

Artifices

LÁSZLÓ SCHOLZ

Now that critical works on Borges fill more shelves than his *oeuvre*, and reference guides map most authors, words, and allusions he ever mentioned, it seems rather surprising how little space is dedicated to his relation to Unamuno. Balderston (1986: 154) lists only five references in *Obras completas*, but neither the Fishburn-Hughes dictionary of Borges (1990) nor the Isbiter-Standish concordance (1991) mentions Unamuno; in recent criticism we find only a handful of essays¹ with very different approaches and one chapter in Echevarren's book (1992: 37–46). Yet if our intuition is more than willing to accept Kerrigan's statement ('No man comes from Nowhere, and Borges came from Unamuno, among other places and worlds', [Unamuno 1984: 4.xxi]) why has Borges's relation to Unamuno not been treated like his debt with Stevenson, Cervantes, or Kafka? My hypothetical answer is that this shadow is not accidental, it is due, on the one hand, to Borges's intentional downplaying of Unamuno's relevance in his life and work, and on the other, to using several literary devices, among others, intricate forms of intertextuality, that permit him to adopt the Spanish master's aesthetic views without naming him.

The visible part of Borges's relation to Unamuno follows one basic pattern: Borges reads and absorbs all major and minor works of Unamuno, develops quite a high esteem towards him, but speaks on more than one occasion very negatively about him. In his youth Borges undoubtedly idolized Unamuno: He discussed his writings, he wrote and sent his first texts to him, and according to Chaves's account (1970: 372) he even memorized *El médico*, an unpublished drama of Don Miguel. Yet when he refers to Spanish philosophy as seen from Argentina, quotes Macedonio Fernández (Borges 1961: 13) saying 'Unamuno y los otros españoles se habían puesto a pensar, y muchas veces a pensar bien, porque sabían que serían leídos en Buenos Aires' (... Unamuno and other Spanish thinkers set to think, and in many cases, to think well because they knew they would be read in Buenos Aires)². Adding a foreword in

1969 to the 1923 volume of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, he recalls his evident attachment this way: 'Yo, por ejemplo, me propuse demasiados fines: remedar ciertas fealdades (que me gustaban) de Miguel de Unamuno ...' (I, for example, set for myself too many goals: to imitate certain ugly features — I found pleasing — of Miguel de Unamuno) (1989/96: 1.13). In the 1920s Borges makes several positive references to Unamuno's poetry: among others publishes an article in *Nosotros*,³ quotes a few lines from the famous Sonnet 88 of *Rosario de sonetos líricos* (fragment that will appear years later at the beginning of *Historia de la eternidad*), as well as mentions Unamuno's virtues as a metaphysical poet in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* and in *El idioma de los argentinos*.⁴ But one decade later when it comes time to say goodbye to the Spanish master, Borges expresses some very negative comments in the two obituaries⁵ published in January 1937 and uses evidently out-of-place adjectives. In *Sur* he quotes Cassou's description: 'Miguel de Unamuno, un luchador que lucha consigo mismo, por su pueblo y contra su pueblo; un hombre de guerra, hostil, fratricida, tribuno sin partidarios, predicador en el desierto, vanidoso, pesimista, paradójal, despedazado por la vida y la muerte, invencible y siempre vencido'⁶ [Miguel de Unamuno, a fighter that fights with himself, for and against his people; a man of war, hostile, fratricide, tribune without any followers, a prophet in the desert, conceited, pessimist, paradoxical, dashed to pieces by life and death, unconquerable and always conquered] (Borges 1999: 143–144). In *El Hogar* he does not hesitate to make a list of the most unpoetic lines of *Rosario de sonetos líricos*. From the 1940s on, Borges writes no more on Unamuno, he just mentions him in interviews among many other authors, he quotes him in a few texts, for example in 'Magias parciales del Quijote', *Prólogos*, 'La inmortalidad', but the Spanish author is evidently left in the background as if he were of no particular importance to Borges.⁷

These visible signs of Unamuno's presence may coincide with some of the symptoms of the 'life cycle' that Bloom describes as the psychological development of the poet (1973: 10–16) but one finds hard to confirm such a sequence even on the basis of Monegal's 1970 findings. The use of literary techniques, on the contrary, seems to be more revealing. Let us examine three cases from *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* to see how Borges, as he would say, creates his 'precursor'.

In Chapter 1 of *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, which Borges always considered Unamuno's most important work (see Borges 1982: 150–151), we read the following sentence (Unamuno 1958: 2.734): 'cada cosa, en cuanto es en sí, se esfuerza por perseverar en su ser ... el esfuerzo con el cual cada cosa se esfuerza por perseverar en su ser, no implica tiempo finito, sino indefinido' [everything, in so far as it is in itself, strives to

persevere in its own being ... the strife with which everything strives to persevere in its own being does not imply finite but indefinite time]. Both sentences are literal translations of Spinoza's famous arguments ('unaquaeque res, quatenus in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur; conatus, quo unaquaeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nullum tempus finitum, sed indefinitum involvit') (1933: 3.6, 3.8). In 'Borges y yo' (1989/96: 2.186) this is quoted as 'todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser; la piedra eternamente quiere ser piedra y el tigre un tigre' [all things wish to go on being what they are — stone wishes eternally to be stone, and tiger, to be tiger]. Unamuno names Spinoza and interprets the Latin original in his own way; Borges names Spinoza, presents his own interpretation, but makes no reference to Unamuno.

His silence can be and has been explained in different ways. One solution is that Borges does not want to connect his literary text to the philosophical-religious context in which Unamuno analyzes all mortals' desire for immortality.⁸ Another explanation is that the sentence in question underlines, and in a certain sense illustrates the actual meaning of survival. The literary 'I' of 'Borges y yo' is persevering in his being right in the text where it appears; mentioning the name of Unamuno, Borges would risk derailing this autoreflexive process. Or perhaps there is no reference made to Unamuno because Borges intends to give an ironical overtone to the citation saying that individual immortality is impossible, at the most, the verbalization of that desire may survive, so he just quotes words from the Spanish author, and ignores his person.

There is some truth to each of these interpretations but there is also a common mechanism in them that I think is more important. I find that the citation in 'Borges y yo' behaves as an interpretant as specified by Riffaterre (1978: 81–114), and as such establishes a series of intertextual relations in the Borges-Unamuno-Spinoza triangle. The first of which is intended to go beyond a simple regressus that would imply the sequence of text-intertext₁-intertext₂. Borges does not name Unamuno because with him he would suggest a time scale or a linear structure; he prefers exploiting the dynamics of the mediating text leaving more space for the reader to move freely among the three texts (Morgan 1989: 264). This is not only a clear intention of spatializing narrative but also an ironical way of looking at the time factor in mortality/immortality as understood by Unamuno. The second layer of the intertextual relations is equally ironical and indirect: in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* Unamuno used Spinoza's arguments just for the opposite goal that the pantheistic master had intended; Borges uses in 'Borges y yo' Unamuno's wording among others to show its absurdity. Now rejecting Unamuno's interpretation Borges could arrive at confirming Spinoza's truth but he wants more than

that, he avoids naming Unamuno in this cycle to be able to widen the scope of absurdity: his irony does go beyond the simple oppositions of Unamuno/Spinoza and Borges/Unamuno, reaching a level where opposing views do not lead to a new assertion or negation but to unresolved paradoxes. Absurdity is reinforced both intertextually and intratextually: the chiasmus-like relation included in Borges's citation of Unamuno/Spinoza is repeated in the self-contradiction produced between the quotation and the rest of the text of 'Borges y yo'. And there is also a third element in Borges's intertextual strategy: he places the adopted citations into an aesthetic frame; thus instead of elaborating philosophical judgments, he shifts towards aesthetic procedures. This is nothing new in the light of his *ars poetica*⁹ and, that is our point here, this is nothing new in comparison with Unamuno either, as he had been aesthetizing ideas¹⁰ in all his works, and not only in novels, poems, and dramas but also in essays like *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*.

In Chapter 2 we find a less elaborate but equally revealing example when Unamuno displays a series of arguments against Descartes (1958: 2.759–762). Among others he considers Descartes' scepticism as mere artifice ('artificio'), he condemns this separation of life and thought, and passes on to discuss the famous argument of *cogito ergo sum*. His conclusion is that 'Pienso, luego soy', no puede querer decir sino 'pienso, luego soy pensante' ['I think, therefore I am' cannot mean but 'I think, therefore I am a thinker']. In 'La encrucijada de Berkeley' (1993: 117–127) Borges examines categories like space, time and ego, and declares their 'absoluta nadería' [absolute nothingness]. As far as the ego is concerned, he argues that if *cogito ergo sum* meant '*Pienso, luego existe un pensar*' [I think, therefore there is a thinking] which is the only conclusion that the premise logically permits, its truth would be both indisputable and useless; if it meant '*Pienso, luego hay un pensador*' [I think, therefore there is a thinker], it is precise in the sense that every act implies an actor, and it is false for suggesting individualization and continuity. Unamuno quotes St. Augustine, Borges mentions, as one would expect, Schopenhauer but remains silent about Unamuno. What is really striking is seeing how closely he follows Unamuno's technique of exploiting intertextuality. In case of the pages on Descartes Unamuno's solution is a spectacular paragraph starting with the usual *chiasmus*, '*La verdad es sum, ergo cogito, soy, luego pienso, aunque no todo lo que es, piense*' [The truth is *sum, ergo cogito*, I am, therefore I think, although not everything that is, thinks], and continuing with no less than nine rhetorical questions. The closing sentences do not arrive at any unambiguous statement but rather connect to what he calls a 'vehemente sospecha' [a vehement conjecture], which turns out to be Spinoza's thesis, the one we saw in the first example.

Borges jumps from Descartes to Schopenhauer and Spencer. First he blames the auxiliary verb *to be* for the misunderstanding, then attributes some mythical meaning to Spencer's term, *conciencia* (conscience), and arrives at the following conclusion: 'La Realidad es como esa imagen nuestra que surge en todos los espejos, simulacro que por nosotros existe, que con nosotros viene, gesticula, y se va, pero en cuya busca basta ir, para dar siempre con él' [Reality is similar to our image that appears in every mirror, a simulacrum that exists for us, that comes, gesticulates and departs with us yet if you want to find it, you just have to go after it.] (Berkeley 1993: 117-127).

In Chapter 3 of *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (1958: 773) we come across two lines of the *Odyssey* that say the gods weave and accomplish the destruction of mortals in order that their posterity may have something to sing. Unamuno does not leave any doubt about his interpretation when he says, 'Rasgo maravilloso, que nos pinta a qué habían venido a parar los que aprendieron en la *Odisea* ...' [An incisive characterization that depicts for us the position reached by those who had learned from the *Odyssey* ...], meaning that the Greeks may seem to be very refined and open, but when it comes to resurrection and immortality, they cease to be tolerant. The argument sounds very passionate, which is surprising because Unamuno is rejecting the very idea that he had considered for years as a guiding principle for his life and art. He himself tells us in *Diario íntimo* that for a long time he had in his study two pictures, a portrait of Spencer and his own drawing of Homer, beneath which he had copied the above-mentioned verses from the *Odyssey*, and that he considers them the 'Quintaesencia del vano espíritu pagano, del estéril esteticismo, que mata toda sustancia espiritual y toda belleza' [Quintessence of the vain spirit of paganism, of the sterile aestheticism that kills all spiritual substance and all beauty] (1970: 16). He uses even harsher terms in the second part of the same diary when he comes back to the quotation¹¹ and connects the above two statements: 'El literaturismo y el esteticismo mismo son flor venenosa del espíritu pagano.' [Literatizing and aestheticizing are the poisonous flowers of the pagan spirit], adding that Homer is blasphemous because he confuses the gods, — who are demons, with God (1970: 90). His conclusive remark about life and art is based on the rejection of art for art's sake (and life for life's sake) and he unites them in a typical *chiasmus*: 'No, la vida por la muerte, la vida por la vida eterna; y el arte por el arte eterno, por la religión' [No, life for death's sake, life for the sake of eternal life, and art for the sake of eternal life, for religion] (1970: 90).

Whether Homer's lines were idolized or rejected by Unamuno, they were undoubtedly central elements of his thought, and as such, could not have been ignored by Borges. They were not. They appear several times

and always without reference to Unamuno. In 'Nota sobre Walt Whitman' Borges raises the issue of a book of books or the absolute book; he mentions Apollonius of Rhodes, Lucan, Camoëns, Donne, Milton, Góngora, Gracián, then while speaking about possible negative themes for such a book, he jumps to Mallarmé, and with him back to Unamuno's favorite citation from Homer: 'su decorosa profesión de fe *Tout aboutit à un livre* parece compendiar la sentencia homérica de que los dioses tejen desdichas para que a las futuras generaciones no les falte algo que cantar' [his decorous profession of faith *Tout aboutit à un livre* seems to summarize the Homeric axiom that the gods fabricate misfortunes so that future generations will have something to sing about] (1989/96: 1.249–253). The statement is very reserved and could well pass unnoticed as an intertextual reference to Unamuno, but the sentence immediately preceding it is an overt inversion of what Unamuno meant in his *Diary* by the Homeric citation. According to Borges Mallarmé felt like Pater that 'todas las artes propenden a la música, el arte en que la forma es el fondo' [all arts gravitate toward music, the art that has form as its substance]. In another writing of the same period, 'Del culto de los libros' we find a very similar procedure: Borges connects once again Unamuno with Homer through Mallarmé, first quoting in prose the two Greek lines in question, then paraphrasing Mallarmé's statement in Spanish, and arriving at a statement of an undoubtedly Unamunian inspiration: 'parece repetir, unos treinta siglos después, el mismo concepto de una justificación estética de los males' [seems to repeat, some thirty centuries later, the same concept of an aesthetic justification for evils] (1989/96: 2.91). The continuation apparently draws on the difference between song (Homer) and book (Mallarmé), the examples include Pythagoras, Plato, Clement of Alexandria, the sacred books of the Moslems, Jews and Christians, Bacon, and Sir Thomas Browne. But when we are about to forget the initial allusion to Unamuno, we return to him through Mallarmé and Bloy to learn that sacred books do not lead necessarily to God and their meaning is rather undeterminable and profoundly hidden. Finally Borges gives a last turn of the screw with Bloy transforming the original subject/object relation: 'somos versículos o palabras o letras de un libro mágico, y ese libro incesante es la única cosa que hay en el mundo: es, mejor dicho, el mundo.' [we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world: or, rather, it is the world] (1989/96: 2.94).

In both texts Borges uses the same procedure that we have seen above with the difference that the intertextual triangle is now duplicated as Mallarmé does not only 'substitute' Unamuno because references made to him function on their own right and form an another interpretant

between Borges and Homer. The duplication and the arising relations in and between the two triangles create a vast intertextual web where it is hard if not impossible to account for all viable connections. Why does Borges avoid naming Unamuno in this process? Not repeating the hypothetical possibilities we mentioned above, one cannot help noticing again the striking similarity between Unamuno's and Borges's technique. Unamuno accepts, then rejects Homer to arrive at a paradoxical artistic *credo*. Borges copies Unamuno/Homer, then replaces and confronts him with Mallarmé/Homer/Bloy to arrive at a concept of art which is not less paradoxical than Unamuno's conclusion. Just to give one example, Borges states in 'La muralla y los libros' — once again with reference to Mallarmé and Pater and Croce — that 'esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético' [this imminence of a revelation that is not produced, is perhaps, the aesthetic event] (1989/96: 2.11–13).

We could present more examples¹² from *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* but perhaps the above three would suffice to point out a relevant aspect of intertextuality as used by Unamuno and Borges. Borges, as we have seen, copies many citations used by Unamuno, then he transforms and uses them for his own purpose but he also goes far beyond a simple adoption of citations. Borges copies Unamuno as interpretant, as mediator who not only feels free to move without constraints in the intertextual triangles and sophisticated citation webs but he feels also determined to generate overtly contradictory solutions shifting constantly from the realm of philosophy to aesthetics. In other words, Borges's intertextuality does not connect to Unamuno metonymically but metaphorically as the results of his intertextual findings are also embedded in his texts the same way. Borges follows Unamuno very closely but avoids naming him because he does not want to establish metonymical relations and because he too battles with the same problem as his 'precursor', with that of finding his real name. The Augustinian¹³ *Mihi quaestio factus sum* defines for both of them the very essence of life and art (Saint Augustine 1961: 239). Freud's thesis on artists as murderers may explain some aspects of the Borges-Unamuno relation, yet we find that the decisive artifice is the one mentioned by Boudreau: 'The act of covering your traces is the act of creation, for that act is *you*' (1996: 38).

Notes

1. See Cro (1967), Kerrigan (1972), Koch (1984), Shaw (1986), Juaristi (1993), Palenzuela (1997), Zubizarreta (1998).
2. I often modify the available English translations.

3. The title is 'Acerca de Unamuno, poeta', and later was included in *Inquisiciones* (Borges 1993: 109–116).
4. Cf. recent editions: Borges (1993: 75; 1994: 148).
5. See 'Inmortalidad de Unamuno', published in *Sur* (1999: 6.28) and 'Presencia de Miguel de Unamuno' in *El Hogar* (29 January); both are reprinted in Borges (1982: 147–151).
6. Cassou's sentence is even harsher: 'Tal es la agonía de don Miguel de Unamuno, hombre en lucha, en lucha consigo mismo, con su pueblo y contra su pueblo, hombre hostil, hombre de guerra civil, tribuno sin partidarios, hombre solitario, desterrado, salvaje, orador en el desierto, provocador, irreconciliable, enemigo de la nada y a quien la nada atrae y devora, desgarrado entre la vida y la muerte, muerto y resucitado a la vez, invencible y siempre vencido' (Unamuno 1966: 94).
7. Seeing this relationship from the other side, Borges was of no real importance to Unamuno: among Unamuno's forty-thousand letters only one is written to Borges (in *Nosotros*, April 1927: 126–127) and two others contain references to him (García Blanco 1964: 49; Robles 1996: 536, 562). Though there is one passage that suggests a lasting presence of Borges in Unamuno's mind and also a latent willingness to enter in dialogue with him: 'Y dígame a éste que en estar pensando escribirle se me han ido los meses y aun los años. Es lo que ocurre cuando uno siente mucho que tener que decir. ¡Las veces que me he detenido en frases de sus escritos y hasta en alguna alusión a mí! Y más de una vez he pensado escribir algún comentario comentando dichos — por escrito — suyos. De todos modos le conste, que no pocas veces cuando escribo algo para el público y hablo del "lector" pienso individual y concretamente en él.' (And please tell Borges that in all the while that I think of writing him, months and even years have slipped by. That's what happens when one feels that there is so much to say. How many times have I paused over one of his phrases, and at some allusion to me! And more than once I have thought to compose some gloss on his sayings-in-writing. In any case I would like him to know that quite often when I address the public but speak of my "readers", I am thinking concretely and individually of him (Unamuno 1984: 2.256).
8. I am relying here on the argumentation of A. F. Zubizarreta's two recent articles (1998 and in press).
9. Cf. e.g., his statement in the epilogue of *Otras inquisiciones* (1989/96: 2.153).
10. Mermall is right considering Unamuno's use of the chiasmus as master trope. See his brilliant analysis in *PMLA* (1990).
11. Unamuno quotes the same lines again and again (Turienzo 1966: 64).
12. See among others the motives of similarity of human faces, the pistol/knife left lying idle and especially letters printed at random composing the *Don Quixote*. (Unamuno 1984).
13. Unamuno uses it as the motto of *Cómo se hace una novela* (1966).

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Special Issue

Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs

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