

What is an author like Borges? Relation between "The Library of Babel" and the theory of Michel Foucault

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Abstract- Foucault talks about the relation of attribution, where Borges can be attributed everything related with things that he said or written. In this essay I define the actions in the name of an author like Borges, related to the category of the proper name. His name is more than a gesture, is part of his connexion between words and things. As Foucault says, Borges is the author of a novel and he is responsible for more than his own text. Borges use connections, different types of discourse and the author's position in a discursive field. The author's name may be relevant in certain circumstances and I would like to define that kind of circumstances in Borges.

Keywords- Library; Author; Philosophy; Names; Words; Things.

"Even now, when we study the history of a concept, a literary genre, or a branch of philosophy, these concerns assume a relatively weak and secondary position in relation to the solid and fundamental role of an author and his work".

Michel Foucault
(Foucault 115)

When Michel Foucault refers to the qualities of the author of a text, he asks two important questions: What is an author? What matter who's speaking? (Foucault 138) At that moment, Foucault simply wants to show that although the author exists, their presence in the works and, especially their function as someone who knows and writes, can be analyzed in a particular way. In the first place, Foucault refers to a fundamental ethical principle; for he mentions that what is important is not to verify the disappearance of the author, but to find his "disappearance -since Mallarmé, an event of our time-" (Foucault 120) where he exercises his function.

What would be the role of an author like Jorge Luis Borges? According to Foucault, the function of an author is something that has some questionable characteristics as the name of the author, the relation of appropriation between an author and his texts, the relation of attribution with what he has said and written, and the position of the author. I am not going to analyze all his texts, I am going to apply this perspective of Foucault to one of the stories of Borges called "The Library of Babel" (1944).

"The Library of Babel" is a story that speaks about a Library composed of hexagons, next to each other. Borges describes that the Library is infinite and represents

a necessary form of absolute space. In it there is the future eternity of the world that no one can ever doubt. In this Library are books that clarify the basic mystery of humanity: origin and time. In the volumes of the books of the Library everything is constantly stored, so that the books are multiplied, the hexagonal spaces are always reproducing and, although the hexagons are within a sphere, the sphere is constantly expanding.

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft, bounded by a low railing. From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below-one after another, endlessly. The arrangement of the galleries is always the same: Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon's six sides; the height of the bookshelves, floor to ceiling, is hardly greater than the height of a normal librarian. One of the hexagon's free sides opens onto a narrow sort of vestibule, which in turn opens onto another gallery, identical in fact to all. To the left and right of the vestibule are two tiny compartments. One is for sleeping, upright; the other, for satisfying one's physical necessities. Through this space, too, there passes a spiral staircase, which winds upward and downward into the remotest distance. In the vestibule there is a

mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances. (Borges 112)

Using this narration about Borges I want to establish what Borges can mean according to the thinking of Michel Foucault. I agree with Foucault that the author has disappeared. However, when we continue to mention an author, for various reasons, it is worth analyzing what is its usefulness within the thinking of the readers.

I would like to speak of Borges. According to Foucault, the name of an author exists; Flaubert, Proust and Kafka are obvious examples of this (Foucault 117). That name has the impossibility of be treating as a definite description and also the impossibility of be treating as a common proper name. I think that "Jorge Luis Borges" is not treated as a common proper name because of his interaction with spaces and places that are beyond literature. As in the case of philosophers, whose names become part of a philosophical theory, Borges includes in his stories certain theories that could be linked with philosophical or mathematical aspects. In "The Library of Babel", for example the logical order of the Universe is the result of the repetition of a certain known world (our world), based on certain metaphors present in his work. This ordering of the cosmos can be debated on the thin borderline between equality and difference, as Foucault pointed out when he mentioned the relation between discourses and power in his work *The Order of Things* (1970). The author can be understood as the grouping of a discourse, as the origin and unity of its meanings. Did Borges deliver a scientific discourse? No. But it can be considered as the author of a literary discourse, with some characteristics that can be used as examples within the area of science or philosophy. This is similar to when Plato used narratives of stories (similar to myths) to illustrate his philosophical thought. Although Borges did not postulate any theory, Foucault mentions Borges to illustrate his philosophical thought.

As for the appropriation relationship proposed by Foucault, the author (Borges) is not exactly the owner or the person responsible for his texts. The author (Borges) is neither his producer nor his inventor. Foucault mentions Borges in the preface to his book "The Orders of Things". Foucault mentions a quote by Borges about the Chinese encyclopedia where words and categories do not have a precise order (Foucault XV). This order of discourse is exotic and unlimited because the limits of discourse are made as the limits of humans worlds, this is similar to the theory of Wittgenstein (1923) mentioned in *The Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, because the imagination can create its own categories and limits. There is a nature of the "speech act" that allows us to say that there is a work. The "speech act" contains propositions, phrases; acts that allow receiving a text according to the discursive interpretation form the text that can be made. The works of Borges have been interpreted in different ways and that interpretation depends on the reader. If we read "The Library of Babel" from a religious point of view, we can think as readers that in this text are metaphors of human existence, where

human beings are symbolically presented as books. In this story, the metaphor of the Universe is the image of the universe model and not its similarity. The reader makes the reading of these metaphors and symbols within its interpretation. This is how the metaphors in the stories assume the aesthetic position of "As If" (The library of Babel as if it were a universe, books as if they were men, multiplication of hexagons as mathematical representations of the infinite). For example, in "The Library of Babel", a reader might interpret a philosopher's using the existence of books as a metaphor for the existence of the various races of human beings (who may look different but possess the same elements of the human identity), if The Library is the model of the Universe:

"The content was also determined: the rudiments of combinatory analysis, illustrated with examples of endlessly repeating variations. Those examples allowed a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This philosopher observed that all books, however different from one another they might be, consist of identical elements: the space, the period, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet". (Borges 113)

Foucault talks about the relation of attribution, where Borges can be attributed where he has said or written: "The name of an author poses all the problems related to the category of the proper name. The proper name has other than indicative functions. It is more than a gesture, a finger pointed to someone; it is, to a certain extent, the equivalent of a description" (Foucault, 121). Foucault also says that "The author of a novel may be responsible for more than his own text; if he acquires some "importance" in the literary world, his influence can have significant ramifications" (Foucault, 132) Then readers and critics of literature establish links with the text, which they identify with Borges, but which are not absolute and unquestionable.

I think that when readers approach literary texts, they also connect what they read with the episteme of their time. The meaning of "Power", that is established in the context of the reader and not in the context of the author is important for its interpretation. A reader of Borges in Argentina of the last century probably interprets his writings differently from a reader of Borges of the present century, in the United States. The reader not only establishes his relation between knowledge and power, but also builds his discursive universe based on what surrounds him at the moment.

Instead of the traditional view of the author's relationship to a book, Foucault points out that it may be the use of connections, different types of discourse (of philosophical discourse, for example) and the author's position in a discursive field. The author's name may be relevant in certain circumstances.

“An author’s name is not simply an element of speech (as a subject, a complement or an element that could be replaced by a pronoun or other parts of speech). Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification. A name can group together a number of texts and thus differentiate them from others. A name also establishes different forms of relationships among texts. Neither Hermes nor Hippocrates existed in the sense that we can say Balzac existed, but the fact that a number of texts were attached to a single name implies that relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization were established among them” (Foucault 123)

Finally, I would like to emphasize that Michel Foucault considers the texts as non-linear structures. In this context, the philosopher raises some arguments for defining literature. We can also ask ourselves: what is the meaning of literature? and in the answers linked to Foucault we can say that literature is historical, because it was born as a genre in the eighteenth century. At the same time literature, is insofar as its nature is purely material, is language speaking language. We could define literary language as a creative and active language, a transgressive language, or dissent. In Borges' case I would simply like to emphasize that his work, especially his short story “The Library of Babel”, can be read and interpreted from multiple perspectives and, at the same time, can be

considered as an imaginary theory about the existence of the Universe and humans. I cannot say that Borges establishes the "function-author" from an individual discourse, but I would like to value his writings as part of the illustration of philosophical thought, since his texts have been used by philosophers such as Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

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