

Borges the Poet

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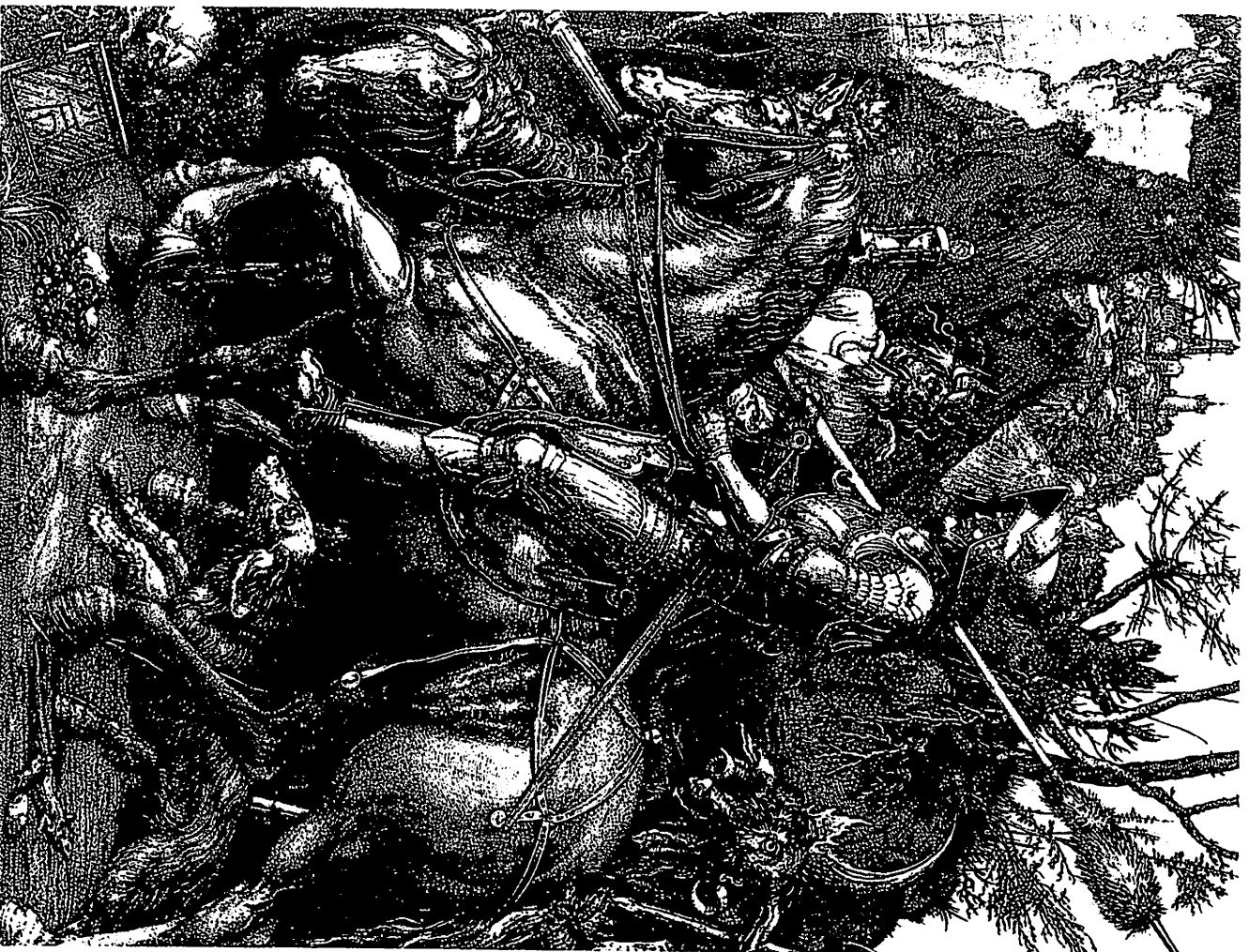
"Knight, Death and the Devil"—Dürer's Imprint
on Two Poems by Borges

If there are indeed seven types of ambiguity, as the well-known critical study by Empson posits,¹ then Borges has certainly availed himself of every opportunity to manifest them in his tales and poems, sometimes modifying them according to his creative needs.

Not only does he present many of his subjects through the technique of ambiguity, he frequently seeks out that which in itself is ambiguous. A case in point is the famous engraving by Albrecht Dürer popularly known as "Knight, Death and the Devil."

In *Delle Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* (Florence, 1568), Giorgio Vasari refers to Dürer's engraving as one of several by the artist "of such excellence that nothing finer can be achieved."² Vasari goes on to laud the technical execution of the engraving's pictorial elements: "In order to depict human fortitude, he engraved an armored knight on horseback with such perfection that even the glitter of his weapons and the skin of his steed can be discerned."³

While these external qualities designate the work as technically masterful, they are only means to a higher purpose: to transport the internal meaning of the piece. It is that deeper level of nuance and ambiguity that has made Dürer's engraving both fascinating and controversial. Originally titled "Der Reuter" (The Rider), the 1513 print possesses an eso-



"Knight, Death and the Devil"—Dürer Imprint

teric nature founded on issues of identity, placement and symbolism. All of these focus on the Knight, whose very position at the front center of the work leads the eye to his enigmatic face. The Knight looks ahead impassively, his face worn by experience and time, his expression more introspective than fixed.

It has been suggested by Thausing that the Knight is the personification of the sanguine temperament, using the "S" before the date as the clue to that particular humor.⁴ But to Sandrart, he was "the Great Christian Knight,"⁵ while Weber considers the Knight to have been modeled on a concept formulated by Erasmus in *Enchiridion militis christiani*, an early sixteenth century treatise which promoted the view that every Christian must be a soldier of Christ passing through the dark wood of earthly life armed with the weapons of the Faith.⁶

Whatever his provenance and identity, the Knight is the hub upon which all the other images are arrayed. The circularity of the work is also implicit in the arcs defined by the Knight's lance; were he to rotate the weapon, it would inscribe a circle encompassing everything in the engraving. Since the handle and tip of the lance each culminate well beyond the borders of the engraving plate, the circle would enclose the rectangular area wholly. This circular placement of essentially Medieval images around an impassive Knight in full armor may symbolize the emergence of Man in the Renaissance as the center of his world, no longer perturbed by the anxieties of the earlier age.

Within this encircled rectangle are two juxtaposed triangles. The upper figure has as its base the horizontally dominant horse, while its sides are delineated by the lance on the left and the inclined slope on the right; at the apex of this suggested triangle is the helmeted head of the Knight. This is the *superior* triangle, the one that points to and parallels the distant mountain at whose apex is the turreted city.

The lower triangle is askew, its inverted base formed by an imaginary line between Death and the Devil, while its lower point is the skull, set off at the left. This is the *inferior* triangle, the one that points to the nether regions: the Underworld of Death, the Hell of the Devil.

The superior triangle is composed of "living" elements—the horse Knight (who together signify a cruciform)—while the inferior triangle is composed of "dead" elements—the manifestations of physical death and the eternal death of the soul. The readily-seen superior triangle

draws its prominence from its placement in the engraving, a manifestation of Dürer's belief in human fortitude; the less-recognizable inferior triangle owes its obscurity to placement in a secondary position in the engraving, symbolic of the darkness of the nether world and its potential danger, even if no longer the prime concern of civilized man in the Renaissance.

Transmogrified into the beastly he-goat of Medieval European folklore, the Devil lurks behind and to the rear of the rider. His evil eyes display the ire of having been bypassed by the unerring Knight.

Just ahead of the rider and behind his pictorial plane, a satyr-like Death looks askance at the failed Devil. The nag on which Death is mounted looks to earth as if transfixed by the skull placed on a tree stump. The nag is in seeming forward motion; if it reaches the skull, it will form a "toll gate" which the Knight will cross or not at some unknown moment out of time.

Still motion. The progress of Death's decrepit mount, as of the Knight's noble steed,⁷ is forever halted in the immutability of the engraving. Never will the nag reach the skull; never will its nagging bell toll a deadly knell. Neither will the Knight's horse encounter Death's divide; it may be almost above the skull, almost at the intersection of the nag's path, but the confrontation will never obtain. And if the dog is indeed symbolic of Veritas, as Panofsky asserts,⁸ its lagging behind the horse's pace, if with insistent urgency, underlines the fact that the Knight will never have his ultimate moment of truth—the encounter with Death.

Dürer makes another statement on the fixedness of the scene through the hourglass held by Death. The two chambers are almost equally filled with sand but no more will flow. Time has been stopped. All the elements of the work are fixed in the midst of progressing towards an encounter, accomplishing some task, or fulfilling destiny. There remains only suspended animation.

At this moment of recognition that time has been suspended, another level of meaning emerges. Man, the viewer, is seeing and experiencing Dürer's print within the context of human time. The timelessness of the print is a mockery of the human condition of the viewer, whose linear time elapses as he assesses the suspended time of the Knight.

It is at this juncture of viewer and object viewed that Borges enters the picture. He approaches Dürer's engraving from two perspectives,

each presented in a different poem. In "Ritter, Tod, und Teufel (I)," Borges first assesses certain figurative elements of the work, proceeds to an interpretation of the ethical values inherent in the Knight, and makes a laudatory bow to his valor and worthiness in the face of formidable enemies.

Beneath the esoteric helmet lies the stern
profile, as cruel as the cruel sword that
lies in wait. Through barren forest
rides the Knight in his serenity arrayed.
Torpid, furtive, the obscene throng
has circled him: the Devil with his abject
eyes, the labyrinthine snakes,
the white old man with sandglass in his hand.
Knight of Iron, whose ever looks at you
intuits that within there's neither falsehood
nor the pale of fear. Your lot is hard
for you command, affront: You're brave as well
and surely will not prove unworthy,
German, of the Devil and of Death.⁹

For Borges, the Knight is steadfast in the confrontation with evil and death, a heroic figure worthy of emulation.

The second poem brings the observer of the first work into the context of the engraving, if not into its cryogenic time. Borges assesses the metaphysical implications of Dürer's hard statement in "Ritter, Tod, und Teufel (II)":

There are two paths. The one the man
of iron and of pride pursues upon his steed,
firm in faith, through the uncertain forest
of the world, between the mocking taunts the Devil mouths
and the immobile dance of Death. The other,
mine, the briefer path. Of what forgotten
night or morning of some ancient day did my own eyes
discover this fantastic work,
the everlasting epic scheme that Dürer dreamed—
the hero and his throng of shades
which seek, then lie in wait and then encounter me?
It is I and not the paladin who is exhorted by the white
old man whose head is crowned by sinuous snakes.
The depsydra's successive measure
counts my time, not his eternal now.

I will become but ash and darkest space;
I, who set out last, will first attain
my mortal end; yet you, who have no life,
you, Knight of the unswording sword
and of the rigid woods, will hold your path
as long as men endure—
unmoved, imaginary, everlasting.¹⁰

Borges' concern with Time first becomes evident in terms of his seeking to locate the moment in his own time when he *saw* the work initially. He seems to be trying to locate a time when his eyesight was not impaired, a time when he viewed the engraving and reacted to its visual elements and its deeper structure.

But the poems appeared in print in 1968, when Borges was already unable to distinguish more than "a kind of luminous greyish or bluish or greenish mist," as he himself calls it.¹¹ If indeed the poems were written around that time, Borges had to have recalled Dürer's engraving rather than actually see it again. His impression of it would, of necessity, have been limited. This would explain why neither poem considers many of the engraving's important visual elements: the dog, the salamander, the skull, the distant city . . . and the mystical geometry in which they are ensconced. Such omissions are consistent with faulty memory, one of the hazards (or, ambiguously, blessings?) of "emotion recollected in tranquility," as Wordsworth so memorably phrased it.

Or is it a matter of selectivity? If the poem is Borges' attempt to recall the moment in which he unlocked the personal meaning of Dürer's engraving rather than the moment when he first saw it, the exclusion of certain elements takes on a different guise. Borges may have chosen for these poems only those elements of the piece which he identified with his personal interpretation of its meaning.

If Dürer's Knight symbolizes the Christian armored by the Faith against the wiles of the Devil and an attendant eternal death, then Borges' exclusion of this theologically oriented motif from his poems is telling evidence that the engraving has another level of interpretation for him. Borges eschews the Christian identification altogether, obviously considering it extraneous to the modern assessment of the engraving. Such elements which were of value to the Christian ethos during Dürer's time are held by an agnostic Borges to be cumbersome, even to detract from the work's modern immediacy.

Immediacy is an important factor to Borges, who has said of his own work: "When I write poetry, I tend to think of something immediate, downright."¹² Thus, he concentrates his attention on the most accessible element in the engraving—the Knight. It is the human condition of the Knight that is of most immediacy to another human being, Borges. Yet in the comparison of the two human existences, the one portrayed and the one being lived, the reality of the poet suffers greatly: the Knight will exist in his "eternal now" while the poet, mortal man, "will become but ash." The great irony, of course, is the comparison of human mortality to the survival of human works. Dürer has passed on, but "Der Reuter" will continue in a state of suspended animation with metaphysical ramifications for human beings, "as long as men endure."

The experience of age behind him, Borges has assessed the main figurative element of the engraving and found in the Knight's serenity, stoicism and relentless pursuit of the goal, despite gruesome hazards, a heroism of magnificent proportions. He does not begrudge the Knight his everness in the ironic context of art's timelessness; Borges has learned to accept the limitations put upon him by his human condition, yet he admires (he cannot emulate) the Knight's existence.

Out of the numerous ambiguities which Dürer's engraving presents, Borges has come to grips admirably with the central enigma, that which has most immediacy. Thus, the imprint of Dürer on Borges is that of one insightful artist upon another, man speaking to man across the centuries about the most ambiguous subject of all, Man.

NOTES

1. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1931).
2. Quoted in Walter L. Strauss, ed., *The Complete Engravings, Etchings & Drypoints of Albrecht Dürer* (New York: Dover, 1973): 150. Antecedents of "Knight, Death and the Devil" are "Horse and Rider," a large watercolor of 1498 presently in the Albertina in Vienna, and two small pen-and-ink studies titled "Knight on Horseback," done on the recto and verso of the same sheet, now in the Ambrosiana in Milan.
3. Strauss, *Complete Engravings*.
4. Moritz Thausing, *Dürer, Geschichte seines Lebens und seiner Kunst* (Leipzig, 1884). Thausing's theory is faulty on the evidence in the engraving since the warm, passionate, cheerful temperament and ruddy complexion associated with this humor are not present in the Knight's visage. To Campbell Dodgson, *Albrecht Dürer. Numbered Catalogue of Engravings, Dry-Points and Etchings with Technical Details* (London, 1926), the "S" stands for *Salus* equivalent to *Anno salutis* (In the Year of Grace), a form of dating employed by Dürer else-

where. My own view is that the "S" may be a stylized snake, a subtle re-statement of the sinuous motifs in Death's headgear and on its shoulders, as well as a third element in association with them and the crawling salamander.

5. Joachim von Sandart, *Teutsche Academie der Edlen Bau- Bild- und Mahlerey Kunstle* (Nuremberg, 1675). Other interpretations range from H. S. Husgen's view of the work as "symbolic of the knight's implety", *Raisonnerendes Verzeichnus aller Kupferund Eisenstiche von Albrecht Dürer* (Frankfort-Leipzig, 1778), to Joseph Heller's ideas that the work may either depict Franz von Sickingen, a notorious 16th century knight much feared throughout Germany, or that it may be a variation on a painting "which bears the legend: 'Let all hell break loose and fight, I'll ride down the devil with might.'" However, Dürer's Knight has by-passed the Devil and ignores him.

6. Weber. *Beiträge zu Dürers Wellanschlaunung* (Strassburg, 1900): 13.

7. Two engravings, "The Great Horse" and "The Little Horse," both dated 1505, show Dürer's interest in herotically executed horses. The Knight's steed in "Der Reuter" is highly modeled, anatomically constructed in idealized proportions, perhaps inspired in Leonardo's St. George monument, designed for Milan. Also of 1505, is a powerful drawing in charcoal titled "Death on Horseback," which depicts a more traditional skeletal figure with scythe riding a decrepit nag.

8. Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer, I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943).

9. This poem did not appear first in a periodical but in *Variaciones sobre un tema de Dürero* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1968). It was published subsequently in Jorge Luis Borges, *Elogio de la sombra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969). The poem is in my translation.

10. First published in *Allantida* (Buenos Aires, September 1968). Dürer's Death holds an hourglass or sandglass, not a "clepsidra" as Borges' poem has it. The clepsidra is a device for measuring time through the regulated flow of water or mercury via a small aperture. The translation is mine.

11. Mark Childress and Charles C. McNair Jr. "The Dark Riddle of Jorge Luis Borges," *Saturday Review* (New York, March 1983): 83.

12. Childress and McNair, *Saturday Review*, 34.

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