

OPENING STRATEGY AND THE SELF AS ILLUSION
IN BORGES' "EL OTRO"



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As is so often the case in a Borges tale, the opening section performs multiple functions. Recent criticism of "El otro" does not address the significance of the opening and the many clues it offers the reader about the meaning of the story. Ezequiel de Olaso's interpretation of "El otro" emphasizes the influence of George Berkeley's idealism on Borges' writing as well as its impact on other philosophers such as G.E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Julie James' analysis makes accurate assertions about the themes of "El otro", namely time, memory and human existence, but only briefly comments on their relation to the structure, since her argument centers on the significance of the variations of the date on the banknote as 1964 or 1974 in the different editions of "El otro." Helen Calaf de Aguera, an early critic of the work, argues that the function of the "double" in "El otro" is to reveal the existential dilemma of man coming to terms with the illusory nature of his existence. She, however, overlooks the significance of memory in the construction of the self. Instead, she associates Borges' technique of the doubling of the self with what C.F. Keppler calls the "doppelgänger" (168). Finally, Nancy Kason Poulson offers a postmodern

reading of the work that, like Olaso, places the textual analysis as secondary.

In this investigation, I argue that the opening strategy in "El otro" fulfills a three-fold track. I attempt to show why Borges deliberately constructs the opening of "El otro" with three different functions in mind. First and foremost, it presents a series of facts and contradictions that create mystery and entice the reader to continue reading. Second, it anticipates both themes of the story through the use of specific phrases and symbolic images. The central theme of the story is the self as illusion due to the fallibility of memory and time as an infinite present. Third, it offers clues as to the role of the narrator that suggest he is an unreliable one. I then discuss how these three aforementioned aspects operate in each paragraph of the opening section. Finally, I analyze how the functions of the opening strategies connect to the story's overall structure as a "fiction within a fiction" that juxtaposes memories. Borges' purpose is to call into question pre-established truths about human individuality, memory and time.

Before proceeding to analyze the opening section, let us briefly summarize the plot. "El otro" is an account of the old Borges' encounter with his younger self. It is a dialogue between two versions of himself: at seventy and at nineteen years old in an infinite present. Their conversation is driven by the old Borges' description of details pertinent only to their lives in an attempt to convince the young Borges that the person speaking to him is an older version of himself. The old Borges speaks of their family, historical events, literature, and writing but the young Borges remains apprehensive and skeptical. The old Borges continuously makes an ironic commentary and eventually reveals that he too questions whether he is in fact a figment of the young Borges' imagination. To prove that he is not, the old Borges asks for money and offers a bill in return. The young Borges is disturbed by the date 1974 on the bill and rips it up. The two decide to meet again but neither one keeps his promise. The story ends with a commentary by the old Borges about the illusory nature of the encounter.

The opening section of "El otro" begins with a reference to a past event and ends when the old Borges concludes that the figure he

sees is also called Borges and he announces the time and place of their encounter. Acutely aware of the notion that the act of reading is often a means of diversion from reality, Borges utilizes persuasive strategies that will convince the reader that the story will fulfill this purpose, or at least appear to do so. As any astute reader of Borges knows, he does not write for the average reader, and therefore the story only superficially appears to achieve this task. Furthermore, an experienced reader of Borges knows that his true intentions are never to satisfy the reader but always to undermine his/her confidence in established convictions about the human condition. Borges employs a series of narrative tricks that engage the reader from the very start.

In the opening section of "El otro" the narrator presents information that resembles the classic opening of a personal memoir. The narrator (the seventy-year old Borges) begins by mentioning a past event, which leads us to believe that the story will be a testimonial account of an actual experience from the narrator's past. The opening line also grasps the reader's attention since we wonder what sort of an event it is. The reader's curiosity is further piqued once the narrator admits in the second sentence that he wished to forget the event: "...mi primer propósito fue olvidarlo para no perder la razón" (11). The fact that the narrator wishes to forget the event in order to maintain his sanity foreshadows the first central theme of the story: memory and the positive effect of memory loss. Similarly as in "Funes el memorioso", in "El otro" Borges is suggesting that memory is both selective and fallible and that, contrary to our belief, this is a blessing in disguise since it allows us, like the narrator in Funes, to recount and recreate past experiences as we would like them to be. The narrator's choosing to forget the incident can be seen as a prefiguration of the theme of unreliable memory and the implications it has on one's understanding of the self. Furthermore, the shift to the present, three years later in 1972, is a clue to the reader that the narrator's words must not be taken as truths since he too is remembering the event. As is the case in another of Borges' other short stories, "La noche de los dones," the "cautiva" is capable of remembering only a specific set of words to describe a memory rather than the actual memory itself; so too is the old Borges in "El

otro" relying on words to describe his encounter. As the story progresses, it is evident that rather than words, sensorial images play a significant role in the recollection of a memory.

The last sentence of the opening paragraph continues to intensify the sense of mystery through the ambiguous reference to "los otros", which we later discover is a reference to the future readers of the story. Moreover, it leads us to pose the question: why does the narrator wish the story to be a fiction? As the story later reveals, the narrator's intentions are a metaphor for the process of progressive memory loss. His words also provide insight into the implications of memory loss for man's illusory nature.

The second and third paragraphs provide more concrete details about the encounter, "Serían las diez de la mañana. Yo estaba recostado en un banco [...] había un alto edificio, cuyo nombre no supe nunca" (11), while at the same time adding more mystery to the tale. The adjectives "atroz" and "gris", the phrase "...cuyo nombre no supe nunca", and the symbolic image of the river all contribute to the presentation of the themes of memory and time. He states: "Sé que fue casi atroz mientras duró y más aún durante las desveladas noches que lo siguieron" (11). This statement purposely does not indicate the duration of the encounter nor how many nights followed. This too is a clue that the notion of time is defined as an infinite present. The word "atroz" in Borges, just like "vertiginoso" and "horroroso" are always direct references to the human condition. It then follows that the encounter itself is too a metaphor of the human condition. The word "gris" is indicative of insignificance and also describes life. The image of the river transporting large pieces of ice and the reference to Heraclitus prefigures the second theme of the story: time as an infinite present. Borges explicitly tells us: "El río hizo que yo pensara en el tiempo. La milenaria imagen de Heráclito" (11). The image of Heraclitus is a metaphor of life's constantly changing nature with the passage of time. Time is not portrayed as linear since the young and old Borges are engaged in a dialogue with a fifty-one year temporal gap. In addition, the notion of an infinite present represents an aspect of the existential crisis of the narrator that deals with the false nature of human personality. Since memory is unreliable and fragmented, man's identity can only be

defined through his own perception of himself. The passage of time does nothing to reveal to us a sense of self and undermines the belief that man gains a deeper understanding of himself with age. It is a perception we impose upon ourselves to give meaning to our existence. Julie James asserts that the reference to Heraclitus suggests "...a way of calling attention to the difficulty of linking time and reality to human existence" (145). Instead, Borges exploits the idea that fragmented memories are the only tools man has to construct a vision of himself that will inevitably remain partial and indistinct.

The fourth paragraph introduces another example of the technique of foreshadowing the theme. Borges states: "Sentí de golpe la impresión [...] de haber vivido ya aquel momento" (11). This statement prefigures the dual experience of the encounter by both the old and young Borges. The nature of their relationship is based on the fact that each one imagines the other as he wishes him to be, but we as readers only experience the old Borges' imagined younger self since he is the one narrating the story. What Borges implies is that the younger self is a figment of the narrator's imagination, which explains why Borges chooses to tell the story from the perspective of the old Borges. Furthermore, the story can only be told from the standpoint of the old Borges and not vice versa since one of the main priorities of the story is to develop the theme of the unreliability of memory, which heightens in old age. In a later dialogue between the two, the chosen narrative perspective becomes clear once we realize that the priority of the narrator is to recover his past self.

Moreover, the fourth paragraph also presents two apparent contradictions that highlight the illusory nature of the human subject. First, the narrator states that he is well rested: "Yo había dormido bien," and soon after attributes the feeling of *déjà-vu* that precedes the dialogue to lack of sleep: "Sentí de golpe la impresión (que según los psicólogos corresponde a los estados de fatiga) de haber vivido ya aquel momento" (11). Borges intentionally tricks us into thinking this is a contradiction until we realize that the act of sleeping is associated with that of forgetting which explains the narrator's sense of *déjà-vu*. The significance of this contradiction becomes clearer through the struggle for self-discovery that Borges develops in the dialogue between the old and young Borges. The second con-

tradiction occurs when the narrator states that he is alone: "No había un alma a la vista" (11), and immediately after, he hears the recognizable voice of the young Borges who appears next to him on the bench: "La voz no era la de Álvaro, pero quería parecerse a la de Álvaro. La reconocí con horror. Me le acerque y le dije: [...]" (11). Clearly, Borges does this to imply that "the other" is imaginary and is a figment of the narrator's imagination. This is later further emphasized when we realize that the old Borges is blind: "Cuando alcanzas mi edad habrás perdido casi por completo la vista" (16), another clue as to the imaginary nature of the young Borges. This is an inlaid detail that reveals to us that the narrator is unreliable. The detail also reinforces the central theme, an echo of Berkeley's idealism, which defines human identity as nothing more than a construct of the mind. Man's perceptions are what define his existence. Following the arrival of the young Borges, the emphasis now shifts to the juxtaposition of the fragmented memories of the narrator. He remembers only sounds and images: "Lo que silbaba, lo que trataba de silbar [...] era el estilo criollo de *La tapera* [...] el estilo me retrajo a un patio y a la memoria de Álvaro Melián Lafinur" (11). Borges is again prefiguring the theme of fallible memory since partial memory prevents us from complete knowledge of the self. Moreover, in the fourth paragraph of the opening Borges continues to treat the narrative as if it were a testimonial account of a commonplace encounter between two people. Just when we are convinced that this is the case, Borges inserts the word "horror" to refer to the singing voice. The word "horror" exemplifies man's awareness of his existence as an artificial construct that permanently discounts individuality and in addition is unsubstantiated due to our forgetfulness.

The final lines of the opening present more information about the narrator, who, as Agüera reminds us, comes in contact with his alter ego but who now also shifts from an observer to a participant (168). This shift demonstrates how the structure of the story reflects the theme. The narrator, like the reader, and like every man, is responsible for the construction of his own identity. The old Borges utters the key phrase in the opening of the dialogue: "En tal caso"(11). These words suggest that the old Borges is quick to assume the "other's" identity by his nationality, place and name. They also re-

mind us of man's comforting belief that such information defines human identity. Borges then subverts this notion soon after in the remainder of the dialogue. The effect of this statement is to shatter all notions of an orderly, comprehensible reality. An analysis of the body, climax and conclusion of the story will resolve the opening ambiguities and will reinforce the purpose of the mystery, prefiguration of the theme and clues about the narratorial stance. As Donald Shaw asserts:

[...] the point of the initial patterning is not really visible to the reader until the story is read through and we return to the beginning again for a closer look, to try to resolve some of our residual puzzlement. (33)

Let us now turn to the remaining sections of the story to bring to light the workings of the opening.

The dialogue between the old and young Borges is the body of the story. Its function is to underscore the fundamental paradox of the human condition in which forgetting is a crucial aspect of the formation of the self, but since we forget we cannot have a real sense of individuality. Consequently, this implies that the notion of linear time too is a construct that man creates to impose an order on his life. Instead, Borges reduces the concept of time to a series of instances. The key phrases that reveal these themes are: "*El hombre de ayer no es el hombre de hoy...*" (14) and "*Éramos demasiado distintos y demasiado parecidos*" (15). The entire dialogue between the young and old Borges is structured around these two statements since they reveal man's struggle to come to terms with this paradox. The function of the two "selves" is to symbolize the futility in trying to define a sense of self since we are not capable of fully remembering who we once were. At the same time, the doubling of the self reinforces the idea that any understanding one has of oneself can only take place in the moment since our sense of self is constantly changing, like the water in the river.

Initially, the young Borges creates tension in the dialogue by doubting the old Borges' assumption that they are the same person and refuses to believe him. His responses serve to express feelings of existential doubt about the reality of the human subject. He also functions to facilitate the old Borges' descriptions of his family, his-

tory, literature and writing. What is most significant about the young Borges is that our perception of him is filtered through the perspective of the narrator. Upon discovering at the end of the story that the narrator is responsible for imagining the young Borges imagining him as an old man: "El otro me soñó, pero no me soñó rigurosamente. Soñó, ahora lo entiendo, la imposible fecha en el dólar" (16), the dialogue between the two takes on an entirely different meaning. A second reading reveals that the narrator's loss of memory impedes his ability to reconstruct a vision of how the young Borges would have envisioned his older self because he does not remember enough about his younger self to do so. This implies that man is unable to distinguish between his younger and older self. The young Borges expresses this idea when he asks: "¿cómo explicar que haya olvidado su encuentro con un señor de edad que en 1918 le dijo que él también era Borges?" to which the older Borges ironically responds: "Tal vez el hecho fue tan extraño que traté de olvidarlo" (14). Given his increased memory loss in old age, he meditates on the discontinuity of the human personality. Borges, the author, exemplifies the old Borges' inability to accurately portray the young Borges through the narratorial voice's commentary.

The narrator continuously makes reference to the young Borges' silence, fear and indifference: "Asintió sin una palabra" (12), "Noté que apenas me prestaba atención. El miedo elemental de lo imposible y sin embargo cierto lo amilanaba," "Sin hacerme caso..." (13), "Casi no me escuchaba," "Aventuró una tímida pregunta" (14), "Sentí su casi temeroso estupor," "Se quedó mirándome", "Sin comprender me ofreció uno de los primeros" (15). The reactions of fear and indifference reflect the older Borges' vague perceptions of himself as a young man. The fact that the old Borges remembers sensorial images of himself as both a fearful and indifferent young man reaffirms the notion of the fallibility of memory. His perception of himself is a mental construction that reflects a moment in his young life when he struggled to choose between believing in the notion of the self as something real and comprehensible or accepting the underlying futility of the process of self-discovery.

While the old Borges represents every man who searches and yearns to define his individuality, the young Borges challenges this

notion and reveals its ultimate futility. The narratorial voice, on the other hand, reaffirms the futility of man's attempt to understand the self and reality. The old Borges, as a character, experiences this same doubt but conceals it from his younger self. His words provide an ironic commentary on the reality of the self that is further emphasized by the interventions of the narratorial voice, which is consciously aware of the true nature of the human condition and underscores the artificiality of the old Borges' words to his younger self.

The references to personal objects such as "un mate de plata", "una palangana de plata", and "dos filas de libros" (12), represent an attempt by the old Borges to prove the younger Borges' identity. At this point, Borges is still deceiving the reader by creating a superficially realistic tone to the story. At the same time, the old Borges is trying to deceive his younger self by falsely reassuring him that he eventually will discover who he is: "Mi sueño ha durado ya setenta años. Al fin y al cabo, al recordarse, no hay persona que no se encuentre consigo misma" (12). This must be read ironically, since the text contradicts itself to reiterate the fact that memory prevents self-discovery from ever truly taking place. The final image describes: "Un atardecer en un primer piso de la plaza Dubourg" (12) which the young Borges corrects as "Dufour" and is another inlaid detail that indicates that memory does not link us completely to our past; therefore we cannot ever have a true understanding of who we are. The old Borges' words are an ironic commentary that allows Borges, the author, to develop the theme of life as an illusion.

The initial ironic commentary reveals a significant aspect of Borges' philosophy. Borges postulates that man must accept the fact that he is an illusion that he himself creates just as he must live his life as if it had meaning and purpose. The old Borges states:

Si esta mañana y este encuentro son sueños, cada uno de los dos tiene que pensar que el soñador es él. Tal vez dejemos de soñar, tal vez no. Nuestra evidente obligación, mientras tanto, es aceptar el sueño, como hemos aceptado el universo [...].(12)

Although the old Borges seems to express doubt by suggesting that we are not always dreaming, he is really telling us that we are.

Borges maintains ambiguity in both the old and young Borges' characters to emphasize the universality of man's struggle to find meaning. The purpose of the dialogue underscores two main philosophical points. First, the notion that man must begin by being conscious of his inability to make sense either of the world or of himself. He must also understand that he can never develop a sense of individuality because of his capacity to forget. Second, he must accept this fact and as a duty, must continue to live as if he did understand, by believing and having faith in his illusion. One instance that justifies this assertion is when the narrator intervenes and expresses the old Borges' true feelings in response to the young Borges' question: "¿Y si el sueño durara?" (12). The narrator states: "Para tranquilizarlo y tranquilizarme, fingí un aplomo que ciertamente no sentía..." (12). The use of the verb "fingir" tells us that he is aware that reality is an individual construct of the mind. Later in the text, the narrator contradicts this philosophy when he concludes: "Comprendí que no podíamos entendernos [...] No podíamos engañarnos [...] cada uno de los dos era el remedo caricaturesco del otro" (15). Here, Borges reiterates Berkeley's idealism by reminding us that man's true understanding of himself is nothing more than what he perceives it to be.

Borges continues to set traps up until the very end of the story. There is an "apparent" climax, when the young Borges sees the date on the banknote, 1974, and discovers that he is a figment of the older Borges' imagination. His reaction when stating: "Todo esto es un milagro [...] y lo milagroso da miedo" (16) is illustrative of man's rationalization of the fact that he will never be able to interpret reality or himself. As a result, man associates the experience of creating an "imagined self" as something unusual or out of the ordinary. The narrator, who interjects soon after, contradicts this by stating: "Los dos mentíamos y cada cual sabía que su interlocutor estaba mintiendo" (16). Both selves are aware that they are figments of each other's imagination. Borges reaffirms the impossibility of constructing a perception of the self, neither past nor future, because we are continuously changing and our memory slowly deteriorates. This is evident in the fact that both selves are openly conscious of their own artificiality. Through the literary dialogue between the old and

young Borges, the narrator, who is a teacher, shows us that the only way to come to terms with our illusory nature is to accept it and shape our perceptions of ourselves, as we desire them to be. The closing remark by the narrator justifies his telling of the story. The act of telling the story reveals to us the horror of a man's journey to the center of his own labyrinth: "Todavía me atormenta el recuerdo" (16).

In short, "El otro" is an attempt by Borges to portray man's eternal yearning to understand the meaning of his existence. Contrary to Unamuno, who believed in the concept of individuality as the only means of salvation after death, Borges believes that man can only experience a sense of individuality in the infinite present. Due to the process of memory loss, man can never reconcile his past and present personality. The three themes of memory, time and the illusion of the self are all present in the framework of the opening section of the story. The opening section of "El otro" carries out three distinct tasks: it grasps the reader's attention by setting up a framework of recognizable reality and a tone that resembles a testimonial account of a past event. Second, the opening prefigures the philosophical theme of the self as illusion through the selection of the key words: "atroz" and "horror." At the same time, the theme of memory is also prefigured through the description of past sounds and images: the milonga, *La tapera*, the patio image, and the memory of Alvaro Lafinur. Third, Borges sets the tone of a detached and unreliable narrator, since he contradicts several aspects of the literary dialogue. In this respect, the narrator allows Borges to maintain ambiguity by blurring the line between fantasy and reality throughout the story. The conversation between the old and young Borges allows Borges, the author, to challenge the reader's convictions about human existence. He utilizes the young and old selves to emphasize the idea that one's insight into oneself is limited to sense perceptions and fragmented memory, in which chronological time plays no role. In doing so, Borges undermines our confidence in the belief that both memory and time are accurate indicators of our personality.

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