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.”

“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 Bibliotec, 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


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-
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, 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 (exposed 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 consistent 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 232 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.
The page in the anthology, 'Fond of Sorrow', reveals a profound connection to the losses of the past. The author, who remains anonymous, reflects on the fleeting nature of time and the enduring impact of moments that become etched in memory. The narrative weaves through themes of regret, redemption, and the pursuit of understanding through the lens of experience. The text invites the reader to consider the preciousness of time and the ways in which stories and memories shape our identities and perspectives.
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, in unfathomable sleep?

When this hand,
instead of the imperfect pen resorts to the total revolver
when the laconic blast erases me
I will not do it (if I do it) out of desperation or tedium
nor for the vitam indicat esse superacists 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 . . .

Or perhaps I have died:
two years ago on a murky stairway on Aycuecho 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.”

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

external evidence, in the period 1940-50. (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 nar-
"rator 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 café 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 textbook and for the nth
time studies the apoiron of Anaximander
old, impersonal things: the apoiron of Anaximander or the
fourth aperia that Aristotle 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 enounced 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.

He has dreamed of learning things that he has not learned: the Hebrew
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 tended 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 consti-
tutes a metaphor—surely his most enduring achievement—a metaphor of
the ineffable.

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