

CMASQUI, - Brigham Young University,

Vol. VIII

Número 3

Mayo 1979

love

in the abstract:

the role of women

in borges' literary world

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LACK of female characters and dearth of love interest in Borges' work inevitably strike his reader and lead him, perhaps, to speculate about the writer's personal experience. One finds allusions to Borges' private life in stories based on more autobiographical themes and can make a small selection of romantic lyrics out of his collection of poems. But the crop is scarce and this is why I have entitled this paper "Love in the Abstract"; "in the abstract" also, because, in the few instances where Borges refers to love situations, he does so in a very detached uncommitted way, following stereotyped patterns. The second half of the title, however, mentions the role of women; this is because I consider that they perform an important function in Borges' presentation of human destiny, as I aim to illustrate in the latter part of this paper.

Of the many critics who have written about Borges, some have discussed at length his emotional life. Of these, Blas Matamoro stands out for the originality of his approach. In an aggressive, almost

irreverent, analysis in which he strictly adheres to Freudian lines, he diagnoses an Oedipus complex.¹ He then explains that the writer's position in the face of the father as the more successful rival to his mother's love, led to impotence; this is alluded to in more than one story;² filial impotence is offset by the condemnation of parenthood.

As a result of this situation, at his father's death Borges was invaded by a deep sense of guilt, that "ciega culpa" felt by Emma when hearing of her father's suicide and exposed by the writer's interest in the episode of Brutus and Caesar. From then on, Matamoro continues, for Borges as for Emma Zunz, "la muerte de su padre...seguiría sucediendo sin fin" (A, 59), causing a trauma whose repercussions on the writer's sexual life would never cease.

Stelio Cró and Manuel Ferrer take a totally different position. Without trying to analyse the cause of Borges' lack of success as a lover and taking the figure of Beatriz from "El Aleph" as a symbol of it, Cró considers at length the association between her and Dante's Beatrice.³ He refers in particular to the unpleasantness of the two women towards their lovers and stresses the importance of this unhappy love episode in Borges' life and the suffering it must have caused him. As a proof of this, Cró quotes one of the four essays on La Divina Comedia in which Borges comments on the contempt Beatrice shows for Dante in Canto XXXII of Purgatorio, and contrasts the poet's unhappiness with the emotions he must have experienced when describing the lovers of Canto V of Inferno: "Habr  forjado con admiraci n y envidia los versos de Paolo y Francesca."⁴

Ferrer, on the other hand, relates Borges' emotional problem to his withdrawal from the physical world; he then adds that Borges does wish to overcome this and "...presiente que la mujer es la que puede...acercarle a la realidad del mundo exterior..."⁵ Yet women reject him. Like Hladik, continues Ferrer, who to offset the horror of his impending death thinks of a woman, Borges has also looked to women for salvation. But women have failed him, or rather he has failed to hold them, adding to his generally negative experience of life.

Either of these interpretations, whether Freudian or romantic, seems to me to lay too much importance on secondary aspects of Borges' writings and not to take enough into account the deliberate detachment with which Borges considers and presents the situation of his heroes, his intellectualised vision and interpretation of life.

THE intention of this paper is:

- 1) to re-examine Borges' work in the light of his relation with his characters, the removed reticence with which he chooses to describe their sexual/emotional experience;
- 2) to point out how this same reticence is applied to the description of his own experience: how he seeks in it the literary situation and reduces the women he introduces in his work to abstraction;

- 3) to show finally how, even as abstract symbols, they perform a vital role in the development of the plot of destiny.

When we look at the protagonists of Borges' fiction, we are soon struck by their lack of personal identity: they are men solely in the sense of being prototypes of the human species, representing facets of the human mind. And, even when, by necessity of their situation, they are ostentatiously male, because they are gauchos or cuchilleros, they are not men in the totality of their masculinity. For example, none of them refers to a wife to a home or to children, with the exception of Martín Fierro whose children are part of the literary tradition from which his figure is abstracted. Moreover, they are seen to live through the episodes round which the stories are centred in a totally detached fashion as if interpreting a role. Significantly enough, the description of their appearance, far from depicting individual traits, brings out their physical insignificance and their similarity. These characters are in fact the central points in the exposition of a theorem. At the end of the story, often coinciding with the death of the protagonist, we are mentally stimulated, intellectually convinced, but, given perhaps one or two exceptions, quite uninvolved emotionally. And this is the way Borges wants it, because this is his attitude towards people, be they men or women.

Matamoro's interpretation of Borges' emotional life, detailed and well proven though it may be, is therefore ultimately irrelevant. Just as irrelevant is, in my opinion, his reference to Borges' repressed homosexuality, based on evidence such as the priest in "Las ruinas..." kissing his son before sending him to reside in another temple. This is no carnal kiss; the son is the creation of the priest's mind, no more real than Borges' own characters.

What, then, is Borges' attitude towards sex? The first definition to come to one's mind is that famous and most devastating remark from "Tlön...": "Todos los hombres, en el vertiginoso instante del coito, son el mismo hombre." (F, 25) We see how the depersonalised presentation of his characters is also reflected in this. Disguised as a dispassionate piece of reasoning, this statement is intended to have an utterly deflating effect on the sexual vanity of the individual. Seen in the context of Borges' fiction, of the description of his characters, it reflects their amorphous identity and accentuates the detachment with which we are intended to view them. We do not even know whether by "hombres" he means men or the human race at large. Logically enough, accompanying this statement concerning the impersonality of the sexual act, we find also its condemnation: "la cópula" becomes "abominable" because it multiplies the number of men. Logically, then, if only one man is enough to represent the human situation, what is the point of producing more individuals?

As a result of this, the people performing the rite of the "Fenix" (most probably the sexual act) do so in the deepest secret. Questioned by Ronald Christ whether the sexual act is the meaning of the rite referred to in the story, Borges avoided committing himself outright, but conceded that it could well be and added how, as a young boy, he had been shocked by the realization that his parents had committed such an act in order to procreate.⁶

LET us now, with reference to Ferrer's and Cró's comments, consider what emotions Borges associates with sexuality and how he interprets any love-relationships with women. In this context, the two following statements are illustrative: "La palabra hombre connota capacidad sexual y bellicosa" (EC, 146), he writes, linking, integrating almost, intercourse with the theme of aggression. And elsewhere, in the universal vision of the Aleph, he refers to "...el engranaje del amor..." emphasizing, by the studious choice of the word "engranaje, the mechanical aspects of love making and dismissing the possibility of romance. In the few instances of Borges' fiction in which the sexual act occurs, we notice, in fact, a conspicuous lack of tenderness: "Era la primera vez que conocía a un hombre. Cuando se fue no le dio un beso." (IB, 135)

Modelling many of his characters on gauchos and cuchilleros, Borges mirrors their conventional attitude towards women as objects to be used for pleasure or to acquire prestige, but not as persons to become attached to: "Un hombre que piensa cinco minutos seguidos en una mujer... es...un marica." (IB, 45) Thus he can easily do away with describing situations in which emotional involvement appears, with the exception of "La Intrusa" where the woman, with whom the brothers fall in love, is soon disposed of. Otherwise, all emotions are directed towards those values which form the dominant themes of that literary tradition: cult of physical courage, respect for one's honour and loyalty to one's male friends.

In that section of his fiction whose characters often present autobiographical elements, and also in the poems with a romantic accent, Borges shows the same lack of emotional commitment. Looking at his early work, poetry and prose, we notice how he avoids becoming deeply involved with the theme of love, how he remains confined to the realm of literary "poetic" situations, rather than referring to concrete experiences. Hence, in his first love poems the emphasis is on the excitement of anticipation or on the sadness of parting, rather than on the actual meeting with the loved one, as the very titles "Despedida", "Ausencia", confirm. Absences, nostalgia, memories, perhaps a legacy from the Romantics, are the themes of these lyrics, and the cult of lost happiness: "...el amor lo que ha perdido alaba..." (OP, 194). It is as if the desire were spent before being manifested. In Inquisiciones, published when Borges was 26, we read: "...también en muchas irresoluciones hay gusto: en el querer que no se atreve a pasión" (I, 51).

In his more mature years, whenever Borges makes reference to his intimate life, understatement characterize the expression of his feelings, "Your profile turned away.../Your dark rich life.../I must get at you somehow..." (OP, 134) he uttered in one of the two English poems written in 1934. And years later, referring to his love for Teodelina he admitted: "¿Confesaré que...estaba enamorado de ella y que su muerte me afectó hasta las lágrimas?" (A, 105).⁷ With similar effect, the ecstasy of love is only vaguely alluded to: "Oh noches, oh compartida... tiniebla" (Con, 37); desire is turned into a literary image: "Oh un oro más precioso, tu cabello/que ansían estas manos" (OT, 16).

Equally that self-deprecating attitude which we find in an apocryphal confession of love to a symbolic woman, "...no he sido nunca/Aquel

en cuyo abrazo desfallecía Matilde Urback!", signed Gaspar Camerarius (OP, 332), returns in a work of prose published in 1960 in which he alludes to his first romantic experience. I am referring to that episode from El Hacedor describing the revelation which confronted Homer about to become blind. Though not employing the first person, Borges attaches strong autobiographical significance to this passage, for here he identifies himself with the Greek poet: "...Homer as an exaltation of myself," he has commented in English, "his blindness as my blindness..." (TA, 277). The experience alluded to in the story has the same reticence and literary emphasis with which Borges refers to his own romances. The woman, "la primera que la depararon los dioses", appearing "en la sombra de un hipogeo", is as elusive as Borges' loved ones. The poet's search for her takes place in an environment whose description has definite labyrinthine connotations: "...por galerías que eran como redes de piedra y por declives que se unían en la sombra". Soon enough, however, the emotions are intellectualized; the woman identifies with "Afrodita", the goddess of love, who will constitute one of the inspirations and themes of Homer's poetry.

When not reduced to a metaphor, Borges' romantic experience is minimized, being presented in retrospect, normally in a situation in which the loved one has rejected him and died. Teodelina, whose identity is glimpsed in "El Zahir", is dead from the beginning of the story. What is more, she gives us the impression of never having been alive, apart from the photographs on the covers of fashionable magazines. Her final image is one of aloofness and contempt: "...perfeccionado su desdén por la muerte" (A, 105).

Dead is Beatriz Viterbo, of whom also only pictures remain, plus allusions to her total neglect of Borges, love affairs with others and even something distasteful in her relationship with her cousin. Whilst of Delia Elena San Marco, who died a year after saying goodbye to Borges, nothing remains but a poetic vision of a possible meeting in some mythical world: incorporeal beings, conversing by some unidentifiable river, unsure of their own identity: "Delia alguna vez anudaremos ¿junto a que río? este diálogo incierto y nos preguntaremos si alguna vez en una ciudad que se perdía en la llanura, fuimos Borges y Delia" (H, 23).

THUS posing as a Romantic and adopting the Romantic scheme of "amor y dolor" and "amor y muerte", Borges not only evades the more concrete aspects of the subject but also confines his expressions to stereotyped patterns and literary images. We remain with the impression that his grief is also literary: the death of these women does not move us because they are no more real than the male protagonists of other stories. We see how their appearance, considerably like that of other female characters briefly viewed in the rest of Borges' fiction, has more the quality of an abstraction than of a physical being. They are all tall, proud and modelled on a northern ideal of beauty.

In one of the stories from El libro de arena, Borges meets their prototype in York. She is called Ulrika and comes from Norway. Perhaps never before has Borges so openly manifested that the women figuring

in his writings are no more than a literary creation. There is a whole history of "Ulrikas" in his fiction; from Ulrica Thrane in Herbert Quain's play, of whom John Quigley morbidly collects portraits (F, 81/82), to Ulrike von Kuhlmann who gives an interpretation of Damian's existence after his death (A, 76) and to whom is dedicated the "Historia del guerrero...".

Being so closely associated with Borges' world of fiction, how can one really believe the Ulrica, or Ulrike, exists? Or rather, that she is more real than the character of a story?

The Ulrika of El libro de arena is no less part of his world of symbols; her presence evoked images of Vikings and of the Norwegian sword kept in the Museum of New York. We are reminded of Borges' life-long concern with the mythologies of the north and of the poem he wrote about that very sword (OP, 134). The appearance of this woman reminds us of a figure from a Pre-Raphaelite painting, confirming the literary bias of Borges' creation: "En Ulrica estaban el oro y la suavidad. Era ligera, alta, de rasgos afilados y de ojos grises..." (LA, 26). Other elements from northern mythologies appear in this story: the protagonists call each other Sigurd and Brynild; a wolf is heard, though there are no wolves in England. Sexually dominant, she makes conditions on his desire and forbids him to touch her, until they reach the appointed inn. Outside the snow falls thicker, the room empties of its contents, and love "repeated over centuries" ("secular" is the word used by Borges) flows between them. Finally, he possesses her image for the first and last time. For it is the image, the abstract idea of the female, which appeals to Borges, not her concrete individual self. What more evident proof of this than the answer which he gave to John Spurling during a conversation which took place in 1971; "I always think of woman and I run away from women."⁸

HAVING observed these facts, the abstracted manifestations of passion, the unresolved situations, the formal descriptions of the loved one, we might conclude that not only romantic experiences, but even the emotions they engender escaped Borges. It is arguable, then, that the comparison between Dante's and Borges' attitude towards their women, referred to by Cró, is of any significance except on a nominal basis. After all, Borges never intended us to take the revelation of the Aleph seriously, having situated it in the cellar of a house about to be demolished. Just as false as the vision brought about by his relationship with Beatriz, so is his love for her. Equally, when Borges considered the emotions with which Dante wrote about Paolo and Francesca, he was only making a critical point and did not, I think, intend to indicate a similar attitude on his part. Finally, in answer to the point made by Ferrer, that Borges, like his character Hladik, looked to women for salvation, one must remember, first of all, that Julia de Weidenau, the image conjured by the imprisoned Jew before his death, is as unreal as the women referred to by Borges: a symbol, in fact, as the text says (ART, 165). And secondly, that Hladik does find his salvation, the justification of his existence, in his writings. And so does Borges.

Reduced to symbols and literary images, unable to arouse concrete, real emotions, what role do women perform in Borges' intellectualized vision of human life? Looking again at those stories, and setting aside what little love element there may be in them, I find that there is a region of the human experience (and this is the region which Borges considers the most vital, the discovery and fulfillment of one's destiny) in which women, though making a timid appearance, almost unnoticeable at first sight, come into their own and make a significant impact. All the more significant, when we consider that most stories were written some thirty or forty years ago, in a society which was indeed a "man's world".

With that society Borges shared the traditional attitude against intellectual women; this is illustrated by the irony present in the description of the learned ladies, friends of Pierre Menard, or of that other "femme savante", who suggested making a compendium of the countless number of books contained in the library of Babel, or of Clara and Marta, the mediocre artists competing for supremacy in "El duelo".

Such antifeminist attitudes Borges no doubt discovered, fully expanded, when reading Schopenhauer who described women as "the anaesthetic sex" and explained that they feign artistic and intellectual interest only as a means for conquering men.⁹ But Schopenhauer, in the same essay, added that women can be useful for their judgement, because they are more susceptible and respond more readily than men to some aspects of reality.¹⁰ It is perhaps in the light of this that Borges often views the function of women in the life of men. That intuition, which is conventionally ascribed to the feminine mind, does acquire special meaning: on the strength of it, though remaining in the margin of the action, Borges' female characters have a significant part in the structure of the story and in the development of the plot.

This is sometimes performed on a purely symbolical level, as in the story of Averroé, where the Arab philosopher, coming back to his home after a fruitless conversation with Abulcásim and Farach, and totally preoccupied with his thoughts about the correct interpretation of the terms "tragedy" and "comedy" found in his readings of Aristotle, does not notice that in his harem "las esclavas de pelo negro habían torturado a una esclava de pelo rojo..." (A, 100). He will only become aware of the episode later in the day when, intellectually defeated, his failure is indicated by his disappearance, that of his house and that of the red-haired girl. For this is his destiny, to arrive at a false interpretation of the truth he seeks. One does not necessarily need to be familiar with Weelock's study to interpret the meaning of the scene witnessed by Averroé in which black stands for the universal, absolute, but elusive, reality, and red for the temporary, hypostatic image of it.¹¹

Besides presenting a symbolical interpretation of destiny, we see how often it is a woman who constitutes the first step towards the "Revelation". As the existence of the ideal world of Tlön begins to dawn on the author, it is a woman (the Princess de Faucigny Lucinge) who discovers in a box the compass, silent witness of that "mundo fantástico". It is also the same woman in whose hands arrives Cartaphilus' manuscript, revealing the existence of the immortals.

Equally, it is a woman who constitutes the first link in the chain of events leading to the revelation of Almotásim, the supreme being. She never appears, but is so insistently referred to by the beggar, that the student sets out to look for her as the first projection of the Divine Virtue he seeks. The woman, whose search signifies the start of the student's mystical experience, thus contributes to the fulfillment of his life.

Another facet of the role of women in Borges' masculine world is their awareness of man's destiny. As the hero strives to discover the shape and meaning of his existence, it is often a woman who first possesses an insight into it. Thus she is aware of man's impending death, though she will not avert it, since it is this death which marks the completion of his destiny. This we see in "El sur", when the landlady cries out in horror at the sight of Dahlmann's wound, apparently superficial, but fatal in the long term; and in "El muerto", where Bandeira's mistress tearfully kisses Otalora, aware of his oncoming death. The most revealing example of a woman's insight into the destiny of man, as well as of her unwillingness and inability to alter it, is the girl in "El Evangelio según Marcos". Espinoza, a student from Buenos Aires, has been stranded for some time in the Butres' remote farm, on account of heavy floods. Knowing of her family's plan to sacrifice the guest in atonement for their sins, the girl gives herself to him in the night; then watches her father leading her lover towards the cross erected for him, her tears silently proclaiming his imminent death.

FINALLY we can observe that just as women appear to perceive and mark the moment of revelation so are their presence and gestures invested with fatal meaning and lead towards the understanding and fulfillment of destiny. In the case of the cuchillero Rosendo, whose story Borges tells us twice, it is la Lujanera who finally makes him decide to turn away from a life of violence. Handing him the knife in order to urge him to accept Real's challenge, she obliges him in fact to face his newly found awareness of the foolishness of duels and to act accordingly; by throwing the knife out of the window, he manifests his refusal ever to fight again, the shape of his future life.

Perhaps no other female character in Borges' fiction represents so significantly the meaning of fate as the cautiva in "Historia del guerrero..."; this English woman, captured by the Indians at an early age, has become totally integrated with their mentality and way of life. Seemingly unconscious of the impact she produces on Borges' grandmother she refuses her offer to save her and, following her own instinctive impulse, she pursues her destiny to the end; her example makes the other woman aware of the meaning of her life and of the necessity to accept it: "quizá mi abuela, entonces, pudo percibir en la otra mujer...un espejo monstruoso de su destino..." (A, 51).

We see then how, showing women to be gifted with such insight and to be performing a function never granted to any of his male characters, Borges subtly underlines the value of their existence; all the more subtly, on account of the brevity of their appearance within the narrative.

One could legitimately conclude, therefore, that the general lack of love interest in Borges' work, or his perfunctory reference to the theme, is only an outcome of the aloofness with which he chooses to consider and present humanity, not as individuals but as abstract intellectualizations. In this world of phantoms, where characters move, or rather are moved, like pieces in a game of chess, women do not appeal to our senses and sensitivity any differently from men. Yet in the game created by Borges, the set of pieces that represents the female characters is in closer contact with the force which controls human life, and has an understanding of it which eludes the rest, thus performing a particular and unique role.

FOOTNOTES

¹cf. Jorge Luis Borges o el juego trascendente (Buenos Aires, A. Pena Lillo, 1971)

²In "El milagro secreto", for instance, Hladik dreams of having to play a game of chess to save the honour of his family, and not being able to remember the rules.

³cf. Jorge Luis Borges Poeta Saggista e Narratore (Arrate Vares, Mursia, 1971) p. 118 and following.

⁴"Encuentro en un sueño", La Nación (Buenos Aires, October 1948)

⁵Borges y la nada (London Thamesia Books Ltd., 1971), p. 84.

⁶The Narrow Act... (New York and London University Press, 1969) p. 190. Disapproval of one's parents' sexuality is exemplified by the Emperor of China who exiled his mother on account of her immorality and ordered the burning of all books in existence to wipe out any record of her infamy.

⁷My underlining.

⁸"Interview with Borges" BBC 3, 29 June 1971.

⁹"On Women", Selected Essays (London, George Bell & Sons, 1891) pp. 341 and following.

¹⁰This conventional view of feminine intuition is echoed by Borges in his essay on Hawthorne: "No digo que era estúpido....pensaba por imagenes, por intuiciones, como suelen pensar las mujeres!". (OI, 76).

¹¹cf. The Mythmaker: A study of motif and symbol in the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges (Austin and London University Press, 1969).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used as references to the writings of Borges quoted during the text of the article.

- (OP) Obra poetica, Obras completas, I (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1967)
- (EC) Evaristo Carriego, Obras completas, I
- (HUI) Historia universal de la infamia, Obras completas, II (1970)
- (F) Ficciones, Obras completas, II
- (ART) Artificios, Obras completas, II
- (A) El Aleph, Obras completas, III (1969)
- (OI) Otras inquisiciones, Obras completas, III
- (H) El hacedor, Obras completas, III
- (ES) Elegio de la sombra (Buenos Aires, Emecé 1969)
- (IB) El informe de Brodie (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1970)
- (OT) El oro de los tigres (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1972)
- (Con) El congreso (Buenos Aires, El Archibrazo Editor 1971)
- (CBE) Cuentos breves y extraordinarios (Buenos Aires, Santiago Rueda 1967)
- (Com) El Compadrito (in conjunction with Silvina Bulrich) (Buenos Aires, Co. Gen. Fabril Editora, S.A. 1968)
- (TA) The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969 (London, Jonathan Cape 1971) edited and translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni.
- (LA) El libro de arena (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1975)