

Nights of the Magician: Borges, Dreams, Cortázar, Writing and Gnosticism

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Abstract. Jorge Luis Borges' short story *Las ruinas circulares* establishes a parallel between dream, the creative process and gnosticism. While Borges never forges any direct link between his character's dream "son" and his own short story, he establishes the connection between dreams and writing in several critical writings. Julio Cortázar -frequently described as Borges' the "hijo espiritual"- reflects in his own writing the connection between dream and writing expounded by Borges. For example, Cortázar's short story *Continuidad de los parques* mirrors the lack of distinction between dream and reality that is implicit in Borges' *Las ruinas circulares*. Just as Borges' magician reflects the possible "dream" reality of humankind in general (a creation in the mind of a god who may be the self-referential reflection of humanity), so Cortázar's man in the green armchair reflects humanity in "flesh and blood", enmeshed in the sign systems of language to such an extent that it is only a linguistic function in a play of repetition and difference that for all practical purposes renders the distinction between "appearance" and "reality" quite insignificant.

Jorge Luis Borges' short story *Las ruinas circulares* describes the labours of a magician who dreams into the context of his own reality a man of flesh and blood, only to discover that he too is an apparition, that someone else is dreaming him (Borges, 1956: 62). Borges likens the magician's creation of an "Adán de sueño" to the demiurge's creation of "un rojo Adán" (*ibid.*: 53) in the cosmogonies of the Gnostics. While Borges never establishes any direct parallel between his character's dream son and his own short story, he states the connection between dreams and literature in several critical writings. In the "Prólogo" to *El Informe de Brodie*, for example, he suggests that literature is nothing other than "un sueño dirigido" (Borges, 1974: 11). In "Everything and Nothing", Shakespeare (as Borges' fictional character) is described as "esa alucinación dirigida" (Borges, 1972, 1975: 61). Similarly, Borges' essay, "Del culto de los libros" (*Otras inquisiciones*) summarizes theories from the *Alcorán* of the Moslems, the book of *Genesis* of the Jews, the *Sepher Yetzirah* of the Cabalist Jews, the dogma of Pythagorus and Iamblicus, Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning*, Scot Carlyle's essay on Cagliostro, Leon Bloy's *L'Âme de Napoléon* and Mallarmé's writings, which all suggest that phenomena of lived reality are letters of "un texto original", "el texto universal", "un libro mágico" (Borges, 1962, 1964: 133 ss). In "El espejo de los enigmas" (also from *Otras inquisiciones*), Borges likens human beings to actors blindly living out God's literary creation "un drama secreto, determinado y premeditado por Dios" (*ibid.*: 120). Borges' writings frequently have been linked to cabalistic doctrine in critical studies such as Oscar Hahn's "El motivo del Golem en 'Las ruinas circulares'" and Don Smulians's "Jorge Luis Borges, Author of Alice Through the Looking Glass". The parallels drawn by Smulian and Hahn between cabalistic texts and Borges' *Las ruinas circulares* are relevant to his analogy between that same story and gnosticism, as Borges has acknowledged the common denominators shared by the ancient doctrines. In "El espejo de los enigmas", Borges (*cf.* 1956: 120) cites Philo of Alexandria (a gnostic) alongside the cabalists and Swedenborg, in

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the course of discussing literal and symbolic meaning in Sacred Scripture.

Borges prefaces *Las ruinas circulares* with an epigraph from Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*: "and he left off dreaming about you". By juxtaposing Carroll's phrase on his own work, Borges invites speculation on their common ground: both testify to the reversibility of dream and reality. Summarizing the parallel, Smulian states that, while the magician's and Alice's dreams appear to be real, both characters are confronted with the possibility that they and their realities are merely dreams: "The hazy border between reality and dream in both works challenges the belief that a tangible reality exists" (*ibid.*: 79).

Didier T. Jaen in *Borges' Esoteric Library* suggests that "Borges' art... consists of attempts to create that 'through-the-looking-glass' world, confronting or juxtaposing it with the world of 'reality'. The result of this juxtaposition is the suggestion that the one is equal to the other. The world of reality is also a world created by our presence, like the images in the mirrors: impermanent, unreal and of mysterious purpose" (Jaen, 1992: 53).

Gérard Genette in "La literatura según Borges" (*Jorge Luis Borges*) emphasizes Borges' reflective, inter-textual vision of literary creation that expresses itself most succinctly in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius": "No existe el concepto de plagio: se ha establecido que todas las obras son obra de un solo autor, que es intemporal y es anónimo" (Genette, 1978: 126-127; see also Smulian, 1989: 84). When considered in the light of "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius", and "Las ruinas circulares" becomes a metaphor for the self-reflective, intertextual nature of literary works that irrevocably obscures the difference between reality and illusion, creator and creation (see Derrida, 1967: 54-55). A case in point are some literary works of Julio Cortázar that reflect the connection between dream and writing which Borges expounded. Just as Borges' dream son is a reflection of his father's subconscious mind, so Cortázar has been described as the "hijo espiritual" of Borges (see Coleman, 1969: 59; Harss and Dohmann, 1967: 208). In "Del cuento breve y sus alrededores", Cortázar (1973: 111-112) suggests that writing is "dreaming awake" ("se sueña despierto al escribir un cuento"). His short story "La continuidad de los parques", mirrors his critical speculations about the reflective relationship of dreams, writing and reading as well as Borges' previous suggestions that the reality of dreams and physical reality may be indistinguishable. In the last sentence of "Las ruinas circulares", Borges' magician/creator typifies a being who has achieved "gnosis" -complete understanding about the true (albeit illusory) nature of his origin and his being-. Werner Foerster suggests that "the totality of Gnosis can be grasped in a single image... gold in mud" (Foerster, 1972: 2). The "gold" -the "self" in man that belongs to the divine- remains "gold" even when enshrouded in the "mud" of the world (*ibid.*: 7). Thus it is significant that Borges' short story commences with the magician running his canoe aground in the "el fango sagrado" at the foot of an opening that was "un templo que devoraran los incendios antiguos". "El hombre gris" who will achieve gnosis in the final paragraph of Borges' story presses his lips to the mud in a gesture of reverence that acknowledges the possibility of an internal transcendental reality masked by the mud (*ibid.*: 49).

Paul A. Cantor suggests in *Creature and Creator* that gnostic writings posit the act of creation as the work of a "fallen" being and thus suggest (in existential fashion, see Jonas, 1970: 325) that man "need no longer feel grateful for being created. He can turn his back on God with a good conscience and set about charting his own course, seeking ways to remake an imperfectly created world, and even to change his own nature for the better" (Cantor, 1984: xiv). "El hombre gris" of Borges' tale exemplifies the reflective nature of gods and men that obscures the concept of a transcendental presence in a play of doubles. "El hombre gris" seemingly takes the place of the god who used to be worshipped at the temple. Whereas the stranger lays himself down at the foot of the deserted image in an apparent gesture of

reverence, so men from the area bring offerings to him as if he were a god: "Rastros de pies descalzos, unos higos y un cántaro le advirtieron que los hombres de la región habían espionado con respeto su sueño y solicitaban su amparo o temían su magia" (*ibid.*: 50). Just as God traditionally is regarded as the "centre" of what he has created, so the magician dreams himself "un anfiteatro circular que era de algún modo el templo incendiado" (*ibid.*: 50). He searches for "un alma que mereciera participar en el universo", and chooses from among the crowds of dream-faces a boy of "rasgos afiliados que repetían los de su soñador" (*ibid.*: 51). The features of the magician's dream-son mirror his own features, just as the Godhead (in Hermes Trismegistus's "Poimandres") created primal man, (Anthropos), as a duplicate; so that "in man, he may love and yet love himself" (Humphries, 1983: 3).

Borges' magician duplicates the work of the Gnostic demiurge: he attempts to mold from dreams his perfect son -a task that is "mucho más arduo que tejer una cuerda de arena o que amonedar el viento sin cara" (*ibid.*: 52). The magician apparently is able to perform his task after abandoning his powers to the gods of the earth and river and beseeching in desperation the help of "la efigie que tal vez era un tigre y tal vez un potro" (*ibid.*: 53). Dreaming the image alive, he discovers that it is not "un atroz bastardo de tigre y potro, sino a la vez esas dos criaturas vehementes y también un toro, una rosa, una tempestad" (*ibid.*: 53). The blurred features of the effigy -that allow it to signify five different phenomena simultaneously- evoke the arbitrary nature of signs that form the basis of human discourse, while also inviting examination of the common internal realities of a tiger, a stallion, a bull, a rose and a tempest. Viewed within the context of the history of Western European thought, all the phenomena suggested by the stone image have symbolic significance in relation to the creative process and the joining of opposed terms. J. E. Cirlot, in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, suggests that "stones fallen from heaven (serve) to explain the origin of life. In volcanic eruptions, air turned to fire, fire became 'water' and 'water' changed to stone; hence stone constitutes the first solid form of the creative rhythm". The tiger, on the one hand, denotes "the unbridled expression of the base powers of the instincts" (Cirlot, 1962: 324), while the stallion symbolizes not only "the blind forces of primigenial Chaos", but also "fire and light", and "the mother within us" (*ibid.*: 144 ss). The bull, according to Cirlot, is "a highly complex symbol" representing the earth, as "heaven and the father". Insofar as the bull corresponds to the intermediary zone between the elements of Fire and Water, it seems to symbolize the communicating link between heaven and earth" (*ibid.*: 33). The storm, like the bull, symbolizes "creative intercourse", and "like everything else that occurs in heaven or descends therefrom, has a sacred quality about it" (*ibid.*: 300-301). The bull and the storm are in fact integrally linked symbolically, "the bull's bellow being associated with the rolling of thunder". Unlike the other above-mentioned phenomena that incarnate symbolically the dichotomy of earth and heaven, the rose is "a symbol of completion of consummate achievement and perfection", representing the harmony of "the mystic centre" (*ibid.*: 263) that both eludes and sustains terms of oppositions (like heaven and earth). In accordance with gnostic doctrine which posits the demiurge as the god of fire (*cf.* Humphries, 1983: 2-3), Borges' "múltiple dios" reveals to the magician that "su nombre terrenal era Fuego". The symbolic value of fire comprehends the dual natures of the bull and the thunderstorm, as well as the transcendent "centre" that the rose represents, thus inferring the reflective internal nature of physical phenomena and those of the mind. Cirlot (1962: 101) suggests that "fire... is an image of energy that may be found at the level of animal passion as well as on the plane of spiritual strength". Following the orders of his "múltiple dios" whose most prominent features appear to be repetition and circularity, the magician agrees to send his dream son downstream "al otro templo despedazado". The father feels anguish when he hears tales that his son has

discovered his uncanny ability to walk on fire, as such a strange privilege might lead to the son's realization that he is "mero simulacro... la proyección del sueño de otro hombre ¡qué humillación incomparable, qué vértigo!" (*ibid.*: 53-55).

While convinced that he (unlike his dream son) is a physical reality of flesh and blood, the magician receives "gnosis" of his true condition at the moment of his "death": "Caminó contra los jirones de fuego. Estos no mordieron su carne, éstos lo acariciaron y lo inundaron sin calor y sin combustión. Con alivio, con humillación, con terror, comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo" (*ibid.*: 56). With this "final" sentence that reaffirms the play of repetition and circularity that binds gods and men, illusion and reality, Borges leaves the reader to reflect on the significance of this "gnosis" in relation to a literary work and its author. Borges' text implies that dream and reality are indistinguishable states of being, whose "difference" is purely relative. The magician, caught up unknowingly in a cycle of infinite "dream" representations, is the personification of humanity's relationship to discourse and an author's correspondence to his/her literary creation. Having created his son (his literary creation) over the course of "mil y una noches secretas" (55, reminiscent of the Arabic collection of short stories *The Thousand and One Nights*), the magician (the author) desires that his child (his literary work) exist as an independent entity. The magician's (author's) fallacy is his failure to recognize the closure implicit in the linguistic system that is not only the means but also the source of his thoughts, perceptions and expression of them. As the dream son of the man who is dreaming him, the magician is a reflection of his creator. As an author, Borges is a reflection of 5,000 years of western European thought that shaped his thoughts and his discourse. Humanity, realizing and recognizing itself in its own discourse, is both the source and duplication of sign systems that limit human perceptions, thoughts, and knowledge. Perceiving themselves as created by God (one of their own dream creations), human beings gave birth to the transcendent principle that is their ultimate dream: a "way out" of the closed circle of self-referential reflections that human discourse perpetuates.

While the magician voices (through his concern for his son) his own fear of being an illusory, secondary representation of a presence beyond himself, his dream son (boldly walking on fire without being burned in the temple of the north, *cf.* 55) appears to have recognized and transcended in existential fashion the anguish of his creator. In Nietzschean/Derridian fashion, the dream son of the magician appears to recognize the freedom enjoyed within the limitations of the closed system that sustains him. Like literature as perceived after the Nietzschean deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence (see Derrida, 1967) the son may have experienced the relief of being mere appearance (and therefore indestructible by virtue of not being finite or "real") before his father (the magician), who has the knowledge thrust upon him after a lifetime of self-delusion about the nature of his true being. The bold fire walker appears to have transcended the limitations of "mero simulacro", just as the gnostics liberated themselves mentally from subjugation to the demiurge through recognition of the latter's own secondary imperfect, "fallen" nature (*cf.* Jonas, 1967: 92-93).

Julio Cortázar's very short story "La continuidad de los parques" reflects the lack of distinction between dream (fiction) and reality that is implicit in Borges' story. While Borges' magician "dreamed" a man into "reality" only to discover that he himself was the dream of another, Cortázar's protagonist -a man reading a novel in a high-backed green velvet armchair- apparently disengages himself (through the act of reading) from the "physical reality" around him ("más allá de los ventanales danzaba el aire del atardecer bajo los robles", Cortázar, 1970: 312) to the extent that he is "absorbed" by his book ("la ilusión novelesca lo ganó casi en seguida", *ibid.*: 112) and enters into its plot, becoming its

unsuspecting victim.

The images of the man's novel take on "color y movimiento"; he becomes "testigo del último encuentro en la cabaña del monte" of a woman and her lover who are meeting to go over the plans ("el doble repaso despiadado") (*ibid.*: 312-313) that will culminate in the murder of the lover's rival. Reminiscent of gnostic doctrine that posits the serpent as the agent who persuades man to taste the fruit of knowledge (Jonas, *op. cit.*: 93), Cortázar as narrator compares his short-story's enticing plot to an "arroyo de serpientes" that bewitches the reader into feeling resigned and helpless: "se sentía que todo estaba decidido desde siempre" (Cortázar, *op. cit.*: 312-313). Following with the narrator/witness the movements of the woman and her lover, the reader of Cortázar's story is led to the realization that the man to be murdered in the novel being read by the man sitting in the green armchair is that "reader" himself:

"La puerta del salón y entonces el puñal en la mano, la luz de los ventanales, el alto respaldo de un sillón de terciopelo verde, la cabeza del hombre en el sillón leyendo una novela." (Cortázar, *op. cit.*: 314)

Like Proust's (1954) narrator in the first paragraph of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Cortázar's man in the green armchair has become the subject of his book, a merger of "physical" and "fictional" realities that is reflected many times in many other literary works (for example, the reflective rapport between people and events in "Melquiádes' manuscripts", and the novel of which they are a part García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; the correspondence between "signs" and "reality" in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, wherein the protagonist's adventures of Part I are the subject of a "best-seller" in Part II). Like Borges' magician, Cortázar's reader in the green armchair is ignorant of the true nature of his being, perceiving himself as a "physical" entity in contrast to the "fictional" characters of his novel, and unaware that, for Cortázar's readers, his reality is purely fictitious, serving only to illustrate the relative nature of reality and fiction, represented concept and representation.

While not purporting to represent reader/text interaction, the play of doubles engendered by Borges' magician and his dream son clarifies the nature of the interaction between "reader" and "text" in Cortázar's tale. Cortázar's man in the green armchair, like Borges' magician, is (for Borges' and Cortázar's readers) a fictional representation of a "flesh and blood" reality whose "physical nature" is exposed as false in the context of his own "physical" world. Just as Borges' magician's "physical" environment - "Las ruinas circulares" - reflect the unresolvable circularity of dream and reality wherein the magician's consciousness resides, so the "physical" structure of Cortázar's short story is circular: the last line of the tale refers back to the first line, inexorably binding "fiction" and "reality" in an unresolvable, self-reflecting relationship. Just as Borges' magician reflects the possible "dream" reality of humankind in general ("a creation of the mind" of a god who may be the self-referential reflection of humanity itself), so Cortázar's man in the green armchair reflects "flesh and blood" humanity enmeshed in the sign systems of language to such an extent that it is only a linguistic function in a play of repetition and difference, that renders the distinction between "appearance" and "reality" quite insignificant, for all practical purposes.

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