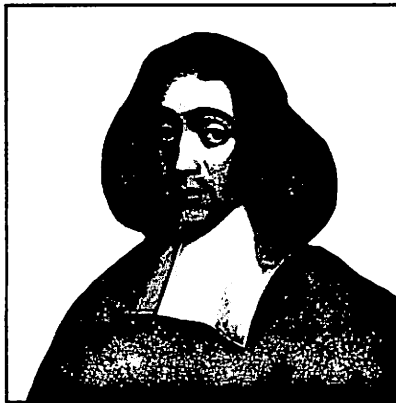


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Spinoza and Literature

Marcelo ABADE Spinoza in Borges's' looking-glass.

Königshausen & Neumann

SPINOZA IN BORGES' LOOKING-GLASS

Marcelo N. Abadi

In the same tongue in which Spinoza refuted the Jewish authorities who brought about his expulsion from the Amsterdam Synagogue, three centuries later an Argentinean writer, long since blind, dictated a sonnet entitled "Baruch Spinoza". Some years earlier he had dictated another sonnet, called, simply, "Spinoza". The poet — Jorge Luis Borges, of course — is one of the most prominent writers in any tongue. He produced no famous novel, no successful play; he created no character comparable to Don Quixote, or Hamlet, or even Father Brown. But in his poems, stories and essays our century can detect a voice that stirs the dormant wonder which, according to the Greeks, lies at the source of the love of knowledge and wisdom.

Borges claimed to be "simply a man of letters" (s. C. Cortínez (ed.), 1982); in private he had described himself as a "puzzled literary man". Yet, though he never purported to be a philosopher, the stuff of his creation is often philosophical: the riddles on which the mind dwells while pondering problems such as the reality of the external world, the identity of the self, the nature of time.

The Vienna Circle held metaphysics to be a branch of fantastical literature. Borges shared this view, referring ironically but also appreciatively to metaphysics and enumerating among the masters of the genre authors such as Plato, Leibniz, Kant. . and Spinoza, whose invention of an infinite substance with infinite attributes he considered a superb fiction.

Borges, admitting that he appraised philosophical ideas according to their aesthetic value or inasmuch as their content were singular or mar-

vellous, never led his readers to expect a style of rigorous demonstration or sustained coherence, which is not to be found in his writings. Nevertheless, one should not hasten to conclude that he was indifferent to truth; he felt there is ultimately a close solidarity between beauty, truth and good. And if he did express deep-rooted scepticism, it was scepticism that spurred his vigilant quest.

But Spinoza deemed his own philosophy to be the true one. In his system there was no place for doubt, not even the provisory doubt of Descartes.

What, then, was the message that three centuries after his death the Dutch philosopher conveyed to the Argentinean man of letters? How is the doctrine of Spinoza to be read in the works of Borges?

In *A Borges Dictionary*,¹ the entry on Spinoza calls attention to echoes of his geometrical method of deduction of reality in "Death and the Compass" (a rigorous detective story where the name of the philosopher appears as a clue) or, too, in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", where a fictitious planet is developed, foreshadowed by a pronouncement to the effect that copulation and mirrors are abominable because they multiply the visible universe. And, of course, Spinoza's name appears in this story also, though the narrator points out that in Tlön only thought — not thought and extension — would be conceivable as a divine attribute (which is indeed a recurrent idea of Borges'). We should, however, not overestimate these allusions. Borges' imagination is certainly less akin to Spinoza's doctrine than to Berkeley, Hume, Schopenhauer, Bradley or Mauthner, whose influence is often acknowledged by the author himself and by critics. We would rather underline the fact that in hardly any of Borges' numerous works written in collaboration — some of which are quite philosophical — does Spinoza's name appear. On the other hand, Borges did write two poems on Spinoza but none on the other philosophers mentioned. It would seem that there is something secret, or at least private, about the relationship.

And surely this is not due solely to the fact that Spinoza was deeply ad-

¹ *A Borges Dictionary*, by Evelyn Fishburn and Psiche Burns. Will soon appear in England, the United States and Argentina.

mired by Borges' father — a professor of psychology, at times a writer —, who initiated his son into literature and metaphysics and, most certainly, into free-thinking, in a sometimes ostensibly religious country.

It is therefore only natural to focus on Borges' poems on Spinoza, follow their development and attempt to understand the differences between them, as we listen to the age-old dialogue between poetry and philosophy.

The first sonnet, "Spinoza", is to be found in a collection of poems called *El otro, el mismo* (The other, the same), which appeared in 1964. It is a beautiful poem, and Borges, who often pretended to forget his own writings, enjoyed reciting it to whomever asked him about it. More than ten years later, he was requested to contribute to a volume on Spinoza which the Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires was preparing in commemoration of the tricentenary of the philosopher's death.² Borges composed a new sonnet: this time the name was "Baruch Spinoza".

In the prologue to *El otro, el mismo*, Borges made fun of his "habit of writing the same page twice over, with minimal changes", generally resulting, in his own opinion, in a somewhat inferior second version. And in the prologue to *La moneda de hierro* (The Iron Coin), where the second sonnet on Spinoza was included, he refers to it as a probable worsening of the first poem. So that when, years later, in answer to a journalist's query as to his favourite compositions, he mentioned "Everness" and "one on Spinoza" (see *La Prensa*, Buenos Aires, April 8th, 1984), it is tempting to conclude that he was referring to the first sonnet of the two. Which is quite possible, but perhaps unfair.

I should imagine that Borges laid value on the fact that — surprisingly enough — the first sonnet expresses Spinoza's doctrine more accurately than the second, which is a looser rendering and certainly a more fictionalized interpretation of Spinoza's endeavour. I say surprisingly enough, because the second sonnet was composed after a period in which Borges undertook a thorough study of Spinoza's works, read about them (partic-

²Museo Judío de Buenos Aires, 1976. The poem by Borges is on page 7.

ularly in Alain and Russell), and resolved to write a book which was to be entitled *Clave de Spinoza* or *Clave de Baruch Spinoza* ("Key to Spinoza", or "Key to Baruch Spinoza".) This project even appears as having been accomplished, in the playfully bogus biography of himself to be found in the *Enciclopedia Sudamericana* of the year 2074 which he "quotes" in the Epilogue of his *Obras completas*, see J. L. Borges, 1981 (from now on cited as *O.C.*), p. 1143, (Collected Works). In Mexico, conversing with Ruffinelli, he avowed, "I am preparing a book on Spinoza's philosophy, because I have never understood him. He has always attracted me, less than Berkeley, less than Schopenhauer, but I cannot understand Spinoza" (cf. *Plural*, Mexico, No. 35, August 1974).

Now, is it true that Borges could not grasp Spinoza's philosophy? Did he understand it after resuming his studies of it? And was the book — that cipher of Spinoza more than once announced but never written — finally condensed into the fourteen lines of the second sonnet?

Let us turn to the first one. It is known that after his expulsion from the Synagogue, Spinoza had to leave Amsterdam for a sort of exile in exile, never renouncing his convictions nor embracing a new faith. In order to safeguard his proud independence, he refused, to the end of his relatively short life, chairs, pensions and honours. He preferred to make a living by polishing lenses, and this is how the first lines of the sonnet portray him:

Las traslúcidas manos del
judío
Labran en la penumbra los
cristales.

The Jew's translucent
hands
Polish the crystal lenses in
the half-light.

The lenses symbolize Spinoza's days and works; one might say they also illustrate — more definitely so in the last verses of the sonnet — a central trait in Modern philosophy, which never ceased to conceive of the human mind as a mirror upon whose fidelity depends the accuracy of whatever knowledge of reality may be achieved (cf. R. Rorty, 1979).

But Modern rationalism and empiricism both had to contend with the prejudices of the revealed religions in order to ensure the constructing of science. And the struggle was not always bloodless: it often led to

isolation and silence, persecution and burning at the stake. Small wonder, then, that a sinister theme should emerge immediately in the sonnet in the shape of fear and monotony:

Y la tarde que muere es
miedo y frío.
(Las tardes a las tardes son
iguales.)

And the dying dusk is fear
and chill.
(The twilight hours are all
alike.)

However, neither fear nor monotony perturb the thinker:

Las manos y el espacio de
jacinto
Que palidece en el confín del
Ghetto
Casi no existen para el hom-
bre quieto
Que está soñando un claro
laberinto.

The hands and the hyacinth
air
That pales towards the con-
fines of the Ghetto
Barely exist for the quiet
man
Who is dreaming up a clear
labyrinth.

Most singular, this labyrinth dreamt up by Spinoza. In the sad dusk it is a light, perhaps the way. It is clear as the hand-polished crystal the dreamer transforms into lenses or as the text the poet was to evolve centuries later out of his own brave darkness.

A "clear labyrinth": I wonder whether the expression is strictly an oxymoron. Actually, Borges' labyrinths do not always cause despair; some there are, infinite and formless, where a man may lose his way and die; others, like the world at times, are the scene of solitude and boredom, but, then again, the scene of deeds of valour guided by love, and there are yet those that constitute a secret order towards which nostalgia is drawn and hope will strive. In 1984, from Knossos, Borges writes, "It is our precious duty to imagine that there is a labyrinth and a thread. We shall never come upon the thread. We may grasp at it and lose it in an act of faith, in a cadence, in dream, in the words we call philosophy, or in plain and simple happiness" ("El hilo de la fábula" in Borges, 1985, p. 61).

In the first tercet on Spinoza we learn that

No lo turba la fama, ese re- flejo	He is not disturbed by fame, that reflection
De sueños en el sueño de otro espejo,	Of dreams within the dream of another mirror,
Ni el temeroso amor de las doncellas.	Nor by the timorous love of maidens.

How could Borges fail to admire the outcast for whom his father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, had felt such devotion, the exiled philosopher who had committed himself to the passion of understanding, while declining honours and braving insecurity?

Spinoza had cast off vanity and illusion, if ever he had been burdened by them, and had scaled the heights of the unadorned essence of his calling. Now,

Libre de la metáfora y del mito	Free from metaphor and myth,
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for he has no craving to dazzle with rhetorical devices, and has banished from knowledge the finalism that remits man to belief in supernatural beings,

Labra un arduo cristal: el infinito	He grinds an arduous crys- tal: the infinite
Mapa de Aquél que es todas Sus estrellas.	Map of the One who is all His stars.

The dusk has died away. Suddenly in the darkness a refulgent crystal, like the vertiginous Aleph, shines with the radiance of all the stars. Infinity has been tamed by a memorable creation, a map of the universe which is also the map of God.

Why this equation? Because for Spinoza there is only one substance: God or Nature. Whether or not this scandalous identification was the

reason for his excommunication, it is the notorious starting point of the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, which, for obvious reasons, was published only after his death.

Descartes, whom Spinoza had studied and commentated, moves from the self and its ignorance to eventually apprehend the existence of God and to attain knowledge of the world. Spinoza, on the other hand, starts from the 'cause of itself' (*causa sui*), which is God. And Spinoza's divinity is not the personal and transcendent creator God of revealed religion, nor is it a being superior to ourselves and outside the order of nature, nor yet a Being who shows indignation, feels compassion, works miracles or causes His son to die for our salvation. *Deus sive natura*, says Spinoza: God, that is Nature. God is the only reality; outside God there is nothing. But, then, Nature is the only substance and outside Nature there is nothing. This explains why, from the time his doctrine came to be known, Spinoza has been considered by some to be an inspired pantheist, the philosopher "drunk with God" that Novalis evokes, whereas others see him as the "prince of atheists", the stubborn naturalist who acknowledges none other than the physical order. At any rate, in Spinozism, science has no need to refer to any supernatural order whatsoever, man is not a fracture in Being and may attain salvation through philosophy, and, furthermore, the State should not be subordinate to religion (F. Alquié, 1959, p. 72).

In Borges' story "La escritura de Dios" (The Writing of God), the magus Tzinacán, the narrator and protagonist, when relating his ecstasy, defines it as "union with divinity, with the universe" and adds, in parentheses, "I don't know that these words differ". Does Tzinacán's (Borges') thought coincide here with that of the *Ethics*? Yes and no. Yes, because he proclaims the identity of God and Nature. No, because these equatable realities are in fact mere words: "I don't know that these words differ" (in *O.C.*, p. 598). And Borges well knows that words do not touch the hard core of reality, that no language is the map of the world, the cipher of the universe or of a life.

This melancholy conviction, which fissures the edifice of classical rationalism, pervades the second sonnet, the one entitled "Baruch Spinoza." Shortly prior to composing it, as we have said, Borges had applied himself to a diligent study of Spinoza's works, which was to prelude a book on

the philosopher. One of the conclusions this study had led to — presaged, no doubt, by his inveterate repudiation of all systematic thinking — was expressed in an interview some years later (*La Opinión*, Buenos Aires, August 31th, 1980). On this occasion Borges averred that the geometrical form of the *Ethics*, far from being essential to Spinoza's doctrine, was not even appropriate to its exposition. He affirmed that Spinoza "had not originally conceived the book in this manner. . . Only later did he endow it with this absurd machinery." Moreover, "he chose this mechanism mistakenly". Borges deplored this, since he believed that the content of the *Ethics* could have been expounded without recourse to such a mechanism, just as Spinoza had expressed it in letters to his friends, which were "most readable and lovely".³

The author of the *Ethics* had intended this work to be impersonal: alone the voice of reason, with the characteristic timbre it had acquired from Galileo and Descartes, was to be audible in its development; no affectivity whatsoever should resound, however indirectly. But Borges — whose own poetry, while often purporting to be objective, springs from subterranean emotion — discovered, behind the screen of axioms, demonstrations and corollaries, a poignant figure: the sad, tenacious, intrepid Baruch. And the sonnet "Baruch Spinoza" begins by presenting him faced with the infinite task that he has assigned himself or that has singled him out among all the men of his times:

Bruma de oro, el occidente
alumbra

La ventana. El asiduo
manuscrito

Aguarda, ya cargado de in-
finito.

Alguien construye a Dios en
la penumbra.

A golden haze, the west
glows

Through the window. The
assiduous manuscript

Awaits, already laden with
infinity.

Someone is constructing
God in the fading light.

It is the same time of evening, probably in the same surroundings

³For a recent discussion of the idea of geometrical order as a rhetorical device, cf. H. de Dijn, 9/86.

suggested in the sonnet "Spinoza". But the crystal transparency of the lenses is not evoked; only a window glows in the last rays of the setting sun. And there, alone, sits Baruch constraining himself to write out infinity.

The greatness of Spinoza's task is already apparent; so, too, is his glorious, inevitable failure. Clearly, the aim outlined in the first sonnet was far from modest, or even attainable: the philosopher had set himself no less than to faceting a diamond that would reflect God, or to drawing an infinite map of the universe. But in "Baruch Spinoza" ambition is directed, perhaps by its own logic, towards another, higher order of endeavour: this God, this universe, is to be carved out of the coarse stuff of language, none the more polished for all its geometrical form.

Un hombre engendra a
Dios. Es un judío
De tristes ojos y piel ce-
trina;
Lo lleva el tiempo como lle-
va el río.
Una hoja en el agua que de-
clina.

A man is begetting God. He
is a Jew
With sad eyes and fallow
skin;
Time bears him along as a
river bears
A leaf on the downward
flow.

A toy in the river of time — a plaything, like the autumn leaf or the sheet of paper reverberant with the incipient poem —, Spinoza does not bemoan, as does the Heine of another of Borges' poems (see "Paris, 1856", in *O.C.*, p. 914), the "fate of being a man and being a Jew". The one lay prostrate, recalling the "delicate melodies" he had instrumented; the other obstinately crafted a "delicate geometry". The third quatrain of this Elizabethan sonnet goes on to say:

No importa. El hechicero
 insiste y labra
 A Dios con geometría deli-
 cada;
 Desde su enfermedad, desde
 su nada,
 Sigue erigiendo a Dios con
 la palabra.

No matter. The wizard per-
 sists and fashions
 God with delicate geome-
 try;
 Out of his infirmity, out of
 his nothingness,
 He continues to erect God
 with the word.

Galileo had observed that the world is a book written in mathematical characters. Borges' metaphysician, having learnt to read — and to write — these characters, could legitimately nourish more ambitious or more feasible projects than those devised by the alchemist, or by the Prague Rabbi who engendered the Golem, the senseless mannequin barely good for sweeping out the Synagogue (cf. "El alquimista" (*O.C.*, p. 925) and "El Golem" (*O.C.*, p. 885). And yet, the terms used by Borges evoke magic, the Kabbala, dreams, perchance literary creation.

Borges belittled the geometrical form of demonstration of the *Ethics*, showing scanty regard for its mathematical, Cartesian inspiration. The analytical geometry discovered by Descartes is reduced to a "delicate geometry", which in turn refers back to a verbal art. Spinoza is creating God out of the word, as the poet creates the text. This word, Borges says, is uttered by the philosopher "out of his infirmity". And perhaps nothing is farther from this idea than the view Spinoza held of himself and man in the world. While Novalis will consider life as an "infirmity of the spirit", while Pascal was dismayed by "the eternal silence of the infinite spaces", man according to Spinoza participates fully in being; no room is left for any sense of helplessness in the heliocentric universe proposed by Modern science (cf. F. Alquié, 1958, pp. 118, 119, *passim*)

It is true that Descartes took an interest in magic in his youth, and true, too, that as a young man Spinoza studied the Kabbala, the mystics and the poets and was also contemporary with Pascal. But of all this there remains in the *Ethics* much less than what these last lines we have quoted might suggest. On the other hand, in the Fifth Part and referring

to God, we do find the none too theistic idea expressed in the final couplet of the sonnet:

El más pródigo amor le fue otorgado,	Love most prodigal was granted him,
El amor que no espera ser amado.	The love that never expects to be loved.

It was not Spinoza's intention to forge a God, but to discover, deduce, an order which is the order of the unique reality or that of its only two attributes known to us: extension and thought.⁴

His conception of the unity of nature is not the same as the one born of Renaissance enthusiasm, but rather the revigorating gesture that asserts scientific optimism while rationally satisfying all man's longings and while requiring a society in which man may reveal himself freely.

Spinoza's God, as Borges recalled in another text, "abhors no one and loves no one".⁵ How then would Spinoza expect His love? Are not his declarations to this effect, above all, a way of underscoring the completely impersonal nature of this God of the *Ethics*?

Perhaps what Borges in turn exhorts, at the close of this sonnet, is a norm akin to the one he finds and values in Robert L. Stevenson, which proclaims that man must be just, whether God be just or not and whether God exist or not.⁶ Likewise the poet must "work at the incorruptible verse" (cf. "El hacedor", in Borges, 1981, p. 50), though the material at hand be perishable.

Spinoza as portrayed in the second sonnet is stripped of his geometri-

⁴I believe that latterly Borges (see for ex. "Nihon" in Borges, 1981, p. 101) committed an interesting mistake: that of considering the knowable attributes of substance according to Spinoza to be space and time rather than space and thought as they in fact are. A slip of the memory or perhaps an attempt to make the existence of finite beings more comprehensible?

⁵"El primer Wells" (*O.C.*, p. 698). In a suggestive article brought to my attention by P.F. Moreau, J. Damade quotes this essay from *Otras inquisiciones* and compares the indifference of Spinoza's God to the indifference Borges shows towards the creatures of his own making. Cf. J. Damade, 1982, pp. 126-130.

⁶Cf. Borges' prologue to the translation — by himself and R. Alifano — of Stevenson's fables: *Fábulas*, 1983, p. 11.

cal armour; his formulations are not the inexorable deduction of reality: reason is an art of the word and there is nothing to warrant any deep correspondence between this art and the world.

Nevertheless, in 1979, on being asked to name his favourite historical character, Borges unhesitatingly answered, "Spinoza, who committed his life to abstract thought" (see *Argencard*, Buenos Aires, May, 1982). It is evident then that in composing "Baruch Spinoza" it was not his intention to present the philosopher as a myth-maker who fabulizes a God promptly to be vaunted as the only and uncreated reality.

Neither should this sonnet be read as formal tribute rendered in deference to a distant thinker nor yet as a mere critique of a conceptual system. Rather does the poem mark the author's encounter, in the labyrinth of the world and of ideas, with an old fellow-adventurer, an ally, a friend.

Despite his claims to the contrary, I believe that Borges had always understood the architecture of the edifice erected by Spinoza, but never deemed it inhabitable by man, conducive to attaining indubitable knowledge, or to experiencing a kind of eternity, to salvation.

He was sensitive to the philosopher's deep yearnings, but disbelieved the algorithmic spells summoned up to satisfy them. The studies he undertook prior to composing the second poem annotated led him to demythologise the mathematical apparatus of the *Ethics*, to view its author, ultimately, as "simply a man of letters" and to strengthen his own misgivings. They did not, however, undermine the admiration his father had passed on to him; they only altered the affective quality of this sentiment, guiding it more closely to the thinker, the laborious, mystical free-thinker, than towards the systematic result of his thought. Thus, one might say that the first sonnet is truly, and not only by virtue of its title, the poetical exposition of a quasi-classical Spinoza by Borges, while the second is, no less truly, the evocation of an intimate, lovable Baruch by Jorge Luis.

In later years, Borges was to insist on his incapacity to apprehend Spinoza's doctrine (see "Nihon", in Borges, 1981, p. 101). Or else he

would say that he could understand it, but that this doctrine constitutes a religion, not a system, and that its author should be considered a saint, (cf. Borges, 1982, pp. 73-76)

Albeit, to the end of his life in 1986, Borges was wont to answer questions on Spinoza (after he became blind, answering questions was one of the ways he most used to avoid writing, or, perhaps, in order to write) with a strong feeling of admiration. I suppose he felt that the finest creation of the *Ethics* was its very author. The *Ethics* may prove not to attain Truth, or the Absolute, but it mirrors the gaze that seeks them regardless of menaces, disdaining fame and riches. Baruch, not God, is construed by the architecture of the *Ethics*. And history teaches us that he existed and lived up to his ideas. Most certainly, Borges admired the audacity of Spinoza's philosophical intention (invention) and adhered to many of its religious,⁷ ethical and social implications. But, above all, he perceived in the thinker's life the acceptance of a cogent intellectual passion and saw perhaps in that life an image of his own existence, entirely committed to an unquestioned literary destiny.

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⁷Borges, of course, utterly disbelieved in divine punishment or reward and, more generally, in God, the personal God of the Bible. Sometimes he was tempted by a sort of pantheism. He recalled Bernard Shaw's expression, "God is in the making". "Why not [believe], Borges asked, in a God who may be evolving through stones, through plants, through beasts, through men(. .), through the days to come (. .)?" Cf. C. Cortínez (ed.), 1986, p. 24.

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RESUME

Borges hérita de son père le culte de Spinoza, à qui il consacra deux beaux sonnets. Le premier de ces poèmes ("Spinoza") reflète avec assez de fidélité le projet naturaliste du philosophe. Le deuxième ("Baruch Spinoza") relève d'une interprétation plus libre et coule d'une source plus intime: ici Spinoza est un sorcier construisant Dieu au moyen de la parole.

Certes, Borges n'est pas spinoziste. Et pourtant, il aimé Spinoza plus que tout autre philosophe. Son Spinoza, en dépit de l'exposé *more geometrico* de l'*Ethique*, partage finalement le sort du poète, toujours condamné à poursuivre l'Absolu ou la Réalité, (f) ne l'atteignant jamais que par allusion.