

No Success Like Failure

Michael Wood
Princeton University

*But the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter
the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather,
to make the transitory eternal.*

T. W. ADORNO

CURRENT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE ESSAY—AND THERE ARE MANY—emphasize the provisional, speculative nature of the genre, the suggestion of a test, a tryout.¹ They return to Montaigne and his use of the word *essai*—and also to his practice of the genre. They don't really contemplate failure. But perhaps the thing is too provisional to succeed or fail. This is what Claire de Obaldia suggests in a carefully worded sentence: “if (the essay) is associated with the authority and authenticity of someone who speaks in his or her name, it also disclaims all responsibility with regard to what is after all only ‘tried out’ and which is therefore closer, in a sense, to the ‘as if’ of fiction.”² We can try and fail, of course. But trying often brackets off the idea of failure in a way that “attempt” does not. Since “attempt” is the meaning of the word *ensayar* in Spanish—closer to “sketch” than to “experiment,” and the word also means “rehearsal”—the *ensayo* acquires a mildly melancholy note that is not present in the French and English names of the genre. I should say too that *ensayar* is not the ordinary Spanish word for “try” as *essayer* is the ordinary word in French. That word would be *tratar* or *intentar*.

¹ See Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French, eds., *Essayists on the Essay* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012); Christy Wampole, “The Essayification of Everything,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2012.

² Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 2–3.



When Borges tells us that a certain article is what he will “now attempt” (*que ahora ensayaré*),³ the promise seems awkward by his standards, the start of something laborious or mock laborious. And the following phrases (all involving the verb *ensayar*) all suggest something well short of a full result:⁴ “the other man made an attempt at irony” (F, 150; CF, 151), “he attempted a scream” (F, 166; CF, 161), “someone tried something new” (F, 68; CF, 102), “before undertaking an examination” (F, 169; CF, 163), “never attempted by Menard” (F, 51; CF, 92), “I shall attempt this chronicle, nonetheless” (*Hacedor*, 46; CF, 321), “I tested several explanations; none satisfied me” (*Aleph*, 87; CF, 233), “she passed through endless metamorphoses, as though fleeing from herself” (*Aleph*, 104; CF, 243). Of course, Borges, like anyone else, can use the word in a sense close to the meaning of *essayist* and be explicit about it (“he attempted other, similar experiments” [F, 64; CF, 99], “I tested those arguments . . . and at last I came to the true one” [*Aleph*, 88; CF, 233]), but I want to suggest that a certain mode of elegant failure becomes not only Borges’s stylistic signature in his essays but a major theme of those essays, the special feature of the literary and philosophical subjects he is drawn to and writes about.

Borges’s essays (after his earliest work), therefore, not only are ironic, as Daniel Balderston correctly says,⁵ but also develop an irony of a special tint. They take the possibility of failure as a form of secret attraction, are amused by it, and quietly succeed at something else, an obscure, intimate adventure they could not arrive at except through the grand, expected misfire. It is not quite a matter, as de Obaldia says, citing Jaime Alazraki (but in relation to Borges’s fictions rather than his essays identified as such), of “the failure or aporias” of Borges’s pretexts as “theories.”⁶ It is that the “theory,” knowing what it can’t do, ruefully pretends it can’t do what it is doing.

We are lucky to be able to hear Borges’s voice before he found this voice—that is, when he had not yet learned what obliquity could do for him. In an essay published in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926), he says that he is not disheartened by Argentinian incredulity. “Disbelief, if it is concentrated, is faith. . . . A grandiose, vehement incredulity may be our achievement” (or “exploit”; the word is *hazaña*).⁷ “Grandiose,” “vehement,” “achievement”: the Borges of only a few moments later would not be caught dead in the company of such thoughts. Think of the tone of the Prologue to *Discusión* (1932): “My life has lacked life and death [he is twenty-seven at the time]. From this poverty [arises] my laborious love for these minutiae.”⁸ He refers to his epigraph, taken from Alfonso Reyes: “That is what is wrong with not publishing one’s writings: life slips away in the reworking of them.” Of course, these imitation apologies—there are many of them in Borges—would make one cringe if there was anything to apologize for, but their actual function is to signal the very ambition they seem to deny, and I am interested in the difference in tone between the claim for grandeur and the offering of minutiae. Borges hasn’t given up the grandeur, he has transferred it: from the size of his hope, let’s say, to the size of the failure of others.

³ Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1970), 31; hereafter cited in text. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999), 217; hereafter cited in text as *SNF*.

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1965); hereafter cited in text as *F*. Jorge Luis Borges, *El aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1965); hereafter cited in text as *Aleph*. Jorge Luis Borges, *El hacedor* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1967); hereafter cited in text as *Hacedor*. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998); hereafter cited in text as *CF*.

⁵ Daniel Balderston, “Borges ensayista,” in *El siglo de Borges* (Frankfurt: Vervuet, 1999), 574.

⁶ De Obaldia, *Essayistic Spirit*, 257.

⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1994), 14, my translation; hereafter cited in text as *Tamaño*. The title literally means “the size of my hope.”

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1970), 10; hereafter cited in text as *D*.

They are many: poets, theologians, philosophers, pundits, almost anyone who is precisely, persistently devoted to elaborate error—for instance, to the history of what could not possibly have a history: eternity, hell, angels. “I tend to return eternally to the Eternal Return.”⁹ Borges is very fond of this style of joke, and his book *Historia de la eternidad* (1936) not only extends the title of a single essay to the whole book but contains discreet, repeated recurrences to the idea of eternity itself even when it is not the ostensible subject. The last sentence of the book recalls the words of a man about to be executed at the stake: “I will burn, but this is a mere event. We shall continue our discussion in eternity” (*Historia*, 158; *SNF*, 91).

Borges never forgets that an error is an error; he is not the solipsist or the relativist he is so often taken to be. He speaks easily and skeptically (in 1932) of “the recent relativist scare” (*Historia*, 17; *SNF*, 124), and of Chaplin’s *City Lights* he says that “its lack of reality is comparable only to its equally exasperating lack of unreality” (*D*, 77; *SNF*, 144). We, like Chaplin, need to do better in both directions. In another essay Borges invites us to imagine the “possible victory” of the Gnostics over the Christians. If this had occurred, the “bizarre and confused stories” he has been telling would be “coherent, majestic, and ordinary” (*D*, 66; *SNF*, 68). Borges’s sense of reality and our relation to it can sound positively Lacanian. Lacan says that the real is what sticks to us, not what we represent to ourselves truly or falsely. Borges says that reality is what we find in the system of mirrors that never leaves us: “Reality is like that image of ours that arises in all the mirrors, a simulacrum that exists for us, that comes with us, gesticulates and goes, but that we shall always run into as soon as we seek it.”¹⁰

But Borges does believe that no intricate or passionately espoused error is ever meaningless, ever merely error. “Mere” is one of his favorite words, a kind of ironic fable in itself. If we speak of “mere metaphors,” for example, this is a clear sign that we don’t know anything about metaphor. He treasures the detail of fallacy. Here is his account of the German theologian Rothe’s description of angels. Their attributes include

intellectual force, free will; immateriality (capable, however, of accidentally uniting itself with matter); aspatiality (neither taking up any space nor being enclosed by it); lasting duration, with a beginning but without end; invisibility, and even immutability, an attribute that harbors them in the eternal. As for the faculties they exercise, they are granted the utmost suppleness, the power of conversing among themselves instantaneously without words or signs, and that of working wonders, but not miracles. They cannot create from nothing or raise the dead. The angelic zone that lies halfway between God and man is, it would seem, highly regulated. (*Tamaño*, 65; *SNF*, 17)

I shall now look at one of Borges’s early essays on this kind of topic. He emerges as less diffident than he may at first seem (or rather, we learn something of the range of his diffidence as a style rather than a moral posture) and indeed as quite fierce about the errors he traces. His pleasure in them, his sympathy for their perpetrators, do not alter his sense of what is wrong. *Tout comprendre n’est pas tout pardonner*—this is how Borges in a later essay describes Dante’s position within the *Divine Comedy*. Thomas Harrison’s wonderful definition of the modern essay (he is thinking principally of the work of Conrad, Musil, Pirandello) is appropriate here. Harrison says

⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Historia de la eternidad* (Madrid: Alianza; Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1971), 97; hereafter cited in text as *Historia*. *CNF*, 225.

¹⁰ Borges, *Inquisiciones* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1994), 127.

that the form finds its meaning at the “junction where reason has abolished truth but not the will to truth.”¹¹ Borges would speak not of abolition but of camouflage or hiding; in his view, neither truth nor lies will go away. Still, this project is very much his. That is why he can be so brilliantly and comically anticlerical and have so much time for fanciful theologians. After a long sympathetic account of Berkeley’s philosophy, Borges turns away at the arrival of “the mind of some sort of eternal spirit.” “This is where the bishop shows up,” he says (*aquí asoma el obispo*).¹²

“Una vindicación de la cábala” begins with a graceful evocation of the kind of shortfall I have been describing: “Neither the first time it has been attempted, nor the last time it will fail, this defense . . .” (*D*, 55; *SNF*, 83). The supposed vindication is distinguished from other such attempts by two facts, Borges says: his “almost complete innocence of the Hebrew language” (he says “innocence,” which Eliot Weinberger idiomatically but unironically translates as “ignorance”) and his interest not in doctrine but in “hermeneutic or cryptographic procedures,” which he seeks (however vainly) to understand. The “distant origin” of these “operations,” he says, is the “mechanical inspiration” of the Bible, a proposition that assumes the work is dictated by God in every detail, down to particular consonants and even later additions like diacritical marks (*D*, 55; *SNF*, 83). Islam thinks of the Koran as one of the attributes of God, and some Lutherans think of scripture as an incarnation of the Holy Ghost.

At this point the essay seems to slip sideways into a commentary on the division of labor among the members of the Trinity.¹³ “It was not the divinity in general” who dictated the Bible, Borges says, “but rather the third hypostasis of the divinity” (*D*, 56; *SNF*, 83). He quotes Bacon on the pen or pencil of the Holy Ghost and Donne on the Holy Ghost as “an eloquent writer” before launching himself on a combination of inquiry and attack: “It is impossible to both name the Spirit and silence the horrendous threefold society of which it is a part” (*D*, 56; *SNF*, 84). Lay Catholics, he says, find the concept correct but “infinitely boring”; liberals believe progress will do away with it; but the Trinity clearly “goes beyond these formulas.” “Imagined all at once, its concept of a father, a son, and a ghost, joined in a single organism, seems like a case of intellectual teratology, a monster that only the horror of a nightmare could spawn” (*D*, 56; *SNF*, 84). “This is what I believe,” Borges adds, “but I try to bear in mind that every object whose end is unknown to us is provisionally monstrous” (*D*, 56; *SNF*, 84).

There follows a long paragraph exploring the connection between the Trinity and the promise of redemption. “Thus one may justify the dogma,” Borges says; it saves Jesus from being “the accidental delegate of the Lord,” and it makes redemption eternal. But then the “eternal generation of the Son, eternal procession of the Spirit,” are the result of the “prideful decision” of Ireneus, an “invention . . . that we can reject or worship, but not discuss.” And Borges returns to his horror: “Hell is merely physical violence, but the three inextricable persons import an intellectual horror, a strangled, specious infinity like facing mirrors.” This is where Borges speaks of “mere metaphors,” a “culpable condition” that he says he is not even taking into account (*D*, 57; *SNF*, 84).

The Spirit is thought to be God’s immanence in our breasts, Borges tells us, but this is a “mere [that word again] syntactical formation”; and he now returns to the Spirit (“the third blind person of the entangled Trinity”) as the writer of the scriptures (*D*, 58; *SNF*, 85). Gibbon, Borges

¹¹ Thomas Harrison, *Essayism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 219–20.

¹² Borges, *Inquisiciones*, 122.

¹³ Borges takes up this whole argument again in *Historia de la eternidad*.

says, reviewed the publications of the Holy Spirit and counted a hundred or so. And with this Borges arrives at Genesis and the Kabbalah.

Or not quite. The idea of a “deliberate writing by an infinite intelligence” makes Borges think of texts and chance. In journalism, for example, everything is information, and sound and spacing are accidental. The reverse occurs with poetry, where the accidental is “not the sound but what it means”—“as in early Tennyson, in Verlaine, in late Swinburne.” The intellectual, if he or she cannot eliminate chance, “has denied as much as possible and restricted its incalculable compliance.” In this, the intellectual “remotely approximates the Lord, for Whom the vague concept of chance holds no meaning” (*D*, 59; *SNF*, 85). Borges concludes:

Let us imagine now this astral intelligence, dedicated to manifesting itself not in dynasties or annihilations or birds, but in written words. Let us also imagine . . . that God dictates, word by word, what he proposes to say. This premise (which was the one postulated by the Kabbalists) turns the Scriptures into an absolute text, where the collaboration of chance is calculated at zero. The conception alone of such a document is a greater wonder than those recorded in its pages. A book impervious to contingencies, a mechanism of infinite purposes, of infallible variations, of revelations lying in wait, of superimpositions of light. . . . How could one not study it to the point of absurdity, to numerical excess, as did the Kabbalah? (*D*, 59–60; *SNF*, 85–86)

What has happened here? Borges has vindicated (has successfully failed to vindicate) not a doctrine or a theology but a practice of reading. He has suggested that Mallarmé’s dream of abolishing chance is significant not because it is achievable but because it is irresistible. Its beauty and rigor put the loose monstrosity of the Trinity to shame, and Borges, in mimicry of such specious theological wanderings, has spent most of his essay on the (apparently) wrong thing, not on his subject but on the modes of misreading that allow us finally to see what reading is. There is a similar movement in Borges’s story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,” where the ostensible topic of writing gives way to the real topic of reading; and the interpretation of the Kabbalah, according to Borges, strongly resembles the cultural method that he sees as producing classics. A classic, he says at the end of his essay on the subject, carefully muting the originality of his thought, “is not a book (I repeat) that necessarily possesses such and such merits; it is a book that generations of men, driven by diverse reasons, read with predetermined enthusiasm and with mysterious loyalty” (*Otras inquisiciones*, 262). Earlier he had said—this is the remark he pretends to be repeating—“a classic is that book that a nation or a group of nations or the length of time has decided to read as if in its pages everything was deliberate, destined, as deep as the cosmos and capable of interpretations without end” (*Otras inquisiciones*, 260). The Kabbalists didn’t have “as if” in mind, but Borges does. His whole project, in his essays as in his fiction, consists in taking “as if” no less seriously than “is”—without confusing the two or neglecting the recurring, obstreperous demands of “is.”

Borges’s question, the question his writing is shaped to answer, is about what he takes to be an unavoidable need that finds all its energy and ingenuity in the quest for what it can’t have; about the desperate immersion in chance, for example, that could lead to such intricate pictures of the escape from it. These dreams are to be deeply respected—but as dreams; otherwise, we are merely (merely) giving in to delusion. This balance is perhaps kept even better in the essays than in the fiction. We might think of one of Borges’s short (and relatively late) pieces, “Dreamtigers.” The writer confesses a passion that has been with him since childhood, an adoration of the tiger,

“the true tiger, the striped Asian breed.” He found such tigers in zoos and books, and then as he grew up, his passion left him, or left his waking life. In dreams things are different; there could be a chance of being able to “bring forth a tiger” (*causar un tigre*). This is possible, but only in the form of a fulfillment indistinguishable from disappointment: “The tiger does appear, but it is all dried up, or it’s flimsy-looking, or it has impure vagaries of shape or an unacceptable size, or it’s altogether too ephemeral, or it looks more like a dog or a bird than like a tiger” (*Hacedor*, 12; *CF*, 294).

This tiger itself is a kind of essay. It matters that it can’t be what Borges wants it to be. But it matters too that the failed tiger is a recurring memorial to the other one, and the failure too is perfect in its fashion. A