

Origins and Narratives



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Borges' literary career begins with a paradox: in his earliest books of verse, particularly *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923),¹ he assumes the *persona* of the elegist and writes songs of commemoration about his family and his city. In his first collection of essays, *Inquisiciones* (1925), Borges negates the very idea of origins. Later in the nineteen twenties, in a short story, "Hombres pelearon," he synthesizes these antithetical concepts by subsuming them into an archetypal plot of ritual violence. In this plot, this ideal ordering of events, an individual finds his identity, not by discovering what makes him unique, but by living out a role in a timeless drama. What I would like to do here is to trace that process which led Borges from poetry and essays to short fiction.

In the essays of *Inquisiciones*, Borges concludes that the ego (the "yo") is nothing more than a linguistic convention, that space is merely a metaphor derived from perception, that time, likewise, is nothing but a word. Following Berkeley, Schopenhauer, and

¹ The early Borges texts quoted in this essay are these:

Fervor de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires: Privately printed, 1923).

Inquisiciones (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1925).

Luna de enfrente (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1925).

El tamaño de mi esperanza (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1926).

El idioma de los argentinos (Buenos Aires: M. Gleizer Editor, 1928).

Cuaderno San Martín (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1929).

Evaristo Carriego (Buenos Aires: M. Gleizer Editor, 1930).

Discusión (Buenos Aires: M. Gleizer Editor, 1932).

All quotations taken from these first editions.

Nietzsche, Borges asserts that a human being is nothing more than a sensory machine, with no essence, no substantiveness.

Borges' denial in these essays of the ego, time, space, objects, even memory, reflects a profound need to deny any but self-generated origins. This kind of denial makes Borges a direct heir to the Romantic tradition, which has reappeared in our century in the form of Existentialism, or in Existentialism's ironic contradiction, the writings of Jacques Derrida.² Where the Borges of the twenties differs from the Existentialists (and where he seems so much a precursor of Derrida) is in his denial of the ontological imperative to invent a durable, individual personality. In his reduction of all human activity to perceiving, he attempts to render the past, including his own, one huge received idea, one that he views with Nietzschean jaundice.

A pair of essays from *Inquisiciones*, "La nadería de la personalidad," and "La encrucijada de Berkeley," shows how Borges reduces any form of identity to ashes. Paradoxically, in "La nadería de la personalidad," Borges fixes the date of his intuition of the inexistence of time: in 1919 or 1920, when the Borges family was about to leave Mallorca to go to the mainland, Borges describes himself saying good-by to a friend:

Pero encima de cualquier alarde egoista, voceaba en mi pecho la voluntad de mostrar por entero mi alma al amigo. Hubiera querido desnudarme de ella y dejarla allí palpitante. Seguimos conversando y discutiendo, al borde del adiós, hasta que de golpe, con una insospechada firmeza de certidumbre, entendí ser nada esa personalidad que solemos tasar con tan incompatible exorbitancia. Ocurrióseme que nunca

² When François Wahl describes the difference between Derrida and Lacan, represented here by Nietzsche and Plato, he uses terms to describe Nietzsche which might easily describe the Borges of 1925:

Un débat traverse toute la pensée contemporaine, dont les termes extrêmes, affrontés, sous les patronages respectifs de Platon et de Nietzsche, sont le sérieux et le jeu, le fondement et son dérobement, le centre et son absence, l'origine et le toujours-précédé, l'immédiat et l'après-coup, le plein et le supplémentaire, l'un et le manque ou l'excès, l'âme hors le corps et l'inscription, le référent et l'effet littéral, le sens et la signification, la figure et la trace, le rapport et la défaillance du support, le face à face sujet-objet et leur inclusion mutuelle dans un procès de concaténation à la fois formel et matériel, l'être et sa différance, le présent et l'à-distance.

In: *Philosophie: la philosophie entre l'avant et l'après du structuralisme*, Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme?, vol. 5 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 127.

justificaría mi vida un instante pleno, absoluto, contenedor de los demás, que todos ellos serían etapas provisionarias, aniquiladoras del pasado y encaradas al porvenir, y que fuera de lo episódico, de lo presente, de lo circunstancial, no éramos nadie. Y abominé de todo misteriosismo.

(p. 90)

This antiproustian anecdote lies at the core of what was then Borges' thinking and it alone should suffice to show why that thinking could never be systematic, why it remained a *boutade* instead of becoming philosophy. In this passage, Borges confuses logical demonstration with dramatic anecdote and cannot escape the "first-person" he rejects. It is here that the problematic "Borges" of so many later stories is born, the Borges of "Borges y yo."

Above all, Borges wants to use his attack on the *ego* as the basis for an esthetics, "una estética, hostil al psicologismo que nos dejó el siglo pasado, afecta a los clásicos y empero alentadora de las más discolas tendencias de hoy." (*Inq.*, p. 84) The nineteenth century, according to Borges, made a fetish of the *ego* and therein committed a double error: the first was to ascribe to the *ego* a reality it never possessed; and the second was to think that any individual was in some way unique. The claim to be unique is, for this Borges, an absurdity, since to be human is to be capable of a given number of experiences, which, since they are common to all, are aspects of what it is to be human and, therefore, incapable of individualizing anyone. Borges says he wants to:

considerar la víacrucis por donde se encaminan fatalmente los idólatras de su yo. Ya hemos visto que cualquier estado de ánimo, por advenedizo que sea, puede colmar nuestra atención; vale decir, puede formar, en su breve plazo absoluto, nuestra esencialidad. Lo cual, vertido al lenguaje de la literatura, significa que procurar expresarse, y querer expresar la vida entera, son una sola cosa y la misma. Afanosa y jadeante correría entre el envión del tiempo y el hombre, quien a semejanza de Aquiles en la preclara adivinanza que formuló Zenón de Elea, siempre se verá rezagado . . .

(*Inq.*, p. 91)

To attempt to make life into art, to attempt to make the perceiving machine into a monolithic singer of itself is to commit esthetic suicide. Borges makes esthetic subjectivism seem like a nonexistent dog attempting to catch its own tail.

Borges ultimately rejects reality itself in this period, and he compares reality to the reflection we see in a mirror because both are mutable:

La Realidad es como esa imagen nuestra que surge en todas los espejos, simulacro que por nosotros existe, que con nosotros viene, gesticula y se va, pero en cuya busca basta ir, para dar siempre con él.

("La encrucijada de Berkeley," p. 119)

Perceived reality changes, the perceiver comes and goes. There can be no doubt that Borges' definition of human beings as perceiving machines makes us wonder just what value living has.

For Borges, it would seem, as for Mallarmé, reality is nothing more than a precondition for the generation of literary texts. But this thesis, with all its adherent ironies—loss of self being the primary irony—does not appear in its totality in Borges' writings until many years later. In *Inquisiciones*, Borges is determined to debunk the *ego* for the sake of his esthetics, which in turn he bases on the production of new metaphors. He mocks any writer's attempt to express himself because of the impersonal nature of language:

El lenguaje—gran fijación de la constancia humana en la fatal movilidad de las cosas—es la discolorada forzosidad de todo escritor. Práctico, inliterario, mucho más apto para organizar que para conmover, no ha recabado aún su adecuación a la urgencia poética y necesita troquelarse en figuras.³

Ordinary language, then, is consubstantial with reality. In itself language is metaphoric, as Borges demonstrates by showing that nouns⁴ are merely metaphors for a series of adjectives or qualities, and of itself it is useful only as a device for communicating with other people. Like that image in the mirror, it is always there when we seek it out, just one more element in the continuous flow of perceiving. Making new images, for Borges the basic esthetic act, subverts language: it takes a utilitarian device and makes it serve ornamental or decorative ends; it also makes something strange out of something familiar—a key element in Formalist esthetics.

Borges' speculations about the *ego*, his reduction of humanity to perceiving devices, and his desire to abolish origins are all mysteriously absent from his poetry. To be sure, his preoccupation with metaphor remains, and it is in the poetry that we see the esthetician

³ "Examen de metáforas," *Inquisiciones*, p. 67.

⁴ "En lugar de contar frío, filoso, hiriente, inquebrantable, brillador, puntiagudo, enunciamos puñal, en sustitución de ausencia de sol y progresión de sombra, decimos que anochece," "Examen de metáforas," *Inquisiciones*, p. 66.

become a practicing artist. Borges' first two collections of verse, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) and *Luna de enfrente* (1925) are elegiac in nature,⁵ concerned with preserving a vanishing cityscape and the memory of certain figures in Argentine history, particularly those in Borges' family. When he returned from Europe in 1921, Borges saw his city with new eyes: he was no longer a child whose experience was limited to his own house and garden. He discovered a metropolis ringing with the corrupt Spanish of immigrants, a city swallowing itself up.

This din and urban cannibalism ought to have been fascinating to a young poet who had participated in Spanish *Ultraísmo*, itself heavily influenced by Italian Futurism. But Borges was never enthralled by the Futurist technological esthetics, and the one overtly Futurist image he uses in the early twenties—oddly enough in *Inquisiciones*—"y el gasómetro rojo. (¡Qué gran tambor de Juicios Finales ese último!)," ("Después de las imágenes," p. 28) sounds slightly absurd. The literary Borges of the twenties recalls Ezra Pound: both disdained the immediate literary past and both sought to rewrite literary history as a way of correcting literary taste. (Borges devotes two collections of essays, *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926) and *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928) to the problem of writing in a way consistent with the best in Argentine culture instead of imitating foreign models.) But where Pound turns to satire, Borges turns to elegy, to preserving the very origins he had taken such pains to deny in *Inquisiciones*.

Typical of the poems about his ancestors is "Inscripción sepulcral, para el coronel don Francisco Borges, mi abuelo." Borges wants this poem to be read as a funerary inscription, an epitaph, and his printed words are to be taken as the simulacrum of a tombstone. His grandfather is dead, absent forever, remembered by only a few: the text will try to supplement fallible memory by commemorating his deeds forever. At the same time, the poem includes something else: it includes the living Borges in the commemoration, and in doing so saves that mortal perceiver of cities and people from oblivion. There is nothing rare in this—we think of "Lycidas"—and Borges' poem on his grandfather follows a traditional schema: he addresses his ancestor—the use of apostrophe itself rendering the grandfather somehow more-than-human—in the first two poetic sentences:

⁵ See my "Et in Arcadia ego: Borges' Elegiac Poetry," *Revista hispánica moderna*, nos. 1-2(1976), pp. 53-61.

Las cariñosas lomas orientales,
 los ardientes esteros paraguayos
 y la pampa rendida
 fueron ante tu alma
 una sola violencia continuada.
 En el combate de La Verde
 desbarató tanto valor la muerte.

Fervor, p. 57)

This apostrophe calls to mind the nature poet's attempt to give life and magical presence to his subject, and in so doing, it does something typical of much modern lyric: "It tries to overcome the secondary or elegiac aspect of language by making language coterminous with life."⁶

This is the essence of Borges' "doublethink" of the early twenties: the printed word, a reminder of absences, becomes if not life then at least its image, the only possible reality left when one negates time. The elegiac nature of the poetic discourse guarantees immortality for both the subject (the grandfather) and the poet, as we see in the final poetic sentence:

Si esta vida contigo fue acerada
 y el corazón, airada muchedumbre
 se te agolpó en el pecho,
 ruego al justo destino
 aliste para tí toda la dicha
 y que toda la inmortalidad sea contigo.

(Fervor, p. 57)

The printed word is inscribed here as a self-portrait of the artist worshipping at the tomb of his ancestor. Both are free from the flux of perception because both have become part of the work of art.

Borges' ancestor worship is mysterious. The ancestors he chooses to consecrate are uniformly masculine, which suggests that they may all be avatars of his father.⁷ The idea that these ancestors, that all of the past in fact, is a father to be appeased—at times belatedly, as in the case of Lugones—becomes more believable when we see

⁶ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry," *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1971), p. 228.

⁷ Borges' father did not die until 1938. He did, however, publish a novel, *El Caudillo* (Mallorca: Imprenta Mallorquina de Juan Guasp Reines, 1921), in which the aged *caudillo* destroys the youthful protagonist who was to have married his daughter. Borges aided his father both in the redaction and the composition of this text.

that Borges wrote a commemorative poem for Juan Manuel de Rosas, who had yet another of Borges' ancestors murdered. Rosas was actually a very distant relative of the Borges family, so his presence in Borges' pantheon may be explained purely as a family matter; but one of Rosas' rivals, Juan Facundo Quiroga, receives his poetic monument in *Luna de enfrente* (1925). "El general Quiroga va en coche al muere" is unique in Borges' early poetry because it is not an epitaph but a kind of rhapsodic interior soliloquy, evocative of Browning, but different because it contains a third-person narrator. Borges evokes Quiroga's rendezvous with death as an oneiric coach ride to the next world; it is as though Quiroga is dead—like Benjamín Otálora of "El muerto"—before he meets his murderers.

Quiroga's error is to think himself an intrinsic part of life, an archetype rather than a mortal individual. Borges clearly admires this self-deception and writes his poem in such a way that Quiroga will be depicted in the process of living. This technique differentiates Quiroga from Borges' ancestors: they are to be commemorated, even placated, because they are dead, while Quiroga, as unaware as a cat of the possibility of death, is to be admired as the incarnation of the life-force. This force, present both in Facundo and in Borges' bellicose ancestors, always expresses itself through violence, as if nothing were so essential to life as that which destroys life.

The homage to violence, a step closer to prose narrative, renders life identical to violence—a Heraclitian echo perhaps—with both subsumed into language. But for Borges language is ultimately a written text because oral speech leads only to death while the printed page preserves some part of its author. The theme of violence obliges Borges to interpret the notion of archetype, an idea he had vaguely touched on in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), in an inscription that attempts to be an anti-inscription, "Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro." In that poem, Borges makes a simple but mystical point: certain aspects of human life, pleasure and pain in particular, are impersonal and therefore identical in all human beings, making all of us immortal. (It might appear that this one poem echoes the ideas already presented in *Inquisiciones*; however, while the poem suggests that our participation in a collective identity provides one possible path to immortality, it in no way diminishes the existence of the individual *ego*, whereas the essays aim precisely at its negation.) The immortality Borges postulates here is that of the species, an immortality he describes in his biographical

study of Evaristo Carriego (*Evaristo Carriego*, 1930, see esp. pp. 45-46). That a generalized immortality should be given such stress in a biography is yet another paradox since biography is not a nameless inscription; that is, specific details (and not abstractions) characterize the genre, except, it would seem, for Borges. But he does not develop this racial immortality further at this time, except to use it as an adjunct to the idea that time does not exist. The concept seemed a dead end until Borges blended it, in a meditation on violence, with the idea of the archetype.

The emergence of the archetype as Borges' major vehicle for achieving immortality and escaping from universal flux takes place first in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926) in a personal manifesto, "Profesión de fe literaria." Here Borges states, effectively effacing *Inquisiciones*, that all literature is autobiographical (p. 146), adding later:

He declarado ya que toda poesía es plena confesión de un yo, de un carácter, de una aventura humana. El destino así revelado puede ser fingido, arquetípico (novelaciones del Quijote, de Martín Fierro, de los soliloquistas de Browning, de los diversos Faustos), o personal: autonovelaciones de Montaigne, de Tomás de Quincey, de Walt Whitman, de cualquier lírico verdadero. Yo solicito lo último.

(p. 152)

This passage, which shows how a life may be turned into literature, opens the way for two vignettes, "Sentirse en muerte" and "Hombres pelearon," published under the collective title "Dos esquinas" in *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928). Taken together, these two prose pieces gather up all of Borges' preoccupations during the twenties: they deal with the self as perceiver; they document a disappearing Buenos Aires; they fuse individual with archetype; they include ritual violence; and they possess an elegiac air.

"Sentirse en muerte" is a problematic text: it occurs in a book whose themes Borges summarizes in this way: "Tres direcciones cardinales lo rigen. La primera es un recelo, el lenguaje; la segunda es un misterio y una esperanza, la eternidad, la tercera es una gustación, Buenos Aires. Las dos últimas confluyen en la declaración intitulada *Sentirse en muerte*. La primera quiere vigilar en todo decir." ("Prólogo," *El idioma de los argentinos*, 1928, p. 8) When Borges calls "Sentirse en muerte" a "declaración," he implies it is a personal statement, an anecdote, but the question arises (probably as a result of having read later Borges narratives where the nar-

rator is also "Borges") whether it is Borges *qua* Borges or Borges become a fictional narrator. One of the reasons for wondering about the nature of Borges here is that "Sentirse en muerte" is juxtaposed to "Hombres pelearon," which is clearly a piece of prose fiction.⁸ It is true that both texts deal with streetcorners in Buenos Aires, and that this geographical coincidence may have been reason enough for joining them under the title "Dos esquinas," but the presence of an obvious fiction in such close proximity to what may be an anecdote contaminates that anecdote.

This contamination affects the meaning of the first-person pronoun in any text by Borges. This "I" against which Borges had fought in *Inquisiciones* he asks the reader to take at face value here, where it records a quasi-religious intuition of eternity. Even the idea of communicating the experience of eternity is far-fetched, to the point that we begin to doubt Borges' good faith and suspect he is surreptitiously presenting us with a short story.

The anecdote begins innocently: the narrator states his intentions and then goes into details. He tells how he set out to stroll in the Buenos Aires suburbs: he notes that he wanted to take no familiar routes, that, in effect, he wanted to get lost, but that he could not:

Con todo, una suerte de gravitación familiar me alejó hacia unos barrios, de cuyo nombre quiero siempre acordarme y que dictan reverencia a mi pecho. No quiero significar así el barrio mío, el preciso ámbito de la infancia, sino sus todavía misteriosas inmediateces: confín que he poseído entero en palabras y poco en realidad, vecino y mitológico a un tiempo.

(p. 148)

"Gravitación familiar" is a strange expression that seems to refer to a kind of inertia one inherits from one's family, an instinct to return to one's point of origin—or perhaps an unconscious drive to fall under the spell of one's ancestors. The situation reiterates Borges' intellectual crux of the *Inquisiciones* period: he would like to abolish his origins and begin life from a zero point (to wander), but, at the same time, his family links oblige him to pay homage to his ancestors. Buenos Aires becomes a map of Borges' soul, one he seeks to rewrite, but which he follows unconsciously.

⁸ Additional doubts about just what "Sentirse en muerte" is, fiction or anecdote, are created by Borges himself in "Nueva refutación del tiempo," (1946), part "A" (1944), where he refers to "el relato *Sentirse en muerte* de mi *Historia de la eternidad* (1936)," in *Otras inquisiciones, 1937-1952* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952), p. 204.

The streets lead him to the corner of his transcendent experience:

La marcha me dejó en una esquina. Aspiré noche, en asueto serenísimo de pensar. La visión, nada complicada por cierto, parecía simplificada por mi cansancio. La irrealizaba su misma tipicidad. La calle era de casas bajas, y aunque su primera significación fuera de pobreza, la segunda era ciertamente de dicha. Era de lo más pobre y de lo más lindo. Ninguna casa se animaba a la calle; la higuera oscurecía sobre la ochava; los portoncitos—más altos que las líneas estiradas de las paredes—parecían obrados en la misma sustancia infinita de la noche. La vereda era escarpada sobre la calle; la calle era de barro elemental, barro de América no conquistado aún. Al fondo, el callejón, ya pampeano, se desmoronaba hacia el Maldonado. Sobre la tierra turbia y caótica, una tapia rosada parecía no hospedar luz de luna, sino efundir luz íntima. No habrá manera de nombrar la ternura mejor que ese rosado.

(pp. 148-9)

The walk leads Borges back to his origins, to the Adamic clay from which his Argentine family sprang, and as if to express his consumstantiality with the American soil, he points out the "tapia rosada," the wall made of the very clay from which it rises. The wall is order, imposed on the unformed substance, order which, like Borges' family heritage, both defines and constrains the individual.

When he interprets his "visión," Borges describes himself in this way: "Me sentí muerto, me sentí percibidor abstracto del mundo: indefinido temor imbuído de ciencia que es la mejor claridad de la metafísica." (p. 150) This moment extends the "instante pleno" Borges had declared impossible in "La nadería de la personalidad" to include a godlike vision of eternity. Borges feels himself extracted from time and contingency, dead for the world, in the way one exists while contemplating the sublime in Schopenhauer. He quickly adds that he felt he had experienced eternity and that the experience imbued him with an almost religious fear. Despite Borges' claim to the opposite, it would seem he has had an experience related to time and origins. Rather than an experience of eternity, the vignette expresses a discovery of one's intimate relationship with his native soil. To deny origins is perhaps to ascribe one's generation to oneself; to find that one's origins are impossible to deny may at first be horrifying, stifling, unless one redefines the experience as contact with a *manes*, one's ancestral spirit who confirms one's belief in the existence of a personal archetype, a destiny.

This "fable of identity"⁹ leads to "Hombres pelearon," a story about a showdown between two *compadritos* and the model for Borges' later texts "Hombre de la esquina rosada"¹⁰ and "Historia de Rosendo Juárez."¹¹ Here Borges abandons poetry, the mode he had been using to pay homage to his ancestors and to his city, and writes a kind of rhythmic prose to describe a bizarre death struggle:

Así fue el entreviro de un cuchillo del Norte y otro del Sur. Dios sabrá su justificación: cuando el Juicio retumbe en las trompetas, oiremos de él.

(p. 154)

We may never know the transcendental reasons for the fight, but we can say that its immediate reason for being was to enable Borges to accommodate his vision of archetypes and predestined patterns to his understanding of literature. It is with this ritualized violence, with this literary sacrifice, that Borges begins his career as a short-story writer.

Borges' struggle with his origins and his attempt to formulate an aesthetics all converge in his discovery of personal and Argentine archetypes. However, this provisional ontological security does not last long: in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," we see a Nietzschean skepticism about the ability of language in any form to provide one with identity. The archetype Borges chose for himself, that of the author, no longer confers immortality on him because it renders him anonymous. We find, in the nineteen forties, that the early phase of Borges' career was a series of self-deceptions which enabled him to escape what seemed an unsatisfactory Argentine destiny. He did escape, but it was by seeing that Argentine destiny as an archetype he was destined to live out, an archetype that would ultimately deprive him of the identity he thought it conferred. The elegist and the nihilistic essayist fuse in the narrator of meaningless death-struggles in a forgotten corner of Buenos Aires. Behind

⁹ "Fable of identity" comes, of course, from Northrop Frye's *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963). Frye's sense of archetype may stand as an adjunct to Borges': "By archetype I mean a literary symbol, or cluster of symbols, which are used recurrently throughout literature, and thereby become conventional," "Literature as Context: Milton's *Lycidas*," p. 120.

¹⁰ "Hombre de la esquina rosada," *Historia universal de la infamia* (Buenos Aires: Tor, 1935). "Hombres pelearon" itself has a precursor in "Leyenda policial," published by Borges (under a pseudonym) in *Martín Fierro*, in 1927).

¹¹ "Historia de Rosendo Juárez," *El informe de Brodie* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1970).

those knife-fights was yet another struggle, that of the author against time, time which would show him that he would only achieve immortality by turning himself into words on a page.

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