

*Borges the Poet*

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Borges, Poet of Ecstasy

The author of a very famous Spanish novel, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, was born in Buenos Aires in the year 1899. His name appears to be Jorge Luis Borges, although this is questionable since he has largely dropped his Christian names and is, in his own words, merely and "unfortunately . . . Borges." But here too the Argentine author of the *Quijote* eludes us and even puts in doubt the American authorship of the Spanish masterpiece by signing the work with the name of an intermediary, an invented Borges, who calls himself Pierre Menard.

Now there are some Spanish nationalists who would claim that the work was actually invented much earlier by a man from Alcalá de Henares named Cervantes. But this is immediately countered by Islamic nationalists who further predate the work, assigning it to the pen of an obscure Arab historian, Cide Hamete Benengeli. But Borges does not mind this receding mirror of Plotinian illusions, nor does it even matter when an outrageous upstart, Avellaneda, attempts to steal the show and to rewrite the Borges masterpiece as his own.

In these multiple creations of creations, we find the essential dilemma in Borges: Borges is a character created by Borges who will always escape into a new creation; but no sooner will he become the other, *el otro*, the *yo* of Borges y *yo*, no sooner does that shy man Borges wielding a mighty club of modesty shift into the writer Borges and into a text and into a reader's vague memory and (according to Borges' own hope) into a

few anonymous phrases that have entered the Spanish language, than we outsiders, like the old counters of Catullus's infinite kisses, lose track so that Borges can return once more to that original Borges, whoever he is, and start again.

From all this I wish to propose that Borges is a very unstable compound, a mysterious compound, who searches relentlessly to find a stable single condition, a label or formula or key to his essence, but is one fated to eternal metamorphosis. Like space abhorring a vacuum, Borges abhors a condition of *stasis*. For this reason he moves from *enstasis* (being in himself) to *ekstasis*, (being elsewhere). As a poet of ecstasy, he is fated to follow the voyage of the seeker, not the finder, to wander, following the original Greek usage of the word *ekstasis*, "outside himself." If we need any further proof of Borgesian mutability, we can find it by looking again at Borges' favorite creation, the *Quijote*, where we see that the main character himself, Alonso Quijano, cannot be quiet and moves, as one moves in dream and oblivion, into the figure of a lanky, helmeted knight, who some very uninformed amateurs of art claim originated in an etching by a more recent Spaniard, living in France, under the name of Picasso.

The Greek word *ekstasis* signifies "being or standing elsewhere," that is, a displacement from a condition of stasis. The early classical meaning is bewilderment, insanity, seizure, anger, terror, reflecting a movement from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from a normal to an "altered state," from being self-contained and standing in oneself (*enstasis*) to standing elsewhere (*ekstasis*). To be "beside oneself" or "out of mind" follows the etymological meaning. But in late Greek the word received another application. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to "withdrawal of the soul from the body" and "mystic trance." So for Neoplatonic and Christian mystics ecstasy occurs when the mind is emptied of all sensory-intellectual phenomena and then is filled with ineffable rapture in anticipation of divine union. Plotinus uses the word to mean a returning movement outward and upward to the emanation from the One. For Longinus ecstasy is transport and elevation, related to his principal idea of the *hypsos*, the sublime, which he finds eminently in Sappho's "concourse of passions" (*pathon te synodos*). In Borges this Neoplatonic ecstasy of ineffable rapture is most pertinent. Later, I will refer to two spe-

cific mystical experiences which Borges speaks of in an interview. This is the Borges of ecstatic contemplation, of mystical ecstasy.

But the more common ecstasy in Borges is not mystical, secular or religious. His is the ecstasy of otherness, a movement from Borges to the *yo* in "Borges y yo," from public man to private dreamer. He shifts slyly from streetcorner knifer to Persian mystic to Chuang-tzu's Chinese butterfly, dreaming it is Chuang-tzu. The protean Borges cannot be formulated and pinned against a wall of reality or illusion. While his quest is self-knowledge, that anagnorisis and elation comes tantalizingly only at the instant of extinction (as at the end of the "Poema conjetural") where none can report the ultimate gnosis. In reading Borges, we are at least prepared to witness the transformation of the spirit or, more modestly, to be alerted to the possibility of ultimate transcendence. But Borges will tell us no ultimate truths. He will not fall into the easy prevaricating trap of prophetic truth and revelation.

Borges' central obsession is Borges: how to get away from that "coward and pedant" he knows too well, whom he must wake to each morning, whose books he won't let in the house. To be free of the old man, he turns his identity into a dream or a simulacrum, and sees the image reflected endlessly in a mirror until "el otro que lo observa / es apenas un sueño del espejo?" ("Beppo").<sup>1</sup> When the other, *el otro*, finally escapes his master Borges, he may become, as in the poem "Beppo" a Plotinian archetype, a shadow. And what we think is our true identity is merely an image in a broken mirror, going back to an Adam before Paradise or to an indecipherable divinity. To become a god, to know the secrets and have the power of that divinity, would be ideal. But Borges knows that that divinity will always be indecipherable and, moreover, unattainable. *El otro* will always be *el otro*, immeasurably remote, as Borges will always be Borges. Yet this is all to the good, for the other, whom Borges would become, offers the foreign port, the Ithaca to use Homer's goal. Or to use Constantine Cavafy's redeeming notion of Ithaca, it promises even more: it offers the voyage. En route Borges will search for algebras, wisdom, answers to riddles; his search would end, however, if he ever became *el otro*. Indeed, Borges is smart enough to know that if he became any of those ideal others he aspires to (including the dead man with the key to the universe), it would be a boring disappointment. (Remember that Ithaca, which gave us the voyage, is itself poor.) So without exception,

Borges' movement toward the other, into ekstasis, is a process, never a completed action. Ithaca is a vision. But to arrive and anchor in the port is inert stasis and death.

Borges has a second obsession, equally nightmarish. While he seeks his way out of labyrinths, back through mirrors and sunsets and clocks, to be *free* of Borges, to experience the ecstasy of otherness, at the same time he *returns* relentlessly to the maker of his travels, to that dubious character, Borges, who may offer a secret or two. Yet he will never wholly find Borges any more than he will wholly be free of himself to find the other.

To move from one identity to another, one must begin some place. At least most of us would like to fix our point of departure. Not Borges. In his enigmatic poem "Descartes" Borges makes clear only that all is in doubt, including the existence of the Descartes he evokes. More than simply asking *what* am I and *who* am I, he has Descartes of the poem go further and ask *do* I, Descartes, even exist? Of course the historical Descartes also doubted his own existence—I doubt that I am but I cannot doubt that I doubt, therefore I think, followed by *je pense, donc je suis*. But the real Descartes is playing circular syllogistic games. Descartes invented by Borges is more serious. He has Descartes jeopardize his very being by casting it into dream:

Quizá no tuve ayer, quizá no he nacido.  
Acaso sueño haber soñado.  
Siento un poco de frío, un poco de miedo.  
Sobre el Danubio está la noche.  
Siguiré soñado a Descartes. . . .

But there is a further trick in all this. (Borges is never reluctant to create wondrous mischief.) For while Descartes is questioning his own existence, suggesting that it may have been a dream or that he may not even have been born, there is obviously a Borges-invented Descartes who is raising questions. Therein lies the mischief. For we need not conclude simplistically as does the historical Descartes, yes, for all these reasons I must exist. We may affirm, rather, that the so-called real Descartes of the poem, that ordinary everyday Descartes, is an illusion, a dream. In that case, then, since we have already posited that some speaker called Descartes raised these questions, then only that Descartes, the doubter, the

dreamer, the one outside the everyday Descartes of the poem, exists. In this instance, there is a movement of identity from that everyday Descartes of the poem, who turns out to be a false dream, to the real dreamer whose voice we hear. That real dreamer is, in regard to the everyday Descartes, in *ekstasis*, outside his normal self (which may never have existed). The doubting dreaming Descartes whom Borges has invented is, in regard to ordinary mortals, someone else. And that someone else, whom Borges would have us return to, that dreamer of philosophers and gods and timeless beasts, is of course another Borges—the elusive figure whom neither he nor we will ever spot clearly in the mirror, who will never be caught in an act of epiphany, spilling the truth. The artist as well as the philosopher Borges would never allow such an inept, anticlimatic ending.

While Borges never appears to leave himself completely—that is for mystics and saints—he does confess that this experience of total otherness occurred twice in his life. “In my life I only had two mystical experiences and I can’t tell them because what happened is not to be put into words, since words, after all, stand for a shared experience. . . . Twice in my life I had a feeling. . . . It was astonishing, astounding. I was overwhelmed, taken aback. I had the feeling of living not in time but outside time. I don’t know how long that feeling lasted, since I was outside time.”<sup>2</sup> In these two instances when Borges reaches into “the other time,” communication between that other condition and the normal one is poor. Hence the notion of oblivion and ineffability associated with mystical transport.

Borges says that such a moment of ecstasy, when one is really elsewhere, in another time, another place, in another being, is not a shared experience. But the ineffable nature of mystical contemplation is not due simply to the lack of a common system of words; the mystic plainly lacks a clear memory of his or her experience. Dreams as well as trances as well as any foray into the unconscious or up to and beyond the heavens are rather hard to put on tape recorders. About this, Borges says simply “in the case of ecstasies, that can only be told through metaphors.” But he expresses this discomfort with eternity much better in verse. After going through all the dreams of ancient places and art works which the New York Cloisters has brought to mind—the maze at Knossos, tapestries of the white unicorn which do not obey time, the sands of America

which Leif Ericsson devised—he is weary and a bit skeptical of such ventures. He writes in “The Cloisters”:

Siento un poco de vértigo.  
No estoy acostumbrado a la eternidad.

Perhaps the last Borges we must address is the first: the Borges who is Borges the writer, the maker. Although Borges is sick and tired of being himself, of looking at the public which is looking at him, it is his duty, given him by his father, as a compensation for his military unfitness, to be a maker. He has been a maker now for six decades and more, and he has found neither the right words nor himself. But he knows very well the habits of that minor maker from the southern hemisphere. As always he is the best conspirator to spy on and denounce himself. Here is what he has to say about the other, “*Aquél*,” who is Borges:

Aquél

Oh días consagrados al inútil  
empeño de olvidar la biografía  
de un poeta menor del hemisferio  
austral, a quien los hados o los astros  
dieron un cuerpo que no deja un hijo  
y la ceguera, que es penumbra y cárcel,  
y la vejez, aurora de la muerte,  
y la fama, que no merece nadie,  
y el hábito de urdir endecasílabos  
y el viejo amor de las enciclopedias  
y de los finos mapas caligráficos  
y del tenue marfil y una incurable  
nostalgia del latín y fragmentarias  
memorias de Edimburgo y de Ginebra  
y el olvido de fechas y de nombres  
y el culto del Oriente, que los pueblos  
del misceláneo Oriente no comparten  
y vísperas de trémula esperanza  
y el abuso de la etimología  
y el hierro de las sílabas sajonas  
y la luna, que siempre nos sorprende,  
y esa mala costumbre, Buenos Aires,  
y el sabor de las uvas y del agua  
y del cacao, dulzura mexicana,  
y unas monedas y un reloj de arena

y que una tarde, igual a tantas otras,  
se resigna a estos versos.

Borges the maker is the ultimate process. That is the one condition in which Borges is most clearly the other Borges. This activity of the maker is his "*Aquél*," his other, and is his experience of supreme ecstasy. All the images he makes, he tells us in "*El hacedor*," make up the cumulative self:

Otra cosa no soy que esas imágenes  
Que baraja el azar y nombra el tedio.  
Con ellas, aunque ciego y quebrantado,  
He de labrar el verso incorruptible  
Y (es mi deber) salvarme.

Here, in this poem written in his eighth decade, Borges no longer rides this other self, the maker, as he did in "*Borges y yo*"; in fact, now after so many years of labor and intimacy with the public Borges, his true self has become the writer. When he ended his essay "*Borges y yo*" with "I do not know which one of us is writing this page," he was prophetic but in unexpected ways, for now not only has the public Borges commingled indistinguishably with the private intimate *yo* (indistinguishable to us as well as to himself) but the substantial *yo*, the anguishing, passionate and dreaming *yo*, has become the public Borges.

This Argentine born in 1899 in Buenos Aires has at last become his other, *el otro*, the author of the *Quijote* as well as of the austere confessional poems of *La cifra*. This mere South American, as he would say of himself, has become Borges. Or to recall the lines from the above lyric "*El hacedor*," this lonely, broken, blind man, carrying out his scribal tasks, is the writer, which is his salvation. And his ecstasy is precisely in moving from the loneliness of the *yo* to the curious loneliness of the creator.

Borges finds his destiny in the ministry of words, and he performs his job, to the end, as an artist. In his mission of self-discovery, he must go beyond words into silence, project himself into a symbol, into some object outside himself. And what better symbol for a poet, unafraid of beauty as he is of intellect, than the moon? In *La cifra*, his last published book of poems, the title poem "*La cifra*" refers to the great lunar circle of the night, the zero to which we aspire. The day before Constantine Cav-

afy died he took a pencil and drew a large Plotinian circle on a hospital napkin. It was his full circle. Borges composes a circle in this last poem, and urges us strongly to contemplate it, for one day

*No volverás a ver la clara luna.  
Has agotado ya la inalterable  
suma de veces que te da el destino.  
Inútil abrir todas las ventanas  
del mundo. Es tarde. No darás con ella.*

So he (or that maker called Borges) warns us that while we are alive we are to pursue its vision, to look at it carefully:

vivimos descubriendo y olvidando  
esa dulce costumbre de la noche.  
Hay que mirarla bien. Puede ser última.

The night activity of a blind poet is to waken us. Although it will one day be too late to open all the windows of the world, Borges moves us for a while, and hopefully himself, into the morning of his created light. Clearly, the ecstatic labor of the blind man is to be the maker, the writer, is to open our eyes and make us see.

#### NOTES

1. All references to poems are from Jorge Luis Borges, *La cifra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981).
2. Other quoted material is from *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*, ed. and with photographs by Willis Barnstone (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

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