

THORPE RUNNING.  
Borges' Ultraist Poetry.

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*Modern Critical Views*

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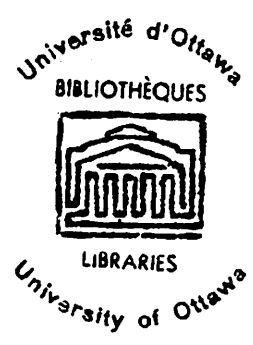
**JORGE LUIS BORGES**

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THORPE RUNNING

*Borges' Ultraist Poetry*

Beginning in 1919 when he met some of the contributors to the first ultraist publication, *Grecia*, in Seville and continuing through the next two years in Madrid, Borges "collaborated" with the Ultra movement in Spain; and he did so at a high pitch of enthusiasm. As might be expected, this early eagerness to join the movement, and his important role there as theorizer and as translator of other European vanguardists, affected some of his own earliest poems, which do reflect the new avant-garde ideals. While in Spain Borges regularly published, in the avant-garde magazines *Grecia*, *Ultra* and *Tableros*, poems with either ultraist or expressionist traits.

Though clearly not a committed expressionist poet even at that time, Borges' interest in translating those German poets also led him to produce his own versions of that type of verse. He did not share their experiences of intergenerational and sociological upheaval, nor did he have any direct involvement with the first world war; but despite his own sheltered personal situation the expressionist poems that he wrote compare favorably with the Germans' efforts. If they must be considered as imitative works, they are excellent copies and are of better quality than the finger exercises one expects from a beginner.

"Rusia," ["Russia"], a poem which shows to what extent expressionism left its mark on Borges, was published in the magazine *Ultra* in 1921; it was probably intended to have a niche in the never-to-be-published collection from his years in Spain, *Salmos rojos* [*Red Psalms*] ("red" referring to the 1917 Soviet Revolution and "Psalms" to the Judaic inclinations of the "Master," Cansinos Asséns).

## Russia

La trinchera avanzada es en la estepa un barco al  
 abordaje con gallardetes de hurras  
 mediodías estallan en los ojos  
 Bajo estandartes de silencio pasan las muchedumbres  
 y el sol crucificado en los ponientes  
 se pluraliza en la vocinglería de las torres del Kremlin.  
 El mar vendrá nadando a esos ejércitos  
 que envolverán sus torsos  
 en todas las praderas del continente.  
 En el cuerpo salvaje de un arco iris clamemos su gesta  
 bayonetas  
 que portan en la punta las mañanas.

## [Russia

The advance trench is in the steppe, a boat  
 to be boarded with pennants of yells  
 middays explode in the eyes.  
 Multitudes pass under banners of silence  
 and the sun crucified on the western horizon  
 is pluralized in the shouting from the Kremlin towers.  
 The sea shall come swimming to those armies  
 that will wrap their bodies  
 over the prairies of the continent.  
 In the savage body of a rainbow let us cry out their geste  
 bayonets  
 which carry mornings on their points.]

War and its associated terminology fill the poem. From the metaphor of the first line, with its startling juxtapositions of distant realities (the trench is a boat to be boarded with pennants of yells), violence prevails. The expressionist use of nature to reflect and crystalize the poets' anguish provides the basis for many of these images of violence. Middays *explode*, the sun is *crucified* and "pluralized" in the *shouting* from Kremlin towers. The rainbow's *savage body* represents the cry for [bayonet-carried] mornings. The middle image (lines 6-8) stands out for its lack of overt violence. The personified sea swims to the troops who, though dead, so dominate the scene that they have the power to wrap themselves in all the meadows of the continent. The extreme understatement of these images (the swimming sea and the meadows suggest only peacefulness) belies the true violence that has been done to the dead soldiers. This reversal

of expected descriptions presents, in violent terms, nature just going about its business; and a scene of mass death in a peaceful setting prefigures the irony that will become so prevalent in all of Borges' subsequent work. Here, however, the effect of irony is not humorous; the litote emphasizes the pathetic result of violence (a violence integral to the poem's theme, as opposed to the often gratuitous harshness used by the dadaists and futurists to underscore their artistic rebelliousness).

Borges has other early poems in this vein, such as "Trinchera" ["Trench"] and "Gesta Maximalista" ["Maximalist Geste"], and expressionist images are used in other, more cosmopolitan, poems: "with guns on their shoulders the streetcars/patrol the avenues," in "Tranvías" ["Streetcars"] for example. Far removed in his personal situation from the actual violence, Borges "as a foreigner, feels the pain of war less deeply and takes greater pleasure in an occasional metaphorical discovery." Experimentation with metaphors, integral to the expressionist poems, continues in his other early pieces such as "Aldea" ["Village"], a poem more in tune with those he will write in Buenos Aires a few years later. In fact, this and "Sala vacía" ["Empty Drawing Room"] (originally published in *Grecia* in 1920) represent the only items of poetry from the years in Spain that will be published in Borges' first collection of poems. A tinge of expressionism remains, but ultraist technique, combined with Borges' own sensitivity, give this poem the qualities that he will be developing in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* [*Buenos Aires' Fervor*].

## Aldea

El poniente de pie como un Arcángel  
 tiranizó el sendero  
 La soledad repleta como un sueño  
     se ha remansado al derredor del pueblo  
 Las esquilas recogen la tristeza  
 dispersa de las tardes  
     la luna nueva  
 es una voccecita bajo el cielo  
     Según va anocheciendo  
 vuelve a ser campo el pueblo.

## [Village

The west wind on foot like an Archangel  
 tyrannized the pathway  
 Solitude full as a dream  
     has formed an eddy around the town

The small bells gather in the afternoons  
scattered sadness  
                  the new moon  
is a little voice under the sky  
                  As it grows dark  
the town turns again into country.]

Expressionist influence is obvious at the beginning of the poem in the personified natural element (the west wind on foot), the religious reference ("Like an Archangel"), and the violence of the action described ("tyrannized"). But then a passiveness, which will predominate in most of Borges' poetry from this point on, sets in. Isolated human emotions—solitude and sadness—are made concrete. Solitude, "full as a dream," has formed an eddy; treated as if it were tangible, like water, the image almost forms a visible pool of solitude. In a similar manner, sadness (which here is a property of, and personifies, "afternoons") is "gathered in" by the little bells which in turn are governed by the moon personified into a "little voice." The emotions herded away under the tyranny of the wind, the town now ceases to affect its surroundings and blends once again into the countryside.

"Aldea" fits Borges' definition of correct ultraist poetry: metaphors reign supreme within the free verse setting. He manages to "synthesize two images into one," fulfilling another prime value of ultraism: solitude is like a dream and is also dammed up like water while sadness is both a property of afternoon (and of the people in the village) and something to be herded up. All of the images in the poem are made up of "distant realities" (there is no expected or logical connection between "moon" and "little voices," for example). The starkness of both the images and the poem's language contrasts completely with *modernista* verse, to which he is already showing a complete aversion. The overall serenity which the poem evokes fits into the ideal of dehumanized structural purity, although the emotional unity which that serenity gives the poem is an unexpected quality because of the usual avant-garde proscription of sentiment. The overriding sense of tranquility, however, gives "Aldea" a validity which an otherwise uncohesive string of metaphors would not necessarily have. Because it is so successful as a poem, Borges deigns to preserve this single sample from his Spanish experience of ultraism in his first collection published in Buenos Aires in 1923, although for some reason he changes its title to "Campos atardecidos"—from "Village" to "Fields in the Dusk."

Borges continues to spread the avant-garde message after his return to Argentina and successfully recruits a number of talented poets to the ultraist ranks. The "banner waver's" own first book of poetry, however, produced a shock wave among his old friends in Spain: they could not believe that he excluded all but one of the earlier poems, and they were surprised at the nature

of the new ones. The title of the book itself, along with the themes of the poems it contains, provide sufficient grounds for those ultraists' puzzled reaction. Concern for thematic development does not fit into "pure" ultraism, and the personal and intellectual ambitiousness of Borges' poems do seem to place them at great divergence from the movement. As the title would suggest (it either indicates Borges' affection for Buenos Aires, or is a personification of the city's *élan*: Buenos Aires' fervor), Borges' home city is a central concern in many of the poems. Other themes in the collection are love (one poem is dedicated to his "novia [girlfriend]," Concepción García), Berkeleyan idealism ("I am the only observer of this street, / if I stopped seeing it, it would die," from the poem "Caminata" ["Long Walk"]) and, pervading the majority of the poems, the topic of time.

As many of Borges' critics (Rodríguez-Monegal, Sucre, Gertel, Stabb, Videla) correctly point out, with this first book of poems he already senses what central ideas are going to preoccupy him in his next half-century of literary creation. Borges himself admits, in spite of his generally negative view of this period in his life, that regarding *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, "looking back on it now, I think I have never strayed beyond that book. I feel that all my subsequent writing has only developed themes first taken up there; I feel that all during my lifetime I have been rewriting that one book." By going against the grain of his own ultraist pronouncements condemning ideological subject matter, Borges both avoids and transcends one of the movement's self-imposed limitations and allows himself freedom to encompass a larger poetic world.

In contrast to that flouting of content limitations, the poems of *Fervor*, in their formation and poetic technique, generally follow Borges' statement that "the two wings" of Ultra poetry should be free verse and the image. As in his earlier poems published in Spain, he continues to use the fantastic, even startling, new type of metaphor which harks back to Gómez de la Serna's *greguerías* and to the theories of Huidobro and Reverdy.

Borges shows, in the poem "Un patio" ["Patio"], his ability to express his thematic concerns—in this case both his love for Buenos Aires and his observations on time—within the ultraist idiom. For Borges the *patio* has a special importance. In an essay from this period with the appropriate title "Buenos Aires," he carefully describes a typical house of the city and singles out the patio as "full of patrician qualities and of primitive efficacy, since it's cemented in the two most fundamental things that exist: in the earth and the sky." The poem elaborates this unique duality.

#### Un Patio

Con la tarde  
se cansaron los dos o tres colores del patio.

La gran franqueza de la luna llena  
 ya no entusiasma su habitual firmamento.  
 Hoy que está crespo el cielo  
 dirá la agorería que ha muerto un angelito.  
 Patio, cielo encauzado.  
 El patio es la ventana  
 por donde Dios mira las almas.  
 El patio es el declive  
 por el cual se derrama el cielo en la casa.  
 Serena  
 la eternidad espera en la encrucijada de estrellas.  
 Lindo es vivir en la amistad oscura  
 de un zaguán, de un alero y de un aljibe.

## [Patio

With afternoon  
 the two or three colors of the patio got tired.  
 The full moon's great frankness  
 no longer makes enthusiastic its habitual firmament.  
 The angry sky will tell a fortune today,  
 that an angel died.  
 Patio, bedded sky.  
 The sky is the window  
 through which God watches the souls.  
 The patio is the slope  
 down which the sky is slid into the house.  
 Serene  
 eternity waits at the juncture of the stars.  
 It is lovely to live in the dark friendship  
 of entryway, eaves and cistern.]

In its formation the poem displays "the two wings" of ultraist technique with its free verse and its unbroken series of images. In the first group of three images (lines 1-6) Borges uses personification, the most frequently occurring poetic recourse in *Fervor*: the colors *got tired*, the moon's *frankness* no longer *makes enthusiastic* its "habitual firmament," and the *angry* sky will *tell a fortune*. In the second grouping of three metaphor-based images, each begins with an anaphora, restating the title (lines 7-11). The patio (*is*) the *bedded* (as in river bed) *sky*, it is "*the window* through which God watches the souls" and it is "*the slope* down which the sky is slid into the house." For the final images he returns to personification: "*serene* eternity *waits* at the juncture of the stars"; and in

the last lines the three parts of the patio, the entryway, eaves and cistern offer "dark friendship."

In versions of this poem republished after 1943, Borges eliminates lines five and six and lines eight and nine; such a removal of almost all of the other references to God or divinity in fact represents one of the major elements in his revisions of this first book of his. That a confessed near-atheist would remove references to divinity causes no surprise; but the question does arise as to why he included them in the first place, even as a young man. Two possibilities suggest themselves: one is the latent expressionist influence and its "search for God" component; the other is an apparent modishness for religious elements, which receives support from the ultraists' intentions to do away with symbolist mythological tropes. Of the four worn-out *modernista* adjectives pointed out for scorn in the *Prisma* manifesto (ineffable, divine, blue, mysterious), for example, only "divine" escapes execution in Borges' essay "Ejecución de tres palabras" ("Execution of three words") from *Inquisiciones* [*Inquisitions*]. And in an essay from *El tamaño de mi esperanza* [*The Measure of My Hope*] (1926), "Historia de los Angeles" ["History of Los Angeles"], he underscores the aversion to symbolist tropes, but singles out the divine exception:

Man's imagination has come up with a number of monsters (tritons, hippogriffs, chimeras, sea serpents, unicorns, devils, dragons, "lobisones," cyclops, fauns, basilisks, semigods, leviathans, and a host of others) and all of them have disappeared except for the angels. Nowadays what verse would dare to mention the phoenix or to provide a path for a centaur? None; but for any poetry, however modern it might be, it is not out of place to be a nest for angels and to glow with their light. I always imagine them at nightfall, in the late afternoons of the suburbs or out in the open country, in that long and quiet instant in which things stand out alone with their backs to the sunset and in which the different colors seem like memories or presentiments of other colors.

A certain faddishness might then explain the inclusion of divine references in the *Fervor* poems in general (God was "in" that season), but "Un patio" loses strength especially with the second omission. Since the first set of three images merely sets the tone of the poem the following series of three metaphors in the original version have the important function of showing the patio's uniqueness and centrality through the anaphora which reinforces its role; and that reinforcement comes not only from the repetition, but also from the progressive description of the patio's cosmic capabilities. The first of the metaphors explains succinctly the special role for the patio which Borges expresses in a more prolix



manner in another *Fervor* poem, "Cercanías" ("Neighborhoods"): "the Moham-medan patios/full of ancestrality and efficacy,/since they are cemented/in the two most fundamental things that exist:/in the earth and the sky."

In "Un patio" Borges expresses this linking function of the patio in his three word metaphor ("patio, cielo encauzado"); the bed, earthbound, holds the sky. As holder of the sky, the patio becomes God's opening into the lives which the house holds, and by means of the patio the sky "slides into" or pervades the house. The sky, which he has just linked with the house through its patio, represents what is timeless for Borges. In his many later treatments of the topic of time, Borges as essayist shows time to be a human phenomenon, and therefore limited to the earth. But the sky is free from the limitations imposed by earthly temporality, a situation which Borges infers when he follows the sky-patio metaphors with the personified status of the eternity which waits serenely in the juncture of the stars. As a result of these two images, which associate the patio with the sky, eternity becomes an aspect of the patio (representative here of "lo criollo" and "lo bonairense"). Thus far Borges has led the reader through a progressive description of the patio—as holder of the afternoon's colors, as the moon's habitat, as the sky's bed, as the conductor of the sky into the house itself, and as a result of this last function his patio endows the whole house with an eternal character.

At this point in the poem it looks as if Borges implies that the eternity admitted into the house will affect its inhabitants as well ("God looks on their souls," after all), and possibly will allow them all an escape from his recurrent nemesis, time. But after this grand progression through the cosmic characteristics of a Buenos Aires house, the final two lines of the poem serve as a typically Borgesian disclaimer: it's nice to live in the dark friendship of an entryway, eaves and a cistern. He has had to give up his cosmic idealizations and has returned to the mundane reality of his familiar home.

Borges uses ultraist technique to present this cosmic-mundane, metaphysical and affectionate interrelationship. Such an intellectual exercise looks like an abandonment of avant-garde ideals, but this procedure represents instead an admirable, if unsanctioned, expansion of the poet's scope, which he achieves while still maintaining accepted avant-garde criteria. The various metaphors for the patio in the poem, made up of unexpected and distant relationships whose "justesse" is established by Borges' metaphysical logic, demonstrate how he uses ultraist technique at a highly sophisticated level.

A more complex and ambitious expansion of poetic expression, but one which still remains within the ultraist mode, occurs in one of the love poems from *Fervor*. "Ausencia" ("Absence") departs from accepted ultraist norms in more ways than the obvious depth of personal emotion which gave the poet his

reason for writing it. Borges ridiculed all poetry categorized under the rubric of "rubendarismo" in his ultraist manifestos, and that implied that he was reacting against everything within *modernismo's* all-encompassing umbrella—with its romantic, parnassian and symbolist elements. But Borges shows in this poem a strong affinity for, and possibly a heavy influence from the highly original avatar of Symbolism, Stéphane Mallarmé. The title alone is enough to make the connection to this poet, and the whole poem continues development of the absence theme. "Peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit" (Do not paint the thing itself, but the effect that it produces), Mallarmé's dictum, summarizes the intent of "Ausencia." "The thing," the beloved, is "the absent one," and Borges evokes a series of descriptions of absences in order to ironically underscore the concreteness of their effect.

## Ausencia

Habré de levantar la vida inmensa  
 que aún ahora es tu espejo:  
 piedra por piedra habré de reconstruirla.  
 Desde que te alejaste,  
 cuántos parajes se han tornado vanos  
 y sin sentido, iguales  
 a luminarias que arrinconan el alba,  
 cuántas sendas perdieron su fragancia!  
 Tardes que fueron nichos de tu imagen,  
 músicas donde siempre me aguardabas,  
 palabras de aquel tiempo,  
 habéis de ser quebradas  
 y a mis manos,  
 reacias y con dolor.  
 El vivo cielo inmenso  
 clama y torna a clamar tu dejamiento.  
 ¿En qué hondonada empozaré mi alma  
 donde no pueda vigilar tu ausencia  
 que como un sol terrible sin ocaso  
 brilla, definitiva e inclemente?  
 Tu ausencia ciñe el alma  
 como cuerda que abarca una garganta.

## [Absence

I will lift up the immense life  
 that even now is your mirror:

stone by stone I will reconstruct it.  
 Since you went away,  
 so many places have turned shallow  
 and meaningless, similar  
 to burning lamps that daybreak corners,  
 so many paths have lost their fragrance!  
 Afternoons that were niches of your image,  
 melodies where you always awaited me,  
 words of that time,  
 you all will be broken  
 in my hands,  
 reluctant and with pain.  
 The immense living sky  
 clamors and clamors again your remoteness.  
 In which ravine will I throw my soul  
 where it would not be able to guard your absence  
 which glares, as a terrible sun without setting,  
 definitive and inclement?  
 Your absence girdles the soul  
 like a cord that encircles a throat.]

The first two lines of the poem could qualify as a "greguería" or as any ultraist's fantastic image; its formation occurs through metonymy and metaphor and the result has the subtlety and suggestive qualities of the best symbolist creations. The poet, instead of referring to the loved one directly, selects an aspect of her, saying he will have to lift, or resuscitate, "the immense life." Her life is her mirror (already Borges uses what will later become one of his own tropes); again he refers not to the real woman but to her image reflected in his mind. Despite the intangibility or irreality of the absent one, the process chosen for reconstructing her memory—"stone by stone"—shows the concrete effect the absence has on him. But conversely, concrete objects in the poem (places, lights, paths) have been drained of any significance.

The next two metaphors (lines 9 and 10) create ethereal effects; intangible afternoons were niches, or solid containments: but for only her image, another intangible which becomes even more etherealized when he describes her as awaiting within the music (Mallarmé's "au creux néant musicien"—in music's hollow void). These intangibles of the senses—afternoons, music, words—again have a concreteness for the poet. All of these elements (words, music, afternoons, paths, lights, places) are the "stones" with which he has reconstructed the "mirror" of the absent one. Despite their vagueness (*vanos, sin fragancia*) or intangibility

these recollections form a concrete effect for the poet, and "they have to be broken" by his hands.

Relief does not come with the breaking of the mirror, that infinite reflector of life. An even more vast and limitless reflector (much like Mallarmé's "tout l'abime vain éployé—the whole vain abyss outspread), the personified sky, echoes ("proclaims and again proclaims") its own pangs at the loved one's leaving. For the last two images Borges reiterates the real effect of the intangible "ausencia" by bridging it, through simile, to two destructive agents: the sun ("shining without setting, definitive and inclement") and the strangling cord. The last simile, in fact, sums up the whole poem; the effect of one intangible (the absence) overriding another (the soul) has the physically strangling result.

Other examples of Mallarmean metonymy are found in "Sábados" ["Saturdays"] where "our two solitudes" blindly seek each other, and only "the whiteness of your flesh" survives the afternoon ("nuestras dos soledades en la sala severa/se buscan como ciegos./Acallando palabras momentáneas/hablan la angustia y tu pudor y mi anhelo./Sobrevive a la tarde/la blancura de tu carne [In the stark hall our two solitudes/blindly seek each other./Silencing momentary words,/the anguish and your prudence and my longing speak./The whiteness of your flesh/survives the afternoon]"). And, in the so vague as to be unreal comparison in "Calle desconocida" ["Unknown Street"], night is compared not just to the coming of music but to "hoped for" or "awaited" (thus absent) music ("y la venida de la noche se advierte/antes como advenimiento de música esperada/que como enorme símbolo de nuestra primordial nadería [and the coming of night is recognized/like an awaited music/not as a symbol of an essential insignificance]").

"Ausencia" develops its Mallarmean theme into a vivid and suggestive evocation of the poet's romantic turmoil (this poem more than adequately reminds that even the "cold" and "philosophical" Borges of many later essays and stories was young once). The pattern of alternations between non-concrete to concrete effects ("mirror" to "reconstitute," "afternoons-music-words" to "broken," "absence-soul" to "cord-throat") and the ending with three straight punishing images (the sky screams, the sun glares, the cord encircles) gives cumulative reinforcement to the poet's anguish. Centering the poem around the poet's personal emotional situation goes against the whole avant-garde trend toward "dehumanized" and unsentimental art; but at the same time the *greguería*-like images shine within "Ausencia" as excellent examples of avant-garde technique. Although influence from Mallarmé does not pervade the entire collection, the examples shown provide sufficient evidence that, for Borges, a poem which offers a well-wrought setting for the images it contains justifies the theoretical compromise involved in using the vagueness of symbolist

suggestion to evoke the effects of love.

Borges continues to defy the ultraists' desire to avoid personal emotion as a basis for poetry in his second published book of verse, *Luna de enfrente* (*Moon across the Way*) of 1925. As in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, love is one of the central themes ("Antelación de amor" ["Anticipation of Love"] and "Dualidad de una despedida" ["Duality of a Departure"] stand out), along with other topics he has previously established: affection for Buenos Aires and a preoccupation with time ("time will go on living me/death—dark and unmoving storm—will scatter my hours" underlie several of the poems. And concern for historical or familiar past continues from "Rosas" ["Roses"] and "Inscripción sepulcral" ["Carved on a Tombstone"] in *Fervor* to "Los llanos" ["The Plain"], "El General Quiroga va en coche al muere" ["General Quiroga Rides to His Death in a Carriage"], "Dulcia linquimus arva," and "El año cuarenta" ["The Year Forty"] in *Luna de enfrente*.

Although he does not continue with poems in the Mallarmean vein, the personal tone which was so apparent in "Ausencia" becomes more intense in his second book. In fact, the increasing appearance of his own sentiment in the love poems, in ancestral reminiscences (especially in the last four verses of "Dulcia linquimus arva"), and most jarringly in a post-adolescent world weariness, translates into a confessional poetry which blatantly violates the third anathema in Borges' own *Nosotros* article of 1921. "Casi juicio final" ["Almost the Final Judgment"] (where he announces, "I have been and I am"), and "Versos de catorce" ["Verses of Fourteen"] (written, as the title indicates, in fourteen syllable verses, or Alexandrines, and thus defying the ultraists' desire to use only free verse) both show an unusually egotistic side of Borges, as does "Mi vida entera" ("My Whole Life"), which shows more than a trace of influence from Paul Valéry: "I am that awkward intensity which a soul is. . . /I have crossed the sea/I have known many lands; I have seen a woman and two or three men/I have loved a haughty and pallid girl who had an Hispanic tranquillity/. . . I have savored numerous words/I believe deeply that that is everything and that I will never see, nor will I do, new things."

This confessionalistic tone, besides creating a greater variance with ultraistic thematic conventions, also undermines the general level of quality for the whole book.

Except for those self-centered pieces, the rest of the poems in *Luna* well represent Borges' modified avant-garde approach, wherein he injects a sensitive thought process into the ultraist framework. All except for "Versos de catorce" and "El General Quiroga va en coche al muere" are in free verse and contain more than a sufficient supply of ultraistic fantastic images. In fact, "Singladura" stands out as a virtually perfect ultraist creation, despite its being an almost

completely revised version of a poem which Borges originally published in Spain in 1921 (only the title and one of the images remain from the original). The 1925 version occasioned most likely by his trip back to Spain two years earlier contains, like the original version, an unbroken series of images, most of them formed by metaphors like those in the opening verses: "the sea is an innumerable sword," "the sea is solitary, like a blind man," "the sea is a wild language that I cannot manage to decipher." As those images would indicate, the whole poem evokes the poet's frustration and sense of solitude when he is separated from Buenos Aires by the sea. Reconciliation with that situation comes through the image, as fantastic or unreal as those from the beginning of the poem, retained from the original poem: "la luna nueva se ha enroscado aun mástil [the new moon has curled up to a mast]." This Disneyesque vision of an affectionate moon hugging the mast leads into an expansion of the same image: "la misma luna que dejamos bajo un arco de piedra y cuya luz agraciara los sauzales [the same moon that he have left under an arch of stone and whose light will grace the willows]"; through watching the moon at sea he finds a mental link to the remembered vision of the mood at home. Borges acknowledged in the prologue to *Luna de enfrente* that, with regard to the book's title, "the moon . . . is already an emblem in poetry." He had to be aware of the incongruousness of using the moon as an affectionate symbol and as the central element of a creationist image when it had been so associated with Leopoldo Lugones (by way of Laforgue, in his *Lunario sentimental* of 1909), whom the ultraists had been holding up as representative of the *modernista* establishment. After the grandiose scope of his comparisons for the moon and the sea, which place them in a highly derealized poetic environment, Borges ends "Singladura" with an ironic return to an everyday calm (as he did in "Un patio") when he says, "I share the afternoon with my sister, like a piece of bread."

A more important poem, "Los llanos" ["The Plain"], with its historical and *criollista* [creole] theme which also dovetails into the concern for time, illustrates the high level of poetic expression which Borges' ultraism can reach. Its formal elements make it, like "Singladura," a true work of avant-garde art. Borges could hardly increase the density of metaphors; they predominate as a technical element in the poem, and they succeed in creating, as Guillermo de Torre had urged, a level of reality which goes "más allá" from [beyond] that of the world of ordinary consciousness. And he achieves that higher level of reality in this poem in spite of, or perhaps because of, his refusal to avoid an "anecdotal" content. Achievement of the vanguardist objectives in "Los llanos" comes through a tight and intelligent structuring of the poem, with metaphors used as the links in its chain of construction.

"Los llanos" has a symmetrical structure. The first five lines deal with the

*llanura*, the plain; the following twelve lines present the central concern of the poem (notwithstanding the title, "The Plain"), which is the empire of Juan Facundo Quiroga; the final five lines, which formally balance the first group of verses, express the effect of this man's empire on Argentina's history.

Los Llanos

La llanura es un dolor pobrísimo que persiste.  
 La llanura es una estéril copia del alma.  
 El arenal es duro y enceguecido y en él no brilla  
 la videncia del agua.  
 ¡Qué cansados de perdurar están estos campos!  
 Esta flagrada y dolorida ausencia es toda la Rioja.  
 Por este llano urgió su imperio hecho de lanzas  
 Juan Facundo Quiroga.  
 Imperio forajido, imperio misérrimo.  
 Imperio cuyos vivos atambores fueron cascos de  
 potros redoblando ciudades humilladas  
 Y cuyas encarnizadas banderas fueron los cuervos  
 que una vez muerta la pelea se abaten  
 Imperio que rubricaron facones criollos encruele-  
 ciéndose en las gargantas.  
 Imperio cuyos únicos palacios fueron las desgarradas  
 y ávidas llamas.  
 Imperio errante. Imperio lastimero.  
 Aquella torpe vida en su entereza se encabrió  
 sobre los llanos  
 Y fueron briosa intensidad la espera de los combates  
 ágiles  
 Y el numeroso arremeter detrás de las profundas  
 tacuaras  
 Y la licencia atestiguando victorias  
 Y el saquear desbocado  
 Y la estrella caliente que trazan el varón y la  
 mujer en juntándose  
 Todo ello se perdió como la tribu de un poniente  
 se pierde  
 O como pasa la vehemencia de un beso  
 Sin haber enriquecido los labios que lo consienten.  
 Es triste que el recuerdo incluya todo  
 Y más aún si es bochornoso el recuerdo.

## [The Plain

The prairie is a very poor pain that persists.  
 The prairie is a sterile copy of the soul.  
 The sandy ground is hard and blind and in it  
     the clairvoyance of the water does not shine.  
 How tired of endurance these fields are!  
 This flagrant and pain-filled absence is all of the Rioja.  
 On this plain urged his empire made of lances  
     Juan Facundo Quiroga.  
 Outlaw empire, miserable empire.  
 Empire whose living drums were horses' hooves  
     beating on humiliated cities  
 And whose flesh-covered flags were the crows  
     flying over once the fight is done  
 Empire that the creole knives sign cruelly into being  
     on throats.  
 Empire whose only palaces were the torn  
     and avid flames.  
 Errant empire. Pitiful empire.  
 That clumsy life in its fortitude rose on its hind legs  
     above the plain  
 And there came the spirited intensity, the expectation  
     of agile combats  
 And numerous attacks behind the profound  
     'tacuaras'  
 And license witnessing victories  
 And looting, out of control  
 And the warm star that the male and the  
     woman sketch in uniting  
 All of that was lost as a tribe of a sunset  
     is lost  
 Or as the vehemence of a kiss passes  
 Without having enriched the lips that consented to it.  
 It is sad that memory retains it all  
 And even more if it is a shameful memory.]

The first five lines reflect the title of the poem, "The Plain." The first three verses form a series of metaphors for this plain, which first is equated with a persistent pain, a pain which afflicts the poet's (and the nation's) conscience, a connection made by the second metaphor of the plain as also a sterile copy



of the soul. The *arenal*, the sandy land of the plain, is *hard*, a word which echoes the effect of the word "estéril" (sterile) of the previous line, but which also connotes a benumbed emotional state; "cansado" in the next line reinforces this sense of total exhaustion. Beyond a hardening, a blindness ("enceguecido") results from this situation which is too painful to bear. The image with which the line ends reflects both of these aspects of the plain: the absence of water keeps it hard (dry) and does not provide the reflective, visual function ("videncia," clairvoyance) which could counteract the blindness. After these expressions of the pain, hardness and sterility inherent in this land, the attribution in the succeeding line of tiredness as a characteristic of the countryside comes as no surprise. This tiredness again reflects the emotional and physical state of the poet onto the plain. In the last of these introductory lines he declares in a metaphor, one which stands out even among Borges' many fantastic images for its flagrant unreality, that this beaten and pained absence is, or refers to, the whole Rioja region. Adjectives of such violent effect applied to the empty state ("ausencia")—not to just a barren or waste land, but to a complete absence—create an image whose sharply incongruous and illogical relationships exemplify the poetic possibilities on the route to the "más allá." Although an absence, a vacuum, cannot be described as beaten or pained, that Mallarmean word evokes (in the same way, although Borges' context is bitter, as Mallarmé's "L'absente de tous bouquets") in *infinite* expression of what is lacking due to Quiroga's destruction.

Each of the first five lines contains a specific reference to the title: *the plain*, *the sandy ground*, *these fields*, and *La Rioja*. Repetition of terms continues into the sixth verse, serving as a link to the beginning of the central section of the poem, which begins with the words "on this plain." The first section has established the bitter tone and the poet's angry sentiments toward the activities which he is about to relate in the body of the poem. This lack of subtlety is underlined by the harsh and unrelenting frequent repetitions of the terms "la llanura" and "Imperio" (Empire) at the beginning of many lines; a repetition which also helps to emphasize the connection between the title—*Los llanos*—and the central theme, Quiroga's empire. The anaphora and use of polysyndeton reflect the extension and ever-continuing vastness of the pampa which parallels the extensiveness of Quiroga's empire and its cruelty.

Throughout these plains, then, Quiroga "urged" his empire "made of lances." There are two images here. One, the graphic construction of an empire made out of spears, emphasizes through metonymic exaggeration the harsh cruelty of this man; this in itself is a double image, the spears standing for the soldiers who created the empire, while "hecho de lanzas" also evokes the results of their destruction. More striking, though, is the verb "urgió" applied to Quiroga's

relationship to this empire. This term gives the impression that he sits astride it as he does his horse, spurring it on—an image that is paralleled seven lines later when “that whole life” *se encabritó* (rose on its hind legs) over the plains. With these descriptions Borges makes the “empire” a living, breathing beast which hovers menacingly over the plain.

Many of the metaphors in the body of the poem reinforce the vision of the cruel beast. The empire’s “living drums were horses’ hooves beating on humiliated cities,” an image whose relentlessness is drummed into the reader by the rhythm which the anaphora in the poem produces; and the empire’s destruction is symbolized by the “flesh covered flags,” the crows flying over the battle fields. In the next image (line 10), a particularly gripping one, Borges personifies the knives, which parallel the lances of which the empire is made (line 6), by means of two verbs of action. These knives “rubicarón” the empire, an action which has double significance due to the expressiveness of that verb. “Rubicar” means both “to sign” and “to cover with red color,” and here it indicates that they leave their bloody seal. They leave this mark of remembrance by “encruelciéndose” (becoming cruel) on the throats of the victims, a verb which literally vivifies the action. The destructive nature of the empire—it is made of lances—is reinforced by Borges’ ironic metaphor of its only palaces being the flames left by Quiroga’s henchmen.

Now comes the portrayal of the empire, a beast raising itself over the plains, causing such depravities, all of which are described as having “spirited intensity,” a description which also fits the restless behavior of a wild stallion. The word “desbocado” which characterizes this destruction has two meanings which apply both to the humans who are committing the atrocities (it can mean “foul-mouthed”), and (with its meaning of “runaway”) to the image of the beast which represents their destructive force.

The beastly empire and its cruelty have an ephemeral existence, however, and the final five lines describe its effect, beginning with “all of that was lost,” an abrupt statement of complete finality backed up by two comparisons. The loss of Quiroga’s violent empire is like the disappearing of an Indian tribe from the West or like the passing of the “vehemence of a kiss” which—in spite of the possible physical and emotional violence inherent in those acts, a parallel to the incongruousness of the “pain-filled absence”—leave no trace. But, with equal abruptness, Borges returns to the present—the last two lines of the poem, like the first five, are in the present tense—to declare that, like the “poor pain that persists,” memory retains it all. In these lines he includes the emotional effect of this disappeared past on himself and on the nation. The sadness he expresses here has a double edge for Borges, for he realizes that memory, which he describes elsewhere as a refuge or “remanso” (backwater) from time’s flow,

can inflict its own pain. This injection of personal feeling again goes counter to his ultraist injunctions against the poet's use of his own emotions in his poem; but the sadness and shame expressed in these lines parallels and ties up the emotions which he had attributed to the plains in the beginning of the poem, thus completing the structural, thematic and emotional balance of the piece. Achieving such a balanced poetic creation clearly takes precedence over ultraist prescriptions for technique, although Borges continues to use the image in almost "industrial quantities" in this and other poems in *Luna de enfrente*.

The third book from the twenties, *Cuaderno San Martín* [*San Martín Copybook*] (1929)—the title is a brand-name of a notebook—marks the end of Borges' publication of poems in book form until the appearance of *El hacedor* [*Dreamtigers*] in 1960 and *El otro, el mismo* [*The Self and the Other*] in 1967. Besides the end of his youthful poetic production it represents the end of poetry as Borges' primary means of expression for the next four decades. The brevity of the book very likely indicates a lessening interest in poetry in general, as well as a significant weakening of the Ultra influence on his work. In any case the ultraist epoch has ended by the time *Cuaderno San Martín* appears; *Martín Fierro* ceased publication in 1927, which corresponded with a drastic curtailment of avant-garde activity in Buenos Aires.

The vanguard's recession scatters imagistic remnants in its wake, leaving some firm traces of its influences even on Borges' collection from late in the decade. "Arrabal en que pesa el campo" (Suburb on which the Countryside Weighs), omitted from the 1954 edition, continues creation of images through personification ("the moon is more alone," "phonographs confess their pain") and through metonymy, in an unusually sensual passage: "in Villa Ortuzar/the male's desire is sad in the afternoon/when hips stroll by on the sidewalk." Of the twelve pieces which comprise *Cuaderno San Martín*, the one which most reflects what remains of the ultraist in Borges is "La Chacarita," the first of two poems grouped under the title "Muertes de Buenos Aires" ("Deaths of Buenos Aires").

Not only the remnants of the avant-garde elements evident in this poem make it an especially interesting example of the last poetry from this period, it also contains both of the themes which predominate in the other pieces from this book, namely nostalgia for the past and death. "La Chacarita" is the name of the cemetery in Buenos Aires where indigents are buried and which stands in contrast to the cemetery called "La Recoleta," the subject of the second poem of the pair, and the resting place of Buenos Aires' aristocracy, among them Borges' ancestors. The origins of the cemetery for the poor receive a very personal and image-filled treatment; again Borges lets sentiment intrude into the poem's metaphors. This personal approach, non-ultraist in a strict sense,

applies to most of these poems written after the avant-garde fever has subsided. Borges' poetic sensibility in this regard overrides his original theories, but his vestigial ultraist "fervor" surfaces in this poem's images, which are still startling because of the terms which they link together in unexpected ways. In this respect Borges continues to follow Guillermo de Torre's quest for the "más allá"; and the discussion of this poem, paraphrasing its descriptive process, should demonstrate how he interweaves the metaphoric transformations into its fabric.

#### La Chacarita

Porque la entraña del cementerio del sur  
 fue saciada por la fiebre amarilla hasta decir basta;  
 porque los conventillos hondos del sur  
 mandaron muerte sobre la cara de Buenos Aires  
 y por que Buenos Aires no pudo mirar esa muerte,  
 a paladas te abrieron  
 en la punta perdida del oeste,  
 detrás de las tormentas de tierra  
 y del barrial pesado y primitivo que hizo a los  
     cuarteadores.  
 Allí no había más que el mundo  
 y las costumbres de las estrellas sobre unas chacras,  
 y el tren salía de un galpón en Bermejo  
 con los olvidos de la muerte:  
 muertos de barba derrumbada y ojos en vela,  
 muertas de carne desalmada y sin magia.  
 Trapacerías de la muerte—sucia como el  
     nacimiento del hombre—  
 siguen multiplicando tu subsuelo y así reclutas  
 tu conventillo de ánimas, tu montonera clandestina  
 de huesos  
 que caen al fondo de tu noche enterrada  
 lo mismo que a la hondura de un mar,  
 hacia una muerte sin inmortalidad y sin honra.  
 Una dura vegetación de sobras en pena  
 hace fuerza contra sus paredones interminables  
 cuyo sentido es perdición  
 y convencido de corruptibilidad el suburbio  
 apura su caliente vida a tus pies  
 en calles traspasadas por una llamarada baja de

barro

o se aturde con desgano de bandoneones  
o con balidos de cornetas sonsas en carnaval.

(El fallo de destino más para siempre,  
que dura en mí lo escuché esa noche en tu noche  
cuando la guitarra bajo la mano del orillero  
dijo lo mismo que las palabras, y ellas decían:  
"La muerte es vida vivida,  
la vida es muerte que viene.").

Mono del cementerio, la Quema  
gesticula advenediza muerte a tus pies.  
Gastamos y enfermamos la realidad: 210 carros  
infaman las mañanas, llevando  
a esa necrópolis de humo  
las cotidianas cosas que hemos contagiado de  
muerte.

Cúpulas estrafalarias de madera y cruces en alto  
se mueven—piezas negras de un ajedrez final—  
por tus calles

y su achacosa majestad va encubriendo  
las vergüenzas de nuestras muertes.

En tu disciplinado recinto  
la muerte es incolora, hueca, numérica;  
se disminuye a fechas y nombres,  
muertes de la palabra.

La noche piensa "nunca";  
un silbido—agresor de infinitud—cruza con su  
malevo.

Chacarita:

desaguadero de esta patria de Buenos Aires, cuesta  
final,

barrio que sobrevives a los otros, que sobremueres,  
lazareto que estás en esta muerte no en la otra vida,  
he oído tu palabra de caducidad y en ella no creo,  
porque tu misma convicción de tragedia es acto de  
vida

y porque la persuasión de una sola rosa es más que  
tus mármoles.

## [Chacarita

Because the guts of the cemetery of the South,  
     satiated by yellow fever, said *enough*;  
 because the tenement houses of the Southside  
     send death over the face of Buenos Aires  
 and because Buenos Aires was unable to look at the carnage,  
 they opened you with shovels  
 in the city's lost western edge  
 behind duststorms  
 and the heavy, primitive district that made the teamsters.  
 There was no more than the world  
 and its custom of stars rising above a few huts,  
 and the train left from a shed in Bermejo  
 with what death forgot:  
 dead men with slack beards and sleepless eyes,  
 dead women, soulless flesh, without magic.  
 Death's deceits—dirty as man's birth—  
 continue thickening your subsoil; so you muster up souls  
 for your compound, your hidden pile of bones  
 that fall to the bottom of your buried night  
 as if into the depths of a sea,  
 toward a death without immortality, without honor.  
 Hardened vegetation, garbage in torment,  
 presses in on the interminable walls  
 that mean perdition  
 and, convinced of its own corruption, the slum  
 hurls its hot life at your feet  
 in alleys shot through with low flames of dust,  
 or is confused with the accordion's deceit  
 or bleatings of dazed carnival cornets.  
 (Destiny's verdict forever,  
 which goes on within me, I heard that night in your night  
 when the guitar and the words joined  
 under the player's hands—and they said:  
 "Death is life lived,  
 life is death coming.")  
 The mocker of the cemetery, La Quema  
 calls newly arrived death to your feet.

We spend and infect reality, 210 cartloads  
to insult the mornings, bringing  
to that necropolis of smoke  
the everyday things which we have contaminated with  
death.

Clumsy wooden domes and raised crosses  
are moving—black pieces in a final chessgame—  
through your streets  
and their sickly majesty covers up  
the shame of your death.

In your disciplined enclosures  
death is colorless, hollow, numerical;  
subsides into dates and names,  
deaths of the word.

Night thinks "never";  
a malevolent whistle—infinite aggressor—  
crosses.

Chacarita:

drain of this patria of Buenos Aires, final hill to  
climb,

district that outlasts the others, and outdies them,  
pesthouse of our death, not of the other life,

I have heard your feeble word and I don't believe it  
because your very conviction of tragedy is an affirmation of life  
and because the persuasion of one single rose is greater than that  
of your marbles.]

The attachment which the poet feels for the cemetery is brought out by the frequent use of personification, which Borges continues to favor. In a poem about the effects of death, this method has particular force, creating images which are fantastic but humanized, however incongruously. In the first image, in which the entrails of the "cemetery of the South" were *satiated* until it *said enough*, the cemetery becomes the effigy of an over-indulging person who has been forced to stuff himself past the point of satiety, an almost Rabelaisian description. The "conventillos del sur" ("tenement houses of the Southside") have the ability to *send* death onto Buenos Aires' *face*, and this city is not able *to look at* that death; in all these instances personification occurs through nouns denoting human physical properties (entrails, face) and through verbs of action. La Chacarita itself is even more completely personified, addressed as a person