

## INNER AND OUTER REALITY: AMBIVALENCE IN BORGES'S LATER POETRY

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The Modern Language Association of American Annual Bibliography currently lists more than 3400 critical items on Borges's work. Of these only a very small number refer exclusively to his later poetry. The reasons are not far to seek. The chief one, I suspect, is connected with the tone of the poems. It tends to be serious and even solemn, whereas, since the great shift in tone and diction brought about principally by Parra and by the rise of colloquial poetry in Spanish America, there has been a tendency towards more relaxed informality, humor and reference to everyday experience, as we see perhaps most of all in the evolution of Neruda from *Residencia en la tierra* to the various series of *Odas elementales*. More recent representative figures might be Antonio Cisneros or J. E. Pacheco. Thematics are also relevant. Borges writes predominantly about the human condition, about ethical values, about illusion and reality, about time and death. He writes only very rarely about love or sexuality, and almost never about social questions, except to exalt *la patria* and to lament the falling away of modern Argentine society from the ideals of his forefathers (cf. Chibán). His diction is simple and sometimes repetitive, but it is not colloquial. His later poetry appeals almost exclusively to the mind; it deals with abstractions and with the past rather than with the present and the concrete. Most of all, perhaps, the relative neglect that it suffers is due to the fact that it hardly evolves. When he returned to poetry Borges was well past middle age. His outlook was largely set, so that what we tend to find in his later poetry is confirmation and amplification of attitudes and ideas which

are already to some degree familiar. A characteristic critical reaction is that of David Laraway, who considers that “Many poems appear hamstrung by their thematic and formal conservatism” and that “Borges appears to be borrowing from himself” and “reworking themes that he had given a more robust treatment elsewhere” (307). As a result Borges, the poet of *El hacedor* and later collections, has admirers but few or no outstanding disciples. His poetic production from the 1960s to the 1980s stands momentarily apart, grandiose and slightly overwhelming. The well-known books by Gertel and Cheselka only cover the beginning of Borges’s later production, so that it still stands in need of serious and sustained critical attention which, despite Laraway’s strictures, would in my view be very helpful. Borges had a complex literary personality and it is not always clear from his essays and especially his interviews when he is really in earnest and when he is indulging in gentle fictions. Did he really believe in Eternal Return or in the existence of archetypes that might be glimpsed at the moment of death? Did he really accept the notion that all was pure chance, or did he think in terms of an ineluctable destiny? Did he despise fame and reject important aspects of his own personality? Quite apart from the intrinsic quality of his later poetry, some of which is his finest, there is much to learn in it about his world view, about himself and about his attitude to poetic creation.

#### INNER REALITY: BORGES’S SELF-PRESENTATION

As we read through the later collections, one of our first impressions is that, contrary to the public Borges whom some of us can remember and who seemed serene, the writer of these poems was not a happy man. Like Unamuno and the young Azorín in Spain, he had learned from Schopenhauer (his favorite philosopher) that consciousness, awareness, especially of human life in time, was what made existence oppressive. So he seems to envy the tiger in “El otro tigre” in whose consciousness there is no sense of time: “en su mundo no hay nombres ni pasado/ ni porvenir, sólo un instante cierto” (*El hacedor* 137).<sup>1</sup> Later he was to make the same point in “Al coyote”: “tuyo es el puro ser, tuyo el arrobo,/ nuestra, la torpe vida sucesiva” (*El oro de los tigres* 415).

1 All quotations are taken from J. L. Borges, *Obra poética* (1989).

This is what makes “El remordimiento” (*La moneda de hierro*) one of his most self-revealing poems. The remorse of the title is the remorse generated by his own unhappiness. But in this case it is not born of awareness of life in time but to another source of misery, to which Borges referred repeatedly: his failure to live up to his family’s tradition of physical courage, the heritage of his military ancestors. In the next poem in the same collection “Einar Tambarskelver” he asserts categorically: “No hay otra obligación que ser valiente” (499).

The symbol of that courage was the sword preserved in his family which he mentions over and over again in his later poetry, for example in “Soy”: “Soy el que es nadie, el que no fue una espada” (*La rosa profunda* 438). Whatever his success as a writer, Borges always affected to believe two things which are important for the understanding of his inner personality. One was that artistic creation is in the end meaningless or at best can only reveal to us something about ourselves. As he wrote in “Arte poética”: “el arte debe ser como ese espejo/ que nos revela nuestra propia cara” (*El hacedor* 162).

Soto, in his analysis of “Arte poética,” takes this rather at face value and in fact Borges repeated the idea in the very late prologue to his *Obra poética*. But in the same prologue he referred to the fact that “toda poesía es misteriosa” (14), so that one may be forgiven for thinking that to attribute too much cognitive power to poetry is to explain one mystery (in this case that of the human personality) in terms of another.

More typically in “El remordimiento” itself Borges refers contemptuously to “el arte, que entreteje naderías” (498). We may presume to doubt how far he was sincere in this. Almost certainly he was expressing a modest evaluation of his own achievement. The other thing he affected to believe was that nothing that he wrote ever really fulfilled him in the sense that it made up for the feelings of inadequacy and betrayal which “El remordimiento” expresses. Thus a companion poem to it is “Mateo XXV, 30” (*El otro, el mismo*) in which Borges lists significant objects and experiences which have contributed themes to his work, but at the climax accuses himself of having been unable to fulfil his destiny as a poet: “has gastado los años y te han gastado/ y todavía no has escrito el poema” (195). Self-scrutiny, then, for Borges, tended to produce unduly negative results. Whether writing of himself specifically, or presenting himself as a representative of the human

condition generally, he tended in his later poetry to over-dramatize a little what on occasion he referred to as the “horror” of life.

As so many of the later poems indicate, a major component of the horror was inner awareness. In this connection another extremely revealing poem is the sonnet “El despertar” in *El otro, el mismo*. Its theme is precisely that of dawning awareness as the poet wakes up. The new day brings renewed consciousness of living in time, as the past merges into the present, and of the poet’s self: “mi voz, mi rostro, mi temor, mi suerte” (217). At the root of his unhappy awareness is memory, since, as he wrote in “Cambridge”: “Somos nuestra memoria,/ somos ese quimérico museo de formas inconstantes/ ese montón de espejos rotos” (*Elogio de la sombra* 324). Memory, which feeds our awareness, is at the same time deceptive. Worse still, it is memory which plunges us into temporal succession: “la memoria/ erige el tiempo” (“El instante,” *El otro, el mismo* 244).

So in “El despertar” he longs to inhabit “un tiempo sin memoria” or to find that awakening brings not memory, but forgetfulness. The other principal aspect of awareness is what Unamuno called “la enfermedad de lo incognoscible,” consciousness of the incomprehensibility of things. Hence, in “Un sábado” he writes of himself:

siente que los actos que ejecuta  
interminablemente en su crepúsculo  
obedecen a un juego que no entiende  
y que dirige un dios indescifrable.  
(*Historia de la noche* 557)

Life is made up of a “serie de hechos inexplicables” (“Inscripción,” *La cifra* 569) which may or may not be the handiwork of a “divinidad indescifrable,” as he wrote in “Beppo” (*La cifra* 578). Our very being in the world is one of those inexplicable facts: “¿Qué arco habrá arrojado esta saeta/ que soy?,” he asks in “De que nada se sabe” (*La rosa profunda* 451). “Yo,” in the same collection tells us that the self is as mysterious as the reality which surrounds us. Both are perhaps unreal. Both Gertel (whose essay Laraway appears to have overlooked) and Laraway have offered useful insights into Borges’s discussion of his own identity in the later poems. The former characterizes the *yo* of the later collections as “una forma disyuntiva y fluctuante” (Gertel, “La identidad” 102) dominated by Borges’s metaphysical preoccupations and his consequent “sentido de ser y no ser al mismo

tiempo" (103). Laraway largely concurs, with the qualification mentioned below. Both, in my opinion, take a rather narrow view of the topic, which I have tried to place in a slightly wider perspective. In the end, despite his twists and turns, Borges presents himself in his later poetry as longing for release from time and awareness, as longing for oblivion after death: "Soy el que sabe que no es más que un eco,/ el que quiere morir enteramente" ("The Thing I Am," *Historia de la noche* 556). However, Lyon, in his article on "a possible immortality" in *Elogio de la sombra*, remains unconvinced by this claim.

How else does he see his inner self in this enigmatic and atrocious universe? At the climax of "El sueño" (*La rosa profunda*), Borges appears to adopt an attitude which is "resignado y sonriente" (427), even in the face of death. But just as his view of reality was ambivalent (chaotic or secretly meaningful), so his vision of death was dual. I personally believe that he was sincere in his proclaimed aspiration to annihilation and oblivion. But in several poems, notably in "La clepsidra" and "A mi padre" (*La moneda de hierro*) he toys with the idea that the moment of death, rather than bringing a hoped-for obliteration of the personality, may bring a final vision of the eternal archetypes and hence of life's true meaning and of one's true self, what Guillermo Sucre calls "la muerte como iluminación" (Alazraki, *Borges* 103). In the meantime we have to face what for Borges in "El amenazado" (*El oro de los tigres*) was "El horror de lo sucesivo" (385). Borges saw himself (and us) as trapped in time, condemned to life in time, which like life itself is a mystery: "Tu material es el tiempo, el incesante/ Tiempo. Eres cada solitario instante" ("El ápice," *La cifra* 610). Equally he saw himself condemned to ultimate solitude in "la interminable/ prisión del universo" ("Poema," *La cifra* 612).

As we see from the above, Alice Poust was correct in her suggestion that "the poems of *La moneda de hierro* demonstrate that Borges "chose to focus his efforts on knowledge that one may obtain, knowledge of oneself" (Cortínez, *Borges* 306) and right to conclude more broadly that "his overall literary creation...constitutes an image in which he may discover himself." But the key word here is "may." José Miguel Oviedo (214), Mark Frisch (78) and Howard Giskin (76) all emphasize that the self, for Borges, was in the last resort as mysterious and perhaps illusory as everything else in the universe. Laraway agrees with them, but makes the valid point, in con-

nection with the poem “Son los ríos” (*Los conjurados*) that Borges shared with his readers a “reluctance to abandon” the idea of a real personality, an individual inner self (315). But even to accept such an inner self creates a problem. If causality exists, as we discuss below, in the revised edition of *Fervor de Buenos Aires* in the late 1960s, Borges was already asking himself whether this applied to his own personality (“Líneas que pude haber escrito y perdido hacia 1922”). Much later, in “Hengist quiere hombres (449 A.D.),” when Hengist recruits an army to invade England in the fifth century A. D., in Borges’s words, it is “para que yo trace estas letras” (*El oro de los tigres* 409). Similarly Macbeth in “Quince monedas” is made to proclaim: “Maté a mi rey para que Shakespeare/ urdiera su tragedia” (*La rosa profunda* 442).

The implication is that each step in the “series” is pre-ordained. The symbol is that of the panther pacing its cage in the zoo on which Borges comments “La jornada/ que cumple cada cual ya fue fijada” (“La pantera,” *La rosa profunda* 432). But, as always, we cannot know what part each event in our lives plays in the series which leads to our final destiny. “All our yesterdays” (*La rosa profunda*) repeats what Borges had anticipated in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*: no one can determine which of our past selves, or earlier actions and experiences, represents our true reality. Memory, which is notoriously unreliable, “esa moneda que no es nunca la misma” (“Juan I, 14,” *Elogio de la sombra* 319) constitutes our only link with the past; it follows that Borges had little confidence in the on-going unity or even the reality of the individual personality, including his own. He had even less confidence in our ability to understand reality outside ourselves.

#### OUTER REALITY, CHANCE AND DETERMINISM

One of the mysteries of Borges’s famous short stories is why at the end of “El Aleph” the Aleph of Calle Garay is alleged to be possibly a false Aleph. So far as I know, no satisfactory explanation of this crucial allegation, which marks the climax of the story, has ever been offered. This small problem may serve to introduce a few notes on Borges’s attitude to outward reality, especially as it reveals itself afresh in the later poetry. The issue is a central one, as Zunilda Gertel affirms: “la búsqueda esencial para nuestro poeta es la delucidación de la realidad” (*Retorno* 75).

We recall that in reply to a question by Reina Roffé in an interview in the early 1980s, Borges made one of his most important statements. Roffé asked him whether the presentation of reality as chaos in “La biblioteca de Babel” represented his real view. Borges replied:

Es lo que siento desgraciadamente, pero quizás sea secretamente un cosmos, quizás haya un orden que no podemos percibir; en todo caso debemos pensar eso para seguir viviendo. Yo preferiría pensar que, a pesar de tanto horror, hay un fin ético en el universo, que el universo propende al bien, en ese argumento pongo mis esperanzas. (11)

Here we notice several things. One is that Borges regretted that he saw reality in this light. Another is that the notion of some ethical principle at work in reality was in fact merely a preference in his mind. But, thirdly, the notion that reality might have room for ethical purposes, although they would be unknown to us, clearly indicates Borges’s nostalgia for a fatherly world according to design.

However, such a world was not the one he believed in with his conscious mind. At that level Borges seems to have accepted that any attempt to understand reality produced no more than a construct in our minds, that is, a selection of those elements in reality with which we can live comfortably and try to order our lives. It is something which we need psychologically, not something which exists “out there,” outside our minds. What exists out there is normally seen by Borges as probably pure chaos: “un infinito juego de azares,” as he wrote at the end of “La lotería en Babilonia” (*Ficciones*). The adjectives he applies to it repeatedly are “inasible,” “misterioso,” “inexplicable” and “atroz.” We must also notice that, in Borges’s view, even if we were in some way wired to understand reality, our understanding of it could not be expressed adequately in words, since, as he insisted more than once: “la realidad no es verbal” (e.g. *Leopoldo Lugones* 97). One of the most potent symbols of the chaos of reality is that of the lottery in that story, in which a key role is played by the mysterious “Company” which may in fact manage the lottery and thus represent a principle of order, but which also may merely be an organization which the Babylonians want to believe in. It is this duality which dominates Borges’s vision of the real. It emerges in the well-known lines of “In memoriam A[lfonso] R[eyes]”: “El vago azar o las precisas leyes/ que rigen este sueño, el universo” (*El hacedor* 142).

As we see below, the notion of a hidden, secret determinism haunted Borges. At the end of his life in “Nubes II” he asked:

¿Qué son las nubes? ¿Una arquitectura  
del azar? Quizá Dios las necesita  
para la ejecución de Su infinita  
obra y son hilos de la trama oscura.  
(*Los conjurados* 674)

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No attempt to understand Borges’s attitude towards reality outside the mind can avoid taking account of this dichotomy. On the one hand reality was atrocious because it was ultimately pure chaos; on the other we find the recurrent idea that every event and every action is causally connected to a series of prior events so that each one can become, as in the case of the suicide of López Merino, “el término final de una serie (“Mayo 20, 1928,” *Elogio de la sombra* 328) which may be inescapable. Another very revealing poem is “Una brújula” (*El otro, el mismo*). Its theme once more is reality, and as we have just seen Borges’s view of reality was essentially ambivalent, at least in his writings. It is one of the aspects of his work which brings him close to Unamuno, who was clearly an important (but underrated) intellectual influence on him in his youth. One of the best books on this aspect of Unamuno’s thought is D. G. Turner’s *Unamuno’s Webs of Fatality* in which Unamuno is presented as struggling in much of his work to reconcile chance and destiny. Borges appears to have been caught on the horns of a similar dilemma, although I am not sure, after studying his work on and off for half a century, whether behind the dilemma there is not an element of poetic fiction. In “Una brújula” we perceive Borges’s standard reaction to reality and to the human condition. On the one hand reality is again seen as pure chaos. Borges alludes to “esa infinita algarabía/ que es la historia del mundo” and to “toda la discordia de Babel” (196) which surrounds mankind. As we have just seen, we, amid this mysterious, incomprehensible reality, are ourselves mysterious; condemned to “esa agonía/ de ser enigma.” But wait: the next two words are contradictory. What we are condemned to is “esa agonía/ de ser enigma, azar, criptografía” (196).

It is one thing to suggest that human life is (at bottom) incomprehensible because it is subject in all things to blind chance. It is quite another thing to suggest that behind the mystery of the human condition



there is a “criptografía,” a pattern of coded signs which in principle could be meaningful. The opening of “La brújula” suggests that this pattern of coded signs is the handiwork of “Alguien” or “Algo” (we notice the capitalization), some God or demiurge who writes the book of reality which, like those in “La biblioteca de Babel” we cannot decipher. The compass, which gives the sonnet its title, indicates a direction, and appears to respond to a mysterious force which is ever-present and unchanging, and which as a result implies a principle or order underlying both reality and human destiny.

It is this latter which I tend to regard as a poetic fiction. I do not think that Borges really believed in an “Alguien” or an “Algo” directing the events of this life. As Oswaldo Romero and James J. Hughes and Carlos Cortínez indicate, there are simply too many indications in his work and in his declarations which contradict such a notion. But Borges in the end always tended to elude categoric statements. In real life he was unquestionably an unbeliever, but as a writer he was more comfortable with a level of ambiguity which reflected his nostalgia for a meaningful existence, and which in the end enriches his work because such nostalgia is probably universal. Lawrence Durrell, for example, in *Justine*, the first novel of his Alexandria Quartet, writes: “Somewhere in the heart of experience there is an order and a coherence which we might surprise if we were attentive enough or patient enough” (221). Behind this aspiration to believe in some sort of order in things lies the problem of determinism and the notion of causality. Borges’s favorite word for this was “la trama.” It first surfaces in his poetry in the much quoted and justly famous sonnet “Ajedrez II”: “¿Qué dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza/ de polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonías? (*El hacedor* 123).

“Ajedrez II” was almost certainly inspired by the verse from FitzGerald’s *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khyyam*:

‘Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and days  
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:  
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,  
And one by one back in the Closet lays. (17)

But whereas FitzGerald simply cites Destiny, Borges substitutes an indefinable “dios detrás de Dios,” a possible conscious purposive mind creating the *trama*. One of Borges’s favorite adjectives, we have mentioned, was

“atroz.” Reality was atrocious essentially because we are not programmed to be able to discern whether there is a *trama*, a meaningful network of causes and effects behind the apparent chaos of human experience. But there were times when what in “Elvira de Alvear” Borges calls “la infinita/ y ubicua red de causas” (*El hacedor* 127) seemed to him to suggest a pattern. Speaking to Burgin, Borges declared: “coincidences are given to us that would involve the idea of a secret plan, no? Coincidences are given to us so that we may feel that there is a pattern ... that there is a pattern in life, that things mean something” (110). As we know, he, who was blind, became director of the National Library after Paul Groussac, who was also blind. Neither of them could see the hundreds of thousands of books surrounding them. Borges’s response was to write in “Poema de los dones”: “Algo, que ciertamente no se nombra/ con la palabra azar, rige estas cosas” (*El hacedor* 118).

How can such things be? Borges asks implicitly, unless an “Algo” or an “Alguien” manipulates our destinies as the hand of a chess-player moves the pieces. This is why Borges’s favorite symbol was that of the labyrinth, which normally combines a principle of order within an apparent disorder. In Borges, the labyrinth has neither an entrance nor an exit. We are born inside it and are condemned to wander in it all our lives. But, Borges wrote in “Laberinto” that “es de hierro tu destino” (*Elogio de la sombra* 332) whichever way we turn is perhaps in some way prefigured. Repeatedly, especially in his poetry, Borges returns to this dilemma. On the one hand we have a poem like “El guardián de los libros.” The keeper of the library believes that the books he guards contain the secret of the order of the universe:

las secretas leyes eternas,  
 el concierto del orbe;  
 esas cosas o su memoria están en los libros  
 que custodio.  
 (*Elogio de la sombra* 342)

But he himself is illiterate. If the books explain the pattern behind experience, he cannot decipher it. Over and over Borges alludes to such a pattern as the handiwork or a “terrible” God:

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.  
("Poema de la cantidad," *El oro de los tigres* 389)

or:

Quizá el destino humano  
de breves dichas y de largas penas  
es instrumento de Otro. Lo ignoramos.  
("De que nada se sabe," *La rosa profunda* 451)

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Now and then, as in "La clepsidra," Borges plays with the notion that at the moment of death will come "el acto de entender el universo" (*La moneda de hierro* 510). But this is mere poetic speculation.

Two poems which develop Borges's view of deterministic causality are the appropriately named "La trama" and "El tercer hombre," both in *La cifra*. Like "La brújula," "La trama" is highly revealing. It begins with two completely different references. One is to a water pipe that drips at intervals. The other is to the death of Julius Caesar. Both are described as "fatal," the insignificant drop of water and the death of one of the greatest figures of antiquity: "Las dos son piezas de la trama que abarca/ el círculo sin principio ni fin" (602). So many of Borges's later poems, following Whitman, are full of enumerations. They are intended for the most part to reflect the variety and mystery of reality which, Borges tells us repeatedly, is too vast and complex for the human mind to embrace or understand. So it is here. Borges selects an actual object, an anchor from a Phoenician ship, two possible but imaginary objects from the even more distant past, "el primer lobo y el primer cordero" (602) and finally two abstract items: the date of his own future death and the lost theorem of Firmat. This is not chaotic enumeration, as Alazraki has made clear (Cortínez, *Borges* 150). Each item in the list is symbolic: the droplets of water signify time's trivial succession, Caesar's death, the opposite; the anchor symbolizes safety, the wolf and the lamb, life's mindless cruelty; the two abstract concepts, death and mystery. Not by chance the enumeration ends with the allusion to mystery, since Borges follows it immediately with the assertion, developing the earlier adjective "fatal," that all of these elements are part of a pre-ordained series, "esa trama de hierro" (602) which is in some sense circular, as if the universe of events, like the Library of Babel, were at once

infinite and periodic (hence the adjective “periódica” attached to the water pipe in line 2), Borges affected to believe in Eternal Return, though I suspect that this too was really a poetic fiction. The climax of “La trama” tells us afresh that all reality is composed of chains of causes and effects, and thus is possibly predetermined. But although we are surrounded by these causal sequences, and every experience reflects them, we cannot take them in mentally. In other words, from the human point of view, it makes no difference whether reality is pre-ordained and deterministic or simply chaotic, because we are not programmed to decipher the code that might explain the workings of the universe. The notion is further expressed in “Las causas” and “El juego” (*Historia de la noche*).

Our lives, in other words, as Borges puts it in “Metáforas de *Las mil y una noches*” are “sujetas al arbitrio del Destino/ o del azar, que son la misma cosa” (*Historia de la noche* 523). Our ignorance of causes and effects is the theme of “El tercer hombre.” Borges selects a trivial incident: as he strolls towards the Calle Córdoba in Buenos Aires, people pass him walking in the other direction. He thinks of the third man to do so. Unknown, mysterious, he passes by and in so doing establishes a fleeting link with the poet. Borges reflects:

No hay un solo acto que no corra el albur  
de ser una operación de la magia,  
no hay un solo hecho que no pueda ser el primero  
de una serie infinita. (608)

If the world is as he thinks it is, then, as he says in *Discusión*, “toda estafalaria cosa es posible” (102). Every event, however trivial, can set off a train of causes and effects the results of which we can never forecast or understand. Similarly, as we have seen, any event can be “el término final de una serie.” Clearly, Borges would have liked these series to add up to “un orden secreto” (“Metáforas de *Las mil y una noches*” 523). As he said to Reina Roffé in the interview mentioned above, he would have preferred to believe that this secret patterning of the universe, if it existed, would have an ethical component. But it was a preference, not a conviction. In one of his last important pronouncements, the prose poem “1982” (*Los conjurados*) even that preference had faded. He asks, “¿hay un fin en la trama?” And his reply now is: “Ese fin no puede ser ético, ya que la ética es una ilusión/ de los hombres, no de las inescrutables divinidades” (698).

The notion of an ethical purpose behind the flow of events is thus seen by Borges in old age as just another comforting construct. Does anything else remain?

I should argue that one of the things that remain is courage, especially moral courage. We saw already that it figured in his self-presentation. It remained part of his bedrock outlook. The notion that he was a total sceptic, to the point that he doubted his own skepticism, is not entirely true. However much he recognized that it was probably not part of any universal design, he never gave up his confidence in the ethical principle at the level of individual human behavior. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his short story “Historia de Rosendo Juárez” (*El informe de Brodie*) which he wrote to correct the mistaken view that in “Hombre de la esquina rosada” (*Historia universal de la infamia*) he had exalted the behavior of the narrator. His concern was to assert the moral superiority of Rosendo. But in addition to moral and ethical courage, Borges believed in physical courage to a greater extent than many readers probably appreciate. The dominant symbolic figures in this connection are the gaucho and the *orillero* whom Borges continued to admire in this respect to the end of his days, just as he did his military ancestors. But there are other symbolic figures in the later poetry, notably those of Herman Melville in the poem of the same name (*La moneda de hierro*) who enjoyed “la felicidad de ser valiente” (490), and the English or Scandinavian chieftain in “La pesadilla” of whom Borges wrote: “Sé que me sueña y que me juzga” (*La moneda de hierro* 480). The last word is significant. The chieftain is not just a passive symbol of the physical courage which Borges liked to associate with the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian past. He represents a standard by which Borges implicitly judges himself (and finds himself wanting, as we have seen).

The ultimate symbol of what Borges prized so much was Dürer’s knight from his picture “Ritter, Tod und Teufel.” The two poems in *Elogio de la sombra* dedicated to the knight are among the most memorable in his later production. In the first he writes:

quien te mira  
sabe que en tí no mora la mentira  
ni el pálido temor...  
...Eres valiente. (351)

The knight combines ethical rectitude and physical courage, the two values that Borges never questioned. In the second poem Borges contrasts his own ephemerality and implicitly his lack of heroism with the eternal moral and physical imperturbability of the knight. Like the chieftain in “La pesadilla,” the knight symbolizes an ideal by which we are judged. What also continues to the very end is the belief that, as he wrote in “The Unending Rose,” “Cada cosa/ Es infinitas cosas (*La rosa profunda* 470). And in “El ingenuo,” “No hay en el orbe una/ cosa que no sea otra, o contraria, o ninguna (*La moneda de hierro* 492).

Enrique Giordano comments: “la realidad es un juego de signos en mutaciones infinitas. Borges reconoce tácitamente el principio de la diversidad inagotable del universo, pero parte todavía de la añoranza de un centro” though this always leads to failure to find it (354). Everything is interconnected; everything implies everything else, perhaps meaningfully. As Giskin writes: “Borges sees all things, but particularly simple objects, as revealing most easily that which lies beyond everyday experience. All things point to the ineffable” (76). But we cannot know exactly how:

No hay una cosa  
Que no sea una letra silenciosa  
de la eterna escritura indescifrable  
cuyo libro es el tiempo.  
 (“Para una versión del I King,” *La moneda de hierro* 505)

The key-word is “indescifrable.” If the great book of the universe is unreadable by us, if we are not programmed to understand its pattern or to perceive its meaning, then for us there can be no difference between chance and determinism: “Todas las cosas están unidas por vínculos secretos” (“Alguien sueña,” *Los conjurados* 665). But the key-word is once again “secretos.” Outside the individual constructs which we create in order to come to terms with reality, all is chaos. But it is not pure chaos, because if it were (as in the vision Borges’s fictional persona achieves in “El Aleph”) cause and effect would not apply. But they do apply; causation, however mysterious, exists. At the very end of his creative career in *Los conjurados* (1985), Borges reiterated the essence of his outlook:

Ahora ni siquiera sabemos si nos rodea un laberinto, un secreto cosmos, o un caos azaroso. Nuestro hermoso deber es imaginar que hay un laberinto y un hilo. Nunca daremos con el hilo; acaso lo en-

conramos y lo perdemos en un acto de fe, en una cadencia, en el sueño, en las palabras que se llaman filosofía o en la mera y sencilla felicidad. (“El hilo de la fábula,” 676)

What, when he spoke to Reina Roffé, had been merely a kind of *mentira vital* is now defined as a duty: the duty to look for the thread of Ariadne which will lead us from chaos to cosmos, in the full knowledge that we shall never find it. Frisch’s assertion that “Borges has found a way to ‘get there’: to make his way through the labyrinth, to create a sense of order, of purpose, of meaning” (170) is clearly an overstatement of the case. Borges’s outlook thus bites its own tail. It begins and ends with the same desire to accept the impenetrable mystery of reality with a resigned smile but qualified by the itch to see in causality some vestige, some residue, of potential meaningfulness. Perhaps those who are not believers all share that itch. If that is so, Borges’s poetry reaches out through this theme towards universality.

In synthesis, therefore, both in our inner selves and in the workings of reality outside ourselves, all may be pure chance, or alternatively all may be governed by mysterious laws of determinism which connect actions or events in ways that are inscrutable to us. To return to the opening mention of “El Aleph”: we notice that what “Borges” sees when he is granted the vision provided by the Aleph is a series of discrete, separate things. What he does not see are connections or series or anything that suggests them. This may explain why the Aleph of Calle Garay could be a false Aleph. If “toda cosa/ es infinitas cosas” and if “No hay cosa en el orbe que no sea otra, o contraria o ninguna,” then every object is a potential Aleph, or there is no such thing.

As long ago as 1973, Gisele Bickel, in an illuminating article, already emphasized the “bifurcación característica” traceable in Borges’s work (297): its tendency to contain opposite tendencies, especially those connected with “orden” and “fragmentación.” A glance at Borges’s later poetry reveals that it persisted to the end of his productive career.

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