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## ***BORGES'S* THE DRAPED MIRRORS**

Critics have associated *Borges's* use of mirrors in his short stories with ideas of representation and repetition.[1] Although the problematic relationship between mimesis and literature is a central element of *Borges's* aesthetics, the symbol of the mirror can also be given a different interpretation, one that is too often ignored: In some borgesian texts, mirrors can also be said to symbolize narcissism. In "The Draped Mirrors,"[2] for example, *Borges* uses the Narcissus myth as a subtext for his story. But *Borges* does not merely rewrite the Greek story using contemporary characters, he also distorts the original story and transforms it into an entirely different one. The final result, as we will see, is a new interpretation of narcissism.

In Ovid's classical rendition of the myth,[3] Echo, a nymph, falls in love with Narcissus, only to be treated with indifference by him. She dies and disappears, and all that remains of her is her voice. Finally, Narcissus looks at himself in the waters of a pool and falls in love with his own image. *Borges* realizes a double inversion of the myth: the actions of the main characters in his story are similar to those of Echo and Narcissus, but the results are completely different. More important, the whole structure of the story has been reversed. Thus, at the beginning of "The Draped Mirrors," *Borges* (Narcissus) looks into a mirror, but instead of falling in love with himself, he is afraid of his own image.[4] In what is obviously an inversion of Echo's story, Julia is introduced "as a nameless, faceless voice," and later on she, or her body, "appears." [5] This time the two protagonists are at first indifferent to each other ("There was no love between us, or even pretense of love" [27]); at the end, instead of love for *Borges*/Narcissus, Julia feels hatred. In *Borges's* version of the myth, it is not Narcissus who becomes insane but Echo, and her insanity is also related to mirrors: "Now, I have just learned that she has lost her mind and that the mirrors in her room are draped because she sees in them my reflection, usurping her own.... This odious fate reserved for my features must perforce make me odious too, but I no longer care" (27-8). Here *Borges's* idea of narcissism is even more destructive than the traditional one: even though in the story "*Borges*" does not love his own image, he steals other people's images and substitutes his for theirs.[6]

In many other stories, *Borges* repudiates mirrors simply because of their ability to reproduce reality. But in "The Draped Mirrors," the dislike of mirrors is also explained as a precondition for narcissism, for once the narrator has recognized that his image is repulsive, he can only be narcissistic if he is no longer able to look at himself in a mirror.

### **NOTES**

1. See, for example, Jaime Alazraki, *Versiones, Inversiones, Reversiones: el espejo como modelo estructural del relato de Borges* (Madrid: Gredos, 1977) and Paul de Man, "A Modem Master," *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Jaime Alazraki (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987) 55-62.

2. Jorge Luis *Borges*, *Dreamtigers* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1964) 27-28.
3. Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1986) 83-87.
4. According to Rodriguez Monegal, *Borges*, fear of mirrors can be traced to his childhood. In his biography of *Borges*, Rodriguez Monegal also presents a psychoanalytical interpretation of the symbol of the mirror in *Borges's* texts. See Emir Rodriguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges. A Literary Biography* (New York: Paragon, 1978) 30-33.
5. *Borges* seems to be alluding to Ovid's narration of the Echo myth, which begins with the sentence, "She still had a body then, she was not just a voice" (Ovid 83, note 3 above).
6. The critic Juan Manuel Marcos has linked this idea of narcissism to *Borges's* modernist will-to-style. He argues that *Borges's* "stylistic narcissism" is so powerful that the only voice that we hear in *Borges's* short stories is his voice. *Borges* does not provide his characters with individual voices. It does not matter whether it is an old poor man in India or an illiterate gaucho in Argentina, they all speak like *Borges*; in other words, they have been deprived of their image. See Juan Manuel Marcos, rev. of *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Jaime Alazraki, *Revista Iberoamericana*, 140 (1987): 707.

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