

BEHIND "BORGES AND I"



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AS A FRIEND AND BIOGRAPHER OF BORGES, I have always been intensely interested in following through his writings—which now extend over a full half-century—the various self-images he has conceived and sustained. No one familiar with Borges' work today is unaware of the extraordinary page entitled "Borges and I." Professor Alexander Coleman has stated clearly the judgment of many in designating it "one of the most perfectly poised pages of prose in the literature of Latin America."¹

"Borges and I" offers readers the most succinct version of a curious and persistent duality of character and identity that the author's most observant critics are disinclined to excuse as merely an amusing, playful game of mirrors. Certain aspects of other prose writings and poems stick persistently in one's memory and, together, insinuate that "Borges and I" is but the surfacing of an idea that Borges has been aware of for many years and that has been finding expression in his work for at least the past three decades.

"Borges and I" was first published as "Borges y yo" in the January-February-March 1957 issue of *La Biblioteca*, a publication of the National Library in Buenos Aires, of which Borges has been Director since 1955. Subsequently, it was included with twenty-two other short prose pieces, twenty-four poems, and the six-part "Museum" in the 1960 volume entitled

¹ *Cinco maestros: Cuentos modernos de Hispanoamérica* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), p. 6.

El hacedor.² Its significance as a key of sorts to the interpretation of Borges' work has since been widely acknowledged.

While on a summer vacation in the *sierra* of the Argentine province of Córdoba, on the 16th of February, 1956, Borges dictated "Borges and I" to his mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges. It had been her custom to take dictation from him since the previous year when Borges' sight deteriorated to the point where he could no longer write and revise by himself. On two-and-one-half pages of a notebook she took down what her son dictated. She recalls that he scarcely paused in giving her the words. (Borges had developed—and has since refined—the art of "rehearsing" his writing before setting it down.) On the manuscript pages there are only three instances of an altered word or phrase (he changed two verbs and a single noun expression). When he had given her the final words, *señora* Borges remembers that she told him without hesitation that she felt it was the best thing he had ever written. Later, Borges made but one revision in his own hand: in the final line he changed "ha escrito" (has written) to "escribe" (is writing).

If we understand anything at all about Borges' manner of composition, we understand that he writes to unburden himself of an idea or a story or an insight that has taken charge of him and will not let him rest until it has been expressed. We are thus justified in imagining that Borges had been preoccupied (as indeed he often has been) with the question of his identity as a man living and writing in Buenos Aires and as a man living and growing in the many books signed, published, and circulated as by Jorge Luis Borges. The purpose of this essay is to look back to earlier writings (which for various reasons did not reach print) to see, now in a new perspective, how this intriguing duality of consciousness may have come about.

Readers and interpreters of Borges no doubt have already found this a fertile subject for speculation since his published work abounds with clues and insights and instances of apparent keen awareness of the problem of personality. Having had access to his surviving composition notebooks and having discussed these concerns on many occasions with him, I should like to put forth a theory of how and when this arresting intuition of "double identity" was first produced. Borges has generously given permission for

² Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1960. This is the ninth volume in the *Obras completas* of Borges that Emecé, in response to the strong recommendations of José Edmundo Clemente, began publishing in 1953. In 1959, Emecé's editorial director, Carlos V. Frías, asked Borges for a new volume of stories or poems. Borges replied that he had nothing new to be collected in such a book. Frías, not to be turned down, replied that every writer had a new book to publish if he would simply dig around in his files and desk drawers. Borges decided to give it a try. The result was *El hacedor*—a volume that Borges has praised because, since it is in every sense a miscellany, it provides a natural and unde-liberate impression of his literary character.

II

Borges' notebooks contain a number of introspective, confessional pages wherein he attempts to come to grips with his essential nature and identity. In one of the earliest of these, a two-page sketch entitled "Boletín de una noche" ("Report on a Night"), which can be situated as belonging to the period 1924-1926,³ he writes of returning home very late at night to a darkened house, immersed in sleep and silence. His sense of being alone and enveloped in the house's deep darkness induces him to reflect on his own being. But here the tone of his questioning is not influenced by the concept of duality, but is rather overwhelmingly laced through with the idealist philosophy (expounded by his father and later elaborated on by Macedonio Fernández) which so pervaded much of his early writing. A few examples from this previously unknown text:

"... I am palpable man (I tell myself) but with black skin, black skeleton, black gums, black blood that flows through intimate black flesh . . . I undress. I am (an instant) that shameful, furtive beast, now inhuman and somehow estranged from itself that is a naked being. . ."

Moments later he is in bed; and sleep begins to possess him.

"... Then I begin losing my name, my past, my conjectural future. I am anyone else. Now sight has left me, then hearing, dreaming, touch . . . I am almost no one: I am like the plants (black with darkness in blackened garden) that broad daylight will not awaken. Yet it is not in daylight but in darkness I am laid out. I am crippled, blind, enormous, terrible in my commonplace disappearing. I am no one."

With these final words, the piece ends. For Borges at this stage in the development of his concept of existence, sleep (loss of consciousness) obliterates his being. In other poems and essays—of distinctly less intimate and introspective nature—that he handed over to a public secretary in the Tribunales district of downtown Buenos Aires for typing and subsequent submission for publication over the space of the next decade, Borges would elaborate on the same basic idealist concepts. In fact, the recurrent manifestations of idealist thought during this period constitute the single most insistent characteristic of the philosophical outlook Borges imparted to his writing. So much for a very early and privileged glimpse into the nature of his concept of self-identity.

³ Borges remembers the house in which he was living at the time he wrote this account—the home at Quintana 222 where the Borges family lived from 1924, when they returned from a second trip to Europe, until moving to the large flat at Pueyrredón 2190 in 1930. Since this piece figures in a handwritten list of titles Borges was considering for inclusion in *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, the volume of essays he published in July of 1926, "Boletín de una noche," was most certainly written before that date.

III

Fervor of Buenos Aires (1923) was Borges' first book and his first volume of collected poetry. It was followed in 1925 by *Moon across the Way*. After that date, Borges virtually gave up writing poetry. When Alfonso Reyes asked him in 1929 for a collection of new poems that he might include in his "Notebooks of the Plate" series, Borges was hard-pressed to bring together the eleven short poems that constitute his *San Martín Notebook* (1929). During the thirties, it is unlikely that Borges composed more than half a dozen poems. From this period we know only of the two English poems dedicated to "I. J." and "Insomnia," the latter published in the magazine *Sur* (under somewhat humiliating circumstances for Borges) in December of 1936.

During this decade, other duties and other pursuits occupied his attentions. In 1930 he published *Evaristo Carriego*, his peculiarly random biography of that young poet of the Buenos Aires "slums." His fourth collection of essays, *Discussion*, appeared in 1932, and he brought out a book-sized edition of his essay "Note About the Kenningar" primarily to correct in the public eye what he considered a lamentable error. In the original version of the essay, published in *Sur* earlier that year, Borges had consistently ascribed the wrong gender to the noun "kenningar," giving it as masculine plural instead of feminine plural.

In 1933 he took his first salaried job, as editor of the literary supplement of the Buenos Aires newspaper, *Crítica*. He would thereafter always hold some sort of remunerative position that brought in at best a modest income. Editorial work of one sort or another would engage much of his time throughout the thirties. In the next seven years he published under his own name only two books: the eight narratives and five brief sketches written in 1933-34 for the pages of *Crítica*, brought together under the title *Universal History of Infamy* (1935), and *History of Eternity*, the last collection of essays to appear until *Other Inquisitions* in 1952.

By 1937, it was clear that the health of Borges' father, Jorge Borges, was declining and that it was advisable that the young Borges find some sort of steady employment. The idea of a librarian's position came quickly into consideration and Borges soon thereafter visited City Hall. He was given a job as second assistant in a dingy municipal library in the shabby lower middle-class workers' district of Almagro. He was told that had he come a day or so earlier, he could have had the post of director of the same library. The job had just been given to the poet Francisco Luis Bernárdez. That day made all the difference in Borges' life, for the job, which he doggedly held onto for nearly nine years, proved to be one of the most unfortunate associations of the author's life. Between 1937 and 1946, the year when some nameless Peronist underling decided to retaliate against Borges for his professed sympathy for the Allied cause in World War II by summarily transferring him to the post of Inspector of Eggs and Poultry in the Municipal Market, Borges experienced what must have been a period of desperate unhappiness. The job turned out to be no job at all. His

follow employees—forty in all in the small library—hard to slow him down in his single duty of cataloguing books. He was told to do no more than a hundred books a day so as not to show up the other workers. By general accord they had agreed to restrict the amount of work they did in order to preserve some small bit of activity for all hands. His colleagues were totally without background or training and could carry on only the most superficial conversation; the gist of any exchange, he recalls, was either gossip or smutty stories. One of his fellow-librarians was a pimp who ran a rowdy dance hall on weekends in another part of town. He left Borges startled and dismayed one day when in the men's room he pulled his shirt out of his pants to show Borges the scars left on his body by knife wounds inflicted during barroom brawls. One woman, Borges recalls, was raped in the library on her way to the bathroom.

But perhaps worse than any of these factors for the young writer was his co-workers' flawless ignorance of his fairly important reputation as a poet and critic. This, he remembers very distinctly, was a great disillusionment for him to bear. The small humiliations he suffered at the library caused him such dismay that at times he would come to his senses in the street, walking the seven blocks to his bus, and realize suddenly that there were tears in his eyes.

The other Borges did exist, away from the library in *Almagro*, for the readers of small literary magazines and for the limited readership of Victoria Ocampo's review, *Sur*. But no one took note of that fact where he worked. One day the pimp and dance hall entrepreneur came across a reference in a biographical encyclopaedia to a writer named Jorge Luis Borges. "Look here," he exclaimed to Borges. "This fellow has the same name as you. How about that. *Che*, do you know who he is?" Borges looked at the biographical note and the photo of himself, taken at a time when he wore a beard and moustache, and answered, "No, I really don't know him."

IV

No one can ever say for sure. But I have a strong feeling that this incident, remembered by Borges in such detail even today, may have produced the first crack, the initial, slight fissure in a despised if not actually intolerable reality. It is not difficult to imagine how the author's prodigious intellectual fancy might have grasped at the concept of two Borgeses springing thus out of one existence.

In any case, Borges' notebooks reveal that long before "Borges and I" was fashioned, he had evolved the idea of two separate persons named Borges. We recall that shortly after Borges began working at the Miguel Cané Municipal Library in Almagro, he lost his father. Jorge Borges died on February 12, 1938. On December 24th of the same year, Borges sustained the head wound that later produced complications and very nearly cost him his life. For reasons that need not be considered here, on his recovery Borges began to write short stories: "Pierre Menard, Author of

the *Quixote*" in 1939, then the astonishing "Tlhu, Utlhu, Orbis Tertius" in 1940. In the same notebook in which he composed "Tlhu," I discovered a half page of prose dealing with the concept of two Borgeses. It can be quite confidently dated as belonging to the year 1940. It seems to me to be as introspective a page as the earlier "Report on a Night"; but here there is an entirely new tension. The page has no title, no caption. At the top of the paragraph stands Borges' full name. After the last line appears an indication that something—evidently a poem—was to have been appended. The page in its entirety reads as follows:

Jorge Luis Borges

The other J. L. B. (the other and real Borges, the one who justifies me in a sufficient but secret way) carried out that afternoon (perhaps for the first time) his duties as second assistant (two hundred and ten pesos a month; with deductions, one hundred and ninety one) at a certain illegible library in the *hinterland* of Boedo, acquired a revolver in one of the gun shops on Entre Rios Street, acquired a novel he had already read (Elery Queen: *The Egyptian Cross Mystery*) at Constitución Station, bought a one-way ticket to Adrogué-Mármol-Turdera, went to the Hotel Las Delicias, consumed and left unpaid for two or three strong brandies and shot himself with a definitive bullet in one of the upstairs rooms. He left behind this poem, evidently written down at the library (as the letterhead shows), which I copy textually.

Reproduce

The poem referred to in the passage is not to be found in the notebook in question. I was puzzled by the evident inconclusiveness of the piece—as was Borges. He had no recollection of what poem that might have been. Recently, during a trip to Buenos Aires, I came across another notebook which I was able to identify with the same year. Included in it was the prologue Borges wrote for Carlos Grinberg's *Jewish Poetry*, published in Buenos Aires in 1940. At the back of the notebook, spread out on a single page in the style of composition so characteristic of the form of Borges' early manuscript drafts, I discovered what was evidently the lost poem. That page, in its entirety, reads as follows.

| | |
|--|---|
| /In a bedroom or the miserable shoulder of love and on Caseros Street | if I pass from the vain pen to the definitive revolver |
|--|---|

Sometimes I think of Borges.

Am I the municipal employee who brings home the kilo of *jerba* given to him at the office, the one who knows the habits of a key and a bus, the obese and epicome (terrible) face that hurls in { mirrors and windows + metals and glass)?

Am I the great-grandson of a bronze
statue { that endures in a plaza in
above which whirl the

the South beneath the rotation of the stars, | am I the grandson of a
punctual stars,

some
dead man who was wrapped in a cow's hide by soldiers?
Am I the person I am a second before sleep inundates me, am I the person
who in some way is—indestructible, inconceivable, secret—in . . .
is, in unfathomable sleep?

last stanza { When this hand,
instead of the imperfect pen resorts to the total revolver
when the laconic blast crases me
I will not do it (if I do it) out of desperation or tedium
nor for the *vitam iudicant esse supervacuum* of Seneca
but rather / oh, friends insulted by my death
in order to find out + know who I am.
verify if I really exist.
+ If this hand one day
passes from the imperfect . . . to the . . .

second-to-the-last { Or perhaps I have died:
two years ago on a murky stairway on Aynacucho Street,
twenty years ago in a venal bedroom in the heart of Europe.

For reasons he does not recall, Borges did not finish the poem and thus never joined it to the introductory paragraph that clearly seems to be linked to it. He acknowledges that around this time there were periods when he did dwell on the idea of suicide. Other autobiographical details stand out in these two companion pieces; but it is not the purpose of this essay to illuminate these features. Rather it is my hope to show that by 1940 Borges was indeed already coming to grips with the idea he treated so brilliantly some sixteen years later in "Borges and I."

V

It is entirely possible that the above cited early depiction of the conscious separation of two manifestations of his personality may not have satisfied Borges because he was unable to attain the equilibrium he achieved in "Borges and I." Yet one more prose fragment, found among his composition notebooks, suggests that Borges continued thereafter to be concerned over the various ways of representing his fundamental identity. Specifically the problem seemed to consist of determining 1) what *person* was going to be depicted and 2) what *person* was going to assume the role of depicter. The composition of the page in question can be situated, through internal and

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external evidence, in the period 1949-50. (Close readers of Borges will recognize elements in this piece that later formed part of his story, "The South," published in 1953.) In tone, "Fatigue or Abundance" is reminiscent of "Report on a Night." But both the attitude and perspective of the narrator have undergone significant changes. While this fragment does indeed look back to the mid-twenties, it also looks ahead, beyond "Borges and I," to the poem "The Watcher," published in English translation in *The New Yorker* in 1972.⁴

Fatigue or Abundance

On Sundays, at quarter past ten in the morning, the gray man arrives at the Paulista cafe on Brazil Street.

He pauses a moment to caress with vague affection an impossible cat,
(abstractedly + mechanically) indifferently

and then takes a seat in the accustomed corner.

He takes from his pocket an elementary philosophy text and for the *n*th time studies the *apoiron* of Anaximander

old, impersonal things: the *apoiron* of Anaximander or the fourth *aporia* that Aristoteles attributed to Zeno; the infinite sphere of Parmenides or the . . .

He will not see fifty again and the things that usually happen to men have happened to him.

He has been deceived many times and he has been deceitful.

He has believed, hearing a single voice or seeing a single face, that that voice and that face could last him for all of his life.

He has engendered a child and later helped to kill it.

He has on occasions turned the sluggish pages of an atlas and has | thought |
of possible lives on other continents and in other ages. | dreamed |

He has | dreamed | of learning things that he has not learned: the Hebrew
| thought |
alphabet, Anglo-Saxon

One more unsatisfactory attempt at getting down on paper the essence of his doubtlessly perplexing, exasperatingly ambiguous concept of self-image, this fragment gives substance to the metaphor (Borges' own) that would designate Borges' most memorable writings as "games with shifting mirrors."

While these forgotten pages apparently represented for Borges unsuccessful rehearsals of prose statements that were never to be made publicly, they illuminate, nonetheless, the precarious poise of "Borges and I," they enrich it and speak in whispers of a truth Borges either has been unable to fathom or that he has tendered to us so many times—in "The Aleph," in "The South," in "The Unworthy One," in "Guayaquil," in "The Watcher"—that we should not have missed it. Yet perhaps we have not missed it. Borges has spoken to us all of something. It may be that his work constitutes a metaphor—surely his most enduring achievement—a metaphor of the ineffable.

⁴ *The New Yorker*, February 26, 1972, p. 42.