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Intimations on a Possible Immortality:  
Ambiguity in *Elogio de la sombra*

Just a few months after the publication of *In Praise of Darkness* (*Elogio de la sombra*),<sup>1</sup> 1969, Borges spoke at the University of Wisconsin. His short prose piece from this book, "A Prayer," was read and then the author commented on it. The next day, the very reputable *Wisconsin State Journal* carried an article, supposedly quoting the English translation, stating that in the story Borges had said: "My wish is to die *holy*." The Spanish original says, "Quiero morir del todo," which translates, "I want to die *wholly*," completely, forever. The reporter had simply missed a small phoneme and then had to justify the word *holy* with a paragraph of unnecessary and inaccurate explanation.

In this instance, the error is obviously the reporter's, yet it demonstrates the ambiguity that Borges himself has often loosed in his poetry and prose. Scores of critics have noted ambiguities in Borges' works, unresolved dichotomies relating to both the physical world and metaphysical concepts of the universe, man's mind, and existence in general. A recent article even points to ambiguity with respect to Buenos Aires, and Borges' constant wavering between urban amenities and the dangers of the unsettled pampa.<sup>2</sup> Borges would probably settle right on the edge of town, the suburbs, to be able to enjoy the best of two contrasting worlds. Ambiguity relating to death and the possibility of an afterlife is a dominant motif in Borges' work and forms the basis of the present

study, an examination of this motif with special emphasis on the poetry and prose of *In Praise of Darkness*.

The initiated reader has already been exposed to preoccupations with death and immortality in the writer's earlier fiction and essays. "The Circular Ruins" and "The Immortals" depict helpless, almost pitiful souls, anguishing over the discovery of their immortality, and the inability to control their own destinies, to die *wholly*. "The Secret Miracle" is quite the opposite: Hladik mentally projects himself into timeless immortality but is suddenly brought to a realization of impending death inflicted by German bullets. These are only three of scores of stories whose characters fight and play with immortality. Some characters attempt, and at times succeed, to multiply their own image endlessly, into an eternity of timelessness or mirrored repetition. Borges' stories, essays and early poetry often depict an endless universe which represents "the endlessness of endlessness of endlessness ad infinitum."<sup>3</sup>

This early expressed motif of immortality recurs with dramatic emphasis in the little-studied *In Praise of Darkness*. It was published on Borges' seventieth birthday and many thought that it would be the author's last major work, his final gift to an anxious world. It was quickly followed, however, by a new book of stories, four more books of poetry and by many other original prose selections. *In Praise of Darkness* was eclipsed by the success and rapidity of publication of these later books; and criticism has not caught up with the author and his recent poetry. A few isolated poems in *In Praise of Darkness* have been analyzed, usually with structural criticism,<sup>4</sup> and Guillermo Sucre has devoted a brief chapter to the book.<sup>5</sup> Much still remains for the energetic critic: ordering, analyzing and interpreting.

*In Praise of Darkness* consists of thirty-four poetic pieces, twenty-nine of which are obviously poems, and indeed "look" like poems, and five other mini-short stories, narrative outbursts of poetic prose. Fourteen of these thirty-four creations deal directly with death, finality, mortality, or immortality, the single most dominant idea in the book. It would be erroneous to interpret all these poems and narrations in an autobiographical sense—Borges is *not* Pedro Salvadores nor Fred Murdock. Yet Borges' personal experiences and feelings loom closely behind most of the poems. Alazraki has already pointed out that the author's recent books of

poetry have turned inward, with little concern for sunlit patios, plazas and the South, and deal with the intimate, subjective life, usually that of the author.<sup>6</sup> Gone are most of the obtuse metaphors and verbal plays of Ultraism, replaced by enumerations of nouns, usually relating to the author's familiar world and experiences. Borges the poet expresses many personal reflections and concerns in *In Praise of Darkness*; if they are not always consistent and clear, neither is life, nor death. A fallacy of much Borgesian criticism is the desire to see only the author behind each poem and analyze the work in terms of his personal experience, or his own personal anguish. This approach unduly limits the poetic significance and requires a knowledge of the author's life and innermost feelings for understanding, thus limiting the possible scope of the poetry. This study examines seven of the pieces in *In Praise of Darkness* as creations with universal expressiveness and meaning.

Several of the fourteen poems dealing with death and immortality project a despair, a desire to "end it all at the end." The prose piece "A Prayer" typifies this desire for oblivion. The few critics who have discussed the work have overlooked the fact that despite the title, the piece is not really a prayer; rather, a few mental wanderings about prayer. The poet reminds himself that he cannot really ask for miracles (that darkness not wholly descend on his eyes), nor can he ask for mercy, for to do so would be to change a major link in the chain of eternity. Finally, toward the end of the long paragraph comes the first supplication: "I want to be remembered less as a poet than as a friend." A simple request, curiously affirming that the poet desires some salvation from oblivion; he wants to live on in the memory of others, as a friend. The last sentence is a final entreaty to divinity, perhaps the only real prayer in the entire piece: "I want to die wholly; I want to die with this companion, my body." Within the work the poet presents a somewhat ambiguous request—a desire for complete oblivion but at the same time prolonged life in the memory of others. Nevertheless, the desire to disappear completely is the predominant idea. In the first sentence, the poet indicates that his mouth regularly recited the Lord's Prayer. He is removed personally; it is his *mouth*, not his mind, or heart, which pronounces this rote prayer, and after struggling for a whole paragraph for the right thing to say, the poet only expresses one wish—complete oblivion and no immortality. Even the title of the piece is ambiguously ironic, since the poet

offers a prayer to some type of divine being, assumed to be immortal, and begs nothing more than complete oblivion. This petitioner is similar to so many Borgesian characters, a heresiarch who depends on God for his being or lack of being.<sup>7</sup>

A similar attitude toward a future is expressed in the excellent sonnet, "Things." In a type of ordered enumeration, as Richard Ford has shown,<sup>8</sup> the poetic voice laments that things last longer than man. The poet moves from the personal to the universal, reminding the reader that "things will last beyond *our* memory / they will never even know that *we* have departed." A delightful but despairing line recalls a violet, "monument to an unforgettable evening, now forgotten." Even memory fades as man disappears. In short, there is no expectation of a future existence, of a life beyond the present.

A third poem, "Heraclitus," reflects on the river of life as a mystery that vanishes into nothingness, and postulates that

Perhaps the source is in me.  
Perhaps from my shadow  
Days spring forth, deadly, imaginary.

Night and nothingness are the winners; existence began with the poet and will obviously end with him. There is to be no continuance.

Several other poems from the book postulate a similar end for man and for human endeavor—nothingness. This is not new; any careful reader recognizes this familiar direction in the author's works. But the same reader must be careful to weigh the three poems here quoted against an equal number of poems from the same collection, for these contradict and counter the above described ideas on death as finality, resulting in excellent literary ambiguity. "The Unending Gift" (the title in English, perhaps because Borges already had too many "poemas de los dones") relates the event of an unfulfilled promise of a painting and the poet's gratitude that it was not completed, because "Men may also make promises; there is something immortal in a promise." *Man* is not part of any immortality yet, but at least it exists, for unfulfilled promises. This profound poem is filled with hope—there seems to be sufficient time for a promise to be completed. Fulfilling the promise would have locked the painting into a fixed time; unfulfilled, it exists in the vastness of an eternity.

"John 1:14" proffers a direct view of immortality. The biblical passage that inspired Borges' poem claims that the Word was with God in the beginning and was made flesh and dwelt on earth. This indicates an ante-mortal life, some pre-mortality, which, of course, would be part of the broader immortality (immortality cannot only refer to life after death, but to life before this present existence). Borges' poem follows the tragic thoughts of the "Word in the Flesh," who, like the poet himself, does not know his destiny but does know that he will be something or someone in another tomorrow, after this life. Christ will live on, and states that "From My Eternity fall these signs," that is, signs as words; so the poem comes to the reader from some eternal fount where deity is now dwelling, and the words have perpetuity of their own.

In the poem "Israel," one Jew may be all Jews—Sampson, Shylock, Spinoza, Moses are all mentioned. Further, a Jew is

A man who insists on being immortal,  
One who has again taken up the battle,  
In the violent light of victory,  
As beautiful as a lion at midday.

Here man's will projects him beyond this life; by his actions he can have some effect on his future existence. Borges marvels at the Hebrew race and religion which have outlasted and will continue to outlive their enemies, their borders, their time. The familiar Borgesian "one man / all men" motif is obviously present in the poem; an immortality is achieved as one man fights the same battles as his distant predecessors.

"His End and His Beginning" (again, the title is in English; how curious that the only two compositions with English titles project man and memory into immortality!) also postulates a very plausible cycle of existence. In this short prose selection the narrator relates the story of a man who slips effortlessly into a seeming dream world, only to realize that he has entered heaven. "He deserved grace; since his death he had always been in heaven" and did not realize it. Echavarría Ferrari wisely argues that Borges here refers to a literary reality, to the author's works continuing and transforming themselves in the minds of unknown, innumerable and hence immortal readers.<sup>9</sup> This is certainly one plausible explanation but it is not the only interpretation. The use of the word "grace" argues for some type of spiritual or religious being who grants eternal favors,

and the word projects a being, an entity, in an eternal sphere, not just a poem or a book. Death occurs and is referred to as the end—heaven is the beginning; there is no line between the two. A more normal title might have been "His Beginning and His End"; beginnings usually precede endings. Borges has purposefully placed the end as the first noun, since death usually concludes existence. But here the end (death) is merely an imperceptible beginning in a continuous life. Man does not cease *being* even in death.

Some of Borges' writings postulate a continuation of existence beyond the present state. About half of them appear in *In Praise of Darkness*; the other half assume *no* immortality. But even if death is the end, "this darkness is slow and painless," says Borges in the title poem, the most autobiographical of all, "In Praise of Darkness." After a recitation of all the things that had always been too numerous in his life, he writes,

Now I can forget them.  
I arrive at my center,  
At my algebra and my key,  
At my mirror.  
Soon I will know who I am.

What calmness and serenity! In death comes self-knowledge and satisfaction. Ceasing *to be* may be the most fulfilling of all possibilities, but if there is more to life, that too could be pleasant. The entire poetry of this book exudes an optimistic mood regarding old age, death and a possible future.

Oswald Romero has counted, catalogued and classified references to God, gods, and the divine in Borges' works. He found more than three-hundred, and these before *La Cifra* and other recent works. God certainly exists in the twentieth century, if in no other place than Borges' writing. Romero notes that in the twenty-two interviews he surveyed, Borges talked of God, Christianity, and the afterlife in nineteen of them.<sup>10</sup> The *Saturday Review* records a conversation with Borges: "I'm a happy agnostic, a rollicking agnostic. I suppose every day we're in heaven, we're in hell."<sup>11</sup>

If one wants to know what Borges thinks about immortality, then one must consult his frequent talks and interviews. He has talked freely on the subject:

—I hope that my death will be total; I hope to die in both body and spirit.<sup>12</sup>  
 —To conclude, I will say that I believe in immortality, not in a personal immortality, rather a cosmic type. We will continue being immortal.<sup>13</sup>  
 —When I think of mortality, of death, I think . . . in a hopeful way, in an expectant way. I should say I am greedy for death, that I want to stop waking up every morning. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, for the reader who would make Borges his prophet, even the author's personal expressions are ambiguous. The first and the third quotations above seem to deny a continuation; the second affirms it. These statements repudiate Monseñor Mallagaray of the University of Jujuy, who rejected Borges for being an atheist, vain and anti-Christian. Borges, the man, however, tells us that he is an agnostic, not an atheist, and has given us contradictory signals regarding an afterlife. Nor is Borges vain or anti-Christian, either in his life or writings.

From this perspective it should be obvious that the time is now past to decide what Borges the man believes or does not believe about God or immortality. What he believes personally will make little difference; in an age of secular humanism, why try to have Borges foretell his future, as if he were a modern prophet? It is time to return to his works and look at them as literature, not as explanations of the author's life. Borges himself appears to argue for this postulate when he says that concerns regarding "immortality occupy a small place in philosophy [and the historical world] and belong more appropriately to poetry."<sup>15</sup> Thus, critics must turn to his poetry rather than the man himself.

The single most important literary motif apparent in *In Praise of Darkness* is ambiguity; dichotomies relating to life and death, faith and reason, Cain and Abel, heroism and cowardice. Death and immortality are present in nearly every selection. The poet does not "decide" the issues; each poem is a separate reality and contradictions between one and another abound. A type of wondrous mischief leads the reader in one direction, only to be countered in the next poem. The yearning for a final death and for a degree of immortality are both positive; the poetry regarding death proposes a calm and peaceful exit from this life and a possible penetration into another—this, a beautiful ambiguity in itself.

Some have suggested that "the Literature of Exhaustion almost totally accounts for Borges' work."<sup>16</sup> They infer that literature is almost all "used up" and hence can only fall back on itself for new energy and inspira-

tion; this type of literature closes the world to new possibilities. To the contrary, the poetry in *In Praise of Darkness* opens up new possibilities, through ambiguity. This time-proven literary device here functions to leave man uncertain of his own future as well as the poet's belief. And why should Borges the poet "solve" this mystery? Life, and literature too, are much more exciting when there is still mystery. Ambiguity and uncertainty reign supreme, even eternal.

## NOTES

1. I will use titles in translations. Translations are my own.
2. María Luisa Bastos, "La topografía de la ambigüedad: Buenos Aires en Borges, Bianco y Bioy Casares," *Hispanérica* 9 (December 1980): 33-46.
3. Carlos Navarro, "The Endlessness in Borges' Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19:3, 395.
4. See Zunilda Gertel's excellent "Heráclito: Conjunción de opuestos," *Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, 19:237-250.
5. Guillermo Sucre, *Borges, el poeta* (Venezuela: Monte Avila, 1968): 127-147. Also Guillermo Sucre, "Borges: el elogio de la sombra," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 36:371-388.
6. Alazraki, Jaime. "Borges o el difícil oficio de la intimidad: Reflexiones sobre su poesía más reciente," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 43 (1977): 449-463.
7. See my study "Heresy as Motif in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges," *Latin American Literary Review*, III, no. 5:23-35.
8. Richard Ford, "La inmortalidad en un soneto de Borges," *Revista de Occidente*, 9 (1976): 59.
9. Unpublished paper in possession of the author; Arturo Echavarría Ferrari, "Muerte y transfiguración del escritor: Borges y (en) sus lectores."
10. Romero, Oswaldo. "Dios en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges: Su teología y su teodicea," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 43 (1977): 465-501.
11. Mark Childress and Charles E. McNair, Jr. "The Dark Riddle of Jorge Luis Borges," *Saturday Review*, (March 1983): 34.
12. Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges, oral* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1979): 28.
13. Borges, *Borges, oral*, 41.
14. Cited in Willis Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty: Conversations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982): 17.
15. Borges, *Borges, oral*, 28.
16. John O. Stark, *The Literature of Exhaustion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1974): 2.

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ALICE POUST

### Knowledge in Borges' *La moneda de hierro*

The idea of poetry as a valid medium for the pursuit and expression of knowledge has become generally accepted in the twentieth century. It has, in fact, become commonplace to speak of contemporary poetry in terms of the knowledge that it offers. What, then, is the nature of the knowledge that Jorge Luis Borges pursues in his poetry? In spite of the fact that the term "scepticism" has been employed by some critics and by Borges himself, regarding his attitude toward the powers of human knowledge, we can observe in the introduction to his recent collection of poetry, *La moneda de hierro*, an affirmation of a special, if limited, kind of knowledge:

Bien cumplidos los setenta años que aconseja el Espíritu, un escritor, por torpe que sea, ya sabe ciertas cosas. La primera, sus límites. Sabe con razonable esperanza lo que puede intentar y—lo cual sin duda es más importante—lo que le está vedado. Esta comprobación, tal vez melancólica, se aplica a las generaciones y al hombre. . . .<sup>3</sup>

En cuanto a mí . . . Sé que este libro misceláneo que el azar fue dejándome a lo largo de 1978, en el yermo universitario de East Lansing y en mi recobrado país, no valdrá mucho más ni mucho menos que los anteriores volúmenes. Este módico vaticinio, que nada nos cuesta admitir, me depara una suerte de impunidad. Puedo consentirme algunos caprichos, ya que no me juzgarán por el texto sino por la imagen indefinida pero suficientemente precisa que se tiene de mí.<sup>3</sup>

In these two passages Borges speaks of a knowledge that pertains to oneself, and by analogy, to people defined by their times, generations,

# BORGES *the Poet*

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