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**THE CONCEPT OF SUICIDE IN BORGES'
STORIES IN RELATION TO THE THEMES
OF DESTINY AND AGGRESSION**

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THE CONCEPT OF SUICIDE IN BORGES' STORIES IN RELATION TO THE THEMES OF DESTINY AND AGGRESSION

by *Psiche Hughes*

To plan an article around the concept of suicide in Borges' stories would at first seem to be a suicidal activity in itself since, in the whole of his work, the total of instances in which a suicide occurs does not amount to more than half a dozen. Besides, as well as being conspicuous for the smallness of their number, the suicides Borges writes about are very briefly alluded to and play only a secondary role in the general concept of the work in which they appear. It is true, of course, that the figure of Francisco López Merino, the young poet contemporary of Borges who committed suicide in his early youth, is central to the poem dedicated to him (OP, 119),¹ and perhaps also to the short piece 'Mayo 20, 1928'² in which the details of a similar situation are reconstructed. But, in both cases, what Borges considers is not so much the frame of mind which led the protagonist to this gesture nor the set of emotions which he experienced in its accomplishment, but, rather, the aesthetic aspects of the event; Borges makes literature out of an act of despair. Elsewhere, the few suicides which occur, do not seem, as we have said, to have more than incidental significance nor do they involve the reader to an extent

¹ Quotations are taken from Emece's publication of Borges' work:

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| <i>Obra Poética</i> | (OBRAS COMPLETAS, 1) Buenos Aires, 1969 (OP) |
| <i>Ficciones</i> | (OBRAS COMPLETAS, 2) Buenos Aires, 1970 (F) |
| <i>Artificios</i> | (OBRAS COMPLETAS, 2) Buenos Aires, 1970 (Art.) |
| <i>El Aleph</i> | (OBRAS COMPLETAS, 3) Buenos Aires, 1969 (A) |
| <i>Otras Inquisiciones</i> | (OBRAS COMPLETAS, 3) Buenos Aires, 1969 (OI) |
| <i>Elogio de la Sombra</i> | Buenos Aires, 1969 (ES) |
| <i>El Informe de Brodie</i> | Buenos Aires, 1971 (IB) |

² ES, 51

greater than the limited physical space they occupy in the page. This apparent lack of suicides and the failure of insight into the mentality and the emotions of the man who has decided to kill himself strike the reader all the more when he considers the figure of Borges, a South American writer, against the modern American literary background.

In his study and classification of the various aspects of literary violence,³ Ariel Dorfman considers the introspective quality it assumes in many American novels and the self-hatred manifested thereby. He quotes as an example the case of the last Buendía in García Márquez's novel *Cien años de soledad*⁴ who kills himself realizing that "el enemigo verdadero era el rostro que había visto — y olvidado — en un espejo hace mucho, mucho tiempo." Borges, however, despite the violence which is a feature of many of his stories and the broody isolation of his characters, does not conform with this apparent generalisation. Considering the personal self-hatred that he often expresses, arising as it does from the concept of the alter-ego and his obsession with mirror images, one is puzzled by the almost total absence of actual suicide cases; the few that do occur being, as we have said, purely incidental.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the reason for this discrepancy and to analyse the significance which the concept of suicide assumes in connection with those basic principles which, according to Borges, constitute the pattern of human life: acceptance of destiny and aggression. In doing so, I shall limit myself to discussing only a few examples pointing out that their process is typical of other similar plots.

The first obvious explanation lies in the mentality of Borges' characters as revealed by their attitude towards themselves, their outlook on life and their expectations. Generally speaking, one can divide men into two types: those who, engrossed in the act of living, emotionally and passionately identify themselves with every manifestation of life; and those others who face their existence intellectually and are able to step outside themselves, survey their situation in a detached way and accept it. The first kind of men, whom we shall call the vitalists, are the men who, even against the dictates of their reason, expect life to justify their love and attachment. The very nature of their craving leads them to assume the existence of those life elements which their intelligence cannot but deny. Once their hopes are shattered and their expectations unfulfilled, these are the men who can be driven to the desperate act of suicide. Paradoxically enough, the vitalist can be reduced to contemplating the destruction of the very life he loves. Unamuno, himself a vitalist, while asserting the

³ *Imaginación y violencia en América*, Santiago de Chile, 1970.

⁴ *Id.*, 35.

right to live and expect more life according to the irrational demands of the heart against the deadening conclusions of reason, defines suicide as the very outcome of this attitude: "A la mayor parte de los que se dan a sí mismos la muerte es el amor lo que les mueve el brazo, el ansia suprema de vida, de más vida, una vez persuadidos de la vanidad de su ansia."⁵ But the majority of Borges' characters do not belong to this type; both physically and intellectually they are the negation of the vitalist: theirs is a loveless existence; they have not produced life, they are childless; if a woman is mentioned in connection with them, she is normally a thing of the past and the love affair has gone by unresolved. Moreover, for them, the act of living is not based on emotional needs arising from their attachment to life, but results from their commitment to a destiny whose form sooner or later they discover and accept.⁶ According to this distinction, therefore, it becomes clear why the protagonists of Borges' stories do not give any consideration to suicide. We can, however, in Borges' interpretation of destiny and in the function of free will in relation to it, and in the significance which he attaches to the act of violent aggression, find new definitions applicable to the concept of suicide. Observing the end of Borges' stories and of their protagonists, almost every act of death can, accordingly, be interpreted as a form of suicide. Let us first consider the human situation based on man's acknowledgement of his role and the function and measure of free will exercisable within it. As we have already said, Borges' characters seem to live as the result of a commitment: they do not expect happiness from life but they expect some form of explanation concerning the meaning of the universe and their place in it. This is the 'revelation' which occurs within the plot of most stories. The outcome of it is only valid within the limits of the existence of the individual; any revelation of a metaphysical nature reflects Borges' basic scepticism: it is impaired by irony and unreality and, as such, finally dismissed. But personal revelation, coming often as a sudden intuition, brings self-knowledge and acquaintance with one's destiny in life; its acceptance is unquestionable.

What is the concept of destiny which Borges reveals in his stories? Carter Wheelock, in the appendix to his Ph.D. dissertation,⁷ presents

⁵ *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos*, 8th edn., New York (Spain), printed 1959.

⁶ It is perhaps relevant that the two suicides in Borges' stories "Emanuel Zunz" (A, 59) and "David Jerusalem" (A, 86) are both men who can be described as vitalists: the former married and with child, the latter a poet who dedicated his art to singing the beauty and happiness of life of which he lovingly described every aspect and manifestation.

⁷ "The characteristics of mythical thought," *The Mythmaker. A study of motif*

Borges' concept of destiny as one of the various traits of mythical thinking occurring in his work, and applies to it Langer's definition of mythical destiny as 'predetermined from the beginning.' This predetermination in Borges is indicated by different methods. Sometimes the writer uses expedients which anticipate the end of the story in the mind of the reader. The exploitation of a well-known myth, such as that of the Minotaur,⁸ serves this purpose: the reader, having identified Asterión, takes for granted the inevitable conclusion; while the monster, the protagonist, living in the sure expectation of the liberator who represents his destiny but whose function he does not fully realize, plays into the hands of fate. That is why he meekly yields to the sword of the hero. Another well-known myth, that of the divine crucifixion necessary to the salvation of humanity has struck Borges by its suicidal connotations which he has considered in an essay dedicated to Donne's 'Biathanatos'⁹ and has imaginatively exploited, first in 'Tres versiones de Judas'¹⁰ and later in 'El Evangelio según Marcos'.¹¹ The destiny of Jesus, often prophesied in the Bible, conforms well with its mythical definition of being predetermined. The son of God, well aware of it, not only accepted it, but moved towards its completion turning his fate into the expression of his will. Donne — Borges says in his essay — fascinated by this concept yet not daring to pronounce an utter blasphemy, half-stated his interpretation by saying that Jesus expired his soul by 'una prodigiosa y voluntaria emisión de su alma'.¹² In 'Tres versiones de Judas' the third version repeats the theory of the divine suicide; it identifies Judas with God who in order to save humanity so lowered himself as to become the traitor and commit the most condemnable of all sins: self-destruction. The motif of the self-willed death of Christ returns more subtly in the story 'El Evangelio según Marcos'. Here Espinoza, a young student and a free-thinker from Buenos Aires stranded during an alluvion in the middle of nowhere with some primitive farmers of Scottish origin, takes to reading the Bible to them. In explaining the mystery of the divine crucifixion, he respectfully attains himself to the religious interpretation, in spite of his own agnosticism. Ironically enough, the simple-minded people around him begin to identify him with the figure of Christ and, disturbed by the fear of their damnation, fear which originates from their puritanical back-

and symbol in the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges. Univ. of Texas, Austin, Texas, 1966.

⁸ *La casa de Asterión* (A, 67).

⁹ OI, 129.

¹⁰ Art., 169.

¹¹ 1B, 125.

¹² OI, 132.

ground and which the present condition and isolation foment, prepare themselves to crucify him. Espinoza, unaware at first, then full of premonitions, does not attempt to escape his fate, but meekly allows himself to be led to the attic where the cross awaits him.

Predetermined destiny also finds the ideal solution within the pattern of the detective story, which Borges, significantly enough, often uses: the plot to kill arranged from the start identifies with the fatal forces in control of human life. In 'La muerte y la brújula'¹³ Scarlach personifies Lönnrot's destiny; he uses the well-known weakness of his enemy, i.e. his passionate urge to rationalize the workings of others' minds, in order to draw him to his death. That Lönnrot will comply with Scarlach's plan and fall into this trap, is anticipated in one of the first sentences of the story: "Scarlach . . . había jurado por su honor la muerte de Lönnrot." Just before he is dragged in front of his enemy and is faced with death, the detective, at the sight of the multicoloured romboidal glasses in the window, is reminded of the Harlequins involved in the third murder. This memory finally brings him the realisation of the prearranged plot which forms his destiny: he is meant to be the fourth victim in Scarlach's tetragonal plan.

Outside the range of familiar myths and the conventions of the detective story, 'El Muerto'¹⁴ is perhaps the story which most clearly illustrates the concept of the fatalistic predetermination of death. All the events of the last part of Otálora's life, seen in the light of his realisation that for Bandeira and his men "ya estaba muerto",¹⁵ appear to have been prearranged for his destruction. He has been given the illusion that his success was of his making, that he controlled the events of his life and the lives of those around him. Only when he is about to be shot does he realise the unreality of his existence. This awareness of his destiny explains his life and the meaning of it.

From these examples it is evident that in Borges' view predetermined destiny most often coincides with death. Striving towards its recognition in order to understand the meaning of their lives, Borges' characters are deliberately contemplating death. Deliberately, because in Borges' interpretation of destiny, though the recognition of it limits the exercise of free will, it does not altogether deny its function. The extent of this is manifested by the conscious wilful acceptance which follows recognition. No other story presents this thesis more forcefully than "La Escritura del Dios"¹⁶ in which the protagonist is actually given the chance to alter the

¹³ Art., 143.

¹⁴ A, 27.

¹⁵ A, 33.

¹⁶ A, 116.

pattern of his destiny. Tzinacán, a former Aztec priest, now a prisoner of the Spaniard Pedro de Alvarado, lies in his cell from which only a miracle can help him to escape. After attempting and failing to accomplish this miracle, he realises that he is destined not to be a priest or an avenger, but a prisoner. Once he has accepted this situation and even blessed every aspect of it, immediately the miracle occurs: he discovers the formula that will give him the power to escape and vanquish his enemy. But, now he has recognised his role, he no longer wishes for freedom and authority. He, therefore, deliberately chooses to remain in his cell because, he says, he has forgotten who Tzinacán was. He who has been granted a divine intuition, no longer cares for his individual identity. It might seem an attitude of extreme humility, until we realise that the Tzinacán he has forgotten is the other self, the priest with whom he no longer identifies. He has recognised that his destiny is to be a prisoner. 'Qué le importa la suerte de aquel otro . . . si él, ahora es nadie.' ¹⁷ In actual fact, Tzinacán, by turning down his chance to escape, is asserting the one and only free will man is capable of: that of fulfilling his destiny. And, since his destiny implies dying in prison, by exercising this choice, Tzinacán is willing his death. In fact, he considers himself dead already, since nobody, "nadie," is the attribute by which Borges elsewhere describes the condition of being dead. ¹⁸ In this way the acceptance of one's destiny and the deliberate fulfilment of it becomes in ultimate terms the expression of a death wish, that very wish which makes the immortal seek for and drink the water that will re-establish his mortality. At the same time, by this interpretation of free will, Borges, like Unamuno, is saying that the extent of our choice lies within wanting what we are able to do; more, what we can not but do. The choice becomes a moral advantage, when man actually takes steps to secure that his role is accomplished; Borges' hero, taking over from fate, manifests his free will by ensuring the event of his death. This concept is first presented, as Gertel remarks, ¹⁹ in 'Poema conjetural' ²⁰ by Laprida's final words: faced with having to die in battle and recognising this death, his 'destino sudamericano', he says: "Yo aguardo que así sea". The advantage of this attitude is more fully realised in many of Borges' stories in which man can actually shape the form of his death according to his desires and ideals. This is for instance the privilege granted to Dahlmann, the protagonist of 'El Sur': doomed to die of septicaemia, he can, like Laprida, fulfill his courageous role and die, or dream of dying, as an Argentinian, during a duel in an open field.

¹⁷ A, 121.

¹⁸ A, 25 *El Inmortal*.

¹⁹ *Borges y su retorno a la poesía*, Univ. of Iowa, 1967, p. 10.

²⁰ OP, 142.

The extent of human intervention in the execution of one's death is most clearly shown in the end of Kilpatrick,²¹ the traitor to the Irish cause, where Nolan, his friend and historian, represents the call of destiny: that of being a hero and a martyr of the rebellion. Kilpatrick's recognition of it starts when he entrusts to Nolan the investigation into the identity of the traitor. After Nolan has publically accused him, Kilpatrick, in the act of signing his sentence, asks that his betrayal be kept secret so that his death may not undermine the spirit of the Irish patriots. By this, he offers the concrete and final proof of the acceptance of his destiny. Having willed his execution, he is now in a position to arrange its circumstances according to the role which Nolan has determined for him and which will accomplish his destiny.

From these examples we have seen how man, bent on the recognition of the predetermined form of his destiny, aims at the contemplation of his death. In wanting to fulfill his role, the Borgesean hero is, therefore, asserting his right to die. Moreover, by turning the unavoidable outcome of his fate into a deliberate attitude of the will, he avails himself of the privilege of ensuring, even controlling, the event of his death. In these terms, the Borgesean hero is, in a metaphorical way, committing suicide. At the same time, the concept of suicide loses its significance as an actual decision of the will, in so far as man acquiesces to what has been predetermined.

The equation death/suicide resulting from the concept of destiny and the individual acceptance of it is enriched through the portrayal of aggression, common to most of Borges' stories. In fact, in the solution of this theme, the aggressor finally identifies with the victim and, in causing his death, he is contemplating his own: violence is equated with self destruction.²² Once the end of the proposed victim is achieved, the victimizer, having lost the purpose of his existence, merges his individuality with that of the dead man.²³

²¹ "Temo del traidor y del héroe", Art. 137.

²² Ariel Dorfman in *Borges y la violencia americana from IMAGINACIÓN Y VIOLENCIA EN AMÉRICA* (see note 3) points out the intellectual recognition and the emotional link which binds the aggressor and the victim, concluding that this "permite al autor retratar la autodestrucción del hombre ya que verdugo y víctima son el mismo" (p. 46).

²³ A most concise example of this process is the final sentence of *El Fin* (Art., 177) when 'el negro,' having killed Martín Fierro to avenge his brother's death, realized that "ahora era nadie. Mejor dicho era el otro" (Art., 180), 'nadie' being, as we have seen already, the key word to indicate the condition of being dead.

This process of annihilation is not always limited to the consciousness of one's identity. In 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan' the obliteration of Yu Tsun which occurs well before his execution, results from the murder of the sinologist whom he has grown to admire and identify with during their brief meeting. Its effect stretches to the existence of the universe and his relationship with it: "Lo demás es irreal, insignificante No sabe (nadie puede saber) mi innumerable contrición y cansancio."²⁴

The motif of identification through aggression first appears, almost unnoticeably, in the story 'El acercamiento a Almotásim'²⁵ based on the search of a young student for the divine source of all that is good and beautiful in human beings. The search starts after an episode in which the student, during a riot, kills an unknown Hindu and concludes with him finally coming into the presence of the divinity and recognising himself in it. In a note at the end of the story, Borges, who so often confines his most significant statements between brackets and in footnotes, adds further points in connection with the symbolical significance of 'la identidad del buscado y del buscador.' Among other suggestions, he proposes that Almotásim, the divinity, is the Hindu originally killed by the student, thus stretching the concept of identification to the relationship between the killer and his victim. This appears in practically every one of Borges' plots of violence where a pursuit takes place and its outcome is the death of the pursued.²⁶

Aggression and consequent identification arise from a situation of rivalry. The rivalry of Lönnrot and Scharlach, which we have already mentioned, is resolved on a mental level by Scharlach reconstructing the way Lönnrot's mind works; this enables him to trap the detective and lead him to his death. The success of the gangster's act of aggression depends on his knowledge of the mentality of the enemy, but also on their basic affinity. This is alluded to, at the beginning of the story, in the description of the detective as being also a bit of an adventurer and a gambler: "algo de aventurero había en él hasta del tahir."²⁷ At the same time this aggression, based as it is on the similarity of the two rivals, takes on the symbolical shape of suicide; not only on behalf of the aggressor, who watches his own death in that of the victim with whom he is eventually identified, but also, in this case, on behalf of the victim. In fact the reconstruction of the mental process is mutual and the detective, who has correctly inter-

²⁴ F, 111.

²⁵ F, 35.

²⁶ The most obvious example of this pattern occurs in *La Espera* (A. 137) in which the pursued, assumes the name of the man from whom he is running away and by whom he is finally killed.

²⁷ Art. 143.

puted Scharlach's plan, by going to Triste le Roy, is going to a sure death. Borges, commenting on this story says: "The killer and the slain whose minds work in the same way, may be the same man," and continues: "Lönnrot . . . is, in a symbolical way, a man committing suicide."²⁸

The story 'Los Teólogos'²⁹ presents a fuller pattern of identification arising from initial rivalry and consequent violence. It starts on a mental level, acquires physical facets with the death of Juan and culminates in total oneness after the death of Aureliano. Although the lives of the two theologians seem at the beginning to run on parallel lines, in so far as they cover similar positions of authority and enjoy equal prestige, it soon transpires that Aureliano resents and envies the success of the other. He will, therefore, be the aggressor in the pattern of rivalry, Juan the victim. Aureliano's hostile sentiments reach their peak when Juan succeeds in confuting the heresy of the 'monótonos' by a brief speech whose clear simplicity defies and shatters his colleague's confidence. Later, confronted with the 'histriones' rampant in his dyocesis, Aureliano finds himself using the very words of that speech as definition of the heresy. Thus, the first stage of their identification is indicated. Realising the unorthodox implications underlying Juan's early argument, Aureliano sees in it the means to undermine the position of his rival. His jealousy and his aggressive sentiments find their fulfillment in the following indictment of Juan. But, as he watches the execution of his enemy, their identifications takes on a more concrete form: he sees Juan's face for the first time, yet already it seems familiar; it reminds him of somebody, though he is not quite sure of whom. Self-recognition in the dying enemy marks the beginning of Aureliano's death. From that moment he feels physically deprived, as if Juan had been until then a presence in his body; unwanted, but necessary. Striving to understand the meaning of his destiny, he moves towards his own death. The revelation comes to him one night, when the sound of rain reminds him of the rain that fell when Juan was burnt. That self-identity which he had recognised in his rival at the moment of the execution is about to be fulfilled. As this realisation takes shape, he is struck by lightning and dies (is able to die) of the same death to which he has condemned his enemy. The identification is completed in terms of terrestrial life. But Borges, since the rivalry of the two men was based on theological grounds, stretches the process of identification into the realm of the metaphysical. Assuming a 'language of metaphors,' he adds that, once in front of God, Aureliano realises that he and Juan, the orthodox and the

²⁸ *Commentaries* from THE ALEPH AND OTHER STORIES, 1933-69 ed. and trans. by Norman Thomas di Giovanis in collaboration with the author, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1971) p. 69.

²⁹ A, 35.

heretic, form one person. The persecutor is therefore totally identified with his victim on a mental, physical and spiritual level. The solution of the rivalry which Aureliano had hoped to achieve by the execution of his enemy, is only fully accomplished by his death, since at the burning of Juan he takes over his identity. As Aureliano's will hinge on the defeat of his rival, he is totally possessed with a wish for self-destruction.

In the story 'Deutsches Requiem'³⁰ the identification between the aggressor and the victim, rather than resulting from violence and representing a metaphor of suicide, becomes the cause of aggression. In perpetrating acts of violence on those people with whom he intellectually and emotionally identifies, the aggressor is manifesting and fulfilling his death wish. Zur Linde, crippled by a wound that prevents him from fighting for Germany, has accepted the post of organiser of a concentration camp to fulfil nazism's moral task: that of cleansing the world of those impurities both physical and mental which have corrupted and weakened it. On an ethnical level, the poet David Jerusalem who comes under his jurisdiction personifies the defiling of the German nation caused by the presence of Jews in its midst; in the field of human emotions, the pity Zur Linde feels for the prisoner is the last of sins which the new superman could possibly commit. By bringing about the death of the Jew, the Nazi is able to eradicate both weaknesses. At the same time, the identification with his victim arising from intellectual affinity and admiration is extended also on an emotional basis, since part of himself dies with the man who has been the object of his pity. But Zur Linde's, as we have said, presents special connotations. Once again, it is in a note that Borges reveals the full evidence of this assumption. In it we are told that there is no factual record of David Jerusalem and that, in the confession of Zur Linde, the poet is merely a symbol of the many intellectual Jews tortured under his authority. In the suffering of David Jerusalem Zur Linde portrays his own unhappiness and frustration. The role which the poet fulfils in the mind of his executioner and the spiritual link between the camp leader and his prisoners are indicated by the date which he chooses for this symbolical death. On the first of March Zur Linde received the wound that put an end to his hope of fighting bravely and dying for his nazi ideals. It is significant therefore, that he chooses to have the Jew dying on March the first. Rightly enough he can then say at the death of David Jerusalem: "Yo de algún modo me he perdido con él."³¹ Deprived of the right to die for Germany, Zur Linde conceived his role of concentration camp leader as the expression of his wilful utter sacrifice to the nazi

³⁰ A, 81.

³¹ A, 87.

cause, since he would pursue it more fully by living for it rather than by just dying for it. But in the accomplishment of his duty, the admiration and pity he feels for his victims and his emotional identification with them reveal and fulfil his wish for personal death.

In these last three examples we have seen how the identity killer / victim, first glimpsed in 'El Acercamiento a Almotásim', gives suicidal connotations to the act of aggression. The quality of these connotations differs from story to story. In 'La Muerte y la Brújula', the identification introduces the element suicide in the movements of the victim whose mental process is identical to that of the killer. In 'Los Teólogos' identification undergoes a gradual progress for the completion of which the aggressor also must die: since at the victim's execution he has acquired his identity, he seeks his own death in order to finally conclude their antagonism. In 'Deutsches Requiem' identification with the victim not only reflects the aggressor's unhappiness, but is a means for him to manifest his frustrated desire for death. In the expression of his violence he looks for an image of his own end.

On the basis of what we have said, it is clear that the absence of suicides in the stories of Borges is only apparent. In fact, the two main themes of predetermined destiny and of aggression which run through most of his stories, sometimes concurrently, present the hypothesis of man contemplating, actually willing his own death. Like Zur Linde's interpreting Schopenhauer's doctrine of the will, Borges seems to say: "toda muerte un suicidio."³²

³² A, 84.