Borges’s Baroque Barbarians

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It is a truth almost universally acknowledged that Jorge Luis Borges is not a baroque writer. Indeed, without even thinking of Borges, one may argue as well that the baroque as a critical category, in what one may view as a baroque permutation of sorts, has progressed, to invoke Heinrich Wölfflin, from clearness to unclearness, or from being a closed form to becoming a (precariously) open one. Focusing on form, Wölfflin circumscribed his view of the baroque to the period in European art history following the High Renaissance, but the baroque took flight and descended on what we now call Latin America, where, in the words of Lois Parkinson Zamora, it transmuted “from a European colonizing instrument encoding Catholic and monarchical ideologies to an instrument of resistance to those same structures, and thus an instrument of postcolonial self-definition” (The Inordinate Eye xvi). How this came about is the subject of Zamora’s masterful study of the New World baroque and Latin American narrative fiction, which covers both

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1 In Principles of Art History (1915), Wölfflin outlines and discusses five pairs of concepts that mark the transit from the Renaissance to the Baroque: the developments from the linear to the painterly; from plane to recession; from closed to open form; and the absolute and relative clarity of the subject (14-16). But that is only the beginning of the term’s long trajectory in the analysis of culture, which includes, to name just a few, studies as varied as René Wellek’s “The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship” (1945, postscript 1962), Roberto González Echevarría’s Celestina’s Brood: Continuities of the Baroque in Spanish and Latin American Literature (1993), Irleneur Chiampi’s Barroco e modernidade: Ensaios sobre literatura latino-americana (1998), all of which are insightful literary-historical considerations and deployments of the baroque; José Antonio Maravall’s La cultura del barroco: Análisis de una estructura histórica (1975) and Gilles Deleuze’s Le Pli: Leibnitz et le baroque (1988), in which the baroque enters new analytical and conceptual terrains; and Robert Harbison’s Reflections on Baroque (2000), which moves from churches in Goa to a museum by Frank Gehry with great agility.

2 See also Greene, Salgado, and Zamora’s exciting “New World Baroque, Neobaroque, Brut Barroco,” in which, departing from a champagne advertisement in a Spanish magazine, she devises yet another offspring of the baroque to analyze the cultural formations of Mexico City.
literary and visual cultures, and several centuries of history, by analyzing such topics as Quetzalcoatl and the Virgin of Guadalupe, prehispanic codices and the murals of Diego Rivera, as well as Frida Kahlo and Gabriel García Márquez, plus the usual suspects of the Cuban neobaroque—Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy, who coined the term—to conclude with none other than Borges and what Zamora calls his “Neobaroque illusionism.”

Borges’s appearance in the closing chapter of this continental survey is somewhat surprising, given that his native Argentina is usually excluded from the list of Latin American countries—Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia—where the historical seventeenth- and eighteenth-century baroque is an observable element of visual culture, or where theories of the neobaroque—again, one is reminded of Cuba—play an important role in literary self-fashioning. Borges, specifically, is often read as an author whose unerring precision and transparency are, if nothing else, the antithesis of the baroque. If the teaching of Latin American fiction ever resorts to the art-historical method of displaying two images side by side, one can easily envision a slide showing Carpentier’s painterly verbiage next to another slide displaying Borges’s absolutely linear clarity. Despite these long-established assumptions, Zamora’s nuanced analysis of Borges is altogether convincing. As she herself asks and answers, “Am I arguing that Borges is above all (or

3 On the baroque in Cuban architecture, painting and everyday practices, see Kaup. For Argentina, an exception would be the neobarroso rioplatense as coined by Nestor Perlongher; see Gundermann. Consider as well the continued journey of the baroque, across the Andes into Chile, in the neobarrocho of Pedro Lemebel, a proliferating (and queer) cartography described thus by Soledad Bianchi: “su obra [Lemebel’s] podrías considerarse una raicilla más de una red entre cuyos nudos pueden reconocerse a Lezama Lima, Sarduy, Perlongher: cada uno a su modo, con sus particularidades, en sus escenarios, en sus territorios, pero todos espejeando, reflejando y haciendo reflejar, provocando y acogiendo ecos, deslizándose desde Cuba, La Habana-Paris, a Buenos Aires y, en su navegación, atracar con las santiaguinas orillas del Mapocho; delineando un mapa otro, diferente y de la diferencia. Fluyendo del Barroco, al Neo-Barroco (americano ya), al Neobarroso rioplatense, al Neobarrocho” (her emphasis). On the baroque and queer desire, see also Oropesa.
only) Baroque? Borges always included the means to deconstruct any single reading of his work, so to insist upon a homogenized ‘Borges barroco’ would be folly” (237).

Resorting to the two possible etymologies of the term, she is also careful to delineate what kind of baroque creator Borges can appear to be: “If Carpentier and Kahlo and García Márquez are part of the irregular pearl lineage of the Baroque (sensuous, emotional, theatrical), Jorge Luis Borges is of the syllogistic branch, the cerebral, logical side of the Baroque” (235). I also concur with Zamora that the recognition of a baroque side to Borges’s writing will enrich both our understanding of Borges and of the baroque, and I too, by looking at “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva,” would like to attempt a baroque reading of Borges. Yet this exercise, instead of confirming the value of the baroque as a critical paradigm, may work to expose its status as artifice—the possibility that the baroque in Latin America, or at least important aspects thereof, may well be little more than an illusion, or illusionism.

Departing from the limited notion of the baroque as just a period or style, the colonial baroque and its twentieth-century neobaroque descendants resurface in Latin America in a substantially more powerful conceptualization, for its various critical and theoretical deployments are often linked to mestizaje and hybridity, which, in turn, lie at the heart of much of the established discussion about Latin American culture. Consider the façade of the church of San Lorenzo, in Potosí, Bolivia. Its splendidly intricate ornamentation is not just an example of baroque architecture as generally understood on both sides of the Atlantic. It is something substantially more important, for as Zamora

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[4] The two widely discussed etymologies mentioned by Zamora link the word baroque to the adjectives used to describe pearls of irregular shape in Portuguese and Spanish, and to a mnemonic term employed in medieval scholasticism (233-34). For an account of the transit of the baroque from art history to literary studies, perhaps first executed by Wölfflin himself in his evaluation of Ariosto and Tasso in Renaissance und Barock (1888), see Wellek 73.
and others before her contend, the apparent fusion of native and imported motifs visible on the façade emerges as a baroque emblem of resistance. In this regard, the exalted description of San Lorenzo in José Lezama Lima’s “La curiosidad barroca,” the second essay in La expresión americana (1957), his visionary meditation on culture in the New World, is hardly atypical:

En los preciosos trabajos del indio Kondori, en cuyo fuego originario tanto podrían encontrar el banal orgullo de los arquitectos contemporáneos, se observa la introducción de una temeridad, de un asombro: la indiátide. En la portada de San Lorenzo, de Potosí, en medio de los angelotes larvales, de las colgantes hojas de piedra, de las llaves que como galeras navegan por la piedra labrada, aparece, suavuosa, hierática, una princesa incaica, con todos sus atributos de poderío y desdén. En un mundo teológico cerrado, con mucho aún del furor a lo divino tan medioeval, aquella figura, aquella temeridad de la piedra obligada a escoger símbolos, ha hecho arder todos los elementos para que la princesa india pueda desfilar en el cortejo de las alabanzas y las referencias. (305; his emphasis)

In his opulently theatrical manner, Lezama refers to the two columns in the semblance of women that flank the façade, but he does not call this formation a cariátide, or caryatid, as one would expect, but an indiátide, by which he means an Inca princess whose apparition bespeaks the persistence of native civilizations even in the midst of Spanish domination. Baroque aesthetics, then, functions as a powerful element in what Lezama terms the contraconquista, that is, Latin America’s cultural self-assertion against the
forces of empire. In Octavio Paz’s study of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the baroque emerges, once again, as an important historical category, one whose origin in Europe and subsequent transplantation to the Indies coincided with the birth and rise of mestizos and, especially, criollos as two distinct groups in viceregal Mexico. For Paz, the baroque vision—the “carácter extremado” (86) of the Mexican baroque vis-à-vis its tamer Spanish models—corresponds naturally with the general temperament of these new groups that had not existed in Spain and were, in fact, a New World phenomenon. The baroque proclivity for the strange and the marvelous was a familiar thing to them, and Paz concludes somewhat dramatically: “La singularidad estética del barroco mexicano correspondía a la singularidad histórica y existencial de los criollos. Entre ellos y el arte barroco había una relación inequívoca, no de causa a efecto, sino de afinidad y coincidencia. Respiraban con naturalidad en el mundo de la extrañeza porque ellos mismos eran y se sabían seres extraños” (86). Again, Paz’s captivating vision, like Lezama’s before him, may be a product of his literary imagination as much as it is a historically verifiable fact.

The baroque, then, at least in Latin America, emerges as an offspring of empire, the strange product of imperial clashes and crossbreeding. If imperial malevolence cannot be denied, the baroque itself rises above the conflagration as a natural site of fertility and creation. This positive vision was not always been the case, as even the

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5 More recently, however, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, focusing on the art-historical lineage visible on the façade, has convincingly argued that the two caryatids are really not indigenous women, but rather two angels formally related to the military angels of Andean colonial art—therefore, less an instance of empowered mestizaje than yet another assertion of imperial mastery and control over the native populations worshipping at San Lorenzo: “Analysis of San Lorenzo, a supposed masterpiece of the mestizo style, thus calls into question any inferences that indigenous belief systems operate in it” (299). For an investigation of the term contraconquista in Lezama Lima, see Parkinson Zamora 370, n 11. For a study of La expresión americana in the context of Latin American intellectual history and cultural theory, see Levinson.

6 On criollos and the baroque, see Moraña.
European baroque was often dismissed as proliferating, extravagant or decadent, or simply as bad taste—and Latin America’s baroque was, to paraphrase Sor Juana, the worst of all. Significantly, in René Wellek’s long, erudite article on the concept of the baroque, there is no mention of Latin America, suggesting, perhaps, that the practice of writing on that side of the Atlantic could be subsumed into the larger corpus of the Spanish baroque—a derivative province at best, until the rise of the barroco de Indias as a literary-historical category. In Latin America itself, one must remark on the ties that seem to bind the critical discourse with the practice of literature. Some of the most passionate apologies of the Latin American baroque were penned by authors who saw themselves, or whom one may regard, as twentieth-century pinnacles of the neobaroque. This seems to be especially true in the case of Cuban literary culture, where Carpentier, Lezama Lima and Sarduy, perhaps unwittingly, authored essays that work as critical tools to explain, or even consecrate, their fiction or poetry. If Latin America asserts itself as a baroque continent, and one happens to be a Neobaroque author, then one is well poised to become an important literary figure.7

Writing from his own private antipodes, Borges, as I said, is hardly ever situated within the baroque, even though his literary beginnings showcase a style that various critics, including a very critical reader named Borges, have often labeled and deplored as baroque. Consider the initial sentence of “Menoscabo y grandeza de Quevedo,” an essay first published in Revista de Occidente (1924) and reprinted in Inquisiciones (1925):

Hay la aventura personal del hombre Quevedo: el tropel negro y

7 On the ties that bind authors and critics in Latin American literary culture, see González Echevarría, Myth and Archive ix-xi. This practice, of course, is hardly unique to Cuba or the rest of Latin America. In the context of the baroque and its European equivalencies, one is reminded of T.S. Eliot’s lectures on the metaphysical poets and his implicit linkage of them with modern poetry, such as that of Eliot himself.
desgarrado que eslabonaron con dureza sus días, el encono que hubo en
sus ojos al traspasar con sus miradas el mundo, la numerosa erudición que
requirió de tanto libro ya lejano, la salacidad que desbarató su estoicismo
como una turbia hoguera, su ahínco en traducir la España apicarada y
cucañista de entonces en simulacros de grandeza apolínea, su aversión a
lechuzos, alguaciles y leguleyos, sus tardeceres, su prisión, su chacota:
todo su sentir de hombre que ya conoció el doble encontronazo de la vida
segura y la insegura muerte. (43)

Arguably, Borges’s extreme diction and strange choices—“tardeceres” instead of
“atadeceres,” for instance—in this labyrinthine sentence is first and foremost an homage
to Quevedo that seeks to mimic the author’s style. Yet the same rhetoric of “Menoscabo
y grandeza de Quevedo” pervades all essays in Inquisiciones, including those dealing
with literatura gauchesca, the works of James Joyce or Norah Lange, even an essay on
Buenos Aires that features such eccentric constructs as diurnalidad and lapidación (87).
Interestingly, the book also contains a very baroque essay on Sir Thomas Browne, the
seventeenth-century author whose name reappears at the end of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis
Tertius,” a story whose narrator, facing the end of the world as we know it, seeks refuge
at the melancholy hotel in Adrogué and spends his time working on “una indecisa
traducción quedediana (que no pienso dar a la imprenta) del Urn Burial de Browne” (I:
443)—an invisible work, as Efraín Kristal would have it, that also happens to be a
tantalizing neobaroque gesture at the story’s dénouement.9

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8 On Borges and Quevedo, see Maurer.
9 On the possible meanings of Browne’s text in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” see Kristal 91-93.
Borges disavowed his baroque phase, and, as is well known, books from the early years, such as *Inquisiciones* and *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926), were reprinted only after his death. As he told James Irby in an interview: “Yo antes escribía de una manera barroca, muy artificiosa. […] Sentía la necesidad de demostrar que sabía muchas palabras raras y que sabía combinarlas de un modo sorprendente” (qtd. by Alazraki, *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* 152-53). In this context, it is telling that, at the end of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the narrator’s translation of Browne’s text should remain unpublished. Indeed, there is a certain repression of the baroque in the Borges text, one that informs even some of Borges’s sharpest readers, including Alazraki, who believes that the author’s rejection of his early writings is tied to their connection not with the baroque, but with modernismo (152-53), a critical gesture that by means of negation brings about a second, arguably more permanent, vanishing of the baroque. Yet, despite these desertions, the ghost of the baroque remains an uncanny revenant in Borges’s work, sometimes in a form that mirrors some of the reflections on the baroque that proliferate elsewhere in the literary culture of Latin America. It is this afterlife of the baroque in Borges, inherently bound to the ruinous fate of languages and empires, that I would like to probe in “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva.”

First published in *Sur* in 1945 and republished in *El Aleph* (1949), the story is one of those middle-period texts that display what Alazraki enthusiastically describes as Borges’s “prosa ajustada, precisa, clara, tan clásica, tan moderna y tan suya” (167-68)—in other words, so different from the baroque lapses and relapses of Carpentier or Lezama Lima. Indeed, in a magnificently transparent style—that “estilo tan estilo,” as Amado
Alonso would have it (qtd. by Alazraki 167)—the brief tale of the warrior and the captive contains two stories in one: first, that of Droctulf, a Germanic warrior who descends on the Italian peninsula to fight Rome, yet willingly embraces its civilization upon first seeing the city of Ravenna; and, second, that of a young English girl from Yorkshire who, in nineteenth-century Argentina, is abducted by Indians, yet ends up cherishing what many would describe as their barbaric costumes. As Alazraki points out in his study of the specular make-up of Borges’s tales, the story’s two distinct halves really make up a chiasmus: “el bárbaro que abraza la cultura europea y la mujer europea que opta por la barbarie” (Versiones, inversiones, reversiones 55). Although Alazraki does not say as much, mirrors and chiasmi lie very much at the heart of the baroque. This alone would not make Borges a baroque writer, yet it points to a certain order of things whereby Borges and, say, Diego de Velázquez may emerge as kindred spirits of sorts. In this regard, specular images in Borges may well be seen as both classic and baroque, in the sense that they partake of a baroque mindset even as they are composed in a seamlessly classic manner whose measured diction belies extravagance. Consider, for instance, the well-balanced enumerations that the narrator, in a cool progression not readily perceived as baroque, employs to describe the truly antithetical worlds that respectively seduce each of the two characters. Upon arriving in Ravenna, Droctulft beholds the radiant signs of civilization: “Ve el día y los cipreses y el mármol. Ve un conjunto que es múltiple sin desorden; ve una ciudad, un organismo hecho de estatuas, de templos, de jardines, de habitaciones, de gradas, de jarrones, de capiteles, de espacios

10 Compare Alonso’s phrase “estilo tan estilo” to Carpentier’s notion of “estilo sin estilo” to describe the accidentally baroque character of Havana’s architectural fabric in La ciudad de las columnas: “la superimposición de estilos, la innovación de estilos, buenos y malos, más malos que buenos, fueron creando a La Habana ese ‘estilo sin estilo’ que a la larga, por proceso de simbiosis, de amalgama, se erige en un barroquismo peculiar que hace las veces de estilo” (21). See also Kaup 157-58.
regulares y abiertos” (I: 558). In the story’s second half, conversely, a character who happens to be Borges’s grandmother acts as focalizer and is able to imagine various signs of barbarism: “los toldos de cuero de caballo, las hogueras de estiércol, los festines de carne chamuscada o de vísceras crudas, las sigilosas marchas al alba; el asalto de los corrales, el alarido y el saqueo; la guerra, el caudaloso arreo de las haciendas por jinetes desnudos, la poligamia, la hediondez y la magia” (I: 559).

The two pictures cannot be more different. Thinking in terms of ekphrasis, one can envision civilized Ravenna painted by the hand of Raphael, while the barbaric hinterland might originate in a Rembrandt transported to South America. But beyond these ephemeral filiations with the linear plane of the Renaissance and the painterly recession of the baroque, what seems to matter ultimately is the possible similitude of Borges’s passionate barbarians. In the narrator’s own words at the end of the text, the two stories that compose “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva” may be read as virtually the same story: “Acaso las historias que he referido son una sola historia. El anverso y el reverso de esta moneda son, para Dios, iguales” (I: 560). The narrator’s point is well taken, for, within the text’s economy and if viewed outside the specificity of their plots,, the warrior’s and the captive’s life journeys are parallel tales of cultural conversion, equal at least in the eyes if not of God, at least the reader. But beyond these personal stories, if one focuses on certain aspects of Borges’s narrative retruécano, another story may be discerned that concerns the fall of empires and the rise of new civilizations. It is, indeed, a story of warfare and captivity, but one in which these two ideas are intrinsically and productively coupled; even as one wages war against another people, one, regardless of victory or defeat, is captivated or seduced—or, in Spanish, conquistado—by one’s
enemy, thereby creating a space for the birth of new cultural forms. Borges’s text, I would argue, is about, and of, hybridity—a tale of imperial admixtures and personal intermixings that result in the birth of new cultural expressions whose apparently debased and impure nature resounds with some of the tenets of the Latin American baroque. This is also a story of linguistic evolution—from Latin into Italian, for instance, or from the “pure” English spoken in Yorkshire to an interlingual form of that tongue contaminated, so to speak, by the indigenous languages of Argentina. In these various sequences of corruption and regeneration, Borges’s seemingly perfect Spanish prose—the text itself of “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva”—rises as the visible, if elusive, emblem of post-imperial, or postcolonial, cultural victories.

The tale of Droctulft is set at the spatial and temporal limits of Roman domination over Europe. Like the English girl several centuries later, Droctulft lives out a story of migration to the south: “a través de una oscura geografía de selvas y de ciénagas, las guerras lo trajeron a Italia, desde las márgenes del Danubio y del Elba, y tal vez no sabía que iba al sur y tal vez no sabía que guerreaba contra el nombre romano” (I: 557). The phrase nombre romano to denote the Roman Empire is significant, for Droctulft’s passion for his new world clearly possesses a strangely moving linguistic sign. In this German’s Italian journey, the imperial words of Rome, even if they cannot be deciphered, conquer and rule his soul. Indeed, the warrior’s seduction is rooted in and framed by language: “Quizá le basta ver un solo arco, con una incomprensible inscripción en eternas letras romanas. Bruscamente lo ciega y lo renueva esa revelación, la Ciudad” (I: 558). Even his death, narrated shortly thereafter, is told through the lenses of language: “Muere, y en
la sepultura graban palabras que él no hubiera entendido” (I: 558). In fact, the text prominently displays the Latin inscription on Droctulft’s tomb:

Contempsit caros, dum nos amat ille, parentes

Hanc patriam reputans esse, Ravenna, suam. (I: 558)

As readers of Spanish can feel, this classical Latin, which mournfully invokes Droctulft’s metamorphosis, will soon itself become transformed into another tongue. In the next paragraph, the story succinctly narrates the story of Latin’s corruption and eventual rebirth as the glorious language of Dante, a modification in which hybridity seems to play a major role: “Al cabo de unas cuantas generaciones, los longobardos que culparon al tránsfuga procedieron como él; se hicieron italianos, lombardos y acaso alguno de su sangre—Aldíger—pudo engendrar a quienes engendran al Alighieri…” (I: 558). Even if, through the lapses of empire, one language is lost, another one, equally magnificent in its literary possibilities and eventual triumphs, is born.

But what about the linguistic permutations of the captive girl in Argentina? If one is reminded here, as one almost inevitably must be, of Domingo F. Sarmiento’s Facundo (1845) and its aspirations for the future of the Argentine Republic, one cannot fail to detect in the woman’s speech a possible tale of immigration gone wrong—of European civilization defeated by native barbarism. Borges’s grandmother, also an Englishwoman, runs into the captive, and their uncanny meeting is as much about language decay and loss as it is about anything else:

Quizá las dos hermanas por un momento se sintieron hermanas, estaban lejos de su isla querida y en un increíble país. Mi abuela enunció alguna
pregunta; la otra respondió con dificultad, buscando las palabras y repitiéndolas, como asombrada de un antiguo sabor. Haría quince años que no hablaba el idioma natal y no le era fácil recuperarlo. Dijo que era de Yorkshire, que sus padres emigraron a Buenos Aires, que los había perdido en un malón, que la habían llevado los indios y que ahora era mujer de un capitanejo, a quien ya había dado dos hijos y que era muy valiente. Eso lo fue diciendo en un inglés rústico, entreverado de araucano o de pampa, y detrás del relato se vislumbraba una vida feral. (I: 559)

If behind her story one can indeed easily envision a wild life, behind the intensity of Borges’s neatly crafted prose one can also hear the captive’s own tongue and breathless speech, signalled by the rapid succession of conjunctions. Unlike Droctulft the civilized barbarian, the Englishwoman has gone native, and her own fascination with abomination may be read as part and parcel of a certain discourse in which European cultural norms vanish as they reach the heart of continents—or the uttermost part of the old Spanish empire, an empty place like Argentina. In the aftermath of independence, and despite the vast numbers of English migrants that helped turn the country into Britain’s so-called Fifth Dominion,11 Borges’s textual republic appears as a dismal realm of linguistic corruption and cultural decadence.

But that is not the end of the story. Strangely, in this double tale of cultural hybridity, the language of the text—a language born from Latin on the Iberian peninsula and reborn on its own in Spanish America as a literary tool—constitutes yet another episode in a story of death, regeneration and ultimate victory, a counterconquest of sorts. When she first appears, the young woman is described as “una muchacha india” (I: 558),

11 See Hennessy.
a fictional character whose mestizaje is not racial but culturally constructed—a verbal, not literary, indiátide. If her fictional biography stands against Sarmiento’s dreams for Argentina, Borges’s words, one could argue (as some have), bespeak the triumph of European cultural forms over native ones. Yet, for Borges’s work to work, I believe, the ghostly English-Indian woman must appear intact, and her strange tale of mixing and hybridity, perhaps paradoxically, must ultimately define the text’s seamless form. In this brave new world of Borges, such a strange being stands as a mirror on which the text itself can see reflected its own seemingly tenuous, yet crucial, bonds with the nation’s—or the continent’s—history of mestizaje. A gap may well emerge between the woman’s interlingual locutions and the text’s unblemished surface, but this gap—a baroque space, no doubt—may well be yet another metaphor for the various threads that make up Latin America’s cultural fabric.

Without claiming that Borges is a neobaroque postcolonial writer, one can still detect in some of his writings a quality of feeling that arguably bespeaks a certain affinity with those cultural theories put forth about the work of the baroque in Latin America. The anxious equilibrium among antithetical pairs, or those cultural forms that playfully disappear and reappear under new guises, are germane to baroque sensibilities, and there is at least one text that tells a story of old empires and new cultures. Delicately, however, Borges’s work teaches readers a lesson of a different kind, one which also coincides with some of the practices of the baroque. Borges’s fiction invites us to behold the artifice of artifacts and reflect on the instability of all claims to truth when it comes to the subject of culture. In “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva,” there is hardly any crucial event whose meaning is not qualified by such words as imaginemos, quizá and acaso. At the end of
the story, Borges’s grandmother and the Indian woman from Yorkshire meet one more time, by chance, at a ranch where a man is slitting a sheep’s throat. A fearsome ritual, not unlike Christian communion, ensues: “Como en un sueño, pasó la india a caballo. Se tiró al suelo y bebió la sangre caliente. No sé si lo hizo porque ya no podía obrar de otro modo, o como un desafío y un signo” (I: 559). How does one read this act, this possible sign of both civilization and barbarism, which, after all, seems to have taken place “como en un sueño”? Indeed, the narrator’s self-conscious words of caution allow the reader to consider the text—and perhaps other stories we tell ourselves—as a realm of speculation and fugacity. All cultural narratives, then, including those that camouflage their tentative status through sweeping assertions and an absence of qualifiers, may turn out to be mere repositories of partial truths or untruths. The perfections of art, then, such as those that lie at the heart of Borges’s cerebral classic manner, openly expose the precariousness of their pronouncements—a belated form of desengaño or disillusion, perhaps, or yet another game of ser versus parecer. A similar instability, the text might argue, should perhaps enfold the assertions of political agendas and essentializing cultural theories. The workings of Borges’s text allow even the weakest of entities—these two highly civilized barbarians—to formulate, against all imperial commands, a better world for themselves. But, as if life were a spectacular baroque play, the lessons of these creatures or creations may turn out to be only a dream—or, then again, in an uncanny folding of sorts, they may hold a form of truth that wants acknowledgement.

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