

RETURN TO THE VOICE

BORGES'S CLASSES ON OSCAR WILDE (1950)

RETORNO A LA VOZ

Las clases de Borges sobre Oscar Wilde (1950)

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the unpublished manuscripts for the classes on Oscar Wilde that Jorge Luis Borges gave in the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores between July and August 1950. The first section shows outlines Borges's work as a lecturer in this period and shows how a class centered on Wilde's speech gave rise to the essay "Del culto de los libros" (1951). The second and third sections argue that the defense Borges mounts of Wilde's work involves two lines of approach, the relation of Wilde's speech to his work and a survey of aesthetic justifications of evil. These two lines converge in Borges's reading of Schopenhauer and Wilde. The fourth section studies Borges's notes on "The critic as artist", where Wilde calls for a "return to the voice". What this might involve is discussed in light of the work of Walter Ong (2012) and the reading of pragmatism elaborated by Bruno Bosteels (2007). The last section traces the echoes of these notes in "La muralla y los libros".

Keywords: Borges. Wilde. Ong. orality. pragmatism.

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia los manuscritos inéditos de las clases sobre Oscar Wilde que dictó Jorge Luis Borges en el Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores entre julio y agosto de 1950. La primera sección muestra un esbozo de la labor docente de Borges en este período y muestra cómo una clase centrada en el discurso de Wilde dio lugar al ensayo "Del culto de los libros" (1951). Las secciones segunda y tercera argumentan que la defensa que hace Borges de la obra de Wilde involucra dos líneas de abordaje, la relación del discurso de Wilde con su obra y un estudio de las justificaciones estéticas del mal. Estas dos líneas convergen en la lectura que Borges hace de Schopenhauer y Wilde. La cuarta sección estudia los apuntes de Borges sobre "The critic as artist", donde Wilde reclama un "retorno a la voz". Lo que esto podría implicar se discute a la luz del trabajo de Walter Ong (2012) y la lectura del pragmatismo elaborada por Bruno Bosteels (2007). La última sección rastrea los ecos de estas notas en "La muralla y los libros".

Palabras clave: Borges. Wilde. Ong. oralidad. pragmatismo.

RESUMO

Este artigo estuda os manuscritos inéditos das aulas sobre Oscar Wilde que Jorge Luis Borges deu no Colégio Libre de Estudios Superiores entre julho e agosto de 1950. A primeira seção mostra um esboço do trabalho docente de Borges nesse período e mostra como uma aula centrada sobre o discurso de Wilde deu origem ao ensaio "Del culto de los libros" (1951). A segunda e terceira seções argumentam que a defesa de Borges da obra de Wilde envolve duas linhas de abordagem, a relação do discurso de Wilde com sua obra e um estudo das justificativas estéticas do mal. Essas duas linhas convergem na leitura que Borges faz de Schopenhauer e Wilde. A quarta seção estuda as notas de Borges sobre "The critic as artist", onde Wilde clama por um "retorno à voz". O que isso pode implicar é discutido à luz da obra de Walter Ong (2012) e da leitura do pragmatismo elaborada por Bruno Bosteels (2007). A última seção traça os ecos dessas notas em "A parede e os livros".

Palavras-chave: Borges. Wilde. Ong. orality. pragmatismo.

I

It was probably on the morning of August 4th, 1950, when Jorge Luis Borges sat down to write his homage to Alberto Gerchunoff, who had died in March that year, titled "El estilo de su fama". The date appears at the bottom of the manuscript, and that evening he was due to speak at a banquet organised by the Sociedad Argentina de Escritores (SADE).¹ Increased access to Borges's working papers, complemented by a much clearer picture of the itinerary of the classes and public lectures he gave during the 1940s and 50s, along with the increased access to many of his manuscripts, has meant that we are now in a much better position to understand the relation between Borges's work as a lecturer and his writing. The common factor here is his reading, and as Daniel Balderston has shown in *How Borges wrote* (2018), in this period before he lost his sight the manuscripts change visibly as they begin to incorporate lists of references in the left and upper margins that register the provenance of ideas and phrases in his lecture notes, stories, essays, and even poems (2018: 27; 2022: 33). How does Borges use these sources? What might this tell us about his reading, writing, and speaking in this period?

In "El estilo de su fama", initially published in *Davar* 31-32-33 in April 1951 and included as the prologue to *Retorno a Don Quijote* that same year, Borges argues that Gerchunoff's style betrays his renown as a man of letters, for he had more of the oral *maestros* of old, like Pythagoras, Socrates and Jesus, who regarded the written word as a second-rate placeholder for speech (2001: 43). Equally comfortable in either form, according to Borges, Gerchunoff's books flow like his conversation even as his speech enjoyed the generosity and unerring precision proper to writing (2001: 43). This extends to his reading, according to Borges; unlike peninsular devotees of Cervantes, who treat his work like "un melancólico museo de palabras arcaicas", Gerchunoff's essays dwell on the range of voices, local and foreign, high and low, that Cervantes sought out "con oído de músico callejero" (2001: 43).

Besides the odd clarifying phrase, the manuscript of the prologue reveals relatively few false starts; for example, "nuestro querido amigo" is substituted for "Gerchunoff". This may be due to the fact that the text shares many references and phrases with the notes Borges was preparing at the same time for a course in the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores (CLES) on the life and work of Oscar Wilde.² There

¹ The dates, locations, and organisers of all the classes and courses Borges taught in this period can be found at www.centroborges.bn.gov.ar/conferencias. Directed by Dr. Mariela C. Blanco, this project is a collaboration between the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno and the Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata.

² The manuscripts for this course consist of 18 pages replete with bibliographic references. As such, they are far too extensive and detailed for a complete account to be given here. Alfredo Alonso Estenoz (2021) has given an engaging overview of the course in *Variaciones Borges* 52. The pages in question come immediately after the notes for "Antiguas Literaturas Germánicas", a course delivered in the CLES

were four classes in all: 1. “La juventud de Wilde” (July 24th), 2. “Wilde, poeta” (July 31st), 3. “La vida oral de Wilde” (August 14th), and 4. “El proceso, la cárcel, la soledad, la muerte en París” (August 21st), where Wilde, too, would emerge as a contemporary oral *maestro*.

Written on an overflow page towards the end of the copybook, the notes for the second class conclude with an outline of the third: “La Odisea y Mallarmé, Platón, San Agustín (siglo IV), Cervantes y los papeles rotos de las calles. Wilde: “la única embriaguez verdadera es la que da la conversación”. Testimonio de Shaw. Hábito de las parábolas. El pecador condenado al infierno. La versión oral era superior a la versión escrita” (Borges, 1950b: 107). The annotation takes up the thread of the prologue to Gerchunoff’s essays on *Don Quijote*. Most notable, however, is that already in the first sentence of this jotting we have the building blocks of “Del culto de los libros” (1951). It would be published in *La Nación* on July 8th, 1951, but here they already constitute approximately a third of the published essay. Here is how the notes for the third lecture begin:

En el octavo libro de la Odisea, se dice que los dioses tejen desdichas para que a las futuras generaciones no les falta algo que cantar [*left margin*: Odyssey (Lang) 133; Degeneration 103?]. La profesión de fe de Mallarmé Tout aboutit, *au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre (Todo tiende a, o culmina en, un libro) parece expresar la misma teleología, o justificación, estética [*left margin*: Salammbô XI], pero la del griego corresponde a una época en que la palabra es oral y la del francés a una época en que la palabra es escrita. Para nosotros, un libro, cualquier libro, es un objeto digno de reverencia; ya Cervantes, que tal vez no escuchaba todo lo que decía la gente, leía hasta “los papeles rotos de las calles.” [*left margin*: Quijote 39] Pitágoras, sin embargo, deliberadamente no escribió nada; Platón dijo con sorna que los libros son como las figuras pintadas, que “parecen vivas, pero no contestan una palabra a las preguntas que les hacen”, e inventó el diálogo para atenuar ese inconveniente. [*left margin*: Gomperz I 99; Five Dialogues 282] Para nosotros, la palabra escrita es un fin; para los antiguos, fué un sucedáneo de la palabra oral. El arte de leer en voz baja (de pasar silenciosamente del signo en el papel al concepto) es relativamente moderno; en el siglo IV, San Agustín aun pudo maravillarse de que San Ambrosio leyera solo y en silencio, “pasando la vista por encima de las páginas, penetrando su alma en el sentido, sin decir palabra ni mover la lengua.” [*left margin*: Confesiones I 112; Confesiones I 113] San Agustín conjeturó que leía de esa extraña manera para que los oyentes presentes no le pidieran explicaciones de algún pasaje oscuro, o “por conservar la voz, que se le tomaba con facilidad.” [*left margin*: Confesiones I 228] Los comentaradores advierten que, en los primeros siglos, era costumbre leer en común, por la escasez de los códices, y leer en voz alta, para entender mejor lo que se leía, porque no había signos de puntuación, ni siquiera división de palabras. Se dice que Aristófanes de Bizancio, bibliotecario del museo de Alejandría, inventó los signos de puntuación: un punto, a diversas alturas de la línea. [*left margin*: E. Br. XVII 622, II 501] ~~Wilde opinó.~~ (Borges, 1950b: 71)

Although a draft of “Del culto de los libros” is to be found later in the same copybook as the notes for the classes on Wilde (Borges, 1950b: 111-115, 121), it was probably not written until shortly before it was published in *La Nación* on July 8th, 1951. This is suggested by the references there to *Caesar and Cleopatra* by Bernard Shaw, on whom Borges was then giving a three-class course in the CLES.

Most of the references that would fill out this passage in the published version are already to be found in the Wilde manuscript, however. On a facing page, we find, from top to bottom, quotations on Pythagoras from Gomperz’ *Greek thinkers* (1901), from Inge’s *The philosophy of Plotinus* (1928), the gospel’s warning not to throw pearls before swine (Matthew 7:8), and the quotation from section 28 of Plato’s *Timaeus* that will also appear in the published version: “Es dura tarea descubrir al hacedor y padre de este universo, y una vez descubierto, es imposible declararlo a todos los hombres” (Borges, 1951c: 1). The references to Bacon and Thomas Browne on nature as book are found on a separate overflow page (1950b: 105). The references to the Quran, Carlyle and León Bloy that would round out the published essay would only be included later.

“Del culto de los libros” skips through history to a vertiginous conclusion. It is worth noting, in this regard, that while each figure, each movement, is glossed or summarised in a few lines, nearly all of these references can be traced to classes Borges had given in the previous year or so. While the juxtaposition of Homer and Mallarmé already appears in the note on Whitman he published in *Anales*

between May and July 1950, and amidst the notes for lectures on the art of fiction, titled “Problemas de la novela”, delivered simultaneously with the first two classes on Oscar Wilde.

de Buenos Aires 13 (1947: 41; Blanco, 2020), another reference to the treatment of time in the *Odyssey* is included in the notes for the class “El problema del tiempo” (August 2nd, 1950) just three pages earlier in the same copybook. “Degeneration 103” refers to the work by Max Nordau, on whom Borges delivered a lecture to the SADE on August 8th, 1949. The references to Saint Augustine can be found in notes for a class on Plotinus (June 17th, 1949), where Borges undertakes a survey of philosophical justifications of evil (1949). The class on Plotinus formed part of the course “Grandes pensadores místicos”, in which Léon Bloy also featured (September 9th, 1949) and just a few weeks later Borges would be discussing the Quran in his lectures on the Kabbalah in Santiago del Estero and Tucumán. Of course, Borges had been familiar with Kabbalah and, indeed, all these writers and thinkers for many years; nevertheless, we now have a clearer idea of where and when these acquaintances were renewed.

It might be argued that these lecture notes do not offer so much we couldn't have got from the published work. Indeed, in the third class, we will find much of “Sobre Oscar Wilde” (Borges, 1946), published in *Anales* 11 three years earlier. For example, Borges compares Wilde to the Lugones of *Los crepúsculos del jardín*, praises the simplicity of his syntax and quotes Alfonso Reyes, as he does there; he even makes a note to cite the concluding comparison with Chesterton from his own article at the close of the fourth class (1950b: 71). He also cites Wilde's version of Plato's fable about the magnets from the *Ion*, which had featured in “Museo” in *Anales* 9 and would reappear in “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (1950b: 71; 1974: 273). Nevertheless, the cumulative process of “préstamos íntimos”, as Alonso Estenoz styles them (2021: 237), from prologue to class to newspaper essays, may have heightened the need to institute the system of references so as to bring more “method” to the manuscripts (Balderston, 2018: 27). There is an acceleration in the round of cross-references, of junctions and hard-left turns. With one class following another, the pace quickens; texts seem to begin in media res, as if we have come into class half an hour late and a discussion is already in full flow. Borges's published work, Alonso Estenoz points out, can seem as if it had been conceived in a flash; little might we suspect many grew, or were plucked, from extended reflections on a particular author (2021: 237).

II

Above all, what is immediately striking is the focus of “La vida oral de Wilde”. If the first class discusses his formative influences, the second, his poetry, and the fourth, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and his time in prison, one might expect the third to take up his plays. *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Salomé* are mentioned in passing, certainly, but the bulk of the class addresses speech. Wilde is set alongside Diderot, Voltaire, Doctor Johnson, “y entre nosotros, Gerchunoff y Macedonio Fernandez” (1950b: 71). His stories, plays and epigrams bubbled over from his conversation, “un desbordamiento, un exceso” (1950b: 73), pieced together from party pieces. Examples pepper the numerous biographies and recur irrepressibly throughout the lecture notes: “The English country gentleman galloping along after a fox—the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable” (Borges, 1950b: 75; Woodcock, 1949: 139). Many commentators, friends and acquaintances, however, have maintained that Wilde indulged this gift for speaking, doing great harm to his published work. Woodcock, in particular, makes the contrast between Wilde the author and Wilde the speaker the cornerstone of his discussion:

Nor can there be much doubt that he was a greater talker than writer. The only amazing thing is that a man with such qualities of improvisation, of happy imagery, of the ready concretisation of abstractions into hard images, should have been so unoriginal a poet and, with a few exceptions, so undistinguished a fiction writer. As Arthur Symons has remarked, his personality was “certainly more interesting than any of his work.” (1949: 191).

Borges, however, will mount a vigorous defence of Wilde in the face of those who argue he is intriguing in spite of his ultimate failure as an artist. Wilde was successful in “la obra feliz, claro está, no en la trágica vida” (1950b: 71). He will approach this apparent disjunction in two converging lines. One is through the relation of his speech to his writing; the second, through the question of evil.

Borges concedes that the prose poems Wilde published are less successful than those his friends remember. Indeed, his own translations condense them even further: “Parábola del pecador condenado

por dios al infierno que dice: ‘No puedes mandarme al infierno, porque siempre he vivido en el infierno’ y después cuando quieren mandarlo al cielo, ‘No puedes mandarme al cielo, porque nunca he podido imaginarlo’” (1950b: 71; Woodcock, 1949: 182). Nevertheless, rather than being a sign of incapacity, he attributes this to a combination of Wilde’s “haraganería e indiferencia” and the *fin-de-siècle* context, in which Wilde felt obliged to adopt “un estilo decorativo, recargado de adornos mitológicos” (Borges, 1950b: 73, 71). Likewise, Borges stresses Wilde’s dislike of the illustrations done for *Salomé* by Aubrey Beardsley, describing him as “el prototipo del decadente”, and he goes on to distance Wilde from the play itself, saying he was given to parodying it in conversation (1950b: 73). Indeed, in every dispute except the fateful decision to sue the Marquess of Queensbury, Borges argues that Wilde was in on the joke. When he is lampooned in a operetta *Patience*, Wilde sits up front and laughs along with everyone else (1950b: 53). Borges makes a similar argument in relation to Wilde’s poetry. He states that Hesketh Pearson may be the best biographer of Wilde but is not the most judicious critic; rather, he prefers Holbrook Jackson’s characterisation of “The Sphinx”, whereby the poem’s baroque excess is consciously deployed (74; Borges, 1950b: 63). Other criticisms are elided. The notes feature several references to Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1895), but only to the period, not his condemnation of Wilde’s “misplaced sentimentousness” (322). Borges does quote Yeats’s judgement that Wilde “tricked and clowned to draw attention to himself” but, for the rest, indulged in the same flaws that mar Victorian verse (1950b: 63; 1936: vi). Undeterred, on an overflow page, Borges proceeds to praise Wilde’s poetry for its “artesanía perfecta”:

Son acaso ejercicios, pero son ejercicios emocionados, que a veces encuentran el tono oral. Este, por ejemplo, en el que declara que no le importan los fanáticos del anarquismo y añade luego, como si pensara en voz alta:

... and yet, and yet

These Christs that die upon the barricades,

God knows it I am with them, in some things. (Borges, 1950b: 103; Wilde, 1948: 693)

Even Chesterton, who finds Wilde a strain, won't grudge that this is a very “sound sonnet” (1913: 222).³

On the one hand, then, in this second lecture Borges argues consistently for the merits of Wilde’s verse; on the other, he presents Wilde as curiously above any fault that may be attributed to him due to his “invulnerable inocencia” (1946: 46), of which his spontaneous speech would appear to be a manifestation. What unites both these aspects is what Borges refers to as the true oral tone.

III

Given the sweep of “Del culto de los libros”, which ends with the world conceived of as a book where we are the characters, one might almost pass over the fact that the *Odyssey* and Mallarmé are juxtaposed in the first sentence as, thirty centuries apart, each proposed “una justificación estética de los males” (1951b: 1). The book is “mágico”, “incesante”, yet the world of sound, whether of Homeric song or of a time when voice was preeminent and writing “un sucedáneo de la palabra oral”, has been left behind (Borges, 1951b: 1). The problem of evil invokes questions of free will and determinism, which are discussed in terms of fate throughout the second-class Borges gives on Wilde.

The class opens with an aphorism by Terence: “Habent sua fata libelli”, all books run their fate (Borges, 1950b: 61). His second-century treatise on verse exemplified each poetic metre in the metre itself,

³ While it is possible this is the line Borges alludes to in the close of “Nueva refutación del tiempo” (1947), Almeida (1996) makes a good case for this pattern deriving from the adversatives found in Shakespeare’s sonnets – via Petrarch, arguably. Since he is referenced in these notes, a more immediate possibility, as much for Wilde as for Borges, are the following lines from Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of *La vida es sueño*, which is closer in theme and tone to the close of Borges’s essay: “And yet, and yet, in these our ghostly lives, / Half night, half day, half sleeping, half awake, / How if our waking life, like that of sleep, / Be all a dream in that eternal life / To which we wake not till we sleep in death?” (Calderón de la Barca, 1910: 56)

combining form and content. Yet the aphorism on the fate of books has become an example of that same method, Borges comments wryly, since it is the only line by Terence that is ever cited. Literary fame also varies from country to country in curious ways, Borges continues, in that an author considered a minor figure in the country of their birth may be lionised elsewhere, or vice versa (1950b: 61).⁴ The historical period in which a writer works will also have an effect, as will a particular author's attitude with respect to the weight of that tradition. This prepares the way for the defence of Wilde's literary reputation that we looked at in the last section.

At the end of the second class, however, separated from the discussion of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" by a diagonal line, the question of fate develops into a survey of justifications of evil. The first is the "justificación cosmogónica" of the Gnostics, according to which the world was created by a deficient god. Here Borges transcribes the brief translation he had made for the class on Plotinus from the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on Basilides (III, 479). Next come three aesthetic justifications of evil. The first is from the *Enneads* (III, II, 12), once more transcribed from the class on Plotinus, where life's hardships are comparable to the slaves and rustic extras in a tragedy (Inge, 1928; Borges, 1949). Then comes Kierkegaard's parable about the sorry fate of the person condemned to being the touch of cinnamon that adds flavour to the dish of life: "Humanly speaking, what a painful thing to be thus sacrificed, to be the little pinch of spice!" (Lowrie, 1944: 260); and, from *The City of God*, Saint Augustine's argument that even hellfire has a mesmerizing beauty: "¿qué objeto hay mas hermoso y apacible a la vista q. el fuego ardiente vivo y resplandeciente?" (1922: 345).⁵ The next three explanations, the "justificación escénica", come from the stage: Plotinus, this time by way of Giuseppe Faggin's translation, compares death to an actor who changes costume (1945: 209); from Lionel Barnett's translation of the Bhagavad-Gita comes Krishna's assurance that "Nunca no he sido, nunca no has sido, nunca no serán estos príncipes" (1920: 88); and, from Hiriyanna's *The essentials of Indian philosophy*, the Sankhyam doctrine of the self as a spectator, not an actor (1949: 115).⁶ Finally, the last justification is provided by Robert Latta's edition of *The Monodology*. Leibniz defends evil on the basis of variety, asking whether a library made up solely of copies of Virgil could be considered more reasonable, no matter how splendidly they were bound (1898: 348; Cámpora, 2021). This may not be true, Borges notes, but is "menos frívola que las anteriores" (1950b: 101). The survey of views has been in vain, it seems, yet once more we can appreciate the cross-pollination the classes foment and get a sense of the commitment to research, with new editions replacing old. Moreover, lists are such a common feature of Borges's essays and stories, and appear to be a favourite method for exploring, rather than proving a question.

The last justification of evil belongs to Wilde, however, just below the Leibniz quote:

Now it seems to me that love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. I cannot conceive of any other explanation. I am convinced that there is no other, & that if the world has indeed, as I have said, been built of sorrow, it has been built by the hands of love, because in no other way could the soul of man, for whom the world was made, reach the full stature of its perfection. (Borges, 1950b: 101; Woodcock, 1949: 93).

This is followed by a couplet from "The Ballad of Reading Gaol": "How but through a broken heart / May Lord Christ enter in?" (Wilde, 1916: 301). Both of these quotations date from the period following Wilde's release from prison. We might read them, then, in light of the reference at the end of the fourth class to Schopenhauer's "Transcendent speculation on the apparent deliberateness in the fate of the individual" (2014), which Borges had published as "Fantasía metafísica" in *Anales* 11, the same issue as "Sobre Oscar Wilde" (1950b: 79). This fragment on the relation between dreams, omens and fatalism

⁴ This theme is developed in "El coronel Ascasubi", published in the first edition of *Sur* and later incorporated into "La poesía gauchesca". Leandro Bohnhoff (2020) reconstructs the genesis of this essay/lecture.

⁵ The references to Kierkegaard and Saint Augustine have been studied by Magdalena Cámpora (2021) as they also feature in notes for a 1949 class on Voltaire and/or Samuel Johnson. While those jottings are somewhat chaotic, the neatness here suggests they have been transcribed. Blanco (2021) compares the use Borges makes of his lecture notes to a musical score

⁶ The Faggin and Barnett references are transcribed from the manuscript for the class Borges gave on Sankhyam and the Vedanta on April 3, 1950, as part of the course on Buddhism in the CLES. This manuscript has been published in Alicia Jurado's *Borges, el budismo y yo* (2011) and Sonia Betancort's *Oriente no es una pieza de museo* (2018).

is another variant on the stage metaphors above. Schopenhauer postulates that just as every night each of us secretly acts as the anonymous stage manager of our own dreams, so fate can appear to us as an external force when, in truth, it is our will that has been pulling the strings (1946: 56). Since, as Iván Almeida points out, this makes it difficult to see what could distinguish a voluntary act from an involuntary one, it follows that those acts thought of as involuntary are also chosen; undaunted by the apparent contradiction, Schopenhauer asserts that culpability is entailed by the bare fact of existence (2004: 123). Borges will repeatedly adopt this kind of argument, Almeida argues, especially when it comes to reviewing the lives of authors, such that the involuntary vicissitudes of the lives of Hawthorne, Wilde, Werfel and Poe are read as choices made with regard to their future work (2004: 124). In terms of Borges's reading of Wilde, it is tempting to look at this from the other side; that is, if Wilde comes to recognise that sorrow is necessary for love, he nevertheless remains the bearer of that "inocencia invulnerable" Borges (1946: 64), both thwarted and sustained by his will. Indeed, the confluence is quite fitting, for Almeida concludes that both Schopenhauer and Borges are less concerned with the task of demonstration than in promoting a circular, adversative pattern of reading where the second sparks off the first (2004: 108). Whether conceptual or figurative, he argues, what both understand by philosophy is an task whereby human perplexities are projected and modulated until they strike the right tone (Almeida, 2004: 109).

IV

This exploration of tone and fate in the second class is extended in the third through a series of quotations from Wilde's "The critic as artist" on two separate overflow pages. Given the number, here we will only look at the first. Most likely, the first annotations were those on the page facing the passage that would be reworked into "Del culto de los libros", as "Wilde opinó" has been crossed out and continued here (Borges, 1950b: 70). The dialogue has begun with Ernest's complaint that art today is weighed down by criticism, a problem unknown "in the best days of art" (Wilde 1948: 952). At which point his friend Gilbert shoots back that it is absurd to imagine that the culture that perfected the critical spirit had nothing to say about art, and that, indeed,

Even if not a single fragment of art-criticism had come down to us from Hellenic or Hellenistic days, it would be none the less true that the Greeks were a nation of art-critics, and that they invented the criticism of art just as they invented everything else. (Wilde, 1948: 955).

Gilbert goes on to argue that since the "fatal" introduction of printing, there has been a tendency to privilege the eye over the ear, whereas for the Greeks "The voice was the medium, and the ear the critic" (Wilde, 1948: 956). Then comes the passage that is cited in Borges's notes, paraphrased at first and then, in a shakier hand and using a different edition, transcribed:

Wilde opinó que la ceguera de Homero es un mito artístico, destinado a significar q. el poeta es siempre un vidente, q. ve con los ojos del alma y no con los del cuerpo [*left margin*: Works 956], "building his song out of music, repeating his each line over & over again to himself, till he has caught the secret of its melody [*left margin*: Works (Collins) III 284 283], chaunting in darkness the words that are winged with music... It was to his blindness, as an occasion, if not as a cause, that Milton owed much of the majestic movement & sonorous splendour of his later verse. When M. could no longer write, h. began to sing ... Yes, writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice." (1950b: 70; Wilde, 1948: 956).⁷

A telling detail here is that Borges misquotes Wilde's phrase. He writes "words winged with music" in place of "words winged with light", which undermines the antithesis. Perhaps, when he began to transcribe, the image of the word "music" stuck in his mind; or perhaps it continued to ring out.

⁷ Most of the references in these notes are to G.F. Maine's one-volume edition, *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (1948). The reference for the section Borges transcribes here, however, is to a multivolume edition of Wilde's works yet to be identified. Both were published by Collins. One theory for the change of edition could be that the annotations were made in preparation for the classes Borges gave on Wilde in Montevideo in October 1950.

Yet what would it mean “to return to the voice”? We could relate it to Borges’s claim that Wilde was given to speaking in parables because he did not think abstractly (1950b: 71). Alonso Estenoz (2021) certainly has grounds to doubt this, but we should take into account that next to this remark Borges has inserted “cf. Coleridge y los sueños”, and in class given the following year, he makes the same remark about Kafka, again on the basis that he composed parables. In this former case, famously, Coleridge saw the palace of Kubla Khan in a dream but when he went to write out his vision, he was interrupted by a visitor and the image of the dream poem vanished; the words of the poem could not be recovered as the poem had not been conceived abstractly (Borges, 1974: 642).

Regarding Wilde and Kafka’s affinity for the parable, we might turn to the discussion in Walter Ong’s *Orality and literacy* of primary orality, which is characterized as involving situational rather than abstract thinking. In this context, instead of describing a character as “blameless”, Homer would use an epithet dense with poise and presence that could be rendered something like “beautiful-in-the-way-a-warrior-ready-to-fight-is-beautiful” (Parry, 1973, as cited by Ong, 2012: 49). The situational dimension of orality derives from the fact that the ear has a different relation to space and time. As Wilde’s Gilbert condemns “the fatal introduction of printing” (1948: 956), so Ong argues that the technology of writing has fostered the powerful illusion of autonomy, of being an unobserved observer (2012: 77). Long after alphabetic writing had broken up words, sound events, into phonemic units, Ong states, manuscript culture in medieval Europe remained highly oral, with texts read aloud and theses defended in disputations; then, the assembly line of the printing process, when letters preexist the words they will form, made words things, commodities (2012: 116). Print accounts for part of the horror of “La biblioteca de Babel”, where the secrets sought after in books are not imagined to have been written by anyone and where no-one writes a word: “Para percibir la distancia que hay entre lo divino y lo humano, basta comparar estos rudos símbolos trémulos que mi falible mano garabatea en la tapa de un libro, con las letras orgánicas del interior: puntuales, delicadas, negrísimas, inimitablemente simétricas” (Borges, 1974: 466). Moreover, the distance of print allows for a heightened sense of control, of a contained system at one’s command, Ong argues (2012: 102). Likewise, Borges criticises systems of combinatory logic in “Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw” precisely because they see arts and metaphysics as exhaustible (1951c: 1). Yet a book is not an “ente incomunicado”, Borges argues, but “un diálogo infinito” (1951c: 1). Wilde’s image of the blind seer explores a corollary of these aspects in that it celebrates the productive redundancy and contingency of sound: “When I pronounce the word ‘permanence’, by the time I get to the ‘-pence’, the ‘perma-’ is gone, and has to be gone” (Ong, 2012: 32). Unlike the endlessly repeating Virgils that Leibniz imagines, Wilde’s seer performs repetition with no mind for closure. This coincides with the “aesthetic of the fragment” that governs Borges’s work, as Daniel Balderston has shown: “the idea that the unfinished, messy, self-contradictory draft, with its plethora of variants, is for him an ideal literary text” (2018: 210).

Wilde, Kafka and Borges are, of course, men of letters; yet the “return to the voice” may be seen in terms of the residual orality Ong attributes to “verbomotor cultures”, literate peoples who retain a largely oral lifestyle (2012: 67). Here attitudes and ideas “depend significantly more on effective use of words, and thus on human interaction and significantly less on non-verbal, often largely visual input from the ‘objective’ world of things” (Ong, 2012: 67). This distinction between graphic and verbomotor perception was also made by Julio A. Como in his lecture on “La oralidad de Wilde” delivered in Buenos Aires in this same period: “el primero imagina mentalmente sus ideas como el ojo las ve, es decir, en perspectiva; en cambio, el verbomotor, lo ve geométricamente. Ve un cubo no en perspectiva, sino por todos sus lados” (1955: 169). As in Ong’s phenomenology of sound, Como’s figure is decentred. The efficacy of words is important for the verbomotor because sound, arising in a particular time and place, is an event: “something is going on” (Ong, 2012: 32). In answer to our question, then, the simulacrum of orality enjoined by Oscar Wilde’s call to “return to the voice” would attend to reading and writing as an event, in its spontaneous context-rich suggestiveness, contingency and capacity for dialogue.

Of course, all language is analytic insofar as, in naming, it breaks into units what William James called the “big blooming buzzing confusion of life” (James, 1977: 234, as cited in Bosteels, 2007: 137). The technology of writing sharpens words’ distinctness, however, while residual orality is more attuned to

context (Ong, 2012: 102, 105). Or, we might say with William James, to its efficacy: “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*,” (1975: 97, as cited in Bosteels, 2007: 144). According to Bosteels, in a world without universals pragmatism proceeds by a series of speculative conjectures upon conjectures elaborated provisionally, whose worth is assessed by their efficacy (2007: 145). It could be argued that the inventive, speculative, makeshift, event-based conjectures of pragmatism constitute the process, the “backwards loop”, as Bosteels (2007) puts it, by which the voice of Kafka “*crea a sus precursores*” (Borges, 1951d: 1). After all, Kafka’s voice, the timbre and mood of his writing, is the tonic that sounds for Borges among the apparently disparate authors: “*creí reconocer su voz, o sus hábitos, en textos de diversas épocas*” (1951d: 1). Yet once it’s discovered, he continues, they are changed by our reading: “*nuestra lectura de Kafka afina y desvía sensiblemente nuestra lectura*” (Borges, 1951d:1; cf. Balderston, 2018: 36). Note that Borges uses a musical term, *afinar*, to tune; that is, Kafka’s voice is also the key to which, once we have read him, our reading tunes other works, and is the tune it makes them play. Likewise, now we might say that these lecture notes on Oscar Wilde can be heard in “Kafka y sus precursores”.

V

These notes will become part of the aggregative process of Borges’s writing and speaking. “Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw” is one example. In this essay, Borges denies that a book is an inert, mute thing and highlights that the words “*amica silentia lunae* significan ahora la luna íntima, silenciosa y luciente, y en la Eneida significaron el interlunio, la oscuridad que permitió a los griegos entrar en la ciudadela de Troya” (1951c: 1). This essay came out of the printer’s less than two weeks after “Del culto de los libros”. One intriguing detail in the manuscript is that the clause with *amica silentia lunae* is rewritten three times; the second time, Borges omits the name of Virgil, as in the published version, and adds “que Wilde solía repetir” (1951a). He is referring to a passage from Frank Harris’s biography that is referenced in the notes for the fourth class on Wilde: “You remember those words of Vergil, Frank—*per amica silentia lunae*— they always seem to me indescribably beautiful; the most magic line about the moon ever written... I love that ‘amica silentia.’ What a beautiful nature the man had who could feel ‘the friendly silences of the moon’” (1930: 329). For us, it’s fitting, likewise, that an image of distant yet intimate silence is the one Borges chooses to illustrate the dialogic capacity of literature and how words speak differently through the ages.

Finally, among the notes for the lecture on Wilde’s poetry come a series of quotations by Walter Pater, Arthur Schopenhauer and Fritz Mauthner:

Walter Pater, en 1877, escribió que todas las artes^{todo arte} ... constantemente aspira a la condición de la música, ya q. ésta es el único arte en el q. es posible una forma pura*[*left margin*: Benson: Pater 43; *upper margin*: *music is the only art which makes its appeal through pure form]... Cf. Schopenhauer: “la música es una objetivación de la voluntad, tan inmediata como el mundo”; cf. Hanslick: “la música es un lenguaje que podemos hablar y comprender, pero no traducir... En la música no hay una oposición de fondo y de forma.” [*left margin*: W. als W. und V. I, 340; Mauthner 3, 85] (Borges, 1950b: 61).

In his biography of Pater, A.C. Benson (1906) describes Pater’s famous 1873 essay on Leonardo as a “musical fantasia” (42) and, on this basis, links it to an essay on the “School of Giorgione” from a few years later where Pater addresses music directly:

“All Art,” he says in an italicised sentence, showing that he is laying it down as an established maxim, “*constantly aspires towards the condition of music*,” because music is the only art which makes its appeal through pure form, while all other art tends to have the motive confused by the matter, by the subject which it aims at reproducing. “Music, then, and not poetry, as is so often supposed,” he adds, “is the true measure of perfected art.” (1906: 43).

This is the passage Borges would cite about months after these classes in the equally famous close to “La muralla y los libros”: “ya Pater, en 1877, afirmó que todas las artes aspiran a la condición de la

música, que no es otra cosa que forma” (1950c: 1).⁸ The emphatic italics of Pater’s maxim are alleviated by the single verb “afirmó”. Indeed, art may aspire to pure form but, as we saw earlier with Schopenhauer, if music objectifies the will, dissonance remains integral to the world of appearances. Mauthner makes a similar argument in favor of adjectival beauty in the entry on *schön* that Borges cites from the third volume of the *Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (1923). Following the line by the composer Hanslick, Mauthner laments that the various attempts to establish a science of aesthetics ended up substantivising beauty, thus degrading it. Art became a deity, and its interpreters, priests (86). What he’s arguing against, however, is not the merging of art and religion: “I don’t place religion that high. Art is not that deep” (86; *my translation*). What they have in common is that beauty has been substantivized and religion has been confused with revealed religion:

the only aesthetic sensations that fully correspond to the dead definitions of scholarly aesthetics are of a religious nature and would have to be dealt with in a free system of science under the heading of religion if we wanted to keep the word. Not just listening to Bach’s St. Matthew Passion or looking at a Gothic cathedral, which are definitely part of the phenomena of a specific religion, no. Also the sight of the storming sea or the starry sky, the experience of a great thunderstorm or a mighty waterfall, the return of spring, the reading of a deeply moving poem: all this serves a religious mood, a mood of fear or reverence, like all of these perhaps historically has helped generate the religions. (Mauthner, 1923: 87; *my translation*)⁹

The mood, the enumeration, the evocation of prosaic beauty, all recall the lines that follow the reference to Pater in “La muralla y los libros”: “La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético” (1950c: 1). To Mauthner’s discussion of the history of aesthetics, Borges adds his own tentative definition. Where Borges departs is, firstly, of course, in his prose, which dispenses with adjectives such as *mighty* or *deeply*, and condenses the extended analogy to religion in the *Wörterbuch* to one word, *revelación*. Secondly, the *hecho estético* arises here as voice, albeit one we might not hear.

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⁸ A manuscript for this essay was published in *Ensayos* (Borges, 2018), edited by Daniel Balderston and María Celeste Martín. There is considerable rewriting of the conclusion; however, since it is at least a second draft, no references figure in the margins (Borges, 2018: 41). Alonso Estenoz (2021) highlights that among the notes for the fourth lecture on Wilde come a tentative series of hypotheses that recall the second-last paragraph (233).

⁹ The passage in Mauthner reads: „Die einzigen ästhetischen Empfindungen, welche den toten Definitionen der gelehrten Ästhetik ganz entsprechen, sind religiöser Art, müßten in einem freien Systeme der Wissenschaften unter der Rubrik Religion abgehandelt werden, wenn wir das Wort beibehalten wollen. Nicht nur das Anhören der Bachschen Matthäus-Passion oder der Anblick eines gotischen Doms, die ja durchaus zu den Erscheinungen einer bestimmten Religion gehören, Nein. Auch der Anblick des stürmenden Meeres oder des gestirnten Himmels, das Erleben eines großen Gewitters oder eines gewaltigen Wasserfalls, die Wiederkehr des Frühlings, das Lesen eines tief bewegenden Gedichts: all das dient einer religiösen Stimmung, einer Stimmung der Furcht oder Ehrfurcht, wie all das vielleicht historisch die Religionen erzeugen geholfen hat“ (1923: 87). For Borges’s reading of Mauthner, see Dapía (2006).

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