

- Borges, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote." In *Ficciones*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1956.
Borges, "Ultraísmo." *Nosotros*, (Dec. 1921), 466.
Borges, "Un soneto de don Francisco de Quevedo." In *El idioma de los argentinos*. Buenos Aires: Colección Índice, 1928.
Gómez de la Serna, Ramón. *Quevedo*. Buenos Aires: Austral, 1953.
Hidalgo, Alberto, Vicente Huidobro y Jorge Luis Borges. *Índice de la nueva poesía americana*. Buenos Aires: Sociedad de Publicaciones, 1926.
Herrera, Fernando de. *Obra poética*. Edited by J. M. Blecua. Madrid: Anejos del BRAE, 1975.
Quevedo, Francisco de. *Antología poética*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1982.
Quevedo. *Poesía original completa*. Edited by F. Buendía. Madrid: Aguilar, 1969.
Toro, José López de. *Los poemas de Lepanto*. Madrid: Instituto Histórico de Marina, 1950.
Zárate, Francisco López de. *Obras varias*. Edited by José Simón Díaz. Madrid: CSIC, 1947.
Zárate, Francisco López de. *Obras varias*. Edited by José Simón Díaz. Madrid: CSIC, 1947.

Borges the Poet

Ed. Carlos Cortínez

Fayetteville: The University of
Arkansas Press, 1986

W. KENNETH HOLDITCH

Borges and Emerson: The Poet as Intellectual

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Borges' deep love for the literature of the United States is the high position in which he has repeatedly, in writing and in interviews, placed Ralph Waldo Emerson as poet. One is certainly not surprised at his appraisal of Walt Whitman as an epic poet, or Emily Dickinson as "perhaps the greatest poet that America . . . has as yet produced," or when he speaks with admiration of the ideas expressed in Emerson's essays; but the praise for Emerson as a poet is another thing altogether. Traditionally Emerson has been admired by American readers and critics, rightly or wrongly, as a philosopher, thinker, and creator of pithy and memorable aphorisms that generously pepper the prose of his famous essays. His poetry, however, interesting insofar as it conveys some of the same philosophical concepts belonging to American romanticism, has generally been relegated to a distant second place. Yes, we remember the farmers who gathered by "the rude bridge that arched the flood" and "fired the shot heard round the world" and may even recall isolated lines such as "Things are in the saddle / And ride mankind," but when we quote Emerson, it is usually from unforgettable lines in his prose; and such essays as "Nature," "Self-Reliance," and "The American Scholar," for example. Borges' praise for the poems, then, places them in a new and intriguing light in which we can identify those aspects of Emerson's poetry Borges finds of particular interest and merit; examine specific poems which he singles out for comment or com-

commendation; and distinguish any Emersonian elements which are present as allusions or influences in Borges' own works.

The one aspect of Emerson's poetry most often commented upon by Borges is its intellectual quality. His most recent published remarks on the subject appear in *Borges at Eighty* in which he states that Emerson, like Walt Whitman, is "one of those men who cannot be thought away," that "literature would not be what it is today" without Poe, Melville, Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson, then singles out Emerson for particular commendation: "I love Emerson and I am very fond of his poetry. He is to me the one intellectual poet—in any case the one intellectual poet who has ideas. The others are merely intellectual with no ideas at all. In the case of Emerson, he had ideas and was thoroughly a poet."¹ The "intellectual poet who has ideas"—this is the characterization that surfaces again and again whenever Borges has written or spoken of the great Transcendentalist.

What exactly does Borges mean by the phrase "intellectual poet"? Is his definition of the word *intellectual* a restrictive one, or are we to accept it as meaning merely rational as opposed to emotional, merely possessed of ideas as opposed to being devoid of same? Part of the answer may be found in his assertion that the "breadth of his mind was astonishing,"² and his comparison of Emerson to three other writers may illuminate this evaluation. In 1949, in the prologue to *Representative Men*, which he had translated into Spanish, Borges identifies Emerson as a classical writer in opposition to Thomas Carlyle the romantic—whom Borges had earlier loved but later declared unreadable—and asserts that Emerson is far superior to those "compatriots who have obscured his glory: Whitman and Poe."³ In *An Introduction to American Literature* he states that Friederich Nietzsche had remarked "that he felt himself so close to Emerson, that he did not dare to praise him because it would have been like praising himself."⁴ Borges counters that identification between the two philosophers, however, by observing that Emerson is "a finer writer and a finer thinker than Nietzsche, though most people wouldn't say that today."⁵ Granted that Borges reserves much of his praise and respect related to philosophers for that other German master, Schopenhauer, his comparison of Nietzsche to Emerson attests surely to his admiration for the philosophy of the American and suggests that it is in the philosophical realm, not only in his prose but also in his poetry, that Emerson ex-

cels intellectually. This is true especially in poetry, one might argue, since Borges has elsewhere asserted that Emerson's prose has a "disconnected character" and suffers from the fact that he does not construct valid, sequential arguments in the essays but merely strings together "memorable sayings, sometimes full of wisdom, which do not proceed from what [has] come before nor prepare for what [is] to come."⁶

When he mentions Emerson in connection with Poe, Borges observes rather ambiguously that "the most curious" volume of the twelve that contains Emerson's collected works is the one devoted to his poetry, then reiterates his belief that Emerson was "a great intellectual poet" and that Poe, "whom he called, not without disdain, the 'jingle man,' did not interest him."⁷ In the short fiction entitled "The Other Death," the persona argues that Emerson is "a poet far more complex, far more skilled, and truly more extraordinary than the unfortunate Poe."⁸

In the preface to *Doctor Brodie's Report*, Borges states that "the art of writing is mysterious" and "the opinions we hold are ephemeral." He prefers, he continues, "the Platonic idea of the Muse to that of Poe, who reasoned, or feigned to reason, that the writing of a poem is an act of the intelligence. It never fails to amaze me that the classics advance a romantic theory of poetry, and romantic poets a classical theory."⁹ Here he is referring, of course, to Poe's famous "explanation" in "The Philosophy of Composition" of the allegedly rational procedure through which he wrote that seemingly irrational poem "The Raven."

Later Borges was to reaffirm this belief when in a 1980 conversation he stated that "opinions come and go, politics come and go, my personal opinions are changing all the time. But when I write I try to be faithful to the dream, to be true to the dream."¹⁰ This rejection of Poe's belief that writing a poem is "an act of the intelligence" and the assertion that our opinions are "ephemeral" might seem markedly contrary to his praise for Emerson as an intellectual poet: a paradox, and how should it be solved? Probably Borges would not want it solved, since much of his work attests to love of the paradoxical, but critics never tire of trying.

The answer to the seeming dilemma lies perhaps in "A Vindication of the Cabala" where writers are categorized as journalists, verse writers, and intellectuals. The journalist, Borges states, in his "ephemeral utterances . . . allows for a noticeable amount of chance," while the verse writer subjects "meaning to euphonic necessities (or superstitions)," but

the intellectual is another matter. Although he has not eliminated chance, either in prose or verse, "he has denied it as much as possible, and limited its incalculable concurrence. He remotely resembles the Lord, for Whom the vague concept of chance holds no meaning, the God, the perfected God of the theologians, Who sees all at once (*uno intelligendu actu*), not only all the events of this replete world, but also those that would take place if even the most evanescent of them should change, the impossible ones also."¹¹ This presumably is the kind of poet that Borges believes Emerson to be, and the introduction of the notion that the intellectual poet sees all—not only that which exists, but that which might have been—relates to a favorite theme of Borges' own poetry. His admiration for the intellectual process as exemplified in Emerson's versifying surely relates to the idea of the nineteenth-century writer that all poetry derives from "meter-making arguments" rather than from meter.

Emerson is admired by Borges not only for his intellectuality, but, as Ronald Christ points out, for being a "man of letters" of the caliber of G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, Thomas DeQuincey, George Bernard Shaw, and Robert Louis Stevenson—all, the critics note, "lovers of words, poets, or storytellers, weavers of theories, manifestations of the writer as *grammaticus*." In addition, Borges has commented on the writer as *vate* or *místico*, the writer, as Christ defines him, "who looks through the solidity of our reality and reveals another world and perhaps a secret scheme or logic which controls our world." Emerson's transcendentalism, the critic concludes, "is explicitly vatic in the Borgesian sense. . . ."¹² In his discussion of Transcendentalism in *An Introduction to American Literature*, Borges points out that the New England version of Romanticism has its origin in, among other sources, Hindu pantheism and "the visionary theology of Swedenborg"—a favorite of Borges', of course—who proposed a belief that "the external light is a mirror of the spiritual."¹³

Emerson's theory of art obviously holds an appeal for Borges, since he refers often to its principles. In *Borges at Eighty*, he is quoted as observing, "I remember what Emerson said: language is fossil poetry. He said every word is a metaphor. You can verify that by looking a word up in the dictionary. All words are metaphors—a fossil poetry, a fine metaphor itself." In the same work, he remarks that "a book, when it lies in the bookshelf — I think Emerson has said so (I like to be indebted to

Emerson, one of my heroes) — a book is a thing among things . . . A book is unaware of itself until the reader comes."¹⁴ Often he has reiterated his agreement with Emerson that creative reading is as important as creative writing, the reader as essential in the scheme of things as he who writes the poetry. Another aspect of Emerson's esthetic, as Christ points out, is the belief that "a work of art is an abstract of the epitome of the world" and Borges has created in "The Aleph" "one of the points of the universe which contains all the points" so that it becomes "a symbol of all Borges' writing."¹⁵

The works of Emerson to which Borges most often refers in his own writing include three remarkable poems, "Days," "The Past," and "Brahma." The first two are concerned with the passage of time and its relationship to man, the third embodies the doctrine of the unity of all that exists.

In "Days," the persona describes the subjects as "Daughters of Time," hypocritical, dumb, like dervishes, who offer to each man "gifts after his will." Forgetting his own "morning wishes," the persona accepts from one of them "a few herbs and apples" and the day departs, a look of scorn upon her face. The poem is decidedly ambiguous, open to at least two interpretations. Certainly the persona may be complaining that he has not taken full advantage of the opportunities offered to him by the days (and months and years) of his life, but has settled rather for something less than the rewards accorded kings and martyrs. On the other hand, the two items he employs to symbolize his choice—herbs and apples—are objects of nature, not worldly baubles, and given Emerson's devotion to the natural world, to the simple; given his belief that man even in his most trivial activities may be involved in the serious labor of eternity, it is surely at least as likely that he is arguing that his decision is correct and the scorn of the "hypocritic" Daughter of Time is not to be accorded credence.

Borges has opted for the former interpretation. In a 1967 interview with Cesar Fernández Moreno, cited by Carlos Cortínez in his study of Borges' poem "Emerson," Borges interprets "Days" as meaning that when Emerson, offered anything he wants on earth, takes only "a few herbs and apples," the days make fun of the poet's absurd moderation ("*la absurda moderación del poeta*"). This leads Borges to speculate that there was in Emerson a secret discontent ("*una secreta insatisfacción*"),

and that he regretted having chosen the life of the mind over the life of action.¹⁶

The powerful sonnet to Emerson portrays the "tall New Englander" closing a volume of Montaigne and going out into the fields one evening. The walk, as much a pleasure for him as reading, takes him toward the sunset, as well as through the memory of Borges who writes of him. Emerson thinks of the important books he has read, the imperishable books he has been granted the privilege to write, and of his national fame and concludes, surprisingly, that "I have not lived. I want to be someone else." In his note to the poem, Emir Rodríguez Monegal observes that the sonnet was written in 1962 after Borges had visited New England and that in the work the North American poet becomes a "mask" for the Argentine poet. Cortínez has argued that Borges creates a contrast in the poem between Emerson, the contemplative man, and Don Quixote, the man of action. Although as I have suggested, the opposite interpretation may be given to "Days," Emerson's belief in the necessity for action certainly was often expressed; consider, for example, his criticism of Thoreau, even as he eulogized him, for being content to be "the captain of a huckleberry-party" when he could have been "engineering for all America."¹⁷

The opening line of "The Other Death," Borges' story of the soldier who behaved in a cowardly manner in battle and may—or may not—be allowed to relive the event and die bravely, refers to a proposed first translation of Emerson's "The Past" into Spanish. In that poem, Emerson's intellectual idea is that what is past is finished; there is no altering any event: "All is now secure and fast; / Not the gods can shake the Past. . . ." "The Other Death" would seem to posit as one of the interpretations of the strange events it contains, a contradiction of Emerson's argument; to offer the possibility, at least, that the past can be relived.

The nostalgic and rather tragic recognition of the immutability of things and events that have been, however, is on other occasions, in other works, embraced by Borges. In "Things That Might Have Been," for example, the poet envisions literary masterpieces that were never written, empires that never existed and "History without the afternoon of the Cross and the afternoon of hemlock. / History without the face of Helen." Or, after "the three labored days of Gettysburg, the victory of the South." In the conclusion of the poem, the persona envisions the

"son I did not have."¹⁸ In "Things That Might Have Been," Borges obviously concurs with Emerson's past that "is now secure and past," even though he may elsewhere assert, as in a 1980 conversation, that "as to the past, we are changing it all the time. Every time we remember something, we slightly alter our memory."¹⁹ On the other hand, remember that one of the attributes of the "intellectual poet," as noted above, is the ability to see "all at once," not only what was, but what might have been; and it is to this category, of course, that he assigns Emerson.

The poem "Brahma" is based on the pantheistic unity which Emerson had derived from his reading of Hindu scriptures. Borges quotes the entire poem in *An Introduction to American Literature* and in *Other Inquisitions* identifies as "perhaps the most memorable line" that in which the persona, Brahma, states paradoxically "When me they fly, I am the wings."²⁰ The concept of the contradictory unity of all things as Emerson conveys it in the poem manifests itself often in Borges' works. Consider the passage in *DreamTigers* called "A Problem" in which he speaks of the possibility of Don Quixote's having been reincarnated as a Hindustani king who stands over the body of the enemy he has slain and understands "that to kill and beget are divine or magical acts which manifestly transcend humanity. He knows that the dead man is an illusion, as is the bloody sword that weighs down his hand, as is he himself, and all his past life, and the vast gods, and the universe."²¹ Not only is the idea of the passage parallel to the argument of "Brahma," but the phrase "the vast gods" is surely an echo of Emerson's line "The strong gods pine for my abode."

In addition to Emerson's concepts reflected in the poems considered above, other themes of his that have been influential in the works of Borges include the doctrines of the Over-Soul and the Universal Poet and man; of Compensation and Undulation; the concepts of Illusions and Miracles, and the ethical considerations of the Concord genius. Of these, Emerson's most important influence on the thought and work of Borges would seem to be the basic Transcendental concept of the Over-Soul, particularly as embodied in the Universal Man, or, more to the point here, the Universal Poet.

In "The Flower of Coleridge," Borges quotes Paul Valéry as saying that literary history should not be constituted by the lives of poets and their careers but rather "the history of the Spirit as the producer or con-

sumer of literature." Borges adds that "It was not the first time that the Spirit had made such an observation," for in 1844, "one of its amanuenses in Concord" wrote,

I am very much struck in literature by the appearance that one person wrote all the books; . . . there is such equality and identity both of judgement and point of view in the narrative that it is plainly the work of one, all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman.²²

This passage from Emerson's essay "Nominalist and Realist" introduces a theme that obviously has a strong appeal for Borges, since he turns to it again and again. In a 1980 conversation, for example, he commented on how little we know of Shakespeare's life, a fact which does not trouble us, he insists, because Shakespeare has converted that life into plays and sonnets. The best thing for any author is to be a part of a tradition, a part of the language, which is in itself a kind of immortality, he argues, since language and tradition go on, while the books may be forgotten: "or perhaps every age rewrites the same books, over and over again. . . . Perhaps the eternal books are all the same books. We are always rewriting what the ancients wrote, and that should prove sufficient."²³ Emerson makes exactly the same point in his essay "The Poet" where he states that "poetry was all written before time was."

A more generalized implication of the Over-Soul concept—the belief that not only are all poets one poet, but all men are one man—has intrigued Borges and provided inspiration in several works. In *An Introduction to American Literature*, he observes that for Emerson, every man is a microcosm and the "soul of the individual is identified with the soul of the world," so that all "each man needs is his own profound and secret identity."²⁴ The prologue to Borges' translation of *Representative Men* contains the observation that since the tragedy of human life results from individuals being "restricted by time and space," nothing is "more gratifying than a belief that there is no one who is not the universe."²⁵ This being the case, for Emerson, men are immortal through their universality; and for Borges, as he states elsewhere, "my days and nights are equal in poverty and richness to those of God and those of all men."²⁶

Any attempt to make a case for Borges as a Transcendentalist in the Emersonian sense would be foolish and futile, but what is apparent from the evidence offered above, incomplete as it may be, is the fact that

Borges feels for that "tall gentleman" of Concord both an admiration and an affinity. The value of finding and analyzing such a relationship is the evidence it offers for the value of tradition and the relationship of that tradition to poets and poetry, and the insight which such a study can afford readers to the writings of two great "intellectual" poets, one of the nineteenth century, one of the present; of two—as Borges himself might express it—"amanuenses" of the one great Spirit that connects all literature of the past and present and—if human beings continue to read—of the future.

NOTES

1. Willis Barnstone, ed. *Borges at Eighty: Conversations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982): 5.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, in collaboration with Esther Zemborain de Torres, *An Introduction to American Literature*. Trans. L. Clark Keating and Robert O. Evans (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973): 26.
3. Carlos Cortínez, "Otra Lectura de 'Emerson' de Borges," *Revista Chilena de Literatura* 19 (1982): 98.
4. Borges, *An Introduction to American Literature*, 25.
5. Cited by Ronald J. Christ, *The Narrow Act* (New York: New York University Press, 1969): 42.
6. Borges, *An Introduction to American Literature*, 26.
7. Borges, *An Introduction to American Literature*, 26.
8. *Borges: A Reader*. Edited by Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Alastair Reid. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981): 215.
9. Borges, *Doctor Brodie's Report*. Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972): 10.
10. Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty*, 12.
11. Monegal and Reid, *Borges: A Reader*, 24.
12. Christ, *The Narrow Act*, 11–12.
13. Borges, *An Introduction to American Literature*, 24.
14. Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty*, 67, 165.
15. Christ, *The Narrow Act*, 11–12.
16. Cortínez, "Otra Lectura de 'Emerson' de Borges," 95.
17. Perry Miller, ed. *Major Writers of America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966): 307.
18. Monegal and Reid, *Borges: A Reader*, 327.
19. Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty*, 14.
20. Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions: 1937–1952* trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964): 69.
21. Jorge Luis Borges, *DreamTigers*. Trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964).
22. Monegal and Reid, *Borges: A Reader*, 163.
23. Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty*, 9.
24. Borges, *An Introduction to American Literature*, 25.

25. Christ, *The Narrow Act*, 131.
26. Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty*, 42.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barnstone, Willis, ed. *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Doctor Brodie's Report*. Translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972.
- Borges, *DreamTigers*. Translated by Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964.
- Borges. *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952*. Translated by Ruth L. C. Simms. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964.
- Borges, Jorge Luis, and Esther Zemborain de Torres. *An Introduction to American Literature*. Translated by L. Clark Keating and Robert O. Owens. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1973.
- Cortínez, Carlos. "Otra Lectura de 'Emerson' de Borges." In *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, 19 (1982): 95, 98.
- Christ, Ronald J. *The Narrow Act*. New York: New York University Press, 1969.
- Miller, Perry, ed. *Major Writers of America*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966.
- Rodríguez Monegal, Emir, and Alastair Reid, eds. *Borges: A Reader*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981.

JULIE JONES

Borges and Browning: A Dramatic Dialogue

In a rather backhanded tribute to Robert Browning, Jorge Luis Borges comments that "si hubiera sido un buen escritor de prosa, creo que no dudaríamos que Browning sería el precursor de la que llamamos literatura moderna."¹ In a writer who has repeatedly emphasized his preference for plot over character and his suspicions about the nonexistence of personality, this interest in the work of a poet who described himself as "more interested in individuals than abstract problems"² is curious, yet despite his claim in *Introducción a la literatura inglesa* of this widely accepted view of Browning, Borges seems drawn to a different reading. For him, Browning is "el gran poeta enigmático,"³ and, with Dickens, one of "dos grandes artifices góticos."⁴ In the introduction to English literature, Borges summarizes a poem he must have especially liked, "How It Strikes a Contemporary": "el protagonista puede ser Cervantes o un misterioso espía de Dios o el arquetipo platónico del poeta,"⁵ and among "Los precursores de Kafka," he numbers another of Browning's poems, "Fears and Scruples," in which the speaker defends a stubbornly enigmatic friend who, it is hinted in the last line, may be God. Borges appears particularly interested in *The Ring and the Book*, with its deployment of multiple narratives on the part of the different characters, each of whom presents his own version of the same murder.⁶ Browning's development of point of view, along with his ambiguity and what Borges sees as a quality of irreality are probably the basis for his argument that

BORGES *the Poet*

Edited by Carlos Cortínez

The University of Arkansas Press
Fayetteville 1986