

The Bewilderment of Being: Resonance of Macedonio Fernández in the Latin American Fantastic

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In memory of Pedro Cuperman

El adolescente se asombra de ser
—Octavio Paz

I must have been around fourteen or fifteen. It was during those adolescent years when I looked in wonder at the river of consciousness, surprised by the phenomenon of being, in awe at the very possibility of existence, when my father walked into my room with a book in his hands. “*Esto te va a gustar,*” he said (“You’re going to like this”). The volume that he handed me was Jorge Luis Borges’ *Ficciones*, in a pocketbook edition by Emecé.

The fictions in this book were different from any other I had read so far. They resembled neither Poe nor Jules Verne. I could get lost in them, but only partially — I was forced to step back and reflect on them as tales, as written rather than told narratives, as systems of signs. They asked me to be simultaneously inside and outside the frame.

When I finished reading the book, I felt two things: The first was that Borges had obliquely (with fiction, with metaphors) addressed some of my existential questions; the second, that I had understood only about half of what I read. But, as Macedonio would have put it, I must have liked the half I didn’t understand because some years later my father came back from Buenos Aires to La Paz with another lasting present: *The Complete Works of Jorge Luis Borges*, also published by Emecé.

I first heard about Macedonio Fernández (1874–1952) in New York where, as luck would have it, I would become a student of one of Borges’ students. We had barely gotten to know each other when my professor observed: “If you like Borges, you are going to like Macedonio, *su maestro* (his teacher).” Curious to know more about this enigmatic figure so affectionately called by his first name, I went down that evening to the library and pulled out the first two books that were published during Macedonio’s life: *No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos* (*We Are Not Always Awake When Our Eyes Are Open*, 1928) and *Papeles de Recienvenido* (*Newcomer’s Papers*, 1929).

These two books illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of Macedonio’s work: The former is a collection of essays on metaphysics and mysticism; the latter a loosely organized miscellanea of stories, poetry, and semi-autobiographical narratives, which include some of the best examples of Macedonio’s humorous writing (*humorismo*).¹ These two facets of his work — the metaphysical and the creative — are tightly interrelated, even syncretic. For in Macedonio, reflection on the phenomenon of being nurtures the play of imagination, and the play of imagination nurtures his metaphysics.

Macedonio only published four books during his life, and not exactly because he wasn't prolific. "Writing was no trouble for Macedonio," Borges tells us, "he lived (more than any other person I have ever known) to think. Every day he abandoned himself to the vicissitudes and surprises of thought as a swimmer is borne along by the current of a great river, and that mode of thinking called writing did not cost him the least effort."² These two books, along with *Una novela que comienza* (*A Novel that Begins*, 1940), were the primary source of Macedonio's thought for a generation of writers that would lead Latin American literature to prominence in the late sixties.³

Only a few of his writings have been translated into English. The two primary sources today are Jo Anne Engelbert's *Macedonio: Selected Writings in Translation* (1984) and Margaret Schwartz's translation of *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna* (1967) — *The Museum of Eterna's Novel* (2010). One of the reasons I decided to write this essay in English is to bring to the attention of English readers some facets of Macedonio's influential life and work. In the process, I translate some passages of his writings, usually of his metaphysics, which have not been previously translated.

Margaret Schwartz's translation of *Museum* was a particularly welcome contribution. By some estimates, Macedonio worked for over fifty years on this eccentric and exorbitant anti-novel, which was assembled by his son Adolfo Obieta and published posthumously in 1967.⁴ Famous for being the novel that never begins, it has more interpolated prologues than chapters (57 prologues, 20 chapters). According to Ricardo Piglia, *Museum* is "the infinite novel that includes all the variants and all the detours. The novel that lasts what life lasts. Failure as a literary form" (518). It is curious to note that this novel, which questions just about every aspect of the traditional novel, was first published around the time of the publication of two landmark novels that would transform the genre: Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1966) and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967).

We Are Not Always Awake and *Newcomer's Papers* showed me two paths to understand salient features of Latin American literature: One of them leads to Borges's classic reframing of the ancient art of the fantastic; the other to a model of an engaged, participatory notion of reading best exemplified by Cortázar's *Hopscotch*. I would like to begin by considering some aspects of the path that leads to Borges' fictions, and which, by way of Borges, had a significant impact on García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

I end with a discussion of the road that leads to Cortázar — not to the Cortázar of fantastic stories, which, he acknowledged, are indebted to Borges, but rather to the creator of *Hopscotch* and the whimsical *cronopios*. That is to say, I end by looking at another side of Macedonio's work that would take Latin American imagination in a direction diametrically opposed to Borges' sober and concise metaphysical tales. This is important to give an idea of the range of Macedonio's influence.

The scope of Macedonio's thought is broad indeed. Given the limited space for this essay, I had to leave out many important aspects of his work. I had to leave out, for instance, a discussion of his anarchist and libertarian inclinations, which led him, as a young lawyer, to

fight for year against the “legal monstrosity” of indentured labor in the Argentine province of Misiones (Abós 78).⁵ I also had to leave out the many intriguing correspondences between Macedonio’s mysticism and some esoteric aspects of the philosophies of India. As Macedonio would put it, if I left out anything else, it wouldn’t fit.

It is for his humor that Macedonio is best known. Macedonio made people laugh at his own burial in Buenos Aires on February 12, 1952. Among the words that Borges spoke in his memory at the solemn grounds of the Recoleta cemetery was one of Macedonio’s jokes: “The gaucho is a pastime for the horses in the ranch.”⁶

It was Borges who sparked the interest in Macedonio. In two essays and numerous interviews, he helped shape the memory of Macedonio Fernández’s life and work — and also his mythology. In 1961, almost ten years after Macedonio’s death, Borges edited the first anthology of Macedonio’s works. It is curious to note that the book’s title page presents Macedonio as if he were yet another one of Borges’ fictions: “*Macedonio Fernández* by Jorge Luis Borges.” Borges, in a way, was creating his precursor.⁷

But in another way, we can also say that Macedonio “invented Borges,” as Marcelo Ballvé put it.⁸ In either case, Macedonio Fernández remains relatively unknown while Jorge Luis Borges would become one of the most influential literary figures of the 20th century — an influence that extends into semiotics, if we consider Borges’ ubiquitous presence in Umberto Eco’s work. Little has been said so far about the echoes of Macedonio’s thought that can be heard in some of Borges’ best-known stories.

Like anyone who becomes curious about Macedonio, I soon discovered that his life, the words he spoke, his acts, his presence, the warmth and quality of his conversation, were more important to the people who knew him than his written work. For the generation of writers to which Borges belonged, Macedonio was a sort of admired and mysterious “elder brother.” This is how the Uruguayan writer Horacio Quiroga, who only met him briefly in Misiones, describes Macedonio in a letter to Leopoldo Lugones: “He is, all of him, like a page from Emerson” (72).

Then, of course, there was his humor. One of the main themes of *Newcomer Papers* is Macedonio’s entry into the world of letters. For the occasion of a banquet in his honor, Macedonio, the “newcomer,” wrote a series of dedications, or toasts, which, with disarming and seemingly innocent fun, mock the stuffy self-importance of literary and academic circles.

In one of them, a friend congratulates Macedonio on his fiftieth birthday. “I have not learned a thing,” he responds, “at my age, and still having birthdays” (*Papeles* 32). In another, Macedonio apologizes to Borges for having missed an invitation to dinner. “I’m so absentminded,” he explains, “that on the way to your house I remembered that I had stayed home” (90).

He is often remembered for having run unofficially for the Argentinian presidency on a platform of pranks. He thought he had a good chance since fewer people seek the Office of the Presidency than, say, work as a pharmacist. And given that most of the voters were undecided, he concluded that all he had to do was impress a catchy slogan on their minds. To this end, he had his friends leave behind papers with his slogans in coffee shops,

movie theaters, and trolley cars. “Macedonio: a political mystery for the next Presidency,” reads one of his slogans (Abós 102).

There are numerous testimonies about Macedonio, but no one has evoked him more eloquently than Borges. “Macedonio’s brilliance,” he told Tomás Eloy Martínez, “was in dialogue, that is why one can associate him with geniuses that never wrote, like Socrates or Pythagoras, or even with Buddha or Christ” (264). Borges adds that although he knew all of the houses in which Macedonio had lived, he seldom visited him “because to converse with him seemed to me a privilege to which I hadn’t earned the right” (267).

A mystic aura surrounds Macedonio. Gabriel del Mazo, his nephew, remembers overhearing Macedonio strum his guitar in mysterious, repeated intervals. When the young Gabriel walked into his room to ask what he was doing, Macedonio responded that he “was trying to find the fundamental chords from which, perhaps, all music derived” (del Mazo 29).

Despite the rather limited access to his work, the impact of Macedonio Fernández in Latin American literature was prompt and extensive. He remains today a lively subject of research and discussion. I would like to take a particular approach to Macedonio’s lasting impact that starts by considering some aspects of his metaphysics as expressed in *We Are Not Always Awake*. For Macedonio, the gateway into metaphysics was a return to the “virginal fringe” of the “newly known,” a rediscovery of the infinite newness that flows from the depths of the here and now (*Vigilia* 189).

We are in metaphysics when, by perceiving anew the phenomenal world to which we have become accustomed, by an act of unknowing the known (*desconocimiento de lo conocido*), we recapture the wonder of existence, the mystery of being. “Metaphysics,” he writes, “begins when one loses the impression of familiarity with being and decides to find its cause in consciousness; it is the sum of considerations that return one to a pure vision, to the mystical state, to the existence of the child before his self-representation as a subject and as externalization, or object. [...] In fact, it can be said that the metaphysical shock — or the impression of de-familiarity with the familiar — is a sort of backwards *déjà vu*: to de-know the known, as in *déjà vu* it is to know anew the known” (*Vigilia* 191).⁹

In “Basics of Metaphysics,” Macedonio writes: “At certain moments of mental plenitude I forget ‘myself, my body, my connections, my memories, the past, all the impressions and acts that determined my separation and this long trajectory of estrangement and distancing. It seems that I have always been there or that I have just started to exist. But soon enough, my very existence is the subject of my most subtle thought; ‘time’, ‘space’ are faded notions; all happens outside any given place: neither close nor separated, neither lasting nor everlasting, neither before nor after” (*Vigilia* 15).

In this rupture with the usual dualities of time open to the phenomenon of being, Macedonio is a newcomer to the infinite richness of the now.¹⁰

We need not search far to find the marvel of the first encounter: it is in the fullness of the here and now of every individual, and this is something very personal and subjective. That is why Macedonio distrusted the distant and the abstract, avoiding academic language

and establishing an intimate, at times colloquial, communication with his reader. And these, too, are among the reasons that led me to begin these pages with a phenomenology of my personal encounter with Macedonio.

My first impression of Macedonio's metaphysics was a double sense of surprise and familiarity. Surprise, for instance, at how, in a long footnote of *We Are Not Always Awake*, he could, with singular authority, swing from Descartes to Shakespeare, from Pascal to Goethe in order to question the validity of Western thought regarding the substantiality of *what is*.¹¹ You see, Macedonio believed in an absolute idealism that falls somewhere outside the orbs of Berkeley, Hume, and Schopenhauer. He advanced a form of subjectivism where what we perceive in our awake-state, and which we call "reality," is essentially no different from our dream-state — it is just a style of dreaming.

"By 'style of a dream,'" Macedonio writes, "I mean everything that is present in its entirety as a state of subjective awareness, without pretensions of external correlations."¹² Much like in the philosophies of India, Macedonio thought that the "I" is illusory and called being "a selfless psychic manifestation [*un almismo ayoico*]" (Engelbert 25). He concludes that it is impossible to either affirm or deny being at the exclusion from non-being: "neither being nor non-being are thinkable; and thus, they are mere verbalisms" (*Vigilia* 220).¹³

Beyond all this, it was the recognition of something familiar in Macedonio that at first touched me deeply. In some passages of *We Are Not Always Awake*, he expressed, with enviable clarity, some of the questions that had sprung, rather amorphously, during my adolescence. He brought back the memory of wonderment at the fact of existing, and heightened its importance. The very basis of Metaphysics, he said, was the perplexity of being at all ("*la perplejidad de ser*"), the surprise of existing ("*el asombro de existir*"), the astonishment at the fact that anything could be or was, that existing exists (*Vigilia* 37).

Macedonio's metaphysics point to "the phenomenon, Being, in its full reality," to a "pure, non-perceptive vision of Reality." For Macedonio, Reality is understandable ("*de conocibilidad absoluta*") (*Vigilia* 87). Kant had shown that reason and intellect stand between both *phenomena*, things we can perceive through our senses, and *noumena*, "that of which we can know nothing" (*Prolegomena* 125). Macedonio scolds Kant: "the *noumenon* and agnosticism are the worst products of the intelligence" (86). There is nothing unknown in the inestimable gift of the present, nor is there anything else that needs to be known. The end of the quest is here and now, accessible to all. The Present is the pearl of knowledge delivered to the shore by the wave of Eternity.

Forms of Eternity

Directly or indirectly, in one way or another, some of the ideas discussed by Macedonio in *We Are Not Always Awake* and illustrated in *Newcomer's Papers*, sparked the imagination of the writers of the so-called "boom" of Latin American literature. I would like, in particular, to consider one of the stories in *Newcomer's Papers*: "Cirugía Psíquica de Extripación" ("Surgery of Psychic Removal"), a text that, as Germán Leopoldo García put it, "ties together all the

variants of Macedonian writing” (82). Perhaps this is also why it was the first of his texts to be translated and published into English.¹⁴

“Surgery” tells the story of Cósimo Schmitz, a blacksmith who undergoes a surgical operation “before a vast audience” that extracts from him, almost fully, the sense of the future (58).¹⁵ The procedure limits Cósimo to be able to anticipate only eight minutes. For all practical purposes, the future does not exist for him. Although Cósimo has been sentenced to die in the electric chair, all his fears and worries have vanished. “His memory is practically nonexistent,” Macedonio writes, “but how intense, how complete, how eternal is his present, undistracted by visions, by presentiments that it will all be over in the wink of an eye” (59). And since the guess of what will be disappears, so too does the corresponding phantom of what has been. Without future, the past also fades away. Everything is.

The metaphysical implications of this story would become a recurrent theme in some of Borges’ polished metaphysical stories that gained international recognition. Macedonio’s stories are unlikely to reach a similar prominence because he used them to question the validity of storytelling. While at one point Macedonio tells us that “Surgery” is “the one and only story you will ever need” (65), but in the last, long footnote of the story he declares, “It is vain academicism to believe in the Story; besides children nobody believes in stories. It is the theme or the problem that is interesting.”¹⁶

In the late twenties a group of writers accused Borges of plagiarizing Macedonio. The words Borges said for Macedonio at his entombment in Buenos Aires’s Recoleta cemetery can be seen, in a way, as a response to this charge. “During those year I imitated [Macedonio] to the point of transcription, of impassioned and devoted plagiarism. I felt: Macedonio *is* metaphysics, *is* literature. Those who preceded him may shine in history, but they were drafts of Macedonio, imperfect and prior versions. Not to imitate that canon would have been an incredible negligence.”¹⁷

As I am about to discuss some of the correspondences between some of Borges’ stories and aspects of Macedonio’s metaphysics, I am reminded of Eugenio D’Ors’s aphorism: “What doesn’t belong to tradition is plagiarism.” But Borges would not only continue the tradition of Macedonio’s metaphysics, he would reframe it within the canon of fantastic literature — and in doing so, he would also reframe fantastic literature. As the metaphysicians of one of his stories saw it, metaphysics was but a chapter in the tradition of fantastic fiction.¹⁸

Let us start with one of the earliest, and perhaps less obvious, examples of these correspondences. In “Funes el memorioso” (“Funes the Memorious,” 1942),¹⁹ Borges inverts the theme of Macedonio’s “Surgery of Psychic Removal (1941).” The removal of the future, which leads to the extinction of the past — and consequently of memories — becomes its mirror opposite: the infinite memory.

Having lost almost all foresight into the future, Cósimo (whose name is reminiscent of “cosmos”), gradually ends up living fully in the now, worry-free. If there is no future, the only thing to be concerned with is experience itself, with the phenomenon, with what is. “It is a moving experience,” Macedonio writes, “to observe [Cósimo] as he beautifies every

subtle nuance of daylight, of moonlight, as he is overcome by each moment of desire or contemplation. He is the lover, the absolute worshiper of the world. Every instant is so complete that for him nothing changes, everything is eternal, and the most insipid object becomes infinitely suggestive and profound” (60).

Much like Cósimo (the man without memory), Funes (the man with impeccable memory) is able to lose himself in the perfect memory of the nuances of every moon, of every cloudy sky, of every leaf in every tree he has ever seen. “The truth was, Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree in every patch of forest, but every time he had perceived or imagined that leaf. [...] His own face in the mirror, his own hands surprised him every time he saw them” (136). In each of his countless recollections (at one point he considers and discards the idea of reducing them to seventy thousand), Funes, too, is a newcomer to the moment — to a given moment frozen by its perfect recollection.

For Cósimo, the past and the memory of the past vanish along with the removal of the future. Instead, Borges’ story thematizes the persistence and indelibility of memory. In the poem “El despertar” (“Waking Up”), daylight wakes up the poet, Borges, as he “ascends clumsily from dream to our shared dream” (*Obras* 894). This waking up to the wonder of the present is soon overwhelmed by the accumulation of the past — memory takes him back to Rome and Carthage, to everything that is and will be, and to death, that other form of waking up. “Oh, if only that morning would have forgetting!” he laments (896). In another poem, Borges declares categorically, “Only one thing there is not: forgetting.”²⁰

Macedonio’s “Surgery of Psychic Removal” is not precisely a fantastic story. Like everything else he wrote it is rather extra-generic. Macedonio’s reflections on time, however, would reverberate in Borges’ reframing of the ancient art of fantastic literature. It helps, then, to begin by considering some of the major themes of the fantastic.

In “Fantastic Literature,” a talk he gave in Montevideo in 1949, Borges offered what seems to me to be the most useful taxonomy of fantastic themes, or devices. He concluded that all fantastic literature could be reduced to a few recurrent themes, which, by virtue of their prevalence must be “symbols of emotional states, processes that everyone experiences” (Passos 185).²¹ Borges cites the following four devices:

1) *The work within the work* — as when Don Quixote reads a book titled *Don Quixote*, or when Hamlet attends a play that more or less recreates Hamlet’s tragedy. An effect of this device is the abysmal image — the impression of standing between parallel mirrors. André Gide called it *mise en abyme* in an 1893 entry of his *Journal* (41).

2) *The travel in time* — as in H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, yes, but this category also includes the theme of the relativity of time. The cause could follow the effect — the reason for traveling, for instance, could be one of the journey’s consequences. The journey (which could be to the future or the past) may also include the stoppage of time, which is a journey into the infinite present.

3) *The confusion of dream and awake states* — as in Coleridge’s flower (“What if you slept...”) or Cortázar’s *The Night Face Up*.

4) *The double* — as in Poe’s “William Wilson,” Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer,” or in Cameron’s *Avatar* (a film where the themes of travel in time and dream are also at play). Borges notes that the philosophical thought on this particular topic is even more fantastic: At one end we have the eternal return, as in Nietzsche or the Stoics, and at the other, solipsism — equivalent to the absolute loneliness of Wells’ *Invisible Man* or Kafka’s *The Trial*.

Macedonio’s “Surgery” is an example of the theme of the stoppage of time. With his future extracted and his past extinguished, Cósimo Schmitz is left living in a near-absolute present — time, in a certain way, has stopped, and he can experience the uninterrupted fullness of the moment. In his story “El milagro secreto” (“The Secret Miracle”, 1943), Borges treats this theme in a way that, as we shall see, will play a role in García Márquez’s 1967 masterpiece, *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*).

Sentenced to death by the Nazis, the Jewish poet Jaromir Hladik faces the firing squad. As he is about to be killed, he prays to God to let him finish writing a play on which he has been working, a work, he prays, “*which can justify me and justify Thee as well, I need one more year. Grant me those days, Thou who art the centuries and time itself*” (160). Seconds before his execution, God grants him his wish. With a drop of rain rolling slowly down his cheek, “the weapons converged upon Hladik, but the men who were to kill him were immobile. The sergeant’s arm seemed to freeze, eternal, in an inconclusive gesture. On one of the paving stones of the yard, a bee cast a motionless shadow. As though in a painting, the wind had died” (161).

The physical world around Hladik stands still but not his consciousness — his mind keeps working. Composing by memory — the play is in verse — he is able to finish his work in a year’s time. “He completed his play; only a single epithet was left to be decided upon now. He found it; the drop of water rolled down his cheek. He began a maddened cry, he shook his head, and the fourfold volley felled him” (162).

The correspondences with Macedonio’s “Surgery of Psychic Removal” are evident. Both Cósimo Schmitz and Jaromir Hladik are facing execution (the first by the electric chair, the latter by firing squad). A fantastic alteration in the usual conception of time spares both the horror of the last moment. Without a future or a past, Cósimo is spared the desperate struggle of one strapped to the chair — he “died as if an ordinary morning of his eternal present were about to begin” (62). Thanks to the stoppage of time, Hladik is spared the full horror of standing in front of the firing squad and dies with the fulfillment of having achieved his last aspiration: to finish his play.

I don’t know if it has been mentioned that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* begins with an ingenious re-writing of the device used by in Borges “The Secret Miracle” (the stoppage of time) and ends with another fantastic device that Borges used in his fiction, and which he mentions in his lecture on “Fantastic Literature” (the work within the work). This is how the novel begins in Gregory Rabassa’s translation: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (1).²²

This sentence plays a key function in the complex relation between the novel's plot and story (a distinction that the Russian formalists called the *fabula* and *sjuzet*). Time does not actually stop at the beginning of the plot, but the bullets of the firing squad take a seemingly endless time to reach Colonel Aureliano Buendía while his mind takes him, and the reader, on a long remembrance that spreads into the story's meandering paths. It is only in chapter seven (more than one hundred pages into the novel) that we find out that, aided by his son, José Arcadio, Colonel Aureliano Buendía had survived the firing squad. As he faced the firing squad, the Colonel

“saw himself again in short pants, wearing a tie around his neck, and he saw his father leading him into the tent on a splendid afternoon, and he saw the ice. When he heard the shout he thought that it was the final command to the squad. He opened his eyes with a shudder of curiosity, expecting to meet the incandescent trajectory of the bullets, but he only saw Captain Roque Carnicero with his arms in the air and José Arcadio crossing the street with his fearsome shotgun ready to go off” (128-29).

And it is only much later, in chapter thirteen, when we witness the Colonel die, an old man urinating into a chestnut tree, his head pulled “in between his shoulders like a baby chick” (267).

One Hundred Years of Solitude ends with another of the devices identified by Borges. In the last pages, Aureliano Babilonia is able to decipher the parchments left behind by the gypsy Melquíades. The whole history of his family is cyphered in this manuscript and, by extension, also the book that we are reading: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Everything that happened has already been written, which means that everything repeats itself endlessly (the eternal return), or, as we find out in the last-line twist of the novel, that everything written “was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on Earth” (417).

Borges thought that interpolating of a work within a work was the “most literary” of all fantastic devices — and also one of the most astonishing, because, as he concludes in “Magias parciales del Quijote” (“Partial Magic in the *Quixote*,” 1949) “if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious” (*Labyrinths* 196). Macedonio is not interested in this kind of literary effect. This device, *strictu sensu*, is absent from his fiction. And yet, his writings are a spectacular showcase of tales within tales, of narratives interrupted by reflections and commentary, all of this intended to disrupt the illusion of continuity, to jolt the reader into reflective awareness.

In his last extant letter to Borges (May 1939), Macedonio tells Borges — whom he, until the end, liked to call *muchacho* (young man) — that what is superficial in Schopenhauer (a philosopher he valued more than any other) — is the lack of “a critique of Futureness.” And in the context of what he saw as the plurality and limited accidentally of the World, or Experience, he mentions an “*instantaneous* and perfectly *contiguous* sequence, attended by a perfectly *continuous* Attention that repeats itself always and single, that is, it pluralizes itself unchanged.”²³

“A critique of Futureness,” as we have seen, is the theme of “Surgery of Psychic Extraction.” What Macedonio writes at the end of his last letter to Borges is reminiscent of the theme of “El Aleph” (“The Aleph,” 1945), perhaps Borges’ most famous story. Longing for the memory of, Beatriz Viterbo, a beloved woman who has recently died, Borges, who is the story’s protagonist, is moved to befriend her first cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, and starts visiting him regularly in the house where Beatriz had lived with him.

Argentino is writing a seemingly endless pretentious poem, and Borges secretly detests him. Argentino finds out that there are plans to demolish his house. In an attempt to have Borges help stop the demolition, Argentino shows him a special treasure: an Aleph that he spotted in the house’s cellar when he was as a boy and which he continues to see. ¿An Aleph? Yes, “one of the points in space that contain all points [...], the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist” (280-81).

Timelessness is part of Borges’ instantaneous and overwhelming experience of looking at the Aleph. “In that unbounded moment, I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts; none amazed me so much as the fact that all occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency” (282-83). The place that contains all places is the mirror image of moment that contains all moments. The Aleph is thus a way of applying to the category of space an idea that Macedonio applies to the category of time in “Surgery” — the spatial equivalent of what, in his metaphysics, Macedonio calls an “infinite simultaneity of states in the privileged present” (*Vigilia* 206).

“It is possible, even in life,” writes Borges, that Macedonio “experienced some of the many forms of eternity” (Martínez 268). Jo Anne Engelbert suggests that “Macedonio’s metaphysics [was] nourished [...] by what certainly appear to be mystical experiences, [which] contest the most fundamental assumptions of Western thought” (*The Narrative* 65). If we think of the many ways in which Borges has expressed the theme of finding the locus of infinite knowledge, we are left to wonder if something similar could also be said of him.

Maybe, but in Borges the value of an aesthetic act supersedes the endless wealth of a mystical all-knowing. Having instantaneous access to infinite knowledge doesn’t mean that one will make something beautiful out of it — or that it will lead one will be ethical. Carlos Argentino had been mining the Aleph for years as a source for an epic poem in which he “proposed to versify the entire planet” (277) — a poem that Borges cannot swallow.

Among the infinite things that Carlos Argentino’s Aleph had shown Borges was that Carlos had been having a sexual relationship his cousin, Beatriz.²⁴ When Borges comes out of the trance of witnessing the Aleph, Carlos Argentino asks him anxiously. “You did see it?” [...] “See it clearly? In color and everything?” That is, writes Borges, when “instantly, I conceived my revenge:”

In the most kindly sort of way — manifestly pitying, nervous, evasive — I thanked Carlos Argentino Daneri for the hospitality of his cellar and urged him to take advantage of the demolition of his house to remove himself from the pernicious influences of the metropolis, which no one — believe me, no one! — can be immune to. I refused, with gentle firmness, to discuss the Aleph; I clasped him by both shoulders as I took my leave and told him again that the country — peace and quiet, you know — was the very best medicine one could take. (284)

Nowhere is the value of beauty over infinite knowledge more eloquently expressed than in one of Borges' greatest poems. In the openly autobiographical "Mateo XXV: 30" ("Matthew XXV: 30," 1964), Borges is standing on a bridge in Plaza Constitución overlooking a hectic train station. Suddenly, time stops and he witnesses everything simultaneously — an experience he recounts using a device that Leo Spitzer called chaotic enumeration.²⁵

The last lines of the poem suggest a few things: that everything is in the making, that art is the goal of this creative process, and that a single good poem, "the poem," may surpass the value of revelation, of the mystical experience:

You have used up the years; the years have used you up,
and still you have not written the poem.²⁶

The Road to Cortázar

Stylistically, Borges and Macedonio are worlds apart. Borges writes in a transparent and relatively easily translatable prose. His texts are tightly constructed and have a formal, sometimes spherical coherence. Macedonio's prose, in contrast, pushes the envelope of our modes of reading. Borges considered him "a mediocre writer, because he used confusing and difficult to read language"²⁷ Borges does not mention that Macedonio's prose is intentionally disconcerting in its ceaseless displacement of conventions both in language as well as in our customary understanding of the world — which our language reflects.

As I had been told that Macedonio was Borges' teacher, when I first read him I kept looking for echoes of Borges in his books. Instead, what I first heard were echoes of other writers. The relation with Borges would take longer to process. Cortázar came to mind immediately, and also, surprisingly, Octavio Paz. I had read recently *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 1950) and something in Macedonio's metaphysics sounded familiar. Then I remembered:

At the beginning of his book, Paz uses the idea of "the bewilderment of being" ("el asombro de ser").²⁸ Comparing the crisis of adolescence to the self-questioning stage of developing nations, Paz writes: "El adolescente se asombra de ser," "The adolescent experiences the bewilderment of being."²⁹ Maybe this is a coincidence, but there are clear correspondences between Macedonio's idea of art and the aesthetics of writers like Paz and Cortázar.

Cortázar writes that during a visit to New Delhi (around 1969), Octavio Paz gave him an admirable essay on Marcel Duchamp. "And there I found," Cortázar writes, "another mention of [Duchamp's] sojourn in Buenos Aires. Duchamp had told Octavio that he had spent a few months in our capital [...] and did not meet a single 'artist, poet, or thinking individual' in Buenos Aires. 'How unfortunate,' Octavio replied, 'I can't think of any temperament that would have been closer to yours than Macedonio Fernández's'"³⁰

In the last footnote of "The Surgery of Psychic Extraction" (which was first published by *Sur* in 1941), Macedonio anticipates the structure of Cortázar's *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1963). "In the meantime," he writes, "without saying it, I'm declaring myself a

writer for the skip-around reader [“lector salteado”], because while other writers wish to be read attentively, I instead write inattentively” (*Papeles* 214).

Hopscotch’s famous “Table of Instructions” offers the reader two main paths to read the novel. One starts with Chapter 1 and ends with Chapter 57, leaving behind a number of “dispensable” chapters. The other reading reorganizes the order of the chapters into a different, more complete, sequence that starts with Chapter 73 and ends in the loop of Chapters 131 – 58 – 131. These are the two main paths, but the novel is open to countless other itineraries. In all but the first, the reader is invited to skip around — this is one of the mechanisms Cortázar uses to generate an active, participatory mode of reading.

This is strikingly similar to Macedonio’s theory of the reader in *The Museum of Eterna’s Novel* (1967). About halfway through this novel — which, we must keep in mind, was published a year after the publication of *Hopscotch* (1966) — Macedonio dedicates the book to the Skip-Around Reader (before placing a curse on the Orderly Reader): “I dedicate my novel to you, Skip-Around Reader; you, in turn, should be grateful to me for a new sensation: reading in order. On the other hand, the orderly reader will experience a new way of skipping; the orderly reading of a skipping-around author” (*The Museum* 119).

Macedonio reminds us of Cortázar in other ways, especially of the Cortázar of *Historias de cronopios y de famas* (*Cronopios and Famas*, 1962) and *Un tal Lucas* (*A Certain Lucas*, 1979). As I read *Newcomer’s Papers* I soon heard echoes of those slippery, nonconforming creatures that are now internationally popular: the cronopios. In fact, it is not at all unlikely that Macedonio had a hand at letting them loose. They remind us of the way Macedonio mocks the *rigor mortis* of literary circles. Or, for instance, his reflections on losing a button:

I have studied the time it takes a button that falls off to hide behind the leg of the bed until its owner leaves. It’s only then that it proceeds to climb up onto the roof of the wardrobe. I have studied that time. When you lose a button you should first look for it under the bed and only later on top of the wardrobe. It takes time to get up there, you know. (*Papeles* 19)

“Who will rescue us from seriousness?” Cortázar wondered as he considered Latin American Literature.³¹ Few have done more so than Macedonio. A valid comparison can be made between Macedonio Fernández and Mark Twain. Both are popularly remembered today more for their humor than for their philosophy. Both had a formidable impact on the literature of the Americas. But while Twain’s humor and literature were in demand during his life, Macedonio’s writings would take longer to be known.

Since I write under the depressive insecurity of existing,” he writes, “enough for today of this literature which may be posthumous. I’m more prudent than Mark Twain, the only other case.” In a footnote Macedonio adds an apocryphal anecdote probably in reference to Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881): “One of Twain’s great merits is that he remained cheerful despite the terrible misfortune in which he had to live all his years after the age of eight, when bathing with his extremely similar, twin brother, one of them drown, and it has never been possible to determine which of the two it was” (*Papeles* 120).

Much of what Macedonio wrote, as I mentioned, would turn out to be posthumous. In a way, he, too, was born posthumously.³² Despite all the recent interest on his life and work, Macedonio remains a mystery. In one of *Newcomer's Papers*, he makes a joke about the smallness of his appearance that hides a metaphysical riddle: “My handicap makes it seem that, wherever I am, I not yet there, a questioned existent, a being ‘there, but,’ and always a ‘new comer’ arriving from Nothingness — even less than arriving: because for one who remains in Nothingness, arriving is too positive” (83).

All of Macedonio’s writings are messages from a newcomer to the now, from a man who has managed to keep the child’s wonder of perception. “Nothing, absolutely nothing,” he asserts, “can experience add to the phenomenon, man to the newborn” (*Vigilia* 15). If *The Museum of Eterna's Novel*, his lifelong narrative, doesn’t seem to ever really start, it is because Macedonio’s starting never ends.

There is nothing to finish because nothing finishes: Being is the only and eternal phenomenon. “The only deaths that man knows,” Macedonio writes, “are those which he survives: deep sleep, fainting, and the many unperceived every day instances in which nothing is felt or thought” (*Vigilia* 66). Macedonio spent his last years with his son, the writer Adolfo de Obieta, who tells that by the end of his life his father felt he lacked nothing and had everything to spare (Obieta 12). Death, he said, was a transit, a mere shedding of “the overcoat,” as he called the body.³³

Macedonio reminds us that paradise is our birthright. It is here and now, for the bewilderment of each newcomer. The professor who introduced me to Macedonio once held a book over his desk and dropped it. “What’s fantastic,” he said, “is not that the book stays floating in midair. What’s fantastic is that it floats.”

And paradise is lost when its wonder is fogged by conventions and convictions — those worn out coins that are passed daily from hand to hand. But if you happen to miss being awake for the dream of creation, you can reclaim it. There are many ways to do so. Among them is the path of signs — the path of reflection and imagination, of writing, *la escritura*. Macedonio maintained that one could obtain perfect states of meditation “by way of words, as strange as it seems, for logic is nothing but the fruit and reflection of a mental structure fact” (*Vigilia* 45).

If you choose to follow this path, be warned: you may find yourself climbing a steep mountain of symbols. And if you succeed to go over its peak, worry not if on the other side the journey turns out to be yet another preface, for prefaces are the destination, auguries of new beginnings and new mountains. So if you are in a rush to get there, as Macedonio would say, maybe it’s better if you stay home.

Notes

1. The editions that followed the 1929 edition of *Papeles de Recienvenido* incorporated additional texts by Macedonio. The book that came to my hands was the 1967 edition by Centro Editor de América Latina. Unless otherwise indicated, all future references to *Papeles* are to this edition and all translations of Spanish texts are mine.
2. “Macedonio Fernández” 113. Translation by Jo Ann Engelbert.

3. Encouraged by his friends, Macedonio also contributed pieces to newspapers and journals such as *Martín Fierro*, *Proa*, and *Sur*.
4. I have included the two large critical editions of *Museum* in the list of works cited.
5. See Chapters 7 and 8 of Abós's *Biografía Imposible*. For a link between Macedonio's writings and his political views see also Federico Fridman's "Deciphering Macedonio: Macedonio Fernández's Project to Found and Alternative Community in *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna (Primera Novela Buena)*."
6. "Macedonio Fernández, 1874–1952" 146.
7. "Every writer creates his own precursors," wrote Borges in "Kafka and His Precursors." *Obras Completas* 712.
8. See Ballvé, "The Man Who Invented Borges." Twenty-five years his elder, Macedonio Fernández was certainly Borges' teacher in many ways.
9. It is hard to avoid noting here the correspondence with Victor Shklovsky's notion of "de-familiarization" in "Art as Device" (1917). Macedonio's notion is also closely related to an aspect of the phenomenological tradition mentioned in the next footnote.
10. We may establish correspondences here with what Anthony J. Steinbock calls "reflective attentiveness," which he tentatively compares to what the early Husserl situated "in the ego's freedom" and later "in *thaumazein* [sense of wonder]." It may also be linked, Steinbock suggests, with "the fundamental mood of *Scheu* or awe — to modify a contention that Heidegger makes in his *Beiträge*" (41).
11. *Vigilia* 88, 1n.
12. Quoted in Engelbert, *Macedonio: Selected Writings* 25.
13. This is a remarkably similar conclusion to the one advanced by Nagarjuna, the influential second century Buddhist philosopher. According to Vicente Fatone, Nagarjuna concludes that: "Being is empty, beings are empty. Non-being is empty, non-beings are empty" (92).
14. The story was first translated by Edith Grossman and published in an issue of *Review* in 1973. It is republished in Engelbert's edition of *Macedonio: Selected Writings in Translation*. My quotes from the story come are from the latter.
15. The image brings to mind the horrid spectacles in the history of surgery before anesthesia, mocking the advances of surgical medicine.
16. *Papeles* 213. My translation. Grossman's translation only contains two of the story's six footnotes.
17. "Macedonio Fernández, 1874–1952" 146. Originally published in *Sur* in 1952, this text can also be found in the 2010 edition of *Papeles* by Corregidor.
18. "The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth or even plausibility — they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature" ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" 74). Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Borges's stories are from Hurley's *Collected Fictions*.
19. I have kept the translation under which the title generally appears. Hurley prefers "Funes, His Memory."
20. "Everness," *Obras* 927. Both poems were published in *El otro, el mismo (The Other, the Same, 1964)*.
21. Carlos Alberto Passos wrote a summary of Borges' lecture for the Montevideo newspaper *El País*: "Sobre 'La literatura fantástica', disertó ayer Jorge Luis Borges." Monegal used this account for his essay, "Jorge Luis Borges y la literatura fantástica." Some of the following examples are mine.
22. The idea of "discovering ice" reminds us Macedonio's notion of "of knowing anew," of seeing something familiar as if for the first time.
23. This letter was published first in *Correspondencia* (20) and later in *Epistolario* (402). My translation considers both versions.
24. Julio Ortega points out that the suggestion of incest was stronger in an earlier version of the story, where Carlos and Beatriz are brother and sister. See Ortega's prologue to his critical edition of "*El Aleph*" (15).
25. Leo Spitzer's essay on *Chaotic Enumeration* begins with a quote from Section 4 of Walt Whitman's poem *Enfans d'Adam*. A Spanish translation of Spitzer's book was published in Buenos Aires in 1945.
26. "Has gastado los años y te han gastado, / Y todavía no has escrito el poema" (*Obras* 874).
27. Quoted in Martínez 264.
28. *Vigilia* 87. "El asombro de ser" is the title of one of Macedonio's essays in *We Are Not Always Awake*. My translation.

29. This is a rather difficult phrase to translate. Lysander Kemp, the translator of this chapter in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, renders it as “[the adolescent] is astonished at the fact of being” (9).
30. *Around the Day* 245-46.
31. *La vuelta al día* 54.
32. I’m using Nietzsche, memorable dictum in the foreword of *The Anti-Christ* (1888): “This book belongs to the very few. Perhaps none of them is even living yet: Some men are born posthumously.”
33. Obieta 23. In his poem Elena Lovelydeath (“Elena Bellamuerte”), written after the death of his wife, he compares her death to “a quiet wave returning from the beach to the wide bosom” (Fue tu partir así suave triunfando / como se aquieta ola que vuelve / de la rivera al seno vasto) (*Museo*. Ed. Fernández Moreno 137).

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