

Borges the Poet

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The Return of the Repressed: Objects
in Borges' Literature

Contrary to the physical and spiritual plenitude of his poems written during the decade of the twenties, Borges' work after the thirties begins to exhibit a deep change that exalts the disjunction, restlessness, frustration, and breaking up of the harmony that impregnates his first three books. The pleasant strolls are no longer a current activity, and there is no joy either in contemplating the country landscape or in remembering his idyllic childhood. The serenity of the poems becomes internal agitation. The process becomes invisible torture, insomnia, and agony.

His lyric process starts reflecting the rupture with limitless confidence in the two forces that are the bases for poetic certainty and emotional serenity (the youthful quasi-boasting): first, an illuminating and absolute ability of his early experiences to achieve *The Poem* and secondly, an actual ability to be able to build the poems. It would seem that during the thirties, his faith in a capability to accede to poetic revelation, or at least its imminence, is gone. This change is simultaneous with the irruption of the narrative that hides a similar process under the structure of the spectacular stories of *Historia universal de la infamia*.¹

The lyric texts written in these years do not signify, therefore, a mere thematic change in Borges' works. Neither do they represent a newborn vocation of intimacy. Rather, they reflect a profound transformation of his view of literature, the world, and of himself.

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This decisive change in Borgesian literature can be attributed to the same years in which he wrote and published *Historia universal de la infamia*. From this period, his lyric and narrative texts start exhibiting, systematically, a serious questioning of the literary work and of its expressive possibilities.

This transformation can be seen in one of the many levels of the discourse, in the coded presence of objects and diverse materials that, expressing a metaphysical dimension, also show "las interjecciones del cuerpo," the instinctive, the sense of doubt and the sense of failure. In other words, the world has changed, from certainty to uncertainty, from Heaven to Hell.

Borges' early poetry associates Heaven with the library, with intellectual activity, with an idealized childhood, and with Adrogué. In "The Thing I Am" from *Historia de la noche*, the reference to ordinary co-existence between Heaven and Hell is clearly explicit for the first time in this highly coded poetry.

In the early texts the sense of happiness and plenitude is evident. Hell is also there but hidden, and potentially ready to develop. In the poems written during the twenties in recollection of Borges' childhood, Hell is perceived as waiting to appear at the first sign of self doubt or pain. The signs of the painful side of life are, from this point of view, expressed by realities or objects such as labyrinths, felines, coins, jails, bars, gratings, parks, stones, iron, precious metals, mirrors, sand, nails and mud. It is easy to see in each one of these materials the obvious metaphysical power which they contain. But we can also perceive, in the cyphered and paradoxical discourse, the presence of instinct and elementary fear repressed by a powerfully intellectual literary thought.

Without attempting to demonstrate in detail how all these objects function in relationship to each other, their similarities and differences, their nuances and shades of meaning, an attempt will be made to show how some of them function in these texts. The purpose is to illustrate how they express a more secret and carefully hidden aspect of life in the literature of Borges and also how they reflect a strong lyric dimension that develops through the years and through his texts.

Adrogué is one of the privileged spaces in the work of Jorge Luis Borges. The name appears in poems, serves as titles for some of them and also for an anthology in 1977. If the name is mentioned, it is also

suggested by smells and sensations which the reader learns to identify with relative ease. Adrogué is the space of a Utopia which, around 1923, he wants to find again, gives up around 1960, and, toward 1977 remembers again. Adrogué is the paradise within his memory, although in maturity Adrogué often becomes the labyrinth implying loss and at times horror.

Toward 1930, Borges' conception of horror is still an aesthetic experience. It is still the "pleasant horror" of nights spent with his favorite books, with his youthful readings. In these readings, recollected around 1930 in the prologue to *Evaristo Carriego*, the labyrinth, the Minotaur, and even fear, are each perceived as one of the forms of existence in Paradise. This is a sort of pleasant horror, protected from the outside world, and controlled by imagination and intelligence as well as by the library. We notice that Adrogué (one Paradise) includes the library of the poet's father (the other Paradise), thus making up two heavens, one inside the other. Nevertheless, in all of these youthful poems the demoniac virtualities are potentially present from the beginning. Adrogué is also the labyrinth; at the same time, the library also represents Babel. At what point do the infernal virtualities latent in these spaces come to predominate over the idyllic atmosphere?

The poems written in the decade of the thirties, show that the exciting horror becomes real agony during this period. In the texts of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *Luna de Enfrente*, and *Cuaderno San Martín*, Adrogué, the library, the labyrinth and objects in general, represent a state of happiness, a state of delight. The labyrinth and the reading activities have an intellectual and playful function which is manifested in "perplexity": "I thought: If I had a magnifying glass and the luck to see well, I could discover the Minotaur."

The same thing occurs in *the South*, identified with Adrogué: it is also the definitive place of dreams and imagination.

In Borges' more mature works, the labyrinth becomes inhabited by the Minotaur, who is perceived as a prisoner who "waits" for his redeemer or his immolator. From that point on, the labyrinth acquires the connotation of a jail, horror, and a true inferno. Erik Lönnrot, one of the Borgean characters, is destroyed in a physical and intellectual labyrinth, and in spite of himself, it is in a labyrinth that Yu Tsun murders Albert. In *Elogio de la sombra* (1969), the poem entitled "Labyrinth" has the

Minotaur as its lyric subject, a pathetic prisoner of "the stone nets," of the "road of monotonous walls," still awaiting its liberator. The monstrous and desolate nature of the locked up beast is also quickly transferred, very early, to the tiger, to Oedipus, and to Janus, who appear in several poems in *El hacedor* (1960).

The atrocious glimpses of life, experienced as a prison, can later be seen in the poet's abundant use of gratings, bars, cages, swords, daggers, and other immurements. One also becomes aware of limitations, of frontiers which confine vibrant and bloody tigers anxious for freedom. The library which has been Paradise becomes a jail and a labyrinth made more painful by the blindness which impedes (prevents) its full enjoyment. The consciousness of anguished living is also expressed by the poet's mentioning ungraspable materials such as sand.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the insistence of the poems, and of the short stories, in expressing the horror of life, there is also a subtle development of a parallel line of feelings whose meaning is to expose the return of vital exaltation always carefully repressed in the Borgean discourse. This is the presence of instinct, which also assumes an enigmatic coded form.

Referring to the afternoon of Socrates' death, Borges comments on the *Phaedon* and what the philosopher said when they set him free from his chains: "How strange! The chains were heavy. It was a form of pain. Now I feel relieved because they've taken them off. Pleasure and pain go together, they are twins!" Borges adds: "How remarkable it is that at that moment, on the last day of his life, he shouldn't say that he's about to die, but rather that pleasure and pain are inseparable."²

Immediately thereafter, Borges' explanation centers on an apology of the senses, of the material, concrete aspect of life in order to finally postulate the dialectic of the desire to live, against the desire to cease. The process may be seen within the structure of his texts from the moment in which living becomes intolerable. This phenomenon explains a kind of recovery of lyric serenity in the poet's later texts. A brief and curious example can be seen in *Tigres azules*, a story in which there is an allusion to the generative, engendering capacity imposed on some magic blue stone disks. This story relates the adventure of Alexander Craigie "professor of Western and Oriental logic," in the process of trying to catch a blue tiger that has lived in his dreams. He travels to the area of the Ganges River

and arrives at a remote village. The atmosphere is primitive and dominated by the physical pullulation of the jungle "which almost penetrates the huts." One night he escapes this village and goes toward a forbidden plateau. There he finds the obsessive color: "Incredibly, it was the blue color of the tiger of my dreams. I wish I had never seen it. I looked closely. The crack was filled with little stones, every one of the same circular form: very smooth and only measuring a few centimeters in diameter."³

The stones represent the sacred tiger. Their function is to engender. In the midst of the tribe's terror, the character, (and narrator, at the same time) displays his discovery.

Finally, the village becomes the stones, the jungle becomes the swamp and the swamp, the jungle. All of the germinal, elemental traits, are here associated with physical, primordial reproduction. This association is not strange to the work of Borges. In "The Circular Ruins," the magician who is prepared to dream up and to engender his son, arises out of the mud, from substance: "No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe sinking in the sacred mud." The old man kisses the mud. When the story ends with a fire, an observation is made concerning the sky which "was rose-colored like a leopard's gums." In the same manner, in *Tigres azules* the presence of the tiger appears (sublimated and hidden in the circular stones), of the mud, of the jungle, of procreation.

In "Simón Carvajal" a poem from *La rosa profunda*, the lyric conclusion identifies the tiger's fate with human destiny, which is simultaneously a destructive force and a destroyed victim: "He was always killing the same immortal tiger. Don't let his destiny surprise you too much. It's yours and mine, except that our tiger has shapes which change endlessly. It's called love, chance, each moment, hate."⁴

Everything seems to lead to the idea that Borges' tiger is a symbolic cypher of man in a manner different from that of the minotaur or Janus (whose connotation is basically tragic, trapped), because they are divided figures. On the contrary, the tiger, the panther and the leopard, become cyphers of a more elementary dimension of the living carnal being: the cypher of the body, of the instinct repressed and displaced by the sublimating discourse which attempts to manifest this only under the form of aesthetic experience. Expressions concerning felines such as

"that fateful splendor" (*Del cielo y del infierno*, 1942) and "terrible elegance" (*Tigres azules*, 1977) also show this.

When an animal is incarcerated, as they appear in many poems, the agony manifest between a purely biological energy and the state of imprisonment clearly illustrates the homology between the beast, tragically cornered by iron bars, and human destiny. Indeed, an obvious meaning of the physical and metaphysical level of life. In "El otro tigre," the lyric text shows the savage and free animal animated by the imagination, next to "the vocative tiger" of the verse, the tiger that is a cypher of man, "shape" of his dreams, and verbal signifier. It is in this tiger that the double clue of the feline is centered: one dimension is the tellurian and the atavistic, which are repressed and carry the implication of torture and suffering; the other one is the principle of life and imagination (the "vocative tiger" of the poems or the free tiger in the poet's dreams) which breaks through the repression either to denounce the prison or to wander lively in the jungle imagined by the lyric subject. It is precisely the latter one that establishes the balance in the texts.

These animals and objects and their dialectic connotation convey the most complex lyricism in Borges' texts due to their symmetrical balance of intimate confession and, at the same time, their masterful art of hiding the true being who pretends (in the explicit dimension of the texts) only to be playing with thoughts, with "the labyrinths of the spirit."

NOTES

1. It has been studied in detail how the short stories of *Historia universal de la infamia* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1954) destroy the narrative verisimilitude, secretly throughout the irony of the discourse which distorts history, and throughout the manipulative power of human language as it is used by the narrators.

2. Translation mine.

3. Translation mine.

4. Translation mine.

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Enumerations as Evocations: On the Use of a
Device in Borges' Latest Poetry

Enumerations in literature are as old as the Old Testament, but in modern times they have achieved the status of an established rhetorical device only since the writing of Walt Whitman. Such are the conclusions of Detlev W. Schumann and Leo Spitzer, two critics who have studied enumerations in contemporary poetry. Spitzer summarized his findings in a well known essay entitled "Chaotic Enumerations in Modern Poetry."¹ There he says: "All seems to indicate that we owe chaotic enumerations as a poetic device to Whitman."² In a different essay devoted to Whitman, Spitzer defines the device as "consisting of lumping together things spiritual and physical, as the raw material of our rich, but un-ordered modern civilization which is made to resemble an oriental bazaar. . . ."³ If enumerations have been, until Whitman, one of the most effective means of describing the perfection of the created world in praise of its Creator, it was Whitman's task to render that same perfection and unity into attributes of our chaotic modern world."⁴ Whitman did not invent the device, but he used it with such intensity and skill that his poetry became a showcase of the rich possibilities offered by the device for poets who succeeded him. In Spanish America, Darío and Neruda were deeply influenced by Whitman and his enumerative style. So was Borges, who wrote about Whitman and on enumerations as early as 1929.

In a short note entitled "The Other Whitman," he argued that Europeans misread Whitman: "They turned him into the forerunner of many provincial inventors of free verse. The French aped the most vulnerable

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