

- Borges, *Historia de la noche*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1977.
Borges, *Historia universal de la infamia*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1954.
Borges, *La rosa profunda*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1975.
Borges, *Libro del cielo y del infierno*. Buenos Aires: Sur, 1960.
Borges, *Luna de Enfrente*. N.p., n.d.
Borges. *Tigres azules*. N.p., 1977.

Borges the Poet

Ed. Carlos Cortínez

Fayetteville: The University of
Arkansas Press, 1986

JAIME ALAZRAKI

Enumerations as Evocations: On the Use of a
Device in Borges' Latest Poetry

Enumerations in literature are as old as the Old Testament, but in modern times they have achieved the status of an established rhetorical device only since the writing of Walt Whitman. Such are the conclusions of Detlev W. Schumann and Leo Spitzer, two critics who have studied enumerations in contemporary poetry. Spitzer summarized his findings in a well known essay entitled "Chaotic Enumerations in Modern Poetry."¹ There he says: "All seems to indicate that we owe chaotic enumerations as a poetic device to Whitman."² In a different essay devoted to Whitman, Spitzer defines the device as "consisting of lumping together things spiritual and physical, as the raw material of our rich, but un-ordered modern civilization which is made to resemble an oriental bazaar. . . ."³ If enumerations have been, until Whitman, one of the most effective means of describing the perfection of the created world in praise of its Creator, it was Whitman's task to render that same perfection and unity into attributes of our chaotic modern world."⁴ Whitman did not invent the device, but he used it with such intensity and skill that his poetry became a showcase of the rich possibilities offered by the device for poets who succeeded him. In Spanish America, Darío and Neruda were deeply influenced by Whitman and his enumerative style. So was Borges, who wrote about Whitman and on enumerations as early as 1929.

In a short note entitled "The Other Whitman," he argued that Europeans misread Whitman: "They turned him into the forerunner of many provincial inventors of free verse. The French aped the most vulnerable

part of his diction: the complaisant geographic, historic, and circumstantial enumerations strung by Whitman to fulfill Emerson's prophecy about a poet worthy of America."⁵ Borges viewed enumerations and free verse—at that time—as foundations of European avant-garde poetry. "Those imitations," he concluded caustically, "were and are the whole of today's French poetry."⁶ He then added, on the subject of enumerations, "many of them didn't even realize that enumeration is one of the oldest poetic devices—think of the Psalms in the Scriptures, and of the first chorus of *The Persians*, and the Homeric catalogue of the ships—, and that its intrinsic merit is not its length but its delicate verbal balance. Walt Whitman didn't ignore that."⁷

Almost fifty years later, in a footnote to his latest collection of poems, *La cifra*, Borges restated the same notion. Referring to the poem "Aquél," he wrote, "this composition, like almost all the others, abuses chaotic enumerations. Of this figure, in which Walt Whitman abounded with so much felicity, I can only say that it should impress us as chaos, as disorder, and be, at the same time, a cosmos, an order."⁸ There are three elements here that need to be emphasized. The first is that Borges adopts in 1981 the term coined, or rather divulged, by Spitzer as it was used earlier by Schumann. Raimundo Lida translated Spitzer's article into Spanish and it was published in Buenos Aires in 1945. It is presumable that Borges read it, but he didn't have to, since the term has become part of our literary jargon and we use it familiarly, unaware of our debt to either Schumann or Spitzer. What matters is that this is the first reference Borges makes to the device under the name of "chaotic enumerations."

The second point is that Borges emphasizes the idea of order in the guise of chaos underlying the effectiveness of chaotic enumerations in Whitman. This is the very core of Spitzer's definition: "Whitman's catalogues," he says, "present a mass of heterogeneous things integrated, however, in a majestic and grand vision of All-One."⁹

The third and last point is Borges' explicit recognition that his last collection, *La cifra*, abuses chaotic enumerations. He is right. Although enumerations appear already in his early collections, and reappear throughout his entire poetic work, the device is considerably more frequent in his latest book. Following is an attempt to track the course of enumerations in Borges' poetry, and an attempt to define the implications of the device in the development of his art.

For a writer who has been an early reader and admirer of Whitman, who has written a couple of essays on him, who has acknowledged his debt to Whitman in numerous texts, early and late, and who has (more recently) translated *Leaves of Grass* into Spanish, it is not at all surprising to find in Borges' own poetry the use and abuse of enumerations. They appear as early as 1925 in his collection *Luna de enfrente* in such poems as: "Los Llanos," "Dualidá en una despedida," "Al coronel Francisco Borges," "La promisión en alta mar," "Mi vida entera," and "Versos de catorce." With the exception of "Mi vida entera" ("My Whole Life"), the other poems use enumerations either partially or for the rhythmic element performed by a repeated word or anaphora. What sets "My Whole Life" aside from the others in his early poetry is the use of enumerations in a manner that will become characteristic of his later work. Note the poem in a translation by W. S. Merwin:

Here once again the memorable lips, unique and like yours.
I am this groping intensity that is a soul.
I have got near to happiness and have stood in the shadow
of suffering.
I have crossed the sea.
I have known many lands; I have seen one woman and two
or three men.
I have loved a girl who was fair and proud, and bore a
Spanish quietness.
I have seen the city's edge, an endless sprawl where the
sun goes down tirelessly, over and over.
I have relished many words.
I believe deeply that this is all, and that I will neither see
nor accomplish new things.
I believe that my days and my nights, in their poverty and
their riches, are the equal of God's and of all men's.¹⁰

With the years, the list will become longer, the lines shorter, the voice deeper, the tone calmer, but the effort to survey his whole life through enumerations will remain the same.

But what exactly do enumerations enumerate in poetry? In the case of Whitman, they list the diversity or even chaos of a country, time, or people, in order to cluster that diversity into a unity: the poem renders that oriental bazaar of our unordered civilization—in the words of Spitzer—into "the powerful Ego, the 'I' of the poet, who has extricated

himself from the chaos."¹¹ This is not the use Borges makes of enumerations. In his second essay on Whitman, he comments on this use of enumerations reminiscent of the holy texts found in most religions: "pantheism," he writes, "has disseminated a variety of phrases which declare that God is several contradictory or (even better) miscellaneous things." He then brings up examples from the *Gita*, Heraclitus, Plotinus, the Sufi poet Attar, and concludes: "Whitman renovated that device. He did not use it, as others had, to define the divinity or to play with the 'sympathies and differences' of words; he wanted to identify himself, in a sort of ferocious tenderness, with all men."¹² Borges himself has employed this particular type of enumeration, proper to pantheism, in his fiction, in the description of divine visions or theophanies in stories like "The Aleph," "The Zahir," and "The God's Script," but not in his poetry.

There is another use of enumerations. It is best summarized by Whitman himself toward the end of his poem "A Backward Glance Over Traveled Roads" when he writes, "*Leaves of Grass* indeed has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and personal nature—an attempt from first to last, to put a *Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the 19th Cent., in America) freely, fully and truly *on record*."¹³ But for Whitman to put a human being on record was to write about Humanity and Nature, History and Politics, America and Sex, or, as he says elsewhere, "to sing the land, the people and the circumstances of the United States, to express their autochthonous song and to define their material and political success."¹⁴

Borges shares this task of poetry ("to articulate in poetic form my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual and aesthetic Personality" in Whitman's words), but in a much more modest and restricted way. Compared to the cosmic world of Whitman, Borges' poetry is an intimate environment peopled by sunsets and cityscapes, streets and outskirts, authors and books, branches of his family tree, Argentine heroes and counter-heroes, obsessions and mythologies, metaphysical and literary reflections, Old English and Germanic sagas, time, blindness, memory, oblivion, old age, love, friendship and death. There is no need to reconcile these two different perceptions of poetry belonging to Whitman and Borges, but rather how to explain the latter's admiration for the former.

In the preface to *Elogio de la sombra* he wrote, "I once strove after the vast breath of the psalms and of Walt Whitman."¹⁵ And in his poem

"Buenos Aires," from the same collection, he writes: "Buenos Aires is a tall house in the South of the city where my wife and I translated Whitman whose great echo, I hope, reverberates in this page."¹⁶ And again in the preface to *El otro, el mismo* he insisted, "In some of these poems, Whitman's influence will be—I hope—noticed."¹⁷ That Whitmanesque "vast breath" is present, paradoxically, in poems where enumerations convey intimate evocations of the poet's personal past, as in his early poem "My Whole Life," written in 1925. Another example, chronologically, of this type of intimate evocation is the second of the "Two English Poems" written in 1934. Like the previous one, this too is a sort of family album in which the most significant experiences and events of the poet's personal life are recorded: desperate sunsets, lean streets, ragged suburbs, a lonely moon, his grandfather killed on the frontier of Buenos Aires, his great-grandfather heading a charge of three hundred men in Perú, the memory of a yellow rose, books, explanations, theories, the poet's loneliness, darkness, and his heart. The poem can be read, indeed, as a microcosm of his entire poetic work; most of his major themes and motifs are spun in this early cocoon.

What needs to be pointed out, though, is that this poem typifies the kind of enumerations that will be predominant in later poetry. There is no chaos here, in the sense used by Spitzer, as an expression of modern world disorder. There is a random survey of experiences we call chaotic enumerations, but the chaos refers mainly to the nature of the presentation rather than to the disorder of the representation (be that a country, a civilization, or the world). Borges too strives "to put a person on record," but not, as in Whitman's case, in the crucial latter half of the nineteenth century, during the rise of America as a world power, but in a very familiar time and in a place that is perceived more in personal than in historical terms.

Enumerations in which the specified material belongs to a strictly intimate space and a highly personal time may be illustrated by this passage:

Stars, bread, libraries of East and West,
 Playing cards, chessboards, galleries, skylights, cellars,
 A human body to walk with on the earth,
 Fingernails, growing at nighttime and in death,
 Shadows for forgetting, mirrors busily multiplying,
 Cascades in music, gentlest of all time's shapes,

Borders of Brazil, Uruguay, horses and mornings,
 A bronze weight, a copy of the Grettir Saga,
 Algebra and fire, the charge at Junín in your blood,
 Days more crowded than Balzac, scent of the honeysuckle,
 Love and the imminence of love and intolerable remembering,
 Dreams like buried treasure, generous luck,
 And memory itself . . . All this was given to you . . .¹⁸

This scrutiny of things past and present comes from "Matthew XXV: 30" written in 1953. It is a recasting, slightly modified, of the enumeration put forth in the second "English Poem" of 1934 which in turn rewrites the earlier inventory recorded in "My Whole Life" of 1925. They are not the same poem: each one has a different intent and a different tone suitable to that intent. In the first, the emphasis is on the admission that, as the poem declares, "this is all, and I will neither see nor accomplish new things," a lucid anticipation, in 1925, of Borges' basic approach to writing as rewriting. The second is a love poem, and in it the poet's life is inscribed through its most memorable assets to be offered, as a trophy, to the beloved one: "I am trying to bribe you with uncertainty, with danger, with defeat."¹⁹ The third poem recounts those same items, concluding: "You have used up the years and they have used up you / And still, and still, you have not written the poem."²⁰

The evocation of those chosen moments or things or people will be repeated throughout Borges' entire poetic work, although never in quite the same way. Specifically it will appear in the poems: "Somebody," "Elegy," and "Another Poem of Gifts." In some cases, the poem enumerates not the things that life gave the poet but those it didn't; poems about gifts not received, like "Limits," expanded into "An Elegy of the Impossible Memory," and tried once again in "Things That Might Have Been." In other poems, there are just inventories of things dear to the poet's memory, like "The Things," reenacted in "Things," and repeated once again in "Inventory." In poems like "The Threatened One" and "To the Sad One," personal things and interests are listed together. There are also poems whose enumerations are intended to give not a portrayal of the poet but of somebody else, or of animals, places, countries, cultures, books, or questions, such as "Descartes," "The Righteous Ones," "The Orient," "Israel," "Buenos Aires," "Iceland," "The Islam," "England," "A Thousand and One Nights," and "Insomnia." Finally, in a poem like

"John, I, 4" the enumeration foregoes the particulars and concentrates on the abstract side of gifts from life.

But the more interesting and the more relevant to this study are those instances of enumeration addressed to a survey of the poet's life. In addition to the already mentioned, the following should be added: "I," "I Am," "Talismans," "The Thing I Am," "A Saturday," "The Causes," "The Maker," "Yesterdays," and "Fame." What pertains to the first three poems applies to these also; each has its own focus, its own inflection and tone. Yet all share the condition of enumeration as a means of evoking the poet's past and reflecting upon his present. The theme is recast, again and again, each time to strike a different chord, or a different poem. The method was essentially set forth in that early poem of 1925; time completed it, skill refined it. The early hesitant and elementary lyrics evolved into the perfection and complexity of Borges' recent poetry in which we hear the same intrinsic melody, but the music now has the balance, the harmony and serenity that befit a master.

A final and concluding remark. Borges' penchant for summaries is proverbial. He has insisted that "to write vast books is a laborious nonsense" and suggested that "a better course is to pretend that those books already exist and then offer a summary, a commentary."²¹ Such a tendency applies to his poetry as well. The poems mentioned as examples of enumerations are summaries of the poet's major themes and motifs, indexes of his poetic production, or metonymies of his main subjects. His ancestors' battles and deaths, splendidly sung in numerous poems, are now resolved in a single and slim line: "I am the memory of a sword." His entire poetic endeavour is compressed into a single verse: "I have woven a certain hendecasyllable," and the plots and counter-plots of his fiction are encapsulated in a terse line from the poem "Fame": "I have only retold ancient stories." There is no need for more. Borges, the master of metonymy, understands that having constructed a literary world of his own, an artful intimation suffices.

I also believe that this type of enumeration expresses his long held notion that "memory is best fulfilled through oblivion." Everything must be forgotten so that a few words remain. But those few words, in turn, condense and contain everything—personal Alephs, indeed—. Oblivion thus becomes the ultimate realization of memory: "Viviré de olvidar-me": "I shall live out of forgetting about myself," he says. What is left is

an echo, a trace, a single line, the wake of a long journey that the poem proceeds to compile.

NOTES

1. Leo Spitzer, *Lingüística e historia literaria* (Madrid: Gredos, 1961): 245–291. Second edition.
2. Spitzer, *Lingüística*, 258.
3. Leo Spitzer, "Explication de Text." Applied to Walt Whitman's poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Included in *Essays on English and American Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1962): 23.
4. Spitzer, *Lingüística*, 261.
5. Jorge Luis Borges, "El otro Whitman." Included in *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957): 52. My own translation.
6. Borges, "El otro Whitman," 52.
7. Borges, "El otro Whitman," 52.
8. Jorge Luis Borges. *La cifra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981): 105.
9. Spitzer, *Lingüística*, 258.
10. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems 1923–1967*. Edited by Norman Thomas di Giovanni. (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972): 43.
11. Spitzer, "Explication de Text," 22.
12. Jorge Luis Borges, "Note On Walt Whitman." Included in *Other Inquisitions*. Translated by Ruth L. C. Simms. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966): 73–4.
13. Walt Whitman, "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads." Included in *Leaves of Grass, Authoritative Texts, Prefaces, Whitman On His Art, Criticism* (New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1973): 573–4.
14. Whitman, "Backward Glance," 574.
15. Jorge Luis Borges, *Elogio de la sombra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969): 11.
16. Borges, *Elogio de la sombra*, 128.
17. Jorge Luis Borges, *El otro, el mismo* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969): 11.
18. Borges, *Selected Poems*, 93.
19. Borges, *El otro, el mismo*, 18.
20. Borges, *Selected Poems*, 93.
21. Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1956): 11.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Elogio de la sombra*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969.
- Borges, *El otro, el mismo*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969.
- Borges, "El otro Whitman." In *Discusión*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957.
- Borges, *Ficciones*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1956.
- Borges, *La cifra*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981.
- Borges, "Note on Walt Whitman." In *Other Inquisitions*. Translated by Ruth L. C. Simms. New York: Washington Square Press, 1966.
- Borges. *Selected Poems 1923–1967*. Edited by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni. New York: Delacorte Press, 1972.
- Spitzer, Leo. "Explication de Text." In *Essays on English and American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962.

Spitzer. *Lingüística e historia literaria*. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1961.

Whitman, Walt. "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads." In *Leaves of Grass, Authoritative Texts, Prefaces, Whitman On His Art, Criticism*. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1973.

BORGES *the Poet*

Edited by Carlos Cortínez

The University of Arkansas Press
Fayetteville 1986