

25. Christ, *The Narrow Act*, 131.
26. Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty*, 42.

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Borges the Poet

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Borges and Browning: A Dramatic Dialogue

In a rather backhanded tribute to Robert Browning, Jorge Luis Borges comments that "si hubiera sido un buen escritor de prosa, creo que no dudaríamos que Browning sería el precursor de la que llamamos literatura moderna."¹ In a writer who has repeatedly emphasized his preference for plot over character and his suspicions about the nonexistence of personality, this interest in the work of a poet who described himself as "more interested in individuals than abstract problems"² is curious, yet despite his claim in *Introducción a la literatura inglesa* of this widely accepted view of Browning, Borges seems drawn to a different reading. For him, Browning is "el gran poeta enigmático,"³ and, with Dickens, one of "dos grandes artifices góticos."⁴ In the introduction to English literature, Borges summarizes a poem he must have especially liked, "How It Strikes a Contemporary": "el protagonista puede ser Cervantes o un misterioso espía de Dios o el arquetipo platónico del poeta,"⁵ and among "Los precursores de Kafka," he numbers another of Browning's poems, "Fears and Scruples," in which the speaker defends a stubbornly enigmatic friend who, it is hinted in the last line, may be God. Borges appears particularly interested in *The Ring and the Book*, with its deployment of multiple narratives on the part of the different characters, each of whom presents his own version of the same murder.⁶ Browning's development of point of view, along with his ambiguity and what Borges sees as a quality of irreality are probably the basis for his argument that

Browning be considered a precursor to James and Kafka and, through them, to much modern literature. Considering his own bent for the exotic, Borges must have been intrigued by the perspectives Browning opens on distant times and places, although he does not mention it. Although Borges' reading of Browning is quirky enough—he has nothing to say about the enormous energy or about the determined optimism that so offended T. S. Eliot—he is not alone in his evaluation of Browning's influence on modern literature. Ezra Pound, for example, claimed Browning as his literary father and pushed him tirelessly. In an essay on the relation between Browning and the Anglo-American Modernists, G. Robert Stange points out three primary reasons for Browning's prestige: his attempt to render spoken speech in verse; his use of an elliptical method with startling jumps and juxtapositions that put the onus of interpretation on the reader; and his elaboration of the dramatic monologue, a form with obvious importance for the literature of perspective developed by James, Conrad, Proust, Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner.⁷ Like so much modern literature, the dramatic monologue insists on the fragmentary, the incomplete; it opens up new areas of experience and conveys them through a single, and therefore limited, perspective.

The use of a conversational tone and an elliptical approach is widespread throughout twentieth-century poetry, but the dramatic monologue, perhaps the dominant form now in Anglo-American poetry, has never really caught on in Hispanic verse. Borges, however, uses the form rather frequently. That he does so may be the result of his intellectual formation in a library composed of English books; still, this fondness for a form that has traditionally been a vehicle for the presentation of character is odd. It is best seen by focusing on Borges' adaptation of the dramatic monologue, as it was developed by Browning, to suit his own ends.

In 1947, Ina Beth Sessions listed the characteristics of the "perfect dramatic monologue": "that literary form which has the definite characteristics of speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present."⁸ The problem with this schema is that it excludes many of Browning's best monologues and is totally inadequate for dealing with such modern examples as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or Pound's "The Tomb at Akr Çaar," in which a soul addresses its mummified body. Although development of character is central to the major-

ity of Browning's monologues, there are notable exceptions—"Saul," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Fears and Scruples," "How It Strikes a Contemporary." Sessions' description is useful as an index of features that often are presented in the form, but it should not be taken as prescriptive. In his seminal study, *The Poetry of Experience*, Robert Langbaum argues that it is more important to consider effect rather than mechanics. For him, the essential effect is to give "facts from within,"⁹ but he offsets this contention by observing that "there is at work in [the monologue] a consciousness . . . beyond what the speaker can lay claim to. This consciousness is the mark of the poet's projection into the poem."¹⁰ Ultimately, Park Honan's definition may offer the most useful rule of thumb: "a single discourse by one whose presence in the poem is indicated by the poet but who is not the poet himself."¹¹

Before examining the dramatic monologue in Borges, it should be helpful to take a brief look at one of Browning's more representative monologues. In his introduction to English literature, Borges mentions "An Epistle of Karshish," in which "un médico árabe refiere la resurrección de Lázaro y la extraña indiferencia de su vida ulterior, como si se tratara de un caso clínico."¹² The entire poem takes the form of an epistle written from Karshish to his mentor, Abib. Karshish writes at some length about his journey into Judea, including details about the political situation and his medical discoveries. Finally, he gets around to the real reason for his writing—his encounter with Lazarus. Even though he dismisses Lazarus as a "case of mania—subinduced / By epilepsy,"¹³ it is evident that he is rationalizing an experience that haunts him, and at the end of the letter, having apologized repeatedly for "this long and tedious case" and actually written his good-byes, he suddenly bursts out:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—
The madman saith He said so: it is strange.

"An Epistle of Karshish" is representative of the Browning monologue as it takes up a character at a specific point in time, at a moment of personal as well as historical crisis. It is thick with detail which establishes time and place and, more importantly, delineates character (a reference to the herb borage, for example, not only demonstrates Karshish's attempt to circumvent his discovery, it also reveals the scientist's prac-

ticed eye). The protagonist addresses a particular person, but the communication is really a pretext for a "dialogue between self and soul" in which, while attempting to come to grips with a disturbing incident, he sums up his entire life. The letter is an expression of self *and* an exploration: what if Lazarus is right? The poem is open-ended; the outcome of the struggle, unresolved. An ironic tension is established between the speaker, who has an incomplete understanding of a firsthand experience, and the reader, whose knowledge is much greater, but who is separated from the event by two millenia.

It is not difficult to see why the poem appeals to Borges. In its oblique approach to a great historical moment, it brings to mind his speculations about why the thief asked to be saved in "Lucas XXIII" and why Judas betrayed Christ in "Tres versiones de Judas." Browning's ironic manipulation of point of view in the monologue looks ahead to "La busca de Averroes," Borges' narrative about the Arab translator of Aristotle, a man of high intelligence, who is prevented by his belief in Islam, on which his strength is founded, from accomplishing the task he has set himself, defining comedy and tragedy. Although repeatedly exposed to clues about the nature of the theater, he is doomed to ignore them. The story is told from the third person (except for an intrusion by Borges at the end to remind us that he is as ignorant of Averroes as Averroes is of drama), but the perspective is so carefully limited and so free of analysis that it is almost internal,¹⁴ and its effect is close to that of the dramatic monologue: it gives the facts "from within."

However, rather than discussing possible analogues in his fiction, it is preferable to examine what Borges does with the dramatic monologue in his poetry. Among the speakers are his ancestor Francisco Laprida; Alexander Selkirk; Hengist, the Jutish king of Kent; God; Heraclitus; a Chinese library guard; Tamerlan, an English madman; Browning himself; Ulysses; an unknown Saxon warrior; an unknown inquisitor; an unknown conquistador; the Altamira painter; the Caliph Omar; Alonso Quijano; and Descartes. For the most part, these are short poems; a number are sonnets. There is neither room to develop nor an intention of developing the kind of psychological complexity that is Browning's peculiar characteristic. Instead, Borges tends to offer just a glimpse of the other.

"Hengist Cyning"¹⁵ is a fine example of the use of the dramatic mono-

logue to open a perspective on the distant past by showing, instead of explaining, a way of thinking that is distinctly not modern. The poem opens with an epitaph that substantiates the claims made by the voice of the dead ruler, Hengist the first Jutish king of Kent, whose monologue makes up the body of the poem. Hengist is concerned with clearing up a misunderstanding about his life. The British accuse him of betrayal because he killed his king but what Hengist wants clarified is that the real betrayal lay in the selling of his strength and courage. By turning on the British Vortigen, he reaffirms his personal worth: "yo fui Hengist el mercenario" (v. 7, italics mine); and *now* he speaks as king. His speech is laconic, as austere as the epitaph engraved on stone, and appropriate for a Northern warrior king. His reference to the murder is understated and curiously touching: "Le quité la luz y la vida" (v. 16). In an economy based on limited good, the only way to attain "luz y vida" is to deprive someone else of these things (the following verse is, "Me place el reino que gané"). In any event, the murder needs no more justification than the comment that "la fuerza y el coraje no sufren / que las vendan los hombres" (vv. 12–13). That he should lay waste the British cities and enslave the subjugated populace is simply taken for granted. Like many dramatic monologues ("My Last Duchess" is a good, if far more complex, example), the poem is a gratuitous assertion of self. The real brunt of the message is: This is what I am, "Yo he sido fiel a mi valentía" (v. 27). To whom is Hengist speaking? A chance passerby at the grave? Future generations? The sole possible audience is Borges, sensitive to these cries from the past, and through him, the reader on whom he now confers a privileged insight into the workings of an archaic sensibility.

Borges has always been interested in what Browning calls that "moment, one and infinite,"¹⁶ when a man recognizes his destiny. Hengist turned on Vortigen because he realized that he was meant to rule rather than be ruled. The body of the poem deals with the upshot of that discovery. "El advenimiento"¹⁷ focuses on the moment itself, when the anonymous painter of the Altamira cave saw the herd of buffalo he later painted (like "Hengist Cyning," the narration here takes place centuries after the event and is addressed to the void—or the ears of the poet):

Son los bisontes, dije. La palabra
No había pasado nunca por mis labios,
Pero sentí que tal era su nombre.

Era como si nunca hubiera visto,
 Como si hubiera estado ciego y muerto
 Antes de los bisontes de la aurora.
 Surgían de la aurora. Eran la aurora.
 No quise que los otros profanaran
 Aquel pesado río de bruteza
 Divina, de ignorancia, de soberbia.
 Pisotearon un perro del camino;
 Lo mismo hubieran hecho con un hombre.
 Después los trazaría en la caverna
 Con ocre y bermellón. (vv. 23–37)

Like many of Borges' poems, "El advenimiento" arises from an intellectual question: how did the Altamira caves come to be painted? Borges answers the question with an impression that is vivid because it is rendered from within. The speaker is neither described nor analyzed. He simply tells us what, not why, he thought, and we instinctively feel—yes, it must have been like that. Through his use of the monologue, Borges allows a very distant, hazy event to become real. For the speaker, the critical moment comes when he sees the herd; the painting, which has had such a great impact on twentieth-century art, is an afterthought. The real genius, Borges suggests—and this notion obviously has wider application—lies in seeing.

In the last verses of the poem, Borges dissolves the image he has created:

. . . Nunca
 Dijo mi boca el nombre de Altamira.
 Fueron muchas mis formas y mis muertes. (vv. 38–40)

Rodríguez-Monegal writes that for Borges, "All men who perform the same basic and ritual act are the same man."¹⁸ As an artist, the speaker has more in common with other artists than he does with his other, non-artist self, the primitive man who must traffic with his tribe, hunt for food, sleep, make love. Since Borges conveys to the reader *only* what is relevant to the epiphanic moment, it is possible for this individual to be subsumed into the species. This type of transformation does not much interest Browning. For the most part, he builds up portraits of the whole man, full of troublesome details that cannot be wished away, even when

he concentrates, say, on a man's art, as in "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto."

Borges uses the monologue to explore situation rather than character: how did the cave paintings come about? what is the reason for an apparent act of treason? Silvia Molloy comments that in Borges' fiction, character and situation usually coincide.¹⁹ In general, this is true of the poetry as well. As a form, the dramatic monologue is suited to this kind of overlapping since it involves the presentation of character *in situ*. Eliot, too, uses the monologue in a way similar to Borges—if "Prufrock" is a rounded portrait of a shattered man, "The Journey of the Magi" and "The Wasteland" (a series of monologues uttered by Tiresias in different times and places) are more concerned with situation.

Like "El advenimiento," "Poema conjetural"²⁰ is an example of a monologue concerned with what Mary Kinzie calls "hidden history," the point when the individual merges with the archetype.²¹ The poem takes place at a specific historical moment. The prefatory note explains: "El doctor Francisco Laprida, asasinado el día 22 de setiembre de 1829 por los montoneros de Aldao, piensa antes de morir." The action is dramatic, but the narrative is secondary to Laprida's discourse. He is even now being hunted down. Although he accepts his approaching death "sin esperanza ni temor," (v. 11), he is confused and bitter about the *kind* of death being doled out to him since it represents a denial of the grounds of his existence, his "Yo, que estudié las leyes y los cánones, / yo, Francisco Narciso de Laprida" (vv. 6–7). He is lost, not because he is about to die, but because his ending makes no sense in terms of his life. The representative of civilization is being done in by the forces of barbarism.

In the second stanza, Laprida reaches for an analogy that may help him understand his peculiar fate. "Aquel capitán del Purgatorio," to whom he refers, Buonconte da Montefeltro, falls into the group of the Late Repentant. In 1289, he commanded the Aretines in an unsuccessful attempt against the Florentines at Campaldino. Following the defeat, he was hunted down; his throat was cut, and his body carried away by the Arno. According to Dante, at the moment of his death, he repented his life of violence and called out the name of Mary, thus saving his soul. The manner of Buonconte's death coincides with Laprida's, but more im-

portant is Laprida's identification with a figure who reaches understanding just before he dies, and the fact that Laprida looks to the universal, embodied in literature, to come to terms with his individual situation; that is, the particular has meaning only in relation to the general. In the remainder of the stanza, Laprida returns to the narrative of his flight. His killers are drawing closer. Earlier he heard shots; now he hears hooves. The outer hunt parallels the inner search; time is running out for both. The situation is similar to that in "El milagro secreto."

At the beginning of the third stanza, Laprida thinks back to his life, much in the terms he used earlier, but the fourth verse signals a change:

pero me endiosa el pecho inexplicable
un júbilo secreto. Al fin me encuentro
con mi destino sudamericano. (vv. 25-27)

The analogy in the previous stanza opens the way for a revelation, a recognition not of Christian divinity, but of the collective unconscious of his race. Seen in this fresh light, Laprida's death is a confirmation, not a denial of self.²² At this critical juncture, Laprida discovers his "insospechado rostro eterno" (v. 37); he becomes one with the archetype—not only of the gaucho, but of warriors over the centuries, including Dante's Aretine captain, whose death he reenacts.

In the last stanza, it only remains to consummate his fate. Laprida, like Buonconte, narrates his own death. This point of view produces a disturbing close-up effect: "Pisan mis pies la sombra de las lanzas" (v. 39):

Ya el primer golpe,
ya el duro hierro que me raja el pecho,
el íntimo cuchillo en la garganta. (vv. 42-44)

In the poem, we find a number of elements typical of the dramatic monologue. The protagonist is forced to formulate his thoughts at a moment of dramatic intensity. Through his discourse, he arrives at a revelation and subsequent understanding. Although the language is pure Borges, it is not beyond the reach of an educated forebear who is, in any event, not speaking out loud.

Through the prefatory note and the title, as well as the language, Borges reminds the reader of his shaping presence in the poem. The "conjectural" establishes the same relationship between creator and

creation as does the last paragraph in "La busca de Averroes." The tension thus set up between past and present, between reality and literature, is associated with the odd notion that only through recourse to letters does Laprida recognize that he is destined to be a man of action. The world of literature provides access to the universal. Yet even though he is, so to speak, disseminated through history, Laprida remains simultaneously fixed for the reader in the memorable gesture of his death, just as the Altamira painter is fixed in the moment he sees the herd.

In her study of his oscillations between the impersonal and the personal, Molloy points to Borges' use of gesture which, she argues, is much like Stevenson's: it gives shape to character, idea or emotion by means of an act or an attitude that captures our attention.²³ Even though he sweeps a character away, Borges often leaves us with something akin to the Cheshire cat's furious grin, a gesture that stays with us. The monologue provides Borges with a ready source of irony—the character who announces his "yo" most tenaciously finds that the only appropriate term is "nosotros," but it also offers a means of making the experience vivid—the character's own perspective. Because in "El advenimiento" we see the herd through the protagonist's eyes, join him imaginatively at the crack through which he peers, both he and the herd, in short, the entire situation, are sharply etched in our minds. Similarly, for an instant, we also find ourselves with Laprida at his death just because our angle of vision is exactly his. It is for this reason that Langbaum describes the dramatic monologue as a "poetry of sympathy."²⁴ Actually, the disparity between Langbaum's insistence that the monologue give the "facts from within" and his contention that there is a greater consciousness at work in the poem is only apparent, as these poems demonstrate. Borges manipulates point of view here to provide additional tension between the particular and the universal, the individual and the archetype. There is a great pathos to these creations that seem to be so bright and are suddenly sent up in smoke.

It is precisely because Borges does not take advantage of the speaker's perspective that "Browning resuelve ser poeta,"²⁵ a poem inevitably in this discussion, is less successful than many of his other dramatic monologues. The title suggests that the poem will focus on a specific occasion—the point when Browning decided to become a poet—but the great moment eludes the poem. The speaker's remark, "descubro que he

elegido / la más curiosa de las profesiones humanas" (vv. 2–3) is undercut by the next comment—"salvo que todas, a su modo, lo son" (v. 4), which reveals a diffidence characteristic of Borges, but quite alien to Browning. The poem turns on a playful series of allusions that continually remind the reader of the author's presence in the poem. For example, the reference to Browning's use of colloquial language:

haré que las comunes palabras—
naipes marcados del tahir, moneda de la plebe—
rindan la magia que fue suya
cuando Thor era el numen e el estrépito (vv. 5–12)

does double duty since the two metaphors for common words point toward Borges' own work. "Los naipes del tahir" is the composition for which the Borges persona does not win an award in "El Aleph"; the coin is probably the "zahir." The poem is graceful and clever, but it lacks the tension that gives a number of other monologues strength. Here the speaker, Browning, is simply swallowed up by the central theme, which is the intertextuality of all literature. Other poems discussed involve identifiable circumstances even though their speakers may now be disembodied voices monologizing centuries after an event; nevertheless, there is an experience and an attitude to remember. The real location of "Browning resuelve ser poeta" is in the pages of universal literature, rather than the "rojos laberintos de Londres" (v. 1) that are dismissed in one verse, and it takes place not at some point in the 1820's, but over the centuries. What is missing here is the memorable gesture that would, as Stevenson suggests, capture our attention.

The true power of the dramatic monologue as Borges uses it lies in its ability to create tension between the temporal and the eternal, between the individual speaker and the archetype, and to offer us a privileged perspective on a situation or mode of thought that would otherwise be inaccessible. If his tribute to Browning falls short of this potential and is—to this reader's mind—less successful, the vivid images that so many of the other dramatic monologues leave testify to Borges' brilliant use of a traditional form.

NOTES

1. Richard Burgin, *Conversaciones con Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968): 48.

2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Introducción a la literatura inglesa* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Columba, 1965): 46. My translation.
3. María Esther Vázquez, "Entrevista a Borges," *Jorge Luis Borges*. Edited by Jaime Alazraki. (Madrid: Taurus, 1976): 71.
4. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas III. Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957): 121.
5. Borges, *Introducción a la literatura inglesa*, 47.
6. Burgin, *Conversaciones*, 48–9.
7. G. Robert Stange, "Browning and Modern Poetry," in *Browning's Mind and Art*. Edited by Clarence Tracy. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968): 153.
8. Ina Beth Sessions, "The Dramatic Monologue," in *PMLA*, 62 (1947): 508.
9. Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963): 85.
10. Langbaum, *Poetry of Experience*, 94.
11. Park Honan, *Browning's Characters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961): 122.
12. Borges, *Introducción a la literatura inglesa*, 47.
13. Robert Browning, *Poetical Works: 1833–1864*, edited by Ian Jack. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970): 594, vv. 79–80. The poem appears on pp. 594–602.
14. Mary Kinzie, "Recursive Prose," *Prose for Borges* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974): 28.
15. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obra poética* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1975): 213.
16. Browning, "By the Fireside," *Poetical Works*, 586, v. 181.
17. Borges, *Obra poética*, 409–10.
18. Emir Rodríguez-Monegal, "Borges: The Reader as Writer," *Prose for Borges*, 120.
19. Silvia Molloy, *Las letras de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1979): 76.
20. Borges, *Obra poética*, 129–30.
21. Kinzie, "Recursive Prose," 34.
22. The poem is, of course, an attempt to find consolation for a needless death—like W. B. Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" and "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory." Interesting in this connection is Jaime Alazraki's discussion of "El Sur," the story in which a librarian who lies dying of septicemia in a hospital in Buenos Aires dreams that he is killed defending his honor in a knife fight somewhere in the South. He sees the "death" as both a wasteful reminder of the country's barbarism and an effort to return to an epic past: "es un exceso y una privación, una destrucción y una forma de realización, una negación y un acto de afirmación." [Jaime Alazraki, *Versiones, Inversiones, Reversiones* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1977): 40.]
23. Robert L. Stevenson cited in Molloy, 124. (I am paraphrasing in English.)
24. Langbaum, *Poetry of Experience*, 79.
25. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Gold of the Tigers: Selected Later Poems*, a bilingual edition, ed. and trans. Alastair Reid. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976): 52, 54.

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MARÍA LUISA BASTOS

*Translated with Daniel Balderston
Whitman as Inscribed in Borges*

For many years I believed that literature, which is almost infinite, was in one man.
BORGES

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. WHITMAN

For the last sixty years, the literature of Borges, an unending text, has been unfolding the variants, the arrangements, the enthusiasms configured in his first books. Tautologically, as Guillermo Sucre observed when commenting on *Elogio de la sombra* (*In Praise of Darkness*), Borges' latest books return to the first Borges, bringing him into a new focus, illuminating and revealing him to us.¹

At the beginning of that text, the identity of which is characterized by movement, and which predicts from the start its future versions, those who will become familiar presences for Borges' readers are already there. They are in the two books he has refused to republish—*Inquisiciones* and *El tamaño de mi esperanza*—in his first three volumes of poetry, and in *Discusión*. Familiar presences: raw material which is predictable because it is constant, but which is also endowed with potentially infinite generative power. The most adequate synecdoches of those presences are the names: Torres Villarroel, Joyce, Berkeley, Cansinos-Assens, Milton, Groussac, Flaubert, Góngora, Quevedo, and Macedonio Fernández. Presences which Borges' texts will not only transform into habit but also into surprise: recognizable signs but also secret traces. On the

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