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BORGES, DE QUINCEY AND THE INTERPRETATION OF WORDS

In his piece on De Quincey in his Introduccion a la literatura inglesa, *Borges* compares De Quincey to Sir Thomas Browne,(n1) and in the epigraph to his collection "Evaristo Carriego," he quotes from De Quincey " . . . a mode of truth, not of truth coherent and central, but angular and splintered. "(n2) These words could apply equally well to Browne or *Borges*. Both use an "angular and splintered" mode of truth with which to express themselves. *Borges* utilizes allusions to Browne and to other authors, such as De Quincey, to explore the theme of the conflicting interpretations of words.(n3).

Ronald Christ, in *The Narrow Act*, points to the vast influence De Quincey had on *Borges*, and the many references to him in *Borges's* work. He has also analyzed some of these allusions in depth. He writes: "The two men travel the same rivers of knowledge, right to their sources, so that the many referential allusions to De Quincey in *Borges's* writing really take us very little of the way towards appreciating what *Borges* ultimately found in De Quincey."(n4) He continues:

There is this to be learned from the explicit references to De Quincey: *Borges's* referential allusions, especially those which indicate a borrowing or a "debt", seldom tell the whole story. They point us in the right direction, but as to real information, they are apt to ignore more than they avow.... There is, then, in addition to the strikingly explicit quality of *Borges's* listing the sources for his fiction, a secret property; the appearance of scrupulous, almost scholarly acknowledgement does not correspond to the real basis in other writings. If nothing else, a recognition of this property should guide the reader to a sense of these references as selected, controlled statements rather than as expressions of literary politesse or pedantry. (p. 154)

Various allusions to De Quincey of the type Ronald Christ describes will be examined and they will indeed be found to exhibit a "secret character," as we shall see.

Christ refers to but does not examine the allusion to De Quincey in "Tres versiones de Judas" (p. 152), and he mentions the reference at the beginning of "El 'Biathanatos'" (p. 153). In "Tres versiones de Judas" *Borges* alludes to De Quincey's essay "Judas Iscariot," to his own essay "El'Biathanatos'," and to De Quincey's essays "On Suicide" and "Casuistry. " In "Tres versiones de Judas" Runeberg quotes in the epigraph to his book, *Kristus och Judas*, the following words attributed to De Quincey from 1857: "No una cosa, sodas las cosas que la tradicion atribuye a Judas Iscariot son falsas."(n5) This quotation no doubt refers to the following words about Judas from De Quincey's essay "Judas Iscariot": "Not one thing, but all things, must rank as false which traditionally we accept about him."(n6) We are also told by the narrator of "Tres versiones de

Judas": "Precedido por algun aleman, De Quincey especulo que Judas entrego a Jesucristo pare forzarlo a declarar su divinidad y a encender una vasta rebelion contra el yugo de Roma" (p. 176). In that same essay De Quincey himself attributes a large part of his argument to "the Germans," and *Borges's* words "el yugo de Roma" are taken directly from De Quincey's "the Roman yoke," written within the same context (pp. 184,181). *Borges* also echoes De Quincey's words, "a man who had been solemnly elected into the small band of the Apostles" in drawing attention to the fact that Judas had been especially chosen ("un varon a quien ha distinguido asi el Redentor") (De Quincey, p. 187, and *Ficciones*, p. 178).

A large part of De Quincey's essay "Judas Iscariot" is devoted to a discussion of how Judas died. This discussion is based on various interpretations given to words in St. Matthew's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. St. Matthew's Gospel led people to believe that Judas died "by a suicidal death, " and The Acts of the Apostles led them to believe he died "by a death not suicidal" (p. 187). This second version, De Quincey tells us, has three elements: "that he 'fell down headlong'; that he 'burst asunder in the middle'; and that 'his bowels gushed out'" (p. 187). De Quincey thinks that the words "fell headlong" mean that he committed suicide (p. 195), and he finally decides that the other two descriptions also refer to suicide. He writes: "To burst in the middle is simply to be shattered and ruined in the central organ of our sensibilities, which is the heart; and, in saying that the viscera of Iscariot, or his middle, had burst and gushed out, the original reporter meant simply that his heart had broke" (p. 197). Consequently, he concludes: "All contradiction disappears; not three deaths assault him--viz. suicide, and also rupture of the intestine, and also an unintelligible effusion of the viscera--but simply suicide, and suicide as the result of that despondency which was figured under the natural idea of a broken heart or ruptured praecordia. The incoherences are gone; the contradictions have vanished; and the gross physical absurdities which under mistranslation had perplexed the confiding student no longer disfigure the Scriptures" (p. 198). In other words, De Quincey argues that the true interpretation of the words referring to Judas's death is that he committed suicide.

In his essay "On Suicide" De Quincey is also interested in the interpretation of words. He starts the essay by writing: "It is a remarkable proof of the inaccuracy with which most men read that Donne's Biathanatos has been supposed to countenance suicide" (p. 398). *Borges's* essay "El 'Biathanatos'" starts with the following words "A De Quincey (con quien es tan vasta mi deuda que especificar una parse parece repudiar o callar las otras) debo mi primer noticia del Biathanatos" (O.C., p. 700). *Borges* then gives two specific references to De Quincey in the essay. In one he writes: "El declarado fin del Biathanatos es paliar el suicidio; el fundamental, indicar que Cristo se suicide" (O.C., p. 702). And he refers the reader in a footnote to "De Quincey: Writings, VIII, 398" and Kant: "Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der Vernunft, II, 2" (p. 702). On page 398 of vol. VIII of De Quincey's *Collected Writings*, we indeed find the words already quoted in which De Quincey states that most men who read the *Biathanatos* think it countenances suicide. De Quincey, however, does not say that its declared aim is to extenuate suicide. He simply says that Donne distinguishes between two types of self-murder, that is self-homicide and self-murder, and that for Donne the former is not suicide. Hence, *Borges* misinterprets De Quincey if his footnote is meant to imply that De Quincey in fact said this. On that same page of De Quincey's work a reference to Kant's *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloosen Vernunft* is also found. What appears to be an erudite reference of *Borges's* own finding is actually one he has copied (although he had to add the volume and page numbers) straight from De Quincey. If any doubt remains that *Borges* worked closely with this essay in the composition of his essay this fact should dispel it. However, *Borges* further, and probably intentionally, misinterprets De Quincey by implying that he thought that the fundamental aim of "The 'Biathanatos'" was to "indicar que Cristo se suicidó" (O. C., p. 702). De Quincey does not say this. Rather, he implies that that very thesis was one of the theses that Donne was attempting to refute (pp. 398-99).

Hence *Borges* misinterprets De Quincey from an essay in which De Quincey is himself

preoccupied by how people have misinterpreted Donne. In that same essay, as has been mentioned, De Quincey also shows an interest in Donne's interpretations of the words "self-homicide" and "self-murder." He shows this same interest in the section "Suicide" in his essay "Casuistry." *Borges* in fact refers us to the relevant page (p. 336) in his essay "El'Biathanatos'," but the words he uses are an equally good representation of the words used by De Quincey in the essay "On Suicide" (O.C., p. 700, and De Quincey, pp. 336, 399). *Borges's* reason for giving the essay "Casuistry" as the reference is that almost immediately following the passage quoted De Quincey refers to "a Prussian or Saxon baron, who wrote a book to prove that Christ committed suicide" (p. 336).

As we have seen, *Borges's* "Tres versiones de Judas" alludes to De Quincey's essay, "Judas Iscariot," in which De Quincey argues that Judas commits suicide. We have also noted that it alludes to essays by De Quincey in which the idea that Christ might have committed suicide is raised. In "Tres versiones de Judas" in Runeberg's third version, Christ becomes Judas. God, we are told, "eligio un infimo destino: fue Judas" (p. 181). Hence, the allusions to De Quincey suggest that Christ commits suicide in "Tres versiones de Judas."

However, yet another interpretation is suggested by "Judas Iscariot." In that essay De Quincey stresses the fact that Christ was a "hakim or physician" (p. 178). He writes: "His [Christ's] very name in Greek . . . presented him to men under the idea of the healer, but then, to all who comprehended his secret and ultimate functions, as a healer of unutterable and spiritual wounds" (p. 205). It is stressed that Christ was both the bodily and spiritual healer (pp. 205-06). But it is also suggested that Judas' seemingly bodily illness in which he "burst asunder in the middle" and "his bowels gushed out" (p. 187) was caused by his spiritual shame at realizing what he had done to Christ. Christ, as the bodily and spiritual healer, thus, reflects Judas as the bodily and spiritually ill. *Borges's* use of the word "hakim" in "El tintorero enmascarado, Hakim de Merv" may likewise be pointing to this reflection. Hakim de Merv is not just a prophet but also a leper (O.C., p. 328). The words used to describe Christ, "varon de dolores, experimentado en quebrantos," would more logically refer to the bodily and spiritually ill Judas than to the bodily and spiritual healer, Christ (Ficciones, p. 181). According to this interpretation of these words Jesus really does reflect Judas, and Jesus, as Judas, therefore, commits suicide. Hence, by alluding to De Quincey in "Tres verisones de Judas" *Borges* draws attention to the different interpretations of words involved in our understanding of the deaths of Jesus and Judas, and to the interconnectedness of their respective deaths. In doing so he reinforces the importance of the interpretation of words in that story and implies that, by reflecting Judas, Jesus commits suicide.

"Los teologos" is another story concerned with the interpretation of words. It can be read within the context of Leon Bloy, a context that is implicitly alluded to in "Los teologos" by the quotation of 1 Corinthians 13:12: "demos ahora por espejo, en oscuridad." (n7) This quotation, to a reader familiar with *Borges's* work, immediately brings to mind the essay "El espejo de los enigmas." There we read of the six different interpretations that Leon Bloy gave to these words from Corinthians. The interpretation that seems most relevant to "Los teologos" is the final one which *Borges* quotes: "No hay en la sierra un ser humano capaz de declarar quien es, con certidumbre. Nadie sabe que a venido a tracer a este mundo, a que corresponden sus actos, sus sentimientos, sus ideas, ni cual es su nombre verdadero. su imperecedero Nombre en el registro de la Luz" (O. C. , p. 722). *Borges* concludes the essay with the words: "Ningun hombre sabe quien es, afirmo Leon Bloy. Nadie como el pare ilustrar esa ignorancia intima. Se creia un catolico riguroso y fue un continuador de los cabalistas, un hermano secreto de Swedenborg y de Blake: heresiarcas" (p. 722). Aureliano also did not know who he was, nor that he too was a heresiarch. He did not know that in the eyes of God, "en el registro de la Luz," he was the same person as Juan de Panonia.

"Los teologos" and "Tres versiones de Judas" also allude to each other. In "Los teologos" we read: "En los libros hermeticos esta escrito que lo que hay abajo es igual a lo que hay arriba, y lo que

hay arriba, igual a lo que hay abajo; en el Zohar, que el mundo inferior es reflejo del superior." We are then told that the "histriones" invoked "1 Corinthians 12:2 'vemos ahora por espejo, en obscuridad' pare demostrar que todo lo que vemos es falso" (p. 43). They also, for instance "imaginaron que nuestros actos proyectan un reflejo invertido, de suerte que si velamos, el otro duerme, si fornicamos, el otro es casto, si robamos, el otro es generoso" (p. 43). It has already been seen that the words from Corinthians in "Los teologos" allude to gorges's essay "El espejo de los enigmas." In the light of the interpretation that the "histriones" gave them and of the allusion to "Tres versiones de Judas" another of Bloy's interpretations becomes relevant. In the fourth interpretation that *Borges* presents, for example, Bloy sees the words as meaning: "demos sodas las cosas al revest Cuando creemos dar, recibimos, etc. Entonces (me dice una querida alma angustiada) nosotros estamos en el cielo y Dios sufre en la tierra" (O. C., p. 721). It is evident that, in both "Los teologos and the fourth interpretation of Bloy, a moral dimension has been added to the idea of reflection. The sinner and the sinless change places. In "Tres versiones de Judas" we find an echo of the words in "Los teologos according to which the inferior world is a reflection of the superior (p. 177). In addition, however, we have the words "Judas refleja de algun modo a Jesus" (p. 177). These words, central to the meaning of the story, contain that same moral element. In this case the most sinful man exchanges places with, or reflects, the man who is most free of sin.

Hence it is clear that "Los teologos and "Tres versiones de Judas" allude not only to each other, but also to "El espejo de los enigmas," and that that essay is centrally concerned with interpretation itself. In "El espejo de los enigmas," as we have seen, *Borges* offers us six of Bloy's different meanings. In "Tres versiones de Judas" the words of the Bible are given three different interpretations by Runeberg, all of which are unorthodox and heretical. Runeberg arrives at his third interpretation in part by giving a very different context to the words: "Brotara como raiz de sierra sedienta; no hay buen parecer en el, ni hermosura; despreciado y el ultimo de los hombres; varon de dolores, experimentado en quebrantos" (p. 181). He interprets them as referring to "todo el atroz porvenir, en el tiempo y en la eternidad, del Verbo hecho carne" (p. 181) rather than, for instance, to Christ in the hour of his death. Similarly, in "Los teologos" Juan de Panonia's words, originally spoken in a context in which they were orthodox, cause him to be burnt as a heretic when they appear in a different context later on. Central to each story is the idea that words can be interpreted differently according to the context within which they are read, and that what is considered heresy and what is considered orthodox is ultimately an arbitrary matter.

In case we should miss the allusions both to "Los teologos" and to "El espejo de los enigmas," shortly after the section from "Tres versiones de Judas" that has been examined, we read:

Asi dilucido Nils Runeberg el enigma de Judas.
Los teologos de sodas las confesiones lo refutaron. (p. 178)

Similarly, shortly before dying, Aureliano preaches a sermon entitled "Luz de las luces encendida en la carne de un reprobato" (p. 48). This could very easily be about Juan de Panonia, who did literally burn as a reprobate, and who has in his death been compared to Christ. However, it also makes us think of Christ in the body of Judas, which is the theme of "Tres versiones de Judas."

The idea that words can be interpreted differently according to how they are contextualized is stressed by gorges's allusions in "Tres versiones de Judas" to De Quincey and by the further intertextual allusions in "Tres versiones de Judas," "Los teologos" and "El espejo de los enigmas." In "El espejo de los enigmas" *Borges* again quotes De Quincey: "Haste los sonidos irracionales del globo deben ser otras tantas algebras y lenguajes que de algun modo tienen sus llaves correspondientes, su severe gramatica y su sintaxis, y asi las minimas cosas del universo pueden ser espejos secretos de las mayores" (O. C. p. 721). Such an "angular and splintered" mode of truth is used by *Borges* in his allusions to De Quincey and his treatment of the theme of the

interpretation of words. The allusions themselves enact the changing meanings of language.(n8)

CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND

(n1.) Jorge Luis gorges, *Obras completas en colaboracion* (Buenos Aires: Emece, 1979), p. 833.

(n2.) Jorge Luis gorges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emece, 1974), p. 99. Hereafter referred to as QC.

(n3.) Cynthia Stephens, "Conflicting Interpretation of Language and Reality in gorges's Narrative," *The Modern Language Review* 85 (1990): 65-76.

(n4.) Ronald J. Christ, *The Narrow Act: gorges' Art of Allusion*, (New York University Press, 1969), p. 154.

(n5.) Jorge Luis gorges, *Ficciones*, 6th ed. (Madrid: Alianza, 1978), p.176. All further references to "Tres versiones de Judas" are to this edition.

(n6.) Thomas De Quincey, *The Collected Writings*, ed. David Masson, 14 vol. (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1890), VIII, 177. (This essay was originally published in 1857. See footnote to p. 177.) All further references to De Quincey's writings are to this volume and this edition.

(n7.) Jorge Luis gorges, *El Aleph*, 6th ed. (Madrid: Alianza, 1977), p. 43. All further references to "Los teologos" are to this edition.

(n8.) I should like to express my thanks to Lorna Close of New Hall, Cambridge, for her help with this article.

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By Cynthia Stephens

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