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Eliot, Borges, and Tradition

Except for an Eliot poem Borges translated and a footnote in "Kafka y sus precursores," one finds little reason to link Eliot and Borges. Eliot is frequently defined and dismissed by his oft-quoted statement that he was an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a royalist in politics and a classicist in literature. Borges, on the other hand, flees such neat, all-encompassing categorizations, and prefers to cultivate the charming image of a genial skeptic and self-effacing writer who questions everything, including the value of his own work. Despite these obvious differences, in style as well as in substance, on at least two central points, Eliot and Borges are not so far apart as one might think. The first point concerns the role of individual talent and effort in the creative process. The second has to do with the creative process itself—or how a poem gets written. I will offer first a brief overview of the positions Eliot and Borges take on these issues, and then, using two of Borges' poems as examples, it may be shown that Eliot describes how Borges writes poems better than Borges does.

Like Borges, Eliot proclaimed the underpinnings of his criticism early in his career. In his seminal and best-known essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," written in 1919, Eliot defended two ideas fundamental to virtually all his thought. The first concerns the importance of tradition as the most significant source of literary creation. Eliot writes:

[Tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . [which is] not only

[a sense] of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.¹

Eliot contends that the poet's first responsibility is to read as widely as possible, for only by that method may he or she bring to writing a sense of tradition, a sense of literature as an inherited activity to which one may add, but from which one cannot escape. In Eliot's view of literary history, innovation and individual talent count for little; the best poets can do is take from tradition, add a little to it, and perhaps modify the manner in which their contemporaries read and understand writers of other generations. It was this last idea that purportedly led Borges to maintain in "Kafka y sus precursores" that literature is rewritten each time it is read. Says Borges, "The fact is that every writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our concept of the past, just as it must modify the future."²

Within Eliot's concept of tradition one discovers two seemingly contrary positions. The first indicates that tradition is inevitable, that we carry it with us in our language, our behavior, and our culture whether it suits us or not. It is this sense of tradition that most resembles Borges' argument in "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," where he contends that the ascendancy of Argentine literature incorporates all of Western culture—inevitably.³ Eliot's second position reflects a conscious awareness that tradition is a vital component of the creative process; it is here that he and Borges differ most. Says Eliot:

The mind of the poet is a [catalyst]. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.⁴

Eliot goes on to describe the creation of a poem as a process of fusion, of concentration. Elements of that fusion may be the poet's private emotions, or themes such as love, death, absence, or praise, which generate their own inertia in a tradition the poet cannot escape. To the process of that fusion, the poet brings "numberless feelings, phrases, [and] images" which are stored in the poet's mind until "all the particles can unite

to form a new compound."⁵ Although Eliot concedes that conscious deliberation forms a vital element in the poetic process, ultimately the creation of a poem is beyond the will of the poet; the creative moment occurs only when the mix of elements is right. In other words, conscious effort and the rhetorical skills of the poet are indispensable in poetic creation; but beyond his will is the exact moment when tradition, private emotion and the poet's skills must combine to make a new poem possible. Despite Eliot's reputation as a dogmatist, his description of poetic creation is remarkably inclusive. It gives credence to individual effort, but not at the expense of tradition; it allows for subconscious elements in creation, but not if they preclude the effort of reading widely and honing one's rhetorical skills.

As has been amply documented in this symposium, Borges, like Eliot, plays down the role of individual talent—particularly his own. We have, for example, those wonderfully audacious essays "The Nothingness of Personality," and "Berkeley at the Crossroads," where Borges argues not only against individual talent but also against the very notion of autonomous existence itself.⁶ Moreover, Borges frequently maintains that art is possible only because of the commonality of humankind, and not because of the genius of any particular individual. As he writes in "Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro":

Ciegamente reclama duración el alma arbitraria
cuando la tiene asegurada en vidas ajenas,
cuando tú mismo eres la continuación realizada
de quienes no alcanzaron tu tiempo
y otros serán (y son) tu inmortalidad en la tierra.⁷

Blindly the willful soul asks for length of days
when its survival is assured by the lives of others,
when you yourself are the embodied continuance
of those who did not live into your time
and others will be (and are) your immortality on earth.

The intention of these lines is clear enough. We are all mirrors of the past; individuality is an arbitrary illusion thwarted by our common human essence. The dead live in us, just as we shall live in those who follow us. Similarly, writers often reflect other writers who in their collectivity add to that organic unity called literature.

We see then with regards to tradition, that Borges and Eliot are in

substantial agreement. In describing the creative process, however, Eliot considers the poet's efforts to be a necessary, though not sufficient, ingredient of the poetic process. Borges, on the other hand, allows an individual even less a role. Typical of his descriptions concerning how he writes a poem is the following statement taken from a lecture given at Columbia University in 1971:

This is a kind of central mystery—how my poems get written. I may be walking down the street, or up and down the staircase of the National Library . . . and suddenly I know that something is about to happen. Then I sit back. I have to be attentive to what is about to happen. It may be a story, or it may be a poem, either in free verse or in some form. The important thing at this point is not to tamper. We must, lest we be ambitious, let the Holy Ghost, or the Muse, or the subconscious—if you prefer modern mythology—have its way with us. . . . All this boils down to a simple statement: poetry is given to the poet. I don't think a poet can sit down at will and write.⁸

As a religious man, Eliot would no doubt disapprove of Borges' suggestion that the Muse, Fate, the Holy Ghost and the subconscious all refer to the same thing. In substance, however, both agree that poetry in some sense lies beyond the will of the poet, that it cannot be forced. Eliot, however, allows the poet a more active role than Borges in maintaining that the poet is at least a catalyst who must bring to the creative moment a conscious sense of tradition that will be actively deployed in writing poetry. Borges, with typical modesty, casts attention away from his erudition and its role in his poetry; on this point, however, it may be said that Eliot describes Borges better than Borges does himself.

Perhaps the best place to study Borges' relationship to tradition, or at least his conscious use of tradition (the kind of thing Eliot advocates), is in those moments when he deliberately appeals to a non-Hispanic literature. A good example of such an appeal is the poem "Fragmento." Borges' thematic intention in "Fragmento" parallels that of his famous "La forma de la espada" where he inverts the order of invention and suggests that the human hand was created to grasp the sword and not vice versa.⁹ In "Fragmento" this idea is linked specifically to the hand of Beowulf and thus to Anglo-Saxon poetry. The linguistic reflection of that link lies in Borges' deliberate inclusion in the poem of several kennings, or at least kenning-like images which were previously identified in his article "Las kenningar."¹⁰ For example, "Igualarán al hielo y al fuego" is

clearly derived from "hielo de la pelea"; similarly "la selva de lanzas" resembles the "bosque de picas" which again appears on Borges' list of kennings.¹¹ Professor Karen Lynn identifies no fewer than eight images in "Fragmento" taken from Borges' list of kennings.¹² However, the specific identification of the kennings is less interesting than the question of why Borges includes them at all. His attitude towards the kennings is at best ambivalent. On the one hand, he belittles them, calling them "cold aberrations, . . . belabored and useless, . . . rancid rhetorical flowers" which "transmit indifference and suggest nothing."¹³ On the other hand, he cannot stay away from them and even dignifies the deplorable kennings by incorporating them into his poetry. Lurking behind this inclusion is precisely the sense of tradition and its influence on literary creation that Eliot so clearly outlines. In Borges there is combined information on kennings, poetic talent, rhetorical skill, intuitive knowledge of humankind's bellicose nature, and a deep appreciation of the Beowulf story; from that fusion the poem was written. Moreover, the inclusion of kennings in the poem is clearly an indication of Eliot's conscious use of tradition. Indeed, few poems could better illustrate his notion of the contemporaneous nature of literature regardless of its age.

But the most ineluctable demonstration of tradition as a real presence in poetry is in language itself, and it is in this connection that Borges shows even greater coincidence with Eliot's dicta on tradition. At this juncture, no statement serves our purposes better than one of Borges' own. In his 1969 foreword to *El otro, el mismo*, Borges writes:

The languages of Man are traditions which embody something predestined. Individual experiments are, in point of fact, minimal, except when the innovator resigns himself to sculpt a museum piece, a game directed to historians of literature, or a mere scandal.¹⁴

In other words, poets are inevitably controlled by their language; as Eliot often repeats and Borges seems to agree, language carries with it an inescapable past. Unlike Eliot, however, Borges allows little room for the poet's conscious participation in that linguistic tradition, preferring to speak of the Muse and the Holy Ghost. By examining one of Borges' English poems, perhaps it can be shown that in actual practice, Borges is much closer to Eliot than may be expected.¹⁵

Thematically, the poem is a love poem and, like most of Borges' love

poetry, it is not particularly convincing. Beyond the thematic intention, however, is the linguistic intention: to write a poem in English using what, in Borges' mind at least, is most "English" about the English language. On this level, he not only adheres to linguistic convention and peculiarity; he revels in it, trying to exploit to their fullest the peculiarities of the English linguistic system which have no equivalent in Spanish. For example, in the lines

Nights are proud waves: dark blue topheavy
waves laden with all hues of deep spoil,
laden with things unlikely and desirable . . .

several interesting points stand out. The first line, for example, except for the last syllable, consists entirely of adjacent stresses. In Spanish, one rarely finds more than two adjacent stresses since the language offers only a very limited number of stressed monosyllabic words. With great difficulty one can create four-stress combinations like "algún buen ron blanco," but it is most unlikely such a phrase would occur in natural speech, much less in poetry. English, on the other hand, is rich in stressed monosyllabic words and can, theoretically at least, string together any number of adjacent stresses; in this sense, Borges' first line indicates a playful indulgence in prosodic capabilities unavailable in his native Spanish. The problem is that, although English permits any number of adjacent stresses, English speakers tend to avoid them. This is one of the reasons the phrase "Big, black bug's blood" is a tongue twister. It is also the reason that Borges' line of poetry is so hard to read without weighty, uncomfortable pauses. One might say that the line is too English to be English. But more importantly, it reveals a conscious manipulation of tradition in exactly the fashion described by Eliot. In no way did this line spring from the Muse or the Holy Ghost; it resulted from a sophisticated awareness of English that unfortunately got out of hand.

In the same poem, one finds a similar problem in Borges' choice of words. In ordinary English discourse, fully one third of the words would be expected to be of Romance origin. In this particular poem, however, the percentage of Latinate words is less than ten percent. Moreover, the words Borges chooses from the native Germanic word stock are either monosyllables or very common disyllables. The remarkable line

I turn them over in the dawn, I lose them, I find
 them; I tell them to the few stray dogs and
 to the few stray stars of the dawn . . .

consists entirely of Germanic monosyllables, as do many of the short, powerful lines like "The big wave brought you," or "What can I hold you with?" When he does introduce a Latinate word, it is conspicuous by its contrast; witness the last stanza, for example,

I must get at you somehow: I put away those
 illustrious toys you have left me, I want
 your hidden look, your real smile—that
 lonely, mocking smile your cool mirror knows.

The lonely word "illustrious" springs out at us precisely because of its Latinate difference. Again, in Borges' near exclusion of Romance derivatives, we find a deliberate appeal to tradition in exactly the fashion Eliot has argued to be the conscious province of all good poets. Unfortunately, as in the case of the adjacent stresses noted earlier, Borges ends up being more English than the English: the result is an almost unreadable poem.

In conclusion, it seems that there is a real affinity between Eliot's and Borges' theoretical positions concerning the volitional role poetry plays in its own creation. Similarly, it appears that both Borges and Eliot agree that no poet escapes the weight of tradition, and that it is futile to try. Finally, regarding the one area where they disagree, it can be safely concluded that Borges' attempts to diminish the role his conscious knowledge of the past plays in his own poetry is largely belied by evidence in the poems themselves—particularly in the English poems where his erudition becomes too heavy for the verses to carry.

NOTES

1. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975): 38.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka y sus precursores," *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé: 1974): 712.
3. Borges, "El escritor argentino y la tradición," *Obras completas*, 273–4.
4. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 41.
5. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 41.
6. Jorge Luis Borges, *Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925): 84–95, 109–119.

7. Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems 1923–1967*, ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968): 16–17.

8. *Borges on Writing*. Ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973): 72–3.

9. Borges, *Selected Poems*, 158–9.

10. Borges, *Obras completas*, 368–381.

11. Borges, *Obras completas*, 372–375.

12. Karen Lynn and Nicolas Shumway, "Borges y las kenningar," unpublished article.

13. All these assertions are found in Borges' article "Las kenningar." (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969).

14. Borges, *Obras completas*, 857.

15. Borges, *Obras completas*, 861.

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