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Borges the Poet

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The Poems of the Gifts: The Inverted Image

When studying Borges' literary opus the reader will find a series of symbols and rhetorical devices constantly repeated. The actual bibliography on these technical devices is enormous.¹ Among the many aspects considered by critics, the image of the mirror—reflection—is undoubtedly predominant. It would seem that Borges' work is, in some way, a reflection of itself. This reflecting structure has been studied in detail in Borges' stories. Moreover, many of his poems are also structured like a mirror.² It would be easy to expand this idea to his poetic works in general, and it is tempting to consider "The Poem of the Gifts" and the "Other Poem of the Gifts"³ as images reflected in a mirror: the second poem reflecting the first. However, after an initial confrontation of the texts, the seemingly reflective structure yields to a more contradictory one. In fact, the poems appear to be opposite texts, the second one inverting the structure of the first, and thus, paradoxically, becoming complementary of each other.

First the external structure of the poems must be considered. "The Poem of the Gifts" has ten hendecasyllabic quatrains and, with the exception of the second one, follows a constant rhyme pattern—abba. The poem is written within the conventions of traditional poetry, with a constant verse/stanza model throughout the text. On the other hand, the "Other Poem of the Gifts" is written in free verse. It consists of one stanza, with a total of eighty-one lines. There is no rhyme or metric pat-

tern that can be perceived. So, it seems that the poems are totally different in their external structure. However, it is known that Borges' poetry evolved from an experimental stage towards classical modes.⁴ Thus, the fact that he chose to return to the experimental form in the second poem, versus the classical structure of the first is very significant. The fact that both share a title suggests that within the apparent opposite nature of the texts, each poem was perceived as a complementary unit. On the external level, one poem is the inverted image of the other.

A more fruitful analysis is derived from the semantics of the poems. The "Poem of the Gifts" deals with the poetic speaker writing about himself, with the *I* of the poet creating the text.⁵ The second poem refers to the poetic *persona* contemplating the world. In a way, it is a list of poetic acknowledgments that the poet pays to authors or books. But Borges has trained his readers to look for the unexpected. Hence, it would be naive to assume that the poems can be reduced to such a simplistic scheme. There are some elements common to both texts that provide a clue for a possible second way of reading them. The first is the presence/absence of God.

Through Borges' works there appears no single concept of God. There is an indifferent deity such as in "The Theologians," or a dreamer who is dreaming a dreamer, as in "The Circular Ruins." Perhaps Borges has been searching for a metaphysical definition of God but has been unsuccessful, and unable to find a single answer. The dual "Poems of the Gifts" present two other possible conceptions of divinity. Both texts start with the idea of God as an active force. The relation of that active being to humanity, however, is quite different. In the "Poem of the Gifts" God is conceived within the Judeo-Christian canon of a paternalistic figure, all-wise and all-powerful, that intervenes in our lives individually. Thus human beings, and Borges, the poet, are His creatures and His inscrutable designs. The poetic persona accepts his destiny. Blindness, for instance, becomes a gift from God in a mysterious way. In the seventh stanza Borges makes clear that *azar*, chance or coincidence, has little to do with the reality of life. The fact that Groussac, the other poet mentioned in the text, was blind, is not a mere coincidence, but part of a carefully conceived plan of the universe.

Something that certainly is not named
with the word *azar* rules these things;

Somebody else already received in other dark
afternoons the (many) books and the shadows.

The "Other Poem of the Gifts," on the contrary, stems from a rationalistic definition of God:

I want to thank the divine
labyrinth of effects and causes
for the diversity of the creatures
that form this singular universe.

These lines remind us of the story "The Aleph." There is a place in the universe where all things are contained at once, both in time and space. The "Other Poem of the Gifts" seems to be, to a certain extent, a poetic version of the same idea. There is one point here in the "divine labyrinth of effects and causes," where everything is comprehended at once. This idea, strangely, is closely related to rationalistic thought. Rationalistic philosophy culminated in the ideas of Leibniz. Interestingly enough, he is one of the thinkers that Borges seldom quotes. However, both have many similar ideas. Some of Leibniz's ideas are summarized here.

The German philosopher based his metaphysical system on a concept of the *monad*. According to Leibniz, the monad is *vis*, energy, the capacity to act. But a monad is also unique, there can be no two equal monads in the universe; it is simple, therefore indivisible; the monad has perception, and more important, it has desire, that is a tendency to pass from one perception to another. Thus, the monad corresponds to the metaphysical reality of the *ego*.⁶ But monads are also subjected to a hierarchy. Hence, a monad that has perception is only a *soul*, while the monad that has a perception of the act of perceiving is a *spirit*. The third level is the highest level where all monads are perceived, where all the ideas are clear, where the universe is contemplated from all perspectives at once, and the unique and perfect monad is God. God is also the creator of all the monads. In being so, he places in each one the law of internal evolution of its perceptions. With Borges' work in mind, it can clearly be seen how the "Other Poem of the Gifts" follows these ideas. God, the maker of labyrinths, is to be thanked by the existence of the universe. The long list of names and facts that follow are, each one, an individual monad, created by God. The idea of creation is emphasized in the text through the repetition of the deictic *by—por—* which makes of

the poem a series of subordinated clauses depending on the verb *to give thanks*. Like in "The Aleph," the whole world is contained in the poem. We can say that the succession of monads is an attempt—limited by form—to capture the whole universe at one glance.

A second concept essential to both poems is the idea of *persona*. Each poem is written from the perspective of the first person singular, *I*. However, the texts reflect a different conception of the poetic *ego*. The "Poem of the Gifts" is based upon an "I" that observes itself, and by doing so, gives reality to its surroundings. But, the poetic speaker is not only one. As it was the case in the famous fragment "Borges and I," the poet wonders "which of the two writes this poem?" The association with Groussac, through blindness and the library, is just a literary device. Borges is changing the reader's focus of attention, but the stanza as a whole makes it clear that the plurality of the "I" is a reflection of a metaphysical view of the universe:

Which of the two writes this poem
about a plural I and one shadow?
What matters the word that names me
if the anathema is one and indivisible?

Let us consider that plurality from the point of view of one of Borges' favorite philosophers: Berkeley. According to the English bishop, *to be* means to be perceived. Perception is what constitutes the being. Thus, what is unperceived does not exist. In Berkeley's system, this is a very important point. For him, if the material substance is conditioned by perception, the spiritual substance—God—exists in an almost Cartesian way: somebody puts the perceptions in our spirit, therefore, that being is superior, is God. It is clear that the "Poem of the Gifts" is dealing with the plurality—duality—of the *persona*, and that duality exists between the material and spiritual substances. The poet's spiritual substance perceives the material one, thus giving it existence. In "Borges and I," there is only one name given to both *personae*. In the "Poem of the Gifts" the poet uses a second name, the name of another poet, for if it is the spiritual perception that creates its surroundings, what matters the name of the material substance?

The idea of the "I" in the "Other Poem of the Gifts" is based on a different perspective. Here the *persona* is reflecting on a series of per-

ceptions about the world. The text is similar to the ideas of Leibniz. The "I" is just one monad, a spirit perceiving the capacity to perceive. In this context, the world has been created by a superior being, who ought to be thanked. The poem lists a series of accomplishments of mankind in the search for knowledge. The poetic "I," thus, does not have to be divided into two different facets, because it belongs to the ultimate monad encompassing all the monads of the world, including books, people, or sunsets.

A third point is the function of the book in both poems. The importance of the written text in Borges' literary creations is well known. It is very difficult to read Borges without thinking of an enormous library included in his works, through quotations, references, paraphrasis, etc. But books go beyond the actual physical texts. "The Library of Babel" is an outstanding example of the multiple values that books have. The story is a quest for the "solution" to a labyrinth, to find a clue that is hidden somewhere in an infinite library. The book becomes a symbol of the universe. In "Poem of the Gifts" Borges mentions the infinite irony of having "books and night" at the same time. He used to think of Paradise, he says, as a library. The poem becomes, then, a text about volumes that cannot be read. The library that surrounds the poetic *persona*, with all its books, is a magnificent irony that can be deciphered only in dreams. Together with the presence of the unreadable books it is important to mention books that have died, such as the manuscripts in the old library at Alexandria. Hence, there are two kinds of unreadable, or undecipherable texts: the polarity between presence/absence points a real/unreal opposition. However, both possibilities have the same kind of existence in the eyes of the blind poet.

The "Other Poem of the Gifts" is a poem about works that have been read. From Ulysses to Schopenhauer to Whitman, the books have been decoded, assimilated, and thus form part of Borges' poetic conscience. "The world is the manuscript of another, inaccessible to a universal reading and that only experience can decipher," according to Jaspers' phrase.⁷ By reading the book of the world, Borges has decoded it, through his experiences with books. However, there is a line in the poem that brings us back to the "Poem of the Gifts." Among the many things that deserve to be praised in the poem, Borges also thanks God for "the name of a book that I have not read: *Gesta Dei per Francos*." The idea of a book not being

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read corresponds to the irony of books and night. Nevertheless, the use of the present perfect indicates that the action has not happened yet, but that it may happen.⁸ The text may be read, and the universe may still be deciphered.

The presence of books in both poems elicits the concept of an implied reader in the texts. At first place it would seem that the poetic "I" is at the same time its own reader. However, a second reader is implied in both poems. After the world has been decoded by the poet's vision, the poems have to be understood by a receptor who did not participate directly in the act of writing. A message of some kind, perhaps literary, is transmitted by the linguistic signs that structure the texts; a message that is comprehensible to the reader. Both "Poems of the Gifts" present the idea of a reader in a similar and complementary manner.

With regard to "Poem of the Gifts" the text assumes an external reader who is present from the opening words: "Let no one debase . . ." Thus, the poem is indeed a message to be transmitted to a hypothetical decoder, and in being so, the poem acquires a didactical tone. The mood is intensified by the digression in line 13: "Of hunger and thirst (a Greek story has it)." The poet's voice is teaching a lesson that can be summarized in a moral statement of acceptance of one's destiny.

In the "Other Poem of the Gifts" readers are implied through the use of the first person plural pronouns and verbal forms: "things that we do not know," "whose names we ignore," etc. The poetic voice does not assume a didactic tone any more. On the contrary, it joins the *persona* of the text with the voices of the readers of the poems. The reader himself becomes part of the text, and praises the world—or image of the world—that the poet describes. The two poems complement each other in the sense that the reader, implied but absent in the first case, becomes explicit and present in the second.

The two poems have been examined here as antagonistic units. However, the apparent contradiction of the texts yields to a better unity of the same. The Borgesian universe does not have a one and only perspective. In fact, it is multiple, but within an absolute unity: at the end, everything is comprehended in the Aleph. Thus, the two texts, by reason of their polarity, present two perspectives that are complementary: they are part of one contiguous text whose purpose is to decode the universe.

NOTES

1. Jaime Alazraki, *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1968); Alazraki, *Versiones, inversiones, reversiones. El espejo como modelo estructural del relato en los cuentos de Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1977); Ana María Barrenechea, *Borges, the Labyrinth Maker*. Translated by Rober Lima (New York: New York University Press, 1965). Translation of *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges*. (México: El colegio de México, 1957; 2da. edición, Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós, 1967).
2. Jaime Alazraki, "Outside and Inside the Mirror in Borges' Poetry." *Simply a Man of Letters*. Edited with a foreword by Carlos Cortínez. (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1982): 27–36.
3. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obra poética 1923–1964*. (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1964): 262–5. Translations mine.
4. Guillermo Sucre, *Borges, El poeta* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1968); Sucre, *La máscara, la transparencia* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1975): 161–180.
5. Antonio Carreño, "La negación de la persona en Jorge Luis Borges." *La dialéctica de la identidad en la poesía contemporánea* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1982): 141–169.
6. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Translated and edited by Peter Remmant and Jonathan Benett. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *The Monadology of Leibniz*, Introduction, Commentary and Supplementary Essays by Herbert W. Carr. (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1930).
7. Quoted by Jacques Derrida. *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions Minuit, 1969): 19.
8. Mauricio Molho, *Sistemática del verbo español*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1975).

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