

The Quest for God in the Work of Borges

Annette U. Flynn

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In the wake of the account in recent biographies of Borges's increased preoccupation with spiritual matters during the last years of his life, there has been a marked interest among a number of critics in examining his work from this perspective. Dr Flynn's study of the subject of her title, *The Quest for God in the Work of Borges*, is a case in point. While she states in the prologue that her immediate concern is not with whether Borges was a believer, or not, but with demonstrating the presence of an intense involvement with spiritual matters throughout his writings, it soon becomes clear that her particular reading is driven by her own conviction regarding Borges's

final arrival at a notion of the divine increasingly understood in personal terms of Christian love and redemption.

Flynn is clearly not interested in repeating well-known observations regarding the many-layered, palimpsestic possibilities in Borges's work, considering counterarguments or looking for irony, let alone humour. Nor does she consider the presence of other religions in Borges's work. The originality of her approach is, precisely, its commitment to a particular reading, and her focused efforts in this respect. While there is an acknowledgement, regarding the complexity and unanswerability of fundamental questions related to this essential quest for God and an awareness of Borges's oscillation between affirmation and denial (3), Flynn's main interest is to tease out any indications in support of her premise.

Flynn's study of Borges's search for God is traced chronologically, thematically and by genre, starting with the early essays, then concentrating on the fiction and finally, looking at the poetry, seen as the culminating point of this quest. It is set out in three parts of unequal length, the first, by far the longest, dealing with those essays related to matters of time and individuality. The importance attached to these essays lies in that they are here considered as the matrix for the fiction.

Flynn gives a lot of background information on the metaphysical philosophies underpinning the essays, arguing Borges's attraction to philosophies that pose a challenge to materialist view of the existence of an independent, absolute reality in favour of a strongly pro-idealist stance. And yet, as Flynn admits, he ultimately departed from these philosophical tenets, too much of a sceptic to accept the (Berkleyan) notion of a divine being lending coherence to the universe through an unceasing perception of it.

Flynn perhaps overinterprets Borges's expressions of the denial of time and individuality, as in "la *nadería* de la personalidad" (my emphasis), insisting that he considers concepts of time and self "null and void" (11, 17, 58, 84, 119). This is, to my mind, a too absolutist interpretation in need of qualification. The repetitions of the piece "Sentirse en muerte" are seen as a sign of Borges's continued fascination with an exceptional experience of a spiritual moment, and are put forward, not altogether convincingly, as evidence of a refutation of his refutation of the significance of this

experience (as suggested in “And yet, and yet” the words heading the final paragraph of his famous essay “Nueva refutación del tiempo”, 84).

Part Two examines fictions specifically concerned with quests for an absolute vision of the universe. Most of these are seen, quite correctly, as failed quests in one sense or another, either as being forever elusive, or, for being ultimately unfulfilling. For example, in “La escritura del Dios”, Tzinacán’s eventual and successful decoding of the magic formula hidden in the jaguar’s spots does not achieve the desired release: Flynn links this failure to a loss of the magician’s individuality. Needless to say, there are many more broadly based readings of this stories offering equally negative interpretations for this outcome, yet I would agree with her assertion that this case is representative of an overall ambivalent presentation of “plenitudes” in Borges’s fiction. The unconsidered question remains to what extent this is a matter purely of theology or also of poetics.

There are some fine insights in this section, such as noting in “The Aleph” a hierarchy of divine objects in ever-increasing degrees of inferiority while the perfection of the divine reality remains inaccessible (133). “Pierre Menard” is seen, interestingly, as “a variant of the idea of the repetition of similar, non-identical experiences which Borges had formulated with ‘El tiempo circular’”, though, disappointingly, this idea is used simply to lend further support to the argument concerning Borges’s denial of individuality (141). Too often the stranglehold of Flynn’s teleological reading becomes problematical. For instance, “El inmortal”, one of Borges’s most complex and richly allusive stories, is here summarized as a fictional rendering of “La nadería de la personalidad” and as a re-writing of “sentirse en muerte” which, challenging textual and authorial identities, presents “an intimation of something approximating the soul” (143). This potentially valuable idea in the context of this discussion is not developed but is simply set beside a passage by the Christian mystic Chiara Lubich regarding the century’s existential crisis of self. The text quoted, moving and inspirational, displays a visionary fervour regarding a “new, more fully developed solution in which the specific gift of Christianity shines forth in all its power”. Flynn finds in these sentiments a philosophical as well as a spiritual answer to the questions posed by Borges in his spiritual quest, but this seems to be a *desideratum* rather than a reasoned conclusion.

By far the shortest section in this book is that devoted to its main hypothesis, Borges's increased spirituality in the final years of his life as expressed in the poetry. The discussion of a selection of poems (thoughtfully included as Appendix) is geared towards substantiating the book's initial claim and is examined accordingly.

Flynn reads poems which allude to Biblical texts with clear understanding of their complexities: for example, she admits that in 'Para una version del I King', "the divine is an inscrutable incomprehensible figure, sinister and threatening", so that the poem "seems to be putting forward a kind of spiritual and metaphysical hell" (159). My quarrel, once more, is with the interpretations that she imposes upon her findings. In this case, again a quotation from Chiara Lubich is invoked suggesting that the presentation of hell allows for a conscious choice of redemption. While these declarations of faith regarding what I assume to be to the Biblical text may be entirely relevant, a more explicit consideration of their particular pertinence to the treatment of hell in Borges's poetry needs to be clarified.

Similarly, "Eclesiastés, I, 9" (inexplicably referred to as "the Gospel passage") is referred to as a text which, "in its austerity, foreshadows the advent of Christ", therefore whose choice by Borges may be indicative of an intuition of a need for transcendence (160-61). Moreover, the conclusions Flynn reaches regarding the famously controversial last lines of "Cristo en la Cruz", "¿De qué puede servirme que aquel hombre / haya sufrido, si yo sufro ahora?" are similarly affected by her belief that Borges's awareness of his exclusion from participating in the faith of Christian Redemption will lead to "an *open* search for a personal encounter with God" (emphasis in the original. 171). Flynn's exclusive supporting source here is an article by Ignacio Navarro, published in *Criterio*, the organ of the Catholic church in Buenos Aires. This information is not meant in any way to empty of value the views expressed but to highlight the particular filter through which they have been arrived at. *The Quest for God in the Work of Borges* is addressed, in the final pages, to a wholly Christian audience, both in the normative tone it adopts and in its assumptions regarding Borges's spiritual longings (e.g.: Borges's search for the meaning of Christ's sacrifice to his own suffering is "the very question which every Christian has to keep asking", 172).

This is a work that is most likely to find understanding and favour in those readers sympathetic to its author's beliefs, but I suggest that readers from all persuasions and none might derive some unexpected benefit in having their own views challenged by an unusually impassioned and committed reading.

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