

# The Visualizing Capacity of Magical Realism: Objects and Expression in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges

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In those days the world of mirrors and the world of men were not, as they are now, cut off from each other.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “Fauna of Mirrors,” *Borges and Guerrero* 67

The term “magical realism” was first uttered in a discussion of the visual arts. The German art critic Franz Roh, in his 1925 essay, described a group of painters whom we now categorize generally as Post-Expressionists, and he used the term *Magischer Realismus* to emphasize (and celebrate) their return to figural representation after a decade or more of abstract art. In the introduction to the expanded Spanish-language version of this essay published two years later, in 1927, by José Ortega y Gasset by his *Revista de Occidente*, Roh again emphasized these painters’ engagement of the “everyday,” the “commonplace”: “with the word ‘magic’ as opposed to ‘mystic,’ I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (“Magical” 16). An alternative label circulating at the time for this style of German painting was *Neue Sachlichkeit*, New Objectivity, a term that has outlived *Magischer Realismus*, in part because Roh eventually disavowed his own designation. In his 1958 survey of twentieth-century German art, he explicitly retired the term “magical re-

alism,” tying its demise to the status of the object itself: “In our day and age, questions about the character of the object . . . have become irrelevant . . . I believe that we can demonstrate that in abstract art the greatest [achievements] are again possible” (*German* 10). In Roh’s retrospective survey he relegates the “countermovement” that he had labeled *Magischer Realismus* to “one of those retardations which history likes to throw in as a breathing spell when we have experienced too many innovations” (*German* 112).

Roh’s 1958 shrug of dismissal has been accepted by literary critics, who have largely preferred to ignore the origins of magical realism in the visual arts. Timing has something to do with it, of course, for just as Roh was performing the last rites, literary critics were beginning to resuscitate the term for use in Latin America. And from the outset they reversed Roh’s emphasis, focusing on the magic rather than the real in the texts in question. This process of transatlantic appropriation took three decades, and we would do well, five decades later still, to review the itinerary of the term and reconsider its visual lineage. I say this because it seems to me that texts accurately referred to as “magical realist” do raise questions about the nature of visual representation, and the nature of the objects represented, as realistic texts do not. Of course, all works of literature require that we visualize objects and settings, but objects and settings in realistic works are generally asked to represent only themselves. On the contrary, the “magic” in magical realist texts resides in the “real” world of everyday objects, places, and persons: Clara’s table, Melquíades’ room, Saleem’s nose. Or, inversely, the “magic” may precede the “real” and generate it: Mackandal’s spirit force in *The Kingdom of this World*, Borges’ idealism in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” Beyond the particular symbolic energies of magical realist texts are their conceptual concerns: *vision* is often a theme, as well as a narrative strategy; magical realist texts conflate sight and insight and thus collapse the literal and figurative meanings of “vision.” So I propose this generalization at the outset: magical realism is characterized by its visualizing capacity, that is, by its capacity to create (magical) meaning by seeing ordinary things in extraordinary ways.

Critical attention to the visualizing capacity of magical realism will, I think, generate interesting questions: how do magical realist authors

describe their fictional worlds, and how differently from realistic writers? How do they use “figurative” language to structure their displacements of conventional realism? How do they negotiate the potential risk of showing too much? In what sense can magical realism be said to compare/compete with painting and poetry? How do magical realist texts translate into the visual medium of film? I won’t begin to answer all of these questions, of course, but a consideration of magical realism’s visualizing strategies will raise such comparative issues. Indeed, Roh’s conception of magical realism was intrinsically interartistic. In his 1925 essay he asserted that “magical realist” painters created a new kind of imagery whose “*special way of intuiting the world . . . can apply to all the arts, including music*” (“Magical” 27, Roh’s emphasis). In his introduction to his 1958 survey of twentieth century German art, even though he had dismissed the term, he again signaled the comparative potential of these painters’ work in a section called “Cultural Parallels,” where he mentions Rilke, Joyce, Freud, Jaspers and Sartre, among others (*German* 12-13).

Roh’s focus on the ways in which visible objects express invisible meanings is obviously relevant to magical realist literature, but to speak of the visualizing potential of a painting is one thing, and to speak of the visualizing potential of literature is quite another. In printed texts, all “seeing” is symbolic, and requires mental operations that literary critics take for granted when we speak about verbal “images.” The relation of consciousness to the visible world is more likely to be the purview of philosophers, and more recently, of psychologists and neurologists, than of literary critics. To apply Roh’s argument to literature, then, we must acknowledge the physical and cultural operations by which the apprehension of material objects (what the eye sees) become literary “images” (what the “mind’s eye” sees). During the Weimar Republic, phenomenologists rigorously studied and theorized the intersubjective relations of self and world, and Roh would surely have read his contemporaries Husserl and Heidegger, as well as their disciple José Ortega y Gasset. I will mention Ortega y Gasset’s theory of the object in a moment, but my intention is to take another path. Roh’s treatment of the object in the visual arts will lead to Latin American literature, where Jorge Luis Borges will serve as guide.

*Roh's Objectivity*

It is the hyperrealistic paintings of Otto Dix, Georg Grosz, Georg Schrimpf, Alexander Kanoldt and Franz Radziwell, among others, whom Roh originally dubbed magical realist. Their exaggerated clarity of line and color, their flattened texture and perspective, their return to human figures and furnishings make them something like the opposite of the Expressionism that had preceded them in the teens and into the twenties in Germany, with its abstract forms and kinetic surfaces. Contrasting this new art to its predecessor under the label *Magischer Realismus*, Roh writes: "we are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane" ("Magical" 17). This "celebration of the mundane" implies a concomitant rejection of "religious and transcendental themes" ("Magical" 17). Looking retrospectively on these painters in 1958 he emphasizes the same point: "Just as Caravaggio had brought back to earth the transcendental proclivities of Mannerism in 1600, Otto Dix wanted to lead an over pathetic German Expressionism back to a mercilessly realistic conception of life" (*German* 118). Obviously Roh does not mean that the paintings of Dix (or Caravaggio) were devoid of meaning, but that meaning now issued from other (more objective) sources: "In opposition to Expressionism, the autonomy of the objective world around us was once more to be enjoyed; the wonder of matter that could crystallize into objects was to be seen anew" (*German* 112).

The essence of this art was, for Roh, to be found in the object. He titled the first section of his essay "The New Objects," the second "Objectivity," the third "The Proximity of the Object as Spiritual Creation," and he asserted at the outset that "the new painting separates itself from Expressionism *by means of its objects*" ("Magical" 16, Roh's emphasis). Consider Roh's development of this assertion:

Post-Expressionism offers us the miracle of existence in its imper-  
 turbable duration: the unending miracle of eternally mobile and vi-  
 brating molecules. *Out of that flux, the constant appearance and*  
*disappearance of material, permanent objects somehow appear:* in  
 short, the marvel by which a variable commotion crystallizes into a

clear set of constants. This miracle of an apparent persistence and duration in the midst of a demoniacal flux; this enigma of total quietude in the midst of general becoming, of universal dissolution: this is what Post-Expressionism admires and highlights. (“Magical” 22, my emphasis)

Roh continues:

When . . . Expressionism had crystallized the object’s exclusively *internal* aspect, *the unusual opportunity of looking at the object close up from the other side* had arrived; *in other words, the opportunity of reconstructing the object, starting exclusively from our interiority.* (“Magical” 24, my emphasis)

What is striking is Roh’s emphasis on “permanent objects” in the first passage and in both passages his emphasis on the *materiality* of the object, the very fact of which, according to Roh, allows us to look at the object “close up from the other side.”

But what “other side?” This is a matter for speculation, of course, but it seems to be analogous to the “magical” content of material objects in magical realist literature. In Roh’s formulation of “the other side,” he engages the dynamic that critics of literary magical realism must also address sooner or later: the dynamic between magic and real, between material and meaning. Does Roh’s emphasis on the materiality of the object suggest that the more “close up” the object, the more resonant the meaning of the “other side?” Does he suggest that the more *objective* the painted image, the more *subjective* is its meaning in the mind of the viewer? For Roh, there does seem to be a direct relation between the realism of the visual image and the magic of its “other side,” a relation that underlines his assertion that the magical in magical realism wells up from the world as we know it.

José Ortega y Gasset’s influential essay on “dehumanization” in the arts was written the same year as Roh’s essay, and upon rereading it, we see why Ortega immediately had Roh’s essay translated into Spanish and saw to its publication. Their arguments are parallel: Ortega, too, celebrates a return to objectivity in the literary arts, though it is not abstrac-

tion (as it is for Roh) but rather the emotionalism of “romantic art” that he considers to have obscured the poetic object: “Instead of delighting in *artistic objects* people delight in their own emotions . . . ‘Lived’ realities are too overpowering not to evoke a sympathy which prevents us from perceiving them in their *objective purity*” (28, my emphasis). Ortega makes the Symbolist Mallarmé his watershed: after asserting that the poet does not merely reflect the world but *adds* to it, he describes Mallarmé’s poems as “small lyrical objects distinct from human fauna and flora” (31); they “present us with figures so extramundane that merely looking at them is delight” (32). Ortega’s “extramundane” parallels Roh’s intuition of “the other side” of the object: magic pre-exists in the material fabric of the world.

Both Roh and Ortega are obviously responding to (and at the same time defining) European avant garde aesthetics. The image was to be a crystalline structure, a dynamic pattern of intellectual and emotional energy, a sharply focused object whose referent is both in the world and what lies beyond. Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams took this “Imagist” aesthetic to its farthest point, a trajectory begun, as Ortega reminds us, by Mallarmé, a poet whom Borges will also celebrate in his famous essay “Narrative Art and Magic,” as we will see. Pound’s Imagist emphasis on metaphor and Eliot’s reclamation of the “metaphysical” conceits of John Donne and George Herbert parallel Roh’s and Ortega’s aesthetic treatment of the object, and they also predict the young poet Borges, who called for the renovation of figurative language in poetry. The avant garde movement in which Borges participated in the twenties in Buenos Aires was *ultraísmo*, the poetics of which also focused on the capacity of the image to communicate sensory material in crystalline forms. In Borges’ early essay entitled “Metaphor,” he urges the creation of images that are “verbal objects, pure and independent like a crystal or a silver ring” (“Metáfora,” *Obras* I: 382). Like the Imagists, the *ultraístas* practiced the “magical realist” objectivity that Roh emphasized in the visual arts. By the end of the twenties, Borges had moved away from “pure poetry,” but he never ceased to explore the expressive capacities of language and, more particularly, the visualizing capacity of verbal figures.

So Roh’s essay leads us to Argentine avant garde aesthetics and to Borges’ early thinking about figurative language and poetic practice. Would

Borges have read Roh's essay in the twenties? If not the 1925 essay in German, then certainly the 1927 translation in the *Revista de Occidente*. Here, however, influence is not crucial to my argument, for I take Roh's essay to reflect an international aesthetic that operated variously in Post-Expressionism, Imagism and *ultraísmo*. Even if Borges did not read Roh, he certainly speculated about the same issues: the counterrealistic potential of the realistic representation. Borges eventually devises very different visualizing strategies from those described by Roh, but Roh's discussion of objects and magic in Post-Expressionist painting nonetheless serves to direct our attention to these relations in Borges' work.

### *Borges' Ideal Objects*

In "Pascal's Sphere," Borges contemplates the possibility that "universal history is the history of a few metaphors" (*Selected* 352). Given the repetition of a few metaphors in his own work, we have reason to accept the premise. Several of Borges' favorite metaphors and narrative devices are intended to call into question visual perception—the mirror, the labyrinth, the dream, the aleph, the *trompe l'oeil*, the *mise en abîme*—and are often used to signal Borges' great theme, the illusory nature of knowledge itself. In fact, seeing and its related modes of verbal description are often the subject of philosophical speculation in his essays and stories. Sadly, Borges' encroaching blindness might account for his particular sensitivity to this matter. But long before his blindness became total in 1955, he had indicated his preference for what the narrator of "The Zahir" describes as abstract appearances at night, "when darkness and silence simplify them" (*Labyrinths* 158).

Consider the *hrönir* in the alternative world described in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940). *Hrönir*, we are told, are "secondary objects" that duplicate lost objects and resemble their originals but are "a little larger." Like shadows in Plato's cave, they exist by virtue of their relation to prior (lost) entities; they are reflections (reproductions) of something that was once "real" but no longer is. These objects are "secondary" in the same sense that visual and verbal images of "real" objects are secondary: the narrator tells us that *hrönir* may replicate themselves endlessly, each copy progressively further removed from its "real" object. These objects are by

definition figurative: “All nouns (man, coin, Thursday, Wednesday, rain) have only a metaphorical value” (*Labyrinths* II). And there is yet another category of objects in Tlön: “Stranger and more perfect than any *hrön* is the *ur*, which is a thing produced by suggestion, an object brought into being by hope” (*Labyrinths* II9). The *ur*, it would seem, is even farther removed from the material world than the *hrön* and thus more real.

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is, of course, a hilarious send-up of Berkeleyan idealism. The narrator explains: “The nations of that planet are congenitally idealist. Their language, with the derivatives of their language—religious, letters, metaphysics—all presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts.” In Tlön, then, “real” objects are nonexistent; only ideal objects are real, so there is no need for nouns: “Every mental state is irreducible: the mere fact of naming it—i.e., of classifying it—implies a falsification” (*Labyrinths* 10).

Nonetheless, the language of Tlön *does* encode objects obliquely in secondary structures analogous to *hrönir*:

the prime unit is . . . the monosyllabic adjective. The noun is formed by an accumulation of adjectives. One does not say “moon”; but rather “round airy-light on dark” or “pale orange-of-the-sky” or any other such combination. In the example selected the mass of adjectives refers to a real object, but this is purely fortuitous. The literature of this hemisphere (like Meinong’s subsistent world) abounds in ideal objects, which are convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs . . . There are objects composed of two terms, one of visual and another of auditory character: the color of the rising sun and the faraway cry of a bird. The objects are of many terms—the sun and the water on a swimmer’s chest, the vague tremulous rose color we see with our eyes closed, the sensation of being carried along by a river and also by sleep. These second-degree objects can be combined with others; through the use of certain abbreviations, the process is practically infinite. There are famous poems made up of one enormous word. This word forms a poetic *object* created by the author. The fact that no one believes in the reality of nouns

paradoxically causes their number to be unending. (*Labyrinths* 9, Borges' emphasis)

This language slavishly reflects the philosophical idealism of Tlön, refusing the normal specificity and objectivity of language by creating metaphors that *stand for* nouns. These "poetic objects" are substituted for (non-existent) real objects: "no one believes in the reality of nouns" or in the objects they designate, so they may proliferate and signify without limit. They transcend their realistic medium, which is language: they are neither substantives nor substantial.

Borges' elaboration of the removedness of verbal objects from their referents might seem at first to resemble Walter Benjamin's discussion of mechanical reproduction, or Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation. But unlike Benjamin and Baudrillard, for whom reproduction (simulation) represents a net loss, Borges celebrates the distance of language from "real" objects, for thus the speaker (or writer) is freed from specificity and liberated to visualize the "magic" of objects in the mind's eye. For Borges, the elusive essence of the real must be approached indirectly, through "second degree" objects like *hrönir*, which do not limit the real because they are strategically removed from it. The universe can only be envisioned, not seen: sight becomes insight only when the visible world is overcome.

There are various types of removedness in Borges' fiction. In "The Zahir," for example, the narrator speculates about Tennyson's lines on the flower in the crannied wall, which he translates as "if we could understand a single flower, we should know what we are and what the world is," and he proposes the following interpretation: "Perhaps [Tennyson] meant that the entire visible world is implicit in every representation" ("El zahir," *Obras* I: 594). That the universe can be envisioned in a single object is an interpretation appropriate to this narrator, who has every reason to worry about the visualizing capacity of the object, for it is precisely his fate to be obsessed by a single object: the zahir, a coin that he no longer possesses but cannot forget, an ideal object gone haywire, a mental image that eliminates all others. This character, like Funes the Memorious, suffers from a visual dysfunction: his mind's eye is blinded by a single object, as Funes is blinded by an infinite proliferation of objects. If

“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” takes idealism to its logical (and absurd) extreme, “The Zahir” and “Funes the Memorious” do the same with pragmatism. Recognizing this play of extremes, I would suggest that it is the impossible, idealizing language of Tlön to which Borges himself aspires, and the utterly specific language of Funes that he works to subvert in all of his fiction.

In his postscript to “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” Borges dramatizes these extremes by providing two instances of the “intrusion of the fantastic world into the real one” (*Labyrinths* 120). We learn of the circumstances surrounding the discovery of a compass among the silver table service of the Princess of Faucigny Lucinge, and the discovery of an exceedingly heavy cone, made of “bright metal, the size of a die” (*Labyrinths* 16). Both appear to be objects from Tlön that have found their way into the “real” world of the narrator. That a compass should appear from a world where there is no conception of space goes unremarked by the narrator, but this is because it is the second object that fascinates him: “I held [the cone] in my hand for some minutes. I remember that it was intolerably heavy, and that after putting it down, its oppression remained. I also remember the precise circle it marked in my flesh” (*Labyrinths* 120). As if to counterbalance the airy idealism of Tlön, this object that “intrudes” into the “real” world is exceedingly heavy: the narrator confesses that the weight of such a tiny object filled him “with a disagreeable impression of repugnance and fear” (*Labyrinths* 17). The passage ends with speculation about how to get rid of the cone.

Recall Borges’ lament in “A New Refutation of Time”: “The world, alas, is real. I, alas, am Borges” (*Other* 187). Perhaps, but his figurative strategies nonetheless resemble the idealizing language of Tlön. He, like the speakers in Tlön, is a universalizer who must describe universals in the relentlessly specific medium of language. His problem, like theirs, is to express the *whole* in words that describe only the *parts*. His verbal figures, like those of the gnostic God described by Borges in “A Defense of Basilides the False,” aim at “*pleroma* or plenitude, the inconceivable museum of Platonic archetypes, intelligible essences, and universals” (*Selected* 65). The narrator of this 1932 essay defends the “vast mythology” of Basilides on the basis that it diminishes the real: “The dizzying tower of heaven in the Basilidean heresy, the proliferation of its angels, the planetary shadow of the demiurges disrupting earth, the machina-

tions of the inferior circles against the *pleroma*, the dense population, whether inconceivable or nominal, of that vast mythology, also point to the diminution of the world" (*Selected* 67). The "demiurges that disrupt earth" and "the machinations of the inferior circles against the *pleroma*": Basilides' heresy stages once again the play of extremes to which I have referred, and it is the demiurges with whom Borges identifies.

Consider Borges' Aleph and Pascal's sphere: they are Tlön-like poetic objects created by the writer, made up of "many terms," a verbal approach to infinity. In "The Aleph," a sphere appears to the narrator that makes visible all objects and places and people, all spaces and times, which the narrator tries futilely to describe by listing a few of the images it contains. In "Pascal's Sphere," Borges' narrator lists dozens of variations of a single image, a circle that stands alternately for God, nature, the universe, infinity. Culminating his enumeration is Pascal's image for the universe: "an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere." Indeed, Borges himself adds to the list: in his story "The Library of Babel," the Library is described as "a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible" (*Labyrinths* 52). The narrator of "Pascal's Sphere" concludes that over the centuries the image of the infinite circle has become "a mental necessity" (*Selected* 352). Like Tlön's *hrönir* and Basilides' vast mythology, so Borges' aleph, his Library, and Pascal's sphere: "no one believes in [their] reality" (*Labyrinths* 9).

We have seen that the speakers of Tlön create "poetic objects" by combining adjectives that circle around the thing itself but do not name it. This strategy of indirection is exactly that of the *kenning*, the medieval Germanic verbal figure of which Borges is so fond. In "The Zahir," the narrator tells his reader that he was writing "a tale of fantasy [that] contained two or three enigmatic circumlocutions, or 'kennings': for example, instead of *blood* it says *sword-water*, and *gold* is the *serpent's bed*" (*Labyrinths* 197). Borges' essay on the kenning in his 1935 collection *History of Eternity* focuses on Icelandic sagas, then moves to the Spanish Baroque poet Baltasar Gracián, whose periphrastic structures he finds similar to Icelandic kennings in their avoidance of nominalism. In another essay that I have already mentioned, "Metaphor," from the same 1935 collection, the same Icelandic sagas are again the subject of Borges' contemplation, and particularly the sagas of the thirteenth-century Icelandic

writer Snorri Sturluson. The question is whether metaphor arises from the intuition of an analogy between *things* or between *words*. We are not surprised to learn that Snorri's metaphors arise from the similarity among *words*, and they are praised for that reason. Similarly, Borges invents his own idealizing strategy of engaging adjectives to subvert the substantiality of nouns: in "The Circular Ruins," for instance, we find a number of insubstantial adjectives joined to nouns: "unanimous night," "incessant trees," "propitious temple," "inextricable jungle," "vain light of afternoon."

A related form of "enigmatic circumlocution" is mentioned in "Narrative Art and Magic" (1932). This is one of Borges' most discussed essays, but, oddly, only the second half of the essay has been given critical attention. In this second half the narrator defines narrative causality in terms of two types of magic and asserts that fiction resembles both forms, each of which obeys causal laws that are predictable and controllable—the very opposite of our lived experience in the world. So Borges reaches his famous conclusion: magic is the basis of narrative realism. But it is the first half of the essay that interests me here, because there Borges contemplates the nature of verbal description in terms of its visual potential, and more particularly, the ways in which certain writers have managed to create verbal objects.

Borges' examples are typically idiosyncratic, and the layers of unreality are typically dizzying: he begins with William Morris's ten-thousand-line poem "Life and Death of Jason" (1867), a work that describes the fantastical objects of myth. How does Morris make the reader visualize the "reality" of the centaur? According to Borges, he does so by referring to the centaur several times before it appears on the fictional scene, and when it does appear, he describes him as "a mighty horse, once roan, but now almost white, with long gray locks on his head and a wreath of oak leaves where man was joined to beast" (*Borges* 34). As specific as this description seems, Borges at once blurs its realism: "We note, in passing, that it is not essential that Morris give the reader his image of the centaur, or even invite us to have one of our own; what is required is our sustained belief in the fact that he had one" (*Borges* 35). And what of the sirens that Morris also describes? Again Borges marvels at Morris' indirection, even as the poet describes the scene in seemingly realistic fashion: "The very precision of Morris's colors—the yellow edges of the shore, the golden spray, the gray cliff—move us, for they seem rescued

intact from that ancient evening" (*Borges* 35). Borges praises the clarity of line and color of Morris' verbal objects: they are like Snorri's kennings, which we have already heard Borges describe as "pure and independent like a crystal or a silver ring"; or like Quevedo's poems, which he describes as "verbal objects, pure and independent like a sword or a silver ring" ("Quevedo," *Other* 42). In "Narrative Art and Magic," Borges proceeds to discuss the color white in Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and Melville's *Moby Dick* (recalling Toni Morrison's recent treatment of this issue in *Playing in the Dark*); then, like Ortega y Gasset, he cites Mallarmé: "Mallarmé is said to have remarked that naming an object outright is to suppress three-fourths of a poem's enjoyment, for the pleasure of reading is in anticipation, and the ideal lies in suggestion" (*Borges* 36).

Yet another expressive form that Borges praises (and uses) for its capacity to avoid "naming the object outright" is allegory. Borges' inordinate appreciation for the English Catholic clergyman G. K. Chesterton is explainable in this context. In his essay "From Allegories to Novels" (1949), Borges sets the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce against the English clergyman and writer of detective fiction G. K. Chesterton: "Croce denies the allegorical art; Chesterton vindicates it. I agree with the former, but I should like to know how a form we consider unjustifiable could have enjoyed so much favor" (*Borges* 230). The narrator is disingenuous or does not represent the author, for Borges is clearly in Chesterton's camp. Chesterton's "vindication," as Borges constructs it, rests upon a passage from a 1904 book by the former on the English painter G. W. Watt. The narrator is not interested in Watt's painting but in Chesterton's assessment of Watt's painting, and more particularly in his treatment of the mystery that inheres in the realistic surfaces of his canvases. Borges quotes Chesterton:

Man knows that there are in the soul tints more bewildering, more numberless, and more nameless than the colours of an autumn forest . . . Yet he seriously believes that these tints can every one of them, in their tones and semi-tones, in all their blends and unions, be accurately represented by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals. He believes that an ordinary civilized stockbroker can really produce out of his own inside noises which denote all the mysteries of memory and all the agonies of desire. (*Borges* 231)

The narrator summarizes the passage: Chesterton denies that “language is the only way to express reality... With one form of communication declared to be insufficient, there is room for others; allegory may be one of them, like architecture or music” (*Borges* 155). Chesterton affirms the position to which Borges himself subscribes: signification always exceeds its signifiers, reality is always richer than any of its descriptions, consciousness overarches and includes individual lives.

Borges agrees so enthusiastically with Chesterton that he cites this same passage two more times. We find it in Borges’ 1949 essay “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” where he uses it to defend Hawthorne against charges of “allegorism” and to praise Chesterton’s intuition “that reality is interminably rich and that the language of men does not exhaust that vertiginous treasure” (*Borges* 219). And again, Borges cites this passage in the concluding paragraph of his 1941 essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” where he prefaces the passage by saying that “these words by Chesterton are perhaps the most lucid ever written about language” (*Borges* 143). So Borges repeatedly celebrates Chesterton’s allegorizing impulse, for literary wholes are inestimably larger than the sum of their linguistic parts.

How, then, do these idealizing procedures of Borges’ compare with the magical mundanity of Post-Expressionist painting as Roh understood it? It seems to me that Borges reverses Roh’s assertion that the magic “hides and palpitates” behind the painted objects. While Roh and Borges are equally concerned with the relations of the visible world to invisible meanings, Roh gives priority to the former, from which he infers the latter, whereas Borges proceeds in the opposite direction, starting with the invisible, from which he infers the world. For the idealist Borges, ideas precede objects and *generate* them; for the realist Roh, the object (looked at “from the other side”) *is* the idea. That Borges differs sharply from Roh is clear in his story “The Circular Ruins.” In this story we are asked to follow the process whereby a “magician” creates his son by imagining him into existence. In the middle of this undertaking, the narrator tells us that the magician “comprehended that the effort to mold the incoherent and vertiginous matter dreams are made of was the most arduous task a man could undertake” (*Labyrinths* 47). But he undertakes it nonetheless: his “unreal child” is an idea that becomes an ideal ob-

ject—not a reflection of the world but an addition to it. This essential disjunction between the real and the ideal, between image and essence, subtends all of Borges' work. If there is a tone of melancholy running throughout Borges' fiction, it arises from this perception.

I will cite one more example. Consider Borges' compendium of poetic objects in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*: the monsters found in a variety of literary, mythological and theological texts. Monsters, Borges tells us in the introduction, are unnatural combinations of natural parts, the possible permutations of which “border on the infinite” (Borges and Guerrero 14). Like the language of Tlön, in which adjectives circle around “moon” but never name it, so the multiple parts of these monsters circle around the “real” but do not go there. The section on the “fauna of mirrors” presents a seemingly fantastical metaphysics of visual representation, but one that nonetheless coincides with what we have discovered in others of Borges' texts. I cited the first sentence of this passage as my epigraph; here is the entire passage:

In those days the world of mirrors and the world of men were not, as they are now, cut off from each other. They were, besides, quite different; neither beings nor colours nor shapes were the same. Both kingdoms, the specular and the human, lived in harmony; you could come and go through mirrors. One night the mirror people invaded the earth. Their power was great, but at the end of bloody warfare the magic arts of the Yellow Emperor prevailed. He repulsed the invaders, imprisoned them in their mirrors, and forced on them the task of repeating, as though in a kind of dream, all the actions of men. He stripped them of their power and of their forms and reduced them to mere slavish reflections. Nonetheless, a day will come when the magic spell will be shaken off. (Borges and Guerrero 67-68)

In this parable of triumphant realism, Borges makes his point allegorically: the mirror people have been reduced to “slavish reflections”; there is only sight, no insight. But this “magic spell” of realism will eventually be undone, and the real magic of the world of mirrors will eventually be reestablished in all its difference. I believe that Borges considered himself part of this assiduous process.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Lily Ann Cunningham for these references and for her insights into Roh's aesthetic of the object.

<sup>2</sup>This shift is apparent in the earliest formulations of Magical Realism as a literary critical term. See the first two essays on this matter by Flores and Leal.

<sup>3</sup>Guenther has initiated this process of reconsideration.

<sup>4</sup>See Mitchell, who traces the cultural history of the evolving relations of visual, verbal and mental images.

<sup>5</sup>For a useful discussion of *ultraísta* aesthetics see Strong.

<sup>6</sup>My translation. Borges is describing the kennings of the Icelandic poet Snorri Sturluson, as we will see shortly.

<sup>7</sup>Borges had written an essay for the *Revista de Occidente* while living in Madrid in 1923-24, and he would surely have followed Ortega's enthusiasm for Roh at this time.

<sup>8</sup>My translation; Fitts' translation of this passage is inadequate. The Spanish is: "Tal vez quiso decir que el mundo visible se da entero en cada representación."

<sup>9</sup>Borges' essay on the kenning was first published in his 1935 collection *The History of Eternity*.

<sup>10</sup>See Haney. Her essay, which is in English, addresses Borges' affinities to Chesterton.

<sup>11</sup>See my essay "Borges' Monsters."

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