

Kant's Dog

On Borges, Philosophy,
and the Time of Translation

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Introduction

Philosophy, Literature, and the Accidents of Translation

The attempt to marginalize Borges's philosophical investment is widespread and often buttressed by his own statements.¹ For instance, in *Unthinking Thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics*, Floyd Merrell quotes Borges as saying that he is “neither a thinker nor a moralist, but simply a man of letters who turns his own perplexities and that respected system of perplexities we call philosophy into the forms of literature” (1991, ix).² On another occasion, in response to María Esther Vázquez's observation that the literary critic Anderson Imbert had argued that Borges was “a nihilist with vast knowledge of all philosophical schools” and that “in each of his stories he had attempted a different philosophical direction without participating vitally in any of them,” Borges simply remarks, “I am neither a philosopher nor a metaphysician; what I have done is to exploit [*explotar*: also ‘explode’], or to explore—a more noble word—the literary possibilities of philosophy” (Vázquez 1977, 105; my translation).³ Moreover, of the claim that he was an idealist, Borges observes, “if I have a share in that philosophy, it has been for the particular propositions of the story and while I was writing it” (105). On more than one occasion Daniel Balderston has followed Chilean philosopher Carla Cordua, who, Balderston affirms, “argues that Borges was not a metaphysician and, hence, that for him ‘the philosophical element, first isolated from its context and then treated not as a concept but as a thing or as a singular existing situation, is thus removed from its medium, separated from the function it had in that

medium, and converted into an opaque sign, suggestive but in the final analysis undecipherable' (1993, 140n8).⁴ More recently Balderston has relied on Cordua in order to assert that "Borges does neither philosophy nor theory, but his texts take philosophy and theory as an object" (Balderston 2000, 154). But Cordua goes further than Balderston when she writes that Borges's statements that he is not a philosopher prove to be "immediately convincing and, moreover, the study of Borges's work confirms that he does not do philosophy [*inmediatamente convincentes y, además, el estudio de la obra de Borges confirma que allí no se trata de filosofía*]" (Cordua 1997, 118; my translation). Indeed, Cordua notes, when it was time to decide about Borges's relation to philosophy, "The best critics adopted, as was logical, these declarations [*Los mejores críticos adoptaron, como era lógico, estas declaraciones*]" (118). But Borges's statements are not *immediately* convincing, if only because there remain a few holdouts: "Almost all of us, save for a few notorious divergent opinions, are in agreement on this [*Casi todos, salvo por algunas pocas y notorias opiniones divergentes, estamos de acuerdo en esto*]" (118–19).

Why is it important for literary scholars to save Borges *for* literature and *from* philosophy? What is the philosophical contaminant that threatens to ruin literature? Where does one draw the line between literature and philosophy? What is a philosopher if not someone who reads philosophy, thereby taking the philosophical text "as an object," as Cordua and Balderston claim Borges does? But it is not only literary critics and scholars who patrol the border between literature and philosophy and who want to keep Borges on literature's side. Cordua, for one, is an important South American philosopher, author of major works on Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. How does exploiting and exploring—but also exploding—the *literary* possibilities of philosophy *not* amount to *doing* philosophy? Is the "philosophical element," as Cordua calls it, so easily determined, so easily isolated from its context and *not* treated as a concept? What concept, finally, is *not* opaque, suggestive but finally indecipherable, untranslatable? What is so unsettling about Borges that so many feel compelled to take a stand on where he stands? It is possible that Borges belongs on the list of those whose work, as Paul de Man put it, "straddles the two activities of the human intellect that are both the closest and the most impenetrable to each other—literature and philosophy" (de Man 103).

In her introduction to *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*, Carolyn Korsmeyer points out that one achievement of philosophical discourse is precisely “a certain detachability of philosophical content from its textual vehicle” (Korsmeyer 4). It is on this basis that Jorge J. E. Gracia distinguishes literature from philosophy and ultimately denies the Borgesian text, *qua* literature, entry to philosophy: “My thesis about philosophy and literature in general is that literary works are distinguished from philosophical ones in that their conditions of identity include the texts through which they are expressed. Moreover, literary texts are distinguished from philosophical ones in that they express literary works” (Gracia 86).

This understanding of the difference between philosophy and literature ultimately turns on the problem of translation. According to Gracia, the difference between philosophy and literature depends on the indissociability of the literary work and text. “A literary work is distinguished from a philosophical one in that its conditions of identity include the text of which it is the meaning. This is to say that the signs of which the text is composed, the entities of which these signs are constituted, and the arrangements of the signs and the entities that constitute the signs are essential to the literary work” (91).⁵ Because literariness is defined as a constitutive relation between text and work, the literary work is necessarily singular: it cannot be divorced from its articulation. As a consequence, literary works are, *stricto sensu*, untranslatable.

This is not the case, however, for philosophical works: “It should not really matter whether I read Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* in German or English (in fact, many believe it is better to read it in English). What should matter is that I get the ideas. The work is not essentially related to German, whereas Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* could have been written only in English and Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* could have been written only in Spanish” (91). The border dividing philosophy and literature is translation. Gracia interprets Gustav Mahler’s statement, in a letter to his wife, that what is “peculiar”—most proper, but also what is singular—to works of art is their defiance of “rationality and expression,” as meaning “that works of art are not reducible to ideas and, therefore, cannot be effectively translated” (85). The peculiarity or idiosyncrasy of works of art lies in their idiomaticity or their textuality. They are, therefore, untranslatable as such. Gracia stipulates that the difference between

philosophy and art or literature hinges on the possibility of translation: "Whereas art is irreducible to ideas and defies translation, philosophy is reducible to ideas and can be translated" (85). It follows from this that for Gracia translation is fundamentally a question of the transference or communicability of ideas pure and simple. A work of art—literature, say—does not attain a level of ideality sufficient to transcend and thus to relieve itself of its textuality or materiality. Literature cannot separate itself from the idiom in which it will have been written. By definition, literature is too idiomatic, too idiosyncratic. Philosophy, however, is so thoroughly ideal that it will never have had any necessary attachment to the language of its articulation. There is nothing idiomatic about philosophy, nothing peculiar or singular. For this reason, philosophy is essentially translatable. That is, according to Gracia, language is accidental to philosophy's articulation. He contends that because Kant's *work* is essentially reducible to ideas, his *text* should be translatable into any language without any loss of meaning. Precisely this possibility establishes Kant's work as philosophy. Because Borges's work is art, thus irreducible to ideas, it is essentially related to the idiom—the material or vehicle—of its articulation. In fine, Borges's *obra* is properly untranslatable, hence it is legible *only* in Spanish.

We should be sensitive to the implications of Gracia's parenthetical claim that "many believe it is better to read [Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*] in English," because this comment unwittingly problematizes Gracia's avowed position. Inasmuch as philosophy expresses the ideas that remain essentially separable from the idiom in which they are articulated, it should not in fact make any difference in which language these ideas are either written or read. In other words, that the *Critique of Pure Reason* would be *more* legible or that it would be *better* to read it in English than in German means that English expresses Kant's ideas *more* clearly than does the language in which Kant both conceived and wrote his philosophy. The upshot is that both English and German affect Kant's ideas, which in principle are separable from and translatable into any particular language. Accordingly, it will be impossible to read Kant—and by extension any philosophical work—without being affected, *at the level of the idea* and thus at the level of philosophy, by the text, by the idiom in which the text takes place. The idiom makes a difference, and it does not simply make a difference in the *text*, but

in the *work* as well. On Gracia's account, however, this is the condition not of philosophy but of literature, which means it is impossible either *to read* or *to write* (philosophy as) anything other than literature.

Gracia is not the only one to assess the possibility of philosophy by making an example of Kant.⁶ Borges does so as well. Although he considered German the language of philosophy, he confessed that Kant should be read in *any* language *but* German insofar as not even Germans were able to read him (Borges 1999, 44).⁷ Borges claims that the *Critique of Pure Reason* "quizás hubiera dejado perplejo al mismo Kant en muchos casos [perhaps, in many cases, left Kant himself perplexed]" (Vázquez 1984, 46; my translation). When applied to the criteria Gracia uses to distinguish philosophy from literature, the irony of this assertion becomes unmistakable. If German is *the* philosophical language, but Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* can only be read in any language but German, then it follows that Kant does not write philosophy. Or he writes philosophy but in a language that obviates the possibility of reading the text *as* philosophy, and thus of its being understood *as* philosophy. In its original German articulation, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is *not* philosophy. At best it is literature.

If we were to make Borges's assertions conform to Gracia's distinctions there would be two consequences for the possibility of reading the *Critique of Pure Reason* as literature or philosophy. *First*, if the *Critique of Pure Reason* can only be read as literature, then Borges's determination that it is best read in any language but German will be impossible in that, *qua* literature, it will be properly untranslatable. Thus, it will only be readable as literature in the German that perplexed Kant. *Second*, it will never be readable *as* philosophy because, unreadable in German, it can make no claim to the universality necessary for philosophy. In other words, for Borges, Kant is legible *neither* as literature *nor* as philosophy. Kant's text is not legible *as literature* because, on the one hand, it cannot be read in the singular language that determines its peculiarity as art; and, on the other hand, it ought to be read in—and thus translated into—any other language. Nor is it legible *as philosophy* because, although it can be translated into and read in any other language, so long as it remains illegible in German, it is not universally translatable. Because it remains unintelligible in the German in which it was written and cannot be read, its idea is not universally communicable.

Gracia's distinction between literature and philosophy turns on two distinct relations between work and text. On the one hand, the work of literature (or of art in general) cannot be "reduced" to ideas pure and simple because the relation between the work and the text is necessary. On the other hand, the work of philosophy can be "reduced" to ideas; therefore, the relation between work and text is accidental. Yet the text nonetheless makes a difference such that the accidental relation between the work and the text of philosophy is in fact necessary. The accident is necessary. This does not mean that philosophy *is* literature, however. It means that the *inscription* of philosophy is necessary to the *work* of philosophy. Such inscription, which is necessarily material, and therefore spatial-temporally determined, is literary. It is not the case that philosophical ideas remain uncorrupted by their articulation in a particular idiom. As Gracia's text (perhaps unwittingly) makes clear, the idiom affects the idea. And insofar as the idiom affects the idea, the idea is irreducibly idiomatic and, therefore, idiosyncratic. Consequently, at the level of its articulation or expression, philosophy is irreducible to ideas pure and simple. The accident corrupts the idea (the essentially philosophical) enabling philosophy to articulate itself in the first place. The accident is necessary, but it nonetheless remains accidental in its determination of philosophy in that, *qua* necessary to the articulation of philosophy, it instances philosophy *as literature*. The instance or the accident of philosophy is the necessity of literature.

Yet, despite its necessity, according to Gracia's claim that the work of art is essentially idiomatic and untranslatable, literature is impossible. The criterion that the work of art be "effectively untranslatable," as Gracia puts it, means that the singularity of literature is such that it is incommunicable. If we take seriously Borges's claim in "Las versiones homéricas [The Homeric Versions]," that translation not only occurs between two languages but also within a single language, a position shared by Martin Heidegger, then the impossibility of translation signals the end of language.⁸ Where there is no translation, there can be no language. It goes without saying that where there is no language, there can be no literature.

If it is the case that the relation between the work of art and the text is necessary, thereby obviating any translation of literature, it is no less the case that if there is literature (or art more generally), there *must*

be translation. The work of art—the singular, idiomatic, idiosyncratic work—must be translatable. The untranslatable must be translatable. The impossible possibility of such translation means that the necessary or essential relation between work and text must be accidental. The necessary becomes accidental. The irreducible work of art must become the reducible work of philosophy as the condition of possibility of the work of art. In order to articulate itself, which requires the possibility of translation, literature must become philosophy. The possibility of literature, then, is its impossibility. The necessity of literature is the accident of philosophy. The conclusions that must be drawn from the aporias of Gracia's attempt to distinguish philosophy and literature according to their respective translatability is that both philosophy and literature are impossible as their condition of possibility. There is no philosophy that does not become literature and there is no literature that does not become philosophy. By necessity *and* by accident. In sum, translation is essential *and* accidental, *consubstantial and incidental, at the same time.*

From the very beginning, the accident is excluded from the highest form of philosophical inquiry, namely, the study of being *qua* being, which entails, according to Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, the determination of “what it [being] is and the attributes which belong to it *qua* being” (1984, 1026a31–32/1620). The attributes or “elements [*stoicheia*]” (1003a30/1584) of being *qua* being must be necessary or essential to being; hence such elements cannot be “*kata sumbebekós*,” by accident (1003a30/1584).⁹ Being, or *ousia*, is that which presences in itself; as such, it cannot be affected by what is not essential to it. Walter Brogan explains: “*ousia* is *to ti en einai*, that which is always already there . . . in contrast, *sumbebēkos* is that which just happens to be together with that which is and is not itself a lying-forth on its own” (51). Brogan affirms that “the contrast” in Aristotle “is between beings that are in themselves, and the nonbeing that ‘is’ as *sumbebēkos*. That which is in the first sense is necessary; that which merely appears along with what is is a kind of nonbeing, what ‘happens to be’ along with what is” (66). The accidental therefore “is merely present *along with* what is and thus can be otherwise than it is” (70). It can be otherwise than it is because it is not in itself and thus does not endure. Nonbeing is the essential attribute of the accidental. That accidents are not *kata to auto*, but rather are always predicated of another, of a subject (*ei aei tò sumbebekòs kath'*

hupokeiménon) (Aristotle 1984, 1007a35–1007b1/1590), means that accidents are always *accidents* of being, of substance or of the subject. Accidents, therefore, are not themselves of the order of being. On the contrary, although the accidental may *be*, because it may also *not be*, it is rather of the order of nonbeing and, as such, Aristotle excludes the accidental from philosophy: “Since ‘being’ has many meanings, we must say regarding the accidental [*peri tou katà sumbebekòs lektéon*], that there can be no scientific treatment of it” (1026b3–4/1620–1).¹⁰

Metaphysics VI takes up where the first Western philosophical lexicon, *Metaphysics* V (the last entry of which concerns the accidental) leaves off: “We call an accident that which attaches to something and can be truly asserted, but neither of necessity nor usually” (1025a14–15/2.1619). Hence, Aristotle repeats, whatever “does not happen of necessity nor usually” (1025a20/1619) is an accident. An accident is that for which “there is no definite cause . . . but a chance cause, i.e. an indefinite one” (1025a25–6/1619). The accident happens by chance, *here and now*; it is unpredictable, unanticipatable. It takes the subject, the *hupokeiménon*—which Brogan interprets as “the givenness, the thereness, of what has come forth” (51)—by surprise.

Aristotle's determination that philosophy concerns what happens necessarily or for the most part does not translate into an opposition between philosophy and literature. On the contrary, in the *Poetics* Aristotle defines poetry (epic, tragedy, comedy) according to philosophy: “the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse—you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be” (1984, 1451a37–1451b5/2322–2323). “Hence,” he concludes, “poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars” (1451b5–6/2323). Poetry is philosophical because it does not take up the accidents of history. Because poetry concerns the possible understood as what either necessarily or probably happens, in principle it is not surprising. Poetry that surprises its audience is an accident.

That the accident takes being by surprise, and thus always arrives from an unpredictable future, relates accidentality to time and thus to unpredictable alterity and alteration. It is this relation that is most important for understanding the relation of philosophy to literature—that the one *always* takes the other by surprise, surprising itself in doing so—as well as for any reading of Borges, whose *ficciones* often turn on the implacability of time and the unpredictability of an accident.¹¹

In Aristotle, both the accident and time are conceived as nonbeing, thus unessential to being, which means time is an accident of being. But the accidental also singularizes the subject and does so precisely by opening it to the future. Accidents attach to the subject *here and now* in the subject's presence to itself. Nevertheless, insofar as the accidental may always not be, accidents attach to the subject without being determined by the horizon of the subject's *here and now* or present. Otherwise they would be essential to the subject. That is, it is always possible that accidents will not be *here and now*. "Therefore since there are attributes and they attach to a subject [*hupokeimenon*], and some of them attach in a particular place and at a particular time, whatever attaches to a subject, *but not because it is a subject*, at this time or in this place, will be an accident" (1025a21–25/1619, emphasis added). Without being essential or necessary to the subject, to that which lies-forth in presencing from out of itself or according to its own principle (*arche*), the accidental nonetheless instances (inscribes, marks) the spatial-temporal singularization of the subject.

Just as he excludes the accidental from philosophy arguing that there can be no science of what does not happen always or for the most part, Aristotle also excludes the singular from philosophical consideration. On Aristotle's account, "sensible individual substances" have neither "definition [*horismo*]" nor "demonstration [*apodeixis*]," because "they are capable both of being and not being; for which reason all the individual instances of them are destructible" (1039b28–30/1641). Aristotle thus concludes, "For perishing things are obscure to those who have knowledge of them, when they have passed from our perception. . . . Therefore when one of those who aim at definition defines any individual, he must recognize that his definition may always be overthrown; for it is not possible to define such things" (1040a2–7/1641–1642). The appearing of whatever appears *each time* that it appears is singular and therefore beyond

definition. The singular is temporal; it perishes; it may or may not be. Hence any determination of the essence of the singular is subject to being overthrown in that the singular, what appears, can always not appear or appear otherwise. The existence of the singular, then, is accidental; and the accidental, inasmuch as it is always spatially-temporally determined, is singular. And neither the singular nor the accidental is of the order of being. Yet, insofar as the subject appears, it must be affected by accidentality and singularity. The *here and now*, the present of the subject is always marked by the accidental, the singular. In other words, the self-presencing of being, the necessity of *phusis* or *ousia* must always be read off from the spatial-temporal—thus accidental and singular—appearance of beings. According to Aristotle, although no accident is necessary to being, nevertheless, whatever *is* does not appear without the unnecessary and singular appearance of accidents. Being *as such* never appears outside accidental—spatial-temporal—determinations.

But if being cannot appear to itself or in itself, if it cannot present or represent itself to itself, if it cannot give itself to itself without or outside the mediation of the accident of appearing, *here and now*, if being always and only shows up and shows itself *here and now*, then it is clear that being never shows itself *in itself*. Rather, being always presents or represents itself *as* another, *as* something else, that is, *as something*. Being does not appear: it appears *as what is*, which means being happens *along with* the accidental appearance of *beings*. “What is” is accidental insofar as it can either be or not be, insofar as it can be otherwise than it is. Appearing is always accidental.

Although Heidegger does not arrive at the conclusion that being is always only accidental and that therefore it is never simply in itself, nonetheless this is the furthest implication of his understanding of the as-structure of language, of thought, and of being *as logos*. According to Heidegger, the as-structure of interpretation—the fact that Dasein encounters what is in the world with it *as something*—is nothing less than “the *a priori* existential constitution of understanding” (1996a, 140/149). He makes clear that the interpretation of “‘something as something’ lies before a thematic statement about it”; hence, the as-structure is the condition of possibility of encountering something in the world: “‘what is’ encountered in the world is always already in a reference which is disclosed in the understanding of world, a reference which is made explicit

by interpretation” (140/150). Further, “Things at hand are always already understood in terms of a totality of reference. This totality need not be explicitly grasped by a thematic interpretation” (140/150). Heidegger points out, however, that the lack of an explicit statement does not obviate the necessity of the *as*-structure. On the contrary, “the simple seeing of things nearest to us in our having to do with . . . contains the structure of interpretation . . .” (140/150). The totality of reference, which is the world in which Dasein exists, is disclosed or discovered in the understanding of Dasein. This understanding is an existential possibility of Dasein. Put simply, where there is Dasein, there is world, that is, there is the totality of reference, which means that whatever is in the world with Dasein—whether so-called inner-worldly beings or other beings-in-the-world—appears there *as something*. According to Heidegger, the appearance—the discovery or disclosedness—of something as something is *meaningful*: “we say that they have *meaning*” (142/151). Heidegger contends, however, that “Strictly speaking, what is understood is not the meaning, but beings, or being” (142/151). This is so because “meaning is an existential of Dasein, not a property which is attached to beings, which lies behind them or floats somewhere as a ‘realm between.’ Only Da-sein ‘has’ meaning in that the disclosedness of being-in-the-world can be ‘fulfilled’ through the being discoverable in it” (142/151).

The importance of this is difficult to overstate. Meaning is always my own, always Dasein’s. Meaning is not a property, an attribute, of what is discovered in the world; rather it is the mode of its being discovered. In other words, when Dasein understands those beings in the world—whether inner-worldly beings or other beings-in-the-world—what Dasein in fact understands are not only beings, but being itself. Being, then, is discoverable in the world *as something*. But *as such*, being cannot be thought as enduring presencing, as presence in itself. Or, rather, it can only be thought *as such*. As something, being exists and whatever exists comes to be and passes away. And whatever comes to be and passes away is affected by another. That is, being *as such* is only *as if* it were.¹² Thus, being is an accident.

The *as*-structure is consubstantial to the possibility of being *quia ousia, qua logos*. It is impossible to posit being without recourse to the *as* that displaces it in order to locate it in the first place. The *as*-structure necessarily opens being, *logos*, to translation and therefore to

accidentality. Pablo Oyarzún writes, “The ‘as’ is the thesis of a comensurability, placed—but with nothing more to prop it up than our obstinate and fragile zeal—there where only slippage rules” (2009, 258; my translation). The *as* (*como*) provides what Oyarzún calls “a limited confidence”: “With the ‘as’ or ‘like’ we believe to have given a structure to translation, and perhaps to language: we persuade ourselves that the structure of translation, and perhaps of language itself, is comparative, analogical. The text that I read here . . . is like the text that is there in the distance of another language” (258). The *as* figures the limited confidence of translation even as it signals its fundamental insecurity, for the *as* (and therefore translation) takes place where only displacement (*desliz*: slippage) rules. If the *as* instances translation as essential displacement, which at the same time provides and undermines the place of whatever appears and of whatever is said, then translation, strictly speaking, does not take place. Translation *literally* never shows up. Oyarzún contends, correctly, “translating, we are always on one side or the other, but never in the passage” (258). Consequently, he notes: “There is no way to make a thesis of translation. It is, in essence, the no-position, pure arbitrariness” (250). There is translation, but translation is never *in itself* or *as such*. It has no being, no essence, no substance.

On the one hand, the absolute and universal demand for translation means that translation (the movement of the *as*) is necessary. No one and no thing is exempt from translation, which means translation does not depend upon the volition of the subject. *On the other hand*, because translation is not in itself, because it always comes from another, it happens arbitrarily, accidentally, by chance. It comes as a surprise. Thus, the absolute and universal demand for translation takes place, if it ever does, singularly, without precedent.

According to Gracia's distinction between philosophy and literature, the *taking place* of translation, the *accident* of translation, *qua* singular, names the taking place of literature. *As such*, the singular and accidental *taking place* of translation is untranslatable. The absolute and universal demand for translation demands the untranslatable.¹³ Only the untranslatable is translatable. This is what is at stake in Oyarzún's proposal to call the *lapsus* between one language and another, which is the *no-place* of translation, “the *individual*: that which hides [*se hurta*] in language, the untranslatable” (259). *Hurtarse* means “to hide” or

“to withdraw.” In its nonreflexive, transitive form *hurtar* means “to steal,” “to withdraw, deflect,” but also “to plagiarize.” Singularity thus instances an improper relation to the other, a theft, an unauthorized and unacknowledged, an illegitimate citation or repetition of the other. It is worth recalling that Borges once remarked that all his stories were plagiarized: “Yes, plagiarized, like all of mine [*Sí, plagiado, como todos los míos*]” (Vázquez 1984, 115).

Whenever and wherever one writes, one writes in translation. That is the law of inscription, the law of writing and the law of the letter. It is the letter of the law. In Spanish *letras* signifies not only literature (*belles lettres*), but also letters, alphabetic characters, the substance of writing. In the singular, *letra* also means handwriting. One writes in a language—in a character or hand—that is not one’s own in order to write one’s *own* language in the first place. One’s own language is always cited, stolen, plagiarized from the other. What is most proper, what is most one’s own, what is most idiosyncratic or peculiar, is also necessarily what is most foreign. This holds not only for language and letters, but also for the one who writes. The connection between letters (*letras*)—alphabetic script and literature—and the technicity of inscription (*letra*: handwriting) ought not to be dismissed. As handwriting or penmanship, *letra* refers to a technology or a mechanism of inscription and the production of identity. One is known by one’s hand: the signature, the mark, is binding. And one always writes in another’s hand; one always already trespasses the limit of one’s own signature and does so as the condition of possibility of the signature. My signature is a forgery. There is no other way to sign my name.

In a witty turn in a text devoted to Borges’s “Pierre Menard,” Daniel Balderston draws attention to Menard’s “suppressed” work: “The *Zeitgeist* did, however, preside over a publication by Menard that the author of the obituary saw fit to pass over in silence, *L’écriture et le subconscient: Psychanalyse et graphologie* [Writing and the Unconscious: Psychoanalysis and Graphology] (1931)” (1993, 35). Balderston’s project in *Out of Context* is to historicize—albeit creatively—Borges’s *ficciones*, thereby taking a stand against the dominant “irrealist” tendency in Borges criticism, a tendency that Balderston admittedly shared.¹⁴ Balderston identifies the historical Pierre Menard, “a lesser disciple” (35) of Freud, as the fictional Pierre Menard, which means Balderston practices the

literary-critical methodology suggested by the narrator at the end of "Pierre Menard": namely, anachronistic attribution, as if Pierre Menard were Pierre Menard. The importance of Balderston's account depends on its turn to graphology, to the science of handwriting, which is the science of the inscribed or written letter, the *lettra*. Graphology is the science of the singular.¹⁵

Balderston points out that the author of *L'Écriture et le subconscient* insists "on the importance of contingency in the study of personality: an individual does not have a single script, but instead the handwriting will vary to show the impact of circumstance" (1993, 37). Indeed, Balderston argues: "Menard's greatest insight is that everything matters in handwriting analysis" (38). He quotes from Menard's "suppressed" work: "Neither in graphology nor in psychoanalysis are there insignificant signs; all signs acquire importance depending on the manner in which one knows how to examine and interpret them and reconnect them to general causes" (Menard, *L'Écriture* 142; quoted in Balderston 1993, 38). There are no insignificant signs, but their significance, both their importance and their meaning, depends on interpretation. The significance of the sign, of the letter, depends on its subordination to the "general cause." The singular inscription—the autograph, say, or the signature—becomes meaningful only insofar as it is comprehended under a category. According to Balderston, Menard "urges his readers to undertake the very exercise to which he devoted himself for so many years—copying: 'To fully be cognizant of all of the peculiarities of a script, a good method consists in tracing it and reproducing it with a pen. In this fashion, one sees the differences that exist between the original and the copy or reproduction'" (1993, 38; Balderston quotes Menard 49).

In his attempt to establish the historical reference of "Pierre Menard," Balderston seeks to secure the difference between the original and the copy, something that cannot be done on the basis of the letter alone. This is because the letter is never alone. The letter is never *in itself*. Because the letter—whether graphic sign, literature, or handwriting—depends on translation, which means the letter is always already in translation. The letter is always double, always already dubbed, foreign to itself, divided in itself. The inscription of the original marks out, erases the original. Tracing the original—copying it, plagiarizing it—*both* inscribes it as original *and* erases it.

On the one hand, the meaning of letters—of literature and of alphabetic signs, of the hand—depends on the general category, on the universalization that is only possible on condition of the subordination or forgetting of the letter's inscription, its singularity. On the other hand, singularity—the marking or tracing of the letter, of the hand—makes possible the self-identity of the letter, making possible its ideality and universalization by constituting the letter as divided in itself. There is no general category, thus no meaning, *before* inscription, *before* singularity. The letter makes meaning possible, but the law of the letter—namely that it is marked by translation and therefore never in itself—makes the letter *as such* impossible.

The fact that Borges always located philosophy or metaphysics within the genre of fantastic literature does not mean he did not take philosophy seriously. It means he did not conceive them as simply opposed to one another. In response to a question concerning the theme of identity, Borges notes, “It is another of the essential themes, which would comprehend the uncertainty and the bifurcations of identity” (Vázquez 1984, 145). In the context of his discussion of a pantheistic idea of identity promulgated in India and rationalized, he says, by Spinoza, Borges adds: “here we see how fantastic literature can become confused with philosophy and with religion, which are perhaps other forms of fantastic literature” (145). Elsewhere he observes that in an anthology of fantastic literature that he edited with Bioy Casares, they left out several of the major practitioners of the genre, including Kant and Hume. In “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” he claimed that in Tlön, “all philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophy of As If*” (1996, 1.436/CF 4). The “philosophy of as if” is the title of Hans Vaihinger's 1911 neo-Kantian treatise in which he argues that although we cannot know the external world, we nevertheless produce “as if” models of reality, illusions, which we then take for reality. Our relation to the world, therefore, is illusory, fictive. Although Vaihinger's reading of Kant is suspect, to say the least, nevertheless, as Derrida notes, the *as if* plays a “decisive and enigmatic role” in Kant's system (2005b, 168n52).

In Kant, the *as if* describes the operation of the regulative Ideas of reason, which provide for the unity of experience but which cannot be derived from experience. In other words, the cognition of nature or of experience provides an *empirical* manifold that cannot give the

transcendental rule for its own unification and thus provides no principle of purposiveness in itself. Regulative Ideas posit the *telos* or finality of nature such that nature can be comprehended *as if* it were organized according to a finality or purposiveness inherent to it. The difficulty, according to Kant, arises when one thinks that such Ideas can be derived from experience and that they are thus the effect of the understanding. But if the Idea of the purposiveness of nature is not derived from concepts of the understanding, nor does it result from practical reason. Kant explains: "The purposiveness of nature is thus a special *a priori* concept that has its origin strictly in the reflecting power of judgment. For we cannot ascribe to the products of nature anything like a relation of nature in them to ends, but can only use this concept in order to reflect on the connection of appearances in nature that are given in accordance with empirical laws. This concept is also entirely distinct from that of practical purposiveness (of human art as well as of morals)" (2000, 68/5:181). Although the concept of the purposiveness or end (*telos*) of nature does not derive from a practical judgment (and thus from a concept of practical reason) it is nonetheless, Kant remarks, "certainly conceived of in terms of an analogy with that" (68/5:181). It is clear that the Idea in the Kantian sense is neither a determinate concept (a concept of experience) nor a practical one; "it is neither a *concept of nature* nor a *concept of freedom*" (Derrida 2001b, 211). This means that regulative Ideas are neither of the order of pure reason nor of practical reason; they derive neither from concepts of the understanding nor from the moral law. Thus, they cannot be said to originate in either sensibility (in which all cognitions of experience must be grounded) or intelligibility (where moral judgments originate without any sensible or pathological contamination). Indeed, Kantian Ideas trouble both these orders of decision. Derrida concludes that "although Kant does not say as much . . . this 'as if' would itself be something like an agent of deconstructive ferment, since it in some way exceeds and comes close to disqualifying the two orders that are so often distinguished and opposed, the order of nature and the order of freedom" (2001b, 211).

The *as if* ruins—even as it articulates and makes possible—the all-too-often opposed logics of structure (system) and decision (agency or singularity). It does so, moreover, by opening onto fantasy, that is, the imagination (*phantasia*). This is what is at stake in Borges's remark that

all of his stories were plagiarized, copied, from another. They were, he confessed, “plagiarized from reality, which, in its turn, has plagiarized a story. One lives stealing. Stealing air in order to breathe. . . . All the time one is receiving foreign things. . . . One could not live even a minute if one were not receiving” (Vázquez 1984, 115). From Aristotle to Kant, the imagination mediates the sensible and the intelligible, the faculties of sense and the understanding, without belonging to either. The imagination is nothing but such mediation; it names the exposure to the other. We are always receiving, in short, from the other. Life is borrowed, stolen, plagiarized from the other. The other is before us: we always write in its name, under its auspices. We live always under a pseudonym, a pen name.

If the imagination is that which opens us to the other as the condition of possibility of life, it follows that life is fundamentally aesthetic, which gives a somewhat different sense to Borges’s claim that he is interested in exploring the aesthetic possibilities of philosophy. The fantastic, therefore, is the only possible genre, not only of literature, but also of thought and of life. There is no writing, no thought, no experience, without the operation of *phantasia*, without the mediation of the imagination. Not only, then, is there no literature, no philosophy, but there is no auto-affection—no auto-biography—without the imagination’s constitutive—absolute and universal—opening toward the other. Life, then, is symbolic. This is the upshot of Borges’s understanding of the all-encompassing “genre” of the fantastic. It is the upshot as well of Derrida’s contention that “[a]uto-affection is a universal structure of experience,” and that “[a]ll living things are capable of auto-affecting” (1974, 165). Auto-affection is another name for symbolizing. If all living beings must be capable of auto-affection, that is, if “[a]uto-affection is the condition of an experience in general” (165), in that it makes possible exposure to an exteriority in general, then it follows that life is symbolic.

The imagination names inscription. It names the mediation that constitutes and ruins, at the same time and in the same stroke, the possibility of sense perception and cognition, of singularity and universality. This is what Borges means when he cites David Hume, who famously awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumber, as having said, “I am a philosopher when I write” (Vázquez 1977, 105–106). On the one hand, writing leaves the trace of singularity; on the other hand, it lays claim

to a necessary ideality and universality. It provides for the possibility of identity. I am a philosopher (*only*) when I write: writing identifies me as a philosopher, makes me identifiable *as such* among others. The possibility of this identity is the determination of an ideality that permits the repetition necessary to the production of identity. Writing produces the possibility of abstraction, of universality, of ideality; writing holds together or collects Hume's "bundle" of perceptions into an identity (1978, 252; quoted in Borges 1996, 2.146/SNF 328). Insofar as it necessarily functions in the absence both of the one who writes and the one who reads, the graphic mark, the inscription, makes possible the endurance over time necessary for the possibility of identity. Only because the mark is not *in itself* is it possible for one mark to relate to another mark *as* to itself, *as if* it were the same, such that identity becomes possible.¹⁶

Yet, the graphic mark also and necessarily happens *here and now* for the first and last time, singularly. As the inscription of singularity, the graphic mark always happens by accident, by chance. The mark is necessarily fungible. It can be erased. It erases itself in its own inscription and in doing so it *necessarily and automatically* erases any relation either to the one who writes or to the one who reads the mark. At stake here is the singular, hence accidental, inscription of the philosopher and of philosophy and, at the same time and in the same place, the necessary universalization of such inscription. There is no inscription that does not bear the mark of this double gesture. Every letter inscribes singularity and universality, literature and philosophy, accident and necessity.

In order to spell out the aporetic structure of the mark, it is worth considering one of Borges's best-known fictions. "The Library of Babel" outlines the total library, which some call the universe. The library's physical organization of identical hexagons whose interiors are also uniform allows the narrator to discern certain incontrovertible principles of the library's structure. For instance, "*The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable [inaccessible]*" (1996, 1.466/CF 113) and "*The Library is endless [interminable]*" (1.465/CF 113). This endlessness coupled with the internal structure of each hexagon—five shelves per wall, thirty-two books per shelf, four hundred pages per book, forty lines per page, eight letters per line—enables the narrator to *remember* certain axioms. The first is that the library "has existed *ab aeternitate [existe ab eterno]*" (1.466/CF 113). The second is

that there are twenty-five orthographic symbols. The discovery of a book “containing almost two pages of homogeneous lines” and the insight of “a librarian of genius” (1.467/CF 114) made possible the discovery of “the fundamental law of the Library,” namely, “that all books, however different from one another they may be, consist of identical elements: the space, the period, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet” (1.467/CF 114). On the basis of the elemental identity of all books, the librarian “also posited a fact which all travelers have since confirmed: *In all the Library, there are no two identical books*” (1.467/CF 114–115). The librarian thus deduces “that the Library is ‘total’—perfect, complete, and whole—and that its bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols (a number which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite)—that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language, *All*” (1.467/CF 115). Henry Sussman points out that the library’s totality “result[s] . . . from the combinatory potential of the orthographic symbols,” which means creativity is “automatic and accidental” (156). Creativity is automatic (or necessary) in that it does not depend on the volition of the individual (or even collective) author for its production and determination. Every book is an instance of a generative machine that cannot not produce every possible combination according to the logic of the book: the calculable distribution of the same variables. At the same time, however, insofar as the production of each singular text is random and without intention, it is arbitrary and accidental.

The upshot of the library’s totality is that, by definition, the library is autonomous, self-contained, *in itself*. Its border or limit is absolute. The library has no outside.¹⁷

The library contains a single instance of all that it is possible (*dable*), which is to say *given* to express. There are no copies. There is no exact repetition. Every instance is singular. Whatever the library contains is absolutely singular despite the uniformity of its presentation. *Expresar* means to manifest something in words or gestures, by signs. The library’s totality thus extends to all that it is possible, given, to express: to write, to say, to think. The narrator recognizes the problem this poses: “To speak is to commit [*incurrir en*] tautologies. This pointless, verbose epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five bookshelves in one of the countless hexagons—as does its refutation” (1.470/CF 117–118).

In the impossible possibility of repetition, of tautology, of citation, which is also and always plagiarism, the limit of the library shows itself. On the one hand, the library cannot be total unless it contains all that it is possible to express. The library is only closed, total, insofar as it contains everything, insofar as everything is given or present in it. Therefore, self-expression—the unpredictable, unanticipatable and accidental, the singular, articulation of one's *own* thoughts and of one's *own* self—must be possible or the library would not be total. It would rather be determined by the exclusion of such articulation. On the other hand, insofar as the library already contains all that is given to express, any self-expression necessarily repeats what the library already contains and therefore opens the library to citation or repetition, thus to an outside that effectively destroys the library. The possibility of the library's closure, the possibility of its totality or absolution, is therefore *structurally* impossible. The instant in which the library closes upon itself—this instant *here and now*—is the instant in which the library repeats or cites itself in the singularity of one's *own*—idiomatic—expression, and thus exposes itself to what it is not. Repetition constitutes and conserves the library at the same time that it destroys it by exposing it to what cannot be contained in it. Every expression articulates—incribes and erases—the limit, the border, of the library. And this articulation is always both *necessary* and *accidental* to the library. It is *both* the structural possibility of the library *as* universal *and* the accidental articulation of the library *as* particular or singular.

In the epilogue to the *Obras completas* version of *Otras inquisiciones* Borges writes that one of the tendencies he discovered while correcting the proofs of the “miscellaneous works of this volume” was “to esteem religious and philosophical ideas for their aesthetic value and even for what they contain of the singular and the marvelous.” This, he says, is perhaps the index (*indicio*) “of an essential skepticism” (2.153). It would be a mistake to dismiss too quickly Borges's investment in religious (or theological) and philosophical ideas on account of his interest in their aesthetic value. At issue in this investment in the aesthetic is the singular and the marvelous. The aesthetic signals the *sensible* inscription of the philosophical and theological idea. As sensible, the inscription is singular, marvelous. A marvel is precisely *extraordinary*, that which is both unexpected, *more than* or *beyond* the ordinary (a marvel always comes

as a surprise); and that which is *extra* ordinary, *more* ordinary than the ordinary. At stake, then, is the extraordinary inscription of the idea: Philosophy's inscription as the *extraordinary* and as the *extraordinary*. There is no philosophy, no idea, without such inscription; no philosophy without singularity and marvel.

But nor is there the ordinary without marvel, without singularity. The ordinary, the everyday, is also singular, marvelous. The ordinary, insofar as it comes to pass, is extraordinary, hence surprising, unexpected, incalculable, without precedent. Whatever happens, if anything happens, comes as a surprise. But because whatever happens is surprising, singular and marvelous, it also indicates an essential skepticism because the ordinary, the everyday, no longer has any determinate ground. The extraordinariness of the ordinary, the singularity and marvelousness of the everyday, means that whatever happens does so always without anticipation. In other words, whatever happens, whatever comes, the ordinary extraordinary or the extraordinary ordinary, does so by accident, by chance, in every case singularly, marvelously. The most ordinary is marvelous, singular. It is the *inscription*—the singularization—of being.



Kant's Dog teases out the implications of the accidents of translation. It remarks the impossible relation between the singular or the accidental and the universal or the necessary. Chapter 1, "Time: For Borges," takes its point of departure from Borges's consistent position that the fundamental problem "for us" is time or what he calls the contradiction between the identity that endures and the time that passes away. The chapter pursues Borges's determination of time in order to demonstrate that in his most explicit statements about time, Borges often repeats its most classical philosophical definition. And yet in every case the Borgesian text also provides the resources for thinking against the philosophical or metaphysical understanding of time. Chapter 1 establishes the temporal logic that organizes the interpretations of Borges and philosophy throughout the remainder of *Kant's Dog*. After describing the logic of temporality that explains the apparent contradiction between identity and temporality, "Time: For Borges" elaborates the logics of impossibility, the promise, and survival, all of which follow from the structure of time and each of

which plays an important role in the chapters that follow. Indeed, the ensuing chapters demonstrate that Borges consistently deploys the logic of temporality that follows ineluctably from his understanding of the intractable contradiction of temporal succession and identity in order to re-mark—to respond to, to trace, to reinscribe—classic philosophical problems. For instance, Chapter 2, “Belief, in Translation,” rethinks the stakes and logic of translation in order to reconsider the relation of translation and original. Through readings of “Las versiones homéricas [The Homeric Versions]” and “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” the chapter problematizes the conditions of identity and authority. Central to this chapter is an analysis of time in Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in which it becomes clear that Hume’s empiricism ineluctably grounds itself in something other than experience, namely, in the enigmatic translating operation of the imagination. Chapter 3, “Kant’s Dog,” takes up in detail the relation of sensibility and the understanding to temporal synthesis by reading in “Funes el memorioso [Funes the Memorious]” an oblique reference to Kant’s description of the synthesis of time in the operation of transcendental schematism. Taken together Chapters 2 and 3 offer a sustained assessment of the limits of empiricism and transcendentalism. At stake in Chapter 2 is the impossibility in Hume, but also in Borges’s “Pierre Menard,” of constituting the empirical impression—which for Hume is the ground of all possible experience—without recourse to the figure of a necessarily nonempirical belief. In Chapter 3, in Kant, but also in Borges’s “Funes,” the issue is the discernment of the necessarily empirical inscription of the operation of transcendental schematism. In short, the logic of temporality implicitly at work in the Borgesian text challenges the limits of the transcendental and the empirical.

The first three chapters of *Kant’s Dog* argue that the time of translation, which informs at the same time the universal demand for translation and its singular impossibility, structures the entire Borgesian archive and, as well, corrupts the distinction between necessity and accidentality, transcendental and empirical, philosophy and literature. Chapters 4 and 5 spell out the implications of the logic of translation for the possibility of decision (hospitality, justice) and the name of God. The Afterword pursues the aporetic logic of translation toward the question of the secret and the possibility of culture.

Chapter 4, “Decisions of Hospitality,” begins with a consideration of the problem of the temporality of metaphor in Borges and Aristotle. Following a suggestion of Borges, the chapter turns to the metaphor of hospitality and to the temporal structure of decision in order to establish the parameters for an interpretation of “The Garden of Forking Paths” and its determination of the time of the possible. Chapter 5, “Idiocy, the Name of God,” reads across Borges’s interest in the religions of the book (Christianity, Islam, Judaism) in order to think through his investment in the name of God and to rethink the limits of the idiom and the *idios*. Finally, the Afterword, “The Secret of Culture,” expounds the logic of the secret in order to argue that Borges proposes a relation to the other that—in the figure of the secret, despite all necessary calculations and precautions—remains singular, incalculable, and in jeopardy.

Kant’s Dog is not simply expository. On the contrary, it pursues a reading strategy that might best be characterized as accidental. Every chapter opens onto the singular, the contingent, following a minor detail, an arbitrary reference, in order to read in—and at the constitutive limit of—the Borgesian archive, its philosophical, hence its *fantastic*, interlocutors. If it is true that metaphysics belongs to the genre of fantastic literature, then the Borgesian text must of necessity be inscribed within the horizon of metaphysics. It is this double inscription of literature and philosophy—each inscribed at the limit of the other—that *Kant’s Dog* seeks both to demonstrate and to perform. It does so by translating literature *into* and *as* philosophy, philosophy *into* and *as* literature. As if there were literature, as if there were philosophy—the traces of each remaining *in* and *as* the other.