

THE OVERLOOKED LIBRARY IN BORGES'S "EL OTRO"

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If I were to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library.
In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library.

Borges "Autobiographical Essay" (24)

In "El otro," Jorge Luis Borges describes an encounter with his own youthful likeness, which supposedly occurred when he was teaching at Harvard, three years prior to the time of the narration. The story dissolves such binaries as past and future, self and other, dreamer and dreamed, profane and sacred. Critics tend to overlook the rich symbolism of the books that are discussed in the story. At just eight pages, "El otro" is the kind of masterpiece that Borges celebrates in his essay "El primer Wells": "La obra que perdura es siempre capaz de una infinita y plástica *ambigüedad*; es todo para todos, como el Apóstol; es un espejo que declara los rasgos del lector y es también un mapa del mundo" (OC 76, emphasis added).

Narrating in the first person in "El otro," Borges recalls the moment when, seated on a bench facing the Charles River, he recollected Heraclitus's image of the river into which one can never step twice.¹ At that

1 In an interview, Borges said in regard to this image, "Yo aseguraría que siempre sentimos esa extraña perplejidad, ésa que sintió mortalmente Heráclito en aquel antiguo ejemplo: 'Nadie se puede bañar dos veces en el mismo río.' En primer término, porque las aguas del río fluyen, no están quietas. Y en segundo término —esto es algo que ya nos concierne metafísicamente, que nos produce como una especie de horror sagrado—, porque nosotros mismos también somos un río, un río que cambia continuamente,

moment, Borges experiences a sensation of *déjà vu*. A young man sits down beside him and whistles a familiar tango in the manner of young Borges imitating a long-deceased cousin of his father. The young man's mimesis of Alvaro Melián Lafinur is the moment of self-recognition for old Borges, who turns to see a much younger self seated beside him.

Borges chats with him and confirms that he is an Argentinean living at his former address in Geneva. Borges informs the young man that the year is 1969 and that they are in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Young Borges, however, insists that he is seated on a bench in Geneva, facing the Rhône. Old Borges tries to prove that they are the same person by describing objects at his former home in Geneva, but young Borges remains unconvinced by proofs that might mean merely that he was dreaming the old man. At the end of the story, the narrator concludes that the meeting was real for himself but only a dream for his younger counterpart, which is seemingly proven by the fact that the older Borges has no recollection of the meeting from his youth in Geneva.

Critics seem to have missed the significance of much of the dialogue between young and old Borges. According to Julio Rodríguez-Luis, "'The Other' is, notwithstanding Borges' effort to make it look like a traditional fantastic story, merely an excuse for an excursion into his own biography and ideological evolution" (53). Gene Bell-Villada deems the story "surprisingly slight" compared to Borges's other stories, and sums up the story as "essentially a 'Borges and I' that is diluted and spread thin... [since] the two Doubles engage in uninteresting chit-chat, bandying personal and political topics that uneasily recall Borges's interviews" (262). However, that "chit-chat" contains fascinating clues that ought to intrigue literary sleuths, particularly when the older Borges proceeds to describe some books that he once had in Geneva:

En el armario de tu cuarto hay dos filas de libros. Los tres volúmenes de *Las Mil y Una Noches* de Lane con grabados en acero y notas en cuerpo menor

nosotros somos también fluctuantes" (Alifano 247). Borges alludes frequently to Heraclitus in his poetry, as in "Arte poética": "También es como el río interminable / que pasa y queda y es cristal de un mismo / Heráclito inconstante, que es el mismo / y es otro, como el río interminable" (*Antología poética* 43).

entre capítulo y capítulo, el diccionario latino de Quicherat, la *Germania* de Tácito en latín y en la versión de Gordon, un *Don Quijote* de la casa Garnier (*sic*), las *Tablas de Sangre* de Rivera Indarte, con la dedicatoria del autor, el *Sartor Resartus* de Carlyle, una biografía de Amiel y, escondido detrás de los demás, un libro en rústica sobre las costumbres sexuales de los pueblos balcánicos (*sic*). No he olvidado tampoco un atardecer en un primer piso de la plaza Dubourg. (“El otro” 8-9)

If “El otro” appears “perfunctory and formulaic, not vivified by intense feeling” to critics such as Mary Lusk Friedman (200), it is because they fail to pursue the leads contained in the above book titles. One suggestive title is *Don Quijote*, in which multiple narrators serve to mock authoritative tones and transfigure conventional notions of objective truth. Another evocative title is Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, which like *Don Quijote*, is a self-conscious book that parodies the creative process. What Borges identifies as the guiding idea in *Sartor Resartus*, “que la historia es una Escritura Sagrada que desciframos y escribimos continuamente y en la que también nos escriben [y] que los hombres de genio son verdaderos textos sagrados” (OC 36), might well also define “El otro.”

In his 1945 forward to an Emecé edition of *Sartor Resartus*, Borges writes:

Carlyle invocó la autoridad de un profesor imaginario, Diógenes Teufels-droekch (Hijo de Dios Bosta del Demonio), que habría publicado en Alemania un vasto volumen sobre la filosofía de arena, o sea de las apariencias. *El Sartor Resartus*, que abarca más de doscientas páginas, sería un mero comentario y compendio de esta obra gigantesca. Ya Cervantes (que Carlyle había leído en español) atribuye el Quijote a un autor arábigo, Cide Hamete Benengeli. El libro incluye una patética biografía de Teufels-droekch, que es en verdad una simbólica y secreta autobiografía, en la que no faltan las burlas. (OC 35)

“El otro” resembles *Sartor Resartus* as, in Borges’s words, a symbolic and secret autobiography that is full of jests. Both works are about appearances, about sand, whose evanescent and shape-shifting image recalls the hourglass and is contained in the title of *El libro de arena*, the book of short stories in which “El otro” appears.

2 The name of the French publishing house is Garnier. This error is present in the 1981 Alianza edition, but not in the original 1975 Emecé edition.

A new bride, Scheherazade, tells the stories within the story of *Las Mil y Una Noches* in order to stay alive. Married to a king who puts his new brides to death after one night of marriage, Scheherazade leaves a story unfinished every night with the result that the king keeps postponing her execution until love finally overcomes his blood lust. Borges's allusion to this collection of tales reminds us that storytelling overcomes oblivion and death, and that authors live on through their fictional characters.³

In one of his lectures, Borges observes how the very title of *Las mil y una noches* implies that its tales are infinite. Those tales were retold by numerous anonymous storytellers from versions of earlier stories. Indeed, all stories are infinite since each new reader is a new context and therefore a new story. Borges observes that the motifs of dreams and the double are present in a tale of *Las Mil y Una Noches*, in which two men dream one another (*Siete Noches* 61, 64, 67).

Emir Rodríguez Monegal notes that the *Las Mil y Una Noches* in "El otro" is in a translation by Lane, who omitted certain passages that he regarded as salacious, and that in an article Borges referred to Lane's version as "a mere encyclopedia of evasion." Lane's translation hints at Borges's own evasions in "El otro" (Rodríguez Monegal 112). We sense a hidden condition of the mind in the unspoken and the unspeakable. When old Borges asks about his family in Geneva, young Borges responds:

–Bien. Padre siempre con sus bromas contra la fe. Anoche dijo que Jesús era como los gauchos, que no quieren comprometerse, y que por eso predicaba en parábolas. (10)

"El otro" too is a kind of "broma contra la fe," and its author also speaks in parables.

The presence of a biography of the philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel in young Borges's book collection hints at the fragmentation of personality in "El otro." In his *Journal Intime*, Amiel conveys the mutability of identity:

3 A Borges scholar, Marina Martín, comments, "para Borges el arte es el espejo de la condición humana, lo que en definitiva nos da identidad y razón de ser. Es el arte, la literatura, lo que salva a Scherezade, en último término, aquello que nos salva y redime. La pluralidad —los individuos— se confunden en este caso en la unidad, representada por Scherezade" (email to the author, July 22, 2010). See Martín: "Arte poética"

To arrive at a faithful portrait, succession must be converted into simultaneousness, plurality into unity, and all the changing phenomena must be traced back to their essence. There are ten men in me, according to time, place, surrounding, and occasion; and in their restless diversity I am forever escaping myself... I feel myself a chameleon, a kaleidoscope, a Proteus; changeable in every way, open to every kind of polarisation; fluid, virtual, and therefore latent — latent even in manifestation, and absent even in presentation. I am a spectator, so to speak, of the molecular whirlwind which men call individual life; I am conscious of an incessant metamorphosis, an irresistible movement of existence, which is going on within me. I am sensible of the flight, the revival, the modification, of all the atoms of my being, all the particles of my river, all the radiations of my special force. (*Amiel's Journal* 126)

The young Borges of “El otro” incarnates spiritual and intellectual qualities of Borges in his late teens. In an interview, Borges slights his former youthful self: “Resumiendo este período de mi vida, encuentro que siento poca simpatía por el pedante y dogmático hombre joven que fui” (Helft and Pauls 16).

One of Borges’s biographers, Edwin Williamson, in a shabby attempt at psychoanalysis, alleges: “Only the most acute estrangement from his own past could have inspired such a story, but as his marriage to Elsa began to fail, it seemed that even his past life was more real than the present, which was so empty, so insubstantial, so unbearable” (377). There is no internal evidence to suggest that “El otro” has anything to do with the failed first marriage of Borges, nor is Borges estranged from his own past, whose dynamic persistence Williamson fails to grasp.

In his essay “La esfera de Pascal,” Borges suggests “[q]uizá la historia universal es la historia de la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas” (OC 16). The river is one such metaphor, for it conveys our ever-changing ontological state. As Terry Eagleton explains:

I live humanly only by constantly “projecting” myself forwards, recognizing and realizing fresh possibilities of being; I am never purely identical with myself, so to speak, but a being always already thrown forwards in advance of myself. My existence is never something which I can grasp as a finished object, but always a question of fresh possibility, always problematic; and this is equivalent to saying that a human being is constituted by history, or time. Time is not a medium we move in as a bottle might move

in a river; it is the very structure of human life itself, something I am made out of before it is something I measure. (63)⁴

This defining metaphor of “El otro,” the river, also finds expression in Amiel’s journal:

I can find no words for what I feel. My consciousness is withdrawn into itself; I hear my heart beating, and my life passing. It seems to me that I have become a statue on the banks of the river of time, that I am the spectator of some mystery, and shall issue from it old, or no longer capable of age. (*Amiel’s Journal* xxiv)

As in “El otro,” we sense a timeless narrator who is neither one nor many, and who is at once a spectator and a spectral presence.

The reference to José Rivas Indarte’s *Tablas de Sangre* suggests the narrator of “El otro” might be unreliable and prone to exaggeration. In that book, Rivas Indarte did his utmost to blacken the legacy of Juan Manuel de Rosas, who headed the Confederación Argentina for nearly two decades during the mid-nineteenth century. Rivas Indarte exaggerates the extent of the political murders and crimes of Rosas. The Unitarians, who included several forbears of Borges, fought Rosas while seeking a centralized Argentine federation. Colonel Isidoro Suárez, Borges’ maternal great-grandfather and a hero in the War of Independence, went into exile rather than live under Rosas’s tyranny. As a result, the lands of Suárez were confiscated and one of his brothers was executed (“Borges Family Chronicle” 267).

We sense the cyclical return of the caudillo Rosas (who, by the way, was a distant relative of Borges) in the person of Juan Domingo Perón who appears in the quick sketch of twentieth-century history that old Borges provides to his younger self. Borges dislikes Perón so much that he does not even mention his name, although the reference is clear:

Buenos Aires, hacia mil novecientos cuarenta y seis, engendró otro Rosas, bastante parecido a nuestro pariente. El cincuenta y cinco, la provincia de Córdoba nos salvó, como antes Entre Ríos. Ahora, las cosas andan mal. Rusia está apoderándose del planeta; América, trabada por la superstición de

4 Borges’s “Arte poética” is a concise expression of the river as a metaphor for time and for ourselves: “Mirar el río hecho de tiempo y agua / y recordar que el tiempo es otro río, / saber que nos perdemos como el río / y que los rostros pasan como el agua.” (*Antología poética* 42).

la democracia, no se resuelve a ser un imperio. Cada día que pasa nuestro país es más provinciano. Más provinciano y más engraido, como si cerrara los ojos. No me sorprendería que la enseñanza del latín fuera reemplazada por la del guaraní. (10)

This elliptical passage has the effect, not of only comparing Rosas to Perón, but of converting him into his nameless double.⁵

When his narrator denigrates Guaraní, a language in which is preserved part of the ancestral memory of the Americas, Borges thereby reveals an ironic awareness of his own prejudices. The image of a provincial, backward nation (“como si cerrara los ojos”) mirrors the physical blindness and apparent limitations with which Borges views the world. Borges’s authorial persona engages in the kind of theatrical exaggeration that he describes in “Borges y yo”:

Me gustan los relojes de arena, los mapas, la tipografía del siglo XVIII, las etimologías, el sabor del café y la prosa de Stevenson; el otro comparte esas preferencias, pero de un modo vanidoso que las convierte en atributos de un actor. Sería exagerado afirmar que nuestra relación es hostil; yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir, para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura y esa literatura me justifica. Nada me cuesta confesar que ha logrado ciertas páginas válidas, pero esas páginas no me pueden salvar, quizá porque lo bueno ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o la tradición. Por lo demás, yo estoy destinado a perderme, definitivamente, y sólo algún instante de mí podrá sobrevivir en el otro. Poco a poco voy cediéndole todo, aunque me consta su perversa costumbre de falsear y magnificar. (OC 186)

“El otro” counterfeits Borges, whose best writing is not even personal since it is inscribed in public memory.

One of young Borges’s books constitutes something of an oxymoron. It concerns the sexual customs of the Balkan peoples. This unnamed paperback appears to recall a youthful sexual encounter, for the elder Borges alludes in the next breath to “*un atardecer en un primer piso de la plaza Dubourg*” (9). The younger Borges corrects him, saying, “Dufour,” heightening our sense of the fallibility of the narrator.

5 Borges had good cause to detest Perón, whose government briefly imprisoned his sister, placed his mother under house arrest, and removed him from his post as municipal librarian. However, Borges chose to ignore the undeniable gains that working class Argentinians achieved in education, social security, and medical care under Perón’s first government (1946-1955).

In his *Borges' Narrative Strategy*, Donald L. Shaw explains how to analyze a story by Borges:

[M]any Borges stories contain what he has called “inlaid details,” small indications or clues, held out to the alert reader, which suggest something about how to understand the tale. To identify those details which are significant in this sense, among others which are not, calls for careful critical discrimination. But a Borges story has not been fully understood until all the important details fit... Every good Borges story is a mechanism: each part of it is functional. A useful exercise with his shorter tales is to number the paragraphs and then attempt to analyse precisely the contribution that each of them makes to the overall pattern. (3, 7)

Shaw fails to follow his own sound critical advice, for in the three pages that he devotes to “El otro” he neglects to mention the books in young Borges’s library, a glaring omission when discussing an author who wrote:

De los diversos instrumentos del hombre, el más asombroso es, sin duda, el libro. Los demás son extensiones de su cuerpo. El microscopio, el telescopio, son extensiones de su vista; el teléfono es extensión de la voz; luego tenemos el arado y la espada, extensiones de su brazo. Pero el libro es otra cosa: el libro es una extensión de la memoria y de la imaginación. (quoted in Pérez 7)

Books are no mere decorations in the fiction of Borges; and they are more than just “inlaid details.” For Borges, that most bookish of writer’s writers, “a book is no less an experience than traveling or falling in love” (Burgin 19). Books are the very substance of Borges’ life: “Que otros se jacten de las páginas que han escrito; / a mí me enorgullecen las que he leído” (“Un Lector”, OC 1016).

Books are inflections of Borges’s own voice, a kind of creative shorthand that reminds us that literary texts are palimpsests that dialogue with one another.⁶ In his essay “Kafka y sus precursores,” Borges tells us: “El

6 Malcom Bowie writes of this literary debt: “[Borges] speaks quietly, but he speaks inside a whispering gallery. He takes pride in his rejection of rhetoric and fine writing, yet by way of his allusions and citations he inserts himself into an extended community of fellow writers and gives his own prose its constant air of plenitude. Language is all we have, Borges seems often to be saying, but it can be scarcely called a possession, for it is always on loan from other people, slips between our fingers as we put it to use, and insists on purveying other meanings than those we intend. The art of fiction, for Borges, is

hecho es que cada escritor crea a sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado como ha de modificar al futuro” (OC 712). The simultaneity of personality mirrors that of authors in a library. We engage our previous selves just as books do earlier ones. In this regard, Carlos Fuentes writes:

In a library, all authors and books are present, here, now, each the contemporary of all the others not only in the space thus created (the Aleph, the library of Babel) but in time. In a library, do not Dante and Diderot rub shoulders, does Cervantes not exist simultaneously with Borges? Is not a library a place and a time where any man is all men and where all men who recite a line of Shakespeare are Shakespeare? The totality of time and space is at hand here, enclosed in one library which contains but one book, which is all books, read by one reader who is all readers. (66)

Shaw notes that the older Borges quotes a line of Victor Hugo to prove to young Borges that he is not a figment of his imagination. However, Shaw does not even quote that line in his analysis of “El otro” (“*L’hydre-univers tordant son corps écaillé d’astres*”), let alone surmise why Borges might have chosen it for this story. Hugo’s image of the universe as a hydra twisting a body scaled with stars suggests that the universe is wondrously alive and that God exists everywhere just as we exist in all our former and future selves. This image conveys the meaning of *alif*, the unity of God, for as Amiel explains, we contain in ourselves “the analogues of everything, the rudiments of everything, of all beings and all forms of life. Whoever can detect the minute beginnings, the germs and the symptoms, can find in himself the mechanism of the universe” (*Private Journal* 155).

The narrator concludes, “Hugo nos había unido” (13). Hugo’s memorable line condenses the meaning of this story, a compact sense of which can also be found in Borges’ “All Our Yesterdays”:⁷

the art of negotiating between existing texts and of hybridising real texts and imaginary ones: it involves acknowledging that the human voice is composite, occasional, handed-down, haunted by the sound of past vocal inflections” (124).

7 The title of this poem is from a famous passage in *Macbeth* that raises the specter of meaninglessness: “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, / To the last syllable of recorded time / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! / Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is

Quiero saber de quién es mi pasado.
 ¿De cuál de los que fui? ¿Del ginebrino
 que trazó algún hexámetro latino
 que los lustrales años han borrado?
 ¿Es de aquel niño que buscó en la entera
 biblioteca del padre las puntuales
 curvaturas del mapa y las ferales
 formas que son el tigre y la pantera?
 ¿O de aquel otro que empujó una puerta
 detrás de la que un hombre se moría
 para siempre, y besó en el blanco día
 la cara que se va y la cara muerta?
 Soy los que ya no son. Inútilmente
 Soy en la tarde esa perdida gente. (*Antología poética* 120)

This poem adumbrates “El otro”: Borges’s youth in Geneva (1914-18), his father’s books, and a desolate sexual encounter.

A sense of loss also underlies the discussion in “El otro” regarding Whitman’s poem “When I heard at the close of the day” about a shared evening by the sea. Young Borges sees the poem as a statement of fact, since he believes that Whitman could never lie, while his elderly counterpart understands the poem as an expression of desire. The allusion to Whitman recalls that poet’s celebration of multiple selves in “Song of Myself”: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / I am large, I contain multitudes” (quoted in Rogers 3).

The conversation in “El otro” turns to Dostoevsky because young Borges is holding *Los poseídos*, whose connotations of madness hint at the insanity of Borges the narrator. Young Borges has read Dostoevsky’s *El doble*, which is about a bureaucrat who sees his double while seated in front of a river, a circumstance that mirrors the meeting in “El otro.” The frenzied, pell-mell narrative in *El doble* conveys the psychic disintegration of an insecure and mediocre civil servant as he encounters everywhere the specter of his diligent and efficient double. Old Borges asks the younger one whether he could distinguish between the characters of Dostoevsky and those of Joseph Conrad (11). The reference here is surely to Conrad’s

heard no more; it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (*Macbeth* 5.5.19-28).

The Secret Sharer, about a ship captain who conceals in his cabin a fugitive with whom he establishes a mysterious communication as with a double.

The discussion on Dostoevsky recalls how at the outset of “El otro” the narrator speaks of his fear of losing his mind: “El hecho ocurrió en el mes de febrero de 1969, al norte de Boston, en Cambridge. No lo escribí inmediatamente porque mi primer propósito fue olvidarlo, para no perder la razón” (“El otro” 7). The Dostoevsky allusions enrich this story about doubles and the contagion of dreams. According to Mircea Eliade,

The extraordinary impression left on the reader of any Dostoyevsky novel is due in large measure to the fact that time is dilated in it, to a considerable extent, and to the fact that his characters, whom he follows closely to keep them from repeating their gestures and words to the point of satiation, explode or contradict themselves out of exasperation, making you think they’re possessed or are acting from “profundity.”... Dostoyevsky’s genius is that he let himself be possessed by his own characters, and this act of demonic magic in itself made him venture into places where other novelists hesitated to tread. (63)

As in a Dostoevsky novel, mendacity and insanity permeate “El otro,” for as John Updike points out, “Borges is not an antiseptic pathologist of the irrational; he is himself susceptible to infection. His connoisseurship has in it a touch of madness” (64). Consider the scene where old Borges proposes to young Borges a way to find out who truly existed and who was but a fiction or a dream of the other:

Le propuse que nos viéramos al día siguiente, en ese mismo banco que está en dos tiempos y en dos sitios. Asintió en el acto y me dijo, sin mirar el reloj, que se le había hecho tarde. Los dos mentíamos y cada cual sabía que su interlocutor estaba mintiendo. (“El otro” 12)

Possibly both men had no intention of turning up the next day because each wanted the other to believe that he truly existed. Or perhaps the author of the story is a big liar and his characters know it too. The very structure of “El otro” is unstable, first because of the narrator’s faulty memory, and second, because of the countless ways in which the story has been and will be read, as Borges well knows: “Cada vez que un libro es leído o

releído, algo ocurre con ese libro” (quoted in Helft and Pauls 71).⁸ Each reading of “El otro” alters the original even when it is done by the same person.

The instability of “El otro” extends to the text itself which also has a double. Towards the end of the story there is a textual divergence regarding the date on a dollar bill:

–Oí –le dije–, ¿tenés algún dinero?

–Sí –me replicó –. Tengo unos veinte francos. Esta noche lo convidé a Simón Jichlinski en el *Crocodile*.

–Dile a Simón que ejercerá la medicina en Carouge, y que hará mucho bien... ahora, me das una de tus monedas.

Sacó tres escudos de plata y unas piezas menores. Sin comprender me ofreció uno de los primeros.

Yo le tendí uno de esos imprudentes billetes americanos que tienen muy diverso valor y el mismo tamaño. Lo examinó con avidez.

–No puede ser –gritó–. Lleva la fecha de mil novecientos setenta y cuatro.

(Meses después alguien me dijo que los billetes de banco no llevan fecha.)

–Todo esto es un milagro –alcanzó a decir– y lo milagroso da miedo. Quienes fueron testigos de la resurrección de Lázaro habrán quedado horrorizados.

No hemos cambiado nada, pensé. Siempre las referencias librescas. Hizo pedazos al billete y guardó la moneda.

Yo resolví tirarla al río. El arco del escudo de plata perdiéndose en el río de plata hubiera conferido a mi historia una imagen vívida, pero la suerte no lo quiso. (“El otro” 13-14)

In the above excerpt from the 1981 edition of *El libro de arena*, the date on the dollar bill is 1974. However, in the first edition of that book (1975), the date on the bill is 1964. Subsequent Spanish language editions give the date on the bill as 1974.

8 Historical, social, and personal contexts of readers all serve to multiply meanings. In this regard, Terry Eagleton comments, “All literary works... are ‘rewritten,’ if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a ‘re-writing.’ No work, and no current evaluation of it, can simply be extended to new groups of people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognizably, in the process; and this is one reason why what counts as literature is a notably unstable affair” (12).

The date on the dollar bill would appear significant to judge from the ending of the story:

He cavilado mucho sobre este encuentro, que no he contado a nadie. Creo haber descubierto la clave. El encuentro fue real, pero el otro conversó conmigo en un sueño y fue así que pudo olvidarme; yo conversé con él en la vigilia y todavía me atormenta el recuerdo.

El otro me soñó, pero no me soñó rigurosamente. Soñó, ahora lo entiendo, la imposible fecha en el dólar. (16)

At the beginning of “El otro,” the narrator tells us that that he was writing around three years after the supposed meeting between the young and old Borges in February 1969. If it was indeed dated 1974, the dollar bill would have been printed five years after that meeting, and two years after the time of the narration of the story, unless the bill had appeared in a dream or were simply an invention of the unreliable narrator.

John Sturrock uncritically accepts the narrator’s dubious explanation about the date on the bill:

Towards the end of the discussion between the two Borgeses the old one offers the young one an American banknote bearing the date 1964, to prove to the other that their encounter is real and not a dream. The young Borges reads the date on the dollar-bill and recognizes that there has been a ‘miracle’. The dated note is the circumstantial evidence of the reality of the experience. Unfortunately, as Borges casually lets on in a parenthesis, ‘Months afterwards someone told me that banknotes do not carry a date’. From having been the evidence of a reality the note is suddenly transformed into the evidence of an unreality: the ‘miracle’ was impossible all along, contradicted by the actual practices of the United States Treasury... This fiction is betrayed by the invention of a single impossible circumstance: eternity is destroyed by a date. The dollar-bill, a forgery if ever there was one, has been introduced into the game in order to put an end to it, to show that timelessness must have a stop. There could, in the fictive world of Borges, be no more deadly or intrusive circumstance than an impossible date. (91-92)

Naomi Lindstrom also trusts the narrator: “It is a concrete detail—a date printed on a banknote, when paper money ought to be undated—that allows Borges to develop, in retrospect, an explanation of the encounter” (106). But United States dollar bills do in fact carry a series year. Why do Sturrock and Lindstrom trust a narrator who is, after all, nearly blind? As to whether

1964 is an impossible date on a dollar bill, critics ought to consider whether the United States Treasury printed dollar bills in 1964.

Since every translation of “El otro” is in effect an interpretation of the story, it is interesting to see how translators treat the matter of the divergent dates. According to Julie James, 1964 is the date on the dollar bill in a German language translation of “El otro” published by Verlag in 1977 (143). The 1977 English language translation by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, who consulted Borges on his translations, also gives 1964 as the year on the dollar bill. Di Giovanni translates the final line of the story as “He dreamed, I now realize, the date on the dollar bill” (*Book of Sand* 19-20), a significant departure from Borges’s “la imposible fecha en el dólar.” The 1998 English language translation by Andrew Hurley also preserves 1964 as the year on the dollar bill, while rendering the final words of the story as “the impossible date on that dollar bill” (*Collected Fictions* 416-17).

A bilingual Spanish-French edition, published by Gallimard, gives two different dates for the dollar bill: the Spanish version is spelled out as “mil novecientos sesenta y cuatro” while the French translation on the facing page reads “1974.” James believes that the two different dates are an oversight on the part of Gallimard (143). Even if unintentionally, Gallimard’s version is nonetheless faithful to the playful intent of Borges, who likes to baffle readers with regards to time. For example, when Borges’s “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” first appeared in print in 1940, it had a postscript dated 1947.

My own view is that the change from 1964 to 1974 on the dollar bill was a deliberate and stealthy decision by Borges. In “El otro” the narrator questions the reality of the date on the dollar bill with a parenthetical aside: “(Meses después alguien me dijo que los billetes de banco no llevan fecha.)” In an interview with Marcos Barnatán, Borges is almost certainly disingenuous or playful when he says, “creo que alguien me dijo que los billetes de dólar no llevaban año y que por lo tanto el intercambio de pruebas quedaba inválido, pero ahora usted confirma mi sospecha de que sí tienen fecha” (Barnatán 119).

James queries that “if this was a mistake, why didn’t the author remove this sentence from later editions?” (148). She surmises that Borges might have changed the date on the dollar bill either to imply that the strange meeting transcends time, or to undermine both the existence of the narrator and the reader’s confidence in reality (150). The date change might be

explained by a remark in which Borges said, “I think that one would work into a story the idea of not being sure of all things, because that’s the way reality is” (quoted in Boegeman 184). The ambiguous language of “El otro” conflates its two characters: “Hizo pedazos al billete y guardó la moneda. Yo resolví tirarla al río” (“El otro” 14).

Shaw notes that the coin in question appears to be the same one, which would imply that both men are one and the same. “Once more, Borges is aiming at a ‘double-take’ ending,” Shaw concludes, “but it is open to question whether, in this case, it is not too over-elaborate to be fully successful” (173). Shaw fails to mention that young Borges took out of his pocket “tres escudos de plata y unas piezas menores” (“El otro” 13) and that he gave the older man one of the escudos. It only enriches the story for readers to be left wondering whether the escudo that young Borges put back in his pocket is the same one that old Borges intended to toss into the river.

If “El otro” is a dream, it is no less real for being a dream, one that is susceptible to the most varied readings. It is a tribute to his artistry that Borges takes literature to its utmost limits with critics barely noticing: “Es curiosa la suerte del autor. Al principio es barroco, vanidosamente barroco, y al cabo de los años puede lograr, si son favorables los astros, no la sencillez, que no es nada, sino la modesta y secreta complejidad” (OC 236). In paying homage to literary ancestors for the metaphors of the river and the double, “El otro” is a spectral presence that seems limitless at just eight pages. These words from Borges’ prologue to *El otro, el mismo* sum up his own artistic achievement: “Clásico es aquel libro que una nación o un grupo de naciones o el largo tiempo han decidido leer como si en sus páginas todo fuera deliberado, fatal, profundo como el cosmos y capaz de interpretaciones sin término” (OC 151). Though written in sand, *El libro de arena* has a cosmic durability.

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