

Borges the Poet

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Modernismo and Borges

"One of the cardinal functions of poetry"—wrote Octavio Paz—"is to show the other side, the wonders of everyday life: not poetic irreality, but the prodigious reality of the world."¹ Borges' poetry performs this function. It may seem paradoxical to say this of a writer who has won worldwide acclaim by the imaginative character of his prose work, but the works of Borges the poet seem well anchored in the world of reality, from where he probes the other side of things.

Borges and his poetry resist classification. He broke away from Spanish Ultraism whose message he propagated. He had become an Ultraist in reaction to the previous movement, Spanish Modernism, to eliminate ornamentation, confessionalism, circumstantial evidence, preaching and deliberate vagueness.² And yet, when his first three collections of poems appeared, he was, in essence, closer to the Modernists than to any other group. These first books, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, (1923), *Luna de enfrente*, (1925), and *Cuaderno San Martín*, (1929), were reviewed by leading Hispanic critics who found them classic in versification (Enrique Díaz Canedo); adhering to norms (Ramón Gómez de la Serna); and more nostalgic for the perennial structures than desirous of new modulations (Guillermo de Torre).³ At the same time, they mentioned elements which were present in the poetry of the Modernists, such as its sensorial character, its mysticism and its contradictions, but they did not relate them to Modernism.

Rafael Cansino Assens, an outstanding Spanish critic of the period who exerted a direct influence in the Ultraist adventure noticed, in a penetrating article about Borges' first books, that to perceive and to know were his two primary desires shown in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* and *Inquisiciones* (a book of essays published by Borges in 1925). That his muse was mystic and religious, was a fact he was able to confirm after reading Borges' second book of poetry, *Luna de enfrente*, and that in his "criollismo" or nativeness, he established a mystic relation between his native Buenos Aires and the true ideal reality of things. Cansino Assens had noted previously that in spite of the vivid, distinctive highlights of Buenos Aires in Borges' poetry, it had a mystic and ideal value. When Guillermo de Torre wrote about *Luna de enfrente*, he noticed that in Borges' identification with the familiar landscape there was a longing for a unifying spiritual reintegration as if repudiating the plurality of the world's suggestions. Finally, Cansino Assens saw a contradictory aspect in Borges' verse and prose, which he attributed to an aristocratic preoccupation with language which made the poet use words for their etymological value, as if to demand the purest of the lexical material, while at the same time, by the same elitist tendency, he forced the expression of the concept, incurring a pleasant and archaic baroque style. There are other contradictions in these first books of Borges.

Borges' poetic vision is like the Modernists in the elements we have mentioned: for his avowed willingness to perceive and to know; for the mystic quality of his vision of reality and his adherence to a unifying concept of the universe; and for his cognizance of its contradictions, embodied in his poetic expression.

Spanish Modernism was a metaphysical quest which used beauty as its most eloquent symbol, as in the poetry of the Spanish-American master Rubén Darío, or the Spanish Modernist master, Juan Ramón Jiménez. It was also an exaltation of the real world, which offered the Modernist poet, consciously or unconsciously, proof of the unifying elements between the material and spiritual worlds. More than any contemporary writers, Modernists were forced, by the empirical beliefs and attitudes prevalent at the end of the 19th century, to take cognizance of perceptual space. In *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Ernst Cassirer explains that perceptual space "is not a simple sense datum; it is of a very complex nature, containing elements of all the different kinds of sense experience—optical, tactual, acoustic, and ki-

nesthetic. The manner in which all these elements cooperate in the construction of perceptual space has proved to be one of the most difficult questions of the modern psychology of sensation."⁴ The data from perceptual space, reinterpreted, gave the Modernists their symbolic vision of the universe. Cassirer tells us, that instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum* and that without symbolism, "man's life would be confined within the limits of his biological needs and his practical interests; it could find no access to the 'ideal world' which is opened to him from different sides by religion, art, philosophy, [and] science." The modernists turned to symbolism to gain access to the ideal world in an epoch when the practical interests of their society superceded their concern with the realms of the ideal. If we accept this fact, we can speak in a similar vein of such different modernist authors as the Cuban, José Martí, the initiator of the movement in 1882, and Darío, its propagator from 1888 on. Borges more closely resembles Martí, in spite of the fact that the philosophical concepts of Martí are based on intuition rather than erudition. Martí believed that the only philosophical source was observable nature and that man, the observer, was the only philosophical agent. To Martí, *nature* meant everything, that is in every form except man's soul and heaven. He believed that to know, it was necessary to examine nature and that the most reliable source of truth derived from this observation.⁵ In Borges' first books of poetry, the speaker is first of all an observer, who takes his time as he walks, but hurries up to meet the sunset; who notices the serenity of the tombs at the cemetery and the juncture of the marble and the flower; the sameness of some houses; and the trees, the moon, the butcher shop. Furthermore, Martí barely diversified the meter or experimented with rhyme, nor did the Post-Modernists, whose simple discourse and native themes marked a return to the roots of the movement, as in Martí's poetry. On the other hand, Darío's ultra-refined vocabulary and at times excessive ornamentation gave poetic discourse an appearance of frivolity, affectation and insincerity. But as noted by Blanco Fombona, an early and important critic of Modernism, had Darío limited himself to the witty, frivolous, rhetoric novelties, he would not have been the great poet he was.⁶

In the prologue to the first edition of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Borges claims that this book is a reaction against the decorative visual and lustrous lyricism inherited from Góngora through Darío, his executor; that

he (Borges) meant to oppose it with a pensive lyricism made of spiritual adventures. But Darío's lyricism, as that of the other modernists, is also a spiritual adventure.

In his work, *Poesía y conocimiento*, Ramón Xirau, a contemporary critic, notes that even before romanticism reached its peak it was thought that poetry and philosophy were akin.⁷ He thinks that philosophy and poetry serve in an effort to grasp this world we encounter and in which we find ourselves.

Cassirer, a philosopher of the physical and cultural sciences had already addressed this topic: "Poetry is one of the forms in which a man may give the verdict on himself and his life. It is self-knowledge and self-criticism. Such criticism is not to be understood in a moral sense. It does not mean appraisal or blame, justification or condemnation, but a new and deeper understanding, a reinterpretation of the poet's personal life. The process is not restricted to poetry; it is possible in every other medium of artistic expression."⁸ To elucidate this phenomena of human culture, Cassirer refers to Goethe, who entitled his autobiography *Poetry and Truth*, not because he used imaginary or fictional elements in the narrative of his life, but because the truth about his life "could only be found by giving to the isolated and dispersed facts of his life a poetical, that is a symbolic, shape." This is what Borges does in his first three books of poetry. He gives the scattered facts of his life symbolic shape.

In his excellent study *Borges, el poeta*, Guillermo Sucre says that he finds in Borges' first books a climate of fervent intimacy, of confessionality, a marked animism which makes the vision of things warmer and deeper.⁹ Even those critics who look for the Ultraist elements in these first books, call attention to their confessionalistic tone.¹⁰ The speaker tells the listener most intimately, that he is one with everything. In the first poem, "Las calles," he confesses that the streets of Buenos Aires are already the innermost recesses of his soul; in "La Recoleta," his soul runs over the streets; in "Sala vacía," old things run after his soul; in "Los llanos" the plain is a barren copy of his soul.

There is a progression in the poetic vision of Borges. In *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, he is forever walking the streets, feeling, perceiving; in *Luna de enfrente*, away from Buenos Aires, he recreates it; in *Cuaderno San Martín* acutely aware of the passing of time, he turns Buenos Aires into a myth. Guillermo Sucre says that Borges recreates the Buenos Aires of his

infancy, which he lost during his long residence in Europe. Borges confesses the same thing in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, in his poem, "Arrabal": "this city which I thought to be my past / is my future and my present; / the years that I have lived in Europe are an illusion / I have always been (I shall always be) in Buenos Aires."¹¹ Like the Modernists, Borges recreates a mythical space which he thought was lost. The poetic vision is essentially the same; the Modernists tried to recreate the mythical space of religion, of God, which they thought lost, but they lacked the spatial data which Borges possessed. Octavio Paz has dealt with this topic in *Children of the Mire*. He implies that Modernism became a metaphysical search because the Modernists felt the necessity of giving a contradictory answer to the spiritual void created by the Positivists in their criticism of religion and metaphysics. In the Post-Modernistic period, coming to terms with their new circumstances, most poets abandoned or postponed the metaphysical search and took cognizance of the more immediate voids in their spaces. This would account for Modernism being first exotic and then regional or nativistic. In Borges' poetry, the native space provided the elements for the mystic search. The streets of Buenos Aires are sublimated because in their great extension into the plains they communicate with the sky, making heaven attainable. The sky is everywhere, it spills over the houses and the patios, which are, in turn, exalted because they hold it, limit it, and then copy it. Patios are grounded in the two primal things of existence, heaven and earth. The sunset also has symbolic meaning. It sets limits; breaks the infinite distance; it is a hallucination imposed by space upon those who fear the shadows; it is a dark ornamental jewel, set in time, to redeem the streets from the humble presence, since the poverty of the houses show under the clear sky.

There are few mornings in this early poetry of Borges. The afternoon, leading to a sunset, is the favorite time of day. But the sunset is also a tyrant, it drives the street crazy with its flashy crowding, it is like an unhealed wound hurting the street, and it is the visualization of time. Night also has a dual, contradictory function; it cancels space, it does away with things, invalidates the immensity and makes it sterile but it increases time, since dreaming is the time for the expansion of the soul.

In *Luna de enfrente*, the space-consciousness of the poems increases; the pampa assumes the symbolic meaning first attributed to the streets.

As the speaker says in the poem "Al horizonte de un suburbio": "Pampa: / You are clear as the moon, you are even as the water / your truth is in the symbol." The plain is a passage between heaven and earth. The ocean provided this passage for the Modernists and the sea journey abounds as a motif in their poetry, but Borges does not need the sea as a mediator, since the plain is a sea of grass. In the text of *Luna de enfrente*, one reads: "the sea is an old language that I can't quite / decipher" ("Singladura"). The afternoon, the sunset and the sky are still favorite elements but the vision is more universal. On the high seas, the speaker feels proximity to his native land through the sight of the stars. They seem to have dropped from the molding of a wall, or to come from the patio's well, or from an afternoon in the province, or from the same sky shining on the dusky extension of the fields. They are like a clear country and Buenos Aires is within its bounds ("La promisión en alta mar"). The last poem in *Luna de enfrente* is a song to the poet's city, praising the intermixture of space and day: "street corners crowned by the sunset / and blue slums made of sky," as he says in "Versos de catorce."

In *Cuaderno San Martín*, Buenos Aires is seen in relation to time, not space, and becomes a myth. Memory is then symbolic matter. The speaker remembers the founding of the city but denies that it had a beginning. He judges it eternal, like water and air ("Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires").

The main theme of the book is death. There are poems about the death of the caudillo Facundo Quiroga; of Borges' ancestor, Colonel Francisco Borges; of the old neighborhood; of the vice district which should not have existed; and the cemetery appears again, as in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. In the last stanza of a poem entitled "Isidoro Acevedo," the speaker confesses: "I was then a child who knew nothing about death, I / was then immortal," and the listener realizes at last that by affirming his existence within the space of his childhood, Borges was also trying to attain immortality. In the poem, "Remordimiento por cualquier defunción," a dead man, "everywhere no one" is "but the loss and absence of the world." (Trans. W. S. Merwin.)

Fervor de Buenos Aires is a passage, by sense experience, to the space of immortality, the space of his childhood. And yet, Borges the prose writer proposes in "La penúltima versión de la realidad," an essay of the same period (1928), that humanity would forget that space existed.¹² He

is commenting on *The Manhood of Humanity*, by Alfred Korzybski. He had not read this book, but based his arguments on what he knew from a review, according to which Korzybski states the view that animal is defined by a hunger for space, but man, a superior being and as such, more original, accumulates time (he means depth, intensity of living). He laments materialism which told man to become space rich, then man forgot his noble task and began to acquire visible things, persons and territories, and the fallacy of progress was born. But human life should be more intense—he says—instead of more extended. Borges opposes this philosophical concept of horizontal and vertical life. He considers space an incident in time and not a universal form of intuition; spatial relation is not a continuity, he says, adding that if mankind were only to be able to hear and smell and not to see or taste, it would continue plotting its history just the same.

There is one further argument in the comparison of Borges and the Modernists. Count Korzybski's phrase, "hunger for space" is reminiscent of the famous verses of Darío: "I hungered for space / and thirsted for heaven."¹³ Borges himself wrote, in the prologue to *Luna de enfrente* ("Al tal vez lector"): "Our daily existence is a dialogue between life and death, made of memories (which are forms of having been and having ceased to be) or else of projects that are a mere hunger to be."

Perceptible space was an obsession in the poetry of the Modernists, who seemed more preoccupied with space than with time, perhaps because time was not an empirical object. It was at this point that Borges differed from the ontological concerns of the Modernists. What may account for this difference is the fact that Borges was not trying to affirm the unifying character of the universe, which the Modernists were beginning to doubt. Borges only wished to decipher the universe, but the Modernists wanted to recreate its harmonious vision. It is for this reason that Pythagoras is forever present in their poetry, from Rubén Darío on, but there is hardly a mention of Heraclitus. (Martí would be the exception, since he still believed in a harmonious universe.) In Borges' poetry, Pythagoras and Heraclitus coexist but there is not the Pythagorean music of the spheres. In the prologue of *Luna de enfrente*, Borges says that he is not interested in the auditive aspects of poetry. But according to Octavio Paz, poetic rhythm is the manifestation of universal rhythm and he chastizes those who fail to see the spiritual rootlessness in the musical

style of the Modernists.¹⁴ There is also philosophical justification for the Modernists' search for Pythagorean rhythm. Cassirer says that symbolic thought translates into the language of numbers all of our knowledge of space and spatial relation, which in turn makes man arrive at a concept of a unique, systematic, cosmic order.¹⁵ Only towards the end of the Modernist period, in the work of Juan Ramón Jiménez, the poet who resolved the mystic search of Modernism by creating a mystical space for contemporary man, do we find the presence of Heraclitus, and it appears as an epigraph for a work entitled "Tiempo," as yet unpublished, and parallel to his famous work entitled "Espacio," both written in the forties. Borges anticipated him by many years.

Thus the relation between Borges and the Modernists is established. In Borges' collection of poems, *El otro, el mismo*, published in Buenos Aires in 1969, there is a poem entitled "Líneas que pude haber perdido o escrito hacia 1922," in which he summarizes his poetic vision of the twenties. He speaks of silent battles at sunset in far away slums; of the ever old defeat in a war in the sky; of the debris of many dawns which came to him from space-deserted depth and from the depth of time. He mentions some of the space data that appears in his first poetry: the moon upon the marble, the everlasting trees, the night, the expected afternoon, and he concludes: "Am I those and the other things / or are they secret keys and arduous algebra / for that which we shall never know?" Darío, whose vision of existence was less clear than that of Borges, also questioned himself in his poem "Fatality" ("Lo fatal"): "To be, and to know nothing and to lack a way / and the dread of having been, . . . / and not to know where we go / nor whence we came! . . ." ¹⁶

NOTES

1. Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire*. Translated by Rachel Phillips. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974): 51.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Ultraísmo." *Nosotros* (Buenos Aires, Año XXIX, Num. 151. Dec., 1921): 468.
3. The opinions about Borges' early works cited here are from the collection of critical articles by Jaime Alazraki, *Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid: Taurus, 1976), as follows: "Enrique Díaz Canedo, 'Fervor de Buenos Aires'": 22; "Ramón Gómez de la Serna, 'Fervor de Buenos Aires'": 26; "Guillermo de Torre, 'Luna de enfrente. Poemas'": 32; "Rafael Cansino Assens,

'Jorge Luis Borges (1919-1923)'." The pages refer to Alazraki's collection, which gives the original date and provenance of the reviews.

4. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944): 43.
5. For Martí's philosophical thought see "Estudios sobre las ideas de Jose Martí" in *Antología crítica de Jose Martí*. Edited by Manuel Pedro González. (México: Publicaciones de la Editorial Cultura, 1960).
6. Rufino Blanco Fombona, *El modernismo y los poetas modernistas* (Madrid: Editorial Mundo Latino, 1929): 36.
7. Ramon Xirau, *Poesía y conocimiento* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1978): 11.
8. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 52.
9. Guillermo Sucre, *Borges, el poeta* (Venezuela: Monte Avila Editores, 1968): 39.
10. Thorpe Running, *Borges' Ultraist Movement and its Poets* (Michigan: International Book Publishers, 1981): 48-9.
11. I have translated into English Borges' verses quoted in the text.
12. Jorge Luis Borges, *Prosa completa*, I (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1980): 39. The concepts attributed to Korzybski are as found in Borges' essay.
13. "Yo soy aquél . . ." in Rubén Darío, *Cantos de la vida y esperanza* (Madrid: Tipografía de la Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos, 1903). My translation.
14. In "Translation and Metaphor." Octavio Paz. *Children of the Mire*.
15. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 49.
16. Lysander Kemp, trans., *Selected Poems of Ruben Darío* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965): 90.

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