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*Borges the Poet*

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*Translated with Daniel Balderston  
Whitman as Inscribed in Borges*

*For many years I believed that literature, which is almost infinite, was in one man.*  
BORGES

*You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.* WHITMAN

For the last sixty years, the literature of Borges, an unending text, has been unfolding the variants, the arrangements, the enthusiasms configured in his first books. Tautologically, as Guillermo Sucre observed when commenting on *Elogio de la sombra* (*In Praise of Darkness*), Borges' latest books return to the first Borges, bringing him into a new focus, illuminating and revealing him to us.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of that text, the identity of which is characterized by movement, and which predicts from the start its future versions, those who will become familiar presences for Borges' readers are already there. They are in the two books he has refused to republish—*Inquisiciones* and *El tamaño de mi esperanza*—in his first three volumes of poetry, and in *Discusión*. Familiar presences: raw material which is predictable because it is constant, but which is also endowed with potentially infinite generative power. The most adequate synecdoches of those presences are the names: Torres Villarroel, Joyce, Berkeley, Cansinos-Assens, Milton, Groussac, Flaubert, Góngora, Quevedo, and Macedonio Fernández. Presences which Borges' texts will not only transform into habit but also into surprise: recognizable signs but also secret traces. On the

one hand, we want to recognize those traces even when strictly speaking they are not there; or, on the other hand, they may be so intensely interwoven into Borges' writing that we pass over them without noticing. For this reason, much as would occur with any of the names inscribed in Borges' texts, a record of the times Whitman's name occurs in his work would be deceptive, would inevitably prove incomplete even if compiled with an extreme thoroughness. Besides, that record could be much better replaced with the texts that Borges has devoted to the Whitman theme, thus, the following essay does not attempt a more or less systematic inventory of Whitman's name in Borges: rather, it provides arbitrary notes to scattered reading, guided above all by memories of prior readings. Also, these notes are doubly arbitrary, since they deal in part with an already expurgated Whitman, selected and translated by Borges, of a Whitman who became part of Borges' text.

### 1. *The Wish to Express the Totality of Life*

In 1925, referring to the extreme subjectivity typical of nineteenth century esthetics, Borges pointed out: ". . . any frame of mind, however extraneous, can become the focus of our attention; in its brief totality, it may be our essence. If translated into the language of literature, this means that trying to express oneself and having the wish to express the totality of life are but one and the same thing." Whitman was the first Atlas attempting to bring such a challenge into action, and he lifted the world upon his shoulders.<sup>2</sup>

Years before, the young Borges, astounded by Whitman's ambitious task,<sup>3</sup> wrote verses that, according to the sarcastic reflection of the mature Borges, instead of echoing Whitman echoed the Peruvian Post-Modernista poet, Chocano.<sup>4</sup> Here is a sample of those verses, from "Himno del mar," written in 1919:

I have longed for a hymn of the sea with rhythms  
as ample as the screaming waves;  
Of the sea when on its waters the sun flutters as  
a scarlet flag;  
Of the sea when it kisses the golden breasts of  
virgin, thirstily waiting, beaches;  
Of the sea when its forces howl, when winds shout  
their blasphemes;

When the polished, bloody moon shines on the steel  
waters. . . .

Oh, protean, I have sprung from you.  
Both of us shackled and nomadic;  
Both of us intensely thirsty of stars;  
Both of us hopeful and deceived;  
Both of us air, light, strength, darkness;  
Both of us with our great desire,  
and both of us with our great misery!<sup>5</sup>

However, in spite of the deliberate grandiloquence with which Borges tried to render the Whitmanesque rhythm, the statements in "Himno del mar," like blurred copies, lessen the optimism of the original. It is useful to compare Borges' verses to Whitman's:

You sea! I resign myself to you also—  
I guess what you mean,  
I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,  
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling  
of me,  
We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me  
out of sight of the land,  
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,  
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.  
Sea of stretch'd ground-swells,  
Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths,  
Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell'd yet  
always-ready graves,  
Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty  
sea,  
I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and  
of all phases.<sup>6</sup>

"Himno del mar" is interesting as a part of the prehistory of Borges' poetry, but the fact remains that many of his lasting early poems are firmly guided by the enticing invitation at the beginning of "Song of Myself": "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems" (25).

Also, both *Fervor de Buenos Aires* and *Luna de enfrente* have many echoes of Whitman's decision: "Creeds and schools in abeyance/ Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten" (24). For the

Borges who wrote *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, to turn away from the schools meant, among other things, having too many different objectives, which he himself mockingly summarized in 1969: ". . . to copy some of Unamuno's awkwardnesses (which I liked), to be a Seventeenth Century Spanish writer, to be Macedonio Fernández, to find out metaphors already found out by Lugones, to sing of a Buenos Aires with one story houses and, towards the West or the South, villas surrounded by iron fences."<sup>7</sup> Underlying those contradictory objectives it is possible, however, to detect one guiding principle, an adaptation of Whitman's ambitious plan: "With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds" (45).

From the very beginning, it is also clear that Borges' project has been designed on a scale totally different from Whitman's. In Borges' first two books of poems and even in *Cuaderno San Martín*, the totality of life has been, paradoxically, envisioned in minute dimensions: the universe is viewed with a very limited focus. Moreover, it is looked for, pointed out and expressed within boundaries. Borges already knew that the poet is not identical to his universe—that he can, and must, keep his distance, accepting the limited dimensions of the poem in relation to the limitless world, to the limitless sectors of the world:

Africa's destiny lies in eternity, where there are  
deeds, idols, kingdoms, arduous forests and swords.  
I have attained a sunset and a village. (66; transl. MLB)

Even before these lines in "Dakar," from *Luna de enfrente*, in "Las calles," the opening poem of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, one can see some sort of a reduction of the Whitmanesque world. In fact, Whitman's "worlds and volumes of worlds" have been replaced by the humble streets which will be Borges' only topography:

Towards the West, the North, and the South  
streets, which are also the native land, have unfurled:  
may those flags be in the verses I design. (16; transl. MLB)

As echoes of Whitman's project and of Whitman's voice, even the more grandiloquent poems—particularly those collected in *Luna de enfrente*: "Una despedida," "Jactancia de quietud," "Dakar," "La promisión en alta mar"—render the tone of the model at a lower pitch. One could

point out the poem, "Casi Juicio Final" ("Almost Last Judgment") as the epitome of that change:

In my heart of hearts, I justify and praise myself:  
I have witnessed the world; I have confessed the  
strangeness of the world.  
I have sung the eternal: the clear returning moon and  
the cheeks longed for by love. (69; transl. MLB)

In *Elogio de la sombra*, Borges acknowledges that he "once coveted the ample breath of the psalms or of Walt Whitman" (975; transl. MLB). The lines quoted above do, in my opinion, recall the almighty Adamic Whitmanesque breath. But it is as if Borges' reproduction had undergone a filtering process. Borges has pointed out very often that language is succession: it can only render a simplified, reduced universe, it cannot reproduce the universe's concurrences. A comparison between Whitman's and Borges' declarations will show the modesty of Borges' project. Whitman says in *Leaves of Grass*:

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,  
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and  
volumes of worlds.  
Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to  
measure itself. (45)

In "Casi Juicio Final," the poetic voice sums up its accomplishments, its originality:

I have commemorated with verses the city that embraces  
me and the shredding outskirts.  
I have expressed wonder where others have merely  
expressed custom.  
I have held up in firm words my feeling which could  
have been easily scattered in tenderness.  
(69; transl. MLB)

It is also worth remembering that "Casi Juicio Final" is like a disturbing anticipation, a matrix of other Last Judgments in Borges' poetry in addition to that in "Mateo, XXV, 30." For instance, in "Otro poema de los dones," from *El otro, el mismo* (*The Self and The Other*), Whitman is a double symbol; his name is equivalent to gratitude and it is also an equivalent of the power of Grace:

I want to thank the divine  
Labyrinth of effects and causes . . .  
For Whitman and Francis of Assisi  
Who already wrote the poem. (936; transl. MLB)

All of the above can be summarized very briefly: if one had to choose only one poem from Borges' early poetry as an emblem of the powerful, yet silent presence of Whitman—presence explicitly reinforced in other texts—"Casi Juicio Final" could be that poem. In it, Whitman's ambition to witness the world is clearly inscribed. This vision, however, expressed through the modest confines of the topography of Buenos Aires has become typically Borgesian.

### 2. Self-Definition through Opposition

One of Borges' practices has been to define his own literary objectives when characterizing the literature of other writers. This, he has done while dealing with Whitman's poetry; in two notes included in *Discusión*—"El otro Whitman"; and "Nota sobre Walt Whitman"—in his lectures on the poet;<sup>8</sup> in the preface to his selection and translations from *Leaves of Grass* (1969);<sup>9</sup> and in his essay, "Valéry como símbolo."

In his essay, "El otro Whitman," written in 1929, Borges wrote that Whitman's themes render "the peculiar poetry of arbitrariness and loss," (208; transl. DB) a phrase which would describe his own poetry with accuracy and concision. He also pointed out the failure of Whitman's critics to see the basic merit of his enumerations, "a merit lying not in their length but in their delicate verbal balance," (206; transl. D.B.) a description which is perhaps ultimately more appropriate for Borges' enumerations than for Whitman's. The essay on Valéry—written on the poet's death in 1945, and collected in *Otras Inquisiciones* in 1952—is an excellent sample of Borges' technique. He defines by closeness or by opposition—*simpatías y diferencias*. He develops an opposition Whitman/Valéry which might serve as a base to define Borges' literature; "Valéry personifies in an illustrious way the labyrinths of the spirit; Whitman, the interjections of the body" (686; transl. DB). Borges says of Whitman: ". . . he wrote his rhapsodies by means of an imaginary self, formed partly from himself, partly from each of his readers." Borges continues that in the face of that quest, of that fiction of a "possible man . . . of unlimited and

careless happiness Valéry glorifies the virtues of the mind." Finally, in Valéry's predilections (the antithesis of Whitman's), are without a doubt Borges' pleasures: "The lucid pleasures of thought and the secret adventures of order."

### 3. The Memory of an Unending Poem

In the early poetry of Borges one can notice the presence of Whitman's diction; but these versions even in the young Borges' display of *Ultraísta* baroque, already announce the future Borges. It is well-known that in the work of both Whitman and Borges free verse, marked by the use of long lines, has Biblical resonances. It is also known that such a resonance largely derives from the anaphoric repetitions and the enumerations. (I think it is appropriate to recall here that Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*,<sup>10</sup> has aptly described Borges' enumerations as heteroclitite, a term more adequate, in my view, than the stylistic "chaotic enumeration" popularized by Leo Spitzer, who, by the way, never mentioned Borges in his essay written in 1944, when Borges had already published twelve books.<sup>11</sup>) Like Whitman's, Borges' diction interweaves somewhat unexpected colloquial language with rather audacious images, linked together by a syntax of a paradoxically grandiloquent ease. That syntax, nonetheless, shows a degree of control which is the privilege of brevity: "he was a poet of a tremulous and sufficient laconism" (207; transl. DB), Borges said of Whitman, a singularly apt characterization of his own poetry. With tremulous and sufficient pithiness, Whitman had announced: "Tenderly will I use you, curling grass" (28), which Borges translated: "Te usaré con ternura, hierba curva."<sup>12</sup> Raised from its elementary condition to a pantheist motif, and ultimately to the level of symbol, the "curling grass" sums up the whole of *Leaves of Grass*, and perhaps provides the main clue to it:

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages  
and lands, they are not original with me,  
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the  
riddle they are nothing,  
If they are not as close as they are distant they  
are nothing.  
This is the grass that grows wherever the land is  
and the water is,  
This the common air that bathes the globe. (38)

It is striking to note that Whitman's verses are particularly close to the reflections on "La nadería de la personalidad" ("The Nothingness of Personality") in *Inquisiciones*,<sup>13</sup> and, above all, to Borges' concept of the author of the poem. That concept, repeated so many times, was set forth in the early inscription to the reader in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*: "Our nothings differ little: it is a trivial and chance circumstance that you are the reader of these exercises, and I the writer of them" (16; transl. DB).

Nonetheless, it must be recognized that the point of contact is at once more subtle and more solid than the comparison of the texts might suggest at first sight. The two concepts of poetry depend essentially on a similar intention: on a way of looking at humble and insignificant elements and raising them to poetic stature, to make them poetically prestigious. It is possible to go still further, and one will note that the deeper connection between Whitman's voice and that of the early Borges will be revealed moreover in the echoes of the first Borges in his later work. Such a connection can be established, I think, once the links are found between the early poems by Borges and later reworkings of them. To be sure, here it is necessary to attempt a reading which would reach for one of those secret traces I referred to previously. Like Whitman's grass, some humble and insignificant elements belong for Borges in the category of symbols. The streets of the out-of-the-way neighborhood, the outskirts—the *arrabal*—are one of those symbols. And just as there is a recognizable echo of "tenderly will I use you, curling grass" in the first line of "Para una calle del Oeste" ("For a street in the West"): "You will give me an alien immortality, lonely street" (72; transl. DB). That echo, that exaltation of something insignificant, similar to Whitman's, is repeated when the neighborhood street—freed of its literal meaning—is endowed with symbolic value.<sup>14</sup>

The preceding remarks are based on the following hypothesis: in "La noche cíclica" ("The Cyclical Night"), one of Borges' most characteristic and striking poems dated in 1940, Whitman is subtly inscribed in the affinity of the poetic quest, and in the will to specify a totalizing vision. There is no doubt, to begin with, that formally the regular quatrains of "La noche cíclica" could not be farther from Whitman's free verse. Besides, it is obvious that there are poems in *El otro, el mismo*—"Insomnio," for instance, with which the book begins—in which the influence of Whitman, a "presence" that Borges acknowledges in the preface, is un-

deniable. But I think that the affinity should also be traced on a more profound level. Perhaps the affinity lies above all in the way of looking at, or in the way of looking for, the substance of poetry. In that respect, Borges transfigures the insignificant neighborhood into a meaningful, relevant poetic symbol:

They knew it, the fervent pupils of Pythagoras . . .  
 But I know that a vague Pythagorean rotation  
 Night after night sets me down in the world  
 On the outskirts of the city. A remote street  
 Which might be either north or west or south,  
 But always with a blue-washed wall, the shade  
 Of a fig tree, and a sidewalk of broken concrete.  
 This, here, is Buenos Aires. Time, which brings  
 Either love or money to men, hands on to me  
 Only this withered rose, this empty tracery  
 Of streets with names recurring from the past  
 In my blood. . . .<sup>15</sup>

These stanzas show that, under the umbrella of other much more explicit shades—Pythagoras, Hume, Anaxagoras—Whitman springs forth to give deeper meaning to the non-prestigious sign (the grass / the neighborhood street). But, also, there is another trace of Whitman in the poem: Whitman is also present in the design of Borges' text. The design by which the last stanza (cyclically) returns to the first line of the poem is a version of Whitman's faith in poetic writing:

It returns, the hollow dark of Anaxagoras;  
 In my human flesh, eternity keeps recurring  
 And the memory, or plan, of an endless poem  
 beginning:  
 "They knew it, the fervent pupils of Pythagoras. . . ."<sup>16</sup>

Borges had commented many times on Whitman's intention that his entire work be a single book or poem, and also on the unattainable nature of such an intention: "La noche cíclica" appears to me as a metaphor, a Borgesian transposition of that ambition.

An earlier reference was made to Borges' desire to transcend Whitman's ambition by a process of moderation or restraint, and to conceive of poetry not as the complex expression of a luxuriant world but limiting

himself to recording and simplifying an already essential universe; in ordering an "enigmatic abundance."<sup>17</sup> In his works on Whitman, Borges insists on the failures of an ultimately unattainable conception of a poem which would embrace the whole universe. In the preface to the selection from *Leaves of Grass*, he states: "To speak of literary experiments is to speak of exercises which have failed in some more or less brilliant way . . . Whitman's experiment worked out so well that we tend to forget that it was an experiment."<sup>18</sup>

In the work of Borges, there is at least one significant example of failure to which we might say that Whitman is secretly, almost cunningly, inscribed. This is the wild project of the second rate, amateurish character in "El Aleph," Carlos Argentino Daneri, bitten with the idea of composing a poem about "La Tierra" ("The Earth"). It is not by chance that this grotesque imitation, this caricature of a Whitman who has failed completely—or, better perhaps, of a barely embryonic Whitman—provides Borges, the character-narrator, with the experience of the Aleph; that Borges should perceive the qualities of that Aleph from Carlos Argentino's place; and, that he should transmit them in a paradigmatic enumeration. That enumeration not only proves the impossibility of rendering the universe's concurrences, but is at once a culmination and a negation of Carlos Argentino's (and Whitman's) unattainable project.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Exorcism and Generative Power

To a certain extent, to write, or to speak about the familiar presences in this work was a fertile exorcism, which led Borges to find his own literary voice. The exorcism of the name of Whitman, like that of the other names which are signs in Borges, began early, perhaps becoming intensified during the hiatus in his poetic production after *Cuaderno San Martín* (*San Martín Copybook*)—as is proven by the two notes included in *Discusión*, mentioned above—and culminating when Whitman appears as an explicit sign in poems and prefaces. A final confrontation between a poem by Whitman and a poem by Borges will be useful to show to what extent the exorcism was successful: it will provide an example of how Whitman's name, an explicit sign starting from *El otro, el mismo* keeps on inspiring the poet, as a secret cipher, as in the texts of Borges' prehistory. In his *Nota sobre Walt Whitman*, included in *Discusión*, Borges included a Spanish version of "Full of Life, Now":

Full of life now, compact, visible,  
I, forty years old the eighty-third year of the States,  
To one a century hence or any number of centuries hence,  
To you yet unborn these, seeking you.

When you read these I that was visible am become  
invisible,  
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems,  
seeking me,  
Fancying how happy you were if I could be with you  
and become your comrade;  
Be it as if I were you. (Be not too certain but I  
am now with you.) (109)

So Borges addresses himself, in *El otro, el mismo*, "To My Reader":

You are invulnerable. Have they not shown you,  
The powers that preordain your destiny,  
The certainty of dust? Is not your time  
As irreversible as that same river  
Where Heraclitus, mirrored, saw the symbol  
Of fleeting life? A marble slab awaits you  
Which you will not read—on it, already written,  
The date, the city, and the epitaph.  
Other men too are only dreams of time,  
Not everlasting bronze nor shining gold;  
The universe is, like you, a Proteus.  
Dark, you will enter the darkness that expects you,  
Doomed to the limits of your traveled time.  
Know that in some sense you by now are dead.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly the dialogue of these two texts can be interpreted as a summary of the generative power of poetry, and as a synthesis of a continuity—ultimately beyond all analysis—of a poetic text combined with an idealist belief and with a clear baroque certainty: the continuity which prevents us from separating this poem from the whole of Borges' poetry, a poetry in which Whitman's name is a permanent force, and perhaps more so when it is not spelled out.

#### NOTES

1. Guillermo Sucre, "Borges: el elogio de la sombra," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 72 (1970): 372.

2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925):91. Translated by MLB.
3. James E. Irby, *Encuentro con Borges* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1968): 12-13.
4. César Fernández Moreno, "Harto de laberintos," *Mundo Nuevo*, 18 (1967):10.
5. In Carlos Meneses, *Poesía juvenil de Jorge Luis Borges* (Barcelona: Otañeta Editor, 1978): 57-8. Translated by MLB.
6. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," 3. In *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose* (New York: the Modern Library, 1950):25. Further references to Whitman belong to this edition, and the page number is given in parenthesis in the text. As I have said, in this paper I refer only to poems by Whitman which Borges chose to translate into Spanish for his selection of *Leaves of Grass*.
7. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969): 13. Translated by MLB. Further references to this edition are given in parenthesis in the text.
8. Apparently, the first public lecture that Borges gave on Whitman took place in Buenos Aires in 1958. Cf. *La Prensa*, Buenos Aires, August 2, 1958, p. 3. To my knowledge, there is a transcription of another lecture on Whitman he gave in Chicago in 1968. Cf. Jorge Luis Borges, "Walt Whitman: Man and Myth," *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (1975): 708-711. James East Irby has mentioned Borges' project to give a lecture on Whitman in Texas in 1961. Cf. Irby, *Encuentro con Borges*, 12. Irby has told me that Borges lectured on Whitman at Princeton University in 1968 or 1969.
9. Walt Whitman, *Hojas de hierba*. Selección, traducción y pró-logo de Jorge Luis Borges (Buenos Aires: Juárez Editor, 1969).
10. Michel Foucault, Preface. *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973): XVII.
11. Leo Spitzer, *La enumeración caótica en la poesía moderna* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1945).
12. Whitman, *Hojas de hierba*, 45.
13. Borges, *Inquisiciones*, 84-95.
14. I have developed this idea in "La topografía de la ambigüedad: Buenos Aires en Borges, Bianco, Bioy Casares," *Hispanérica*, 27 (1980): 33-46. The opposition: Literal meaning/ symbolic value is based in A. J. Greimas' theory, in *Du Sens* (Paris: Seuil, 1970): 7-17.
15. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems, 1923-1967* (New York: Dell, 1972): 79. Translation by Alastair Reid.
16. Borges, *Selected Poems*, 81.
17. Borges wrote in "Examen de metáforas," *Inquisiciones*, 65: "Language is an efficient ordering of the world's enigmatic abundance." Translation by MLB.
18. Jorge Luis Borges, "Prólogo," Walt Whitman, *Hojas de hierba*, 29. Translation DB.
19. There is, I think, another echo of that unattainable project in the drama in verse, *The Enemies*, by the second-rate writer Jaromir Hladic, victim of the Nazis, protagonist of "El milagro secreto" ("The Secret Miracle") in *Ficciones*.
20. Borges, *Selected Poems*, 183. Translated by Alastair Reid.

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# BORGES *the Poet*

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