

7. "I am neither a missionary of Christianity nor of agnosticism . . . Everything is possible, even God . . . We are not even sure that God does not exist . . ." in Oswaldo Romero, "Dios en la obra de J. L. Borges: su Teología y su Teodicea," *Revista Iberoamericana*, n. 100: 465-501.
8. About the Holy Trinity: J. L. Borges, *Obras completas*, 283-4; and "El budismo" in J. L. Borges, *Siete Noches* (N.p., n.d.).
9. ". . . being a Catholic, I feel attracted to Protestantism . . ." Interview with Rita Guibert, *Life en Español*, XXXI, n. 5 (March 11, 1968): 58. "I have been raised in a Catholic environment; my grandmother knew the Bible by heart, my mother was a Catholic, my father was an atheist, but not in a belligerent or political way . . ." (Polemic with the president of the University of Jujuy, December 1976) in Manuel Caldeiro, "Yo acuso a Borges," (*Gente* XII, n. 597, Jan. 6, 1977): 74.
10. The most complete study on the subject, even if it focuses mainly on Borges' answers to journalists and only deals with a few of his poems, is the already mentioned article by Oswaldo Romero.
11. "De que nada se sabe," Jorge Luis Borges, *La rosa profunda* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1975).
12. When in his lecture on Buddhism, for example, he states that he is not sure of being a Christian, although he is sure of not being a Buddhist.
13. "Autobiographical Essay" in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1970); and Selden Rodman, *Tongues of Fallen Angels* (New York: New Directions, 1972): 24.
14. In this way, among others, in the following poems: "Everness," "Elogio de la sombra," "The unending rose," "A mi padre," "La clepsidra."
15. Emily Dickinson in Poem #1129, in T. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1958): 506.
16. Lines in the poems "Blind Pew" and "1964, II," respectively.

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Borges the Poet

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Some Unamunesque Preoccupations
in Borges' Poetry

So far as I am aware only three short studies have been published on Unamuno and Borges. One is Anthony Kerrigan's essay "Borges/Unamuno" in the *Tri-Quarterly* homage volume to Borges.¹ The second is an interesting article by Stelio Cro, "Jorge Luis Borges e Miguel de Unamuno."² The last is an essay of my own, published in an obscure magazine.³ Hence there may be room to return to the subject, with special reference to Borges' poetry. For one cannot wholly agree with Kerrigan that "the truest testaments from these two meditative Spanish bookmen are necessarily in their fictions." Certainly in the case of Borges, we cannot overlook his remark to Keith Botsford in 1964,⁴ that "en última instancia soy poeta" or to Madelaine Chapsal "Creo que no soy más que eso. Un poeta . . ."⁵ The aim here is to suggest with respect to Borges the poet, that as Hispanists we can perhaps understand some of his preoccupations in a clearer and more familiar perspective by looking at them beside Unamuno's rather than by comparing them to those of non-Hispanic writers such as Chesterton, Emerson, Bloy, Hawthorne or Nabokov.

One of the intriguing aspects of Borges' work is that after "Acerca de Unamuno, poeta"⁶ and the necrological article "Inmortalidad de Unamuno,"⁷ Borges rarely mentions Unamuno.⁸ Roberto Paoli⁹ quite rightly speaks of "Unamuno, un autore la cui influenza su Borges, così manifesta, non è stata adeguatamente riconosciuta da chi l'ha subita." For al-

though to Burgin¹⁰ Borges asserted that Unamuno was "a very great writer" whom he greatly admired, he went on to say that Unamuno was interested in things that he, Borges, was not.

This is not always the case. Hardly less intriguing is that while Barrenechea, Enguídanos and Irby among others, also refer to Unamuno in connection with Borges, Sucre never mentions him once and Gertel is content with a reference to the 1923 essay; this despite affinities which seem to cry out for comment. Nor are these affinities casual. In his autobiographical statements, Borges has regularly emphasized his infatuation with Macedonio Fernández, the roots of whose work are very clearly in Unamuno's, so much so that Fernández once referred to himself jokingly as "Ningunamuno." In fact, Cro shows convincingly that throughout most of the 1920s Borges remained deeply interested in Unamuno. He makes the dangerous suggestion that the latter's influence may have been "decisive" in bringing on Borges' break with *Ultraísmo* between 1922 and 1923; and he notes the interesting parallel between Borges' hope for a kind of "criollismo universal" and Unamuno's similar postulate that a writer may reach the universal via the national tradition. In the end, however, Cro tends to restrict himself to remarks connected with Unamuno's *Rosario de sonetos líricos* and in practice suggests that the only major poem of Borges in which parallels with Unamuno can be detected is "La Recoleta," which he compares with "La oración del ateo." Perhaps this is too limited a view.

Above all what unites the work of Borges and Unamuno and makes any comparison possible is of course the philosophical, or rather metaphysical, basis on which it rests. Both men are essentially concerned with exploring, and inducing their readers to explore with them the problematic natures of being and reality. For this reason both deliberately blur the difference between analytic thought and creative imagination. Both seek, in differing degrees, to transcend the contingency of life through art, knowing the attempt to be vain. Sucre's description of the poetry of Borges as "una angustiosa meditación" is equally descriptive of Unamuno's. Unamuno, a man of his time, expresses his anguish in rather more religious terms; Borges, a man of our time, in rather more secular ones. But many of the roots are the same, for both belong to a historical pattern of collapsing confidence in what Sherman Eoff called "a fatherly world according to design."

At the center of the collapse is the sense of our individual identity, which we think of as real. We recall Victor Goti's remark in chapter thirty of Unamuno's *Niebla* that "el lector de la novela llega a dudar de su propia realidad." We note in Unamuno that this is the end of a process which began with the acquisition of metaphysical awareness via rational, analytical thought. In Borges, on the other hand, it is a starting point, that of his intuition of "nuestra esencial nadería."¹¹ It is preceded by that most Unamunesque of all the lines in Borges' youthful verse, the second line of "La Recoleta," which reminds me that we are "irrealizados por tanta certidumbre de anulación."¹² All the threat to our ultimate substantiality, which Unamuno perceived in the inevitability of death, rings in that line. It condemns the ". . . deseable / dignidad de estar muerto" promised by the tombstones, to exist as mere *vanilocuencia*.

Life, "La Recoleta" tells us, is the absolute. Time and space are projections of the conscious mind only. Things, objects in what seems to be external reality, may be "ajenas de substancia"¹³ and a street in the very suburbs which Borges celebrates with such warmth and tenderness may have only the reality of a legend or a line of poetry.¹⁴ Borges toys with the idea which he and Unamuno shared sporadically with Berkeley and Schopenhauer that perception creates reality. This is certainly a major point of convergence between the two poets, as Cro recognizes:

È impossibile trasferire a un piano metafisico delle dimensioni fisiche. Questo è l'asse della problematica della poesia di Borges: l'impossibilità di penetrare il mistero con la ragione, ma la necessità di esprimere l'esperienza emotiva suscitata dal mistero. È chiaro a questo punto la profonda analogia con la poesia di Unamuno.¹⁵

But what is perception? "Amanecer" contains the telling juxtaposition ". . . una actividad de la mente, / un sueño de las almas"¹⁶ and suddenly we are back in the heartland of Unamuno territory.

For Unamuno, dreaming was both a comfort and a threat. Blanco Aguinaga in his well-known *El Unamuno contemplativo*¹⁷ long ago distinguished four categories of dreaming in Unamuno's work: the conventional Calderonian concept of earthly life as unreal compared to life after death; the concept of man as a dream of God and vice versa; the *ensueño* or daydream of those who attempt to demonstrate God's existence or non-existence; and finally the *buen sueño* of unquestioning faith and ontological security. But to these we must add a fifth category which is

clearly present in Unamuno's *La novela de don Sandalio, jugador de ajedrez* and in his play *Soledad*. It is this category which reveals the affinity with Borges. It rests on Unamuno's hope that "El sueño de dos es ya la verdad, la realidad,"¹⁸ the proof of existence is to exist in the minds of others.

There are three possible consequences. On the one hand it may be possible, as Unamuno suggests in his late play *El hermano Juan*, to provoke others, through love, to dream their dreams of us and thus strengthen our substantiality. The notion is present in another early poem of Borges' "El jardín botánico" in which love differentiates us from the trees "que balbucean apenas el ser,"¹⁹ but which nonetheless seek to join the quest for the unknown. This existential or ontological dimension of the love relationship is deeply Unamunesque. Secondly, as Frances Weyers has pointed out, "'La vida es sueño' may mean that someone else is dreaming us; the dream becomes a symbol of self-estrangement."²⁰ Lastly, there is the possibility that both we ourselves and others who dream us are all no more than dreams, but dreams in God's mind.

These last two possibilities surface in the second phase of Borges' poetic work in his well-known "El golem." Its theme combines two fundamentally Unamunesque ideas. First, the aspiration to add something to existing reality, to ". . . agregar a la infinita / serie un símbolo más."²¹ This is very similar to Fulgencio Entrambasmares' doctrine of the *morcilla*. Don Fulgencio, a character in Unamuno's *Amor y pedagogía* in whom we recognize a kind of self-caricature by Unamuno, explains in chapter four: "morcilla se llama . . . a lo que meten los actores por su cuenta en sus recitados, a lo que añaden a la obra del autor dramático." Only by intercalating one's own *morcilla* into pre-existing reality, by adding one's own creation to God's creation, can one achieve a "momento meta-dramático" and guarantee one's own immortality. Borges' rabbi had attempted to bring about a "momento metadramático" of his own, like the wizard in the earlier tale "Las ruinas circulares." But the end of the poem forces us to recognize, like don Fulgencio, that the *morcilla* was merely one which "también nos sopla al oído el gran Apuntador." As the rabbi contemplates his creation (in all its inadequacy), so God ironically contemplates the rabbi. Borges himself underlined the totally Unamunesque quality of the poem when he declared to Burgin ". . . in the end it is suggested that as the golem is to the magician, to the cabbalist, so is man

to God."²² It is hardly by chance therefore that when Don Quixote in "Ni siquiera soy polvo" (*Historia de la noche*) asserts "Mi Dios, mi soñador, sigue soñandome," he is unconsciously—or consciously—echoing the situation that is at the base of the ending of *Niebla*. If we are the stuff that dreams are made of in this sense, we are, to use another of Borges' (and Unamuno's) favorite images, mere reflections in a mirror. But to speak of ourselves as dreams or reflections at least implies the existence of a dreamer to dream us or a mirror to reflect us. In moods of deepest scepticism both Unamuno and Borges were prepared to deny man even this vestige of substantiality. Unamuno both in his plays and in *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* introduces the idea that life is not merely a dream, whoever dreams it, but a dream within a dream. So in "Arte poética" Borges can refer to the notion that ". . . la vigilia es otro sueño / que sueña no soñar."²³ There is, of course, a fundamental difference between Borges' treatment of the theme and Unamuno's, to which we shall return presently.

First we may glance at Borges' double sonnet "Ajedrez," whose theme is profoundly familiar to all students of Unamuno. The bulk of the second, and far better, of the two sonnets rehearses in four lines to essences of Unamuno's *La novela de don Sandalio*, which in turn expresses preoccupations which go far back in his work. In *La esfinge*, the hero, Angel, in the course of a chess game, asks: "¿No estamos los hombres con nuestras luchas matando la eternidad a un Ser Supremo que con nosotros juega?" Later, in *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, Unamuno asserts explicitly: "Y si las piezas de ajedrez tuviesen consciencia, es fácil que se atribuyeran albedrío en sus movimientos."²⁴ Echoing the idea, Borges writes of the chessmen in "Ajedrez":

No saben que la mano señalada
Del jugador gobierna su destino,
No saben que un rigor adamantino
Sujeta su albedrío y su jornada.²⁵

The source of Borges' poem was not Unamuno, however, but Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam, stanza 49:

Impotent pieces of the game he plays
Upon his chequered board of Nights and Days
Hither and thither moves, and checks and stays;
And one by one back in the closet lays.

What is interesting is that in the first edition of Fitzgerald's translation the subject of the verb in the first line of the above quotation was not God but Destiny. Hence the progression in the sestet of Borges' sonnet:

También el jugador es prisionero
(La sentencia es de Omar) do otro tablero
De negras noches y de blancas días.
Dios mueve el jugador, y éste, la pieza.

But this follows:

¿Qué dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza
De polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonías?

We think at once of Tzinacán's vision in "La escritura del Dios" in which among other things Tzinacán tells us "Vi el dios sin cara que hay detrás de los dioses." The idea of a faceless God (Destiny) behind the personal God of the Christian religion is one which as D. G. Turner has shown,²⁶ obsessed Unamuno no less than Borges (and Fitzgerald). For, if Unamuno is understood correctly, the chessboard in *Niebla*, *La novela de don Sandalio* and *La esfinge*, as well as elsewhere, is a patent symbol of determinism. What is not plain is the form of the determining force. Is it chance, Providence or destiny?

Borges and Unamuno share a consuming interest in the roles of design and chance in the workings of the universe. Some critics have insisted that Borges' central symbol, the labyrinth, is essentially a man-made object, and have related it to what they see as Borges' exposure of man's obstinate tendency to impose a pattern or structure on the chaos and flux of reality. Even this is a prominent Unamunesque idea. We see it in Augusto Pérez's reflection in Chapter Seven of *Niebla* that "esa idea de la necesidad no es sino la forma suprema que el azar toma en nuestra mente." Compare Borges' reference in "Las metáforas de las 1001 noches" in *Historia de la noche* to "el arbitrio del Destino / o del Azar, que son la misma cosa." But more important is the fact that a labyrinth is a chaos with the appearance of regularity or design. This is what fascinates both Unamuno and Borges: the idea enunciated by don Fermín in *Niebla*, Chapter Six: "Rigen a los hombres y a sus cosas enigmáticas leyes, que el hombre, sin embargo, puede vislumbrar." We are immediately reminded of Borges' lines in "In memoriam Alfonso Reyes": "El vago azar o las precisas leyes / que rigen nuestro sueño, el universo";²⁷ and the cognate but

more explicit "El claro azar o las secretas leyes / que rigen este sueño, mi destino"²⁸ of "Oda compuesta en 1960." Just as a labyrinth appears to have a meaningful design, with a discoverable way to its center, so at intervals, as with Unamuno, Borges seems to have thought he could intuit a mysterious but significant design in his experience. Hence he could write in "Poema de los dones": "Algo que ciertamente no se nombra / con la palabra azar, rige estas cosas"; and much later in "Poema de la cantidad" from *El oro de los tigres*:

Acaso cada hormiga que pisamos
Es única ante Dios, que la precisa
Para la ejecución de las puntuales
Leyes que rigen su curioso mundo.
Si así no fuera, el universo entero
Sería un error y un oneroso caos.²⁹

The labyrinth in Borges' work has only a deceitful appearance of order and regularity. In fact it is a meaningless and circular trap, a maze without an outlet or a center. This being so, there is no escape from the conclusion that God, Providence, Fate and determinism mean one and the same thing. The "despiadado dios que no se nombra" of "El otro,"³⁰ the "minuciosa Providencia / que administra lo pródigo y lo parco" of "In memoriam Alfonso Reyes,"³¹ and the "hado o el azar" of "La luna"³² are merely interchangeable concepts. The temptation at this point is to qualify this last affirmation in the light of occasional glimpses of doubt and longing for immortality.³³ Thus, for example, in the second of two very moving poems concerned with Borges' parents in *La moneda de hierro*, "El fin" and "A mi padre," we read the strikingly Unamunesque line ". . . Nadie sabe / De qué mañana el marmol es la llave" with its suggestion of *ultratumberías*. In the first of the two poems Borges writes: "Dios o Tal Vez o Nadie, yo te pido / Su inagotable imagen, no el olvido." Is this a hint of *agonismo*? Even though the image in question is that of Borges' father, not his own, the yearning for its survival rather than resigned acceptance of its annihilation is noteworthy in a man who has almost always insisted that for him death is the end.

I incline to the view that a more detailed study of Borges' later poems might cast doubt on Cro's affirmation that Borges never carries his *problemática* beyond the interplay of mere ideas, rational exercises and theological speculation. While for Unamuno the essence of human tragedy

was the recognition that life may be ephemeral, that existence may be definable as "ser sueño de una sombra," for Borges the opposite is normally true. In "El otro Whitman" (*Discusión*) he wrote of life that "su misma contingencia es una riqueza." It is life with all its precariousness and brevity which allows us to confer value on things. And yet quite recently Borges wrote in "Elegía del recuerdo imposible" (*La moneda de hierro*):

Qué no daría yo por la memoria
De haber sido auditor de aquel Sócrates
Que, en la tarde de la cicuta,
Examino serenamente el problema
De la inmortalidad. . . .

The poem contains eight rhetorical questions in each of which the poet expresses his regret that certain experiences, and therefore the memory of them, have been denied him. Seven of the experiences are directly related to reality, whether historical or psychological, while the last belongs to a quite different order of aspiration. The first seven longed-for experiences thus form a separate group, arranged climactically. The climax-image is that of Socrates discussing immortality as he lies slowly dying. We have to ask why Borges placed this *recuerdo imposible* in this important position. The last pages of Plato's *Apology* indicate that Socrates believed strongly in the soul's immortality. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, in expressing at this point in the poem the wish to have heard Socrates' conclusions, Borges is implicitly admitting that what for Unamuno was the question of questions was even for him, despite his often-expressed scepticism, a recurrent preoccupation underlying the repeated affirmation of his desire merely for oblivion.

However, the difference of emphasis between Unamuno and Borges subsists. At various times and with various degrees of conviction, Unamuno was prepared ultimately to affirm the existence of a true reality, of a Divine Mind, behind the illusion which we call the real. For Borges there is in the end no First Cause and only the most sporadic aspiration towards belief in one. There is only an infinite regression into which everything meaningful ultimately dissolves. Although he could speak in "Lectores" of "algo inmortal y esencial,"³⁴ which possibly survives corporeal death, it is not Unamuno's "alma de bulto." Borges very often

writes in much the same key as Unamuno, but the latter's yearning to discover a true self, to recover ontological confidence—not just in *ser* but in *serse*—is more intimately anguishing. When he reaches the most fearful possibilities, the total illusoriness or the final annihilation of our personalities, for example, Unamuno draws back and takes refuge in mystiques. Borges seems to possess the tragic vision no less than Unamuno. "Nuestro destino es trágico" he wrote in a prologue to a translation of Emerson's *Representative Men*, "porque somos irreparablemente individuos, coartados por el tiempo y el espacio." But he seems able to face this tragic destiny for the most part with serenity and even with humor, though, as I have implied, the poetry contains occasional hints that this serenity is less than complete.

What a comparison of the work of Unamuno and Borges underlines is that both belong to that current of literature which has flowed out of the "European Crisis of Confidence" which Morse Peckham, among others, has analyzed so brilliantly in his *Beyond the Tragic Vision*.³⁵ But they represent two distinct and in large measure separate moments in the development of our modern *Weltanschauung*. Unamuno was much closer to the moment of full realization that the absolute had been lost. Borges, in the next generation, accepts that loss more readily. In his work we perceive one of the noblest ways of accommodating our minds and spirits to that loss.

NOTES

1. Anthony Kerrigan, "Borges/Unamuno." *Tri-Quarterly* 25 (Fall 1972). Later published in *Prose for Borges*. Edited by Charles Newman and Mary Kinzie. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).
2. Stelio Cro, "Jorge Luis Borges e Miguel de Unamuno." *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 6 (1967): 81–90.
3. D. L. Shaw, *Spanish Studies* 3 (London, 1981): 3–10.
4. Keith Botsford, "Sobre y al margen de Jorge Luis Borges." *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* Mayo/junio (1964). Cit. M. Ferrer. *Borges y nada* (London: ———, 1971): 45.
5. G. Sucre, *Borges, el poeta* (Venezuela: Monte Avila, 1968): 32.
6. Jorge Luis Borges, "Acerca de Unamuno, poeta." *Nosotros* 175 (1923). Later included in *Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925).
7. Borges. "Inmortalidad de Unamuno." *Sur* 28 (1937): 92–3.
8. But Cro lists references in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1926), *El idioma de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Colección índice, 1928) and *Historia de la eternidad* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969). As late as 1937 in the *Sur* necrological article Borges wrote,

"El primer escritor de nuestro idioma acaba de morir; no sé de un homenaje mejor que proseguir las ricas discusiones iniciadas por él y que desentrañar las secretas leyes de su alma."

9. R. Paoli, *Borges, percorsi di significato* (Mesiana/Firenze, 1977): 49.
10. Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).
11. Jorge Luis Borges, "Calle desconocida." *Obra poética* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1964): 21.
12. Borges. *Obra poética*, 19.
13. Borges. "Amanecer." *Obra poética*, 48.
14. Borges. "Calle desconocida." *Obra poética*, 22.
15. Stelio Cro, "Borges e Unamuno." 86.
16. Borges. *Obra poética*, 47.
17. Blanco Aguinaga, *El Unamuno contemplativo* (Mexico: ———, 1959).
18. Miguel de Unamuno, *Niebla* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1966).
19. Borges. *Obra poética*, 23.
20. Frances Weyers Weber, *Miguel de Unamuno. The Contrary Self*. (London: ———, 1976): 62.
21. Borges. *Obra Poética*, 72.
22. Burgin. "Conversations." 75.
23. Borges. *Obra poética*, 223.
24. Miguel de Unamuno. *Obras completas XVI* (Madrid: A. Aguado, 1958): 257.
25. Borges. *Obra poética*, 182.
26. D. G. Turner, *Unamuno's Webs of Fatality* (London: ———, 1974): 162-7.
27. Borges. *Obra poética*, 203.
28. Borges. *Obra poética*, 209.
29. Borges. *Obra poética*, 177.
30. Borges. *Obra poética*, 225.
31. Borges. *Obra poética*, 204.
32. Borges. *Obra poética*, 193.
33. Cited from the very well-documented study by Oswaldo Romero, "Dios en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges." *Revista Iberoamericana* 100/101(1977): 465-501.
34. Borges. *Obra poética*, 227.
35. Morse Peckham, *Beyond the Tragic Vision* (New York: G. Braziller, 1962).

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