

## "Borges and I" A Russian Interpretation

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### 1

Right from the title and almost to the very end of this one-page story, which appeared in the collection *The Maker* (*El hacedor*, OC 2: 186), Jorge Luis Borges separates his "I for others", that is for us, his readers, from "I for myself", speaking from Mikhail Bakhtin's ethical-aesthetical categories, primarily from the work *Author and Hero* (*Avtor i geroy*). The renowned Borges with "his literature" is "the other" to himself, *el otro* (thus will the story about the meeting between the two Borgeses, the young and the old, later be called); in this alienated *su literatura* can be heard the ending of Verlaine's *The Art of Poetry*, "Et tout le reste est littérature" as well as in the raging *The Fourth Prose* by Mandelstam. The speaking and writing I-for-others is the other for the nameless I-for-myself, which listens, understands and thinks. "It's given to you, but used by others", this is a riddle about names (*Zagadki* n° 1623), and following that Bakhtin: "My name I get from others and it exists for others (naming oneself is imposture)" (*Sobranie* 344). Here is why "there are Peters and Ivans, who cannot pronounce Petya or Vanya without a certain feeling of falseness", said by Nabokov in the third chapter of *Glory* (*Podvig* 18), "whereas there are others, who, while having a long conversation with you, will relish pronouncing their name and patronymic twenty times at least, or even worse than that -their nickname." My face is also for others, and anyhow pronouncing one's own name is the same as looking in the mirror.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In regard to a person's feeling of falsehood in front of the mirror see Bakhtin, *Avtor* 31, and his special note in *Sobranie* 71.

## 1.1

The artistic division of himself by Borges corresponds, besides to Bakhtin's philosophical, also to the confessional division in Lev Tolstoy's diary from the 8<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 1909:

How good, necessary, beneficial it is when conscious of all appearing wishes, to ask myself: Whose wish is this – Tolstoy's or *mine*. Tolstoy wants to denounce, to think badly about NN, but *I* don't want to. And if only I remembered this, remembered that Tolstoy is not *I*, then the problem would be solved irrevocably. (...) You, Tolstoy, want or don't want something or other – that's your affair. To carry out that which you want, to acknowledge the justice, the legality of your wishes, that's *my* affair. (...)

I don't know how this might seem to others, but to me this clear division of myself into Tolstoy and *I* is surprisingly pleasant fruitful for doing good.

Tolstoy will overpower *me*. But he's lying. I, I, and only *I* am real, while he, Tolstoy, is dream both nasty and dumb.

Yes, Tolstoy wants to be right, but *I* want, on the contrary, that I was denounced, but would know for myself that I am right. (*Polnoe* 47-50)

Further, Mandelstam comes to mind: "Oh, how disgusting for me is some name-sake – that wasn't I, that was someone else" (from the poem "No, I have never been anyone's contemporary"). But the sophisticated division of the self that Yakov Druskin made with his *Vision of Non-vision* (*Videnie nevideniya*), doesn't fit here.

## 2

The purpose of the mirror is not to repeat the visible, like in a kaleidoscope – according to Borges's two heresiarchs Hakim (*OC* 1: 327) and the anonymous Uqbarian (*OC* 1: 431), the mirrors are "abominable" and "hateful" because they multiply what is existent, –but to show the invisible. Hence the peasant girls' fortune in the mirror (for Slavic folklore, see Tolstaya, *Zerkalo*) and the enchanted mirror in fairytales, hence the passion for mirrors by women with their obsession with strange men's glances. The mirror is first of all a means, though unsatisfactory, of confirming one's own embodiment, which we are not endowed to see directly, in the same way as the other's soul isn't an immediate reality to us. The mirror duplicates me for another person, not for myself, and I myself seeing me in the mirror as the other and learn to recognize myself in my reflection: "What is there – is that really me?", from the poem of Vladislav Khodasevich, *Before the Mirror*

(*Pered zerkalom*). Each of us, for himself, is someone without a face and a name, no one. A woman needs a mirror in order to know how she looks, that's I-for-another, while a man, upon seeing his own reflection, rather tries to understand, who he is, that's I-for-myself, but neither of them achieve their object. "The best mirror is the eyes of a man", as the eastern proverb reminds women. And the mirror, which the fool *Nemo*, i.e. Nobody, looks at in the picture with the ambiguous caption in Flemish, "Nobody knows himself", –a detail in Pieter Bruegel's drawing *Elck-* that mirror of man's self-knowledge is God (cf. Plato, *Alcibiades I* 132c-133c); Plato and Aristotle have also told about a friend as a mirror (*Phaedrus* 255d and *Great Ethics* 1213a).

## 2.1

The best mirror of a woman's body is the eyes of a man, the mirror of the soul, of the heart, is the face of a friend, and the mirror of the spirit, the mind, myself for myself is God. For man's self-knowledge one can turn to Bakhtin (*Avtor* 52): "But *I-for-myself* is *the other* for God. (...) What I should be for the other, God is for me." The face as a mirror is depicted *en face* and with the eyes directed at the viewer. The Muslim angel of death Izrail/Azrail has different faces for sinners and the righteous, that is he has a "face like a mirror" (as one Kurd said during a Danish lesson) –the mirror of the soul he came for.

## 3

My feeling and my thought, re-created with sympathetic understanding, as if they were taken from me ready-made, return to me in an answer-reflection of an understanding friend; a thought comes back to me as a word, but my word, in which I recognize the meaning. And the less understanding in a word, the less the object of the matter is visible in it and all the more visible is the one who misunderstands, who "judges by himself." We don't re-create another's thought in its entirety, our understanding and at the same time non-understanding (according to Wilhelm Humboldt) I would compare not with a solid mirror, but with one in places transparent, behind which the not quite understanding one himself appears, or even with simple but at times reflecting glass. Just because of this unconscious and therefore bad self-portraitness of non-understanding, the common "You are a fool yourself!" or "The same to you!" in answer to name calling makes sense. But then the non-understanding one creates, "With sense –we

consider, without sense- we do", according to the proverb (*Poslovici* 445), as well as by Giambattista Vico, "*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*" (*Scienza nuova* II: 2.2,1), and the mirror of the understanding one reflects the creation of the non-understanding one, created in his image and likeness. Karamzin's warning "The creator is always portrayed in the creation and often - against his will" (*Izbrannie* 120) does not agree with young Dostoevsky's "They've gotten used to seeing the author's mug in everything; I haven't shown mine", in a letter to his brother Mikhail of Febr. 1, 1846 (*Polnoe* 117), but agrees with the parable which Borges told in the afterword of his *The Maker* (OC 2: 232) and before his death in the sonnet "The Sum" (OC 3: 466): An artist, having worked for many years on an enormous picture of the world, upon dying sees, that it is a self-portrait, *la imagen de su cara* (here one remembers Giuseppe Arcimboldo's paintings). Language is the mirror of the world, to the extent of our understanding of the world, and to the extent of the human incomprehension language is an involuntary image of man himself. But if the artist intentionally drew a self-portrait, and not the world, the result wouldn't have come out as a double exposure; and so, know yourself, become Nemo.

### 3.1

In *Chuang-tzu* (chap. 7 and 13) the heart of a higher person, a wise man, is the mirror of all things; according to Nicholas of Cusa (*Idiota de mente*, chap. 5) the mind is like a "living mirror". And "The evil doesn't believe, that there are good people" (*Poslovici* 127), the evil judges by himself. Behind answers like "You are a fool yourself!" lies a transfer from the deed to the words of the rule "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (talion law), which functions like a mirror: when, among Danish children, one calls another names, then the latter holds up the palm of his hand toward the offender and says *Spejl!*, i.e. "Mirror!"

## 4

"I don't know, which of the two is writing this page", thus ends *Borges and I*. Borges's "I", having looked into the mirror of self-knowledge, gave "the other" this page too.

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(Translated by David Dunsmore)

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