



Notes

BORGES' SUBVERSIVE PARABLE, "LOS DOS REYES Y LOS DOS LABERINTOS"

Jorge Luis Borges noted the persistence throughout his canon of variations on his first short fiction, the duel story "Hombres pelearon" ("Men Fought").¹ One of the most immediately accessible of these tales of contesting adversaries is "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos" ("The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths"), the briefest of the stories in Borges' two major collections, *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*. Though rarely noticed by commentators, this account of a proud Babylonian king who uses his labyrinth to humiliate his Arabian counterpart, and lives to regret it, is particularly interesting since it directly expresses the ethic which infuses the Borgean world.

Scarcely two paragraphs long and deceptively simple, "Los dos reyes" masquerades as a secondary effort—a sort of afterthought to its much longer immediate predecessor in *El Aleph*.² There its seeming stimulus, the less successfully accomplished "Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto" ("Abenjacán the Bojarí, Dead in His Labyrinth"), alludes to an Eastern parable on the sin of pride (A 125), and Borges' footnote accompanying "Los dos reyes" expressly identifies it as that parable (A 135). Nonetheless, Borges more recently admitted that really he wrote "Los dos reyes" first, as a discrete creation which intentionally imitated the *Arabian Nights* adventures (AOS 274). Indeed, falsely attributed to R. F. Burton, the story first appeared in print over five years before "Abenjacán el Bojarí."³

Borges' extratextual indication of the story's meaning—that it treats the sin of pride—is patently unnecessary for an appreciation of the parable's allegorical intention. The narrator himself frankly declares that in building a labyrinth, the arrogant Babylonian ruler has usurped God's prerogative: "Esa obra era un escándalo, porque la confusión y la maravilla son operaciones propias de Dios, y no de los hombres" (A 135).⁴ Borges complements this overt indictment of the Babylonian's pride with a plot which insinuates the rewards of humility while it transparently expresses the retribution of a jealous God: the ensnared Arabian king first finds

¹Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 232. Further references to this volume will be cited in the text with the abbreviation AOS.

²Jorge Luis Borges, *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1957), pp. 135-136. Further references to this volume will be cited in the text with the abbreviation A.

³In his bibliographical notes, Norman Thomas di Giovanni lists the following particulars of first publication of the two stories: "'Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos' (entitled 'Historia de los dos reyes y los dos laberintos' and attributed, as an excerpt from *The Land of Midian Revisited* [1879], to R. F. Burton), *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* (May 1946)"; "'Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su Laberinto,' *Sur* (August 1951)" (AOS p. 285).

⁴"That work was a scandal, because confusion and marvel are works appropriate to God, and not to man." This and succeeding translations are my own.

through humility his escape from the Babylonian's maze, and then, humbly serving as an instrument of God's justice, he effects his terrible revenge. Even the setting of the Babylonian labyrinth intrinsically expresses the theme of man's overweening pride. Evocative of materialism, sensuality and godlessness, Babylonia is the site of another blasphemous structure which already figures as Judeo-Christendom's most familiar parabolical symbol of mankind's presumptuousness, the Tower of Babel. That Babylonian edifice, whose name originally meant "gate of God," is virtually synonymous with the folly of man's pride.⁵

In addition to their common location and meaning, the Babylonian maze and its Biblical predecessor share other important characteristics, including the aspect of bewilderment. Though not itself a maze, Babel's suggestion of perplexity arises through its association with the linguistic confusion which an affronted God wrought as punishment, and Borges has used both Babel and Babylonia ("La biblioteca de Babel" ["The Library of Babel"], "La lotería en Babilonia" ["The Lottery in Babylonia"])⁶ to represent the labyrinthine chaos in which mankind is lost. Symbolic both of man's haughty self-glorification and of an imprisoning confusion, Babel and the Babylonian labyrinth are expressive vehicles well accommodated to the philosophical Idealist structure which underlies Borges' fictional world,⁷ where the illusions of chaotic material substance and infinite chronological time persist because of the perceiver's ego. In "Los dos reyes" the Arab's final, mocking epithet for the Babylonian king suggests, in fact, that through the Babylonian labyrinth he has come to discover the truth of this very world, for he calls the unfortunate Babylonian not "King of the Age," a staple of the *Arabian Nights*⁸ which would emphasize only his egocentricity, but rather the carefully adapted "Rey del tiempo y substancia y cifra del siglo" (A 136; italics added).⁹

Babel and the Babylonian labyrinth share a final similarity in their symbolism of the Sacred Center. The Tower of Babel was a ziggurat, a multi-level "Sacred Mountain" situated at the mythological center of the universe. As the intersection of planes of being, it was quite literally the gate through which the gods might communicate with the lower regions. Throughout Babylonia, various such structures and cities were endowed with these same symbolic elements, including the city of Babylon itself, and

⁵Facts concerning the Tower of Babel, including its original name and the supposition that it was a ziggurat, are found in notes accompanying Genesis 11:1-9, *The Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 13. Borges also exploits elsewhere the equation of Babel and the sin of pride, and clearly shows his awareness of the similarity which "Los dos reyes" and the story of Babel share. "El Rey de Babel" is one appellation which he gives to Abenjacán, the arrogant Islamic labyrinth builder for whom "Los dos reyes" is later an intended moral lesson (A p. 125).

⁶Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1966), pp. 83-93, 65-73.

⁷This Idealist framework, together with the overcoming of the self and the solar imagery with which Borges expresses it, is carefully explained in my "'Everness': una clave para el mundo borgiano," *Revista Iberoamericana*, Nos. 100-101 (1977), 627-636.

⁸*The Arabian Nights' Entertainments—or The Thousand and One Nights*, trans. Edward William Lane (New York: Tudor, 1927). "O King of the Age," its variations and similar epithets are exceedingly frequent throughout the book, as are the parenthetical exclamations and comments of an Islamic flavor which Borges here imitates so well; cf. pp. 180, 225, 229, 719, etc.

⁹"King of Time and Substance and Mark of the Century."

the labyrinth is, of course, not only a maze but a well-known representation of the mythological "difficult journey" to just such a Sacred Center.¹⁰

For the Arab, this perplexing Babylonian maze ultimately does resolve into a mythological labyrinth which, like its ancient historical model, encloses at its center a literal "gate of God." The Arab has evidently found that point of communication between planes of being and its moment of revelation, for when he at last asks God's help, he immediately discovers the exit. The philosophical precepts of the Borgean world require a loss of self before such direct commerce with the eternal, and the Arab's prayer supplies it. After his own unsuccessful search throughout the labyrinth, his plea to God is a tacit confession of his personal impotence. Borges characteristically selects the setting sun, symbolic of the dying ego, to silhouette this moment of self-humiliation: "vagó afrentado y confundido hasta la declinación de la tarde. Entonces imploró socorro divino y dio con la puerta" (A 135).¹¹ Bearing in mind his recent lesson in humility, the Arab promises the Babylonian king equal retaliation—provided it is the will of God: "le dijo al rey de Babilonia que él en Arabia tenía un laberinto mejor y que, si Dios era servido, se lo daría a conocer algún día" (A 135).¹² His subsequent campaign successfully devastates the Babylonian kingdom, and he ultimately sentences the captured Babylonian king to perish in his labyrinth, the desert, once again crediting his success not to himself but rather to God: "el Poderoso ha tenido a bien que te muestre [mi laberinto], donde no hay escaleras que subir . . ." (A 136).¹³

Obviously reminiscent of the traditional tale of Babel, "Los dos reyes" merges the perfectly adapted mythological and Idealist principles of Borges' fictional world into what Joseph Campbell would call an archetypically classic tale of the tyrant:

The tyrant is proud, and therein resides his doom. He is proud because he thinks of his strength as his own; thus he is in the clown role, as a mistaker of shadow for substance; it is his destiny to be tricked. The mythological hero, reappearing from the darkness that is the source of the shapes of the day, brings a knowledge of the secret of the tyrant's doom.¹⁴

A version of Babel for the Borgean world, however, "Los dos reyes" exhibits its unmistakable modernity through yet another—and this time subversive—dimension, reversing the joke and exposing the tyrannical nature of God. Because the Babylonian's sin is his imitation of God, he in his arrogant tyranny reflects God's character. Similarly, his maze—a structure of "confusion and marvel" (A 135)—mirrors God's own creation, a world of confu-

¹⁰Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Bollingen, 1954), pp. 13-15, 18.

¹¹"He wandered affronted and confused until evening. Then he begged God's help and came upon the door."

¹²"He told the King of Babilonia that in Arabia he had a better labyrinth and that, God willing, he would someday show it to him."

¹³"The Almighty has seen fit that I show you [my labyrinth], where there are no stairs to climb. . . ."

¹⁴Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Cleveland: World, 1968), p. 337.

sion and marvel, but one which must itself be a maze. Indeed, the desert-dwelling Arabian directly calls his part of that world a labyrinth.¹⁶ And one need only look to the Babylonian's motive for imprisoning the Arab, then, to infer why God subjects mankind to such confinement. He does it merely for sport: "para hacer burla de la simplicidad de su huésped" (A 135).¹⁶ The parable's concluding narrative effect conveys the true measure of God's cruelty. After recounting for the reader the utterly atrocious death which God wills for the Babylonian, the narrator ironically juxtaposes with it his own hollow, echoing words in God's praise: "La gloria sea con Aquel que no muere" (A 136).¹⁷

"Los dos reyes" is artfully enriched throughout with the kind of exotic detail which might indeed betray "a page—overlooked by Lane or Burton—out of the *Arabian Nights*" (AOS271). It feigns a hallowed origin in ancient, oral tradition and, amid a desert setting deftly seasoned with camels and occasional vocabulary of Arabic origin ("Alá," "alcaides" [A 135]),¹⁸ it authentically incorporates appropriate epithets and other Islamic commonplaces of speech typical of its Eastern model. However, examination of phrases like "Rey del tiempo y substancia y cifra del siglo" (A 136) or "si Dios era servido" (A 135)¹⁹ discloses that Borges' flavorful embellishments often are purposefully adapted to serve a further narrative function. Several of these phrases suggest, in fact, that the narrator perhaps learned his story's moral more thoroughly than God might have wished. Apparently, one may accomplish any act, however heinous or extreme, simply by begging God's indulgence. Thus, although the parable's narrator dares to open the tale with an act of pride—the declaration "Cuentan los hombres dignos de fe . . ." (A 135)²⁰ is an assumption for himself of worthiness of faith, an attribute which only God merits—the Arabian storyteller immediately protects himself with the cloak of a parenthetical obeisance, "(pero Alá sabe más),"²¹ and proceeds with impunity to relate his subversive parable, ostensibly exalting God but in fact subtly ridiculing and debasing him. The exposure of God's cruelty complete, the Arabian narrator closes with an ironic acknowledgment of God's supremacy, "La gloria sea con Aquel que no muere,"²² thus cleverly shielding himself from God's wrathful retribution and protecting forever a subversive parable far more profoundly Byzantine than any ever told by Scheherazade.

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¹⁶Supporters of the view that Borges' labyrinths indicate a completely chaotic universe frequently cite this point. One of the more thoughtfully argued instances may be found in Frances W. Weber's "Borges' Stories: Fiction and Philosophy," *Hispanic Review*, 36, No. 1 (1968), 133-134.

¹⁶"to make fun of his guest's simplicity."

¹⁷"Glory be to Him who does not die."

¹⁸"Allah," "lieutenants."

¹⁹"King of Time and Substance and Mark of the Century"; "God willing."

²⁰"Men worthy of faith relate. . . ."

²¹"(but Allah knows more)."

²²"Glory be to Him who does not die."