

## 1964 or 1974: Which is “the other?”

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“**E**l otro,” by Jorge Luis Borges, is a short story in which the narrator, Borges, encounters a younger version of himself. The two characters meet and begin to converse, at which time the discovery is made that they are two variations of the same person, each existing in distinct periods of time and space. As a consequence of their encounter, the characters are faced with disturbing existential ambiguities. Even the location of this meeting is not clear, as the older Borges believes it to take place on a park bench facing the Charles River in Massachusetts, while the younger Borges insists that the river they are facing is the Rhône in Geneva. This confusion sets the stage for further complications that arise as the two versions of the self attempt to determine which is the “real” Borges. Discussions ensue and the older Borges offers several examples of “proof” that he is the one who exists, suggesting that the younger Borges is simply a character in his dream. With the hope that he might be able to produce something to support his claim, the older Borges presents his younger self with a dollar bill so as to prove that the encounter is taking place in the United States during the year 1969.

The presentation of this bank note as “proof” of existence is essential to a critical analysis of “El otro.” While many critics have recognized the importance of this scene, they have failed to point out one very important discrepancy. In the first edition of the story, the bill is dated 1964 (mil novecientos sesenta y cuatro) whereas in subsequent editions, it reads 1974 (mil novecientos setenta y cuatro). While it can be argued that this change is insignificant, I will attempt to prove otherwise by demonstrating how the difference in dates significantly alters the interpretation of the text.

It is therefore very important to this analysis to establish when and how the change came to be, for if the alteration was demanded by the author himself, as we assume to be the case, there must be a reason. In order to establish the significance of this modification, several editions

of "El otro" were studied, compared and interpreted according to the dates presented.

This part of the investigation commenced with an attempt to trace the change in dates from one edition to the next and the results demonstrate that the alteration occurred somewhere between the first edition and the second. In the first edition, published in 1975 by Emecé in Buenos Aires, the text states that the date on the bank note reads "mil novecientos sesenta y cuatro." In 1977, the year of the second edition, the rights to the collection were transferred to Alianza/Emecé publishers in Madrid, at which time the date on the bank note appeared as "mil novecientos setenta y cuatro." This new date appeared in the third edition, as well. Unfortunately, no explanation of any kind (footnote, note of the author) was provided to account for this change.

Once the time in which the change occurred was determined, several different translations were then examined with the hope that they might shed more light on the reasons that might explain why the text was altered. The German translation of "El otro" was made by Dieter Zimmer and published by Carl Hanser Verlag in 1977, the same year in which the second (Spanish) edition of the story came out. However, this translation was based on the first edition of the Spanish text. It will therefore come as no surprise that the bank note is dated 1964.

In the English translation of the text, Norman Thomas di Giovanni explains that his work is based on the original version of "El otro" which first appeared in 1971 as a short story separate from the collection and which incidentally first appeared in English in, of all literary publications, *Playboy* magazine. In di Giovanni's translation, the date on the dollar bill also reads 1964.

The most baffling finding, however, has to do with a French translation published by Gallimard in the Folio bilingual series in which the original text and the translation are juxtaposed. The Spanish version appears on the left-hand page and reads "mil novecientos sesenta y cuatro," while the translation into French appears on the opposite page and reads "1974." Not only are they two different dates, but the Spanish version is spelled out while the French version is presented using arabic numerals. Obviously Gallimard copied the first edition of "El otro" to appear as the Spanish version, but it seems that the translation was based on a subsequent edition without the publisher being made aware of the difference—a rather large oversight on the part of Gallimard.

Needless to say, rather than succeeding in producing answers to our question, the results of this research served only to further complicate the issue. While the information gathered aided in pinpointing the moment in which the change occurred, it failed to uncover the reasons for this change. All we know is that from one version of the story to the next, there is a difference of one letter that could conceivably alter the way in which the story can be interpreted.

Before proceeding with structural analyses of the texts, it must first be pointed out that the two editions of the story, regardless of the date that appears on the bank note, are thematically identical. The change in date, although it produces a remarkable variation of the conclusion, does not change to any great extent the overall structure of the story. As such, structural analyses of both editions would prove only to be repetitive. Therefore, we will proceed with an analysis of the 1975 edition and continue by contrasting this story with the version dated 1977.

"El otro," although it is one of Borges's later works, is reminiscent of his earlier productions in terms of thematics. For example, the theme of the individual's reality in "El otro" has appeared before in "Las ruinas circulares," (*Ficciones* 1956) a story that serves to question the notion of human existence. "Las ruinas circulares" suggests that perhaps our existence as humans is not real as we would have ourselves believe, but rather that each individual exists only as a player in the dream of another being. The theme of cyclical repetition in "El otro" is yet another of the many themes that can be linked to his previous works. In "Tema del traidor y del héroe," (*Ficciones* 1956) the events in the present are mere repetitions of past events and only the actors have changed, the suggestion being that all events follow an infinite cycle in which they are reenacted over and over throughout time. Another theme of "El otro" has to do with the problem of memory as a means for establishing continuity of personality between the past and the present. This theme is more closely tied to his later works in which Borges begins to express a concern for the problem of failing memory. It makes perfect sense that such a concern would develop in the author's old age and would, therefore, appear as one of the main themes in his later works. In "El otro" as in "La noche de los dones," two stories that appear in the same collection, the reader discovers that since memory is not reliable, there can be no way of expressing an ongoing unity of the personality throughout time. That is to say, the only link between *who I am* and *who I was* is memory and if memory fails, so does this connection. Therefore, Borges suggests the possibility that the *I* of today may not

be the *I* of yesterday, due to the simple fact that memory, as the sole means for establishing continuity of personality throughout time, is fallible. The themes of human existence, time, and memory are the main themes of "El otro" and are interwoven throughout the text so as to provide the basis for the author's philosophical beliefs with regard to the problematics of the individual's reality.

"El otro" begins by presenting the reader with "factual" information. The reader is first told that the year in which the narrator is speaking is 1972 and that the event he is about to recount took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts during the year 1969. This introduction is used by the author as a way of manipulating the reader into a false sense of security. By accepting these time markers as factual data, the reader is made to believe that "El otro" is a true story. Next, the description of the narrator's surroundings brings about one of Borges's obsessions: the problem of time. The water of the river is described as grey, *gris*, a color that, in the works of Borges, tends to symbolize a lack of apparent significance. The narrator tells us that the river made him think of time, "el río hizo que yo pensara en el tiempo." At this point, the reader is tempted to establish a connection between the insignificance of the water (or the river) and time. It seems that the key is in the narrator's reference to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Heraclitus is best known for his assertion that humans like rivers are constantly changing with time. Similar references to Heraclitus can be found, for instance, in a collection of poems entitled, *El otro, el mismo*, and more specifically in the poem, "A quien está leyéndome:"

(...) ¿No es acaso  
 Tu irreversible tiempo el de aquel río  
 En cuyo espejo Heráclito vio el símbolo  
 De su fugacidad? (...)  
 Sueños del tiempo son también los otros (OC 2: 302)

or in an essay entitled, "Nueva refutación del tiempo," in which Borges refers once again to Heraclitus:

cada vez que recuerdo el fragmento 91 de Heráclito: "No bajarás dos veces al mismo río", admiro su destreza dialéctica, pues la facilidad con que aceptamos el primer sentido ("El río es otro") nos impone clandestinamente el segundo ("Soy otro"). (OC 2: 141)

Albert Robatto, in his study entitled *Borges, Buenos Aires y el tiempo*, tells us that the time-river connection is a reminder of the fugacity of human existence in the face of time (123-4). Borges incorporates this reference to Heraclitus as a way of calling attention to the difficulty of linking time and reality to human existence — an idea that will develop

as the story progresses. Immediately after the reference to Heraclitus, the narrator of "El otro" expresses the feeling that he had already lived that moment, "sentí de golpe la impresión (...) de haber vivido aquel momento" (7). The author chooses the word "impression" as a way of pointing out the fallibility of memory in the face of time. As in any case of paramnesia, the narrator cannot say for sure whether or not he had already experienced this particular moment in his life. Hence, the borgesian implication that if memory is the only link one has with one's past and memory is unreliable, time and human existence then become abstract concepts in the mind of the perceiver.

At this moment in the story, the narrator becomes aware of the presence of another, someone who reminds him of Álvaro Melián Lafinur. Although this person (the new arrival) does not have the same voice as Lafinur, the narrator tells us that the newcomer wanted to sound like him, ("La voz no era la de Álvaro, pero quería parecerse a la de Álvaro", 8). The reference to Lafinur is important to the introduction of the story because Lafinur was a cousin of Borges's father and a man who played a large role in Borges's younger life. In this sense, the author is offering the reference to Lafinur as a sort of pre-introduction of the character, whom we will soon discover to be the young Borges. This pre-textual reference to Lafinur is inserted into the story as a clue for the Borges connoisseur. The reader who is unfamiliar with the author's life will have difficulty determining the significance of the reference. Yet, at the same time, this lack of knowledge does not impede in any way an accurate deciphering of the text since the newcomer is identified in the paragraph that follows this reference.

Certain borgesian themes are further developed in this section of the text that deals, more specifically, with the problems of memory and time and how they relate to the individual and his existence on earth. For example, the question of time is raised when the narrator, who is telling his other about the future of his family, ends by asking "¿Cómo están?" a question that is delivered using the present tense. The temporal divisions of past, present, and future are blurred as a result. Moreover, if the narrator is who he claims to be, then he would already have the answer to his question, for he would have already experienced that particular moment in his life.

Next, the narrator moves on to discuss certain historical events that await his younger self. He compares World War II and Hitler to Waterloo and Napoleon, stretching the comparison even further to include a comparison between Rosas and Perón in Argentina. The key to this

segment is in the phrase "la cíclica batalla de Waterloo," indicative of the theme of cyclical repetition, that bears great resemblance to the story "Tema del traidor y del héroe." In "Tema del traidor y del héroe," the main character, Ryan, discovers that the death of his ancestor is a repetition of the death of Julius Ceasar and that all events "parecen repetir o combinar hechos de remotas regiones, de remotas edades" (OC 1: 496). The connection, then, can be easily drawn between this story and "El otro," in which, once again the question of time is raised.

The problem of memory arises when the narrator refers to an experience the younger Borges had at the "plaza Dubourg." The younger Borges corrects him, telling the narrator that the name of the plaza was "Dufour" and not "Dubourg." This point marks the second instance in which the story demonstrates the fallibility of memory.

This theme of memory is closely related to the theme of discontinuity of personality, a theme that arises when the topic of discussion moves abruptly from a focus on historical events to one of a more personal nature. This idea develops when the two versions of Borges argue about the importance of writing for the masses as opposed to writing about the individual. The older Borges attempts to persuade the younger Borges that the masses are an abstraction and that if anyone exists, it is the individual: "no es más que una abstracción. Sólo los individuos existen, si es que existe alguien" (11). The narrator goes on to quote "some Greek" who said that "*el hombre de ayer no es el hombre de hoy*" (11). This statement clearly touches on the theme of discontinuity of the individual and the theme of human existence. The author, who wrestles with the question of existence, tells us that if we do exist, we only exist as individuals. The idea is as follows: since it is difficult to establish unity of personality within an individual, something that the narrator and his younger self are unable to do, we could not possibly link the individual with others. The simple fact that the narrator and his younger self cannot seem to find anything in common emphasizes the metaphorical significance of the river. "En efecto, los dos Borges del cuento, aunque tienen el mismo nombre no son la misma persona. Si con el fluir del tiempo todo pasa y queda atrás, también lo que parece estático e inmóvil en realidad es dinámico y se transforma" (Silvestri 51). That is to say, the reality of the individual exists only in the infinite present because, like the river, one changes with time. Even memory is not enough to establish a link between one's present and past because memory is unreliable. The younger Borges questions the narrator about his memory and, in turn about his existence, when the two realize that

the older Borges is unable to recollect this meeting. If the narrator is who he claims, then he must remember that in 1918, he met up with an older version of himself, but he does not remember. As a consequence of his failed memory, the narrator's existence and his idea of reality are threatened and he searches his mind for a way to prove that he does in fact exist. He recalls a Coleridge fantasy in which "alguien sueña que cruza el paraíso y le dan como prueba una flor. Al despertarse, ahí está la flor" (13). With this story in mind, the narrator decides to make an exchange with his younger self so that, when the real Borges awakens, the proof of the encounter and the proof of his existence will be validated. So, he asks his younger self to produce some money and he does the same. The younger Borges offers a Swiss coin and the older Borges produces a dollar bill. This exchange marks a pivotal point in the text.

After the two characters examine the money exchanged, the younger Borges exclaims "No puede ser (...) lleva la fecha de mil novecientos sesenta y cuatro" (14). This character who believed himself to be real, based on his idea of time and space, discovers that perhaps he was mistaken, for he cannot explain his existence in terms of time if he holds in his hand a bank note dated 46 years into his future. The implication, now, is that the narrator is the real Borges and as soon as the reader is secure in this belief, he is thrown for a loop as the author casts yet another shadow of doubt on the situation. Immediately following the younger Borges's exclamation, we read the following statement in parenthesis, "(Meses después alguien me dijo que los billetes de banco no llevan fecha)". This statement presents the reader with two problems. On the level of factual information, the reader who knows that dollar bills are in fact dated, must wonder whether the presentation of such misinformation was intentional or simply a mistake on the part of the writer. The answer to this question appears to be clear. In an interview with Marcos Barnatán, Borges explains: "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" (119). Therefore, it seems to have been a simple oversight. But is it really so simple? Experienced readers of Borges know that he is a meticulous author and that he would not make such an obvious mistake. Moreover, if this was a mistake, why didn't the author remove this sentence from later editions?

This brings us to the second problem of the statement. As Borges claimed in his interview, the assertion that dollar bills do not carry a date invalidates the proof of the narrator's existence. The fact that the

narrator demonstrates confusion about the date (whether or not one is printed on the bill) presents the same problem. The reader must consider, at this point, that perhaps the author intended this interjection as a way of invalidating the proof that the narrator exists and, in turn, as a means for contradicting the reader's belief in what is real. Just when the reader feels secure in his idea of reality, he is plunged into a pool of confusion. The story is complicated even further when the younger Borges tears up the dollar bill and the older Borges throws the coin into the river. All proof is destroyed. Where, in Coleridge's fantasy, the character awakened reassured of his existence, the narrator in "El otro" is left only with a perception of reality that is plagued by doubt. The reader cannot say, in all certainty, whether or not these characters ever existed or whether this encounter ever took place. An obvious extension of the problematic is that "El otro" succeeds in undermining the reader's confidence in his own existence in time and space. For, if what we believed to be real in this story is not real, then we are tempted to question all that we previously believed to be real. The reader can no longer be sure of his own internal and external reality, for "El otro" serves to undermine our conceptions of time, space and consciousness — all that we use to explain and define our existence as humans on earth. Perhaps this is what the narrator was referring to when, in the introduction, he forewarned the reader of the atrociousness of the story, "Sé que fue casi atroz mientras duró y más aún durante las desveladas noches que lo siguieron" (7).

The later editions of "El otro" follow the same structural divisions as the first, where the introduction begins by providing the reader with a series of factual data, a metaphorical reference to Heraclitus and the introduction of a second participant. The body proceeds with a discussion between the characters and an existential debate that leads to the pivotal point, or climax of the story, where the bank note is presented as proof of the narrator's existence. The presentation of the dollar bill, then, determines the conclusion of the story and any change in this particular section would therefore affect an overall reading of "El otro," as we hope to demonstrate in this section of our study.

As mentioned earlier, the date on the bill changes from 1964 in the first edition, to 1974 in subsequent editions. Several hypotheses can be drawn about the significance of this *fait*. The first interpretation has to do with an extension of the theme of circularity of time in "El otro." At first glance, the reader protests, knowing that it would be impossible for the narrator, who exists in the year 1969, to present a bank note



dated five years into his future, based on what we know about linear time. However, one must not forget that the theme of cyclical time is clearly referred to when the connection is drawn between Hitler and Napoleon, for example. In this sense, the reader could draw the conclusion that the meeting along the river is an event that is repeated over and over throughout time, just as the battle of Waterloo occurs in cycles bearing a different name each time. Moreover, if we recall the scene in which the narrator is reminded that he must have experienced this event once before in his life, we realize that the recognition that this occurred once in the past is also an implication that it will reoccur in the future. The process is never -ending. If this is the case and this event is also cyclical in nature, one could postulate that a third, a fourth, or an infinite number of Borgeses is involved. This event must transcend both space and time. The date on the bill, then, serves to underscore this problem.

Another interpretation, that complements the afore -mentioned conclusion, is that the author changed the date on the bank note so as to further complicate this issue of time. In the first edition of the story, the climax is reassuring to the reader. By believing, for a moment, that the narrator can produce a tangible item as proof of his existence, the reader feels confident and secure in his own idea of reality. The conclusion of the first edition, then, serves only to place the seeds of doubt in the mind of the reader whereas, in the later edition, the climactic moment of security never arrives. The climax of the later edition succeeds in completely annihilating the reader's belief in reality. Past, present and future intersect and we are unable to provide a logical explanation for the event that transpired.

Although the date of 1974 on the bank note could produce a number of different interpretations, it seems that the thematics of the story call for an interpretation that has to do with the problem of time. Many readers might be tempted to interpret the impossible date as a result of the narrator's failed memory since the problem of memory is one of the main themes in this story. However, the fact that our interpretation of the text relies on a specific date in time, demonstrates the need for an interpretation that relates to this particular issue - the theme of time. Considering, once again, the description of the river in the introduction, we recall that the color of the water is described as grey, or insignificant. The reference to Heraclitus proposes a relationship between rivers and human existence in that each is transformed with the passage of time. Therefore, if the present state of the river can be seen as

insignificant, due to the simple fact that it will not remain static throughout time, then one could postulate that our existence as humans is also insignificant in the face of time. The date on the dollar bill, then, is the *significant* element of the story, in that it demonstrates the *insignificance* of the narrator's (and, by extension, the reader's) existence in time and space.

The main question then becomes: Was the change from the first edition to the second a deliberate choice on the part of the author or was it the result of a simple typographical error? It is certainly possible that the change in date can be attributed to a mistake on the part of the Alianza/Emecé publishing company. When the rights to the story changed from Emecé to Alianza/Emecé, the story might have been re-typed and the result might have been the change from "sesenta" to "setenta," a simple letter change. However, in the preface to *A Concordance to the Works of Jorge Luis Borges*, Rob Isbister and Peter Standish praise Alianza/Emecé as being one of the more reliable publishing companies (i). Moreover, they explain that the information found in their concordance was compiled using the Alianza/Emecé editions because they are "of good quality" and "complete" (i). Given Alianza's apparently good reputation, the likelihood of such an error occurring during the transfer from one edition to the next is minimal.

Another possibility to consider is that the first edition of "El otro" was the one that contained the mistaken date (1964) instead of the intended 1974. This possibility, however, seems just as unlikely as the one previously mentioned. According to Jean -Pierre Bernès, as explained in the Preface provided in the Gallimard translation of the text, the idea for this story was based on the collection of poetry, *El otro, el mismo*, coincidentally dated 1964. Therefore, it appears that the date on the bank note might not have been one the author chose at random. Regardless, the author himself would be the only one to answer this question and, since he is deceased, one can only guess at the numerous possibilities.

In the same light, one cannot be sure whether the author himself mandated the change in dates from one edition to the next. Nevertheless, given what we know about Borges's thematics, we can compare and analyze the two versions and determine, based on the findings, which of the two editions better communicates the main themes of the story. Since the themes of time and memory are prevalent throughout the rest of the text, it seems that the second edition (the one in which the bank note is dated 1974) develops to a greater extent the problematics expressed. It would appear, then, that the change in dates was intentional

and from this, one might conclude that both editions are “The Other.” That is to say, it seems likely that in the first edition of the text (printed in 1975), the author intended for the date on the bank note to read 1964. Yet, upon realization that the date of 1974 would further develop the themes of the text, the author might have requested that the change be made in all subsequent publications. The truth is that we may never possess a definitive answer to the question, but whatever the reasons may be for the alteration in the text, this discrepancy certainly allows for a wider spectrum of interpretation.

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