Los problemas del lenguaje y la autenticidad: Julian Barnes en diálogo con Borges

The Problems of Language and Authenticity: Julian Barnes in Dialogue with Borges

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RESUMEN

El artículo pretende hacer un estudio comparativo de las novelas El loro de Flaubert (1984) e Inglaterra, Inglaterra (1998), dos novelas representativas de la obra de Julian Barnes, y algunos cuentos cortos de Jorge Luis Borges. Sabiendo positivamente que Barnes estudió a Borges, este texto traza las correspondencias o similitudes que constituyen los ecos de Borges rastreables en Barnes. El estudio gira alrededor de la noción de autenticidad, su problematización y otras obsesiones, literarias y filosóficas, comunes a ambos autores. Temas como la oposición entre el arquetipo y la copia, los problemas de identidad y la fiabilidad de la memoria serán los hilos conductores del ensayo. El método empleado será el análisis de la potencial intertextualidad independientemente de los aspectos biográficos o contextuales.

Palabras clave: Barnes; Borges; hipertexto; relaciones platónicas; realidad; fiabilidad.

ABSTRACT

The article attempts to make a comparative study of Flaubert's Parrot (1984) and England, England (1998), two of Julian Barnes' most celebrated novels, and Jorge Luis Borges' selected short fiction. Knowing positively that Barnes read Borges, this text will trace the correspondences and (dis)similarities that constitute the echoes of Borges that can be uncovered in Barnes. The main focus will be on the notion of authenticity, its problematization and other subsidiary literary and philosophical obsessions common to both authors, namely the opposition between the archetype and the copy, identity problems and the reliability of memory. Language and its problems will be considered as the thread that binds all these topics together. The method employed will be the analysis of potential intertextuality regardless of biographical or contextual aspects.

Keywords: Barnes; Borges; hypertext; Platonic connections; reality; reliability.

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It is widely acknowledged that British author Julian Barnes read and admired Jorge Luis Borges. Several scholars have already noted this link and have studied some of its literary and biographical implications (Moneta, 2013: 69). We do not attempt to establish whether these coincidences in topics are intentional or not, as we know that there are times when authors may influence other writers unconsciously or inadvertently. Umberto Eco writes in Interpretation and Overinterpretation (2002) about the influences that have been found in his writings, of which he was unaware: "I have read critical analyses in which the interpreter discovered influences of which I was unaware when writing, but I certainly had read those books in my youth and I understood that I was unconsciously influenced by them" (75). Having studied him, it is not strange that Barnes shares some of the Argentinian's most recurrent topics, obsessions and literary artifices, such as identity problems, memory and its reliability in the attempt to grasp the past and also the fixation with platonic doctrines like the opposition between the archetype and the copy. All these concerns can be grouped under the category of authenticity and its problems. It is indeed our belief that this issue is at the core of Barnes' Flaubert's Parrot (1984) and England, England (1998), and that it is present in a manifold way.

Barnes probes into the question of authenticity with Borges in mind. Several apocryphal quotes and texts serve as an intertextual tool to set the grounds for such a quest. A dialogue between Barnes and Borges is therefore established, trespassing the boundaries of the book and creating a network of ideas and literary *topoi* to be disentangled. It is the text itself that drives us into searching for hypertextual clues and hidden references: "we are not making direct reference, although of course in our intertextual world such reference, however ironic, is of course implicit and inevitable. I hope we all understand that there is no such thing as a reference-free zone" (Barnes, *England, England*: 53). Thus, we attempt to trace these references behind Barnes' novels, always taking the texts as a semiotic battlefield and leaving biographical and other contextual aspects in the background. That the intention of the author is not the core issue here has been already pointed out. As Eco suggests, the intention of the author is often "very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of a text" (25). Consequently, we do not mean to decipher what Barnes *meant* but what his texts actually offer, whether he intended it or not.

One of the most prominent problems that arise when reading Barnes is that of language, and whether it is an adequate tool to know the world. This has been already discussed extensively by L. Moneta (2013) but it is worth revising it. In the very first pages of *Flaubert's Parrot* the narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, is concerned about the reliability of words: "Don't we believe the words enough?" (Barnes, 1990: 12). And the answer would be *no*. By mocking the French academics, Barnes makes explicit the suspicion that pervades his literature, namely, that language might not be that suitable an instrument to give an accurate account of the reality that surrounds us. Borges shares this preoccupation to a large extent, as he shows

in texts such as the following monologue spoken by the Minotaur in "La casa de Asterión":

> Como el filósofo, pienso que nada es comunicable por el arte de la escritura. Las enojosas y triviales minucias no tienen cabida en mi espíritu, que está capacitado para lo grande; jamás he retenido la diferencia entre una letra y otra. Cierta impaciencia generosa no ha consentido que yo aprendiera a leer. A veces lo deploro, porque las noches y los días son largos (68).

This paragraph is pervaded by the same concern that Geoffrey shows. We wonder to what extent we can be sure about the words of the Minotaur, if he claims that he does not know how to read. This introduces the idea that ultimately we, as readers, cannot be sure of the intention of a given narrator because language is too poor a tool. There have been philosophers who, troubled by the insufficiency of language, have come up with theories such as the referential theory of language, posited by Locke. He proposed a language of particulars; a language where there would be no universals because they lead to ambiguity. If each entity in the world had a proper name to refer to it, language would not be subject to confusion and misinterpretation; we *would* believe the words to be enough. The most evident objection to this theory is that if applied, there would be as many words as entities in the world, thus making communication ultimately impossible. Not only has this been an objection stated from a philosophical point of view but also from a literary one, in 1726 Jonathan Swift parodied this idea in *Gulliver's Travels:*

> The other project was a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever; and this was urged as a great advantage in point of health as well as brevity. For it is plain that every word we speak is in some degree a diminution of our lungs by corrosion, and consequently contributes to the shortening of our lives. An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on. [...] many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things, which hath only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back, unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like pedlars among us; who, when they met in the streets, would lay down their loads, open their sacks, and hold conversation for an hour together; then put up their implements, help each other to resume their burthens, and take their leave (203-204).

Borges also takes narrative advantage of this premise in "Funes el memorioso" whose protagonist is gifted with enough memory and perception to own such a language, rendering him incompetent to deal with a language of universals such as ours. Barnes' narrators, together with Borges, definitely belong to the tradition that takes for granted "the un-

derlying inadequacy of the Word" and considers language "tragically insufficient" (Barnes, 1990: 19). Although tentative in her claim, Martha Cochrane, the protagonist of *England, England,* acknowledges that "[T]he words don't seem to fit the thoughts nowadays" (237), thus pointing to another philosophical problem about the nature of language and things that has concerned thinkers ever since antiquity. It is well known that Plato, one of Borges' favourite sources, reproduced the discussion about the arbitrariness of words and their nature in dialogues such as *Cratylus*. This leads us to wonder whether words naturally represent the thing they are referring to or if they are merely conventional. And if conventional, we wonder whether words are anything more than lies, since they do not bear a relationship of *necessity* with the thing. Jack Pitman calls all of his personal assistants "Susie" regardless of their real names, and that is why "it was not really her name he was unsure of, but her identity" (Barnes, *England, England*: 34). The name given to these women does not correspond to who they really are and therefore, the relationship between the name and the thing represented is, indeed, artificial.

Borges took part in this discussion and adopted different and contradictory positions in his fiction. In this article, we are to resort to him as a counterpoint to Barnes' theories, although one must be careful when using Borges as the representative of a single philosophical idea. Just as Barnes does, Borges used fiction as a tool to play with philosophical theories, and practically every piece of fiction he wrote is the literary representation of a concrete philosophical postulate. Thus, when we refer to his conclusions we must clarify that we know that these are not definitive, fixed philosophical beliefs but just mere pretexts to write literature. For the sake of the comparison between the two authors, we have selected those texts in which Borges denies the duplicity (and hence, the correspondence) between the word and the thing itself. In order to explain this, we have to refer to two opposite conceptions of language as represented by Saint Augustine and the Kabbalah. The Augustinian tradition has prevailed in the Western world, perpetuating the notion that the real world contains entities, concepts or *things*, which are perceived by the senses, whereas in the (symbolic) world of language there are different entities or *words*, which designate the things in the real world. Translated to Platonic terms, things would stand for Ideas and words for copies (as will be explained below). This implies that the world exists *out of* and *before* our language, and we just name it through symbolic processes.

Given this duplicity between words and things, Borges deliberately introduces the Third Man Argument, which is the Aristotelian critique to the Platonic theory of ideas. Borges was no stranger to the argument, as can be confirmed in "Avatares de la tortuga", where he attributes it to Aristotle[1]:

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1 Although Aristotle names, explains and promotes the argument, he is not responsible for its enunciation, as claimed in Borges' quote. The main plot is described by Plato in one of his later middle dialogues, *Parmenides*. Whether attributed to ignorance, a lapse of memory, or a diversion —three recurrent elements in Borges' *oeuvre*— the authorship question does not compromise the article's thread.

> Debemos a la pluma de Aristóteles la comunicación y la primera refutación de esos argumentos. Los refuta con una brevedad quizá desdeñosa, pero su recuerdo le inspira el famoso argumento del tercer hombre contra la doctrina platónica (255).

With such proposal, he takes the side of the Kabbalistic approach to language, which conveys the idea that the world *is,* ultimately, language. The Third Man Argument essentially maintains that when there is duplicity between word and thing, this duplicity is subject to corruption by means of degeneration, because once separated, that is, once two elements are proposed, the Third Man Argument is set in motion. This exposes the weakness of the platonic theory of ideas, rendering them useless or inexistent, by evincing the need of infinite elements between a given object in reality and its archetype. If there is a separation between the word and the thing, there is room for this dissociation to become corrupted. Consequently, the word no longer represents the idea in an honest way. After such an infinite train of corruption, the difference between object and idea would be such that the two elements would be unrecognizable.

In order to eliminate the Third Man Argument Borges suggests that words and things are ultimately one thing: there is no duplicity, not a container (word) and its content (thing) but just one entity. As usual, Borges uses fiction to deal with philosophical concerns as though they were games. Thus, in "La rosa de Paracelso", we see how the master Paracelso is asked by his apprentice to reconstruct a rose that had been previously destroyed. Paracelso claims that he would need only one word to do so:

> –Te digo que la rosa es eterna y que solo su apariencia puede cambiar. Me bastaría una palabra para que la vieras de nuevo.
> ¿Una palabra? –dijo con extrañeza el discípulo–. El atanor está apagado y están llenos de polvos los alambiques. ¿Qué harías para que resurgiera? Paracelso lo miró con tristeza. [...] Paracelso se quedó solo. Antes de apagar la lámpara y de sentarse en el fatigado sillón, volcó el tenue puñado de ceniza en la mano cóncava y dijo una palabra en voz baja.
> La rosa resurgió (388-390).

The word uttered by Paracelso would not be, precisely, a word but the real, ideal rose itself: there is no separation between the real rose and the word which represents it. This problem is similarly presented in Borges' story "Parábola del palacio", where we read that "En el mundo no puede haber dos cosas iguales; bastó (nos dicen) que el poeta pronunciara el poema para que desapareciera el palacio, como abolido y fulminado por la última sílaba" (180). The palace disappears when a poet writes it (not writes about it, but writes it), just as the rose appears when Paracelso says it. This same problem can also be found in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait", where a young lady dies in the very moment when her beloved finishes painting her portrait (1990, 305-307). Borges also deals with this very problem in his poem "El otro tigre" in which he speaks about a tiger that only exists in the language: it is a representation and not an actual

tiger. It is therefore not real, because the mere act of naming it distorts its entity and transforms it into fiction:

> El tigre vocativo de mi verso
> Es un tigre de símbolos y sombras,
> Una serie de tropos literarios
> Y de memorias de la enciclopedia
> Y no el tigre fatal, la aciaga joya [...]
> Al tigre de los símbolos he opuesto
> El verdadero, el de caliente sangre, [...]
>
> Alarga en la pradera una pausada
> Sombra, pero ya el hecho de nombrarlo
> Y de conjeturar su circunstancia
> Lo hace ficción del arte y no criatura
> [...] Un tercer tigre buscaremos. Éste
> Será como los otros una forma
> De mi sueño, un sistema de palabras
> Humanas y no el tigre vertebrado
> [...]Bien lo sé, pero algo
> Me impone esta aventura indefinida,
> Insensata y antigua, y persevero
> En buscar [...]
> El otro tigre, el que no está en el verso.

(202-203)

Elsewhere in the poem ("en su mundo no hay nombres ni pasado") (Borges, 1996d: 202), Borges claims that in the tiger's world there are no names (because things are things in themselves, there is no separation noun/thing) nor past (because it cannot be grasped with certitude as the past is no more than a fiction). But still he vows to keep looking for the real tiger, the one which is not in the language. Just like Barnes, who knows that his inquiry in *Flaubert's Parrot* is fruitless but still writes a whole book about it, and who knows that language is essentially unreliable but still relies on it to state how unreliable it is. It is in this point that Barnes and Borges diverge: while Barnes wonders about the *correspondence* between the word and the thing and thus inscribes himself in the Augustinian tradition of language, Borges denies the existence of two elements (as we have already pointed out, this is only true in *some* of his works), and hence, any correspondence whatsoever. Barnes does not only maintain that the copy of the thing (and the word that represents it) is *possible* but that it becomes reality itself, whereas for Borges this is an illusion.

As has been already pointed out, the discussion about words and things can be easily transferred to the broader field of copies and archetypes, and it is not difficult to understand in the archetypal game a relationship with Borges, who dwelt extensively on this subject. Barnes extends the problem of language to the problem of reality. This subject comes, once again, from the Platonic theory in which the world is composed by Ideas, that is, perfect archetypes, which are eternal, pre-existing and immutable, and the

world of Things, which are imperfect copies of the archetypes. The issue is arguably present in *Flaubert's Parrot*, where the protagonist begins a quest to know which one is the original parrot that inspired Flaubert's writings and which ones are mere copies.

However, it is in *England, England* where Barnes addresses this in a more direct way. The structure of Borges' story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" bears a certain resemblance to "England, England". This has been pointed out by Moneta in the article "Borges y sus precursores: la obra de Julian Barnes", without elaborating further after enunciating such a connexion. Tlön is a world of ideas, an archetypal haven where thought prevails over matter. As Button Burlá states: "Tlön es algo así como el mundo al revés, donde sólo las ideas tienen existencia concreta; los objetos están subordinados al pensamiento (Burlá: 73). Likewise, Jack Pitman's England, England[2] has reunited the "archetypal" features of Englishness, i.e. what the perfect idea of England is (note the "Fifty Quintessences of Englishness" in Barnes, 2012: 83-85), and has made of it a brand new country. Every feature that is contained in the *idea* of England is now part of Jack Pitman's creation. England, England thus becomes at the same time the archetype and the copy: it is the archetype because it is ideal, and it is a copy because it re-produces or re-presents the idea of England. This is an interesting turning point: the copy displaces the original and becomes, as Sir Jack Pitman says, "*the thing itself*" (Barnes, 2012: 59). The copy is no longer a worse, degraded version of a purer thing but rather "an enhancement and enrichment, an ironization and summation of that world" (Barnes, 2012: 55). The original England is now abandoned and given the name of Anglia (mocking the idealized notion of Britannia), a name that suggests the state of rusticity and pre-civilization that now dominates the former England. The archetype has become a degraded version of the archetype itself. Barnes is here ironically mocking the Platonic theory in which the archetypes are perfect, immutable and eternal. If they were so, we could not explain that Pitman and his company have actually made England *more perfect*.

In order to understand this, it becomes necessary to discuss two confronted conceptions about the nature of words, specifically regarding the duality between particulars and universals. Certain rationalist philosophers have claimed that there are universals *in re,* meaning that universals are contained in things. In contrast, the nominalist tradition has defended that there are universals *ante re*, this is, things do not contain universal abstractions, which only exist in language. Nominalists claim that universals are ultimately *flatus vocis* that do not represent reality. Following this distinction, the "Englishness" that Jack Pitman exports would be a universal *ante re*. If it were a universal *in re* it could be contained in original England and it would not be possible to transfer it to another entity. The copy would be a worse version of the archetype. How-

2 For the sake of clarity, it must be noted that italicized *"England, England"* refers to Barnes' novel, whereas "England, England" refers to Jack Pitman's new country.

ever, the reverse is true in Jack Pitman's world, which becomes a *better* version of England. England thus becomes a *flatus vocis.* A postmodernist explanation of what is at stake in *England, England* could be provided by the notion of "aura" as explained by Walter Benjamin. He talked about the status of artistic production in his essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (2007), claiming that when a piece of art is reproduced it loses its aura, its contextual integration (223). It is deprived of its ritualistic meaning, and by decontextualizing it its real significance fades. According to Benjamin, authenticity cannot be reproduced. Thus, even if Pitman's creation definitely lacks the aura that would make of it an original creation, Barnes suggests that it does not matter. With or without aura, England, England is successful:

> Indeed it has been incontrovertibly proven by many of those I have earlier cited – that nowadays we prefer the replica to the original. We prefer the reproduction of the work of art to the work of art itself, the perfect sound and solitude of the compact disc to the symphony concert in the company of a thousand victims of throat complaints, the book on tape to the book on the lap (Barnes, 2012: 53).

Archetypes are not supposed to be perfectible, but Barnes shows that in fact, they are. The underlying point here is the suggestion that authenticity is something ever-changing and subjective and hence, unattainable. It is easy to claim that copies are imperfect, that they imply degradation and that they do not give a reliable account of reality. The next step is to claim the same about archetypes. As Dr Max clearly puts it: "Bo–gus implies, to my mind, an authenticity which is being betrayed. But is this, I ask myself, the case in the present instance? Is not the very notion of the authentic somehow, in its own way, bogus?" (Barnes, 2012: 131). If authenticity is bogus, then copies can become *authentic*, as can be seen in the novel. The real England is abandoned and the *idea* of England becomes associated to the *copy* and not to the original. This is what happens to the *hrönir* ("secondary objects") in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius":

> Hecho curioso: los hrönir de segundo y de tercer grado -los hrönir derivados de otro hrön, los hrönir derivados del hrön de un hrön– exageran las aberraciones del inicial; los de quinto son casi uniformes; los de noveno se confunden con los de segundo; en los de undécimo hay una pureza de líneas que los originales no tienen. El proceso es periódico: el hrön de duodécimo grado ya empieza a decaer (440).

The same happens with the new population of England, England. People are hired to play certain "English roles" such as Robin Hood or Samuel Johnson. At first they just play their parts, according to the idea that England, England is more of a theme park than a real country. This takes us directly to Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, as it will be explained below. However, as time goes by and the country obtains its independence they

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Número 19, Año 2017

start to become more deeply involved with their parts and actually begin to act as the characters they are representing:

> Certain members of Backdrop could no longer be addressed as Pitco employees, only as the characters they were paid to inhabit. Their case was initially misdiagnosed. They were thought to be showing signs of discontent, whereas the opposite was the case: they were showing signs of content. They were happy to be who they had become, and didn't wish to be other (Barnes, 2012: 198).

Thus, Robin Hood and his gang begin to steal in order to benefit the poor and smugglers begin to smuggle, to the outrage of Jack Pitman and his team. Each performance copies the one from the day before, but according to the Third Man Argument, each one is a degraded version of the former, leading to the point in which the original and the last one do not recognize each other. This leads to two possibilities: either a disintegration of the original, or, like in the case of the *hrönir* of 11ᵗʰ grade, the copy becomes an independent identity (they have "una pureza de líneas que los originales no tienen (Borges, 1996h: 440). We saw how Barnes wondered about the correspondence between the word and the thing, and even if he did not explicitly deny it, he was suspicious of it. Now, in the field of copies and archetypes, he seems to embrace the Aristotelian solution of the Third Man Argument by evincing that archetypes do not necessarily exist; in case they did, they are so far removed from the copies that are supposed to represent them that they do not affect our comprehension of the world. The copy in *England, England* turns out to be real and wins the ontological battle. Jean Baudrillard used the term "hyperreality" to describe the fact that the representation and its referent do no longer hold a relationship. The representation becomes the *simulacra*, which is now independent from the original. The process that Baudrillard describes can easily be applied to the process that Jack Pitman sets in motion:

> –[the image] is the reflection of a basic reality
> –it masks and perverts a basic reality
> –it masks the absence of a basic reality
> –it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard: 256).

Thus, England, England reflects the basic reality of "Englishness" and perverts it by dispossessing it of its aura. Then it goes on to present itself as the "real" England, leaving Anglia in a state of rusticity, and ultimately England, England becomes a hyperreal. Baudrillard uses Disneyland as an effective materialization of this theory, defining it as "an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter" (Baudrillard: 262). We could very well substitute England, England for Disneyland and the analysis would remain the same.

Once that England, England has supplanted England in the minds of its inhabitants we need to wonder about the role of memory and history in

the change from one country to the other. The utter oblivion of the original England by the inhabitants of England, England is possible due to the futility of History, which is not a useful tool when trying to know the past. History is presented in the novel as the testimony of the powerful and thus as a biased, subjective construction of the past: "There was no history except Pitco history" (Barnes, 2012: 202). The creation of England, England is the living proof of it. The inhabitants of England have adopted a brand new identity because as Martha thinks: "Old England had lost its history, and therefore —since memory is identity— had lost all sense of itself." (Barnes, 2012: 251). Another interesting example of this idea is found at the beginning of the novel, when Martha Cochrane and her Spanish friend discuss the figure of Sir Francis Drake, who is a national hero for the former and a pirate for the latter:

> 'Francis Drake was a pirate', she had said No he wasn't, because she knew he was an English hero and a Sir and an Admiral and therefore a Gentleman. When Cristina, more seriously this time, repeated, 'He was a pirate', Martha knew that this was the comforting if necessary fiction of the defeated. Later, she looked up Drake in a British encyclopaedia, and while the word 'pirate' never appeared, the words 'privateer' and 'plunder' frequently did, and she could quite see that one person's plundering privateer might be another person's pirate, but even so Sir Francis Drake remained for her an English hero, untainted by this knowledge (Barnes, 2012: 7).

The pointlessness of the study of history is likewise made clear on several occasions in *Flaubert's Parrot*. The second chapter of the novel is called "Chronology", and it consists of three different chronologies of Flaubert's life. The first one could be considered to be the most apparently objective one (that is, if neutrality exists, which probably it does not), one we could find in a school textbook. It gives a rather optimistic account of the writer's life as it focuses on his literary achievements. The second chronology is basically a list of all the tragedies that ensued in his life, thus giving the impression that Flaubert's life was over-all miserable and full of toil. The third and last is a recollection of fragments belonging to Flaubert's private diary. None of the three chronologies lie – inasmuch as the three provide events that really *did* happen. However, as Moneta has already noticed (2013) the impression each of them makes is radically different, if not opposite, from the others. What we gather from this is something that Borges already felt in his short piece of non-fiction "El pudor de la historia": "yo he sospechado que la historia, la verdadera historia, es más pudorosa y que sus fechas esenciales pueden ser, asimismo, durante largo tiempo, secretas" (132). He claims that historical events are fabricated for advertising interests, and that history holds its own secrets to be unfolded. Also, he acknowledges that history can be created, almost out of nowhere, according to the interests of a particular individual.

As suggested above, if using history to reach the truth about the past is to no avail, memory is not a better tool either: "'What's your first

memory?' someone would ask. And she would reply, 'I don't remember'" (Barnes, 2012: 3). Thus begins *England, England*. Martha Cochrane, the protagonist, cannot remember what her first memory ever was because a first memory, she thinks,

> Wasn't something like your first bra, or your first friend, or your first kiss, or your first fuck, or your first marriage, or your first child, or the death of your first parent, or your first sudden sense of the lancing hopelessness of the human condition – it wasn't like any of that. It isn't a solid, seizable thing, which time, in its plodding, humorous way, might decorate down the years with fanciful detail (Barnes, 2012: 3).

Barnes and Borges dwell on the idea of an unremembered memory as the origin of actual memory; although it might seem slightly contradictory, it appears to appeal to everyone's initial cognitive impressions. The previous fragment resembles the beginning of Borges' "La Noche de los dones", where a character claims, as Martha does, that first memories are not reliable:

> No acabo de entender lo de los arquetipos platónicos. Nadie recuerda la primera vez que vio el amarillo o el negro o la primera vez que le tomó el gusto a una fruta, acaso porque era muy chico y no podía saber que inauguraba una serie muy larga. Por supuesto, hay otras primeras veces que nadie olvida. (41)

In relation to this problem, there is an anecdote documented by Button Burlá in which Borges talks about the uselessness of memory, using coins as a metaphor. He remembers how his father used to tell him that memories are like a pile of coins, where the first coin would be the most accurate memory and all the others a subsequent deformation of it. As Martha Cochrane would say, "A memory now of a memory a bit earlier of a memory before that of a memory way back when" (Barnes, 2012: 3):

> 'Verás, esta primera moneda, la de abajo, sería la primera imagen, por ejemplo, de la casa de mi niñez. Esta segunda, sería el recuerdo de aquella casa cuando llegué a Buenos Aires. La tercera, otro recuerdo, y así una y otra vez. Y como en cada recuerdo hay una ligera diferencia, supongo que mis recuerdos de hoy no se asemejan mucho a los primeros recuerdos que tenía' […] Y aquello me puso triste. Pensar que tal vez no tengamos recuerdos verdaderos de nuestra juventud (Borges quoted by Burlá, 1983: 74).

This is similar to the succession of *hrönirs* in Tlön: *hrönirs* become more corrupted each time, but nevertheless they end up establishing a new reality, almost more perfect, more *real* than the previous one. The parallel between coins and memories is clear: they become more corrupted each time but at the same time they bring about our perception of reality and the conceptualization of the past, which we take to be the real one. The same issue is troubling Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert's Parrot*: "How do you compare two parrots, one already idealised by memory and metaphor, the other a squawking intruder?" (1990: 21). Barnes

and Borges not only agree that memory is not a reliable account of past events but insist that it is a rather deformed and manipulated conceptualization of reality. History and memory are ultimately entangled: "Most people remembered history in the same conceited yet evanescent fashion as they recalled their own childhood" (Barnes, 2012: 82). To continue with the problem of memory we must mention Dr. Max the historian, another character from *England, England*, who while discussing history posits the idea –quite similar to Borges'– that it is futile to try to grasp the starting point of a memory:

> We may choose to freeze a moment and say that it all "began" then, but as an historian I have to tell you that such labelling is intellectually indefensible. What we are looking at is almost always a replica, if that is the locally fashionable term, of something earlier. There is no prime moment (132).

If the past is made up of memories and memories are ultimately lies and therefore unreliable, Barnes wonders "How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?" (*Flaubert's Parrot*: 14). There are two major underlying problems here and we shall now deal with them. In the first place, they are epistemological and ultimately ontological. These problems are the recurrent questions of *how* we can know, of the limits of said knowledge or, even, if the object of our knowledge *is* knowable. On Martha Cochrane's opinion, memories are lies: "in all her years she was never to come across a first memory which was not in her opinion a lie" (Barnes, 2012: 4). Barnes thus reveals that the past is known through our subjective filters which deform and manipulate it, consequently creating a new reality that might be similar but never identical to that object we are trying to know. If memories are lies, then biographies are no more than a compilation of those lies: "the past is merely autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report" (Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*: 90).

Along with the problem of memory and history, the figure of the author in the novels discussed becomes the epitome of the impossibility to grasp the past or even get a hold of the subtlest particle of truth. The question of identity remains unanswered, whether it refers to the narrator or the fictional figure of the author. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Geoffrey Braithwaite is trying to re-construct Flaubert, as Borges would put it, *ex ungue leonem*. Indeed, what *Flaubert's Parrot* is really about is the quest that the narrator undergoes in order to find out about the French author and his life. As it often happens in postmodern novels, this quest is ironic in the sense that Barnes knows that his narrator's enterprise is doomed from the very beginning: as we have been repeating throughout the essay, it is not possible to reach the truth about the past, be it through memory or through history. Braithwaite is aware of how unnecessary his task is, and as a postmodern narrator he has already sent the author to the guillotine, but still he feels the need to continue with his task:

> Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't the books enough? Flaubert wanted them to be: few writers believed more in the objectivity of the written text and the in-

significance of the writer's personality; yet still we disobediently pursue (Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*: 12).
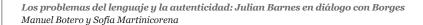
The necessity to find out about The Author becomes an unsatisfied need for Braithwaite who realizes to his own demise that the task is impossible. The series of rhetorical questions seems, yet again, a paraphrase of Borges in "La flor de Coleridge" when he discusses:

> La Historia de la literatura no debería ser la historia de los autores y de los accidentes de su carrera o de la carrera de sus obras sino la Historia del Espíritu como productor o consumidor de literatura. Esa historia podría llevarse a término sin mencionar un solo escritor (17).

Braithwaite is permanently torn between two drives: his urge to find out about the God-author, and his knowing that doing so is sterile. "God is dead, they told us, and therefore so is the God-like novelist" (Barnes, 1990: 88). The farcical reference to the Barthesian death of the author is evident here. Barthes asserted the end of the Author-God and the theological writing, but a century before Flaubert had already been "denying the significance of his own personality" (Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*: 88). This "demand for authorial absence" (Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*: 87) is present in Borges' "A quien leyere", where he acknowledges that the fact that he is the author of his texts is random and contingent, thus eliminating his God-like position:

> Si las páginas de este libro consienten algún verso feliz, perdóneme el lector la descortesía de haberlo usurpado yo, previamente. Nuestras nadas poco difieren; es trivial y fortuita la circunstancia de que seas tú el lector de estos ejercicios, y yo su redactor (16).

It is clear that the feeling that reality and truth are problematic pervades both Barnes' and Borges' fiction. The correspondences and (dis)similarities that manifest the influence Borges had upon Barnes have become evident, even if the conclusions that they reach are not the same in every case. Neither language, nor history nor memory, which are the traditional ways in which humans have tried to approach reality, provide a truthful account of the world. The general topic of authenticity and other subsidiary literary and philosophical obsessions, namely the opposition between the archetype and the copy, identity problems and the reliability of memory have worried both authors to the extent of defining their literary endeavors. Language and its problems have been considered as thematic threads that unite all these topics together. However, at an ontological level we have seen how language becomes the reason for the disintegration of certainties. Just as the relation between language and reality becomes inadequate, the correspondence between archetypes and copies is deprived of meaning. The concept of an original entity is brutally displaced by the copies, which take over its originality. Authenticity, the archetype, the original, just as Flaubert's parrot, are nowhere to be found: "What happened to the truth is not recorded" (Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*: 65).

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Los problemas del lenguaje y la autenticidad: Julian Barnes en diálogo con Borges
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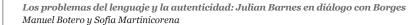--- (2012). *England, England*. London: Vintage.

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