

*Borges the Poet*

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Where Do You Stand with God, Ms. Dickinson,  
Señor Borges?

*God in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson*

Where does Emily Dickinson stand with God? She stood stubbornly outside the congregation of those officially designated "godly" in her community and her family. This courageous or foolish or perverse personal attitude is central to the posture of the poet as it is expressed in her poems. But remember, she has been called both the witch and the nun of Amherst!

Dickinson's views anticipate moderns like Borges. In her case, as possibly in Borges', such convictions seem on the edge, at the border, of the possibly provincial frontier of a creative re-evaluation of acquired wisdom. For the language of these early rebels must also be the very language of conventional communities against which, but also in which, their stands are made.

In Dickinson, and possibly in spite of himself, in Borges, there are suggestions or elements of orthodoxy. In Dickinson's case there is a significant amount of what might be called orthodox anxiety, as if a fear that such and such a stance with or against God were indeed warning proof of damnation. In response to this anxiety, some Dickinson poems appear conventionally pious. Nevertheless, one's overall impression of Dickinson's *oeuvre* suggests that even these "safe" poems are part of a restlessly continuing experimentation with words and the possible relationships

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with God words can reveal or assure. Dickinson's religious poems can be called wagers (in Pascal's sense of that word), or possibly pragmatic prayers.

Dickinson's uneasy but persistent experimentation with the language and postures of life is her most instructive legacy to those, like Borges, who come after her. If any doubts seemed willfully perverse in her place and time, they appear now as refreshingly honest evidence of an unfortunately troubled integrity. What Borges said at Dickinson College about his hearing Dickinson's voice, testifies to the lasting impact of her example.

I can only suggest the range of Dickinson's attitude towards God. Four poems and one letter may reveal for her poetic heirs the questioning complexity of these pioneering examples. The first poem is considered conventional enough to become a favorite of school anthologies.

I never saw a Moor—  
I never saw the Sea—  
Yet know I how the Heather looks  
And what a Billow be.  
I never spoke with God  
Nor visited in Heaven—  
Yet certain am I of the spot  
As if the Checks were given—<sup>1</sup>

Even in the absence of experience, the believer can ascertain the existence of heaven. But might it not be significant that God appears reduced to "the Spot," a designation more appropriate to the geographically located Heaven and obviously departing from the parallel expectations of the first stanza? Furthermore, this popular poem begs the question of proof that lies behind belief, the very question at the heart of Dickinson's persistent experimentation.

Before returning to the critically interesting question of Dickinson's choice of the word "Checks," let me quote a second poem, one that raises a fundamental question about the nature of the kind of knowing that faith exemplifies.

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—  
For—put them side by side—  
The one the other will contain  
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—  
 For—hold them—Blue to Blue—  
 The one the other will absorb—  
 As Sponges—Buckets—do—  
 The Brain is just the weight of God—  
 For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—  
 And they will differ—if they do—  
 As Syllable from Sound—<sup>2</sup>

Here the believing, certain Brain is “just” as heavy as God. Where does Dickinson stand with God? Here she stands side by side, weighing all in the balance by the audacity of a creative verbal act. The Brain that creates syllables out of sounds, poems out of experience, creates belief and even, perhaps, the object or subject of that belief.

Many other Dickinson poems, of course, posit a personal view on behalf of God’s objective existence. But even in these poems, as in some of Borges’ “religious” poems, the attributes given God are not orthodox. That last line of “I never saw a Moor,” for example, introduces one of these daring notions: “As if the Checks were given—.” Dickinson’s official editor, Thomas H. Higginson, notes the “use of the word ‘Checks’ perplexed the early editors, who altered it. She seems to be using it in the accepted colloquial sense of railroad tickets: ‘My assurance of the existence of Heaven is as great as though, having surrendered my checks to the conductor, I knew I had arrived there.’”<sup>3</sup> Johnson’s explanation of “Checks” fails to account for the implications of that explanation: the certainty of Heaven, if not God, depends upon the surrendering of proofs not of existence but of purchase. Surrendering tickets purchased in the promise of a destination suggests arrival, as well as a schedule and a price scale. This may be analogous to the Puritans’ designated stages in spiritual development from an initially embarking Election and Life of Sin to a finally disembarking Glorification. What Bunyan called *Pilgrim’s Progress* and Hawthorne a “Celestial Railroad,” Dickinson, like Hawthorne, sometimes uses terminology of this spiritual journey in less than orthodox ways.

But another look at “Checks” in Dickinson’s own Noah Webster’s *Dictionary of the American Language*, suggests even more.<sup>4</sup> The primary meanings of the noun “Check” all refer to stops (as on a train?!), hindrances, rebuffs, continued restraints, curbs, controls, governments, rebukes,

fears: all these are Dickinson attributes of the God who created both death and sin to check the conceivably endlessly uninterrupted Eden of living.<sup>5</sup> Consider too the financial meaning of the word “Check”: “The correspondent cipher of a bank note; a corresponding indenture; any counter-register.” Cipher? Indentured servant of God? Checks that counter and register symbolic proofs of and against some ultimately real accounting? Noah Webster continues: “An order for money, drawn on a banker or on the cashier of a bank, payable to the bearer.” Where does Dickinson stand with God? Sometimes as bearer not only of tickets purchased and surrendered, but as bearer of an IOU, a creative collector of God’s indebtedness for His arbitrary or at least unreasonable checks and restraints, those imbalancing riddles of deaths and sins and loves.

Another poem may summarize, over-simply, Dickinson’s stand with God in terms of her delightful but dangerous play with terms of belief and accountability.

I never lost as much but twice,  
 And that was in the sod.  
 Twice have I stood a beggar  
 Before the door of God!  
 Angels—twice descending  
 Reimbursed my store—  
 Burglar! Banker—Father!  
 I am poor once more!<sup>6</sup>

Dickinson’s version of the Trinity here is central to her lifelong conflict with that believed, but ambivalent certainty, which checks again and again our immortal longings and lovings. Thus Dickinson may not be able to share Borges’ trust in death. Coupling “Burglar” and “Banker” may anticipate, quite unwittingly of course, the Marxist sense of an economic system, capitalism, that specializes in waylayings of the potentially free spirit. “Burglar! Banker—Father!” It is a trinity one might or might not expect from the rebellious daughter and sister of lawyers in a frontier orthodox capitalist community whose Puritan deity specializes in keeping seemingly unfair accounts, exchanging checks of one kind for checks of another, with power only in obscure reserve, with at least as much alien theft as fatherly love.

Where does Dickinson stand with God the Father, the Burglar and the Banker?

"Heavenly Father"—take to thee  
 The supreme iniquity  
 Fashioned by thy candid Hand  
 In a moment contraband—  
 Though to trust us—seem to us  
 More respectful—"We are Dust—"  
 We apologize to thee  
 For thine own Duplicity—<sup>7</sup>

Dickinson might mean: forgive us for making us the way you did. Forgive us for your trespasses. Forgive us for your indebtedness to us.

In 1845, Dickinson explained her sentiments against a highly pressured group effort to convert her:

I was almost persuaded to be a Christian. . . . I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior. But I soon forgot my morning prayer or else it was irksome to me. One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever. . . . I hope at sometime the heavenly gates will be opened to receive me and the angels will consent to call me sister. I am continually putting off becoming a Christian. Evil voices lisp in my ear—<sup>8</sup>

For better or worse, those "evil voices" may well be the poet's own restlessness, her own inquiring mind, her own pragmatic faith in facts and the marvellously manifold words and meanings that express and define them.

Dickinson describes the ubiquity of whatever God

Perennial beholds us—  
 Myself would run away  
 From Him—and Holy Ghost—and All—  
 But there's the "Judgment Day"!<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps that possibly blaming, checking, cost-accounting homiletics was arguing God too narrowly for Dickinson's romantic imagination and modern skepticism.<sup>10</sup> Borges once offered us Anglos, us Yankee heirs of Dickinson's litigious liturgical legacy, "the loyalty of a man who has never been loyal."<sup>11</sup> Borges stands nearer Dickinson than one might expect; the two of them may really offer us seemingly endless poetic proof that when all has been said and done, there may be no last stands where God is concerned. God the Father? Dickinson's father was a not very nurturing, enigmatic, devout lawyer. Borges' father was an anarchistic free

thinker. A fundamentally modern designation of deity is, as Dickinson and Borges show, ambiguous at best.

J. H.

#### *God in Borges' Poetry*

Speaking of his countrymen Borges says that they believe in a supernatural world but that they are not interested in it. On the contrary, he himself is interested in it but does not believe.<sup>1</sup> He gives this answer every time that he is asked about his religious convictions. For the record, Borges is neither a Catholic nor a Christian.

When asked to name the most important book ever written he immediately answers *The Divine Comedy*, but is quick to add that, of course, he shares neither the Christian vision of Dante nor his faith. Borges appreciates the poem exclusively for its literary qualities.<sup>2</sup>

The person who limits his knowledge of Borges to the interviews that are incessantly printed all over the world by magazines and newspapers knows very well—because those interviews all are so similar—that the author is not only an agnostic but perhaps—since he himself says so—an outright atheist.

Everyone is aware that Argentina, like all the countries of Latin America, is a Catholic nation. The Church there enjoys certain privileges regardless of which dictatorship is in control at any given moment. It is virtually a spiritual monopoly, and woe to anyone who dares to defy it. During the first administration of Perón, attacks on the Catholic Church were encouraged by the "justicialismo," and finally brought down the dictator. On the other hand, Catholic support for Rosas during the previous century kept that tyrant in his palace for an intolerably long period of time.

Borges' parents offered their son a contradictory example: his father was an anarchist, a free thinker; his mother, a devout Catholic. The son followed the paternal path from an early age but lived most of his life close to his mother. After his father died in 1938, Borges spent almost forty years in close dialogue with his mother, Doña Leonor. His mother's

influence became more intense during the fifties, when Borges' almost total blindness forced her to become also his secretary, reader, amanuensis, travel companion and of course, confidant. Only to satisfy her insistent request did Borges receive communion before her death.

Thus it was not surprising to a casual observer of Argentine life to learn of a more or less noisy polemic, in 1976, between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the "atheist" writer.

But moving away from what journalists tell us about Borges' thoughts (a rather superficial source of information), and turning toward his works, a much less simplistic situation is evident.

The first thing that stands out is a preponderance of theological motifs. It is true that philosophical subjects, in particular the question of time, abound in Borges' works. Neither is there a lack of labyrinths, knives, and hoodlums. But, quantitatively, it appears that the theme of God and related concerns, such as theological discussion, biblical gloss, mystical characters, and heretics, clearly predominates in his extensive literary corpus.

In his short stories, nevertheless, in spite of the intensity with which some of them (for instance, "The Zahir," "God's script," "The Secret Miracle") deal with a religious subject, we cannot transfer to the author the concerns or the mystical experiences of their characters. At the same time, of course, the writer cannot totally distance himself from the subjects that his literature treats. One really has to wonder if it isn't a bit suspicious that God strolls around so ubiquitously through the fictional works of an author who is a professed atheist.

Concentrating upon Borges' poetry, a genre that allows us to identify the lyric voice with that of its author, the findings are of another nature. There are still an overwhelming number of references to the Deity. Some of them are direct invocations of that Almighty Being, and are identified in the traditional terminology as God. In other poems references are made to a Supreme Being but with a more non-committal name: "Something" or "Somebody," or even "the divine labyrinth of causes and effects."<sup>3</sup> In many poems there are allusions to Christ, and the Bible is mentioned frequently as a Holy Book and is the inspiration for several poems written about certain favorite passages.<sup>4</sup>

Granted that from the quantity of poems, more than a hundred with religious themes or significant allusions, we cannot identify an orthodox

religious belief. Many poems presuppose a God and the lyric voice in the poem invokes Him. Many others, however, question His existence or attribute to Him very different characteristics from those which the Judeo-Christian tradition assign Him. God appears, then, as a created Being (not eternal) or is indifferent to human destiny, or antagonistic towards human beings. At times God's will is depicted as ironic (giving the poet, for instance, books and blindness simultaneously) or generous (because blindness proves to be advantageous to thought) or selfish (because He has created human diversity only in order to expand His own possible experiences and perceptions).<sup>5</sup>

With respect to life after death, Borges fluctuates between poems that assure Truth (that is to say, the Archetypes, the Rose, our own enigma) will be revealed to us after our death, and others in which, following the paternal example, he pleads to die "entirely," both in body and soul.<sup>6</sup>

Although Borges' atheism is not, by any means militant or belligerent,<sup>7</sup> it is voiced occasionally in disrespectful or provocative terms, as when he mocks dogmas such as that of the Holy Trinity (and speaks of "teratology"!) or when he makes corrections of passages in the Gospels or replaces the Lord's Prayer with a revised version.<sup>8</sup>

Adding to this his total lack of interest in the notion of sin, one can readily judge why it is not easy to consider Borges an orthodox Roman Catholic, in spite of the fact that there are also statements from him—rare, to be sure—insisting that he is a Catholic because he has been raised in a Catholic environment.<sup>9</sup>

In this very brief outline of an immense subject within the work and thought of Borges, it may only be suggested that the so-called "agnosticism" of the Argentine writer is an oversimplified, hastily-arrived-at conclusion.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps Borges is really skeptical of theological constructions that are formulated by human beings in order to sustain their intuitions with dogmatic force. Reason does not allow us to "know" with certainty. As the title of one of his poems expresses it: "De que nada se sabe": "That Nothing is Known." It is mentioned in this poem that perhaps human destiny does not belong to men, and may belong to someone else, but calling that someone else "God" does not help us at all. Therefore, it makes no sense to fear, to doubt, to pray.<sup>11</sup>

Unwilling to accept as evidence that which is not self-evident, Borges,

of necessity, distances himself from any dogma or faith. He proves himself nevertheless interested, curious to explore every religion (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Shintoism) but reluctant to join any of them.<sup>12</sup> The closest that he has been to a formal declaration of a concrete faith is his "Autobiographical Essay," in which he declares himself an "amateur Protestant."<sup>13</sup>

But if the poetical works of Borges are read carefully, the reader can perceive something more than a mere insistence upon religious subjects and an incessant speculation, almost obsessive in nature, about the intentions of the Creator (or the "Dreamer" as he would say). I think the poems reveal that, despite what reason tells the author, there is an intuition, perhaps a certainty, that there is a Divine Being—one that gives us its truth in small brief glimpses, perhaps keeping the total revelation for after our death.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike Hölderlin or Rilke, who justify God's silence by reminding us of the terrible consequences that a revelation could cause to man, Borges does not have a satisfactory answer for the mystery. Declaring himself an agnostic, Borges misleads the superficial inquirer and remains free to continue his incessant probing from all possible points of view and without the constraints of religious bias, of the subject that obsesses him. Emily Dickinson has advised, "Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant." Borges seems to agree with her when he says that Homer was not unaware that things should be said in an indirect way.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to flat journalistic statements, the poetical works of Borges—which fortunately are non-confessional—tell his readers, in a subtle but forceful way that the poet indeed possesses a religious faith, not a blind one but an expectant one, an intuition regarding a "divine" labyrinth of causes and effects, a "Something" or "Somebody" who will in fact face us with the Archetypes and Splendors, who will reveal to us, finally, who we have been, who we are. That's why he sees death as a "hidden treasure," a "dark marvel that lies in wait for us" ("un oculto tesoro," "una oscura maravilla que nos acecha").<sup>16</sup>

C. C.

#### NOTES

##### *God in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson*

1. Thomas H. Johnson, ed. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), Vol. II: 72. Poem #1052.
2. Johnson, *The Poems of Dickinson*, 486. Poem #632.
3. Johnson, *The Poems of Dickinson*, II, 742.
4. *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828. Two volumes.
5. Johnson, *The Poems of Dickinson*, III, 838. Poem #1205:  
Of heaven above the firmest proof  
We fundamental know  
Except for its marauding Hand  
It had been Heaven below.
6. Johnson, *The Poems of Dickinson*, I, 38. Poem #49.
7. Johnson, *The Poems of Dickinson*, III, 1009–10. Poem #1461.
8. Thomas H. Johnson, ed. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, 27. Letter #10.
9. Johnson, *The Poems of Dickinson*, I, 322. Poem #413.
10. Johnson, *The Poems of Dickinson*, III, 839. Poem #1207.
11. Jorge Luis Borges, "Two English Poems, II." *Selected Poems 1923–1967*. Edited by Norman Thomas di Giovanni. (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972): 77.

##### *God in Borges' Poetry*

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974): 282.
2. "... the best book Literature has yet produced . . ." J. L. Borges, *Nueve Ensayos Dantescos* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982).
3. "Something" or "Somebody" ("Algo" or "Alguien") in reference to God, in the following poems: "Alguien", "Islandia", "Una brújula", "La clepsidra". In the poem "El fin", it is called "Perhaps" or "Nobody" ("Tal vez" or "Nadie"), quite significantly because it is a poem about the writer's mother. In two other poems the reference to God is done with the formula "labyrinth of causes and effects": "Otro poema de los dones" and "Al iniciar el estudio de la gramática anglosajona."
4. Christ in: "La noche que en el sur lo velaron," "Poema del cuarto elemento," "Baltasar Gracián," "Al vino," "Milonga de Manuel Flores," "Buenos Aires," "No eres los otros," "Things that might have been," "Acevedo." Biblical passages in: "Juan I, 14," "Lucas XXIII," "Mateo XXV, 30."
5. a) a created God: "Ajedrez II," "Cosmogonía," "Baruch Spinoza."  
b) an indifferent God: "No eres los otros," "La moneda de hierro."  
c) a terrible God: "El golem."  
d) an ironic God: "Poema de los dones."  
e) a generous God: "Versos de catorce," "La mañana."  
f) a selfish God: "El," "Juan I, 14."  
g) a not almighty God: "Amanecer."  
h) a subtle God: "Los espejos," "Una brújula."  
i) a capricious God: "In memoriam A.R."  
j) a fair God: "El otro."  
k) a lyric voice sure of its immortality: "Composición escrita en un ejemplar del *Beowulf*."  
l) a lyric voice open to the possibility of God: "Los enigmas."
6. In reference to his father: "A mi padre." In reference to himself: "The thing I am."

7. "I am neither a missionary of Christianity nor of agnosticism . . . Everything is possible, even God . . . We are not even sure that God does not exist . . ." in Oswaldo Romero, "Dios en la obra de J. L. Borges: su Teología y su Teodicea," *Revista Iberoamericana*, n. 100: 465-501.
8. About the Holy Trinity: J. L. Borges, *Obras completas*, 283-4; and "El budismo" in J. L. Borges, *Siete Noches* (N.p., n.d.).
9. ". . . being a Catholic, I feel attracted to Protestantism . . ." Interview with Rita Guibert, *Life en Español*, XXXI, n. 5 (March 11, 1968): 58. "I have been raised in a Catholic environment; my grandmother knew the Bible by heart, my mother was a Catholic, my father was an atheist, but not in a belligerent or political way . . ." (Polemic with the president of the University of Jujuy, December 1976) in Manuel Caldeiro, "Yo acuso a Borges," (*Gente* XII, n. 597, Jan. 6, 1977): 74.
10. The most complete study on the subject, even if it focuses mainly on Borges' answers to journalists and only deals with a few of his poems, is the already mentioned article by Oswaldo Romero.
11. "De que nada se sabe," Jorge Luis Borges, *La rosa profunda* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1975).
12. When in his lecture on Buddhism, for example, he states that he is not sure of being a Christian, although he is sure of not being a Buddhist.
13. "Autobiographical Essay" in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1970); and Selden Rodman, *Tongues of Fallen Angels* (New York: New Directions, 1972): 24.
14. In this way, among others, in the following poems: "Everness," "Elogio de la sombra," "The unending rose," "A mi padre," "La clepsidra."
15. Emily Dickinson in Poem #1129, in T. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1958): 506.
16. Lines in the poems "Blind Pew" and "1964, II," respectively.

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D. L. SHAW

Some Unamunesque Preoccupations  
in Borges' Poetry

So far as I am aware only three short studies have been published on Unamuno and Borges. One is Anthony Kerrigan's essay "Borges/Unamuno" in the *Tri-Quarterly* homage volume to Borges.<sup>1</sup> The second is an interesting article by Stelio Cro, "Jorge Luis Borges e Miguel de Unamuno."<sup>2</sup> The last is an essay of my own, published in an obscure magazine.<sup>3</sup> Hence there may be room to return to the subject, with special reference to Borges' poetry. For one cannot wholly agree with Kerrigan that "the truest testaments from these two meditative Spanish bookmen are necessarily in their fictions." Certainly in the case of Borges, we cannot overlook his remark to Keith Botsford in 1964,<sup>4</sup> that "en última instancia soy poeta" or to Madelaine Chapsal "Creo que no soy más que eso. Un poeta . . ."<sup>5</sup> The aim here is to suggest with respect to Borges the poet, that as Hispanists we can perhaps understand some of his preoccupations in a clearer and more familiar perspective by looking at them beside Unamuno's rather than by comparing them to those of non-Hispanic writers such as Chesterton, Emerson, Bloy, Hawthorne or Nabokov.

One of the intriguing aspects of Borges' work is that after "Acerca de Unamuno, poeta"<sup>6</sup> and the necrological article "Inmortalidad de Unamuno,"<sup>7</sup> Borges rarely mentions Unamuno.<sup>8</sup> Roberto Paoli<sup>9</sup> quite rightly speaks of "Unamuno, un autore la cui influenza su Borges, così manifesta, non è stata adeguatamente riconosciuta da chi l'ha subita." For al-

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