religion. One finds in Riobaldo, indeed, an excess, a desperate need to

⁸⁴ “Desconfiar”, the original verb, has a wide range of related yet not necessarily compatible meanings. It can mean to “mistrust”, to “distrust”, to “doubt”, as well as to “believe”. The English verb to “suspect”, it seems to me, comes closest to this fertile ambiguity. In the published English translation, Harriet de Onís opts to render the passage as “I know almost nothing — but I have my doubt about many things”, thus opting for univocal clarity over rich — and contextually relevant — ambiguity.

hold on to something, to find a firm ground on which to settle and finally put his doubts to rest. Yet it is precisely this excess, this oxymoronic desperate faith, that reveals how distant, or how fragile, such a ground is:

Muita religião, seu moço! Eu cá, não perco ocasião de religião. Aproveito de todas. Bebo água de todo rio... Uma só, para mim, é pouca, talvez não me chegue. Rezo cristão, católico, embrenho a certo; e aceito as preces de compadre meu Quelemém, doutrina dele, de Cardéque. Mas, quando posso, vou no Mindubim, onde um Matias é crente, metodista: a gente se acusa de pecador, lê alto a Bíblia, e ora, cantando hinos belos deles. Tudo me quieta, me suspende. Qualquer sombrinha me refresca. Mas é só muito provisório.

[Lots of religion, sir! As for me, I never miss a chance for religion. I take advantage of all of them. I drink water from any river... In my opinion just one religion is too little, it might not be enough. I pray Christian, Catholic, I delve right deep into them; and I accept the prayers of my compadre Quelemém, according to his doctrine, that of Kardec. But when I can I go to Mindubim, where there is one Mathias, a Protestant, a Methodist: we accuse ourselves of being sinners, we read the Bible out loud, and we pray, chanting the beautiful hymns of theirs. It all calms me down, it allays my worries. Any shade refreshes me. But only for the time being.] (32)

It is not surprising, then, that Joca Ramiro, having appeared in the eyes of Riobaldo in the image of a god-like sun — an ordering center and radiant divine figure—, should acquire, little by little, the characteristics of a *Deus absconditus*, of an absent divinity, hidden and inaccessible to men:

Decerto vinha com o nome de Joca Ramiro! Joca Ramiro... Esse nem a gente conseguia exato real, era um nome só, aquela graça, sem autoridade nenhuma avistável, andava por longe, se era que andava... Quem sabe, mesmo, Joca Ramiro estava no propósito de deixar a gente se acabar ali, na má guerra, em sertão plano?

[Undoubtedly he would come out with the name of Joca Ramiro! Joca Ramiro... You could not form a clear image of him, he was nothing but a name, a name, lacking any visible authority, moving far in the distance, if indeed there at all... Who knows, perhaps Joca Ramiro really did intend to leave us to our fate, to struggle by ourselves, in the wild plains?](197-8; 246)

There is, of course, an important connection between the notion of a *Deus absconditus* and that of allegory. All allegory is, strictly speaking, the token of an absence. As Bainard Cowan has noted with regard to Benjamin's theory of allegory, "the affirmation of the existence of truth... is the first precondition for allegory; the second is the recognition of its absence" (Cowan 114). Allegory is, thus, the affirmation (or the

presence) of such an absence. With that in mind, the paradox formulated by Riobaldo in the beginning of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*—and which I have also used as the epigraph to the present chapter— appears under a new light. If “Deus existe mesmo quando não há”, if “God exists even when He isn’t”⁸⁵ (76), God exists allegorically. The relationship between allegory and the *Deus absconditus* takes us back to the dialectical opposition between *diabolos* (that which separates, splits, disunites) and *symbol*. It is worth recalling that, for Benjamin, allegory distinguishes itself from symbol (which he associates with synthesis and unity) due to its fragmentary, residual character: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.” (Benjamin 178) Riobaldo himself will surreptitiously blur the clear distinctions to suggest, in the referred passage, the identification (the confusion, the ambiguity) between the *diabolos* and a God that presents itself only *in absentia*, only allegorically: “O que não é Deus, é estado do demônio. Deus existe mesmo quando não há. Mas o demônio não precisa de existir para haver — a gente sabendo que ele não existe, aí é que ele toma conta de tudo” [What is not God is the state of the devil⁸⁶. God exists even when He isn’t. But the devil doesn’t need to exist to be— when people know that he doesn’t exist, it is then that he takes over.] (Grande Sertão: Veredas 76)

2.2.3 “O mundo à revelia” [The world *in absentia*]

It is however in the events that culminate in the trial of Zé Bebelo at the Sempre-Verde ranch that Joca Ramiro makes his only lasting appearance in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*.⁸⁷ It is also there that, for the first time in Riobaldo’s narrative, the explicit conflict between two distinct socio-political orders takes place: the world of the archaic men of the jagunços representative of the patriarchal, rural oligarchy that dominated political relationships in Brazil for most of its history, on the one hand, and the modernizing world of the early Republic, represented in the figure of Zé Bebelo, on the other.

⁸⁵ In the published English translation, Onís opted for the elimination of the paradox, rendering the passage as a dogmatically pious platitude: “God exists even when they say He doesn’t.”

⁸⁶ Thomas Aquinas stated in the first part of the *Summa Theologica* that “we cannot know what God is, but what He is not “ (Aquinas Preface to Question 3). Since Aquinas was not however a doubter like Riobaldo, the conclusion at which he arrives is that we can only refer to God *analogically*: that is to say, we can know *about* God (though we cannot know *God* properly) by analogy with His creation (Aquinas Question 13, Article 5). Analogy, for Aquinas, is therefore an evidence (albeit an indirect one) of God’s existence, and not, as in the case of allegory, a sign of God’s absence.

⁸⁷ Strictly speaking, Joca Ramiro’s first appearance (and his only appearance in addition to the one at Zé Bebelo’s trial) took place briefly, in the space of a single night that the young Riobaldo would never forget: it occurred at the ranch of Riobaldo’s godfather, Selorico Mendes, prior to Riobaldo’s entry in the world of the jagunços. It was also in that same night that Riobaldo met Hermógenes for the first time, and heard for the last time the song of Siruiz. (Rosa, Grande Sertão: Veredas 132-135).

This first encounter between the jagunços and Zé Bebelo also sets the beginning of chronological sequence in Riobaldo's narrative, which until then had taken the form of meandering digressions and solutions of continuity. Zé Bebelo appears as the announcement of a new order, and the profound changes arising from that announcement reflect themselves no less profoundly in the temporality of the text: one moves, as it were, from the reversible meandrous time of memory towards a chronological, linear time suggestive of the notion of progress⁸⁸.

In effect, Zé Bebelo presents himself, in the image of Comtean positivism, as an advocate of progress, a defensor of the Republican centralist ideal, appearing thus in frontal opposition to the federalist tradition around which the world of the *sertanejos* and the *jagunços* turned: "Considerava o progresso de todos — como se mais esse todo Brasil, territórios — e falava, horas, horas. — 'Vim de vez!' — disse, quando retornou de Goiás. O passado, para ele, era mesmo passado, não vogava." [He considered everyone's progress — the progress of the entire Brazil and all its territories, and he talked hour after hour. — "I have come back for good!" —, he said, when he returned from Goiás. The past, for him, was really past, and didn't count." (Rosa, Grande Sertão: Veredas 93). It is precisely this which Joca Ramiro points out to Zé Bebelo at the beginning of his trial: "O senhor veio querendo desnortear, desencaminhar os sertanejos de seu velho costume de lei..." [You came to disorient⁸⁹, to turn the people of the sertão from their old ways], to which Zé Bebelo characteristically responds: "Velho é, o que já está de si desencaminhado. O velho valeu enquanto foi novo..." [That which is old has already lost its way. The old was good when it was new...] (276). And yet, it is not so much his progressist discourse as it is the emphasis on its character *as discourse* what strikes one about Zé Bebelo. If Joca Ramiro appears as the center of an order in which truth and certainty are still inseparable, justice and law still synonyms, Zé Bebelo represents a

⁸⁸ It may be worth noting that the motto of the Brazilian national flag, adopted with the proclamation of the Republic in 1889 and used to this day, is of Comtean inspiration. Conceived by Teixeira Mendes with the collaboration of Miguel Lemos, both ardent positivists, it reads "Ordem e Progresso" [Order and Progress].

⁸⁹ In the historico-political context of Brazil, the verb "desnortear" carries a second layer of semantic pertinence that is lost in its rendering as "disorient". On a literal level, to "disorient" (which also exists in Portuguese, as "desorientar") and "desnortear" are equivalent, as both suggest the loss of one's bearings: "disorient" assuming the rising sun as its lost point of reference; "desnortear" assuming the magnetic north instead. On a slightly less literal level, however — or perhaps on a *more* literal level, as in this reading the north is no longer a metaphor for the magnetic north, but a reference to the north of Brazil — "desnortear", to *disnorth*, suggests the eradication of the more "archaic", more traditional, less "progressive" sector of Brazilian society, that of the rural oligarchy, as historically represented by the North of Brazil in opposition to the industrialized South. (The North of Brazil, in this particular context, would be analogous to the historical South of the United States vis-à-vis the industrialized North). Today one would speak of the "Northeast" of Brazil instead of the "North" in this context; but, as historian Durval Muniz de Albuquerque has compellingly shown, the Northeast as a metonym for the archaic Brazil is a twentieth-century invention, and does not appear in newspapers or in the discourse of intellectuals and politicians with this connotation until the 1920s. (Albuquerque 59-105)

radical inversion of values: to justice and truth (remnants, so to speak, of a certain kind of jusnaturalism) Zé Bebelo opposes verbal artifice, deliberate digression, and rhetorical equivocation — “...tudo quanto falava ficava sendo verdade.” [...everything he said acquired truth.] (105)—; to certainty, he opposed the power of persuasion by means of discourse.

A small digression is perhaps in order here so that we can focus on the etymology of the word *discourse*. Coming from the Latin *discūrsus*, “discourse” originally indicated the action of “running to and fro”, of “taking various directions” (*dis* + *cursus*). It indicated, in other words, a deviation from a course. This etymology immediately brings to mind the apparently paradoxical definition that Walter Benjamin, in the same study where he develops his theory of allegory, offers of *method*: “Method ist Umweg”, “Method is a digression”⁹⁰ (Benjamin 28). From “deviation from a course”, by extension (or should one say by a solution of continuity?) *discūrsus* came to mean “discourse”, defined by the *Houaiss* as “a reasoning that is effected by the sequence from one conceptual formulation to the next, according to a logically ordered chain”. It would thus be possible to speak of a “discourse on method”, like Descartes did. (And one would be tempted to either find in Benjamin’s formulation a critique of Cartesianism in a nutshell, or perhaps find in Descartes —as Jean-Luc Nancy, perhaps against his will, may have come close to suggest⁹¹— a Benjaminian exposition of method and discourse *avant la lettre*.)

Course and dis-course. Discourse and digression. Once again, we find in the figure of Zé Bebelo the dispersive or diabolical motif (*diabolos*), standing in opposition

⁹⁰ The German highlights, more clearly than its English rendering, the anithetical structure of this formulation. If we recall that the word “method”, of Greek origin, originally meant “path”, and if we recall that “Weg” is the German word for path, then Benjamin’s definition of method could be rephrased thus: method is un-method; method is not method.

⁹¹ I am thinking of Nancy’s “Mundus Est Fabula”. In this essay, Nancy re-interprets Cartesian philosophy through the words “mundus est fabula”, a maxim which is displayed in the open book that Descartes appears holding in one of his portraits. The identification of the clear and distinct truth of “mundus” —“*mundus*, pure, clean/proper, well ordered, well arranged... the world is that which is not impure [immonde]” (Nancy 636)— with the absent, oblique or concealed truth of fable amounts to the identification of the orderly aspirations (and, one could perhaps add, the orderly, neatly composed self-portrait) of philosophical discourse with its postulated opposite, and thus to the withdrawal of discourse from itself: “Descartes says in effect, I am giving this story only as a fable for I do not give absolute ‘precepts’, which would imply that I possess an authority superior to ordinary men. I have nothing more to communicate than the path [i.e. the method] I have followed. I do not *teach* (which invalidates the fable’s function as defined by the adage *fabula docet*), I *show*. What one can show when one does not teach is oneself. There is no ‘hidden instruction’ here; the instruction itself, the motif or the subject of instructing is as if withdrawn from the fable. Here authority, truth as authority, *withdraws itself*. It is thus that *fabula docet*: I teach above all that I am not teaching... We must reverse the reversal of the poem that appeared to make up the poetics of the *Discours*. Here ‘discourse’ is withdrawn from the ‘narrative’. *Discourse withdraws itself* is perhaps the statement, although still enigmatic, that characterizes this Discourse.” (Nancy 643-644, emphases in original)

to the unifying motif (sertão) represented by the archaic order in the figure of Joca Ramiro.⁹² It is however in the enigmatic response that Zé Bebelo gives to Joca Ramiro in the first dialogue held between the two that the inversion of values, as well as its potentially dispersive dimension, appears in its most condensed form. The description offered by Riobaldo of this first encounter, highlighting the contrast between the two men coming from distinct worlds, illustrates in a striking manner the conflict between the two socio-political orders to which we have already referred: “Tinha sido aquilo: Joca Ramiro chegando, real, em seu alto cavalo branco, e defrontando Zé Bebelo a pé, rasgado e sujo, sem chapéu nenhum, com as mãos amarradas atrás, e seguro por dois homens” [It had happened thus: Joca Ramiro had arrived, regal on his tall white horse, and faced Zé Bebelo, who was on foot, ragged and dirty, without a hat, his hands tied behind him, and held by two men.] (Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* 270-1) Defeated, on foot, ragged and dirty, Zé Bebelo nonetheless raises his voice to Joca Ramiro and demands respect. He demands, confronted with the majestic bearing of the great jagunço leader, to be recognized as his equal: “Dê respeito, chefe. O senhor está diante de mim, o grande cavaleiro, mas eu sou seu igual. Dê respeito!” [Show me respect, Chief. You, the great horseman, are looking down on me, but I am your equal. Show me respect!] (271) And the dialogue continues:

— “O senhor se acalme. O senhor está preso...” — Joca Ramiro respondeu, sem levantar a voz.

Mas, com surpresa de todos, Zé Bebelo também mudou de toada, para debicar, com um engraçado atrevimento:

— “Preso? Ah, preso... Estou, pois sei que estou. Mas, então, o senhor vê não é o que o senhor vê, compadre: é o que o senhor vai ver...”

— “Vejo um homem valente, preso...” — aí o que disse Joca Ramiro, disse com consideração.

— “Isso. Certo. Se estou preso... é outra coisa...”

— “O que, mano velho?”

— “... É, é o mundo à revelia!...” — isso foi o fecho do que Zé Bebelo falou. E todos que ouviram deram risadas.

[— “Calm down, sir. You are a prisoner”, replied Joca Ramiro, without raising his voice.

Then, to everyone’s surprise, Zé Bebelo also changed his tone, and responded with mocking insolence:

— “A prisoner? Ah, yes, a prisoner. So I am, as I well know. But then, what you are seeing is not what you see, old fellow: it is what you will see.”

⁹² In Zé Bebelo’s name, as Rosenfield observes, “ressoa o anagrama do demônio Belzebu” [the anagram of the devil Beelzebub reverberates] (Rosenfield, *Desenveredando Rosa* 21). See also her *Grande Sertão: veredas: roteiro de leitura* (Rosenfield, *Grande sertão: veredas: roteiro de leitura* 58)

—“I see a brave man, prisoner...,” Joca Ramiro then said, and he spoke considerately.
 —“Ah, yes. Right. If I am a prisoner, it is something else.”
 —“What is it, old brother?”
 —“...It is, it is the world *in absentia*!⁹³...” — Thus Zé Bebelo capped his remarks, and all who heard him laughed.] (271)

If Zé Bebelo is the defendant on trial, why would precisely the *world* be *in absentia*? A possible answer —the expression, after all, is not without ambiguity— is suggested by Riobaldo himself when, pages later, he shares with his interlocutor his thoughts about the trial:

O julgamento? Digo: aquilo para mim foi coisa séria de importante. Por isso mesmo é que fiz questão de relatar tudo ao senhor, com tanta despesa de tempo e miúcias de palavras. — “O que nem foi julgamento legítimo nenhum: só uma extração estúrdia e destrambelhada, doideira acontecida sem senso, neste meio do sertão...” — o senhor dirá. Pois: por isso mesmo. Zé Bebelo não era réu no real! Ah, mas, no centro do sertão, o que é doideira às vezes pode ser a razão mais certa e de mais juízo!

[The trial? I tell you: for me, it was a very serious and important thing. It was for this very reason that I have made a point of telling you all about it in such detail. You may say it wasn't a legitimate trial at all, just an absurd and disorderly performance, a senseless piece of madness that took place in the middle of the sertão. Well, that is precisely why. Zé Bebelo was not a real defendant! Ah, but in the middle of the sertão, madness may at times be the best reason, and the one with best judgment!] (301)

Zé Bebelo “was not a real defendant”. And the world was *in absentia*... Riobaldo seems to suggest that the real defendant — an *absent* defendant and therefore one incapable of speaking for itself — was, not Zé Bebelo, but the world. It is possible to see in this “world *in absentia*” —world that entered *in absentia* the moment Zé Bebelo, who

⁹³ The Portuguese expression “à revelia” literally means “in rebellion”. However, it is also —and nowadays this is its most common usage— the expression used in juridical language to indicate the situation in which a trial is conducted in the absence of the defendant. Hence, *in absentia*, as per standard English legal usage. The questionable decision to put a Latin expression in the mouth of Zé Bebelo can be partly justified by the fact that “à revelia” is, as already noted, (and in contrast to the more common and more widely used “em rebeldia”) nowadays almost exclusively restricted to the juridical context. Thus the strangeness or the affectation of having Zé Bebelo speak Latin in my rendering is perhaps compensated by the fact that, in the original Portuguese, he speaks in no less affected legalese. In her translation, Harriet de Onís as usual missed the complex semantic layers and variety of linguistic registers at work here. In her rendering, Zé Bebelo’s line reads: “It is, it is the world beyond control.” For other considerations regarding the expression “o mundo à revelia”, see notes 58 and 62 above.

“was not a real defendant”, was captured and put on trial— the world represented by Joca Ramiro, the world of the rural oligarchy and the “archaic men” from whose “old customs” Zé Bebelo had come to divert them. The suggestion that the world *in absentia* is indeed the world of Joca Ramiro, the world of the archaic men, is reinforced by Riobaldo when he attempts, with little success, to share with his friend Diadorim his thoughts on the strange events they had just witnessed:

Não me esqueci daquelas palavras dele: que agora era “o mundo à revelia...” Disse a Diadorim. Mas Diadorim menos me respondeu. Ao dar, que falou: — “Riobaldo, você prezava de ir viver n’Os-Porcos, que lá é bonito sempre — com as estrelas tão reluzidas?...” Dei que sim. Como ia querer dizer diferente: pois lá n’Os Porcos não era a terra de Diadorim própria, lugar dele de crescimento? Mas, mesmo enquanto que essas palavras, eu pensasse que Diadorim podia ter me respondido, assim nestas fações: — “Mundo à revelia? Mas, Riobaldo, desse jeito mesmo é que o mundo sempre esteve...”

[I had not forgotten these words of his: that now it was “the world *in absentia*...” I said so to Diadorim. But Diadorim did not answer me. After a while, he spoke: —“Riobaldo, would you like to go live at Os-Porcos, where it is always so beautiful, and the stars so bright?” I said yes. How could I say otherwise, for was not Os-Porcos Diadorim’s own part of the country, the place where he had grown up? But even while he was speaking, I thought Diadorim might have answered something along these lines: —“World *in absentia*? But, Riobaldo, that’s the way the world has always been...”] (299-300)

This answer, not spoken by Diadorim but longed for by Riobaldo, the answer that the world had always been *in absentia* (that is to say, even when it did not seem to be so) will resonate further ahead, like a distant echo, when Riobaldo, having interrupted for an instant the narration of events, evokes the figure of Joca Ramiro: “Assim era Joca Ramiro, tão diverso e reinante, que, mesmo em quando ainda parava vivo, era como se já estivesse constando de falecido” [This is the way Joca Ramiro was, a man so different and so commanding, that even when he was still alive he was revered as though he was already dead.] (326).

And yet the world *in absentia* is also so in a second sense, one that goes beyond legal metaphors. It is a world whose center — however one may call it: “Truth”, “Justice”, “God”, “Reason”— , around which the plurality of values which constituted it organized itself, was no longer to be found. It is this world *in absentia* that Riobaldo discovers when, at the Guararavacã do Guaicuí, a little more than two months after Zé Bebelo’s trial and the sentence that provisionally banished him from the sertão, he learns of the death of Joca Ramiro: “Ao que não havia mais chão, nem razão, o mundo nas juntas se desgovernava” [The was no longer any ground on which to stand, nor reason,

the world was out of joint.]⁹⁴ (312). The death of Joca Ramiro marks the absence of an organizing principle without which the world, out of control, enters in rebellion [“à revelia”, meaning both “in rebellion” and “*in absentia*”]; it rebels against the universals that had until then secured its relatively stable order, and words such as *truth* and *justice* suddenly reveal themselves as mere *words (flatus vocis)*, giving way to the inexhaustable and unpredictable rhetoric of the particulars. It is the image of this world in rebellion, this world *in absentia*, that Riobaldo provides to the as yet unknowing interlocutor/reader in the beginning of his narrative:

Como não ter Deus?! Com Deus existindo, tudo dá esperança: sempre um milagre é possível, o mundo se resolve. Mas, se não tem Deus, há-de a gente perdidos no vai-vem, e a vida é burra. É o aberto perigo das grandes e pequenas horas, não se podendo facilitar — é todos contra os acasos.

[How can there be no God?! With God existing, there is always hope; a miracle is always possible, the world resolves itself. But, if there is no God, we are lost in the turmoil, and life is stupid. It is the open danger of small and large hours, and one must always be on guard — it is blind chance against all. (76)

“Joca Ramiro”, Riobaldo tells us, “morreu como o decreto de uma lei nova” [Joca Ramiro died like the decree of a new law] (314). His death opens the way to Zé Bebelo’s return to the sertão, and with him, indeed, to the instauration of a new law— itself, however, a law *in absentia*, grounded on the shifting circumstances of particular situations rather than on the basis of an invariable reference in accordance to which it could orient itself: “Com Zé Bebelo, ôi, o rumo das coisas nascia inconstante diferente, conforme cada vez.” [With Zé Bebelo, now, nothing was hard and fast, things took a different turn every time.] (91) “Vim por ordem e por desordem” [I have come for order and for disorder] (105), declares Zé Bebelo to Riobaldo and his fellow jagunços as, after the deaths of Joca Ramiro and Medeiro Vaz, he returns to the sertão with his five-men army and his new law.

2.2.4. Riobaldo, between two worlds

On the one hand, then, we find the world of archaic men, “o mundo dos homens antigos”, centered on the figure of Joca Ramiro and Medeiro Vaz, “touro pretos solitários urrando no meio da tempestade” [lonely black bulls bellowing under the storm] (312; 326), as Riobaldo describes them in their death, in an image reminiscent of the

⁹⁴ Curiously, in this passage, in which the sartorial motif is not in effect, Harriet de Onís opts for a sartorial image in her translation: she renders the Hamletian “o mundo nas juntas se desgovernava” (literally: the world was losing control at its joints; hence my more explicitly Hamletian “the world was out of joint”) as “the world was coming loose at the seams”. (The Devil to Pay in the Backlands 246)

powerless potency evoked by the Kantian dynamical sublime. In this world, the unifying motif of the *sertão* prevails. It is a world structured around a center capable of maintaining in relative harmony a value hierarchy that must not be questioned. On the other hand, irreverent harbinger of a new order, we find Zé Bebelo and what could perhaps be called a version of a modern world⁹⁵. A world which, denouncing the precariousness of the center around which the plurality of values structured itself, renounces its own univocal center of meaning. A world *in absentia* and in rebellion where, dispersive and centrifugal, the *diabolical* motif prevails, reminding us at every moment and through its constant negation that “a fé nem vê a desordem ao redor.” [faith is blind to the disorder all about.] (356)

But in which side does Riobaldo find himself?

The answer we have been trying to suggest in the course of the present chapter is: in none, and in both. Neither the unifying motif of the *sertão* by itself, which would imply the return to a unity and a synthesis that are no longer possible; nor, by itself, the diabolic motif of dispersion, the result of which exclusive choice would be the absolute impossibility of any order whatsoever, however precarious, however fleeting. We have then, as previously stated, the irreducible tension between both worlds, and a dialectics without a synthesis. Between an archaic world whose center he respects yet questions, and a modern world whose complex precariousness he acknowledges, admires, yet resists to accept, Riobaldo appears, split between both, as a kind of belated baroque man. “Eu resguardava meu talvez”, “I safeguarded my perhaps”(380), Riobaldo tells his interlocutor and his reader, suspending his judgment in the manner of the *epokhé* with which the first skeptics appeased their anti-dogmatic spirits, and through which — reluctant, insecure— the baroque men, those belated and contradictory skeptics, gave expression to their torments. The confrontation between the motifs of the *diabo* and the *sertão*, the dispute between dispersion and order around which *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is built— finds its moment of maximum tension in a passage in which both motifs converge and, taking shape in a single word —“Sertão é isto, o senhor sabe: tudo incerto, tudo certo” [Sertão is this, you know, sir: everything uncertain, everything certain] (172)—, give form to another, greater, contradictory, *grande Sertão*:

⁹⁵ It is of course the case that the “modernity” represented by Zé Bebelo is a fundamentally contradictory one. Zé Bebelo is the man of the city that sets to himself the task of ridding the backlands of the jagunços, but ends up by becoming himself a jagunço leader. In this sense, Zé Bebelo can be seen as an example of the mixture of archaic and modernizing elements that characterizes the idiosyncratic “modernity” implemented in Brazil —a theme which, at least since Euclides da Cunha’s *Os Sertões*, is at the root of the social sciences in Brazil. Without reducing *Grande Sertão: Veredas* to a mere illustration of social and historical problems (a temptation that has, in spite of itself, produced interesting studies, such as Willi Bolle’s *Grandesertão.br*, in which Rosa’s *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is reinterpreted as a re-writing of da Cunha’s *Os Sertões*), my analysis at the beginning of this chapter, in the section titled “The trial of fiction”, was an attempt at exploring some of these fundamental contradictions and how they make their way into, and are illuminated by, Rosa’s text.

Conheci. Enchi minha história. Até que, nisso, alguém se riu de mim, como que escutei. O que era um riso escondido, tão exato em mim, como o meu mesmo, atabafado. Donde desconfiei. Não pensei no que não queria pensar; e certifiquei que isso era falsa idéia próxima; e, então, eu ia denunciar nome, dar a cita: ...*Satanão! Sujo!*... e dele disse somentes — *S...* — *Sertão.. Sertão...* (607)

[I was sure of it. My breast swollen with pride. But then I heard someone laughing at me. A hidden, muffled laughter, sounding so close to me as if it were my own. I then became suspicious. I refused to think about what I did not want to think; and I assured myself it was a false idea. I was then about to denounce it, to curse it: ...*Satan! Slimy One!*... but instead I said only: — *S...* — *Sertão... Sertão...*]

In this great *Sertão*, already prefigured in the title of the book, dispersion and disorder, the devil and the sertão —the minor sertão with its improvised and provisional patchwork of “veredas”— converge. Like the image of the whirlwind, the dust devil that traverses Riobaldo’s entire narrative, this great *Sertão* appears as a metonym of the book itself — “mundo misturado”⁹⁶ contained in a little more than six hundred pages—, revealing, with its absence of demarcated pastures, through the dynamic tension between opposite but complementary elements, the dialectical confrontation between truth and doubt, the other, positive, elusive face of allegory. Because if allegory is the presence of an absence, what exists, Riobaldo will seem to suggest, are not categorical and immutable truths. “Existe é homem humano” [What exists is man] (624), he tells his interlocutor just before concluding his narrative by refusing to conclude it (“Travessia”; the symbol of the infinite). And it is in man, this fragile meeting-point between the “disorder all around” (356) and the order that we continuously strive to construct and revise by means of our theories and our fictions, that the devil and the sertão co-exist.

⁹⁶ The expression, already quoted, is Riobaldo’s, and it refers to the “mixed-up world” in which boundaries are no longer clearly demarcated. But it could perhaps also equally refer to the “*monde immonde*” which Jean-Luc Nancy indirectly counterpoises to the explicit Cartesian project and its ideal of clear and distinct methodological and foundational purity. (Nancy 636) See also note 92 above.

CHAPTER 3

Jorge Luis Borges: fiction and the rhetoric of artifice

My conviction is that we shall not get much farther in understanding the evolution of language and the relations between speech and human performance so long as we see ‘falsity’ as primarily negative, so long as we consider counter-factuality, contradiction, and the many nuances of conditionality as specialized, often logically bastard modes. *Language is the main instrument of man’s refusal to accept the world as it is.*

(George Steiner, *After Babel*)

Ignoro si la música sabe desesperar de la música y si el mármol del mármol, pero la literatura es un arte que sabe profetizar aquel tiempo en que habrá enmudecido, y encarnizarse con la propia virtud y enamorarse de la propia disolución y cortejar su fin.

[I do not know whether music can despair of music or marble of marble, yet literature is an art that knows how to prophesize the time when it will no longer speak, how to inflame itself with its own virtue, and fall in love with its own dissolution, and court its own end.]

(“La supersticiosa ética del lector”)

In Borges, the questions raised by the authors examined in the present study converge: the problem of borrowed erudition vis-à-vis the predicament of a national tradition that possesses no conceptual vocabulary of its own, and the correlate question of the possibility of originality and change in face of the certainty that “everything has already been written”⁹⁷, that the conceptual tools and technical vocabulary are already set on the table of discourse; the question, finally, to which all the previous relate, of the formation of form and of the dialectics of production and legislation, of authorship and authority, that informs it. Like Sarmiento and da Cunha, in his writings Borges problematizes not only the internal categorical separations that articulate literature as a

⁹⁷ “La certidumbre de que todo está escrito nos anula o nos afantasma” (La Biblioteca de Babel 505)

discursive and disciplinary institution (the normative boundaries of literary genres), but also the categorical separations that articulate the institution of the discursive field in its entirety, which opposes literature and rhetoric, on the one hand, to philosophy and science, on the other. It is a separation, Borges's texts will seem to indicate, that, taking the form of a *dialogue des sourds* whose parties are persuaded by their own convictions beforehand, disguises nonetheless the problematic common ground—the problematic common groundlessness—that the assumptions underlying both literature and philosophy, rhetoric and science, share.

In this chapter, I will examine how Borges, through a problematization of the question of national identity, engages with some of the key issues that were at the center of Sarmiento's literary-political project, while at the same time reformulating the terms in which the question is posed. Faced with the question of the Argentine writer and its relationship to tradition, Borges will unsettle and recast in his own terms the conventional meanings of "tradition", of what is to be "Argentine", of what is to be an "Argentine writer", and of what is to be a "writer". This radical reformulation will be carried through by means of a particular rhetorical strategy in which duplicity and frankness converge—a rhetoric which will be articulated around the notion of artifice. I will then show how the problem of national identity and its radical imperviousness to univocal definition is, for Borges, ultimately a problem that underlies the notion of identity itself, which is to be understood not as a substantive notion but as one that is adjectival: substantive identity gives way, in the economy of Borges's philosophical-aesthetic project, to contextual, adjectival identity. The examination of Borges's rhetoric of artifice in conjunction with the problem of identity and its reformulation as adjectival rather than substantive will allow us to investigate the role which the tautology that grounds substantive identity plays in the formation of discursive authority, and how in the process tautology and assertive violence come together. It is at the moment when tautology and violence intersect—a moment that becomes evident in the dogmatic violence that underlies the most unassuming *petitio principii* or the most basic categorical assertion: "it is because it is"; "it is so"—that fiction opens up from within the inescapability of its rhetorical situation a privileged space for critique. We will show that it is at this intersection—at the point where tautology asserts itself in the violence of dogma—that Borges's fiction, non-assertive and conjectural, will operate.

3.1. Reframing the Argentine writer and the tradition

Yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges.

[I, unfortunately, am Borges.]

(“Nueva refutación del tiempo”)

Al otro, a Borges, es a quien le ocurren las cosas.

[It is to the other, to Borges, that things happen.]

(“Borges y yo”)

In Borges, as in Sarmiento and da Cunha, the question of limits is central, in a way that goes beyond mere force of expression. Confronted with his writings, one must ask: what does it mean for *limits* to be *central*? What does this tell us about the network of relationships, the constellation of forces within which it alone makes sense to speak of a center? (For a center, as Borges himself well knows, exists only in relation to its eccentric surroundings, and its very designation as such presupposes a particular, would-be static locus of enunciation from which the central and the eccentric could mutually determine their would-be fixed identities). The question of limits is also, in Borges as in Sarmiento and da Cunha, at the same time a question of *definitions*: of defining the limits of a tradition in process of formation (its moment of production), and of exploring the limits of the defining gesture itself (its moment of legislation).

To speak of limits is, at a first moment, to spatialize and territorialize the question. For Borges, as it was for Sarmiento, it is to speak of Argentina and the particularities and contradictions that make up its cultural and literary tradition: a tradition marked by a double origin to which, nonetheless, it relates only in a mediated, second hand way: its *criollo* heritage and the European influence that, in the first decades of the twentieth century, was responsible for shaping the rapidly changing urban and cultural landscape of a cosmopolitan Buenos Aires whose population, as early as 1895, consisted of 52% immigrants (Korn 48)⁹⁸. As Piglia has noted, on the ideological level this is a tradition that takes the form of the fundamental Sarmentine antagonism: an antagonism

entre las armas y las letras, entre el criollo y lo europeo, entre el linaje y el mérito, entre el coraje y la cultura. En última instancia estas oposiciones no hacen más que reproducir la fórmula básica con que esa tradición ideológica ha pensado la historia y la cultura argentina bajo la máscara dramática de la lucha entre civilización y barbarie.

[between arms and letters, between the *criollo* and the European, between lineage and merit, between bravery and culture. Ultimately these

⁹⁸ “...Buenos Aires mostró que de sus 663.854 habitantes, en mayo de 1895, algo más que la mitad de ellos (52%) eran extranjeros; que en las 29 secciones que se consideraron para dividir por áreas a la ciudad, estos extranjeros siempre eran entre el 40 y el 70% de la población de cada area; que de todos estos extranjeros, el 53% era de nacionalidad italiana, el 24% de nacionalidad española y el 10% de nacionalidad francesa. Con respecto a la existencia de las sociedades cosmopolitas tanto de patronos como de obreros, baste agregar que de los 8.439 propietarios de industria de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, el 92% eran extranjeros, de los 70.649 empleados en industrias lo era el 75%, de los 12.831 propietarios de comercios el 87% eran extranjeros, y que de los 55.698 empleados en comercios el 72% eran también extranjeros.” (Korn 48-9)

oppositions do no more than to reproduce the basic formula with which this ideological tradition has thought the history and culture of Argentina under the dramatic mask of the struggle between civilization and barbarism.] (Piglia, *Ideología y ficción en Borges* 4)

At the same time, however, to speak of the centrality of limits is, in the same gesture by which territorialization is effected, to deterritorialize⁹⁹ it. A territory whose body consists only of boundaries cannot be bounded, its identity cannot be fixed, as there is indeed *no substantive body* to be fixed; it lacks a proper name or, rather, it has an *improper* relationship to its own name: its self-identity is one of non-belonging. If this deterritorialized territory has its topographical representation in *las orillas*, which Beatriz Sarlo has described as an imaginary urban-*criollo* topology, the “indeterminate space between the plains and the first houses of the city” (Sarlo 21)¹⁰⁰, its conceptual illustration is the infinitely divisible (for infinitely mediated) Eleatic space, given however a Borgesian twist which sets it in motion (the absence of motion becoming its condition of impossibility) despite —and by means of— Zeno’s arguments to the contrary.¹⁰¹ To speak of and from within the Argentine tradition is, for Borges, to resist

⁹⁹ The term “deterritorialization” has been used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the context of Kafka’s work, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Cf. in particular pages 16-27. To the extent that marginality, outsidership, and non-belonging are key concepts at work here, there is, in the Borgesian dialectics of territorialization and deterritorialization something of what Martin Jay, in reference to Sigfried Kracauer and borrowing Kracauer’s own term, has called “extraterritoriality” (Jay, *The Extraterritorial Life of Sigfried Kracauer* 50) However, the deliberate performative contradiction effected by means of the constant thematization of this issue in Borges (the *centralization* of limits, as I have called it), makes me prefer to employ both terms — territorialization and deterritorialization—in conjunction, so as to preserve their semantic tension that is somewhat diminished in the adoption of a single term that should encompass their meanings, as is perhaps the case with “extraterritoriality”. For the notion of “extraterritoriality” in the context of polyglotism and the absence of a first, “native” language, together with its implications in light of the world-shaping power of language, see George Steiner (*After Babel* 120ff.). For the thesis that the relationship between language and world is not merely one of referentiality, but that particular languages entail and in fact shape particular conceptions of the world, the classical text remains Benjamin Whorf’s collection of essays in *Language, Thought, and Reality*. According to Whorf, “the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing system for voicing ideas, but rather is itself a shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade.” (Whorf 212)

¹⁰⁰ In its liminal indeterminacy between countryside and the city, the *orillas* distinguishes themselves from another well-known literary *topos*, that of clear separation between inside and outside, proper and alien, represented in the “outside” beyond the city walls in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, and embodied as the personification of the detached philosophical gaze in the figure of the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*. For an alternative interpretation of the role of the outside space beyond the city walls in Plato’s *Phaedrus* in terms of a disruption of the boundaries that Plato himself had drawn between “philosophic” and “non-philosophic” discourses, see Nightingale, Andrea (*Genres in Dialogue* 133ff).

¹⁰¹ The connection between deterritorialization and the inescapability of mediation was also noted by Adorno in the (foreign) context of the foreign word: “Language participates in reification, the

the ever present temptation of substituting substantives for adjectives. Identity, in Borges, becomes adjectival, which is to say not merely subordinate (although it is that too: and subordination itself becomes a center) but also relational, contextual.¹⁰² Even the territorial question *par excellence*, that of a national tradition and its defining traits, appears in Borges in a way that borders on deterritorialization (a *bordering* gesture which, yet again, goes beyond mere force of expression to acquire thematic and structural force¹⁰³). Let us examine one such case.

In the essay “El escritor argentino y la tradición” [The Argentine writer and tradition], included in the 1932 book *Discusión* but originally delivered as a conference in 1951¹⁰⁴, Borges takes up the problem of the substance of national tradition, of a

separation of subject matter and thought. The customary ring of naturalness deceives us about that. It creates the illusion that what is said is immediately equivalent to what is meant. By acknowledging itself as a token, the foreign word reminds us bluntly that all real language has something of the token in it.” (Adorno, *Words from Abroad* 189)

¹⁰² In “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, a story which we will examine in detail further ahead, one reads, in a sentence attributed to the metaphysicians of Tlön: “saben que un sistema no es otra cosa que la subordinación de todos los aspectos del universo a uno cualquiera de ellos”. [they know that a system is nothing but the subordination of all aspects of the universe to a single one of them] (Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius 467). Speaking of Borges, Ricardo Piglia has noted: “creo que podríamos inferior uno de los grandes pilares de la crítica borgeana, lo que en muchos sentidos yo llamaría lo borgeano mismo: la idea de que el encuadramiento, lo que podríamos llamar el marco, el contexto, las expectativas de lectura, constituyen el texto... El marco es un elemento importantísimo de la construcción ficcional. En Borges la ruptura del marco es un elemento básico de su propia ficción... Entonces, hay un sistema que tiene que ver con una tradición de los mundos posibles, de la constitución de los espacios de diferenciación de verdad y ficción como teoría del marco, y por otro lado hay una aplicación notable de esa cuestión que consiste en leer fuera del contexto.” [I believe we could infer one of the greatest pillars of Borges’s critique, that which in many senses I would call the “Borgean” itself: the idea that the framework, the frame, the context, the reading expectations, constitute the text... The frame is a very important element in the fictional construction. In Borges the rupture of the frame is a basic element of his own fiction... Therefore, there is a system that has to do with a tradition of possible worlds, of the constitution of the spaces of differentiation between truth and fiction as a theory of the frame, and on the other hand there is a remarkable application of this question which consists in reading out of context.] (Piglia, *Crítica y Ficción* 163-4)

¹⁰³ As Beatriz Sarlo has noted in her study of the role of *las orillas* in the work of the early Borges: “The place which Borges inhabits, which he invented in his three first books of poetry published in the nineteen twenties, is what he called *las orillas*.... For Borges, the imaginary landscape of Argentine literature should be an ambiguous region where the end of the countryside and the outline of the city became blurred.” (Sarlo 20)

¹⁰⁴ Originally delivered in 1951 as a conference at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, “El escritor argentino y la tradición” first appeared in print in 1953 in the volume *Cursos y Conferencias*. Beginning in 1957, it was included in *Discusión*, a collection of essays first published in 1932. Although the aesthetic project formulated in the essay fits the overall orientation of the remaining texts in *Discusión*, Borges’s chronological sleight of hand points, above all, to his awareness that the meaning of a text cannot be considered in isolation from the context of its reception, a context which includes, of course, its surrounding or framing *texts*. The inclusion of the 1951 essay in the 1932 book changes both the way one reads the individual text and the way one reads the network of texts

postulated “argentinidad”. Despite the rather conventional title of the essay, what follows is a series of reflections aimed at unsettling the conventional meanings of “tradition”, of what is to be “Argentine”, of what is to be an “Argentine writer”, and of what is to be a “writer”. To the essentialism that not only characterizes such discussions but is also postulated by them, Borges opposes a twofold strategy. The first moment of this strategy is literally unsettling (it unsettles the conventional grounds of discussion and, in doing so, disturbs the appearance of literality— of univocal objectivity— that it exhibits): it consists in shifting the focus from the question of what characterizes the essence of nationality to that moment that lies *before* the analytical focal point itself, and which as such occupies the blind spot of analysis: the postulating gesture itself. Focusing on the postulating gesture itself does precisely what the act of postulation, in order to be effective and satisfy its own conditions, must not do: it reveals its postulated nature, its nature *as postulation*. Contrary to their accepted definition, Borges seems to suggest that postulates are not self-evident but rather self-effacing, and it is this operation of self-effacement that he attempts to undo by shifting the focus of analysis to the postulating gesture, making explicit that which must be assumed. Herein lies the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of that particularly Borgesian attitude towards language, which Borges himself will refer to at several times as a certain kind of “pudor”, a certain kind of modesty: a modesty, however, that is the visible face of a radically irreverent attitude¹⁰⁵. If it is true, as Alan Pauls has noted, that “el ‘nacionalismo’ borgeano es lo contrario de una veleidad; es el reconocimiento, la suave glorificación de una condición *apagada*, sin relieve, cuyo acento distintivo reside en la falta de cualquier acento” [Borges’s ‘nationalism’ is the opposite of vanity; it is the recognition, the subtle glorification of an *effaced* condition, whose distinctive accent resides in the absence of any accent] (Pauls 47), it is also true that, side by side with this preference for the understatement over unnecessary emphasis (and, for Borges, this last expression is itself an emphasis: for emphases, he would say, are by definition unnecessary), Borges’s self-effacing *pudor*¹⁰⁶

that must now reconfigure itself, dynamically rearranging its semantic force field to account for the new addition.

¹⁰⁵ For the concept of irreverence as it pertains to Borges’s politics of translation, see Waisman, Sergio. *Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery*, in particular Chapter 4 (124-56).

¹⁰⁶ The act of postulation —the postulation of reality of the classical writers as opposed to the emphatic overstatement of the romantics, for instance — is one of the forms of *pudor*, for Borges. Cf. the essay “La Postulación de la Realidad”, in *Discusión*, where Borges distinguishes between the “romantic” and “classical” writers, terms understood not so much in their historical connotations but rather as “archetypes”, as two different modes of approaching writing: “El romántico, en general con pobre fortuna, quiere incesantemente expresar... La [realidad] que procuran agotar los románticos es de carácter impositivo más bien: su método contínuo es el énfasis, la mentira parcial” [The Romantic, generally with little fortune, want incessantly to express... The reality that the romantics attempt to exhaust is rather of an impositive character: their continuous method is the emphasis, the partial lie]. The classical writer, on the other hand, “prescinde contadas veces de una petición de principio.... Dicho con mejor precisión: no escribe los primeros contactos de la realidad, sino su elaboración final en conceptos.” [can countless times do without a *petitio principii*... Said more accurately: he does not

is characterized by constant, almost obsessive self-reference. The second moment of Borges's strategy, once the postulating gesture is brought from the backstage to the front stage of discussion, is also unsettling: once the postulating gesture is made explicit, it is not discarded on the grounds of artificiality and of its ultimately conjectural, non-apodictic nature: it is precisely on these grounds that it *is* accepted, its artificial and conjectural nature acknowledged as necessary and embraced as such¹⁰⁷. It will thus be possible to speak, making use of what appears to be an oxymoron but is in fact a tautology, of "the postulation of reality", and by extension the postulation of essences or hypostatized circumstantial qualities and events such as that of "argentinidad".

Borges starts the essay on the Argentine writer and tradition¹⁰⁸ by stating his skepticism regarding the question he is about to discuss. A skepticism, he tells us, that concerns not the difficulty or the possibility of solving the problem, but the existence of the problem itself:

Quiero formular y justificar algunas proposiciones escépticas sobre el problema del escritor argentino y la tradición. Mi escepticismo no se refiere a la dificultad o imposibilidad de resolverlo, sino a la existencia misma del problema. Creo que nos enfrenta un tema retórico, apto para desarrollos patéticos; más que de una verdadera dificultad mental entiendo que se trata de una apariencia, de un simulacro, de un seudoproblema.

[I wish to formulate and justify some skeptical propositions regarding the problem of the Argentine writer and the tradition. My skepticism does not

write the first contacts with reality, but rather their final elaboration in concepts] (La Postulación de la Realidad 229-31)

¹⁰⁷ The necessarily conjectural nature of that which is postulated also holds for systems of classification, as Borges notes in "El Idioma analítico de John Wilkins", an essay included in *Otras Inquisiciones* whose profoundly ironical key would influence Foucault to write *The Order of Things*. In Borges's essay we read: "He registrado las arbitrariedades de Wilkins, del desconocido (o apócrifo) enciclopedista chino y del Instituto Bibliográfico de Bruselas; notoriamente no hay clasificación del universo que no sea arbitraria y conjectural. La razón es muy simple: no sabemos qué cosa es el universo". To which he adds: "La imposibilidad de penetrar el esquema divino del universo no puede, sin embargo, disuadirnos de planear esquemas humanos, aunque nos conste que éstos son provisorios." (El Idioma analítico de John Wilkins 91-2)

¹⁰⁸ Note that no possessive pronoun connects the Argentine writer to *his* tradition. In fact, even though the title in Spanish reads "El Escritor argentino y *la* tradición" (emphasis added), I would argue that the definite article preceding "tradition" does not mean to suggest that Borges's is opposing a monolithic, universal Tradition (with capital "T") to the various local "traditions" of which the Argentine would be one. Borges is concerned, instead, with the notion of "tradition", of tradition as an idea, as an intellectual problem, as he puts it in the text. I would suggest, therefore, that the best rendering of the title to English would be, not "The Argentine writer and the tradition", but, as I have used it here, "The Argentine writer and tradition". (In Spanish, the omission of the article goes against the syntactic logic of the language, which, as a result, allows the original title — "El escritor argentino y la tradición" — room for ambiguity, justifying this footnote.)

concern the difficulty or the impossibility of solving it, but the very existence of the problem. I believe that we are faced with a rhetorical theme, suitable for pathetic elaborations; more than a real intellectual difficulty I believe that it is an appearance, a simulacrum, a pseudoproblem.] (El escritor argentino y la tradición 282)

It is interesting to note, right away, how Borges qualifies the “pseudoproblem” that he decides to confront. First impression to the contrary, at no point does Borges claim that the problem of the Argentine writer and tradition does not exist. He states, to be sure, his skepticism concerning the existence of the problem. Skepticism, however, as Borges is well aware, is the very opposite of negation¹⁰⁹. He then asserts his belief as to the unreality or falsity of the problem — and here we must note that, first, it is a *belief* that is asserted, thus severely qualifying the assertive nature of the assertion, which becomes in fact an assertion of its non-assertive nature (a subtle distinction that in Borges’s conjectural *modus operandi* is however of key importance); and that, secondly, this belief corresponds to the *unreality* or *falsity*, and not to the inexistence, of the problem. The problem is called a “pseudoproblem”, an “appearance”, a “simulacrum”, words that in the pen of any other writer would appear as conveyors of a negative, unfavorable criticism. Coming from Borges, however, they become slightly suspicious, suggesting a different set of connotations, “como la palabra ‘delito’ en boca de un estafador consumado” [like the word ‘crime’ in the mouth of a consummate fraudster], to quote Alan Pauls. (El Factor Borges 52)¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Though regarded as opposites from the point of view of the atomistic organizing principle governing the structure of the dictionary, which regards words as individual, self-contained entities taken in isolation from their surroundings (and of which, perhaps, the analytical language of John Wilkins, to which Borges dedicated one of the essays in *Otras Inquisiciones*, is the most extreme example), from the point of view of a dialectical, contextual theory of meaning production —and, as George Steiner reminds us, “every linguistic particle above the level of the phoneme is context-bound” (After Babel 118)—, assertions and denials are much closer to each other than they are distinct, and therefore constitute no absolute opposites. For to assert something (say, the inexistence of a problem) is necessarily to deny its existence. Conversely, to deny its existence is, at the same time, to assert its non-existence. “Ser una cosa es inexorablemente no ser todas las otras cosas”, Borges will write in another text (De alguien a nadie 123). To use the Hegelian terminology, negations, from the contextual point of view, are always determinate. The skeptical attitude, on the other hand, withholding judgment by means of its engagement in *epoche*, neither asserts nor denies. According to Pyrrho’s student Timon, as referred by Philip Hallie in his introduction to the writings of Sextus Empiricus, when asked in what relation we stand to things around us, Pyrrho would respond: “we must neither accept nor reject any of the conflicting, equally plausible (or equally implausible) theories about the inner nature of things that philosophers present to us: we must engage in *epoche*, or the withholding of assent and dissent with respect to such matters” (Empiricus 13-14)

¹¹⁰ In a similar vein, Paul de Man remarks that, in Borges, the recurring motifs of plagiarism, impersonation, and infamy possess no moral connotation; “instead, infamy functions here as an aesthetic, formal principle.” (De Man, A Modern Master 22)

Borges then proceeds to consider three common solutions given to the question of the Argentine writer and tradition before presenting his own problematization of the matter. The first solution claims that Argentina's literary tradition has its origin in gauchesque poetry, and that José Hernández's *Martin Fierro* is Argentina's national epic. The second solution claims that the roots of Argentina's literary tradition are to be found in the literature of Spain. The third solution that it has no roots in the past; that there has been a solution of continuity between Argentina and Europe, and that, as such, "los argentinos estamos como en los primeros días de la creación" [we the Argentine are as if on the first days of creation] (El escritor argentino y la tradición 287). The three solutions have in common both a particular form of calculated spontaneity or disguised affectation *and* a seeming unawareness that this is the case. To the first solution, Borges responds that the gauchesque genre is marked by the cultivation of a language that is deliberately popular, whereas the popular poetry of the *gauchos* in which it claims to have its roots lacks deliberation and cultivation: it needs no studied emphasis to be what it already is. To the second solution, which claims that the literature of Argentina finds the ground of its tradition in Spanish literature — a view, according to Borges, which, although less narrow than the first, is also confining¹¹¹ —, Borges's response is twofold. First, he objects that "la historia argentina puede definirse sin equivocación como un querer apartarse de España, como un voluntario distanciamiento de España" [the history of Argentina can be defined without equivocation as the will to distance itself from Spain, as a voluntary moving away from Spain] (287). His second objection is that the taste for Spanish literature among Argentines is not determined by a supposedly Iberian ancestry, but is rather an acquired taste, an observation which allows Borges's arguments to skilfully move away from potential deterministic implications to the freedom that comes from the lack of natural bonds: "Entre nosotros, el placer de la literatura Española, un placer que yo personalmente comparto, suele ser un gusto adquirido... por eso creo que el hecho de que algunos ilustres escritores argentinos escriban como españoles es menos el testimonio de una capacidad heredada que una prueba de la versatilidad argentina." [Among ourselves, the pleasure afforded by Spanish literature, a pleasure that I personally share, is usually an acquired taste... for this reason I believe that the fact that some illustrious Argentine writers write like Spaniards is less the testimony of an inherited ability than a proof of Argentine versatility.] (287) In the third solution, which postulates a radical break between Argentina and its past, and thus regards national tradition as a creation *ex nihilo* of sorts, Borges sees an affectation of existentialist authenticity in the form of a self-fulfilling (and thus fundamentally circular or tautological) prophecy: "Comprendo que muchos la acepten, porque esta declaración de nuestra soledad, de nuestra perdición, de nuestro carácter primitivo tiene, como el existencialismo, los encantos del patético. Muchas personas pueden aceptar esta opinión porque una vez aceptada se sentirán solas, desconsoladas y, de algún modo, interesantes." [I understand that many will accept it, because this statement of our loneliness, of our perdition, of our primitive character has, like Existentialism, the charm of the pathetic.

¹¹¹ "Este segundo consejo es desde luego un poco menos estrecho que el primero, pero también tiende a encerrarnos" (287)

Many will accept this opinion because, once accepted, they will feel lonely, disconsolate, and somehow interesting.] (287) All three solutions, in their will to exclusivity, also have in common the fact that they ignore the contextual, multi-axial nature of the dialectics of formation and conformation: they either postulate a univocal beginning (the poetry of gauchos or the literature of Spain), of which the Argentine tradition would be a derivation and to whose generic defining lines it must, however loosely, conform; or they reject the moment of conformation altogether, postulating an absolute originality that severs it from its synchronic and diachronic contexts.

The first solution deserves Borges's greatest attention, and its refutation occupies the bulk of the essay. Given its importance and its points of contact with the other solutions, it is also the one I will focus on in the present analysis. This solution, Borges writes, is so common that it passes itself as a matter of common sense: it is "una solución que se ha hecho casi instintiva, que se presenta sin colaboración de razonamientos" [a solution that has become almost instinctive, that presents itself without the support of reasoning] (282). Its thesis is representative of the cultural nationalism prevailing during the Centenario¹¹², and defends the notion that Argentine literature should abound in local color and concern itself exclusively with local themes. Thus formulated, of course, it begs an important question: for one of the points under dispute is precisely the definition of "local", the meaning and location of the *locus* of tradition, of what is to be understood by an *Argentine* tradition. Thus formulated, therefore, the solution takes for granted precisely what has, since Sarmiento's *Facundo*, been the crux of national identity in Argentina. The concept of "local" all too easily reveals its problematic nature as soon as under its rubric one attempts to account for the cosmopolitan Buenos Aires of the first half of the twentieth century, a bustling urban center with over half of its population consisting of immigrants¹¹³. The response offered by the solution under consideration to these potential difficulties consisted in the creation of a mythical foundation which entailed a temporal and a spatial displacement, away both from the complexity of Argentina's multi-layered past and its rapidly changing present, and away from the urban centers that, in their shifting plurality, resisted the idea of a univocal tradition¹¹⁴. It located the matrix of the Argentine literary tradition in gauchesque poetry, and chose as its national epic José Hernández's *Martín Fierro*, "poema [que, según esa solución,] debe

¹¹² The Centenario refers to the series of celebrations in 1910 by occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the May Revolution (25th May, 1810) in Argentina. In response to the growing immigrant population in Argentina, in the years surrounding the Centenario the definition of an "Argentine identity" became a pressing issue among the Argentine intellectual community.

¹¹³ "Buenos Aires had become a cosmopolitan city in terms of its population. What scandalized or terrified the nationalists in 1910, the centenary of Argentine independence, also influenced the intellectuals of 1920 or 1930: the European immigrants who had begun to arrive in the last third of the nineteenth century, now totaled tens of thousands." (Sarlo 12)

¹¹⁴ This spatial-temporal displacement was examined in Raymond Williams's classic *The Country and the City*, where he claims that the particular version of the Golden Age that has crystallized around the idea of the "country", as opposed to the city, is "a myth functioning as a memory." (Williams 43)

ser para nosotros lo que los poemas homéricos fueron para los griegos.... El léxico, los procedimientos, los temas de la poesía gauchesca deben ilustrar al escritor contemporáneo, y son un punto de partida y quizá un arquetipo.” [a poem which, according to this solution, should be for us Argentines what the Homeric poems were for the Greek.... The vocabulary, the procedures, the themes of gauchesque poetry should illustrate the contemporary writer, and are a starting point and perhaps an archetype] (El escritor argentino y la tradición 282). Its thesis had been advanced by Leopoldo Lugones in 1913, who, in the prologue to a series of conferences published under the title *El Payador*, described the trajectory from the popular poetry of the “payadores” to the gauchesque genre, whose culmination was to be found in Hernández’s *Martín Fierro*:

Titulo este libro con el nombre de los antiguos cantores errantes que recorrían nuestras campañas trovando romances y endechas, porque fueron ellos los personajes más significativos en la formación de nuestra raza. ... Por esto elegí simbólicamente para mi título, una voz que nos pertenece completa, y al mismo tiempo define la noble función de aquellos rústicos cantores. ... Aquella obra espontánea culminó por último en un poema épico... De suerte que estudiarlo en dicha obra, es lo mismo que determinar por la flor el género y la especie de una planta. He aquí por qué nuestro *Martín Fierro* es el objeto capital de este libro.

[The title of this book comes from the name of the ancient errant bards that traveled our plains, singing romances and dirges, for they were the most significant actors in the formation of our race. For this reason I have chosen symbolically for my title a voice that belongs to us in its totality, while at the same time defining the noble function of those rustic singers. Their spontaneous work culminated, at last, in an epic poem... Thus to study their work through this work is akin to determining, through the study of its flower, the genus and the species of a plant. This is why our *Martín Fierro* is the main object of this book.] (Lugones 14)¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Jorge Panesi rightly observes that underlying the localist rhetoric of Lugones’s argument there is an attempt to connect the supposedly popular roots of the Argentine tradition in the gaucho with the classical (Greco-Roman) branch of Western tradition: “El nacionalismo recrea o inventa una cultura ubicada en el pasado, en el edén agrícola-ganadero de lo campesino. Son las necesarias fuentes de identidad totalizadora, las particularidades que no excluyen la universalización. Lugones extrae la cultura subordinada del gaucho y la pone en contacto con uno de los troncos de la cultura occidental. Es una operación que, a pesar del repliegue político manifiesto que manda limpiar los zaguanes contaminados por la inmigración y restablecer las tradiciones puras, dibuja un ademán universalizador. La alta cultura occidental, en homología heroica con la literatura gauchesca, oficia de mediadora.” [Nationalism recreates or invents a culture located in the past, in the agricultural and cattle-based Eden of the peasant. These are the necessary sources of totalizing identity, the particularities that do not exclude universalization. Lugones extracts the subordinated culture of the “gaucho” and puts it in contact with one of the pillars of Western culture. It is an operation that, despite the manifest political quality that demands the cleaning of the hallways contaminated by immigration and the reestablishment of the purity of traditions, reveals a universalizing gesture.

Lugones's thesis was taken up and further elaborated by Ricardo Rojas, who, shortly afterwards, in his *Historia de la Literatura Argentina*, reinforced through a comparative analysis of the prosody of gauchesque poetry in relation to that of the gauchos the claim that the former was a derivation of the latter, and thus that it had a popular, authentic origin. By means of the affiliation of the gauchesque genre to the popular poetry of the gauchos, the origin of a historically situated literary genre was displaced into the shrouded realm of national folklore. "Rojas, para dar raíz popular a la poesía de los gauchescos, que empieza en [Bartolomé] Hidalgo y culmina en [José] Hernández, la presenta como una continuación o derivación de la de los gauchos, y así, Bartolomé Hidalgo es, no el Homero de esta poesía, como dijo Mitre, sino un eslabón". [Rojas, in order to give a popular root to the gauchesque poetry, which begins with Bartolomé Hidalgo and finds its culmination in José Hernández, presents it as a continuation or derivation of the poetry of the *gauchos*, and thus Bartolomé Hidalgo becomes, not the Homer of such poetry, as Mitre had said, but a link] (Borges, *El escritor argentino y la tradición* 283)

Borges's refuting strategy consists precisely in rescuing the moment of production at the root of the gauchesque genre from its attempted self-effacement in the spontaneous generation of popular origin. To the claim of authenticity and spontaneity in which Lugones and Rojas attempted to ground the gauchesque genre, Borges opposes the fact of its artificial cultivation:

Entiendo que hay una diferencia fundamental entre la poesía de los gauchos y la poesía gauchesca... Lo poetas populares del campo y del suburbio versifican temas generales: las penas del amor y de la ausencia, el dolor del amor, y lo hacen en un léxico muy general también; en cambio, los poetas gauchescos cultivan un lenguaje deliberadamente popular, que los poetas populares no ensayan. No quiero decir que el idioma de los poetas populares sea un español correcto, quiero decir que si hay incorrecciones son obra de la ignorancia. En cambio, en los poetas gauchescos hay una busca de las palabras nativas, una profusión de color local... Todo esto puede resumirse así: la poesía gauchesca, que ha producido —me apresuro a repetirlo— obras admirables, es un género literario tan artificial como cualquier otro.

[I understand that there is a fundamental difference between the poetry of the *gauchos* and the gauchesque poetry... The popular poets of the countryside and of the suburbs versify general themes: the sorrows of love and of absence, the pain of love, and they do it with an equally general vocabulary; the gauchesque poets, on the contrary, cultivate a language that is deliberately popular, which the popular poets do not rehearse. I do not mean to say that the idiom of the popular poets is a correct Spanish, I

Western high culture, in a heroic homology with gauchesque literature, acts as a mediator.] (Panesi 21)

do mean to say that if there are incorrections they are the product of ignorance. By contrast, in the gauchesque poets there is a search for native words, a profusion of local color.... All this can be summed up in the following way: gauchesque poetry, which has produced —I hasten to repeat it— admirable works, is as artificial as any other literary genre.] (283)

The artificiality was not, for Borges, the *locus* of the problem. The problem, in his view, was the attempt to pass artificiality for authenticity, and the means by which this pretense was to be achieved. “La idea de que la poesía argentina debe abundar en rasgos diferenciales argentinos y en color local argentino me parece una equivocación” [the idea that Argentine poetry must abound in differential traits and in Argentine local color seems to me an equivocation] (284), writes Borges, pointing out, at the same time, the contradiction that lies at the root of the conflation of the “local” with the “picturesque”, and which was already visible in Lugones’s classically inspired apology of the *gaucho* singer, which betrayed the exotifying logic at work in the emphatic use of local color. A contradiction that Borges denounces lapidarily in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*: “El culto argentino del color local es un reciente culto europeo que los nacionalistas deberían rechazar por foráneo”. [The Argentine cult of local color is a recent European cult which the nationalists ought to reject as foreign.] (285) Borges’s example in support of his critique of local color is well-known, as is the paralogical conclusion that he draws from it:

Gibbon observa que en el libro árabe por excelencia, en el Alcorán, no hay camellos; yo creo que si hubiera alguna duda sobre la autenticidad del Alcorán, bastaría esa ausencia de camellos para probar que es árabe. Fue escrito por Mahoma, y Mahoma, como árabe, no tenía por qué distinguirlos; en cambio un falsario, un turista, un nacionalista árabe, lo primero que hubiera hecho es prodigar camellos, caravanas de camellos en cada página; pero Mahoma, como árabe, estaba tranquilo: sabía que podía ser árabe sin camellos. Creo que los argentinos podemos parecernos a Mahoma, podemos creer en la posibilidad de ser argentinos sin abundar en color local.

[Gibbon observes that in the Arab book *par excellence*, in the *Koran*, there are no camels; I believe that if there were any doubt as to the authenticity of the *Koran*, this lack of camels would suffice to prove that it is Arab. It was written by Muhammad, and Muhammad, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were particularly Arab; they were, for him, a part of reality, and he had no reason to single them out; whereas the first thing that a forger, a tourist, or an Arab nationalist would do is bring on the camels, whole caravans of camels on every page; but Muhammad, as an Arab, was unconcerned; he knew he could be Arab without camels. I believe that we Argentines can be like Muhammad; we can believe in the possibility of being Argentine without abounding in local color.] (285)

After mounting his refutations against the most common solutions to the question of the Argentine writer and tradition, Borges goes on to reformulate the original problem, and in so doing he overturns the terms in which national tradition and national identity are defined. Argentina's lack of a univocal tradition and its second hand relationship to all other traditions become, in Borges's argument, an asset. Lack—the lack of a substantive, positive identity, one's improper relationship to one's own proper name—becomes a form of fundamental freedom that is, also, a freedom from foundations. The groundlessness of Argentine tradition becomes, as it were, its own ground: “¿Cuál es la tradición argentina? Creo que podemos contestar fácilmente y que no hay problema en esta pregunta. Creo que nuestra tradición es toda la cultura occidental, y creo también que tenemos derecho a esta tradición, mayor que el que pueden tener los habitantes de una u otra nación occidental.” [What is the Argentine tradition? I believe that this question poses no problem and can be easily answered. I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have.] (288) As a result, like the Jews in Veblen's thesis¹¹⁶, “los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general... podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas.” [the Argentine, the South Americans in general... can take on all the European subjects, take them on without superstitions, with an irreverence that can have, and already has, fortunate consequences.] (288)

¹¹⁶ The reference to Veblen and the ensuing analogy is Borges's, though the essay in question is only mentioned indirectly. In “The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe”, Veblen writes: “The men of this Jewish extraction count for more than their proportionate share in the intellectual life of western civilization; and they count particularly among the vanguard, the pioneers, the uneasy gild of pathfinders and iconoclasts, in science, scholarship and institutional change and growth. On tis face it appears as if an infusion of Jewish blood, even in some degree of hybrid attenuation were the one decisive factor in the case... But even a casual survey of the available evidence will leave so broad a claim in doubt. ... It may be more to the purpose to note that this intellectual pre-eminence of the Jews has come into bearing within the gentile community of peoples, not from the outside... It appears to be only when the gifted Jew escapes from the cultural environment created and fed by the particular genius of his own people, only when he falls into the alien lines of gentile inquiry and becomes a naturalized, though hyphenate, citizen in the gentile republic of learning, that he comes into his own as a creative leader in the world's intellectual enterprise. It is by loss of allegiance, or at the best by force of a divided allegiance to the people of his origin, that he finds himself in the vanguard of modern inquiry.” (Veblen 36-8)

Borges extends the same reasoning to the Irish in relation to the culture of England: “Tratándose de los irlandeses, no tenemos por qué suponer que la profusión de nombres irlandeses en la literatura y la filosofía británicas se deba a una preeminencia racial, porque muchos de esos irlandeses ilustres (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) fueron descendientes de ingleses, fueron personas que no tenían sangre celta; sin embargo, les bastó el hecho de sentirse irlandeses, distintos, para innovar en la cultura inglesa.” [When it comes to the Irish, we have no reason to suppose that the profusion of Irish names in British literature and philosophy is due to racial preeminence, since many of these illustrious Irishmen (Shaw, Berkeley, Swift) were of English descent, were people who possessed no Celtic blood.] (Borges, *El escritor argentino y la tradición* 288)

The freedom afforded by the lack of a fixed *national* identity becomes, in Borges, the freedom that comes from the lack of a fixed, positive and posited identity; the same freedom that, following the English Romantics and borrowing William Hazlitt's formulation, Borges would find, with admiration, in the Protean figure of William Shakespeare¹¹⁷: the man "who was everyone and no one"¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁷ As the literary scholar Jonathan Bate notes, the image of Shakespeare as Proteus acquired great currency among the Romantics: "In the introduction to his 1768 edition of the plays, Edward Capell called Shakespeare 'this *Proteus*, who could put on any shape that either serv'd his interest or suited his inclination'. Capell coined the metaphor while discussing Shakespeare's capacity to write in whatever genre the public demanded; six years later William Richardson... called Shakespeare 'the Proteus of the drama': 'he changes himself into every character, and enters easily into every condition of human nature'. The image was subsequently used by the chief Romantic Shakespearean critics in both England and Germany. A. W. Schlegel said 'Rather is he, such is the diversity of tone and colour, which varies according to the quality of his subjects he assumes, a very Proteus', and in a crucial passage on the sympathetic imagination William Hazlitt wrote that Shakespeare had 'a perfect sympathy with all things' yet was 'alike indifferent to all', that he was characterized by 'the faculty of transforming himself at will into whatever he chose: his originality was the power of seeing every object from the exact point of view in which others would see it. He was the Proteus of the human intellect'. Hazlitt was the intellectual mentor of Keats... remarks such as this lie behind Keats's belief that men of genius 'have not any individuality, any determined Character'." (Bate 14-15)

¹¹⁸ Hazlitt's formulation, which Borges quotes textually at least once, appears in the section of his "Lectures on the English Poets" dedicated to Shakespeare and Milton. There Hazlitt writes: "The striking peculiarity of Shakespeare's mind was its generic quality, its power of communication with all other minds— so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another. He was just like any other man, but that he was like all other man. He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself, but he was all that others were, or that they could become." (Hazlitt 92-3) Borges offers his own translation of the passage in the essay "De Alguien a Nadie" [From Someone to No one], whose title is itself a reference to this proteic quality derived from a lack of substantive identity. Borges's translation is literal: "Shakespeare se parecía a todos los hombres, salvo en lo de parecerse a todos los hombres. Íntimamente no era nada, pero era todo lo que son los demás, o lo que pueden ser." (Borges, *De Alguien a Nadie* 122) The essay in question is itself a testament to the importance of this Romantic idea in Borges's own writing, playing the role, as it were, of an indirect statement of his own poetic practice, which he states at near the end, followed by a series of feints and double negations, in the form of its reverse formulation: "Ser una cosa es inexorablemente no ser todas las otras cosas" [To be one thing is inexorably not to be all other things] (Borges, *De alguien a nadie* 123)

Borges saw a similar characteristic —a similar kind of "negative capability", to borrow the expression Keats used to refer to Shakespeare's ability to "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason... remaining content with half-knowledge" (Keats 193-4)— in Paul Valéry, of which he notes, in the essay "Valéry como símbolo": "Paul Valéry nos deja, al morir, el símbolo de un hombre infinitamente sensible a todo hecho y para el cual todo hecho es un estímulo que puede suscitar una infinita serie de pensamientos. De un hombre que trasciende los rasgos diferenciales del yo y de quien podemos decir, como William Hazlitt de Shakespeare: *He is nothing in himself*. De un hombre cuyos admirables textos no agotan, ni siquiera definen, sus omnímodas posibilidades." [Paul Valéry leaves us, in his death, the symbol of a man infinitely sensitive to every event and to whom each event is a stimulus that may give rise to an infinite series of thoughts. Of a man who transcends the differential traits of the 'I' and of whom we can say, like

Borges's repeatedly returns to this motif, or variations thereof, throughout his work, in several different contexts. "Everything and Nothing", for instance (whose title appears in English in the original), a story about a man who, we learn as we approach its conclusion, is precisely Shakespeare, ends in the following way:

La historia agrega que, antes o después de morir, se supo frente a Dios y le dijo: 'Yo, que tantos hombres he sido en vano, quiero ser uno y yo.' La voz de Dios le contestó desde un torbellino: 'Yo tampoco soy; yo soñé el mundo como tú soñaste tu obra, mi Shakespeare, y entre las formas de mi sueño estabas tú, que como yo eres muchos y nadie.

[History adds that, before or after he passed away, he appeared before God and told him: 'I, who have in vain been so many men, want to be one and myself.' The voice of God responded from within a whirlwind: 'I also am not; I have dreamt a world like you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms of my dream there was you, who like me are many and no one.] (Everything and Nothing 193)

The motif recurs, though not the formulation, in "La Memoria de Shakespeare", the story of Hermann Soergel, a man who, one day, receives and accepts the memory of Shakespeare. Soergel's expectation — that, having received the memory of Shakespeare, he would *become* Shakespeare — is, we learn, soon frustrated. After all, there was nothing — there was *no thing* — to become through the possession of Shakespeare's memory. For Shakespeare's identity was not a substance, it was not a thing; in the possession of Shakespeare's memory, Soergel realizes that Shakespeare's identity was not substantive but rather adjectival: "La memoria de Shakespeare no podía revelarme otra cosa que las circunstancias de Shakespeare" [Shakespeare's memory could not reveal me anything but Shakespeare's circumstances.] (Borges, La Memoria de Shakespeare 436) Indeed, as early as 1925, in *Inquisiciones*, his first book of prose, the young Borges would write, in an essay suggestively titled "La nadería de la personalidad" (and whose *Leitmotif* is the motto "there is no whole self", "no hay yo de conjunto"), that "fuera de lo episódico, de lo presente, de lo circunstancial, no éramos nadie." [beyond the episodic, the present, the circumstantial, we were nobody] (Borges, La nadería de la personalidad 99)

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Borges would apply this motif, with subtle yet devastating irony, to the character whose distinguishing qualities were supposed, in the eyes of the intellectuals of the Centenario, to lay the solid foundation of a distinguished national literary tradition: the gaucho Martín Fierro. But Martín Fierro, Borges noted, did

William Hazlitt of Shakespeare: *He is nothing in himself*. Of a man whose admirable texts do not exhaust, nor even define, his omnimode possibilities] (Borges, Valéry como símbolo 69). Paul de Man would go so far as to claim that Valéry — and Valéry's anti-self, Monsieur Teste — is the model behind the figure of Pierre Menard, the protagonist in "Pierre Menard, author del Quijote". (De Man, A Modern Master 24)

not possess, or at least was not meant to possess in the eyes of his author, any distinguishing qualities¹¹⁹: “Para los fines del panfleto rimado que [Hernández] se proponía escribir, convenía que el héroe fuera de algún modo todos los gauchos o cualquier gaucho. Martín Fierro, desde el principio, carece de rasgos diferenciales.” [To the ends of the rhymed pamphlet that Hernández set to write, it was necessary that the hero were somehow all the gauchos or any gaucho. Martín Fierro, from the beginning, lacks distinguishing traits] (Borges, Martín Fierro 96)

To be no one and everyone. To lack a proper, fixed identity and therefore to be free to make use of all other identities, all other traditions, with a freedom, a lack of superstitions and an irreverence that those who are committed or rooted to such traditions do not have. It is this same freedom, a freedom derived not from a substantive identity, but from an identity that is adjectival, relational —or, as some detractors would go so far as to say, parasitic¹²⁰ — that characterizes fiction’s freedom, its fundamental non-committal to pre-established categories of thought and theoretical frameworks vis-à-vis the authoritative discourses —the discourses of science, religion, philosophy— against which, and in constant dialogue with, it is always in the process of defining itself.

¹¹⁹ In this sense, Martín Fierro, Argentina’s national literary hero, is not so different from Brazilian Mario de Andrade’s *Macunaíma*, the Protean protagonist of the homonymous book, who came to embody “Brazilian-ness” and to whom Andrade gave the telling epithet of “o herói sem nenhum caráter” [the hero with no character]. (Andrade, *Macunaíma*)

¹²⁰ Such was the case of Ramón Doll, a nationalist Argentine writer contemporary of Borges, who, in his suggestively titled book *Policía Intelectual* [Intellectual Police], engages in which is intended to be a negative assessment of Borges’s literary practice but which turns out to be, as Alan Pauls perspicaciously notes, a very accurate and insightful description of Borges’s *modus operandi*. Alan Pauls recounts Doll’s attempted criticism of Borges in a lively and compelling way: “Borges, según Doll, abusa de las cosas ajenas: repite y degrada lo que repite: no solo reproduce textos sino que lo hace inmoderadamente, como si nunca hubieran sido publicados; asume una actitud ‘tolerante’ sólo a modo de pose, como un ardid para legitimar moralmente algo que tal vez sea un vicio (la pereza) o un delito (el plagio). Difícil encontrar, para resumir esas imputaciones, una carátula más gráfica que la que elige Doll: parasitismo, literatura *parasitaria*. Es muy probable que Borges, contra toda expectativa de Doll, no la haya desaprobado. Con la astucia y el sentido de la economía de los grandes inadaptables, que reciclan los golpes del enemigo para fortalecer los propios, Borges no rechaza la condena de Doll, sino que la convierte — la *revierte*— en un programa artístico propio.” [Borges, according to Doll, abuses of the things of others: he repeats and he degrades that which he repeats: not only does he reproduces texts but he does so immoderately, as though they had never been published before; he assumes a “tolerant” attitude only in the way of a pose, as an artifice to morally legitimate something that is perhaps a vice (laziness) or a crime (plagiarism). It is hard to find, as way of a summary of such imputations, a more graphic expression than one chosen by Doll: parasitism, *parasitic* literature. It is very likely that Borges, against every expectation of Doll, would not have disapproved of the term. With the cunning and the sense of economy of the great misfits, those who recycle the enemy’s blows in order to strengthen their own, Borges does not reject Doll’s indictment, but rather converts it — reverts it — into his own artistic program.] (Pauls 103-4)

3.2. Fiction and the rhetoric of artifice

‘El mayor hechicero (escribe memorablemente Novalis) sería el que se hechizara hasta el punto de tomar sus propias fantasmagorías por apariciones autónomas. ¿No sería ése nuestro caso?’ Yo conjeturo que así es.

[‘The greatest sorcerer (writes Novalis memorably) would be the one who bewitched himself to the point of taking his own phantasmagorias for autonomous apparitions. Would not this be true of ourselves?’ I conjecture that it is.]

(“Avatares de la Tortuga”)

La historia los conoce por muchos nombres (*especulares, abismales, cainitas*), pero de todos el más recibido es histriones, que Aureliano les dio y que ellos con atravesamiento adoptaron. En Frigia les dijeron *simulacros*, y también en Dardania. Juan Damasceno los llamó *formas*... El espejo y el óbolo eran emblemas de los nuevos cismáticos.

[History knows them by many names (Speculars, Abysmals, Cainites), but the most common of all is Histriones, a name Aurelian gave them and which they insolently adopted. In Frigia they were called Simulacra, and also in Dardania. John of Damascus called them Forms... The mirror and the obolus were the new schismatics’ emblem.]

(“Los Teólogos”)

At this point I would like to return to Borges’s refutation of the problem of the Argentine writer and tradition, and note an intriguing yet often overlooked detail in his denouncement of the emphatic use of local color (of the emphasis, Borges would perhaps say, that *is* the use of local color). In his critique, what Borges chooses to point out and denounce is, in his words, not an “equivoco” [a mistake], but an “equivocación” [an equivocation]: “La idea de que la poesía argentina debe abundar en rasgos diferenciales argentinos y en color local argentino me parece una *equivocación*.” [The idea that Argentine poetry should abound in differential traits and in Argentine local color seems to me an *equivocation*] (El escritor argentino y la tradición 284, emphasis added). That Borges, whose texts abound in false attributions, deliberate omissions, and misleading

displays of apocryphal erudition should use the word “equivocation” in the context of his critique is, as we will see, both equivocal and revealing.

It is indeed a commonplace in the critical literature on Borges the observation that his texts are articulated around what Paul de Man referred to as “infamy as a formal, aesthetic principle” (De Man, *A Modern Master* 22), through which misattributions, apocryphal references, and other subversive strategies of intellectual trafficking and bibliographical smuggling proliferate. Jorge Panesi has noted, in this regard, the symbolic and structuring role played by the figure of the “traitor” in Borges’s texts:

Personaje infame, no trae desde un afuera cultural la amenaza que puede alterar las identidades, las fijaciones o las historias. El traidor pertenece a lo interior de un grupo: el traidor es intrínseco. Su paradoja consiste en que resulta no menos necesario que el enemigo exterior: el traidor genera alteraciones, es una marca de mutabilidad que produce reacciones defensivas y puede consolidar los lazos del grupo. Se lo considera un enemigo de la identidad nacional porque recuerda la contingencia y la arbitrariedad con que las naciones se han formado históricamente.

[Infamous character that he is, he does not bring from a cultural outside the threat that may alter identities, fixations, or histories. The traitor belongs to the interior of a group: the traitor is intrinsic. His paradox consists in that he is no less necessary than the external enemy: the traitor generates change, he is a mark of the mutability that produces defensible reactions and may consolidate the bonds of the group. He is considered an enemy of national identity because he brings to mind the contingency and the arbitrariness through which nations have historically been formed.] (Panesi 27)

“It is no wonder that traitors abound in his stories”, writes Sylvia Molloy in a similar vein, following her remark with a quote from Tamayo and Ruiz-Díaz’s early study on Borges’s narrative sleights of hand: “La traición implica una ficción con una superficie engañadora que se muestra y un trasfondo que permanece oculto y es la sustancia traidora” [Treason implies a fiction with a deceptive surface that shows itself and an underside that remains hidden and constitutes the treacherous core.] (Molloy 83)¹²¹ Alan

¹²¹ Tamayo and Ruiz-Díaz follow the quoted passage with a lengthy (yet incomplete) enumeration of those of Borges’s stories which feature the motif of treason: “Además del muy especializado ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’, aparece en ‘La forma de la espada’, disimulada narración de un delator; en ‘El muerto’, suerte de un traidor cuyo plan es superado por otro más perfecto y cuya confabulada graduación lo reduce a factor de la propia muerte; en ‘Historia del guerrero y de la cuativa’, que estudia los problemas de la traición a la tierra y a la sangre por secreta fidelidad al destino; en ‘Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz’, donde la traición es sólo apariencia de la franca aceptación de la propia sangre; en ‘Emma Zunz’, donde se observan los procedimientos de la traición sirviendo al sacrificio y la venganza. Y finalmente en ‘Tres versiones de Judas’, ingeniosa investigación sobre el traidor evangélico.” (Borges: *Enigma y clave* 64) To this extensive list they could also have added, possibly among others, “El Soborno”, in which the professor Ezra Winthrop, possessor of an

Pauls, in his turn, characterizes Borges's overall approach to literary tradition as that of a "literatura parasitaria", a parasitary literature which is constantly writing and re-writing "un gozoso elogio de la infracción, una exaltación del desvío" [a joyous praise of infraction, an exaltation of deviation]. According to Pauls, Borges's relationship to literature (his own and that of others) turns around an ethics of subordination which consists in "falsear y tergiversar ajenas historias" [falsifying and disfiguring stories of others], a practice and a philosophy of writing that is embodied both in the many personae of the biographical Borges and in the Borgesian characters *par excellence*: translators, commentators, reviewers, compilers, readers. (Pauls 104-113). Duplicity is indeed a common thread throughout Borges's literature, and, as can be seen from this brief overview, scholars and critics alike have taken due note of that.

What has not been remarked with equal frequency, however —what, indeed, as far as I have been able to determine, has not been remarked at all—, is that, side by side with this rhetoric of deceit, side by side with the profusion of false attributions and deliberate omissions for which he is known, we find in Borges, with equal consistency and playing just as important a role in the economy of his work, that which philosopher Stanley Rosen has called, in reference to both Nietzsche and Kant, a "rhetoric of frankness". The distinguishing characteristic of this rhetoric is a certain kind of fundamental honesty: the honest statement of the precariousness and ultimate unreliability of its starting ground, which is necessarily and provisionally postulated (and this rhetoric knows, and it does not disguise the fact that it knows, that the provisional nature of its postulations follows from the necessity of postulating them). It is possible to distinguish, Stanley Rosen writes, between two kinds of rhetoric. Rosen calls the first one the "rhetoric of caution", possibly influenced in his choice of nomenclature by Strauss's concept of esoteric writing¹²². Yet, for my purposes, I would rather call it the rhetoric of

irreproachable sense of ethics, must betray his own inner convictions and code of ethics in order to keep up the (false) appearance, in the eyes of his colleagues, that he has remained true to his own convictions and code of ethics; and "El Jardín de Senderos que se Bifurcan", in which Yu Tsun, a Chinese spy working for the German government, attempts to complete his mission and escape from Richard Madden, an Irish official accused of treason that must redeem himself through the death of Yu Tsun.

¹²² In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* Leo Strauss distinguishes between esoteric (enigmatic, opaque) and exoteric (disclosed, accessible) writing. In the context Leo Strauss employs the term — that of the intersection between philosophy and politics, in particular that of philosophical writing under the possibility of political persecution—, esoteric writing has the purpose of concealing and distorting the truth (the often heterodox truths of philosophical discourse) in order to escape political retaliation. Esoteric discourse would in this context make use of a "rhetoric of caution" to the extent that, in order to escape persecution or censorship, it makes use of multiple and concealed layers of meanings, of irony and paradox, and even (Leo Strauss gives the example of Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed*) the use of deliberate self-contradiction: "Persecution cannot even prevent public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines." (Strauss 24) The apology of the virtues of mendacity in the public sphere on the part of Leo Strauss, exemplified in his defense of the strategic use of esoteric writing, had also, like Plato's "noble lie" and the privilege

deceit, since, as will become immediately clear, in my view the cautious attitude resides in the skeptical reticence that characterizes the second kind of rhetoric. The rhetoric of deceit sanctions lying, Rosen tells us, “in the specific sense of pretending to believe what one does not believe and not to believe what one does believe”. Contrasting with the rhetoric of deceit is the second kind of rhetoric which Rosen distinguishes, the rhetoric of frankness. In contradistinction to the rhetoric of deceit, “the second [kind] does not sanction lying in this specific sense and, indeed, states frankly that it does not know what it does not know; in other words, it identifies its hypothesis as distinct from the arguments to which they give rise. This type of rhetoric freely asserts that it will assume what it needs in order to preserve a case it deems worth making. Kant practices this second kind of rhetoric.” (Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* 27)

The rhetoric of frankness stems from the same lack of evidence, the same groundlessness that Hans Blumenberg, also possibly with Kant in mind, locates at the root of rhetoric in general. “Lacking definitive evidence and being compelled to act” — the conjunction of provisionality and necessity— “are the prerequisites of the rhetorical situation.” (Blumenberg, *An Anthropological Approach to Rhetoric* 441). Rhetoric, for Blumenberg, is not an option, but a necessary response to a radical insufficiency, to what he calls the “principle of insufficient reason” (447). It should not, as Plato and his followers would have it, be opposed to rational, philosophic discourse, but should instead be regarded as “a form of rationality itself — a rational way of coming to terms with the provisionality of reason” (452) “The rhetorical effect is not an alternative that one can choose instead of an insight that one could *also* have, but an alternative to a definitive evidence that one *cannot* have, or cannot have yet, or at any rate cannot have here and now.” (436) As such, rhetoric “is not only the technique of producing such an effect, it is always also a means of keeping the effect transparent” (436). This last statement, however, cannot be accepted unqualifiedly, despite Blumenberg’s seemingly unqualified formulation. For we know at least since Plato’s attack on the Sophists that rhetoric can be and indeed has often been used to conceal rhetoric— Plato’s own rhetoric being, perhaps, the best such example. (It is interesting, incidentally, that despite Plato’s insistence on siding the discourse of philosophy with the unchanging truth of *episteme* against the voluble unreliability of *doxa*, when it came to the intersection of philosophy and politics—and, in classical Athens, it could be argued that this intersection was the very condition

he allotted to the philosopher guardians in his ideal Republic, an elitist ideological ground. As Martin Jay notes in his recent study on lying in politics, quoting Strauss, “it was for a wise elite ‘a matter of duty to hide the truth from the majority of mankind’” (Jay, *The Virtues of Mendacity* 4). The same elitist justification of the “rhetoric of caution” reappears in Strauss’s explanation of Maimonides’s frequent recourse to contradiction in his work: “To sum up: Maimonides teaches the truth not plainly, but secretly; i.e. he reveals the truth to those learned men who are able to understand by themselves and at the same time he hides it from the vulgar. There probably is no better way of hiding the truth than to contradict it. Consequently, Maimonides makes contradictory statements about all important subjects; he reveals the truth by stating it, and hides it by contradicting it. Now the truth must be stated in a more hidden way than it is contradicted, or else it would become accessible to the vulgar; and those who are able to understand by themselves are in a position to find out the concealed statement of the truth.” (Strauss 73-4)

of possibility of both philosophy and politics as we know it— Plato favored the *gennaion pseudos*, the “noble lie” as the necessary foundation of a just political order¹²³). Blumenberg’s unqualified statement, therefore, becomes accurate only the moment we use it to refer to a rhetoric that presents itself *as* rhetoric; only the moment, that is, we use it to refer to a rhetoric of frankness.

Stating the issue in more concrete terms, and connecting it with Borges’s own historical situation, we become aware that the problem that confronted Sarmiento (and, in Brazil, the analogous problem that confronted Euclides da Cunha) —the problem of the possibility of the production of form in face of the fact that “everything has already been written”, and written in an idiom that is not our own and whose concepts and vocabulary were forged within and for a context that is both alien and alienating— receives a new layer of complexity. For it is now not only the case that the words and the categories that one must borrow, and to which one relates only second hand, do not quite fit the context to which they are transposed and yet, in spite and because of this misplacement, must be made to fill a second-degree lack by means of imperfect analogies, creative misunderstandings, and conceptual catachresis. The lack which they must fill is now discovered to have been always already an original one: the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism which lay at the heart of Sarmiento’s *Facundo* is now seen to play itself out again and again and again within the empty core of civilization itself, projecting its dialectical struggle *ad infinitum* in an endless specular procession. At the root of the crux of national identity lies the crux of identity itself. Indeed, it is in the inescapable suspicion that origin and lack are inseparably bound together that the rhetoric of frankness (which is also, to adapt Paul Ricoeur’s well-known phrase, a rhetoric of suspicion¹²⁴) finds its justification and, if the Kantian architectural metaphor can still be allowed, lays its own ground.

¹²³ Martin Jay, referring to Hans Sluga’s study of philosophy and politics in Nazi Germany, observes that “It was not by chance that Plato —rather than more recent German thinkers like Hegel or Nietzsche— was the favorite philosopher of the Third Reich”, noting that “Its leaders could also pride themselves on the burden they took on — like the guardians of Plato’s Republic— to do great and benevolent deeds while hiding their responsibility from the uncomprehending masses”. (The Virtues of Mendacity 3). Considering the possibility of a more generous interpretation of the Platonic noble lie, Jay adds that “Plato could [however also] be understood as the inspiration for a benign elitism, the rule of philosopher-kings, who really do try to rule wisely and moderately and are a check against the irrationalism of the masses and the demagogues who exploit it.” (The Virtues of Mendacity 99) Given Borges’s profound antipathy for the demagogic populism of Juan Perón (who was in office from 1946 to 1955, around the time Borges’s essay on the Argentine writer and tradition was written), it is perhaps safe to speculate that none of these readings of the Platonic noble lie, not even its benevolent justification, would appeal to him. If Piglia’s claim that populism is a strong element in Borges’s writing is to be taken seriously (Piglia, *Crítica y Ficción* 77), his populism was certainly not of the demagogic variety.

¹²⁴ Borges’s rhetoric of frankness or of suspicion stands as an antagonistic response both to what he calls “la supersticiosa ética del lector” [the superstitious ethics of the reader] and to what he refers, in the same essay, as a favorite equivocation of today’s literature: “el énfasis” [emphasis]. The superstitious ethics of the reader (which, in fact, as he himself writes, is more accurately described as

The connection between the rhetoric of frankness and Kant is not merely illustrative. The choice between a rhetoric of frankness and a rhetoric of deceit—a choice that is nonetheless still bound to the realm of rhetoric, i.e. to the mediated realm of language—presents itself as a direct consequence of Kant’s critical enterprise and its partial failure—or partial success—in laying the groundwork for metaphysics. For the cost of Kant’s Copernican Revolution was the establishment of a tautological foundation, the realization—in Adorno’s words—of the problem of “knowledge as tautology”. (Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* 69). This is a problem that binds inextricably together the ontological to the methodological, the immediate to the mediate (the *ontos* appearing—and concealing itself—solely as the unnamed and unnamable name of name): for to the impossibility of direct access to the object of ontology corresponds the inescapability of the mediation of method. Stanley Rosen describes the problem and the tautological solution offered by the Kantian critical enterprise in the following way:

In order to acquire a conceptual grasp of nature (or of the given as given), we need to construct technical tools of acquisition. In this case, however,

a formulaic, uncritically adopted “etiquette” rather than properly an ethics) consists in an over-valorization of style (or whatever is decreed to count as such) instead of the efficacy or inefficacy of a text: “Son indiferentes a la propia convicción o emoción: buscan tecniquerías... que les informarán si lo escrito tiene el derecho o no de agradarles. Oyeron que la adjetivación no debe ser trivial y opinarán que está mal escrita una página si no hay sorpresas en la juntura de adjetivos con sustantivos, aunque su finalidad general esté realizada. Oyeron que la concisión es una virtud y tienen por conciso a quien se demora en diez frases breves y no a quien maneje una larga... oyeron que la cercana repetición de unas sílabas es cacofónica y simularán que en prosa les duele, aunque en verso les agencie un gusto especial, pienso que simulado también.” [They are indifferent to their own convictions or feelings, and seek technical tricks... that will inform them of whether or not the text has the right to please them. They have heard that adjectives should not be trivial and will espouse the opinion that a page is badly written if it does not provide startling liaisons between adjectives and nouns, even if it succeeds in fulfilling its intent. They have heard that concision is a virtue and will hold as concise he who plods through his prose for ten brief sentences rather than he who shows command of a long one... They have heard that the close repetition of syllables is cacophonous, and will feign that in prose it hurts their ears, even though in verse it affords them a special pleasure, I suspect of an equally feigned kind.] (*La supersticiosa ética del lector* 214)

The second target against which Borges’s rhetoric of frankness is directed is the use of “emphasis”, that “favorite equivocation of today’s literature” which all too lightly ignores the limits of the Kantian (or Wittgensteinian) injunction, or goes against that which Blumenberg calls a “postulate of theoretical humility” (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* 206), and which as such characterizes it as typical of a rhetoric of deceit: “La preferida equivocación de la literatura de hoy es el énfasis. Palabras definitivas, palabras que postulan sabidurías adivinas o angélicas o resoluciones de una más que humana firmeza— *único, nunca, siempre, todo, perfección, acabado*— son del comercio habitual de *todo* escritor. No piensan que decir de más una cosa es tan de inhábiles como no decir la del todo, y que la descuidada generalización e intensificación es una pobreza y que así la siente el lector.” [The favorite equivocation of today’s literature is emphasis. Definitive words, words that postulate prophetic or angelic wisdom, or resolutions of a superhuman tenacity—*unique, never, always, all, perfection, finished*— are the habitual barter of *all* writers. They do not consider that to overstate something is as inept as not stating it at all, and that careless generalization and intensification is an impoverishment, and that the reader senses it as such.] (*La supersticiosa ética del lector* 216)

what we acquire is already shaped by the nature of the tools with which we grasp it. Kant's Copernican Revolution amounts to the ingenious suggestion that we regard this apparent dilemma as the foundation of conceptual knowledge. Unfortunately, it also institutionalizes dualism; it guarantees that the conceptual construction of science is built within an unknowable context that is also the *condition* of the intelligibility of the conceptual construction. (Rosen, *The Limits of Analysis* 244)

Hegel's attempt to escape the tautology resulting from Kant's solution to the problem of foundations—a tautology which, to the extent that it openly admits to the self-assertion of its own starting points, takes the form (if a contradiction in terms can be allowed) of an *explicit* petition of principles—had the effect of replacing arbitrariness (the deliberate arbitrariness of artifice in Kant's rhetoric of frankness¹²⁵) by circularity, the violent interruption of a “bad” infinity by the dialectical completeness of a “good” infinity:

Hegel reformulated it as follows. A complete science must be presuppositionless; it cannot depend upon axioms or principles that are not themselves grounded within conceptual demonstration. If science is not complete in this sense, then it cannot be distinguished from poetry or daydreaming... [T]he attempt to distinguish science from poetry then turns upon a quarrel over power. Since the quarrel is itself not part of science, poetry necessarily wins. In order to invert this poetic triumph, science must be circular. The principles cannot be demonstrated in the usual sense since all demonstrations require principles in turn. (Rosen, *The Limits of Analysis* 245)

It is through recourse to fiction that Borges is able to evade the choice between a rhetoric of deceit and a rhetoric of frankness—a choice that philosophy, in contradistinction to fiction, cannot escape; a choice indeed that philosophy has always already made the moment it defined itself, at its origin, through the postulation of a radical separation between itself and rhetoric¹²⁶. In Borges, the rhetoric of frankness and

¹²⁵ “If, in a world no longer arranged for the benefit of and coordinated by man, knowledge of nature proves to be a condition of possibility of human self-assertion, then the conditions under which knowledge of nature is possible must be presupposed as given, or at any rate as not open to meaningful doubt. The metaphysical foundation of the possibility of knowledge of nature seems itself to be something that on the given assumptions cannot be demanded because the desired foundation would have to be subject to the same skepticism that created the demand for it. The appeal to the *cursus naturae solitus* [normal course of nature] is not teleological but rather hypothetical, in the sense of a general supposition without which no other hypothesis has any sense at all — a postulate of self-defense, which does not assert the regularity and dependability of nature but rather assumes them as the only possibility left to man.” (Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* 191).

¹²⁶ In *Genres in Dialogue* Andrea Nightingale examines the rhetorical and poetic strategies by which Plato's philosophy attempted to distinguish itself from rhetoric as well as from poetry in the process of establishing itself as an authoritative and legitimate form of discourse: “[I]t is precisely by

the rhetoric of deceit meet, coming together in what can perhaps be best called a rhetoric of artifice: the artifice being the constitutive element of fiction's conjectural, as-if logic, the art that does not hide the fact that it hides its art through art; the postulating gesture that reveals itself *qua* postulation, the illusion that does not conceal its illusory nature.

In Borges, the problem of the tautological foundation of knowledge and the denouncement of the assertive violence inherent in tautology is itself at the root of his fictional enterprise. It is at the moment when knowledge as tautology and knowledge as power intersect—a moment that becomes evident in the dogmatic violence that underlies the most unassuming *petitio principii* or the most basic categorical assertion: “it is because it is”; “it is so”—that fiction, bringing frankness and deceit together in the form of artifice, opens up from within the inescapability of its rhetorical situation a privileged space for critique. It is at this intersection—the point where tautology asserts itself in the violence of dogma—that Borges's fiction, non-assertive and conjectural, will operate. This operation can be seen with particular clarity in his fictional explorations—a theme to which he often returns—of the genesis of authority in the context of orthodoxy's self-assertion over heterodoxy, as witnessed in the process of formation of the Biblical canon. Let us examine two such cases, in which the interplay between deceit and frankness where fiction finds its critical potential is seen at work with almost didactic clarity: the early essay “Una vindicación del falso Basíledes”, published in the 1932 volume *Discusión*, and “Tres versiones de Judas”, which appeared in 1944 and was included in the volume *Ficciones*, under a sub-section suggestively titled “Artificios”.

“Las herejías que debemos temer son las que pueden confundirse con la ortodoxía” [The heresies that we must fear are those that may be confused with orthodoxy], wrote Borges in 1949 (*Los teólogos* 589). This was not, however, the first time that Borges had shown interest in the early history of Christianity, that period in which authority and authorship engaged, not always amicably, in the contested ground of a canon still in formation. Nor would it be the last. As early as 1932, in an essay intriguingly titled “Una vindicación del falso Basíledes” [A vindication of the False Basilides], Borges engaged with the theme of Gnosticism, that old enemy of orthodox Christianity which, in Hans Blumenberg's provocative account, “did not come from outside but was ensconced at Christianity's very roots, the enemy whose dangerousness resided in the evidence that it had on its side a more consistent systematization of the biblical premises”. (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* 126).

designating certain modes of discourse and spheres of activity as ‘anti-philosophical’ that Plato was able to create a separate identity for ‘philosophy.’ This was a bold and difficult enterprise whose success was by no means guaranteed: because history has conferred upon the discipline of philosophy the legitimacy and the high status that Plato claimed for it, we moderns tend to overlook the effort it took to bring this about.... Plato proceeds by contrasting the philosopher to all other claimants to wisdom. The former, he urges, is true coin and the latter counterfeit: difference is coded as opposition.” (Nightingale 11)

This early essay begins in a way that foreshadows Borges's mature fictional work. Consistently with the belief that "todo está escrito", and that therefore literary and conceptual creation must take place *in media res*, knowledge finding its source always already in variation or deviation from previous knowledge, an encyclopedia serves as the catalyst for the narration: "Hacia 1905, yo sabía que las páginas omniscientes (de A a All) del primer volumen del *Diccionario enciclopédico hispano-americano* de Montaner y Simón, incluían un breve y alarmante dibujo de una especie de rey, con perfilada cabeza de gallo, torso viril con brazos abiertos que gobernaban un escudo y un látigo, y lo demás una mera cola enroscada que le servía de trono." [By 1905, I knew that the omniscient pages (from A to All) of the first volume of the *Hispanic-American Encyclopedic Dictionary* by Montaner and Simón, included a brief and disturbing illustration of some sort of king, with a rooster head in profile, a male torso with open arms that wielded a shield and a scourge, all the rest being merely a coiled tail serving as his throne.] (Una vindicación del falso Basílides 225) The narrator tells us that he first came across Basilides's name in an "obscure enumeration" by Quevedo: "Hacia 1916 leí esta oscura enumeración de Quevedo: 'Estaba el maldito Basílides heresiarca. Estaba Nicolás antioqueno, Carpócrates y Cerintho y el infame Ebión. Vino luego Valentino, el que dio por principio de todo, el mar y el silencio'" (Una vindicación del falso Basílides 225). Although the essay does not mention it, the quoted passage was extracted from Quevedo's *Los Sueños*. A consultation to the 1916 Spanish edition of this work (most likely the same edition used by Borges) reveals, in a footnote to the cited passage, that "Basílides, heresiarca del siglo II, fue natural de Alejandría, discípulo de Menandro y maestro de Marción" [Basilides, heresiarch of the 2nd century, born in Alexandria, was a disciple of Menandro and Marcion's teacher] (Quevedo 176n); the same Marcion, incidentally, whom Hans Blumenberg would refer to as "the greatest and most fascinating of Gnostic thinkers", and whose doctrines Blumenberg held as the most systematic and consistent threat to the contradictory orthodoxy of early Christianity¹²⁷.

¹²⁷ "Marcion wanted a god who did not need to contradict himself by creating man in such a way that he would have to deliver him from his lost state; by laying down a Law, the impossibility of complying with which would make it necessary for him to absolve those who became guilty under it; by setting up a natural order, only to infringe on it with his own miracles — in a word, by producing a world that, in spite of his omnipotence, in the end allows the announced design of salvation to accrue only to a few men." Blumenberg adds that, riddled by such internal contradictions, confronted with Gnosticism's more systematic and more consistent interpretation of the Biblical canon, "the Church, in the interest of consolidation, [was forced to] define itself in terms of dogma." (Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* 130) Some, as Adolf von Harnack, whom Blumenberg quotes, went so far as to advance the claim that "Catholicism was constructed in opposition to Marcion" (Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* 130), a thesis that reappears in the form of an unnamed attribution in the work of Elaine Pagels, who writes that "some scholars suggest" that the Christian Creed, which begins with the words "I believe in one God, Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth", "was originally formulated to exclude the followers of the heretic Marcion from orthodox churches." (Pagels 28)

After an exposition of Basilides's cosmogony (whose proliferation of worlds and divinities — “365 pisos de cielo, a 7 potestades por cielo”¹²⁸—, mirrors Borges's fascination for *mise en abîmes* and specular multiplications, is of little interest to the present analysis), Borges concludes with a set of conjectures that offer a glimpse into the fundamental discursive violence at the root of the formation of canonical authority: it shows that the categorical assertion of one particular version of events corresponds of necessity to the categorical negation of all other assertions to the contrary. He notes that “durante los primeros siglos de nuestra era [and the tautological violence of self-assertion becomes apparent as soon as one realizes that the first person pronoun — “nuestra”— stands, in fact, for the “Christian” era] los gnósticos disputaron con los cristianos. Fueron aniquilados, pero nos podemos representar su victoria posible” [during the first centuries of our era the Gnostics disputed with the Christians. They were annihilated, but we can represent to ourselves their possible victory] (Una vindicación del falso Basilides 228). The annihilation of the Gnostics (“they”) by the Christians (“we”) meant that what little notice has survived of the Gnostics' teachings has, for the most part, reached us through the words of their detractors¹²⁹. (A similar case of material survival by textual determinate negation —if I am allowed to express myself through yet another moment of catachretic borrowing— can be seen, incidentally, in the fact that what little we know about the Sophists came to us through the writings and teachings of their rivals, in particular those of Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle.¹³⁰) The first person, the “I/we” whose

¹²⁸ Hans Jonas, in his pioneering study on the Gnostic religion, writes in reference to the Gnostic cosmology: “The universe, the domain of the Archons, is like a vast prison whose innermost dungeon is the earth, the scene of man's life. Around and above it the cosmic spheres are ranged like concentric enclosing shells. Most frequently there are the seven spheres of the planets surrounded by the eighth, that of the fixed stars. There was, however, a tendency to multiply the structures and make the scheme more and more extensive: Basilides counted no fewer than 365 ‘heavens’. The religious significance of this cosmic architecture lies in the idea that everything which intervenes between here and the beyond serves to separate man from God, not merely by spatial distance but through active demonic force. Thus the vastness and multiplicity of the cosmic system express the degree to which man is removed from God.” (Jonas 43) The notion of the removal of man, in his contingent this-worldliness, from an other-worldliness that is somehow its more perfect and more permanent image, is of Platonic origin and was given a more extreme formulation in neo-Platonic thought, which exercised direct influence over the Gnostic thinkers (a central concept in Marcion's doctrine is that of the “alien God”). It made its way to modern philosophy, and its influence can be felt, for instance, in the Hegelian concept of alienation as well as in its Marxist reinterpretation.

¹²⁹ “The efforts [of the orthodox fathers of the Church] to destroy every trace of heretical ‘blasphemy’ proved so successful that, until the discoveries at Nag Hammadi, nearly all our information concerning alternative forms of early Christianity came from the massive orthodox attacks upon them. Although Gnosticism is perhaps the earliest —and most threatening— of the heresies, scholars had known only a handful of original texts, none published before the nineteenth century.” (Pagels xxiv)

¹³⁰ See, for instance, Hakan Tell's summary account of the problematic (or problematic because unproblematic) reception of the term “sophist”: “Most modern treatments of the sophists assert that there existed in fifth- and fourth-century Greece a distinct group of individuals called sophists. Such studies often mention in passing that the term had an earlier, less pejorative undertone, but that by the end of the fifth century a new class of people had emerged who appropriated the term for their

version is asserted with canonical authority, stands at the origin —the mediated origin, the only accessible origin— of all other versions: the “polarity of persons” postulated by Benveniste as the fundamental condition of language¹³¹ reveals, here, in its relation to the third person, to the person outside of discourse, its violent, non-dialogical dimension; the “I/we” posits, through its presence as the origin of discourse, the absence of the third person whose version we can only have access to by means of the “I/we” who denies “them” their voice¹³². It is only by relinquishing its claim to authority that the narrator,

practices. Once this group had established itself, the old, complimentary connotation fell out of use.... Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle ultimately won the struggle over definition, and the pejorative designation of certain *sophoi* as sophists has become the ‘historical truth’. (Tell 22)

¹³¹ “Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as I in his discourse. Because of this, I posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to ‘me’, becomes my echo to whom I say you and who says you to me. This polarity of persons is the fundamental condition in language, of which the process of communication, in which we share, is only a mere pragmatic consequence. It is a polarity, moreover, very peculiar in itself, as it offers a type of opposition whose equivalent is encountered nowhere else outside of language. This polarity does not mean either equality or symmetry: ‘ego’ always has a position of transcendence with regard to you. Nevertheless, neither of the terms can be conceived of without the other; they are complementary, although according to an ‘interior/exterior’ opposition, and, at the same time, they are reversible.” (Benveniste 225)

¹³² A similar operation appears at work in Borges’s “Los teólogos”, the fictional story of the dispute between two theologians in the early years of Christianity, Aureliano and Juan de Panonia, over who would write the definitive refutation of a newly formed heretic doctrine. Unlike Aureliano’s prolix and painfully argued refutation, Juan de Panonia’s was clear, concise, elegant, universal: “no parecía redactado por una persona concreta, sino por cualquier hombre o, quizá, por todos los hombres” [it did not seem to have been written by a concrete person, but rather by any man or, perhaps, by every man] (Los teólogos 591). Juan de Panonia’s refutation was (as expected) the one chosen instead of Aureliano’s. Humiliated and possessed by envy, Aureliano and Juan de Panonia (the story proceeds) continued their secret battle. “Militaban los dos en el mismo ejército, anhelaban al mismo galardón, guerreaban contra el mismo Enemigo, pero Aureliano no escribió una palabra que inconfesablemente no propendiera a superar a Juan.” [Both served in the same army, coveted the same guerdon, warred against the same Enemy, but Aureliano did not write a word which secretly did not strive to surpass Juan.] As the story moves on, we learn that many years later a new heretic circle appeared. Again, Aureliano set himself to refute it. Faced with the difficulty of formulating the heretic thesis, he stopped unable to find the right words. “De pronto, una oración de veinte palabras se presentó a su espíritu. La escribió, gozoso; inmediatamente, después, lo inquietó la sospecha de que era ajena.” [Suddenly, a sentence of twenty words came to his mind. He wrote it down, joyfully; immediately afterwards, he was troubled by the suspicion that it was the work of another] (593). The sentence of twenty words that had come to Aureliano, and in which he had found the perfect formulation of the heretic thesis, belonged to Juan de Panonia’s concise refutation of which we had been informed in the beginning of the story. (Earlier in the story we read that “las herejías que debemos temer son las que pueden confundirse con la ortodoxia” [the heresies we must fear are those that may be confused with orthodoxy] (289)). Not changing the words but changing their context, Aureliano retained Juan de Panonia’s twenty words. Juan de Panonia was, as expected, accused of professing heretic opinions and later condemned to burn at the stake. “No figura una sola vez el nombre del *otro* en los muchos volúmenes de Aureliano que atesora la *Patrología* de Migne. (De las obras de Juan, sólo han perdurado veinte palabras)” [the name of the *other* does not appear once in the many volumes by Aureliano preserved in Migne’s *Patrology* (Of John’s works only twenty words have survived.)] (591)

substituting the creative conjectural moment of authorship for the (self-) assertiveness of authority, is able to include, if only subjunctively through the mode of the as-if (“*podemos representar su victoria posible*”), the third person back into the dialogical space of discourse: “De haber triunfado Alejandría y no Roma”, writes the narrator in Borges’s story, “las estrambóticas y turbias historias que he resumido aquí serían coherentes, majestuosas y cotidianas.” [Should Alexandria and not Rome have triumphed, the outlandish and obscure stories that I have here summarized would be coherent, majestic, and commonsensical.] (228)

This brings us back to the intriguing title of the essay: “Una vindicación del *falso* Basílides”, a vindication of the *false* Basilides. The title is intriguing owing to the fact that only *one* Basilides is ever mentioned in the essay, and it is precisely the false one, the one that has survived the (and through the) condemnation of orthodoxy. The real Basilides, like the *deus absconditus*, the alien or hidden God of the Gnostics, is only present through his forced absence. The only Basilides left to be vindicated, indeed the only Basilides left, is the false one.

A similar kind of vindication is found in the story “Tres versiones de Judas” [Three Versions of Judas], which appears in *Ficciones*. There we are introduced to the disturbing thesis of Nils Runeberg, a fictional scholar of early Christianity, who offers a radical reinterpretation of the acts and significance of that personification of duplicity that was Judas Iscariot.

Already in the epigraph that frames the story, semblance and certainty, conjecture and conviction are brought together, their distinguishing lines blurred: “There *seemed a certainty* in degradation”, reads the sentence extracted from the autobiography of that other famous traitor (that other famous hero), T. E. Lawrence, the Lawrence of Arabia.¹³³ The story itself begins the same way the essay on Basilides had ended, namely in the subjunctive mood: had he lived in Alexandria or in Asia Minor, in the early centuries of Christianity,

¹³³ The theme of the traitor and the hero, as well as that of the shifting line that distinguishes them and brings them together, was, of course, a dear one to Borges. It is the story of the “Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz”, the soldier who —fulfilling his name— *crosses* to the other side joining the outlaw Martín Fierro in José Hernández’s homonymous poem: “Comprendió que el otro era él. Amanecía en la desaforada llanura; Cruz arrojó por tierra el quepís, gritó que no iba a consentir el delito de que se matara a un valiente y se puso a pelear contra los soldados, junto al desertor Martín Fierro.” [He understood that the other man was himself. Day dawned over the boundless plain. Cruz threw down his kepi, called out that he would not be party to the crime of killing a brave man, and began fighting against his own soldiers, shoulder to shoulder with Martín Fierro, the deserter.] (Borges, *Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz* 602) It is also the theme and the title of “Tema del traidor y del héroe” [The theme of the traitor and the hero], as is that of the story of Droctulft in “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva” [Story of the Warrior and the Captive], the Lombard warrior who, in the siege of Ravenna, abandoned his fellow men and died defending the city he had attacked. (Borges, *Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva* 596)

Nils Runeberg hubiera dirigido, con singular pasión intelectual, uno de los conventículos gnósticos. Dante le hubiera destinado, tal vez, un sepulcro de fuego; su nombre aumentaría los catálogos de heresiarcas menores, entre Saturnilo y Carpócrates; algún fragmento de sus prédicas, exornado de injurias, perduraría en el apócrifo *Liber adversus omnes haereses* o habría perecido cuando el incendio de una biblioteca monástica devoró el último ejemplar del *Syntagma*.

[Nils Runeberg might have directed, with a singular intellectual passion, one of the Gnostic conventicles. Dante would have destined him, perhaps, a fiery sepulcher; his name might have augmented the catalogues of minor heresiarchs, between Saturnius and Carpocrates; some fragment of his preaching, embellished with invective, might have been preserved in the apocryphal *Liber adversus omnes haereses* or might have perished when the burning of a monastic library consumed the last copy of the *Syntagma*.] (Borges, Tres versiones de Judas 551)

Reality, however (or rather the indication of reality, its illusory effect, as the series of apocryphal references that follows attests), promptly asserts itself:

En cambio, Dios le deparó el siglo XX y la ciudad universitaria de Lund. Ahí, en 1904, publicó la primera edición de *Kristus och Judas*; ahí en 1909, su libro capital *Den hemlige Frälsaren*. (Del último hay versión alemana, ejecutada en 1912 por Emil Schering; se llama *Der heimliche Heiland*.)

[Instead, God assigned him to the 20th century, and to the university city of Lund. There, in 1904, he published the first edition of *Kristus och Judas*; there, in 1909, his masterpiece *Den hemlige Frälsaren* appeared. (Of the latter work there exists a German version, titled *Der heimliche Heiland*, executed in 1912 by Emil Schering.)] (551)

Borges, who spoke fluent German but no Swedish (or at any rate no more Swedish than a solid knowledge of German will indirectly afford), was certainly aware of the highly suggestive false cognate present in the Swedish title of Runeberg's major work: "Den hemlige *Frälsaren*" (the secret Saviour), so seemingly close to the German "Der heimliche *Fälscher*" (the secret Forger), yet at the same time so distant. The theme of falsehood is repeated and amplified when we are informed of the line from De Quincey that Runeberg himself had chosen as the epigraph for the first edition of his book: "No una cosa, todas las cosas que la tradición atribuye a Judas Iscariote son falsas" [Not one thing, but everything tradition attributes to Judas Iscariot is false], a categorical affirmation that resembles the falsehood of the "false Basilides" in the title of Borges's earlier essay: for not only has everything we know about Judas reached us through the tradition that condemned him, *but that very tradition built itself on and around that very condemnation*. Judas, his betrayal and the infamy linked to his act and

name, can be understood as the condition of possibility of the Christian doctrine as we know it.

In order to prepare his reinterpretation of the significance of Judas in *Kristus och Judas*, his first book, Runeberg begins by pointing out the apparent superfluity of Judas's act, and the seeming contradictions that surround it:

Observa (como Robertson) que para identificar a un maestro que diariamente predicaba en la sinagoga y que obraba milagros ante concursos de miles de hombres, no se requiere la tradición de un apóstol. Ello, sin embargo, ocurrió.... Rebatíó, luego, a quienes afirman que nada sabemos del inexplicable traidor; sabemos, dijo, que fue uno de los apóstoles, uno de los elegidos para anunciar el reino de los cielos, para sanar enfermos, para limpiar leprosos, para resucitar muertos y para echar fuera demonios (Mateo 10:7-8; Lucas 9:1). Un varón a quien ha distinguido así el Redentor merece de nosotros la mejor interpretación de sus actos.

[He observes (as did Robertson) that in order to identify a master who daily preached in the synagogue and who performed miracles before gatherings of thousands, the treachery of an apostle is not necessary. This, nevertheless, occurred.... He refuted, then, those who affirm that we know nothing of the inexplicable traitor; we know, he said, that he was one of the apostles, one of those chosen to announce the kingdom of heaven, to cure the sick, to cleanse the leprous, to resurrect the dead, and to cast out demons (Matthew 10:7-8; Luke 9-1). A man whom the Redeemer has thus distinguished deserves from us the best interpretations of his deeds.] (552-3)

Runeberg, then, proceeds to do just that: to offer the best possible interpretation of Judas's deeds. Jealousy, spite, greed, are —we are told— the basest possible motives. Once the hermeneutical ethical postulate is accepted —that we owe Judas the best interpretation possible of his deeds—, the choice of such base motives to explain his actions are bound to reveal more about the prejudices and dubious motivations of the interpreters than they are about those of the interpreted. Instead of such questionable motives, therefore, Runeberg proposes the opposite motive: “un hiperbólico y hasta ilimitado ascetismo. El asceta, para mayor gloria de Dios, envilece y mortifica la carne; Judas hizo el mismo con el espíritu. Renunció al honor, al bien, a la paz, al reino de los cielos, como otros, menos heroicamente, al placer.” [a hyperbolic and even limitless asceticism. The ascetic, for the greater glory of God, degrades and mortifies the flesh; Judas did the same with the spirit. He renounced honor, good, peace, the kingdom of heaven, as others, less heroically, renounced pleasure.] (553)

Such is the “second version” of Judas. The “third version” of Judas to which the title of the story refers, the most radical one, is presented in Runeberg's major work, *Den hemlige Frälsaren*.

The duplicity concealed and revealed in the false cognate present in the title of Runeberg's major work, already referred to above — “Den hemlige *Frälsaren*” (the secret Saviour), at the same time so close to and so distant from its cognate in German “Der heimliche *Fälscher*” (the secret Forger)—, is projected on the central thesis of the book¹³⁴, repeating on the level of logical argumentation the same radical unsettling of identity that it had suggested on the base of the false cognate —or cognate falsity¹³⁵— expressed in its title. It is, however, a radical *unsettling* that results from the attempt to *settle* identity in an absolute, final way: if the conclusion arrived at is, as the narrator puts it, “monstrous”, it is so not because of the magnification of latent contradictions that are then brought to the fore; the monstrosity of the conclusion results, instead, precisely from the attempt to eliminate once and for all every contradiction; it results from the absolute assertion of an identity from which all difference has been, finally, removed:

El argumento general no es complejo, si bien la conclusión es monstruosa. Dios, arguye Nils Runeberg, se rebajó a ser hombre para la redención del género humano; cabe conjeturar que fue perfecto el sacrificio obrado por él, no invalidado o atenuado por omisiones. Limitar lo que padeció a la agonía de una tarde en la cruz es blasfematorio. Afirmar que fue hombre y que fue incapaz de pecado encierra contradicción; los atributos de *impeccabilitas* y de *humanitas* no son compatibles.... Dios totalmente se hizo hombre pero hombre hasta la infamia, hombre hasta la reprobación y el abismo. Para salvarnos, pudo elegir *cualquiera* de los destinos que tramam la perpleja red de la historia; pudo ser Alejandro o Pitágoras o Rurik o Jesús; eligió un ínfimo destino: fue Judas.

[The general argument is not complex, even if the conclusion is monstrous. God, argues Nils Runeberg, lowered himself to be a man for the redemption of the human race; it is reasonable to assume that the sacrifice offered by him was perfect, not invalidated or attenuated by any omission. To limit all his suffering to the agony of one afternoon on the

¹³⁴ To the extent that the (fictional) book exists only in and through Borges's fictional account of it, it is possible to say that the book *is*, in fact, its central thesis. We witness, here, the reverse —the *döppelgänger*, inverted double— of the mechanism of canonical self-assertion that has already been discussed, only what is effected this time is an operation of *inclusion* rather than *exclusion*. Similarly to the Gnostic doctrines, which exist for the most part only in and through the refutation of their victorious rivals, like the practice and writings of the Sophists, which exist for the most part only in and through the negative account offered by their philosophical opponents, so do the books of Nils Runeberg. The difference, however, is that in Borges the text (Borges's) that gives us access to the mediated text serves a *positive* or *additive* function, it makes available an access to a text that would otherwise not exist by way of, as it were, *creating its existence, which exists solely that mediated way*. Whereas in the examples of the account of heretic texts through the orthodox doctrine responsible for condemning them, or of the sophistic writings through their victorious rival, the function of mediation is mainly *negative* or *subtractive*.

¹³⁵ From the Latin *cognātus*: *co-* together + *gnātus* born (*OED*). Cognate falsity suggests, then, a shared illusory/artificial origin, and/or a falsity that is born simultaneously with its own truth.

cross is blasphemous. To affirm that he was a man and that he was incapable of sin contains a contradiction; the attributes of *impeccabilitas* and of *humanitas* are not compatible.... God became a man in totality, a man to the point of infamy, a man to the point of reprobation, all the way to the abyss. In order to save us, he could have chosen *any* of the destinies which together weave the perplexing web of history; he could have been Alexander or Pythagoras or Rurik or Jesus; he chose an infamous destiny: he was Judas.] (Borges, Tres versiones de Judas 554)]

Den Frälsaren becomes *der Fälscher*: *der Fälscher* becomes *den Frälsaren*. The dualism that grounds the (neo)Platonism of Gnostic thought is eliminated the very moment it reaches its most extreme formulation: absolute identity is reached, opposites are harmonized, difference suppressed, but only because the elements that confront and cancel each other on each side of the chiasmus are ideal, archetypal, perfected forms: like the Gnostic alien God, they do not speak to us creatures of deficiency—to use Blumenberg’s expression—and to our provisory, radically contingent situation. Judas is the traitor by antonomasia, his infamy, his sacrifice and debasement are imperfection taken to its perfect consummation, “not invalidated or attenuated by any omission”. In his “vertiginosa dialéctica” (555), Nils Runeberg repeats the same equivocation committed by his dogmatic detractors: he ignores the difference between name and thing, word and world, that radical difference that constantly threatens to undermine the authority of discourse, and yet is at the same time its very condition of possibility. As such, Runeberg falls victim of his own artifice, like the sorcerer of which Novalis writes and which Borges is always, in one way or another, using as the foil against which to erect his fictions and against which to measure the critical efficacy of fiction’s rhetoric of artifice:

“El mayor hechicero (escribe memorablemente Novalis) sería el que se hechizara hasta el punto de tomar sus propias fantasmagorías por apariciones autonomas. ¿No sería ése nuestro caso?” Yo conjeturo que así es. Nosotros (la indivisa divinidad que opera en nosotros) hemos soñado el mundo. Lo hemos soñado resistente, misterioso, visible, ubicuo en el espacio y firme en el tiempo; pero hemos consentido en su arquitectura tenues y eternos intersticios de sinrazón para saber que es falso.

[‘The greatest sorcerer (writes Novalis memorably) would be the one who bewitched himself to the point of taking his own phantasmagorias for autonomous apparitions. Would not this be true of ourselves?’ I conjecture that it is. We (the undivided divinity that operates within us) have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it strong, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and secure in time; but we have allowed tenuous, eternal interstices of unreason in its structure so that we may know that it is false.]

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