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Borges's THE HOUSE OF ASTERION

In "The House of Asterion," Borges's characteristic preoccupation with ontological and metaphysical questions is presented as a variation on the Minotaur myth.[1] The story's significance, Borges claims, lies in its being told by the "monster." "I felt there might be something true in the idea of a monster wanting to be killed, needing to be killed," he writes, "Knowing itself masterless . . . he knew all the time there was something awful about him, so he must have felt thankful to the hero who killed him."[2] As is the case with almost any Borgesian narrative, however, the issues raised transcend the immediate fictional occasion to address human experience in general. The ancient myth is transformed into an ironic fantasy on the antics of man comically—tragically—lost or imprisoned in existence.

In the preface to *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Borges defines a monster as "no more than a combination of the parts of real beings," and adds that the designation, "imaginary being," would permit "the inclusion of Prince Hamlet, of the point, of the line, of the surface, of n-dimensional hyperplanes and hypervolumes, of all generic terms, and perhaps of each one of us and of the godhead."[3] From the immutable perspective of the cosmos, man and his fabrications are all "monstrous." The usefulness of such a definition is that its scope replaces the horror, disgust, and contempt usually evoked by the idea *monster* with awe and wonder: humanity and its achievements are *splendid* anomalies.

It is almost inevitable, then, that Borges should be attracted to the myth of the Minotaur—the image of an imprisoned creature awaiting the slayer who will simultaneously destroy and liberate him. The very nature of the myth evokes his favorite propositions:

> The idea of a house built so that people could get lost in it is perhaps more unusual than that of a man with a bull's head, but both ideas go well together and the image of the labyrinth fits with the image of

> the Minotaur. It is equally fitting that in the center of a monstrous house there be a monstrous inhabitant.[4]

The monstrous thus becomes the unusual, that which is beyond man's daily structures, or the perversion of those structures to unusual purposes.

The details of the Minotaur myth, which lie behind Borges's tale, are important to its larger significance: the Labyrinth was built by the supreme artificer, Daedalus, for Minos, the king of Crete, in order to house the son of his wife Pasiphae, herself the daughter of the sun and Perseis, and a bull sent as a coronation gift to Minos by Poseidon. The Minotaur is thus part animal, part human, and part divine, and he inhabits a structure that is a summary expression of human intelligence and craftsmanship. In the myth, the Minotaur is merely a heterogeneous horror, one of the obstacles over which the Athenian Theseus must triumph in order to demonstrate his status as culture hero. Even his popular name is the functional equivalent of "monster": etymologically, it means "the bull of Minos" and thus emphasizes the bestial and the terrifying rather than the human. Borges prefers, instead, the creature's actual name, which he shares with the former ruler of Crete—Asterion—thereby semantically bringing him within the human community from which he is otherwise isolated.

The presentation of the tale from Asterion's point of view is another humanizing technique that makes him appear more eccentric than monstrous. Asterion repeatedly refers to the Labyrinth—for the reader, connotative of a superfluous and sinister complexity—as his "house." He extols its simplicity, boasting that a visitor "will find here no female pomp or gallant court formality, but he will find quiet and solitude." Even his "detractors" admit that it is elegantly unfurnished, and he insists on its uniqueness, denying the possibility that a similar house might exist in Egypt. Pride is thus one of Asterion's essential traits: for instance, he judges the signs of hysteria and terror that he excites while roaming the streets one evening to be the natural homage due his royal lineage. "The people prayed, fled, prostrated themselves," he recalls. "One of them, I believe hid himself beneath the sea. Not for nothing was my mother a queen." And this pride of family is corollary to a kind of intellectual pretension:

> The fact is that I am unique. I am not interested in what one may transmit to other men; like the philosopher, I think that nothing is communicated by the art of writing. Bothersome and trivial details have no place in my spirit, which is prepared for all that is vast and grand; I have never retained the difference between one letter and another. A certain generous impatience has not permitted that I learn to read. Sometimes I deplore this, for the nights and days are long.

The uniqueness Asterion attributes to himself he recognizes elsewhere only in the sun; all other objects he dreams to be as infinitely replicated as the forms of his house itself, which he identifies and confuses with the universe. In his empty dwelling his favorite game is imagining himself, the projection of that special guest, "the other Asterion," who will banish his solitude. Thus, for all his claim that the doors of his house are infinite, unlocked, and allow free passage in or out, and that he himself is not a prisoner, the mutual terror that he and the people inspire in each other creates an isolation more complete than any mere physical imprisonment.

Asterion's pretensions would be merely grotesquely comic were it not for the recognizably human loneliness that underlies them. His boast of illiteracy is poignantly juxtaposed with his partial realization that he has relinquished the sole mode of populating his solitude. Borges otherwise carefully undercuts Asterion's assertions and points to the ignorance, blindness, and error they express. Asterion claims to be frightened of the people outside the Labyrinth because their faces are "as discolored and flat as the palm of one's hand," without realizing that his own dark and distended physiognomy is anomalous on the streets of Knossos. His assertion of a philosophical soul prepared for sublime meditations is followed by an account of amusements that are mindless and bestial:

> Like a ram about to charge, I run through the stone galleries until I fall dizzy to the floor. I crouch in the shadow of a pool or around a corner and pretend that I am being followed. There are roofs from which I let myself fall until I am bloody. At any time I can pretend to be asleep with my eyes closed and my breathing heavy.

Such passages prevent the reader from forgetting entirely that Asterion is, after all, a monster—a human form that inhabits a building furnished with mangers and drinking troughs. But he is, at the same time, a symbol of human dilemmas. Borges has noted elsewhere that the universe's most notorious characteristic is its complexity,[5] and he is enamored of those exotic, esoteric, or heretical doctrines that propose the circularity of time—its reiteration of identical gestures. He even describes the very fictions that man dreams and creates as characteristically intricate. Thus, the labyrinth becomes a symbol that unites the universe, time and space, and literature in a single trope; and its monstrous inhabitant is an analog for that human creature who produces fictive labyrinths while calling a bewilderingly complex universe home: the artist. In such parables as "The Maker" and "Everything and Nothing," Borges describes the artist as the one man who is all men and all things, in which he is like God, who also multiplies and exhausts the possibilities of being.[6] But such a heterogeneity is monstrous and essentially identical with Asterion's disparate composition.

In this context, the "arrogance," "madness," and "misanthropy,"

which Asterion claims that an unspecified "they" charge him with, are but the traditional indictments levelled at the mystic, the philosopher, and the artist. Asterion specifically associates himself with this company, so that his foibles present an ironic treatment of post-Romantic and modernist artists: their assumption of personal uniqueness and intellectual superiority; their desire not only to *épater le bourgeois*, but to withdraw into self-created worlds in which the communicative elements are minimized according to what Susan Sontag has christened the "aesthetics of silence."[7]

Wandering the solitary corridors of his house, Asterion imagines himself and hopes for salvation. Just as Job on the dung-heap exclaims, "For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon earth" (Job 19.25), so Asterion interprets the prophecy of his eventual death as a promise of liberation, and he exults in identical language: "Since then my loneliness does not pain me, because I know that my redeemer lives and he will finally rise above the dust." His final questions echo the poignant queries of humanity interrogating the nature of God: "What will my redeemer be like? Will he be a bull or a man? Will he perhaps be a bull with the face of a man? Or will he be like me?" Asterion thus exhausts the ontological possibilities of the redeeming Other: the separation of his own constituent parts and the valuation of one over the other; the inversion of their order of ascendancy; or absolute identity—the face in the mirror.

The tale ends with a few brief lines in which Theseus marvels: "Would you believe it, Ariadne? . . . The Minotaur scarcely defended himself." With this shift outside Asterion's consciousness, we recover "Minotaur" and return to the unequivocally monstrous. But the perspective of the myth has been undermined, and Theseus' words, with their mixture of bewilderment and smugness, are no longer adequate to the experience of the Labyrinth. Asterion's foolish pretensions and uninformed hypotheses, his isolation and his loneliness, are too identifiably human. He retains the reader's sympathy because he is humanity—an equally monstrous combination of the animal, the human, and the divine—and man's life, too, composes a labyrinth of fear, pretension, conjecture, and, above all, *hope*.

Borges's definition of the monstrous as everything human or man-derived empties the term of any practical significance. His alternative conception of the monstrous as the unusual and apparently *inhuman* expresses a humanistic vision that rejects the irrational and exalts human intelligence. "The House of Asterion" unites these two ideas in the figure of the Minotaur, who becomes a symbol of man and his aspirations mediated through the imagination.

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NOTES

1. The extreme brevity of this tale (three pages, or nine paragraphs) makes specific page citations both redundant and superfluous, but the reader should have little difficulty locating quoted passages in *Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates, James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962).

2. Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) 41.

3. Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, rev. and trans. Norman Thomas de Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969) 16.

4. Borges and Guerrero 158.

5. In the prologue to *El informe de Brodie*, Borges writes of the volume's stories: "No me atrevo a afirmar que son sencillos; no hay en la tierra una sola página, una sola palabra, que lo sea, ya que todas postulan el universo, cuyo mas notorio atributo es la complejidad" (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores, 1974) 10.

6. Particularly at the end of "Everything and Nothing," where God informs his avatar, Shakespeare, that he, too, has projected himself as so many characters that he is no one thing at all.

7. See "The Aesthetics of Silence," *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966).

West's THE DREAM LIFE OF BALSO SNELL

Written between 1922 and 1929, Nathanael West's first novel, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, has been criticized by readers as formless, scatologically revolting, and immature.[1] Yet these same characteristics constitute the very heart of Dada art and theory. An early 1920s movement that began in Paris, Dada sought to amuse and disgust, shock and delight—ridicule and rebel from all conventional thinking. Tristan Tzara wrote in his 1924 "Lecture on Dada," "[T]he Beautiful and the True in art do not exist. . . . Everything happens in a completely idiotic way."[2] A few critics have noted Dada influence in the novel's nihilism and its desire to shock. In particular, Deborah Wyrick has seen in its structure something akin to Dadaist collage.[3]

But no one has suggested that *Balso*'s very vehicle, the Trojan Horse, is itself a parody of Dadaism. In the novel, Balso Snell dreams that he enters the Trojan Horse—from behind—and begins a picaresque journey through the convoluted folds of the horse's intestines. That West would take a conventionally classic form and twist it into a literal, fleshy mockery is consistent with West's use of the grotesque throughout the novel. We meet, among other characters, Maloney the Aeropagite and Saint Puce, who dwells in Christ's armpit—until he dies of overexposure at the

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