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Ed. Carlos Cortínez

Fayetteville: The University of  
Arkansas Press, 1986

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,<sup>1</sup> 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>2</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,

and to man as idea. This knowledge, which begins with a recognition of one's own limits in order to define the space within which human activity and creation will be undertaken, coincides, on this point, with the thinking of the Italian philosopher-historian Giambattista Vico who sought to direct the pursuit of knowledge away from topics that lay outside the limits of human understanding (metaphysics) to the study of man himself.<sup>4</sup> For Vico the only appropriate object of human knowledge was that which man created: history.<sup>5</sup> He envisioned a kind of self-knowledge for mankind, which was based partly on empirical data; the study of language, laws, literature, religious beliefs, and social customs; and partly on one's intuition and self-awareness.<sup>6</sup> Borges' foreword, as well as the poems in *La moneda de hierro* demonstrate that he chose to focus his efforts on knowledge that one may obtain, knowledge of oneself, even though this knowledge may relate to other individuals, and, indeed, cultures. The ideology of Borges and Vico is similar as it extends beyond the parameters that each sets up for the concentration of his own efforts, to include the close ties that exist for both writers between knowledge and creation, as well as a mutual willingness to employ memory as a method for obtaining knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Although it cannot be affirmed that there is a direct link between Vico and Borges, it may be suggested that Vico's thought is an important component of the ideological context within which Borges' *La moneda de hierro* should be considered.

This study is divided into two parts reflecting two types of "knowing" expressed in Spanish as *saber* and as *conocer*. A discussion of knowing as *saber*, which involves one's realizing or understanding, will be followed by a discussion of knowing as *conocer* which means, of course, "to be acquainted with," but often suggests "to experience." Both senses of the verb "to know" refer primarily to self-knowledge in this text.

Fundamental knowledge in the sense of *saber*, is perhaps best expressed in "No eres los otros."<sup>8</sup> The poem is born of the poet's knowledge that he is going to die, an awareness that leads him to feel the solitude of his human condition. The poetic voice addresses a "tú," expressing to the other an intimate knowledge of his ephemeral existence:

No te habrá de salvar lo que dejaron  
Escrito aquellos que tu miedo implora;  
No eres los otros y te ves ahora

Centro del laberinto que tramaron  
Tus pasos. No te salva la agonía  
de Jesús o de Sócrates ni el fuerte  
Siddhartha de oro que aceptó la muerte  
En un jardín, al declinar el día.  
Polvo también es la palabra escrita  
Por tu mano o el verbo pronunciado  
Por tu boca. No hay lástima en el Hado  
Y la noche de Dios es infinita.  
Tu materia es el tiempo, el incesante  
Tiempo. Eres cada solitario instante.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that the "tú" in the poem is a writer and the presence of images and motifs that frequent Borges' literary creation, such as the labyrinth, the garden, time, and death, lead us to believe that the poetic voice is addressing Borges. The direct discourse of the poetic voice creates a moment of realization of the terrible solitude of one sentenced to an irrevocable and lasting death. The poet is clearly not interested merely in portraying cognition, but in evoking a profound emotional impact of this particular knowledge within the individual consciousness. An awareness of death is the most fundamental recognition of one's limits. This is the knowledge that defines the nature of Borges' poetry in *La moneda de hierro*.

Borges recreates the moment of one's realization of mortality in a somewhat more complicated manner in "Heráclito."<sup>10</sup> In this poem Heraclitus appears alongside a river whose name and course he does not know. In a slight alteration of what we might consider normal causality, the philosopher sees his reflection in the water and utters the aphorism "Nadie baja dos veces a las aguas / Del mismo río,"<sup>11</sup> without fully comprehending its meaning for him. The poem provides a new interpretation of Heraclitus' discovery. According to this text, his knowledge has not come as a result of reasoning, or close observation of the water's flow, but is elicited as he sees himself in "the water's fleeting mirror." Heraclitus encounters his image in two complementary senses and in two moments: the water has offered him his reflection, but through analogy, has brought him face to face with his own temporal nature:

Siente con el asombro de un horror sagrado  
Que él también es un río y una fuga.<sup>12</sup>

Heraclitus' discovery about time and space achieves its maximum level of significance as it reveals to him a truth about himself.

Borges follows up Heraclitus' feeling of the illusory quality of his existence with the revelation that the philosopher is actually an illusion created by Borges, himself. Instead of dwelling upon faraway Buenos Aires and loved ones, the reader must consider the verses about Heraclitus, not merely in terms of their own poetic content, but as poetic data that refer to Borges. The figure of Heraclitus has served as a substitute for Borges as a knowing subject, a role the poet reclaims at the end of the poem as he confesses his motive to the reader. It is up to the latter, who initially may have been taken aback by the seemingly disjunctive effect of the poet's revelation, to reconstruct the poem's unity on the basis of its emotional quality and knowledge that Heraclitus and Borges possess.

In *La moneda de hierro* both knowledge and ignorance about oneself perform a creative function, as a reading of "Una llave en East Lansing" <sup>13</sup> demonstrates. They not only divide one's consciousness into two spheres, but also serve as a structuring device for the poem, which pits the detailed, if partial, knowledge of the poetic subject (a key) against the reader's lack of knowledge. The key knows its identity: "Soy una pieza de limado acero," <sup>14</sup> recognizes that it was designed for a purpose: "Mi borde irregular no es arbitrario," knows its destiny: "Hay una cerradura que me espera." <sup>15</sup> This knowledge tends to disconcert the reader, for the information offered by the poetic subject raises some fundamental questions about the causal force behind the creation and handling of the key, as well as what will come after the key has fulfilled its role.

The poem leaves little doubt that on the other side of the locked door one will find death. Yet, who is that "one" to be? Perhaps the most meaningful way in which a reader may experience the poem's mystery is by responding to the poet's invitation to wonder if he or she might be the subject for whom the door will be unlocked. In "Una llave en East Lansing," the poet both offers and withholds information which challenges the reader to contribute a personal answer to the questions posed by the poem. In this way the reader assumes a creative role in much the same manner that Borges himself has often done, according to Carter Wheelock's *The Mythmaker*, which is to create effectively from one's lack

of knowledge. Thus Borges finds that personal limitation can be turned to esthetic advantage. <sup>16</sup>

Up to this point "knowing" has been discussed in the sense of the verb *saber*, especially with reference to knowing about oneself. Now the discussion will focus upon modes of knowing oneself, and others, as the verb *conocer* implies.

John Sturrock, in his book *The Ideal Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges* <sup>17</sup> comments on the epilogue of *El hacedor*. In this work Borges evokes an image of a man who understakes the task of populating an imaginary space with provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people, only to discover soon before his death that the contours of this labyrinthine creation were those of his own face. <sup>18</sup> Sturrock affirms that this brief story deals less with self-discovery, as some critics believe, than with the process of self-creation through which a man becomes author. Rather than distinguishing knowledge of oneself from a creation of oneself, the two should be viewed as related premises in Borges' work. Returning a moment to Vico's idea that man must have, as object of his knowledge, that which he has created, it may be seen that Borges has in fact carried out this idea by inventing a man who recognizes himself upon contemplating his creation. *La moneda de hierro* thus comprises the subject's knowledge of himself both through creation and through the contemplation of that creation.

Memory performs an important function in *La moneda de hierro*. By dividing consciousness into present and past, to which he has access through memory, the poet may view himself as an object of knowledge. Memory provides a richer knowledge than original experience because it incorporates both an evaluation and an understanding of that experience. Borges himself emphasizes the importance of memory to literary creation in a conversation with Willis Barnstone: "I suppose a poet should live in memory because, after all, what is imagination? Imagination, I should say, is made of memory and of oblivion. It is a kind of blending of the two things." <sup>19</sup>

"Elegía del recuerdo imposible," <sup>20</sup> the first poem of the collection, defines the nature and function of memory in *La moneda de hierro*. Here the poet finds himself thrice removed from the experience that he desires, first by the passage of time, second by even the lack of a memory of the

experience, and third, because in all but perhaps one of the cases, involving the work by Turner, the poet never lived the scenes that he describes. Paradoxically, all of these facts strengthen his poetic creation in which the impossible memory, or its absence, becomes a creative force in evoking an imaginary presence.

Qué no daría yo por la memoria  
De una calle de tierra con tapias bajas  
Y de un alto jinete llenando el alba  
(Largo y raído el poncho)  
En uno de los días de la llanura,  
En un día sin fecha.  
Qué no daría yo por la memoria  
De mi madre mirando la mañana  
En la estancia de Santa Irene,  
Sin saber que su nombre iba a ser Borges.  
Qué no daría yo por la memoria  
De haber combatido en Cepeda  
Y de haber visto a Estanislao del Campo  
Saludando la primer bala  
Con la alegría del coraje.  
Qué no daría yo por la memoria  
De un portón de quinta secreta  
Que mi padre empujaba cada noche  
Antes de perderse en el sueño  
Y que empujó por última vez  
El catorce de febrero del 38.<sup>21</sup>

"Elegía del recuerdo imposible" was created from both the poet's lack of knowledge, and from his yearning for experiences that he has considered and made a part of his past. At the same time, the poem offers the reader a knowledge of the poetic subject revealing himself in his wishes and in the importance that he assigns to the experiences he seeks and describes.

The poetry of *La moneda de hierro* continues to explore the relationship that Borges has acknowledged in other works, between knowledge of oneself and knowledge of others. These are often figures from the past: Colonel Suarez, Hilario Ascasubi, Herman Melville, Johannes Brahms, Einar Tambarskelver, Baruch Spinoza, or Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur. Knowledge of others is possible in this context since they appear as crea-

tions of the poetic consciousness and therefore contain an element of self-knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

Borges begins the poem "Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur" with an awareness of his ancestors as being part of himself; as shadowy figures whom he may conjure up at will. He singles out Lafinur, with whom he feels a special affinity and proceeds to portray him in moments that accentuate the similarities between the poet and his predecessor. Borges' creation supposes his own self-knowledge as well as a familiarity with the presence of Lafinur. The poet's imaginary constructs are founded upon an underlying knowledge of himself and of his ancestor, until the final moment when the poet's fancy actually produces a more radical discovery concerning their relationship.

The poet may invoke the power of memory to recreate, not only his own past, but the past of others. In this poem the poet's self-awareness serves as a point of departure for his knowledge of another. In "Lafinur" the poetic subject, (we suppose that it is Borges) approaches the figure from the past by first reflecting upon himself:

Cuando en la tarde evoco la azarosa  
Procesión de mis sombras, . . .<sup>23</sup>

The context determines that the word "sombras" refers to the subject's ancestors, yet the image suggests that it may be a projection of Borges himself.

The poet distinguishes Lafinur from his other ancestors, most of whom pursued arms rather than letters. (In this respect Lafinur and Borges have something in common.) The subject then imagines Lafinur arguing with the poet's father about philosophy, evoking an encounter that could not have taken place because the lives of the two did not overlap. (Such a conversation, however, could have taken place between Borges and his father.) Next, the poet envisions Lafinur as he formulates, or perhaps reformulates the theory of eternal forms in the mind, a theory with which Borges himself has toyed in his works. Each of the poet's images of Lafinur reflects, to some extent, on himself, leading up to the final two lines of the poem:

Del otro lado del ya incierto espejo  
Lo imagino limando este bosquejo.<sup>24</sup>

We have seen that Borges' recognition of his limits as a writer places *La moneda de hierro* within the sphere of the poet's knowledge of himself. The poet is aware of his overall literary creation as a unified body that constitutes an image in which he may discover himself, and by which the public may know him. Borges pursues his self-knowledge within the boundaries established by the temporal nature of man. He does this on a poetic level through the exercise of memory, which, in this text, doubles for imagination. Memory allows the present contemplation of past events or experiences and serves as a vehicle for the knowledge of oneself and of others, much as Vico had envisioned. While the knowing subject in *La moneda de hierro* is first and foremost the poet, Borges, it may also be one of the poet's creations, Heraclitus, a key, or even one who may not realize that he or she is also, in a sense, the poet's creation: the reader.

In *La moneda de hierro* knowledge plays both an existential and an aesthetic role, for the moment of knowing is one of crisis that polarizes consciousness in a "before" and "after" frame of time. The way in which Borges selectively presents knowledge in relation to matters of highest significance for man (identity, death, and the value of life) makes knowing and creating the key functions of the poetic and human consciousness.

## NOTES

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "Epílogo." *Otras Inquisiciones. Obras completas 1923-1972* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974): 775.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, *La moneda de hierro* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1976): 9.
3. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 10.
4. Richard Manson, *The Theory of Knowledge of Giambattista Vico* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1969): 11-12.
5. Manson, *Theory of Knowledge*, 11-12.
6. Manson, *Theory of Knowledge*, 29.
7. Donald Phillip Verene, "Memory." *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981): 96-126.
8. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 145-7.
9. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 147.
10. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 139-140.
11. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 139.
12. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 139.
13. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 27-9.
14. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 29.
15. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 29.
16. Carter Wheelock, *The Mythmaker* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969): 220.

17. John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977): 203.
18. Borges, *El hacedor*, in *Obras completas*, 854.
19. Willis Barnstone, ed. *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982): 20.
20. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 13-14.
21. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 13.
22. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 133-5.
23. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 135.
24. Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, 135.

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# BORGES *the Poet*

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*Edited by Carlos Cortínez*

The University of Arkansas Press  
Fayetteville 1986