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**METAFICTION, TRANSFICTIONALITY AND POSSIBLE WORLDS IN
JORGE LUIS BORGES' *THE IMMORTAL***

Abstract: The paper aims to develop and put into operation the concepts of metafiction, transfictionality and possible worlds, particularly fictional worlds. The analysis is placed within the context of fictional studies, discussing the status of fiction and its relationship with reality, not only from a modal logic perspective, but also by exploring the fictional possibilities of the world outside the fictional text, while taking fiction as a starting point. Possible worlds theory has the means for understanding and expanding transfictionality, e.g. the concept of counterparts relations (Lewis), the principle of minimal departure (Ryan) or the causal theory of names (Kripke). Metafiction and transfictionality presuppose the existence of multiple worlds (actual, fictional), while the transfer of meaning between worlds is best explored in metafictional theories. Therefore, the interrelation of the concepts legitimises and makes necessary an analysis that takes into account all the mentioned theoretical perspectives which successively glimpse the intricate relation fiction-reality, and work together to construct a more solid understanding of the problem of fiction.

Keywords: fiction theory, narrative theory, metafiction, transfictionality, possible worlds, Jorge Luis Borges

Borges' endeavour to give the world a sense of meaning in fiction and outside of it by using the means of fiction is the attempt to create a transgressive literature open to extra-text, the ambition to extend the text's sphere to meta-text. In order to

meet this endeavour halfway, our aim is to develop and put into operation the concepts of metafiction, transfictionality and possible worlds, particularly fictional worlds, and understand how they work in *The Immortal* by Jorge Luis Borges. The analysis is placed within a context of fictional studies discussing the status of fiction and its relationship with reality, not only from a modal logic perspective, but also exploring the fictional possibilities of the world outside the fictional text, while taking fiction as a starting point.

Aiming to analyse three different concepts in the mentioned short story, the paper may seem too ambitious. However, the explanation for this arrangement consists of the interrelation of the concepts. Possible worlds theory has the means for understanding and expanding transfictionality, e.g. the concept of counterparts relations (Lewis), the principle of minimal departure (Ryan) or the causal theory of names (Kripke). Metafiction, as theory and practice of self-conscious, auto-referential fiction, suggests the possibility that multiple worlds co-exist (fictional worlds and actual world). Transfictionality, as the intrusion of a fictional world into another fictional world, already presupposes the existence of multiple fictional worlds. The transfer of meaning between worlds is best explored in metafictional theories. Therefore, the interrelation of the concepts legitimises and even makes necessary an analysis that takes into account all the mentioned theoretical perspectives which successively glimpse at the intricate relation fiction-reality, and work together to construct a more solid understanding of the problem of fiction.

I chose *The Immortal*, from the collection of short stories with a fantastical touch, *Aleph*, due to its conceptual richness which mark this particular stage in Borges' writing stances – having become already conscious of the (re)sources and mechanisms of writing and exposing them in an intra-textual theory of fiction, already exercised in *Ficcions* – and also for the constant use of allusions to the mentioned concepts.

“Borges began by introducing his own imaginary passages into already existing books, then progressed to the fabrication of imaginary books with bits of real ones worked in, and finally created a single character who not only is responsible for this story, but for all literature: the author of authors: *The Immortal*” (Ronald J. Christ, 1986, 76).

Through a gradual process of dispersion of individuality (an idea that will be developed later), the author strives for an openness to archetypal, metaphysic and, more importantly for this paper, metatextual possibilities. Christ's observation, mentioned due to its metatextual speculation, is not sufficiently developed in his paper which favours the hermeneutic interpretation of the short story. Also, the analyses on Borges in autochthon literary theory and critique are very few and rather limited in the theoretical framework they propose. In theoretical writings on metafiction, Borges is often discussed as an example (including Inger Christensen, Robert Scholes, Marie Laure-Ryan, Ronald J. Christ, Michael Evans, Hallvard Haug); however, most studies focus on *Fictions* from an either hermeneutical perspective, or a pure theoretical one, the latter starting from the text as a metafictional finality and ignoring the mechanisms of metafiction working from inside the text (as characters or narratological placements).

The paper has the following structure with specific methodologies: in the first part, critically discussing the concepts of metafiction, transfictionality and possible worlds, specifying the meaning in use, in a rather theoretical way, while in the second part, the application and adaptation of the concepts to Borges' short story, using constant references to the theoretical framework (the inductive method) as the main method, and also narratological analysis.

The shift to viewing text as artefact was notably achieved by Robert Scholes, who proposed the term *experimental fabulation* (1979), as opposed to the systematic realist expectations of literature, the so-called *naïve realism*. Another direction is Gerard Genette's (1980, 234) understanding of metalepsis as a contamination of the intradiegetic space with the extra-diegetic world, and thus the text that undergoes this kind of leap becomes a meta-diegetic narration. We can read into this setting the possible world theory under the structuralist surface: the postulation of two distinct worlds and with the possibility to connect and interweave – implications that prefigure the problem discussed later. The established term which designate this turning point is metafiction and it is coined by William Gas in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. The meaning we work with is the one found in Patricia Waugh's writings:

“Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order

to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, *they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text*" (1984, 2).

The emphasis is ours and it draws attention upon another type of exchange between text and the world outside of it. Meta-diegetic narration was a contamination of the text with something outside of it for Genette, while Waugh sensed a reversed direction of the contamination. In that sense, possible worlds theories play their part, given the fact that they all have in common the premise that the logic of fiction is not underlain on immanent features of the text, but it is formed in relation with the contextual separation between fictional and non-fictional.

Possible worlds theories re-emerged with Kripke's modal logic. Possible worlds are non-actualised worlds and they do not require ontological commitment. In order for the theory to become an interdisciplinary paradigm, from Leibniz to Kripke two changes occurred: possible worlds are not transcendental and possible worlds are fundamentally incomplete (either this incompleteness is accentuated or is diminished). There are two tendencies in fictionalism: on the one hand, there is the idea that the actual world, the one in which we live, has the same status as any other possible world/ is an (actualised) possible world, which diminishes or annihilates the referentiality of the actualised world; on the other hand, the actual world can be seen as a solid point outside of the system, being the referent-world. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the first theoretical direction, having in mind that is the closest to Borges' view on literature.

Transfictionality, the textual game played by Borges in *The Immortal*, can be defined as "the migration of elements such as characters, plot structures, or settings from one fictional text to another" (Marie-Laure Ryan, 2008, 385-417), but here it reveals a relation with the text and a way to view literature that transgress the definition. What type of Homer is in the centre of the text and what kind of theoretical and conceptual radiation he disperses from this position?

We can presuppose, in the logic of Genette's mentioned structuralism, that an extra-diegetic element (Homer, the author of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, contaminates the intra-diegetic space. Our presupposition is considerably far from possible worlds theory's perspective, which states that "[a]s non-actualised possibles, all

fictional entities are of the same ontological nature” (Lubomír Doležel, 1998, 785-809) in order to co-exist in the same world. This does not mean that the referential act to the Homer inside of the text systematically fails to connect to the Homer outside of the text, neither that the fictional character is infested with reality. The first question: does the actual non-existence of fictional objects lead to the systematic fail of the speech acts that make reference to these objects? Our position is that it does not fail because the object that the reader attributes to the referential expression is identical with the object the author wanted to designate through that referential expression. The branch of semantics inspired by the possible worlds theory legitimises the concept of fictional reference, by extending the universe of discourse to include fictional entities. There is still the problem of the status we confer to fictional objects. The second question, more important for this analysis: how it is possible to make the connection of the character with its prototype from the actual world and what does this connection implies?

It is common knowledge that the reader does not perceive the encounter with the character Homer in a *tabula rasa* way. Rather, the reader accesses general information about the world, the mental image of the author Homer. The confirmation or refutation of these images by the text is of less importance for now than the accessing itself. However, Borges counts precisely on the relations between fictional entities and actual entities that generate versions of the prototype: Homeric versions. How is it possible for a Homer that the main character which relates the story finds to resemble Argos, observing “the Troglodyte's lowly birth and condition” (Jorge Luis Borges, 426), and who proves to be one of the Immortals, to take part in the same network of signs that the prototype of the Homer constructs? Once again, the possible worlds theory proves useful in understanding the fictional universe through the concept of *counterparts relations* (David Lewis, 1986): a flexible relation of similarity. As Doležel observed, the term is used “in a radically non-essentialist semantics of fictionality” (1998, 785-809): it does not imply the necessity of preserving an essential property of the fictional entity throughout its transfer between worlds. After all, Homer is a linguistic palimpsest, with reminiscences and actualizations, whose identity is conferred solely by a name. Instead of an essential property that brings together the variations, there is the linguistic property of being a *rigid designator*, legitimated by the causal theory of names (Saul Kripke, 1972, 253-355).

Yet Borges' intention goes beyond reinventing a Homer – “I have been Homer; soon, like Ulysses, I shall be Nobody; soon, I shall be all men – I shall be dead” (Borges, 440). Philosophical ramifications apart, what interests us is the position of the character which surpasses the definition of transfictionality (that presupposes individualities that migrate between possible worlds) and elevate itself to a form of *transindividuality*. The direct implication is that Homer, as designate, intra-textually aggregates the character with the appearance of Argos, the character-narrator and, by extension, the author postulated by the text. Although the function of names in the possible worlds theory is to make reference to only one specific individual in a possible world (hence, the possibility of having the same referent designate different individuals in different possible worlds), linguistically speaking, Homer extends its referentiality to other entities that are not Homer. This way of creating meaning has a rich metatextual openness.

The most convenient thread that starts from the already discussed transindividuality leads to Borges' conception of literature, which he sees like the Book of books, like an Aleph-text, or a Babel library, exhibiting the ambition to contain everything, to become everything. It is neither necessary, nor productive to interpret his vision in a mystical sense. Rather, we can understand it in a metatextual way, as an awareness of a state of literature coming to exhaustion (John Barth, 1984), which claims the disintegration of the idea of originality. The idea of a literature of exhaustion is translated in a metaphorical register as a character-author responsible for the entire literature, the Immortal. Another perspective comes from the paradigm of possible worlds.

Transindividuality, coupled with the (in)completeness of the fictional worlds, discloses a paradoxical state. Scholars such as Thomas Pavel or Doležel assert the unavoidable incompleteness of a fictional world, gaps in its representation which are not to be filled through legitimate inferences, because they are ontological: not only we cannot know what the text does not make explicit, but those disruptions in representation cannot be retrieved because there is no material for retrieval to begin with. Pavel correlates the reduction or the enlargement of the fictional incompleteness with the episteme that generated the text: the attenuation of the hollows might be the manifestation of an episteme which views the world as a rather stable and finite space, whereas a period of transition and conflict is usually marked by fragmentation. The poetics Borges practises after *Ficcions* punctuate a period of radical incompleteness. The text accuses itself of “over-employment of

circumstantial details, a way of writing that I learned from poets; it is a procedure that infects everything with falseness, since there may be a wealth of details in the event, yet not in memory..." (Borges, 437), revealing Borges' wish to create a world reduced to its skeleton of ideas, incomplete *par excellence*. Paradoxically, the same world reclaims a generative force which inclines to plenitude, all-encompassing and even ubiquity of the fictional world (Borges' ambivalence to see text in context, to repeal the referentiality of real, as we already mentioned). Transindividuality, the idea of an author which ultimately includes all the authors, is a direct consequence of this auto-proclaimed force. Perhaps the depiction of the character is less "circumstantial" precisely in order to preserve the necessary space for comprising an infinity of faces. In this case, completeness and incompleteness overlap.

Metafiction is the most fertile space for analysing completeness and incompleteness in a fictional world, because it disrupts the already established categories that tried to capture this problem and rethinks the status of fiction and the relation fiction-reality. The fullness of an intra-textual world is rather the product of an ancient conception (meaning simultaneously obsolete and from Antiquity): the theory of *mimesis*, i.e. the trust in a text's power of representation, text which supposedly creates a world similar even regarding its completeness to the one in which we live. One end of this mimetic tendency is, of course, overcrowding with descriptive details, extra-"furnishing" the world until satiation in realist texts. The only thing this does is to reduce to minimum the incompleteness of the fictional world (but not to annihilate it), through the illusion of almost photographic representation. A cause of the failure of realism as literary genre is to be found precisely in this illusion of filling the inherent white spaces of fiction using a material abundance in the space created by the text. At the other end, once fiction turns to itself, it assumes and simultaneously negates its limits – on the one hand, it maximises the fragmentation through narratological mechanisms such as the reduction to essence of the world created, the reduction of the *fabula* (in the formalist sense, as material of happenings) to ideas that still help the narration progress, the undressing of the characteristics in characters' construction; and, on the other hand, it still tries to encapsulate a latent matter in these gaps, a potentiality which the ideas-events allude to:

“This City, I thought, is so horrific that its mere existence, the mere fact of its having endured — even in the middle of a secret desert— pollutes the past and the future and somehow compromises the stars. So long as this City endures, no one in the world can ever be happy or courageous. I do not want to describe it; a chaos of heterogeneous words, the body of a tiger or a bull pullulating with teeth, organs, and heads monstrously yoked together yet hating each other—those might, perhaps, be approximate images” (Borges, 424).

The city of Immortals is placed somewhere between metaphor and image, it is not a depiction, but rather a series of ideas concentrated around the same referent. In the logic of the text, the city is as real as possible, yet it has the conceptual force of a nucleus of ideas – this is the most suitable mechanism for metafiction.

Another way to view the dispersion of individuality from the fictional worlds’ perspective that does not privilege the incompleteness assumes that a fictional entity is ontologically as “full” as the real entity which stood as its model. Although seen from a logical-modal point of view fictional worlds are fundamentally incomplete (even in *The Immortal*, where incompleteness merges into an intended form of plenitude, as we have showed), we must take into account the receptive dimension of a text, the reading process as an imaginative one. Ryan proposes the principle of *minimal departure* (1991) to show the way in which the reader traverses the distance from the known object to the mental representation of that object’s image in the text: the reader will make changes only where the text suggests a divergence from the known world. The text may or may not make those changes and departures from the known world; either way, the principle of minimal departure presupposes that the fictional entities have attached a fullness which comes from the reader’s mental representation of them and which completes the gaps. The element of surprise in Borges’ short story plays exactly on the reader’s expectations regarding a troglodyte and his expectations regarding Homer. Nonetheless, the aim of *The Immortal* is far more complex.

Operating a process of inverted minimal departure, Borges intends to idealistically construct a reality as close as possible to the fictional world. The extension of text to meta-text changes the fictional world into a system of worlds. Accepting the author’s conception of literature as explanation for this ambition, we could still ask, from a fictionalistic point of view, how is it possible to reverse the

relationship between the fictional and the actual world as for the fictional world to acquire generative force outside of itself? Before discussing this problem, it is necessary to rethink the partial conclusions about (in)completeness.

Gathering directions so far, we see completeness and incompleteness as tendencies which alternatively activate and shape the matter of a fictional world, piercing its mold through the generative act itself or, on the contrary, filling the fictional gaps through the mental representation of the created world. This kind of dynamic allows literature to create worlds without becoming an endless list of objects. Similarly, Borges argues that the text he aims for contains the whole literature, without practically containing all the actual or possible texts. Fiction is marked by incompleteness in the same way as the Borges' construct of the idea of literature is traversed by the idea of absence which could become not only a presence, but even an omnipresence: Borges' idea that all texts are simultaneously present in any text, which proves itself a challenge for metafiction.

Along those lines, *The Immortal's* ending speaks about reinvesting words in absence: "As the end approaches, wrote Cartaphilus, there are no longer any images from memory – there are only words" (Borges, 441). In a metafictional key, the ending reaffirms the anguish of everything being already written or of the possibility to write everything, to exhaust the images from memory (the modes of catching thoughts and experiences in text). However, this anguish is rather positively exploited, unlike the impossibility to escape the sense of despair in Ioan Groșan's writings, for example. Perhaps there is no real anguish in Borges' logic and sense of literature. Here, the whole literature is nothing but a great Text, written and rewritten throughout time, exhaustible, but susceptible of reshaping, even if it is only through putting the same image in a new speech act, intuition that had already been developed in *Pierre Ménard, author of Don Quijote*.

Revisiting the idea of a world-generating power of fictional texts, this implies that the text exists before the world it constructs (Doležel, 785-809). Although this might seem common sense, the observation has to be made because it contradicts the idea exalted by the theories of *mimesis* of the text's power of representation. Indeed, the possible worlds theory's stance is profoundly anti-mimetic. It is part of Borges' logic and it is legitimately possible from a fictionalistic point of view for the same image to generate a new world by being put in a new act of speech, because the text does not represent, but generates. In this context, a possibility can become

a fictional existence either due to a generative/illocutionary force (Ana-Maria Deliu, 2014, 20-21) or a pragmatic force, or through an indirect representation of an author's thought, or through another sort of force exhibited by the text. While a possibility can become a fictional existence in various ways, Borges glimpses the limit of literature, that is to create a possibility out of a fictional product, and conceptually strikes this fragile zone.

Along with the challenges inside of metafiction, there is the challenge of reading metafiction in a fictionalist key, as showed in the present paper. Although this is not an established praxis, theories of fiction can function as modes of reading, not only from a bird's eye view, considering the text as a finality, as aims and accomplishments, but also in analysing the conflicts that emerge within the fictional machinery, trying to break its wheels, and succeeding in casting light upon its spokes. The result is a mediation between text and theory, in which theory is privileged, because the analysis is meant as an interpellation of fiction by theory, and not a reconciliation of the two dimensions of discourse. Thus, fiction struggles with its status as a possible, with the reflection upon itself (the core of metafiction does not seem to be fiction, but the prefixoid "meta"), with the dissipation of the character's individuality and with the problematic relation fiction-reality.

Therefore, the paper aims to develop and apply the (interrelated) concepts of metafiction, transfictionality and possible worlds, specifically fictional worlds, analysed with perceptiveness for relatively new fiction theories. The migration of interest from text as finality (although the author's intention and assumptions are not neglected) to text as fictional mechanism is the significant mutation of the point of analysis, meant to create a new reading grid. *The Immortal* has Homer dissipating his individuality as a character and becoming a centre of conceptualising force, raising metafictional and possible worlds-related issues.

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