

Borges the Poet

Ed. Carlos Cortínez

Fayetteville: The University of
Arkansas Press, 1986

THORPE RUNNING

The "Secret Complexity" of Borges' Poetry

Ever since the final years of the ultraist decade of the 20s in Argentina, Borges has tried to undo or to discredit almost everything that he believed or wrote during those years. This purposeful rejection of what was, after all, a synthetic approach to art, a catch-all of avant-garde theory and practice, has led him into new areas of poetic investigation which paradoxically place him once again in the forefront of current theoretical development.

Although Borges rejects the militant tone of his early ultraist pronouncements, as well as a belief in the supreme powers of the metaphor which they expressed, he retains, in spite of his apparent reticence and self-effacement, an insistent resolve to discover—to rescue—the basis for a true poetic image. In contrast to the intended difficulties imposed by the Ultraists' contrived metaphors which had correlated ever more "distant realities," he now "modestly" advises us that his later poetry has a "secret complexity" underlying its apparently ordinary language. Borges' careful consideration of the characteristics of the words he uses in his poetry parallels the concerns of other Latin American poets, especially the more adventurous ones who deal with what Octavio Paz labels the "zone of language." This focus on words and their limitations also carries Borges' poetry into the realm of theory currently dominated largely by French literary critics and philosophers such as Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Michael Riffaterre and Gérard Genette.

Both of those groups share an awareness of the limits of language and a lack of confidence in its ability to express anything in concrete or unequivocal terms. Specifically, they mistrust the meanings engendered by words; thus, they tend to concentrate on the word as signifier only, and to disregard the ambiguous "signifieds" that they have been saddled with. This focus on the word stripped of its various meanings has necessarily also led more recent poets to reject a poetry built on analogy, since analogy is based on mental associations made between the implications of words. Their rejection of analogy places them perfectly in line with Borges' own rejection of ultraism and its glorification of the metaphor. The ultraists were supremely confident that they had found in the metaphor the ultimate creative source; however, new critics and poets who reject both the word with a fixed meaning and the metaphor it makes possible, now find greater creative possibilities in the view of a word seen primarily as signifier. Jacques Derrida, for example, makes this succinct comment regarding the linguistic sign: "L'absence de signifié transcendantal étend à l'infini le champ et le jeu de la signification."¹ As a result of this absence of transcendental signification the word can now be seen as a *significant flottant*—a "floating signifier."

Such open-ended possibilities within a word can be responsible for a shattering effect upon language, as Octavio Paz shows in these lines from *Pasado en claro*.

Una sonaja de semillas secas
las letras rotas de los nombres:
hemos dispersado a los nombres,
hemos deshonrado a los nombres.
Ando en busca del nombre desde entonces.

But, in the same poem, he shows that in spite of the disorienting effect of this dispersal of meaning, a continual creative process (*espiral, rotación*) is set in motion because of the inherent possibilities within words which have an "infinite field of meaning."

Alcé con las palabras y sus sombras
una casa ambulante de reflejos,
torre que anda, construcción de viento.
El tiempo y sus combinaciones:
los años y los muertos y las sílabas,
cuentos distintos de la misma cuenta.

Espiral de los ecos, el poema
es aire que se esculpe y se disipa,
fugaz alegoría de los nombres
verdaderos. A veces la página respira:
los enjambres de sonidos y sentidos,
en rotación magnética se enlazan y dispersan
sobre el papel.²

In this same vein, Roberto Juárez, an Argentine who bases his entire poetics on the "floating" sign, clearly summarizes a view of language with no meaning attached to its signs.

Porque aquí y ahora la palabra no existe.
Tan sólo queda su identificación
en los archivos policiales
de la historia del hombre.
Su sonido es un coágulo en el tiempo.
Su escritura es un pálido diafragma
para las tácticas funestas
del corredor de la memoria.³

Borges is as aware of the fallibility and the futility of language and its signs as are those other poets and thinkers; in fact, his prose writing owes its original and easily identifiable technique to his belief that language does not have the ability to "name" things, as Sylvia Molloy has shown in her article on "simulacro y causalidad textual" in his fiction.⁴ This concern becomes an even greater dilemma for the poet, as Borges explains in his postscript to *Historia de la noche* (1977).

La materia de que dispone el lenguaje es, como afirma Stevenson, absurdamente inadecuada. ¿Qué hacer con las gastadas palabras—con los *Idola Fori* de Francis Bacon—y con algunos artificios retóricos que están en los manuales?

He then elaborates on the "inadequacy" of what he elsewhere calls "ambiguous language."

Whitehead ha denunciado la falacia del diccionario perfecto: suponer que para cada cosa hay una palabra. Trabajamos a tientas. El universo es fluido y cambiante; el lenguaje, rígido.⁵

That last reference to a fluid and changing universe recalls the "floating signifier," and also parallels Derrida's explanation for that phenomenon, namely the lack of a fixed "center" for each word. Derrida's term for that ungraspable sign is the "trace,"⁶ which Borges again almost echoes

with the words *vástago* (descendent) and *reflejo* (reflection) in these two selections from the poems "A Johannes Brahms" and "Juan 1,14."

Mi servidumbre es la palabra impura,
Vástago de un concepto y de un sonido;
Ni símbolo, ni espejo, ni gemido,
Tuyo es el río que huye y que perdura.⁷

He encomendado esta escritura a un hombre cualquiera;
no será nunca lo que quiero decir,
no dejará de ser su reflejo.⁸

In Borges' later poetry this inability to "name," and the frustration with a "worn out" and "ambiguous" language is an ever present concern; his famous poem "El otro tigre" from *El otro, el mismo* (1967), clearly illustrates this preoccupation which carries into all of the subsequent volumes. In the last line of the first quotation above, we see part of the reason ("tuyo es el río") why this holds such fascination for a writer whose favorite topic is time. For Borges, language's failings are linked with human weaknesses, since both share a temporal nature; language is both worn out (*gastado*) and undermined (*universo fluido y cambiante*) by time, as are its practitioners. But he is not content to just play on this awareness; he does not simply turn the "game of signification" into a "spiral of echoes." Borges points out in the prologue to *La moneda de hierro*, in which he discusses the limitations of art, that in spite of its shifting meanings, language—the word—literally has a future.

Cada sujeto, por ocasional o tenue que sea, nos impone una estética peculiar. Cada palabra, aunque esté cargada de siglos, inicia una página en blanco y compromete el porvenir.

In the face of an impure language and his own mortality, he insists on establishing a poetry with a durable meaning, and this insistence is personal and solidly affirmative, in spite of the "secret" aspects which it will entail.

The first way in which Borges' texts face up to an ambiguous language is to demonstrate how a word "loaded down by centuries" can have an almost unlimited richness in its multiplicity of meanings. The poem "El otro tigre" does just that, showing that, as Roman Jakobson says, "the context is variable and each new context gives the word a new signification. In that fact resides the creative force of the literary sign."⁹

"Blake," a poem in *La cifra*, contains the same kind of assertion about its subject, the rose.¹⁰ It is important to note that Borges is not casual about selecting these subjects: both the rose and the tiger already have poetic (or as Borges would say, "archetypal") associations. Another poem on the same topic, "The Unending Rose," carries this idea of a multiplicity of meanings within a single word to an almost unlimited degree, a concept reinforced by the related title of the book it is contained in, *La rosa profunda*. That adjective, "profundo," is one that Roberto Juárez also uses in his *Poesía vertical* in order to indicate the unlimited verticality—the open-ended depth of signification—of the poetic word. At the end of "The Unending Rose" it is evident that "the rose" has taken on a wealth of associations; addressing the rose, the poet says:

Cada cosa

Es infinitas cosas. Eres música,
Firmamentos, palacios, ríos, ángeles,
Rosa profunda, ilimitada, íntima,
Que el Señor mostrará a mis ojos muertos.¹¹

This awareness that the word in poetry has the potential to evoke a vast range of meanings within the reader underlies, then, all of Borges' mature poetry, and is an important part of his poetry's "secret complexity." Although in "The Unending Rose" Borges shows how a word's endless implications can provide poetic depths, he does not exclusively exploit the idea which some poets also see as the way to unlimited expression; Juárez, for example, sees it as the key to a *poesía explosiva*. Rather, Borges seems to turn his back on this penetrating vision of what an ambiguous but unlimited language can do, incongruously insisting on consciously disregarding that knowledge. He explains the contradiction in his poem "El ingenuo" from *La moneda de hierro*.

Cada aurora (nos dicen) maquina maravillas
Capaces de torcer la más terca fortuna;
Hay pisadas humanas que han medido la luna
Y el insomnio devasta los años y las millas.
En el azul acechan públicas pesadillas
Que entenebran el día. No hay en el orbe una
Cosa que no sea otra, o contraria, o ninguna.
A mí sólo me inquietan las sorpresas sencillas.
Me asombra que una llave pueda abrir una puerta,
Me asombra que mi mano sea una cosa cierta,

Me asombra que del griego la eleática saeta
 Instantánea no alcance la inalcanzable meta,
 Me asombra que la espada cruel pueda ser hermosa,
 Y que la rosa tenga el olor de la rosa.

The poem is, in spite of its title, anything but a reflection of naïveté. Perhaps, "El otro, el mismo" would have been a more fitting title for a poem which devotes the first half to a demonstration of poetic self-consciousness and the second half to a declaration of self-limitation. The opening seven lines are made up of the kind of exotic images which have characterized all modernist poetry, and also relate extraordinary events connected with modern society. Its imagery becomes almost a parody of avant-garde verse. As in the ultraists' poetry there is dehumanization; human elements are referred to through metonymy (*pisadas humanas, insomnio, públicas pesadillas*), but the images in these lines are all formed by the ultraists' favorite means, personification (*cada aurora maquina maravillas*, etc.). The verbs used are all in the creationist mold—dynamic and assertive (*maquinar, torcer, medir, devastar, acechar*). At the end of these seven verses ("no hay . . . una cosa que no sea otra . . .") Borges restates his frequently expressed belief that there is an excess of analogies and nihilistic pessimism in the world and in language.

In contrast to that conscious "modernity" of both expression and content, the second half of the poem deals with unremarkable things which nevertheless "astonish" him, and it is written in an apparently flat and prose-like style which still adheres to the strict form of the poem, with its fourteen-syllable lines and consonantal rhyme. This poem, which could well be seen as the poetics for all of Borges' later work, is a fleshing out of a key statement from the prologue to *El otro, el mismo*.

Es curiosa la suerte del escritor. Al principio es barroco, vanidosamente barroco, y al cabo de los años puede lograr, si son favorables los astros, no la sencillez, que no es nada, sino la modesta y secreta complejidad.¹²

This "secret complexity" is his understated rebellion against the more obvious "baroque" difficulties of modernist or imagist poetry. In "Brown-ing resuelve ser poeta" Borges explains his plan of attack against over-worked poetry:

Como los alquimistas
 que buscaron la piedra filosofal

en el azogue fugitivo,
 haré que las comunes palabras
 —naipes marcados del tahir, moneda de la plebe—
 rindan la magia que fue suya
 cuando Thor era el numen y el estrépito,
 el trueno y la plegaria.

Besides becoming the basis for this alchemistic transformation of simple words into sources of magic, common, everyday words give Borges' later work a pronounced "intimacy" as Jaime Alazraki has shown.¹³ Because of the obvious personal connection which Borges feels for the things he writes about, his later poetry becomes what Maurice Blanchot calls the author's "journal," filled as it is with the writer's own "insignificant details."¹⁴

Even a casual reading of the poet's later collections quickly reveals the frequent repetition of what Borges often calls "habitual" details. This is done consciously, with Borges even forewarning the reader in the prologue to *El otro, el mismo* about "las previsible monotonías, la repetición de palabras y tal vez de líneas enteras." The repetition, which is really a self-conscious exercise of "intertextuality," counteracts the ambiguousness of language by concentrating the reader's attention on the word within the text. As both Blanchot and Michael Riffaterre emphasize, repetition thus fulfills a poetic purpose, with the restated words themselves becoming images or symbols.¹⁵ Borges confirms that even when dealing with familiar words he is using a form of image. In a recent interview he said, referring to Emerson, that "all words are metaphors—or fossil poetry, a fine metaphor itself."¹⁶ Borges' remarks on the word "fossil" are significant, since the word leads us to think of rock-hard remnants of an original life form and suggests further that Borges' approach to poetic language might have an archeological cast. Indeed, much of his later work reflects a desire to go back to original linguistic models, very much the same desire that Derrida sees in Lévi-Strauss, "[une] nostalgie de l'origine, de l'innocence archaïque et naturelle." "Archaic and natural innocence" is precisely what Borges is looking for in his new approach to the image, as in the poem "Un sajón." Its third strophe virtually describes "fossil poetry."

Era tenaz. Obraron su fortuna
 Remos, redes, arado, espada, escudo;

La dura mano que guerreaba pudo
Grabar con hierro una porfiada runa.

Fossils are often seen as hard outlines of original life forms preserved in stone, and that is exactly what runes are, namely sculpted outlines of the first writers' symbols. Even the act of carving them is seen as a firm and laborious process done by a "hard" hand, which engraves with an iron tool. And just as the carver must be "tenacious," so too must the symbol he carves persist with "stubbornness." As if to illustrate the durable word-as-image ideal derived from this process, the second line here is comprised only of five words—five things—which are personified into images by the introductory phrase, "they worked out his fate." This poem's final four strophes describe the original process of language formation which had the magical quality Borges is working toward in his own verse.

Para cantar memorias o alabanzas
Amonedaba laboriosos nombres;
La guerra era el encuentro de los hombres
Y también el encuentro de las lanzas.

Su mundo era de magias en los mares,
De reyes y de lobos y del hado
Que no perdona y del horror sagrado
Que hay en el corazón de los pinares.

Traía las palabras esenciales
De una lengua que el tiempo exaltaría
A música de Shakespeare: noche y día,
Agua, fuego, colores y metales.

Hambre, sed, amargura, sueño, guerra,
Muerte y los otros hábitos humanos;
En arduos montes y en abiertos llanos,
Sus hijos engendraron a Inglaterra. (*El otro*, 46)

Even for the purpose of singing, the archaic linguistic development is described here as a hard, solid "coining" operation; the coined word could well be seen, then, as a "moneda de hierro," the title of Borges' 1976 book. These laboriously fabricated words were used to symbolize the magical relationship which the Saxon had with his world. And, just as importantly, these are "essential words" describing "human habits," the words and the functions to which Borges wants to return through the "alchemy" he mentioned in the "Browning" poem. This recapturing of a magical experience explains the astonishment seen in the four-

times-repeated "me asombra" that Borges expresses in connection with essential things in the poem "El ingenuo"; and those lines in turn recall this one from "El mar": "the astonishment that elemental things leave."

Borges makes explicit his desire to return to linguistic origins, to a *lenguaje del alba*, as he calls it, in "Al iniciar el estudio de la gramática anglosajona," from the same book.

Símbolos de otros símbolos, variaciones
Del futuro inglés o alemán me parecen estas palabras
Que alguna vez fueron imágenes
Y que un hombre usó para celebrar el mar o una espada;
Mañana volverán a vivir,
Mañana *fyr* no será *fire* sino esa suerte
De dios domesticado y cambiante
Que a nadie le está dado mirar sin un antiguo asombro. (*El otro*, 105)

Again it is the original word as metaphor (*símbolos de otros símbolos*) an image that Borges describes here, and that he wants to use in the same way in order to "compromise the future" (*mañana volverán a vivir*). The future effect will be, once again, a sense of astonishment which goes back to the original magical relationship—an *antiguo asombro*.

We see now that Borges' "secret complexity" lies in the words he uses—and in the people who read them. This "secret" even allows him to write a poem to the moon, a subject scorned during the ultraist period as being nothing but an outworn poetic cliché. He explains why he can now write about this essentially poetic topic.

El secreto, a mi ver, está en usarla
con humildad. Es la palabra *luna*.

In the next strophe he states that he does not dare spoil the moon "with a vain image"—an indictment of both Modernismo and Ultraism—explaining in the following verses that the word *luna* already provides sufficient "complexity."

Sé que la luna o la palabra *luna*
Es una letra que fue creada para
La compleja escritura de esa rara
Cosa que somos, numerosa y una. (*El otro*, 74)

The "secret complexity" already exists in the "complex script" of human experience. It lies in the multiple associations a word has gathered

over the centuries. Or, at an even deeper level of difficulty which requires ingenuousness, it involves stripping away the word's timeworn complications in order to experience the original astonishment that fabricators of language felt when they made their first metaphorical connections between words and objects.

Translations by T. Running

1. A rattling of dry seeds
the broken letters of the names;
we have scattered the names,
we have dishonored the names.
Ever since then I have been walking in search of the name.

I raised with words and their shadows
a walking house of reflections,
a tower which walks, a construction of wind.
Time and its combinations:
years, the dead, syllables,
different stories from the same account.
A spiral of echoes, the poem
is air which is sculpted and dissipates, a
fleeting allegory of true names.
At times the page breathes;
the clusters of sounds and senses,
in a magnetic rotation, connect and disperse
on the page. (O. Paz, *Pasado en claro*, 1975)
2. Because here and now the word does not exist.
Its identification only remains
in the police files
of man's history.
Its sound is a clot in time.
Its script is a palid diaphragm
for the ill-fated tactics
in the hall of memory. (Juarroz, *Poesía vertical*)
3. My obligation is the impure word,
descendent of a concept and a sound;
neither symbol, nor mirror, nor moan
yours is the river which flees and which remains.

4. I have entrusted this writing to any man at all;
it will never be what I want to say,
it will be nothing but its reflection.
5. Each thing
Is infinite things. You are music,
Firmaments, palaces, rivers, angels,
Profound rose, unlimited, intimate,
That the Lord will show to my dead eyes.
6. *The Naive Person* (J. L. Borges)
Each dawn (they tell us) fabricates marvels
Capable of twisting the most stubborn fortune;
There are human steps that have measured the moon
And insomnia devastates years and miles.
Public nightmares lie in wait in the blue
And make the day gloomy. In the sphere there is
Nothing that is not another or contrary thing, or nothing.
Only the simple surprises disturb me.
It amazes me that a key can open a door.
It amazes me that my hand may be a certain thing.
It amazes me that the Greek's
Instantaneous Eleatic arrow does not reach the unreachable goal,
It amazes me that the cruel sword can be beautiful,
And that the rose can have the smell of a rose.
7. Like the alchemists
who looked for the philosophers' stone
in the fleeting mercury,
I will make the common words
—cards marked by the gambler, common coins—
produce the magic that was theirs
when Thor was divine and noisy,
thunder and prayer.
8. He was tenacious. These things worked out his fate:
Oars, nets, plow, sword, shield;
The hard hand that fought was able
To carve with iron a stubborn rune.
9. To sing of memories or praises
He coined laborious names;
War was the collision of people
And also the clash of spears.

His world was one of magic on the seas,
Of kings and wolves and fate
That does not pardon and of the sacred horror
That lies in the heart of the pine groves.

He brought the essential words
Of a language that time would raise
Into Shakespeare's music: night and day,
Water, fire, colors and metals.

Hunger, thirst, bitterness, sleep, war,
Death and other human habits;
In arduous forests and in open plains,
His/Their children will produce England.

10. Symbols of other symbols, variations
Of the future English or German are these words
Which at one time were images
And which a man used to celebrate the sea or a sword;
Tomorrow they will live again,
Tomorrow *fyr* will not be *fire* but rather that kind
Of domesticated and changing God
Which nobody is allowed to see without an ancient astonishment.
11. The secret, in my view, is in using it
with humility. It is the word *moon*.
I know that the moon or the word *moon*
is an inscription that was created for
The complex script of that rare
Thing that we are, numerous and one.

NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967): 411.
2. Octavio Paz, *Pasado en claro* (Mexico: FCE, 1975): 230.
3. Robert Juárez, *Poesía vertical* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1976): 230.
4. Sylvia Molloy, "'Dios acecha en los intervalos': simulacro y causalidad textual en la ficción de Borges," *Revista Iberoamericana*, 100-101 (Julio-Diciembre, 1977): 381-398.
5. Jorge Luis Borges, *Historia de la noche* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1977): 139.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Paris: Les editions de minuit, 1972): 40.
7. Jorge Luis Borges, *La moneda de oro* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1976): 73.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, *Elogio de la sombra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969): 16.
9. Roman Jakobson, *Lingüística, poética, tiempo* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1981): 97.
My translation.
10. Jorge Luis Borges, *La cifra* (Madrid: Alianza tres, 1981): 47. The reference to archetypes here is not a casual one. In *La cifra* Borges repeatedly brings up the notion of a Pla-

tonic ideal; it seems obvious that he would like to extend the return to original linguistic symbols all the way back to an archetype.

11. Jorge Luis Borges, *La rosa profunda* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1975): 156.
12. Jorge Luis Borges, *El otro, el mismo* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1967): 10.
13. Jaime Alazraki, "Borges o el difícil oficio de la intimidad; reflexiones sobre su poesía más reciente," *Revista Iberoamericana* 100-101, 449-463.
14. Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955): 20.
15. Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire*, 14. Michael Riffaterre. *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978): 49.
16. Willis Barnstone, *Borges at Eighty* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981): 165.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alazraki, Jaime. "Borges o el difícil oficio de la intimidad: reflexiones sobre su poesía más reciente." *Revista Iberoamericana*. 100/101 (n.d.) 449-463.
- Barnstone, Willis, ed. *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Elogio de la sombra*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969.
- Borges, *El otro, el mismo*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1967.
- Borges, *Historia de la noche*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1977.
- Borges, *La cifra*. Madrid: Alianza tres, 1981.
- Borges, *La moneda de oro*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1976.
- Borges. *La rosa profunda*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1967.
- Derrida, Jacques. *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972.
- Derrida. *Positions*. Paris: Les editions de minuit, 1972.
- Jakobson, Roman. *Lingüística, poética, tiempo*. Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1981.
- Juárez, Roberto. *Poesía vertical*. Caracas: Monte Avila, 1976.
- Molloy, Sylvia. "'Dios acecha en los intervalos': simulacro y causalidad textual en la ficción de Borges." *Revista Iberoamericana*. 100/101 (1977) 381-398.
- Paz, Octavio. *Pasado en claro*. Mexico: FCE, 1975.

BORGES *the Poet*

Edited by Carlos Cortínez

The University of Arkansas Press
Fayetteville 1986