Borges the Poet

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Some Unamunian Preoccupations in Borges' Poetry

So far as I am aware only three short studies have been published on Unamuno and Borges. One is Anthony Kerrigan's essay "Borges/Unamuno" in the Tri-Quarterly homage volume to Borges. The second is an interesting article by Stelio Cro, "Jorge Luis Borges e Miguel de Unamuno." The last is an essay of my own, published in an obscure magazine. Hence there may be room to return to the subject, with special reference to Borges' poetry. For one cannot wholly agree with Kerrigan that "the truest testaments from these two meditative Spanish bookmen are necessarily in their fictions." Certainly in the case of Borges, we cannot overlook his remark to Keith Botsford in 1964, that "en última instancia soy poeta" or to Madelaine Chapsal "Creo que no soy más que eso. Un poeta . . ." The aim here is to suggest with respect to Borges the poet, that as Hispanics we can perhaps understand some of his preoccupations in a clearer and more familiar perspective by looking at them beside Unamuno's rather than by comparing them to those of non-Hispanic writers such as Chesterton, Emerson, Bloy, Hawthorne or Nabokov.

One of the intriguing aspects of Borges' work is that after "Acerca de Unamuno, poeta" and the necrological article "Inmortalidad de Unamuno," Borges rarely mentions Unamuno. Roberto Paoli quite rightly speaks of "Unamuno, un autor a la cual influencia su Borges, como manifesta, non è stata adeguatamente riconosciuta da chi l'ha subita." For al-

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though to Burgin 10 Borges asserted that Unamuno was “a very great writer" whom he greatly admired, he went on to say that Unamuno was interested in things that he, Borges, was not.

This is not always the case. Hardly less intriguing is that while Barrenechea, Enguidanos and Ibarry among others, also refer to Unamuno in connection with Borges, Sucre never mentions him once and Gertel is content with a reference to the 1923 essay; this despite affinities which seem to cry out for comment. Nor are these affinities casual. In his autobiographical statements, Borges has regularly emphasized his infatuation with Macedonio Fernández, the roots of whose work are very clearly in Unamuno’s, so much so that Fernández once referred to himself jokingly as “Ningunamuno.” In fact, Cro shows convincingly that throughout most of the 1920s Borges remained deeply interested in Unamuno. He makes the dangerous suggestion that the latter’s influence may have been “decisive” in bringing on Borges’ break with Ultratismo between 1922 and 1923; and he notes the interesting parallel between Borges’ hope for a kind of “criollismo universal” and Unamuno’s similar postulate that a writer may reach the universal via the national tradition. In the end, however, Cro tends to restrict himself to remarks connected with Unamuno’s Rosario de sonetos liricos and in practice suggests that the only major poem of Borges in which parallels with Unamuno can be detected is “La Recoleta,” which he compares with “La oración del ateo.” Perhaps this is too limited a view.

Above all what unites the work of Borges and Unamuno and makes any comparison possible is of course the philosophical, or rather metaphysical, basis on which it rests. Both men are essentially concerned with exploring, and inducing their readers to explore with them the problematic natures of being and reality. For this reason both deliberately blur the difference between analytic thought and creative imagination. Both seek, in differing degrees, to transcend the contingency of life through art, knowing the attempt to be vain. Sucre’s description of the poetry of Borges as "una angustiosa meditación" is equally descriptive of Unamuno’s. Unamuno, a man of his time, expresses his anguish in rather more religious terms; Borges, a man of our time, in rather more secular ones. But many of the roots are the same, for both belong to a historical pattern of collapsing confidence in what Sherman Eoff called “a fatherly world according to design.”

At the center of the collapse is the sense of our individual identity, which we think of as real. We recall Victor Goti’s remark in chapter thirty of Unamuno’s Niebla that “el lector de la novela llega a dudar de su propia realidad.” We note in Unamuno that this is the end of a process which began with the acquisition of metaphysical awareness via rational, analytical thought. In Borges, on the other hand, it is a starting point, that of his intuition of “nuestra esencial nadería.” 11 It is preceded by that most Unamunesque of all the lines in Borges’ youthful verse, the second line of “La Recoleta,” which reminds me that we are “irrealizados por tanta certidumbre de anulación.” 12 All the threat to our ultimate substantiality, which Unamuno perceived in the inevitability of death, rings in that line. It condemns the “... desable / dignidad de estar muerto” promised by the tombstones, to exist as mere vaniociencia.

Life, “La Recoleta” tells us, is the absolute. Time and space are projections of the conscious mind only. Things, objects in what seems to be external reality, may be “ajenas de substancia” 13 and a street in the very suburbs which Borges celebrates with such warmth and tenderness may have only the reality of a legend or a line of poetry. 14 Borges toys with the idea which he and Unamuno shared sporadically with Berkeley and Schopenhauer that perception creates reality. This is certainly a major point of convergence between the two poets, as Cro recognizes:

È impossibile trasferire a un piano metafisico delle dimensioni fisiche. Questo è l’asile della problematica della poesia di Borges: l’impossibilità di penetrare il mistero con la ragione, ma la necessità di esprimere l’esperienza emotiva suscitata dal mistero. È chiaro a questo punto la profonda analogia con la poesia di Unamuno. 15

But what is perception? “Amanecer” contains the telling juxtaposition “… una actividad de la mente, / un sueño de las almas” 16 and suddenly we are back in the heartland of Unamuno territory.

For Unamuno, dreaming was both a comfort and a threat. Blanco Aguinaga in his well-known El Unamuno contemplativo 17 long ago distinguished four categories of dreaming in Unamuno’s work: the conventional Calderonian concept of earthly life as unreal compared to life after death; the concept of man as a dream of God and vice versa; the ensueño or daydream of those who attempt to demonstrate God’s existence or non-existence; and finally the buen sueño of unquestioning faith and ontological security. But to these we must add a fifth category which is
clearly present in Unamuno’s *La novela de don Sandalio, jugador de ajedrez* and in his play *Soledad*. It is this category which reveals the affinity with Borges. It rests on Unamuno’s hope that “El sueño de dos es ya la verdad, la realidad,” the proof of existence is to exist in the minds of others.

There are three possible consequences. On the one hand it may be possible, as Unamuno suggests in his late play *El hermano Juan*, to provoke others, through love, to dream their dreams of us and thus strengthen our substantiality. The notion is present in another early poem of Borges’ “El jardín botánico” in which love differentiates us from the trees “que babuecan apenas el ser,” but which nonetheless seek to join the quest for the unknown. This existential or ontological dimension of the love relationship is deeply Unamunesque. Secondly, as Frances Weyers has pointed out, “‘La vida es sueño’ may mean that someone else is dreaming us; the dream becomes a symbol of self-estranglement.” Lastly, there is the possibility that both we ourselves and others who dream us are all no more than dreams, but dreams in God’s mind.

These last two possibilities surface in the second condition of Borges’ poetic work in his well-known “El golem.” Its theme combines two fundamentally Unamunesque ideas. First, the aspiration to add something to existing reality, to “... agregar a la infinita / serie un símbolo más.” This is very similar to Fulgencio Entrambasmores’ doctrine of the morcilla. Don Fulgencio, a character in Unamuno’s *Amor y pedagogía* in whom we recognize a kind of self-caricature by Unamuno, explains in chapter four: “morcilla se llama ... a lo que meten los actores por su cuenta en sus recintos, a lo que añaden a la obra del autor dramático.” Only by intercalating one’s own morcilla into pre-existing reality, by adding one’s own creation to God’s creation, can one achieve a “momento metadramático” and guarantee one’s own immortality. Borges’ rabbit had attempted to bring about a “momento metadramático” of his own, like the wizard in the earlier tale “Las ruinas circulares.” But the end of the poem forces us to recognize, like don Fulgencio, that the morcilla was merely one which “también nos sopla al olvido el gran Apuntador.” As the rabbit contemplates his creation (in all its inadequacy), so God ironically contemplates the rabbit. Borges himself underlined the totally Unamunesque quality of the poem when he declared to Burgin “... in the end it is suggested that as the golem is to the magician, to the cabbalist, so is man to God.” It is hardly by chance therefore that when Don Quixote in “Ni siquiera soy polvo” (Historia de la noche) asserts “Mi Dios, no soñador, sigo soñandome,” he is unconsciously—or consciously—echoing the situation that is at the base of the ending of Nieves. If we are the stuff that dreams are made of in this sense, we are, to use another of Borges’ (and Unamuno’s) favorite images, mere reflections in a mirror. But to speak of ourselves as dreams or reflections at least implies the existence of a dreamer to dream us or a mirror to reflect us. In moods of deepest scepticism both Unamuno and Borges were prepared to deny man even this vestige of substantiality. Unamuno both in his plays and in San Manuel Bueno, martir introduces the idea that life is not merely a dream, whoever dreams it, but a dream within a dream. So in “Arte poética” Borges can refer to the notion that “... la vigilia es otro sueño / que sueña no soñar.” There is, of course, a fundamental difference between Borges’ treatment of the theme and Unamuno’s, to which we shall return presently.

First we may glance at Borges’ double sonnet “Ajedrez,” whose theme is profoundly familiar to all students of Unamuno. The bulk of the second, and far better, of the two sonnets rehearses in four lines to essences of Unamuno’s *La novela de don Sandalio*, which in turn expresses preoccupations which go far back in his work. In La esfinge, the hero, Angel, in the course of a chess game, asks: “¿No estamos los hombres con nuestras luchas matando la eternidad a un Ser Supremo que con nosotros juega?” Later, in Del sentimiento trágico de la vida, Unamuno asserts explicitly: “Y si las piezas de ajedrez tuviesen consciencia, es fácil que se atribuyeran albedrío en sus movimientos.” Echoing the idea, Borges writes of the chessmen in “Ajedrez”:

No saben que la mano señalada
Del jugador goberna su destino,
No saben que un rigor adamantino
Sujeta su albedrío y su jornada.

The source of Borges’ poem was not Unamuno, however, but Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam, stanza 49:

Impotent pieces of the game he plays
Upon his chequered board of Nights and Days
Hither and thither moves, and checks and stays;
And one by one back in the closet lays.
What is interesting is that in the first edition of Fitzgerald’s translation the subject of the verb in the first line of the above quotation was not God but Destiny. Hence the progression in the sestet of Borges’ sonnet:

También el jugador es prisionero
(La sentencia es de Omar) do otro tablero
De negras noches y de blancas días.
Dios mueve el jugador, y éste, la pieza.

But this follows:

¿Qué dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza
De polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonías?

We think at once of Tzinacán’s vision in “La escritura del Dios” in which among other things Tzinacán tells us “Vi el dios sin cara que hay detrás de los dioses.” The idea of a faceless God (Destiny) behind the personal God of the Christian religion is one which as D. G. Turner has shown,28 obsessed Unamuno no less than Borges (and Fitzgerald). For, if Unamuno is understood correctly, the chessboard in Niebla, La novela de don Sandalio and La esfinge, as well as elsewhere, is a patent symbol of determinism. What is not plain is the form of the determining force. Is it chance, Providence or destiny?

Borges and Unamuno share a consuming interest in the roles of design and chance in the workings of the universe. Some critics have insisted that Borges’ central symbol, the labyrinth, is essentially a man-made object, and have related it to what they see as Borges’ exposure of man’s obstinate tendency to impose a pattern or structure on the chaos and flux of reality. Even this is a prominent Unamunesque idea. We see it in Augusto Pérez’s reflection in Chapter Seven of Niebla that “esa idea de la necesidad no es sino la forma suprema que el azar toma en nuestra mente.” Compare Borges’ reference in “Las metáforas de las 1001 noches” in Historia de la noche to “el arbitrio del Destino o del Azar, que son la misma cosa.” But more important is the fact that a labyrinth is a chaos with the appearance of regularity or design. This is what fascinates both Unamuno and Borges: the idea enunciated by don Fermín in Niebla, Chapter Six: “Rigen a los hombres y a sus cosas enigmáticas leyes, que el hombre, sin embargo, puede vislumbrar.” We are immediately reminded of Borges’ lines in “In memoriam Alfonso Reyes”: “El vago azar o las precisas leyes / que rigen nuestro sueño, el universo”29 and the cognate but more explicit “El claro azar o las secretas leyes / que rigen este sueño, mi destino”28 of “Oda compuesta en 1960.” Just as a labyrinth appears to have a meaningful design, with a discoverable way to its center, so at intervals, as with Unamuno, Borges seems to have thought he could intuit a mysterious but significant design in his experience. Hence he could write in “Poema de los dones”: “Algo que ciertamente no se nombra / con la palabra azar, rige estas cosas”; and much later in “Poema de la cantidad” from El oro de los tigres:

Acaso cada hormiga que pisamos
Es única ante Dios, que la precisa
Para la ejecución de las puntuales
Leyes que rigen su curioso mundo.
Si así no fuera, el universo entero
Sería un error y un oneroso caos.”

The labyrinth in Borges’ work has only a deceitful appearance of order and regularity. In fact it is a meaningless and circular trap, a maze without an outlet or a center. This being so, there is no escape from the conclusion that God, Providence, Fate and determinism mean one and the same thing. The “despiadado dios que no se nombra” of “El otro,”30 the “minuciosa Providencia / que administra lo prodigio y lo parco” of “In memoriam Alfonso Reyes,”31 and the “hado o el azar” of “La luna”32 are merely interchangeable concepts. The temptation at this point is to qualify this last affirmation in the light of occasional glimpses of doubt and longing for immortality.33 Thus, for example, in the second of two very moving poems concerned with Borges’ parents in La moneda de hierro, “El fin” and “A mi padre,” we read the strikingly Unamunesque line “... Nadie sabe / De qué mañana el marmol es la llave” with its suggestion of ultratumbleras. In the first of the two poems Borges writes: “Dios o Tal Vez o Nadie, yo te pido / Su inagotable imagen, no el olvido.” Is this a hint of agonismo? Even though the image in question is that of Borges’ father, not his own, the yearning for its survival rather than resigned acceptance of its annihilation is noteworthy in a man who has almost always insisted that for him death is the end.

I incline to the view that a more detailed study of Borges’ later poems might cast doubt on Cro’s affirmation that Borges never carries his problemática beyond the interplay of mere ideas, rational exercises and theoretical speculation. While for Unamuno the essence of human tragedy
writes in much the same key as Unamuno, but the latter's yearning to
discover a true self, to recover ontological confidence—not just in ser but
in serce—is more intimately anguishing. When he reaches the most fear-
ful possibilities, the total illusoriness or the final annihilation of our
personalities, for example, Unamuno draws back and takes refuge in mys-
tiques. Borges seems to possess the tragic vision no less than Unamuno.
"Nuestro destino es trágico" he wrote in a prologue to a translation of
Emerson's Representative Men, "porque somos irreparablemente indi-
viduos, coartados por el tiempo y el espacio." But he seems able to face
this tragic destiny for the most part with serenity and even with humor,
though, as I have implied, the poetry contains occasional hints that this
serenity is less than complete.

What a comparison of the work of Unamuno and Borges underlines
is that both belong to that current of literature which has flowed out of
the "European Crisis of Confidence" which Morse Peckham, among
others, has analyzed so brilliantly in his Beyond the Tragic Vision. But
they represent two distinct and in large measure separate moments in
the development of our modern Weltanschauung. Unamuno was much
closer to the moment of full realization that the absolute had been lost.
Borges, in the next generation, accepts that loss more readily. In his work
we perceive one of the noblest ways of accommodating our minds and
spirits to that loss.

NOTES
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6. Jorge Luis Borges, "Acera de Unamuno, poeta." Nosotros 175 (1922). Later in-
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8. But Cro lists references in El tamaño de mi esperanza (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1926), El
idioma de los argentinos (Buenos Aires: Colección índice, 1928) and Historia de la eternidad
(Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969). As late as 1937 in the Sur necrological article Borges wrote,
“El primer escritor de nuestro idioma acaba de morir; no sé de un homenaje mejor que proseguir las ricas discusiones iniciadas por él y que desentrañar las secretas leyes de su alma.”


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