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From Expression to Allusion: Towards a Theory of Poetic  
Language in Borges\*

In several youthful essays, Borges repeatedly pointed to the fact that poetry was forced to use a language consisting of words which, being in everyday use and constituting common currency, was alien to its very nature: the poet's intent to convey something personal and unique. Noting that there was no such thing as a "poetic language," he called for its invention through the use of new combinations of words which would transmit "unheard-of visions" of reality. This possibility was at the time clearly grounded on two suppositions: that language is capable of reflecting the world in all its complexity, therefore being *expressive*; and that the *expressive* capability of language is for all purposes limitless, judging by all the possible word combinations that can be carried out.

The mature Borges thinks differently. Language is not *expressive* at all; words are not images of reality and in fact can only be used to *mention* or *allude to*, but not to *express* ("Alguna vez yo también busqué la expresión; ahora sé que mis dices no me conceden más que la alusión o mención,"<sup>1</sup>), and therefore what can be said is limited. Taking these premises as a point of departure, Borges goes on to structure a personal poetic language using such everyday words as *río*, *noche*, *sombra*, or *sueño*. He manages to do this through an extremely complex intertextual system

based on allusion, which, for the sake of clarity, may be spoken of as "external allusion" (allusion to the texts of other writers), and "internal allusion" (allusion to his own texts). This framework results in the enrichment and transmuting of the habitual meaning of "common" words in such a way that some of them (primarily *noche*, and *sombra*) become metaphors of a total conception of literature as a virtual world of *sombrias* (shadows/images), which contains imbedded in it the *sombra* of the writer, which in turn can only be realized through the reader.

Such words as *noche*, *sombra*, and to a lesser extent *oro*, thus become the cornerstone of a personal poetic vocabulary which in turn projects a particular view of literature.

In the poem "Un lector" (*Elogio de la sombra*), Borges writes: "Mis noches están llenas de Virgilio." The verse is interwoven with others that allude to his growing blindness: "Cuando en mis ojos se borron / las vanas apariencias queridas . . ." <sup>2</sup> Interpreted on a primary level, *mis noches* (my nights), alludes to the darkness which is insidiously invading the world of the poet-reader and transforming his "days" into "nights." But it might be asked if indeed these words refer only to the poet's blindness.

In "Invocación a Joyce" he writes:

pero la memoria tiene sus talismanes,  
sus ecos de Virgilio,  
y así en las calles de la noche perduran  
tus infernos espléndidos,  
tantas cadencias y metáforas tuyas,  
los oros de tu sombra. (p. 342)

The reader could very well ask if the metaphors of Joyce, *los oros de tu sombra* ("the golds of your shadow") can endure in *las calles de la noche* ("the streets of night"). What does *en las calles de la noche* really mean? In a poem written many years before, "La noche cíclica" (1940), after stating that the battle between Lapiths and Centaurs will again take place in the future, that the monster in the Labyrinth of Crete will once again wail "en la infinita Noche," the poet concludes with the following words:

Vuelve la noche cóncava que describió Anaxágoras;  
Vuelve a mí carne humana la eternidad constante  
Y el recuerdo ¿el proyecto? de un poema incesante  
"Lo supieron los arduos alumnos de Pitágoras . . ." (p. 177)

\*This is a translated, abridged and revised version of the second chapter of my book *Lengua y Literatura de Borges* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1983).

The last line, as has been noted frequently, is a quote of the first line of the poem. *La noche (night)*, it is insinuated, or *infinita noche* ("infinite night"), symbolizes memory as it registers myths which are received through literature, since to read—and to remember what has been read—is equivalent to the registering of images, and equivalent to dreaming. But at the same time in that *noche* Borges is trying to compose a poem, and *la noche* transforms itself metaphorically into a space peopled by his own dreams, a space in which a new myth arises. And yet, if the reader wishes to search so to speak, for the roots of *la noche* in the context of Borges' work, he must reach back to an essay written in the poet's youth, in the book *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1925):

... for any human being in the process of poeticizing, night is another thing. It is a simultaneous vision of earth and heaven, it is the celestial vault of the Romantics, it is a long-lasting and perfumed freshness, it is a spatial image not a concept, it is a showcase of images [un *mostradero de imágenes*].

Further on, he adds that writers have also contributed to the construction of *la noche*:

Without my willing it, in my vision of night there is also the Virgilian *ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram*.<sup>3</sup>

*La noche* then becomes a *mostradero de imágenes* ("a showcase of images"), and also a space in which Borges remembers the verses of other poets, or other people's words which in turn project upon the reader's fantasy, other images. But as has been noted, Borges' poetic thought deepens and becomes further refined with age. Years later, in the "Prologue" to *El hacedor* (1960), just before invoking *la sombra de Luiones* (his "ghost"/"shade") to whom he will "deliver" the book, he observes in the great hall of the library, people reading, *soñando* ("dreaming"), and suddenly recalls that same line by Virgil, "*ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbras*," like that, *umbras (sombros)*. Borges seems to be alluding to the *Aeneid* (VI), where the verse is found, where it serves as the preamble to Aeneas' descent into Hades, who himself as a "*sombra*" ("shade"), will come face to face with other "*sombros*" (Charon and the centuars, for example), which are in effect the projections of words belonging to men of the past. This reading seems to be confirmed by a poem written even later, "El desterrado" ("The Exile," 1975), in which Ulysses substitutes for his literary precursor, Aeneas:

En el confín del orbe yo, Ulises,  
Descendí a la Casa de Hades  
Y vi la sombra del tebano Tiresias  
Que desligó el amor de las serpientes,  
Y la sombra de Heracles  
Que mata sombras de leones en la pradera . . . (p. 449)

*Sombros* (shadows/images) face and interact with other *sombros* (images), which in turn are projections of the words of other poets, who today are nothing but mere words themselves, mere names. Thus, in another poem published in 1975, *noche* and *sombra* are unequivocally connected with each other, and these *sombros* are made to encompass, in very explicit terms, their "creators." When, in the poem "A un ruisenior" ("To a Nightingale") Borges invokes "*el ruisenior de la sombra*" ("the nightingale of shadows" or of night), he invokes simultaneously those who named him in different poetic contexts. "*El ruisenior de la sombra*," refers to the dreamt nightingale, the image by which sheer and marvelous chance becomes also a "bird of darkness [shadows]," and is meant to include Shakespeare, Keats, Heine, Virgil, and especially the Persian poets who constructed a highly complex mystical literature around this symbol:

?En qué noche secreta de Inglaterra  
O del constante Rhin incalculable,  
Perdida entre las noches de mis noches,  
A mi ignorante oído habrá llegado  
Tu voz cargada de mitologías,  
Ruisenior de Virgilio y de los persas? (p. 426)

In *la noche*, the night of Borges, the poet where the song of that nocturnal bird materializes, other *noches* and other songs are included such as the songs of Shakespeare, of Keats, of Heine, of Virgil and the Persians. Songs which reciprocally include other songs, that of the nightingale itself and those of the poets, all materialize under the benevolent protection of a truly vast and multiple and *unánime* (unanimous) *noche*.

It would be very hard indeed to trace and explain with a semblance of precision all the simultaneous referents of the word *noche*. Certain words, in the context of Borges' mature poetry, acquire, as has been noted, through his own poems—and sometimes through his essays and stories—a multiplicity of meanings which endow them with a power to hallucinate. The words *mis noches* in the context of "mis noches están

llenas de Virgilio . . . " may have then, as simultaneous referents: Borges' blindness, that space in which his poetic images arise (and thus the presence of Virgil in his poetry); the images (*sombras*) of Virgil's words that keep echoing in his memory; and finally, the name of *Virgil*, which is nothing more than a composition of letters, a word that projects a *sombra*, a "shade" of Virgil himself. *Joyce* is also a word, a *sombra* whose existence is due to the multiple power he managed to instill in words, metaphors with the power to hallucinate, *los oros de su sombra* (golfs of his shadow or shade).

In *Sub nocte*, Virgil and Joyce are both *sombras*. *Sombras* that project other *sombras*, through words, and poetic images. Thus, upon rereading the title of the book which is perhaps Borges' greatest collection of poems, we begin to acknowledge the astounding truth. *Elogio de la sombra* can be read as praise of his growing blindness, but simultaneously it is praise for poets who endure in their work through the "magical" virtue of words, praise for the night in which poems come forth, praise for the power of words to project images in the minds of the readers, praise, in sum, of the power of language, and of poetry and of immortality.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the book, it may be noticed that in many of the poems Borges either expressly mentions the word *sombra* (shadow) or creates the *sombras* through the power of his own words.

But of all those poems which evoke *sombras* (shades or ghosts) of writers such as Joyce, López Merino, or Ricardo Güiraldes, just to mention a few, none is more eloquent than the one which bears the title "A cierta sombra, 1940" ("To a certain shade [ghost], 1940"). In this poem, Borges addresses De Quincey, the *sombra* alluded to:

Que nos salven ahora las indescifrables arquitecturas  
que dieron horror a tu sueño.  
Hermano de la noche, bebedor de opio,  
padre de sinuosos períodos que ya son laberintos y torres,  
padre de las palabras que no se olvidan . . . (p. 328)

It is important to note that in the last two lines, one proceeds from De Quincey (*sombra/shade*) to the *indescifrables arquitecturas* ("indecipherable structures") of his dream, that is, the images conceived in creative trance (*sombras/shadows*), and from there, through language, to the images (*sombras*) which these words project in the mind of the reader: "padre de

sinuosos períodos que ya son laberintos y torres / padre de las palabras que no se olvidan . . . "

Other poems in the *Elogio* reveal, through a skillful and lucid use of language, that Borges "creates" with the actual cooperation of the reader the *sombra* (shadow/image) through words. In the poem "The Unending Gift," the *I* that writes manages, as the poem is being read, to bring forth the existence of a painting that a painter friend named Jorge Larco promised him but was never able to deliver:

Ahora, en New England, sé que ha muerto . . .  
Pensé en el hombre y en el cuadro  
perdidos . . .  
Pensé después: si estuviera ahí, sería con  
el tiempo una cosa más, una de las vanidades o hábitos de la casa; ahora es  
ilimitada, incesante, capaz de cualquier  
forma y cualquier color y no atada a  
ninguno.  
Existe de algún modo. Vivirá y crecerá como una  
música y estará conmigo hasta el fin . . . (p. 321)

The painting exists through Borges' imaginative power, through the "magic" of his own words. Moreover, the deliberate ambiguity used to describe the picture itself ("capaz de cualquier forma y cualquier color") reflects, in the reader's imagination, an object which conforms to his preferences and wishes, and that, in truth, will vary each time the poem is read. The painting not only exists but, as a function of a multitude of readers, is and will be, in form and color, infinite.

The fact that Borges is able to create *sombras* (shadow/images) through words—Jorge Larco's "picture," for example—*sombras* which, in a first instance, belong only to his imaginative powers, implies that the poet impresses in these *sombras* a portion of time as he experiences it, a portion of his own identity as a writer. In the poem "Heráclito," where the poet states that he is "hecho . . . de tiempo" ("made up of time"), he concludes: "Acaso el manantial está en mí. / Acaso de mi sombra / surgen, fatales e ilusorios, los días" ("Maybe the source is in me. / Maybe out of my shade/the days arise, relentless and unreal").

Thus, if time constitutes Borges, Borges the poet reconstitutes time in his works through language. And yet, in such diverse poems as "El

reloj de arena" ("The Hourglass") and "El alquimista" ("The Alchemist")—whose analysis cannot be deliberated here—the poet speaks of the impossibility of finding "*el oro aquel que matará la Muerte*" ("that gold that will kill Death"). But this is not entirely so. The contest with time—the subject of these as so many other of his poems—is in itself a way of capturing it. The will of the poet displayed as he tries to modify language, to transmute and enrich the meanings of words, transfigures him, in the end, into a triumphant alchemist. This process is clearly alluded to in a recent poem, "Browning decide ser poeta" (1975):

Como los alquimistas  
que buscaron la piedra filosofal  
en el azogue fugitivo,  
haré que las comunes palabras  
—naipes marcados del tahur, moneda de la plebe—  
rindan la magia que fue suya  
cuando Thor era el numen y el estrépito,  
el trueno y la plegaria. . . (p. 418)

In what is perhaps one of his most extraordinary poems, "Una rosa y Milton," Borges willingly becomes the alchemist. Mingling what has been read (past literature) with what he literally imagines, the poet tries to inscribe his own poetic time in a word which stands for an image of the rose, an image that he wills unique and personal since the rose, and the word "rose," in the context of the poem, initially exists only in his own mind:

De las generaciones de las rosas  
Que en el fondo del tiempo se han perdido  
Quiero que una se salve del olvido,  
Una sin marca o signo entre las cosas  
Que fueron. El destino me depara  
Este don de nombrar por vez primera  
Esa flor silenciosa, la postrera  
Rosa que Milton acercó a su cara,  
Sin verla. Oh tú, bermeja o amarilla  
O blanca rosa de un jardín borrado,  
Deja mágicamente tu pasado  
Inmemorial y en este verso brilla,  
Oro, sangre o marfil o tenebrosa,  
Como en sus manos, invisible rosa. (p. 207)

The flower is a *sombra* (shadow) before the dead eyes of Milton, a *sombra* (shadow/image) in Borges' fantasy, and through the word *rosa*, a *sombra* in our imagination, a *sombra* (shadow/image) inextricably tied to *la noche* (the night), to the imaginative spaces in which the poet traced it. Moreover, the mere fact that he invokes it in a poetic context such as this, constitutes Borges' rose in such a way that we are bound to find imbedded in it the roses of Dante, of Ronsard, of Marino, of the Persian poets. *La tenebrosa flor* (the shadowy flower), moreover,—like Jorge Larco's picture—shall be archetypal and infinite, since it is neither tied to a specific color or form. Borges' time, and that of his precursors, flows and changes with the time of the reader through *sombras*, through words.

But in order for this to happen, as we have just pointed out, writing must be transformed into reading, his dreams must be re-dreamt, our *sombras* (shadows) must somehow reflect his *sombra* and his *sombras*. In a poem, "La moneda de hierro," it is so stated:

En la sombra del otro buscamos nuestra sombra;  
En el cristal del otro, nuestro cristal recíproco. (p. 501)

Reading, thus, becomes the process through which we see literally "through a glass darkly." Without this mutual reflection, without the interaction of writing and reading, everything will vanish, as everything vanishes in that unstable world conceived by Berkeley once the perceiver disappears. In the poem "Historia de la noche" (1977), Borges once again alludes, in a deliberately ambiguous way, to the power of recreation inherent in the reader, whose perception is the only guarantor of the existence of that evanescent world of letters. The poem sets out to write a history of "night," from the very beginning when it is a univocal name which denotes a period of darkness to the point when, through a complex process of literary elaboration (that of Virgil, Pascal, Fray Luis de León, among others), it becomes a symbol which has multiple and simultaneous designations:

A lo largo de sus generaciones  
los hombre erigieron la noche.  
En el principio era la ceguera y el sueño  
y espinas que faceran el pie desnudo  
y temor de los lobos.  
Nunca sabremos quien forjó la palabra

para el intervalo de sombra  
que divide los crepúsculos;  
nunca sabremos en qué siglo fue cifra  
del espacio de estrellas.  
Otros engendrarón el mito.  
La hicieron madre de las Parcas tranquilas  
. . . . .

Doce casas le dieron los Caldeos;  
infinitos mundos, el Pórtico.  
Hexámetros latinos la modelaron  
y el terror de Pascal.  
Luis de León vio en ella la patria  
de su alma estremecida.  
Ahora la sentimos inagotable  
como un antiguo vino  
y nadie puede contemplarla sin vértigo  
y el tiempo la ha cargado de eternidad.

But, the poet hastens to add, neither a night that one can observe directly, nor, even less so, that which time has *cargado de eternidad* ("burdened with eternity") and whose nature is indeed virtual, would possess any reality at all if it was not perceived. Thinking of the *inagotable noche* (unfathomable night), he concludes:

Y pensar que no existiría  
sin esos tenues instrumentos, los ojos.<sup>5</sup>

Without the reader, then, everything will vanish and dissolve in forgetfulness. In the poem "Ariosto y los árabes," Borges regrets that the *Orlando Furioso* is a dream that nobody dreams any longer:

Por islámicas artes reducido  
A simple erudición, a mera historia,  
Está solo soñándose. (La gloria  
Es una de las formas del olvido).  
Por el cristal ya pálido la incierta  
Luz de una tarde más toca el volumen  
Y otra vez arden y otra vez se consumen  
Los oros que envanecen la cubierta . . . (p. 148)

In the melancholy dusk in the poem, the word *oro* acquires a new designation. Los oros (the golds) here represent the engraved title and the name of the author on the cover. It is not through these visible "golds"

that Borges the poet would like to remain in the world, but rather through *los oros invisibles* (the invisible golds), his metaphors, intimate time transcribed in words.

Borges has apparently accomplished what he originally set out to do many years before. He has managed to say something unique and personal, not by expressing, but by *naming* and above all, *alluding* to (*mención y alusión*). *Padre de las palabras que no se olvidan* (creator of unforgettable words), Borges calls his *hermano de la noche* (brother of the night), the *sombra* of De Quincey. And like De Quincey, he would like to continue existing as a *sombra* (shadow/shade/ghost) who projects other *sombras* (images) in the halls of memory; he would wish to endure by "*el oro de los tigres*," *los que no están en el verso* ("the gold of the tigers," those which are absent from the verse), like Virgil and Joyce, by "los oros de su sombra," by the richness and diversity with which he endowed words that, belonging to everyone or to no one, he has definitely made his.

## NOTES

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Antología personal* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1966): 8.
  2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obra poética* (Buenos Aires: Emeché, 1977): 353. Further quotes will pertain to this edition and the page number will be included in parentheses in the text.
  3. Jorge Luis Borges, *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1926): 111–12.
  4. Guillermo Sucre, in an article which deals mainly with the *Elogio de la sombra*, also sees in the title of the book a "variado símbolo" (multiple symbol) Sucre, "Borges: el elogio de la sombra" in *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. XXXVI, No. 72, julio-agosto, 1970, reprinted in Jaime Alazraki (editor), *Jorge Luis Borges. El escritor y la crítica* (Madrid: Taurus, 1976): 106. If, on the one hand, I find myself in agreement with Professor Sucre when he notes that Borges' *persona* is "creada e inventada por su obra" ("created and invented by his own literary work"), I differ as to the implications of this concept. My reading varies from Sucre's, for example, with respect to what I consider the "central" meaning of the word *sombra* (shadow)—which Sucre reads as referring primarily to death and dispossession—and also with respect to the ways the writer uses language to create and project that literary *persona* in the mind of the reader. *Sombra* (shadow), as will be noted above, has indeed multiple meanings, but these meanings point to some central aspects of a theory of literature.
- It is interesting to note, in passing, that Borges' concept of *sombras* as images registered in the mind of the reader is very similar to that of Coleridge when he defines "poetic faith." In the writing of poetry, he strives for ". . . a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of the imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith." S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* ed. George Watson (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1965): 168–9. (Emphasis mine.)
5. Jorge Luis Borges, *Historia de la noche* (Buenos Aires: Emeché, 1977): 135–6.

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JOSÉ MIGUEL OVIEDO

### Borges: The Poet According to His Prologues

Borges' readers will have noticed that nearly every book he has written has been accompanied, at some moment in its published history, by a prologue which fulfills more important functions than those usually attributed to these preliminary texts. In the case of his poetic works, these functions are much more precise and revealing than those in other collections, thus meriting particular attention.

His *Obras Completas*<sup>1</sup> of 1974 brings together sixteen books of poems, essays and fiction, thirteen of which are preceded by prologues. The other three (*El aleph*, *Obras inquisiciones*, *El hacedor*) don't have, strictly speaking, prologues (although *El hacedor* presents us with a dedication "A Leopoldo Lugones" which almost constitutes a prologue); however, all three do have epilogues and one (*El aleph*) includes a postscript to the epilogue. There is, it seems, in Borges, a very personal tendency to present his works with preliminary or concluding texts, as if establishing between them and the body of the book a textual dialogue—a verbal sequence which attempts to close the circle of text, author's voice and reader's response. The *Obras Completas* also closes with a general epilogue, a brief autobiography disguised as a note in the apocryphal *Enciclopedia Sudamericana*, "to be published in Santiago de Chile in the year 2074" (OC, 1143). In that ideal autobiography the author writes: "The renown that Borges enjoyed during his lifetime, documented by an accumulation of studies and polemics, continues to amaze us today. Yet he was the first to be surprised at his fame, always fearful that he would be

# BORGES the Poet

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