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Seventeen notes towards deciphering Borges
(Glosses)

Readers and friends of Borges have always suspected the existence of an underlying secret in his work, and especially in his poetry, which no one has ever been able to unravel. Since 1981, however, there has been available a book of poems entitled—not by mere chance—*La cifra* (*The Cipher*). Here, with a deliberately ingenuous aim of deciphering Borges, are submitted a few random notes or glosses in miniature.

1. Yes, there is a woman—and assuredly more than one—in the life of the poet. But in 1981, at the time of publication of *La cifra*, there was just one. The poet announces, and pronounces, her name in the “Inscription”: she is María Kodama, the lovely Japanese-Argentinian whom we have known for a number of years. The fact that the poet “pronounces” her name is not fortuitous. Nor does it bow to any kind of amatory exhibitionism. Without a doubt she is an essential piece in the cipher that locks the mystery of Borges’ latest work. Her name, her person, her breath, her roots in a distant and mysterious land, all appear and reappear throughout the length of the book. We are told, too, in that initial “Inscription” dedicated to María that transoceanic voyages, mornings and strolls through oriental and western parks have been accompanied by abundant readings of Virgil. Why Virgil?

2. The final piece of the jigsaw which this collection appears to present, has for its title the selfsame name—“*La cifra*”—as the book in its entirety. Borges has always relished detective stories, “policiales,” as

they say in Argentina, and has himself written several that are outstanding. Why not therefore follow the trail of the poet’s final mystery, by calling upon the “science of deduction” as exercised by the greatest character in the genre? Let us be good “mystery” readers, then, and begin with the ending in order to discover right away the name of the “culprit.” For that is how it would seem. The book finishes where it began: it appears that Virgil is the poetically inspiring criminal, according to the sworn and explicit statement of the author in his final page. Virgil? Why Virgil? The easiest thing for the reader is to pay attention to the poet and not read any further. But of course, Virgil! “*La amistad silenciosa de la luna*” (“The friendly silence of the moon”). But what about the woman, what about María? What is this strange complicity of a woman, the poet—the poets—and the moon? It is all too simple, is it not?

3. That is the way in which many of us read Conan Doyle and Poe. By cheating! And why? Was it in order to finish all the sooner? No. What happened was that in reading the masters of detective fiction, some of us were more interested in the intrigue itself than the outcome. Therein lay, and therein continues to lie, the charm of those stories. That trick, then, won’t help us to “decipher” Borges. We must read his book step by step; and without forgetting the preestablished and ultimate complicity between two poets, a woman, and the moon.

4. There are seventeen *haiku* in *La cifra*; in the seventeenth, Borges says:

La vieja mano
sigue trazando versos
para el olvido.

The old hand
goes on tracing verses
for oblivion.

Here is the core, the very essence and marrow. What anguish! To be a poet, to write with the urgent endeavour of transcending the here and now; and yet, at bottom, to feel that one is writing for oblivion. But is this, really and truly, what the poet feels? Perhaps . . . , tense agony? The dark, deep longing for perduration?

5. *La cifra* carries, besides the dedication, a prologue. A strange, story-laden prologue. In it, Borges tells us of his dilemma in the face of “*el ejercicio de la literatura*” (“the exercise of literature”), in other words, of poetry. These are two paths for the poet: either that of “*la cadencia mágica*” (“magic cadence”)—Rubén Darío?—or that of intellectual po-

etry, which as Borges says is "casi un oxímoron" ("almost an oxymoron"), Browning, Frost, Unamuno and, he adds with sarcasm, "quizás" ("perhaps") Paul Valéry. No, Borges does not want to travel this latter route. He would prefer to follow the impetuous, impossible flight of the "peregrina paloma imaginaria" ("imaginary pilgrim dove") of Ricardo Jaimes Freyre. The closing words of this prologue, "Estas páginas buscan, no sin incertidumbre, una vía media" ("These pages seek, not without uncertainty, a middle way") are the confession of a trembling fear on the part of the poet. But that fear does not impede recognition of the ultimate truth: the "middle way" is one that can only limp, and with "trembling uncertainty" the poet is aware that poetry is the attempt to capture the impossible flight of the imaginary pilgrim dove.

6. Literature and its core, which is poetry, are among other things, none other than verbal terrorism in moments of emergency. Borges knows that life—and his own is proving to be a long one—is nothing but a hold-up, staged upon the wayfarer-reader: Your money or your life! Speak it now, or perish—perish for ever. It is the knife of Juan Muraña. The dreamed-of deed in a marginal world. Knife that is sword: Mío Cid, Martín Fierro, Don Segundo Sombra, nothingness. Television, perhaps.

7. In "Ronda" the poet encounters the memory of Islam, "que fue espadas que desolaron el poniente" ("which were swords that laid waste the setting sun"—the West) and, still further, "un cóncavo silencio de patios, un ocio del jazmín y un tenue rumor de agua, que conjuraba memorias de desiertos" ("a concave silence of patios, an idleness of jasmine and a faint murmur of water, that conjured memories of deserts"). Borges the poet has the advantage. Others of us were in Ronda performing tedious martial duties. Borges is right; those of us who were there know that he is.

8. The *Quijote* was written in Arabic by Cide Hamete Benengeli and a soldier gave us the Castilian version of the manuscript. Borges inserts a prose poem in *La cifra* to express his admiration for so real a fantasy. An imaginary Arab dreams it; Cervantes held the Arabic manuscript in his hands. "No lo leyó nunca, pero cumplió minuciosamente el destino que había soñado el árabe y seguirá cumpliéndolo siempre, porque su aventura ya es parte de la larga memoria de los pueblos." ("He never read it, but he scrupulously fulfilled the destiny which the Arab had dreamed of

and he will forever continue to fulfil it, because his adventure forms part now of the long memory of all the people.")

9. Borges visits at last one of those remote lands which, as children, seemed to us like a realm of fantasy. He has arrived too late to see it; yet nevertheless blindness does not impede a radical and profound vision of what he himself insists on calling nothing more than surface:

"... desde una escritura que ejerce la insinuación y que ignora la hipérbole, desde jardines donde el agua y la piedra no importan menos que la hierba, desde tigres pintados por quienes nunca vieron un tigre y nos dan casi el arquetipo . . . desde puentes, mañanas y santuarios, desde una música que es casi el silencio, desde tus muchedumbres en voz baja, he divisado tu superficie, oh Japón. En ese delicado laberinto . . ."

("... from a writing that practices insinuation and that ignores hyperbole, from gardens where water and stone matter no less than grass, from tigers painted by people who never saw a tiger and who give us almost the archetype . . . from bridges, mornings and sanctuaries, from a music which is almost silence, from your low-voiced crowds, I have glimpsed your surface, oh Japan. In that delicate labyrinth . . ."). Some "surface," this! Gardens of water and stone, painters who manage almost to trace the archetypal tiger, a music of quasi silence, low-voiced crowds . . . delicate labyrinth! The want of physical vision matters not. That other vision, that of the poet's soul, has seen Japan. And María? We must imagine María Kodama guiding the blind poet through those gardens, bridges and mornings, with the music of her voice, with her sweet patience, through the twists and turns of the labyrinth from whence proceeds half her lineage. (María is to Borges what Virgil is to Dante. Dante? Beatrice? We are beginning to decipher what is coded in the book. Or are we beginning to get dizzy?)

10. María Kodama discovered the lacquer cane with which the poet probes uncertain paths. "Pese a su autoridad y a su firmeza, es curiosamente liviano." ("In spite of its authority and strength, it is curiously light.") The blind poet says that he "mira" ("looks at") his cane. What he "sees," naturally, is the profundity, the meaning, of this simple piece of Chinese craftsmanship: "Siento que es una parte de aquel imperio, infinito en el tiempo, que erigió su muralla para construir un recinto má-

gico." ("I sense that it is a part of that empire, infinite in time, which erected its wall in order to construct a magic precinct.") But he also thinks ". . . en el artesano que trabajó el bambú y lo dobló para que mi mano derecha pudiera calzar bien en el puño" ("of the craftsman who worked the bamboo and bent it so that my right hand could comfortably grasp its handle"), and he feels himself united with it by an undefined but necessary bond. The creative effort of the Chinese craftsman and that of the poet from Buenos Aires coincide at a point in the universe. The certainty of this affirms the poet's *raison d'être*. Perhaps the seventeenth *haiku* is intentionally fallacious. Perhaps the universe requires that the old hand go on tracing verses, and that is the reason for the fate of the lacquer cane . . .

11. The intrigue is what matters. Be it called life or universe. Everything is linked together in a circle that has neither beginning nor end. Time flows: the dripping of a fountain and the death of Caesar are pieces of the same intrigue. Likewise, Rome and Chaldea. Man is both able and unable to behold the universe altogether. What do the two faces of double-fronted Janus see?

12. Dreams. An old theme in Borges: "La noche nos impone su tarea mágica. Destejer el universo, las ramificaciones infinitas de efectos y de causas, que se pierden en ese vértigo sin fondo, el tiempo." ("Night imposes its magic task. To unravel the universe, the infinite ramifications of cause and effect, which lose themselves in that bottomless whirl which is time.") Three poems are dedicated to dreaming. And also a strange and unexpected dedication to another woman: Viviana Aguilar. Is this the Other Woman? No, that is not the path which will lead us to the discovery of the key. The poet dreams "en el alba dudosa" ("in the doubtful dawn") and of the dream remembers only the fact that "había muchas puertas" ("there were many doors"). All the rest he has forgotten upon awakening. "Sigue la duda y la penumbra crece." ("The doubt continues and the half-light grows.") The trembling of doubt, the mystery of oblivion. Here is the key. Let it not escape us. In the longing to recover what he has dreamed lies the secret of Borges' poetry: "Si supiera qué ha sido de aquél que he soñado, o que sueño haber soñado, sabría todas las cosas." ("If I knew what has become of what I have dreamed, or what I dream I have dreamed, I would know all things.") No less! The poet dreams that he can achieve that supreme wisdom. But let us go back a mo-

ment: towards the beginning of the book is a poem entitled "Descartes" in which systematic doubt is turned upside down. There is no certainty possible. It is not true that I exist because I doubt. All is mere "acazos," mere "perhapses": God, man, earth, moon and time. Even having dreamed, even yesterday, even being born, are doubtful. But one night the poet feels a shiver of cold, a quiver of fear. Is existence itself a perhaps? The poet decides to continue to dream "a Descartes y a la fe de sus padres" ("of Descartes and the faith of his forebears").

13. Pierced with the tremor of time is this small book of Borges. A poem entitled "Himno" ("Hymn") begins as follows:

"Esta mañana hay en el aire la increíble fragancia de las rosas del Paraíso.	This morning there is in the air the incredible fragrance of the roses of Paradise.
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And in a great, circular, poetic adventure the poet takes us to the first morning of man. "Adán descubre la frescura del agua." ("Adam discovers the coolness of water.") From there to the golden Olympus of Zeus, to Agrigento, to Altamira, to the Rome of Virgil (once again Virgil), who here caresses silk brought from China by caravans and ships to Hungary, where the first nightingale sings: ages, characters and adventures succeed each other in giddy speed in the poem. Pythagoras "revela a sus griegos que la forma del tiempo es la del círculo" ("reveals to his Greeks that the shape of time is that of the circle"). The blind poet arrives, in his hymn, as far as Manhattan and there he hears Walt Whitman sing. But all this traversing of the past is motivated by an erotic force:

Todo el pasado vuelve como una ola y esas antiguas cosas recurren porque una mujer te ha besado.	All the past returns like a wave and those ancient things recur because a woman has kissed you.
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14. "Llorado amor, ceniza del deleite" ("Lamented love, ash of delight"): in one poem, "El hacedor" ("The Maker"), which appears to be an appeal to Heraclitus, love is seen dragged along the intangible course of time. All is ashes, all is the image of the irrevocable passage of time—"el tiempo, que ni vuelve ni tropieza" ("time, which neither returns nor stumbles"), said Quevedo. The poet (in this case Borges), nevertheless

proclaims himself, thanks to his work or to his task, victor over time. The "deed" done by the maker will save him:

Otra cosa no soy que esas imágenes	I am no other thing than those images
Que baraja el azar y nombra el tedio.	Which chance shuffles and tedium names.
Con ellas, aunque ciego y quebrantado,	With them, though blind and broken,
He de labrar el verso incorruptible Y (es mi deber) salvarme.	I have to fashion incorruptible verse And (it is my duty) save myself.

15. The *haiku* are, in great measure, the key to *La cifra*; or rather, the cipher within the cipher. *Haiku* 15 says:

La luna nueva.	The new moon.
Ella también la mira desde otra puerta.	She too looks at it from another door.

Let us remember that the lunar cycle begins with the new moon. Its pallid light announces the hope that one day it will become a full moon. Love too might be able to commence anew and reach its plenitude, however pale it might be. But she . . . , the woman who inspires the *haiku*, and in consequence the book entire, is now in some other place, also looking at the room . . . from another door. Could the new moon reunite the lovers?

16. The poet is alone, without the beloved, in a garden. "Lejos un trino." ("A distant warbling.") The nightingale sings in the night. The poet suffers in his solitude, beneath the moon. He casts a slight shadow: his own, only his own! The poet is alone, but the warble of the nightingale consoles him. The poet will go on "tracing verses." What sorrow to bequeath them only to oblivion! There remains, nevertheless, the hidden hope that some, perhaps just a few, may remember them and, without the poet's knowledge, find in them some comfort for unknown griefs. But the less said of it, the better.

17. Does the number seventeen hold some magic meaning? Borges includes in *La cifra* seventeen *haiku*, as I have already said. Perhaps this is just a matter of chance, or simply tiredness. Yet I do not think so: Borges is one of the most precise and purposeful modern poets. Let us pause here and interrupt for now this small glossary. Let us return for a

moment to Virgil. "Tacitae per amica silentia lunae." *Aeneid*, ii. 255. ("Through the friendly silence of the mute moon", or "Through the silent friendship of the mute moon".) Virgil's line is transformed in the poem called "La cifra," through a deliberate misquotation by Borges, to become "la amistad silenciosa de la luna" ("the silent friendship of the moon"), which is the companion (woman or ash) of the poet ever since one night, or perhaps one evening, when the almost extinguished light of his eyes "deciphered her for ever." Moon, reflection: light of the blind, light which does not burn, but which is there and which is a sweet companion. Yes, it is a woman. Love of ashes, or ashes of love. Never again will the poet see the "clear moon." No longer will it be of any use to "abrir todas las ventanas del mundo" ("open all the windows of the world"). The poet knows that the final secret of his work lies in that sensation of having arrived always too late. Life has been for him a continual, anguished evening. For ever? "I know," says the poet, "that someone, some day, will truly be able to say to you: Never again will you see the clear moon." Come what may, he knows full well that his poetry is a song, from the very first line to the as yet unwritten last one: a song to the pale light lost in an evanescent past; a song to the love that might have been; to the moment which ought to have been lived as if it were the last. This is the terrible misfortune of the poet; and yet, here before us is his poetry: not the flesh of oblivion, but the supreme attempt of salvation from death, evasion from the void.

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BORGES *the Poet*

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