

“Borges and I,” A Narrative Sleight of Hand

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In memory of Raimundo Lida and Peter Marlay

An autobiographical page?

Due to its autobiographical appearance, “Borges and I,” a brief work published in *El Hacedor* (1960), seems to present, under the pattern of a dual personality, what a writer actually feels, or imagines he may feel, in confronting his social persona.¹ Because this text, usually understood as a confession, offers some aesthetic insights and succinct information about thematic changes, quotations have frequently been taken from it to corroborate conclusions about the author and his work. Criticism, nonetheless, has paid little attention to its narrative quality.

Can “Borges and I” be considered a narrative text, a short story whose writing shows the author’s original technique?² In her analysis of Borges’s *Evaristo Carriego*, Sylvia Molloy states that this biography is where “the future maker of fictions, undertakes the possibility of re-creating and inscribing a character” to add that “it is also a place where he [Borges] inaugurates the possibility of erasing the very character he has inscribed” (13-14). In her view, Borges had already anticipated the basic characteristic that he assigns to the short story in his conception and exercise of biography. Thus, observing that most of the characters of Borges’s narrative are “narrative functions,” Molloy goes on to conclude that “the dissolution of a foreseeable character *is* the situation in his stories” (40-41). Once this primacy of situation over character has been accepted, it isn’t surprising that he who would deny the personality’s entity as such shows it at the beginning of “Borges and I” as split into two entities or contrary characters whose conflicting relation is described.

Yet it is neither enough to describe characters—the *writer I* (the intellectual) and the *vital I* (the existential)—nor only to describe the conflictive relation in which they are involved to create the narrative fiction. At first glance, it seems impossible to deny that nothing happens while we are reading the text and that, although it abundantly provides information about events that usually happen—by using the present tense—and about some events that have happened in the past, no actual present action takes place in the text.

It is true that Borges—an author who has accustomed us to seeing him in the ludic exercise of erasing the limits not only between imagination and experienced realities but also between opposing concepts—finally blurs the distinction between the characters, the writer Borges and the vital I, in the concluding sentence of the text. This one sentence that follows the text's body, an almost page-long paragraph, has an ambiguity that, in this case, seems perfectly suited to the presentation of a psychological phenomenon in which those characters are the poles of a divided personality. But the fact that the text belongs to Borges's infinite and reversible universe is not enough to justify viewing it as a narrative piece. Nor is it sufficient to argue that some of the author's other short stories present two opposite characters temporarily superimposed through narrative impersonation ("The Shape of the Sword"), or two ethically opposed qualifications competing to define a character in order to determine what he really is ("Theme of the Traitor and the Hero") or a negative characteristic that shifts from one opposite individual personality to another ("The Theologians").³

The dialectic of victim and victimizer

In "Borges and I" the vital I declares that both he and the writer I share preferences: hourglasses, maps, seventeenth-century typography, the taste of coffee, and Stevenson's prose. At the same time it is made clear that the vital I is subject to exploitation by the writer I, who takes over his experiences of the surroundings to create literature: "Yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir, para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura" 'I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges can contrive his literature' (*Lab* 246).⁴ Nonetheless, it can be observed too that the vital I accepts this exploitation, conceiving it as an exchange, when he confesses "esa literatura me justifica" 'this literature justifies me' (*Lab* 246), that is to say, that he admits that this literature

gives some meaning—meaning pursued, we think, by every human being—to his life.

Yet while the writer I achieves his goal of creating his literature, the vital I doubts the extent to which he himself, his actual self, may truly be saved in these literary creations. He points out that even the writer's "válidas" 'valid' pages cannot save him, "quizá porque lo bueno ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o de la tradición" 'perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition' (*Lab* 246), and also declares that he doesn't recognize himself—his individuality—in the author's books. It is true that, in the midst of his confidences, he asserts that "sólo algún instante de mí podrá sobrevivir en el otro" 'only some instant of myself can survive in him' (*Lab* 246). Yet he concludes the description of the relationship and his sense of despoilment by declaring his stoic pessimism: "así mi vida es una fuga y todo lo pierdo y todo es del olvido, o del otro" 'Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him' (*Lab* 247).

It is evident that each of the two characters has clearly defined his specific, positive attributes, as well as his negative ones. To speak of a double, the parallelism of the two characters has its origin in a complement of desire by which one covets what the other possesses.⁵ Molloy points out that in the double rivalry of Borges's narrative, "Once desire is sated, those fragments [of a character] revert to the same 'nothingness of personality,' to the same zero degree of desire" (47). The case is, however, that while the writer I comfortably benefits by despoiling the vital I's capacity to experience, the vital I feels disappointed with the exchange of life for literature and aspires to have his part in the work of art socially recognized—perhaps to reveal himself as its actual source—a goal that, to some extent, he has begun pursuing in so far as he is exercising the function of an "historian" I.

Within the dialectic of the I and the Other, the text which, to our understanding, had begun in a disparaging tone in the first sentence—"Al otro, a Borges, es a quien le ocurren las cosas" 'The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to' (*Lab* 246)—has ended by asserting that the other is the one who abusively takes over everything. To prove this, the vital I enumerates the topics of his interest—"las mitologías del arrabal" 'the mythologies of the suburbs' (*Lab* 246) and "los juegos con el tiempo y con lo infinito" 'the games with time and infinity' (*Lab* 246-47)—which

throughout his life and the writer I's production have been the objects of despoilment.

Such detailed information indicates that the vital I is, to some degree, a victim of the writer I. Yet we may be somewhat disoriented, but not convinced of the contrary, when the vital I declares: "sería exagerado afirmar que nuestra relación es hostil" 'It would an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship' (*Lab* 246). But the victim's hostility cannot be hidden, despite his cautious dissimulation in trying to deny how serious the conflict is, because it appears clearly revealed by the kind of terms used to characterize the writer I's behavior: he shares preferences "de un modo vanidoso que las convierte en atributos de un actor" 'in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor' (*Lab* 246), he has a "perversa costumbre de falsear y magnificar" 'perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things' (*Lab* 246). Because of this, we can suspect that the relationship described, a symbiotic one within which convenient dissimulations like those mentioned take place, deserves to be considered a sort of sado-masochistic relationship. It isn't too audacious, therefore, that we begin to doubt the verbal behavior of the vital I, a masochist who has a part in the conflictive relationship in which the masochistic and the sadistic roles are reversed along the lines of a painful and cruel game.

From a philosophical point of view, "Borges and I" may also be considered a precise revelation, one example among many of the lack of the subject's unity, as well as of the metaphysical enigma of personal identity, a topic that, without any doubt, points to the influence of Schopenhauer.⁶ Mourey has pointed out that "Borges's narration puts on stage by means of the complexity of his narrative devices the absence of an origin-I and the gap of the Real" (18), and has specifically asserted that Borges is aware of "the impossibility of a univocal and non-problematic constitution of them [the characters Borges used by the author] as subjects of/in the writing" (33).

In our opinion, the split of the personality in "Borges and I" is a necessary literary pattern so that the writer may set on the narrative's fictional stage the idea of the subject's illusory reality. Yet we think that in order to understand the extent of the interplay of Borges's philosophical ideas and his literary creations, Borges's final statement in "A New Refutation of Time," an essay in *Other Inquisitions*, has to be carefully taken into consideration:

Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. . . . El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. . . . El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges.

Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. . . . Time is the substance I am made of. . . . The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges. (*OC* 771; *Lab* 233-34)

A slanderous plot?

Although the ambiguity of the conflict shown above is not unusual in an autobiographical document and by itself cannot bestow narrative quality on the text, readers would have let themselves be taken in by the obvious if they hadn't found it extremely odd that the description ends with a brief yet tantalizing sentence set apart from the long paragraph, a sentence that comes back from the past to the present—in the Spanish original neither 'escribió' nor 'ha escrito'—to tell us, despite the fact that it belongs to the informing voice: "No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página" 'I do not know which one of us has written this page' (*Lab* 247).⁷

The last statement of "Borges and I" cannot be accepted without a good reason to justify it; it obviously doesn't make sense.⁸ Yet Mourey takes it literally and points out that, within the logical matrix offered by the short story's title and its final statement, the text may be interpreted as either I or Borges, or as neither I nor Borges, this last a double negation which leads to an infinite polemic (39 n. 89). Thus, he concludes: "Structural failure of the enunciation's subject in the subject of what is enunciated, a failure that the text, in its process, puts on stage, re-presents" (39). Our main objection to Mourey is that, by extracting a logical text, which only partially takes into account Borges's text, he loses sight of the complex short story's narrative action.

If we well know that the vital I describes the relation in this autobiographical confession as a first-hand witness, and if we know also without the slightest doubt that the writer I is the one who, according to his precise characterization, writes, it seems apparent that the writer I is the one who has just written this page and that the vital I ought to know it. Therefore, the vital I's final statement may

not be a dissimulation but, instead, a flagrant lie. If that is the case, there would be good ground to suspect that the entire text is a falsehood, the product of a compulsive intent to falsify.

From this perspective, the text's nature changes radically: it becomes a "story" (a 'lie') by which we see the vital I (the narrating character) in the very act of deceiving the reader (narrative action), a deception which he was about to achieve if he hadn't betrayed himself in the last statement, which allows the readers—participating, active readers—to escape the deception into which they might otherwise have fallen. Such an interpretation is attractive: we might assert that we have the short story of a lie, of the deceiving process, whose deception is unveiled. Yet to assert that would be, perhaps, to let ourselves be led too easily into an error by Borges's ludic magic.

The short story's rite of passage

If we attributed short story quality to such a narrative simply because it is well written and is signed by a well known writer, we would be obliged to acknowledge that we have a short story that is only a topical one which uses a quite simple technique. But because simplicity isn't one of Borges's sins, we may dare venture the hypothesis that in this short story we are in the presence of a much more subtle narrative architecture which masterfully offers a much more substantial action than what we have seen so far.

A more careful examination of the text requires that we not believe in the vital I's candor. We already know that he isn't trustworthy, not only because of his first-person narrator's role, but also because of his dubious statements. We must conceive of him as a person who is or feels himself a victim, or who wants us to believe he is, who may be able to use better strategies to achieve his goal of defending himself or of deceiving us.

It shouldn't be forgotten that the vital I has given us two examples of a repeatable pattern of thievery. Guided by that pattern, we observe that, in flight from Borges, after having first abandoned to him the mythologies of the enclaves at the city outskirts and, second, the games with time and infinity, now, on the page we are reading, the vital I has deliberately focused on his own psychological anguish to implement a sweet vengeance. We may suspect then that, because he wants to reveal to the readers his condition of victim in his relation to the writer I, the vital I sets himself to create

a trap. We then become aware that he knows that, attracted by this new and interesting vital experience, the writer I will repeat once more his compulsive stealing pattern to take it over by virtue of his writing, thus falling into that mouse-trap.

Given the fact that the vital I has issued an accusation against the writer I, it is the unsuspecting Borges I, who, by his own hand, turns it into a literary page, a text that becomes a written self-indictment handed to the reader. To avoid Borges's guessing the danger and escaping from the temptation as well as to alert the reader who will witness the accusation, the vital I completes the implementation of his strategic design by "dictating" the ironical last sentence, underscoring it through its separation from the long paragraph. With such a statement about not knowing which of the two writes the page (which is ambiguous only on the surface) the completion of the vital I's vengeance has been secured. Certainly such a vengeance, aimed at discrediting the writer I, is a signal of how the victim and victimizer roles have been inverted.

The delivery process of the vital I's vengeance has been the narrative action which, impelled by the revenge motif, has taken place in the short story while we were reading it, an action within which the vital I and the writer I played their roles as protagonist and antagonist, true characters of the plot. These basic narrative elements escape a superficial reading because the literary discourse conceals them by a well calculated maneuver that almost annihilated them only to reserve a dazzling final surprise for the reader. Doubtless, Jorge Luis Borges is always Jorge Luis Borges: he actually invites the reader to participate, not only as recipient of the victim's message, but also as witness, in a true initiation rite into the narrative's thaumaturgy.⁹

It is necessary now to show a meaningful intertextual game that takes place in this short story in order to gain access to the ultimate meaning of Borges's art. Mentioning the phrase that affirms that "todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser" 'all things long to persist in their being' (*Lab* 246) is to accept—without saying so—the daring exegesis by don Miguel de Unamuno of the man "of flesh and bone," Spinoza. Unamuno claimed that this statement of the sixth proposition of the third part of the *Ethics* is proof of an unyielding desire for immortality which goes beyond the metaphysical system of the pantheist philosopher.¹⁰ Given Borges's special use of philosophy, it appears clear that avoiding a reference to Unamuno allowed the author to stay out of the Spanish thinker's philosophi-

cal and religious context and to create his literature freely. But it is also true that the insertion of that statement underlines the powerful desire felt by the hurt vital I—whether it be useless or not—to survive into the fate—whatever it might be—of the literary text.

Readers often feel that the verbal, literary construction of Borges's infinite and reversible universe seems to be a flight from personal existence and from the human anguish in trying to find life's meaning. However, alerted by the quotation from Spinoza with which the protagonist of "Borges and I" supports his most deep-seated aspiration, we may try to have a clearer glimpse of the dramatic point of departure of Borges's literary creation. A poem entices us to pursue in that endeavor. In the poem "El espejo" ("The mirror") Jorge Luis Borges reveals the awe with which a mirror filled him in his childhood: "Yo, de niño, temía que el espejo / Me mostrara otra cara o una ciega / Máscara impersonal que ocultaría / Algo sin duda atroz" 'Being a child, I used to fear that the mirror / Would show to me another face or a blind / Impersonal mask which would hide / Something doubtlessly atrocious'; and that still he felt it as a mature man: "Yo temo ahora que el espejo encierre / El verdadero rostro de mi alma, / Lastimada de sombras y de culpas, / El que Dios ve y acaso ven los hombres" 'Now I fear that the mirror keeps / The true face of my soul, / hurt by shadows and by misdeeds / The one God sees and maybe men see' (*Historia* 107; my translation). Taking into consideration that even the most nihilistic literary text originates in the writer's impossible task of escaping from a dreadful human experience (see Blanchot 4-20), one can conjecture that Borges's dread was tamed thanks to scientific formulas and philosophical systems that, taken as great metaphors, served his literary purposes as a stoic neo-fantastic writer.

No critic denies that interpreting Borges's literary works is an extremely difficult task and that in trying to provide the readers with an adequate access to Borges's art we run the risk of oversimplifying. As Mourey describes it, Borges's ludic magic is "a play with truth and with the reader's belief, specular and labyrinthic spaces exhibition, evocation of a marvelous Sign which might include, destroy or create its Referent" (6). Without trusting standard patterns of analysis, and without risking getting lost in the gallery of mirrors or in the labyrinths of interpretation, we wanted to share our reading of "Borges and I," to invite the reader to enjoy such a succinct and, at the same time, complex narrative text, so apparently transparent on the surface that it almost eludes us, a short story in which the

tenacious search for an individual's "instant" that perhaps could be saved is revealed and narrated. Thanks to that fictional creation of a split author's alter ego, a tour de force in which life and creative will are meshed, Borges's reader may gain access to the dreadful vision not only of the process from which the literary work of art emerges but also of the author's intent—between Orpheus's longing and Sisyphus's resignation—of creating himself as a subject.¹¹

Notes

1. This and other prose works by the author are quoted from his *Obras Completas*, hereafter referred to as *OC*. In that edition the entire text is on page 808. English quotations of Borges's prose texts are from *Labyrinths*, hereafter referred to as *Lab*. Translations of the quotations taken from criticism are mine.

2. Jean-Pierre Mourey, whose work shows a rigorous use of contemporary literary analysis, recognizes the narrative nature of "Borges and I" (38-39). See also Aguadé (171-75) and McGuirk (43-49).

3. Alazraki states that the two theologians in conflict are one individual and offers a text by Schopenhauer to justify his interpretation (*La prosa* 64-65).

4. In my opinion, *me dejo vivir* isn't fully rendered by the usual translations "[I] let myself go on living" or "I allow myself to live." The symbiotic relationship context, Spanish parallel constructions like *dejarse querer*, and the term "vividor" lead me to think that the meaning in the Spanish original is 'to be used' by the other.

5. For Borges's autobiographical convention and the double, see Mourey (33-45). The double, a specular metaphor, at odds with a realistic conception of literature as a mirror of life, is the aesthetic axis of Borges's neo-fantastic literature, which allows him to avoid the recourse to terror used in the preceding fantastic literature. For the neo-fantastic, see Alazraki, "Neofantástico."

6. On Schopenhauer's influence, see Paoli 121-91.

7. Yates informs us that Borges had deleted "ha escrito" in the original manuscript (318). The definitive Spanish text reads "escribe," which is better rendered by the present progressive "is writing."

8. About the final statement of the text, McGuirk opens up a pertinent question: "Coda or supplement? Trace of I in the 'other'?" (47).

9. Hutcheon thinks that, because what she considers a mimesis of the product is insufficient to understand postmodernist creation, a mimesis of the "process" is necessary (39). That seems quite justified by this text by Borges, which implicates the reader to such a degree.

10. See Unamuno 132-33. In this particular case it isn't possible to say, as Molloy does, that "it hardly matters whether Borges refers directly to works he has read or to commentators of those works" (105). For an overview of the Unamuno-Borges relation, see Kerrigan and Koch.

11. By staging a conflict among the selves, the text illuminates the drama of the individual self, but at the same time shows a poetic self-identifying intent in which a postulated subject aspires to overcome heterogeneity by indicting the masks born from the experience of the social context.

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