

Borges the Poet

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Allegory in Dreamtigers, and the Theory of Reality

In his 1960 Epilogue to *Dreamtigers*, Jorge Luis Borges called this collection his most personal because it "abounds in reflections and interpolations."¹ The poet has used a vocabulary expressive of his life's concentration on profoundly personal reactions. Memories of sensations deeply rooted in childhood, and material from many levels of reading, are transformed and blended into a rare poetic fabric.

A selection of certain poems from *Dreamtigers*, may provide a discussion of two inherent tendencies common to Borges' poetry: to construct paradisiac images and themes, and to explore problems in knowledge and reality, even though Borges does not trust philosophical systems. He is an architect of intellectual territories, of imaginary and reconstructed historical beings as well as gods. Also, a third connecting theme cannot be disregarded, such as the nature of art, which, in Borges' interpretation, relates to the metaphysical leanings shown in his poetry.

"Adrogué" (87-88) is a poetic memory of a place revisited in darkness, first a park where the poet is walking among trees and black flowers. He assures the reader or himself: "Let no fear be that in indecipherable night/I shall lose myself. . . ." He knows by heart the shapes, sounds, and odors; the smell of eucalyptus trees, the lion's head biting a ring (like a mythic beast who guards entrances), the dripping faucet in a patio where his footsteps have brought him. At the threshold of a building, the stained glass windows "reveal to a child wonders / Of a crimson world and another greener world," and he thinks of the dead sleeping behind the door in an eternal dream. The flood of memory is so

intense that the barrier between past and present has slipped away; dawn and evening are the same, life and death the same. The patios and the gardens of the past are preserved in "that forbidden round," a world which one can never physically enter again, where the dripping faucet marks time without advancing the hours. This time-stopped atmosphere is characteristic of several poems involving reminiscences of Borges' earlier days and in general evoking his response to Buenos Aires as the first and continuing environment of his life. In "Adrogué" he asks:

How could I lose that precise
Order of humble and beloved things,
As out of reach today as the roses
That Paradise gave to the first Adam?

In a sonnet entitled "The Rain" (67) Borges again meditates on fragments of the past, once again organized into poetic wholeness by the rain, which is "falling, or it fell"; because the persistent force of memory pulls the past into the present, the present into the past, the rain is falling in both times at once. A patio, and in the last stanza, his father's voice, come to life again through the power of that continuity of memory which is imagination. The nostalgic feeling of the poem links with the paradisaical content of "Adrogué," adding the symbol of the father, who can be extended into the parental archetype of God, now lost.

Dreamtigers contains another Paradisaical symbol: a library filled with infinite books: infinite knowledge and the attractions of pursuing the unknown. The subject of "Poem about Gifts" (55-56) is expulsion from the library's world-in-itself, from the richness of access to written words, by fate, by God whose "excelling irony/ Gives me at once both books and night," a recognition that great human happiness and freedom may bear the seeds of destruction. For one who considers himself first a reader and secondly a writer,² blindness can be irremediable. Because Borges has said that his mind contains more memories of books than of places—"In fact, I hardly remember my own life"³—the library may thus be more nostalgic than the patio, representing the sensory less and the intellect more. The library, infinite and unseeing, takes its place as one of the many labyrinths in Borges' poetry, a maze in which the poet searches tirelessly for the experience of knowledge, moving slowly among encyclopaedias and atlases without being able to read them.

Slow in my darkness, I explore
The hollow gloom with my hesitant stick,
I, that used to figure Paradise
In such a library's guise.

Not mere chance but some kind of purpose is indicated, and the poet, connecting himself with others suffering from the same deprivation questions his identity: is he this self, or another?

Which of us two is writing now these lines
About a plural I and a single gloom?
What does it matter which word is my name
If the curse is indivisibly the same?

Following Hebrew-Christian tradition, the punishment of Adam is now assumed by the poet, whose role becomes allegorical. In "Adrogué" and "The Rain" there appears a garden of youthful happiness, representing a security that is later forbidden. Perhaps the library may be interpreted as a tree of knowledge actualized into life, the hubris-motivated choice of learning for its own sake, a passion for reading. The word *curse* has been used in "Poem about Gifts." In the context of the poet's allegorical projection, the ironic giving and taking away suggests that the expiation due is suffering through deprivation, the blindness which makes reading a lost joy.

The poems in *Dreamtigers*, although sometimes incompletely and sometimes antagonistically, relate to each other by means of themes and symbols. Hovering around these mythic connections in varying moods, Borges touches on only a part, not forcing a systematic parallel. Whatever picture of salvation is offered is not theological but personal, and expresses itself in the poems' existence: they are here, composed of a life's subject matter which includes not only events but endurance, reflection, creation, and the self-knowledge that intensifies imagination. Much has been gained in this strong and individual salvation. Looking back, Borges has said in a Preface to *El otro, el mismo*, "More than by any school, I have been educated by a library—my father's—and despite the vicissitudes of time and space, I believe I have not read those beloved volumes in vain."⁴

Not only the poems of religious meaning but those of philosophical bearing are enriched by sensory images and fictive actions, for although

Borges deals with abstractions he cloaks ideas in physical guise. In "The Game of Chess," reflective of the *Rubaiyat* and of Heraclitus, the players sit in their "grave corner" moving the pieces. The shapes—king, queen, horse, bishop, pawn—seem alive in the antagonistic plays; in fact, after the players' deaths the game will go on. At the end of the first part we are told that the game is a world game and is infinite. The second part continues to invest the pieces with human motives:

They do not know it is the artful hand
Of the player that rules their fate,
They do not know that an adamant rigor
Subdues their free will and their span.

But the players are also controlled, by God who keeps them prisoners. The final question is:

What god behind God originates the scheme
Of dust and time and dream and agony?

The poem is grounded in an oriental fatalism which denies free will, whether or not this is believed by the poet, or is under consideration, or is an artistic game in itself.

Another large-scale, impersonal look at the universe is found in "The Hourglass" (57–58), in which the forces of nature have nothing to do with our individual lives. The hourglass shows the regular flow of sand piling up "With an urgency wholly human," or so it seems to human observation. But the sand represents "Unwoundable eternity" and marks the time without stopping, its chill inevitability making the brief stance of human life seem especially frail. Cosmic time sees us all destroyed.

This tireless subtle thread of unnumbered
Sand degrades all down to loss.
I cannot save myself, a come-by-chance
Of time, being matter that is crumbling.

Time is of great fascination to this poet. He has declared in *Borges at Eighty*: "I think that time is the one essential mystery. . . . We can go on making guesswork—we will call that guesswork philosophy, which is really mere guesswork. We will go on weaving theories, and being very

much amused by them, and then unweaving and taking other new ones."⁵ To Borges all philosophy is like art, personal, created, ready to be compared to other human productions; yet in his own work the involvement of the self in a poem, the depth of emotion, can suggest philosophical affinities and explorations if not absolute purchase-holds.

Two poems about women known to Borges provide examples of lives seen against an indifferent or malignant universe. "Elvira de Alvear" (62) is a study in contrasts between an earlier span of beauty, freedom, and luxury—"That wealth which annuls all distance / Like the magic carpet"—and the downward path to loss of all things but one, the subject's natural courtesy, surviving against an irreversible illness. But this was a poet whose book contained a preface by Borges; he universalizes the tragedy of her fate and the role of art, which "transforms our actual sorrows / Into a music. . . ." It was the stars that, friendly at first, went against her, the inexplicable nature of human destiny.

A companion piece, "Susana Soca" (63), describes a woman less related to the world than Elvira de Alvear, preferring greys to strong red colors, a woman of afternoon or evening. Susana observed life from outside the labyrinth, "Just like that other lady of the mirror." But once more the forces of the universe do not align themselves with human justice: Susana Soca was killed in the terror and violence of an airplane crash, or as Borges interprets it:

Gods who dwell far-off past prayer
Abandoned her to that tiger, Fire.

The poem "Mirrors" (60–61) links questions about reality with implications about knowledge. The "horror of mirrors," Borges says, has haunted him because "They prolong this hollow, unstable world / In their dizzying spider's-web" of duplications that never stop, reflecting reflections into infinity. It is another kind of Borgesian labyrinth where one wanders and is lost. The poem is a brilliant statement by a mind that, having contemplated the shifting nature of perception, has come to the admission that we can know nothing. The concluding stanzas consider the creative agent of such a universe:

God (I keep thinking) has taken pains
To design that ungraspable architecture

Reared by every dawn from the gleam
 Of a mirror, by darkness from a dream.
 God has created nighttime, which he arms
 With dreams, and mirrors, to make clear
 To man he is a reflection and a mere
 Vanity. Therefore these alarms.

The comings and goings of night and day, of dreams and mirrors, leave us nothing but our illusory existence; even the great globe itself, mirrored in our rooms, is an illusion.

Borges has also had a long, imaginative involvement with the moon. The twenty-three stanzas of his poem called simply "The Moon" (64–66) review mythic treatments of this object which has so attracted his poetic attention; and a warning is announced applying to the moon in particular and to everything in general. A man once "conceived the unconscionable plan" of making a condensed description of the universe in a single volume, but when it was finished he realized that he had forgotten the moon. "The essence is always lost." When fate decided that Borges would be a poet, he reasoned that he too had inherited the obligation to define the moon, that a poet's function is to give things their exact names, "like red Adam in Paradise" naming the animals, but later he came to understand how futile it is to attempt true definitions of anything. The moon is its own essence, the *moon*, and there is no verbal equivalent. Using his familiar alternatives, he ascribes to fate or chance the gift of the moon to us, and at the poem's end a guarded hope is suggested: one day by using the symbol of the moon in its complex relatedness to all things, man may discover and write "his own true name / Uplifted in glory or in agony."

A like problem governs one of the key poems to the collection, which begins:

I think of a tiger. The gloom here makes
 The vast and busy Library seem lofty
 And pushes the shelves back. . . .

"The Other Tiger" (70–71) is about reality and art. The entrance place to imagination is the library again, perceived through a dimmed vision which, by turning inward, enlarging, makes room for a forest where a young tiger roams. Time and space present no obstacles to the poet's

mind; leaping all distances he pursues the tiger in Sumatra or Bengal, to see the stripes and feel the skin with the intensity of experience. The poet's soul begins to understand that the tiger of his poems is only a ghost and not the real tiger, for describing it

Makes it a figment of art and no creature
 Living among those that walk the earth.

In a final stanza Borges announces a search for the third tiger. This one will be his invention also—and here we have a Berkeleyan concept that one cannot get outside his own impressions, or, to state it in William James' language, one cannot catch anything on an errand of its own. Nevertheless, as he speaks through this poem, Borges is irresistibly drawn to track down the pure reality of the tiger-in-itself, and in so doing to go beyond his own poetry.

I know well enough
 That something lays on me this quest
 Undefined, senseless and ancient, and I go on
 Seeking through the afternoon time
 The other tiger, that which is not in verse.

There is a tinge of Platonic idealism in the mystical force of this quest for reality, as often in Borges' poems the reader suspects counter-affinities: up to the archetypes, down to the senses. In "The Other Tiger" what is skillfully blended is a double attraction, to the physical animal for its enviable freedom and beauty, and to its symbolic representation of some spiritual energy in the universe—even though the first cathexis appears to be dominant and to occupy most of the poem's content. This work acknowledges the lure of discovery against odds, the hope of finding a hidden essence underlying the appearances of nature and the enigmas of our human drama.

The final work to be discussed, "Ars Poetica," reflects the Heraclitean flux, as is shown in the opening stanza:

To gaze at the river made of time and water
 And recall that time itself is another river,
 To know we cease to be, just like the river,
 And that our faces pass away, just like the water.

Because this poem, in its rhythms and repetitions of language, concerns

theories of change and opposites, things and conditions become each other in an eternal round. Waking is sleep, dreaming it is not asleep. Death is the same as every night's sleep from which we wake. Through this perception of human life, Borges finds it is the function of art:

To transform the outrage of the years
Into a music, a rumor and a symbol. . . .

And in almost identical lines from "Elvira de Alvear," Borges shows the Lady herself possessed that talent in verse

That transforms our actual sorrows
Into a music, a hearsay, and a symbol. . . .

But as the river flows and all things change, so do the concepts fluctuate in "Ars Poetica." Art is not one fixed entity any more than the nature of reality is an end-stopped universe. Art, Borges explains, must be a mirror that reveals to us our faces, as in a sudden glance we may experience a flash of comprehension (even though in "Mirrors" he expresses a horror of this stare). Art is not something extraordinary, but something humble. From tales about Ulysses we learn how he wept on reaching home:

Art is that Ithaca
Of green eternity, not of wonders.

Finally, absorbing the fluctuations of water into the endlessness of its flow, and appearing to contradict the meaning of the opening stanza, Borges assigns eternity to the river, compares art to the river, and makes art a mirror reflecting the shifting yet eternal Heraclitus:

It is also like an endless river
That passes and remains, a mirror for one same
Inconstant Heraclitus, who is the same
And another, like an endless river.

Not only is art a reflection of something which is itself a reflection, but as we experience the things of this world we form our own interpretations, and our creations are dependent upon us who in turn are dependent upon the changing, insubstantial universe. These paradoxes are not evasions on Borges' part but recognitions that reality is open: the mind searching for truth about nature is, as Plato said, a changing ob-

server trying to understand a changing object. This is why, to the Greek idealist, the quest for Being must fix itself upon the permanent, transcendent forms—a lure that Borges sometimes seems to dangle in front of his own eyes, though he won't be caught in any absolute dogma of philosophy. To him, the power in the universe is fascinating to search for through his art, but he does not identify it as a traditional personal God. Pantheistically, God and the universe are one; we are at the service of a blind, uncaring destiny, such as that "tiger, Fire" that burned Susana Soca. And yet, behind the pessimistic view often found in the *Dreamtiger* poems, there lurks a vital spiritual need. The long life of this poet, Borges, devotes itself to reflection, memory, and to the "senseless" quest for knowledge, because it brings delight. He gives us poetry of elegance and truth.

NOTES

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "Epilogue" to *Dreamtigers*. Translated from *El Hacedor* by Mildred Boyer and Harold Moreland, with a Preface by Victor Lange and Introduction by Miguel Enguídanos (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970): 93. All quotations from the poems will refer to this edition.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, "Foreword" to *Selected Poems 1923-1967*. Edited, with an Introduction and Notes by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972): xv.
3. Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges at Eighty*. Edited by Willis Barnstone (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982): 7.
4. Borges, "Preface to *El otro, el mismo*," *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, 279.
5. Borges, *Borges at Eighty*, 110.

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