

THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE IN THE POETRY OF JORGE LUIS BORGES

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The dramatic monologue, generally recognized as having been crafted by Robert Browning in the nineteenth century, became a major genre in English language poetry in the twentieth century. Honan points out that “The very term ‘dramatic monologue’ does not seem to occur in criticism before the latter part of the nineteenth century, and it is only recently that suggestions were first made—largely with Browning’s rather than with Tennyson’s or anyone else’s work in mind—that it was time to consider the existence of a new poetic class similar to but distinct from that of the lyric” (105). Martin further clarifies:

One cannot really say that the dramatic monologue was a dominant literary form in the nineteenth century. Much of its prestige derives from its later influence; in the mid nineteenth century, it was the central mode of expression for only one poet, Robert Browning. Nevertheless, Browning did not “invent” the genre in isolation. Tennyson wrote a small number of monologues before Browning did and continued to write new ones and tinker with the old ones throughout his career. (200)

Nevertheless, it has only been in the last seventy to eighty years that the dramatic monologue has been increasingly used in Spanish language poetry, both in Spain and Latin America. In Spain, although used by some earlier poets, the genre was promoted by some of the Generation of 1927

poets, primarily Luis Cernuda.¹ In Latin America, the genre seems to owe its introduction around the same time to the “Poema conjetural” of Jorge Luis Borges, originally published in his 1943 collection *Poemas*.² Among the numerous contemporary Spanish American poets to use the dramatic monologue, the most well known are Nicanor Parra, Enrique Lihn, Ernesto Cardenal, José Emilio Pacheco, Antonio Cisneros, and Oscar Hahn.

Despite its many variations as it evolved over the years, the dramatic monologue has several essential characteristics that define the genre. Curry identifies four basic elements: speaker, hearer, place or situation, and time and connections (placing the emphasis on the instant):

To understand a monologue ... the student must first answer such questions as, Who speaks? What kind of a man says this? To whom does he speak? Of whom is he talking? Where is he? At what point in the conversation do we break in upon him in the unconscious utterance of his life and motives? Then, last of all, -What is the argument? The general subject and thought will gradually become plain from the first question and the argument may be pretty clear before all the points are presented. (94-95)

Curry further clarifies:

All of the questions are not applicable to every monologue. Sometimes one has greater force than the others. Some monologues are given without any necessity of conceiving a distinct place; some require no definite time in the conversation; in a few the listener may be almost any one; but in some monologues every one of these questions will have force. (95)

Thus, in its simplest configuration, the dramatic monologue requires the creation of a character who is not the author and who addresses in the first person an implied listener, a second character, generally not the reader. There is an anecdote that contextualizes the monologue, often but not necessarily a moment of crisis or difficulty, and the language is generally direct and often quite colloquial. Critics of the genre have elucidated

1 The development of the genre in Spanish poetry has been well studied. That is not the case with Latin American poetry, however. The author of this study is currently undertaking this project.

2 “Poema conjetural” was first published in the literary supplement to the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Nación* on July 4, 1943. It was subsequently included in the volume *Poemas* (1943, 1952, 1958), *El otro, el mismo* (1964) and *Obra poética* (1964, 1966, 1967, etc.).

the differences between the nineteenth-century dramatic monologues of Browning and Tennyson, themselves quite distinct from one another, and those of the twentieth century, of T.S. Eliot, Pound, Edgar Lee Masters, to name the most frequently cited.

Borges was an avid reader and admirer of Browning. He referred to him repeatedly in several essays and poems³ and considered him one of the foremost precursors of modern literature (Burgin, 57). Perhaps the most recognized reference pertinent to our study is Borges's poem "Browning resuelve ser poeta," itself a dramatic monologue and belonging to the 1975 collection *La rosa profunda*, the volume that contains a great number of Borges's dramatic monologues, possibly in tribute to Browning. In this poem Browning, i.e. Borges, outlines his paradigm for the genre. First, and above all, the poem is a verbal creation, and the poet's mission is to restore the original magic of common everyday words:

Como los alquimistas
que buscaron la piedra filosofal
en el azogue fugitivo,
haré que las comunes palabras
—naipes marcados del tahúr, moneda de la plebe—
rindan la magia que fue suya
cuando Thor era el numen y el estrépito,
el trueno y la plegaria.
En el dialecto de hoy
diré a mi vez las cosas eternas. (16)⁴

Julie Jones, in her excellent article on Borges's adaptation of the Browning dramatic monologue "to suit his own ends" (208), aptly points out that the "naipes marcados del tahúr" is the title of the composition in "El Aleph" that does not win the literary prize and the "moneda de la plebe" is clearly the zahir of the Borges story with the same name (216). This "coincidence" underscores our stance that Borges is a presence lurking behind his Browning, or, as Borges himself might put it, Borges and Browning are mirror images of each other and they speak in unison in the poem.

3 See the Index to Borges of the University of Pittsburgh Borges Center for a list of citations: http://www.borges.pitt.edu/search_results.php?all-search=browning

4 All poems from *La rosa profunda* and subsequent volumes are quoted from Jorge Luis Borges. *Obra poética*, 3. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1995.

The second characteristic the speaker cites is the need to relinquish the lyric “I,” the Romantic self (“Viviré de olvidarme” 17) and replace it with the creation of characters: “Ser la cara que entreveo y que olvido” (17). Nevertheless, the use of the word “máscaras” for these characters reveals the special hybrid nature of their persona, for their creator is always hidden behind them; albeit in the shadows, his presence is felt. Furthermore, it is through the assumption of these characters as masks that the poet, the creator, realizes and sees himself for who he really is.

Máscaras, agonías, resurrecciones,
desejerán y tejerán mi suerte
y alguna vez será Robert Browning. (17)

Although the confessional Romantic “I” is abandoned in favor of the creation of the fictitious “I” of a personage, the dual voice of the monologue, i.e. that of the author as well as the character, is felt throughout. As Howe indicates: There is an “inherent dichotomy between the voice of the poem’s speaker and that of the poet, who is inevitably present [...] The words are simultaneously those of an identified individual and of the poet [...] This phenomenon of hearing two distinct voices in a single speech act, is referred to by Mikhail Bakhtin as dialogism” (8-9).

In fact, Borges’s voice and predilections are clearly visible in the words of his character Browning: the straightforward, prosaic syntax of the free verse; his usual lexicon: *naipes del tahur, moneda, laberinto, tejer y desejer la suerte*; the ironically inverted themes: *entrever y olvidar, la divina misión de Judas que acepta ser traidor* so that Jesus may become the savior; and the allusions and references of an intellectual and well educated author who speaks to the privileged reader: *alquimia, piedra filosofal, azogue, Thor, numen*. Furthermore, the essential components of the dramatic monologue cited by this poem in the voice of Browning more closely reflect those of Borges than of Browning himself. Browning created primarily fictitious characters, whereas Borges in his dramatic monologues prefers historical personages or mythological characters. In “Browning resuelve ser poeta,” the characters “Browning” cites are recognizable figures of our western tradition whose stories entail some of Borges’s favorite themes: Caliban, Judas, Policrates, the dual heritage of Persians and Romans, the ironic union of opposites (“seré el amigo que me odia” 17). The “real” Brown-

ing fully developed his characters with a special interest in psychological nuances. Borges, whose rejection of the notion of personality is well documented, tends to view the individual as a reflection of the archetype (all men are the same man, all creators, one creator). Borges's framing of the particular as reflective of a larger, more universal archetypal context, the essence of his *ars poetica*, is perfectly captured in the line "En el dialecto de hoy/ diré a mi vez las cosas eternas."

Borges, as numerous critics have pointed out, prefers plot and situation to character development, and he is particularly fascinated with what Jones has called the "epiphanic moment" (212), the climactic instant when man's true identity and destiny are revealed. Thus, this monologue, as is the case with many of Borges's dramatic monologues, shifts the emphasis from character development to the critical moment of decision, the moment when Browning decides to become a poet, i.e. chooses his identity. In Borges's work people's decision is often overridden by an ironic destiny that imposes upon them an identity contrary to their own choice and expectations, as is the case with his most famous dramatic monologue "Poema conjetural." In this poem Borges dramatizes the South American dilemma, the conflict between civilization and barbarity, or rather the ironic marriage of the two in the life of Francisco Narciso de Laprida, the archetype for "mi destino sudamericano".⁵

Perhaps Borges's most identifiable distinguishing characteristic is his insistence on the significance of perspective and interpretation. Borges re-reads and reinterprets literature, giving us his version, literally his "turning around" of a work. "Browning resuelve ser poeta" is precisely a re-reading and re-focusing of the genre of the dramatic monologue, and in his "own" compositions Borges reinterprets history in its critical as well as the seemingly insignificant Unamunesque "intrahistoria" moments. As Gunnar Thorgilsson (1816-1879) declares, the glorious battles and empires of history will always be consecrated in epics and drama, but for him, it is that moment of personal happiness he longs to remember:

La memoria del tiempo
está llena de espadas y de naves

5 Given that this poem is perhaps Borges's best known and has been repeatedly analyzed by several critics (Jones, Alazraki, Carilla, among others), I have chosen to simply refer to the poem without further discussion.

y de polvo de imperios
y de rumor de hexámetros
y de altos caballos de Guerra
y de clamores y de Shakespeare.
Yo quiero recordar aquel beso
con el que me besabas en Islandia. (140)

The dramatic monologue allows Borges not only to revisit and re-view the past but to actualize it, placing it in the present moment in all its dramatic intensity. A listing of the titles of his dramatic monologues⁶ reveals this predilection for a revisionist dramatization of history and culture, especially those lesser-known aspects, perhaps foreign to many of his readers:

- El hacedor* (1960): “El enemigo generoso” (Muirchertach, king of Dublin)
- El otro, el mismo* (1964): “Poema conjetural”
“Alexander Selkirk”
“Hengist Cyning”
“Adam Cast Forth”
- El oro de los tigres* (1972): “Tamerlán (1336-1405)”
“El advenimiento”⁷
- La rosa profunda* (1975): “Quince monedas”: “Un poeta oriental”
“Asterión”
“Un poeta menor”
“Génesis, IV, 8”
“Miguel de Cervantes”
“Macbeth”
“E.A.P.” [Edgar Allan Poe]
“Habla un busto de Jano”
“Brunanburh, 937 A.D.”
- La moneda de hierro* (1976): “Unas monedas”: “Mateo, XXVII, 9”
- Historia de la noche* (1977): “Alejandría, 641 A.D.”
“Endimión en Latmos”

6 Both Linares and Cervera include listings of the dramatic monologues of Borges. Their lists do not entirely coincide given their somewhat different definitions of the genre. My own list basically coincides with Linares’s, although we don’t always coincide on the volume from which the poems are taken.

7 Although the title doesn’t openly reveal the content, “El advenimiento” is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker is the painter of the Altamira caves.

	“Gunnar Thorgilsson (1816-1875)” ⁸
<i>La cifra</i> (1981):	“Descartes”
<i>Los conjurados</i> (1985):	“Góngora”

Borges’s characters are, on the whole, heroes, men of action engaged and victorious in battle (Magnus Barfod, Muirchertach, Omar I, Tamerlain, Hengist the King), men who have faced and overcome great challenges (Alexander Selkirk, Adam), renowned authors (Descartes, Cervantes, Góngora) and literary and mythological personages (Don Quijote, Macbeth, Asterion, the Minotaur). In a fashion typical of Borges, no distinction is made between authentic historical characters, literary personages, mythological figures, and purely fictitious, imagined creations, for all history is a human creation, all reality an interpretation and perception, the validity of which is entirely beyond our reach.

In the section “Museo” of *El hacedor*, Borges tests our inability to distinguish myth and fiction from reality by including five dramatic monologues apparently written by authors of other times and cultures that are, in fact, apocryphal, yet convincing creations of Borges’s own imagination and reflective of his obsessive themes. In *El otro, el mismo*, the dramatic monologues feature characters with dual identities, as the volume title indicates: Alexander Selkirk (Robinson Crusoe); Hengist Cyning (as seen in the epitaph on his tomb and in his own words as both traitor and hero); Adam (in the Garden of Eden and after); Cain (the mirror image of Abel). “Tamerlán” (*El oro de los tigres*) laments: “Busco mi cara en el espejo; es otra” (14).⁹ Linares points to a series of dramatic monologues in which the character is so much a mirror image of the author that he is almost indistinguishable from him since his life coincides with many aspects of Borges’s own biography: “El que guardó los libros” (*Elogio de la sombra*).

A large number of Borges’s dramatic monologues can be found in *El oro de los tigres* (1972) and *La rosa profunda* (1975), the volumes that marked Borges’s return to poetry as his eyesight increasingly failed him and he had to compose from memory with the aid of a reader, usually his mother, and later María Kodama. Borges’s return to poetry in the 1950s

8 I have been unable to determine whether Gunnar Thorgilsson (1816-1875) actually existed or whether Borges simply “dreamt” him using a typical Icelandic name taken from the poet warrior sagas he so loved.

9 All quotes from *El oro de los tigres* come from the Buenos Aires Emecé 1972 volume.

has been the subject of much discussion. Gertel dedicates an entire volume to his “retorno a la poesía” while Cheselka questions the real existence of a “lyrical hiatus” between 1930 and 1960 (121-48). What is unquestionable is that beginning in the mid-fifties Borges increasingly returns to poetry as his primary means of literary expression. Perhaps the transition from fiction to poetry was further facilitated by the very auditory nature of the genre of the dramatic monologue. In addition, the genre shares to a great extent many of the characteristics of the short story narrative Borges had been cultivating in terms of personages, plot, and a kind of dialogue, albeit one-sided, as is the case of the monologue. In fact, although the dramatic monologue clearly replaces narration with representation, the dramatic, theatrical, oral aspect of the genre interested Borges less. His characters speak as if they were writing; although the language he uses is simple, it is not colloquial. The characters think aloud, and, as in most of Borges’s short stories, they are ideas, not fully developed psychological beings. The characters of the Borges’s dramatic monologues share the major obsessive themes and often echo those of his most famous short stories, especially “Las ruinas circulares”: literary creation is parallel to divine creation. All human beings are characters in the dream of another who in turn is being dreamed by yet another in a series of reflecting mirrors. The created, i.e. dreamed, character sees himself as autonomous from his creator when in fact his every move has been manipulated in a destiny over which he has no control. In typical fashion, the two sides of the coin are lived simultaneously, Janus figures with two inseparable faces: at once the active subject and the passive object, oneself and the other. One freely chooses one’s path and identity yet ironically the pattern has already been predetermined by another. In the poem “E.A.P” Edgar Allan Poe dreams his most famous works, and in “Cervantes,” the Spaniard, dreams his Quijote (29). In a kind of companion poem “Ni siquiera soy polvo,” Alonso Quijano, who consciously fashions himself into Don Quijote, recognizes his dual fate as creator and created:

Ni siquiera soy polvo. Soy un sueño
 que entreteje en el sueño y la vigilia
 mi hermano y padre, el capitán Cervantes,
 que militó en lo mares de Lepanto
 y supo unos latines y algo de árabe...

Para que yo pueda soñar al otro
cuya verde memoria será parte
de los días del hombre te suplico:
Mi Dios, mi soñador, sigue soñándome. (137)

In the short poem “Macbeth” the character exists to vindicate the author: “Maté a mi rey para que Shakespeare/ urdiera su tragedia” (30).

The ironic twists of fate and the inversion of opposites so common in the short stories are present in the dramatic monologues as well. Cervantes declares that he has had both positive and negative experiences, and he considers his most positive his imprisonment since it was there that he dreamt the *Quijote* (29). And in the poem “El ingenuo” the character, echoing Borges’s fascination with violence, declares: “Me asombra que la espada cruel pueda ser Hermosa” (88).

The search for identity is at the core of every one of Borges’s dramatic monologues. As the blind man declares in “Un ciego”: “Pienso que si pudiera ver mi cara/ sabría quién soy en esta tarde rara” (45). In fact, blindness is a metaphor repeatedly used by Borges in the dramatic monologues and throughout his work since it expresses man’s inability to foresee his destiny or the ultimate meaning of life, although, as we know, in Borges’s case it is both a literal and figurative image.

And whereas Browning seeks to capture the critical moment employing such devices as “verbs of progressive aspect; present participles of dynamic verbs used as adverbs; adverbial phrases signifying temporary proximity” (Martin 86), Borges opts for the simple present tense or the simple preterit with few adjectives or adverbs: more than a specific instance or situation, Borges’s character faces Time (“El viento del tiempo” 84), reliving his past (“el tenue ayer” 78) in search of an explanation, a hidden meaning, or analyzing his present in pursuit of his ultimate destiny (and I say “his” since all characters are male). While it is fascinating to hypothesize about why Borges rarely chooses female protagonists (even “Emma Zunz,” “La intrusa,” and “Ulrica” are actually reflections of a male perspective and the role woman plays in male fantasies), and in fact, the biographies of Borges have attempted various dubious psychological explanations, it is probably safe to affirm that since voice is the essence of the dramatic monologue, Borges clearly felt more adept and comfortable with male characters.

One of the strategies common to dramatic monologues is “the technique of provoking unanswered questions, delaying the useful information that answers them as long as possible, and then, while supplying that information, raising new questions to start the process all over again constitutes one of the central rhetorical strategies of the dramatic monologue” (Martin 97). Borges on occasion delays the identity of his character, surprising the reader in the last few verses (“El” in *El otro, el mismo*; “El advenimiento” in *El oro de los tigres*; “Alejandría, 641 A.D.” in *Historia de la noche*). More often than not, however, he indicates directly in the title of the poem or in an introductory stanza or preface (“Poema conjetural,” “Milonga de Manuel Flores,” “Hengist Cyning”) who the speaker is, although he tends to leave the situation more vague since ultimately the idea the character represents overshadows his existence as a distinct and individual psychological entity.

Numerous characters populate Borges’s poetry, either as the speaker, the topic of the poem or the person addressed. Borges has actually toyed with all three voices: the first person speaker, the second person to whom one speaks, and the third person subject about which one is speaking. In the dramatic monologue, each of these has an important role. In Borges’s dramatic monologues, the speaker’s voice is the determining factor for the genre. The role of the implied listener in the dramatic monologues is less explicit than in Browning’s, and in fact, the audience to whom the subject directs his monologue can easily be interpreted as the reader. The listener is virtually absent from the poems and often the monologues seem more like soliloquies. There are a few dramatic monologues, however, in which there is a declared listener: “El enemigo generoso,” “Al hijo;” “Ni siquiera soy polvo;” “Gunnar Thorgilsson (1816-1875)”. Ironically, in a kind of corollary to the dramatic monologue genre, in an inordinate number of Borges’s poems that are not dramatic monologues and as early as in his first volumes and increasingly in the volumes beginning with *El otro, el mismo*, the poetic subject addresses a specific listener other than the reader. In this sense Borges’s poetry has always had a dramatic bent.

Borges has repeatedly underscored the symbiotic relationship between the author and the reader, the creator and the re-creator or interpreter: “El que lee mis palabras está inventándolas” (“La dicha,” *La cifra* 207). The text is the object that triggers the unique experience of each. While cer-

tainly Borges's work is enhanced by a well educated, "privileged" reader (to use the term Riffaterre coined in *The Semiotics of Poetry*), a reader who is able to understand the double entendres and the intertextual allusions, nevertheless, most of Borges's work, both in poetry and prose, can be read on multiple levels. Even in the most literal reading, where the reader is unaware of the numerous historical, literary, and even autobiographical references, the main theme is expressed so clearly through the plot and situation that its meaning becomes apparent even to the less discerning reader. Furthermore, Borges often includes notes to assist the reader with his more esoteric references. Unlike the footnotes to the short stories, where Borges toys with his readers giving them false references and leading them astray, the notes to the various volumes of poetry are genuine clarifications as to sources of inspiration.

After *La rosa profunda* Borges wrote fewer dramatic monologues, although he didn't entirely abandon the genre.¹⁰ In the later volumes he tends to opt for more generic types rather than the distinctly defined personages of the earlier volumes, archetypes of marginalized figures¹¹ whose true identity is precisely the opposite of the associated stereotype. The spy, the prisoner, the accomplice, the exiled one, the blind man, the innocent one, the inquisitor and the executioner are all victims of their fate, destined to be despised by their peers yet redeemed by their sacrifice and suffering for some greater and incomprehensible purpose. They adhere, to a great extent, to what Langbaum has called "the tension between sympathy and moral judgment" (85), an ambiguity clearly akin to Borges's inverted characterizations. The inquisitor declares: "Pude haber sido un mártir. Fui un verdugo" (84) and the spy laments:

10 The count is as follows: *El hacedor*: 5; *El otro, el mismo*: 7 (in addition to the 5 from *Hacedor*); *Seis cuerdas*: 1; *Elogio*: 2; *El oro de los tigres*: 9; *Rosa profunda*: 8; *Moneda*: 5; *Historia*: 4; *Cifra*: 3; *Conjurados*: 1.

11 Browning also had a predilection for marginalized characters whose redemption was generally perceived as perverse, according to Langbaum: "most successful dramatic monologues deal with speakers who are in some way reprehensible. Browning's contemporaries accused him of 'perversity' because they found it necessary to sympathize with his reprehensible characters" (85-86). He further points out that "The American poets, Robinson and Masters, use dramatic monologues to make us sympathize with misfits of the American scene, and Frost uses the form (often first-person narratives) to expose aberrations of mind and soul in New England. Eliot writes of asexuality and fear of life in 'Prufrock' and 'Portrait of a Lady'" (93).

En la pública luz de las batallas
 otros dan su vida a la patria
 y los recuerda el mármol.
 Yo he errado oscuro por ciudades que odio.
 le di otras cosas. (31)

Abjuré de mi honor,
 traicioné a quienes me creyeron su amigo,
 compré conciencias,
 abominé del nombre de la patria.
 me resigno a la infamia. (237)¹²

The conqueror, on the other hand, celebrates his courage and valor, despite the pain he has inflicted. He cares little for the ideologies his actions represented, and he openly rejects the black legend of his avarice. He is the heroic archetype of strength and bravery (repeatedly seen in Borges' cult of masculine power in his portrayal of the "barbarous" gaucho):

Ni Cristo ni mi Rey ni el oro rojo
 fueron el acicate del arrojito
 que puso miedo en la pagana gente.

De mis trabajos fue razón la hermosa
 espada y la contienda procelosa.
 No importa lo demás. Yo fui valiente. (85)

In one of the more unusual dramatic monologues, Borges made an inanimate object the subject of the poem: the key in East Lansing, Michigan. As it hangs on its keychain, it awaits its encounter with the lock for which it has been made, for the door it will open, building on both the literal and figurative meaning of key, *llave* and *clave*.

Borges's last dramatic monologue, "Góngora," collected in his last volume of poetry published in 1985, *Los conjurados*, is unique in its metrical pattern: Here Borges uses a series of rhymed ABBA hendesyllabic quatrains with a concluding couplet. The poem appears to be an attempt to "make peace" with his youthful ultraísta period with its emphasis on the metaphor as the poem's prime innovative strategy. Although the

12 This poem appears in both *La rosa profunda* and *La cifra*. The only variant in the two poems is the final line: in *La rosa profunda* the verb is in the past "Me resigné a la infamia", whereas in the later volume, *La cifra*, Borges opts for the verb in the present tense, making the infamy more pronounced and long lasting: "Me resigno a la infamia".

avant-garde poets of the period idolized the Spanish Baroque poet Luis de Góngora, Borges, even at the height of his ultraísta period, found him too ornate and excessive for his taste. In this poem, rather than alter his own view of Góngora, he presents a kind of *mea culpa* in the voice of Góngora himself as he renounces his hermetic labyrinthine poetry (“Hice que cada/ estrofa fuera un arduo laberinto/ de entretejidas voces, un recinto/ vedado al vulgo” [313]) and, just as Borges once did, returns to the simple and the commonplace, exclaiming: “Quiero volver a las comunes cosas:/ el agua, el pan, un cántaro, unas rosas... (314). In typical fashion, he uncovers his secret destiny, his cabalistic fate: “¿Quién me dirá si en el secreto archivo/ de Dios están las letras de mi nombre?” (314).

Once again Borges rewrites history: he has donned the mask of his speaker and assumed a dual identity, that of the seventeenth century Baroque Spanish poet upon whom he imposes his own preferred trajectory as a poet.¹³ It is almost as if the youthful Gongorino Borges has come full circle as he reviews in one of his last poems his life and his work in preparation for his encounter with his destiny, or as he so beautifully phrased the phenomenon in the epilogue of *El hacedor*:

Un hombre se propone la tarea de dibujar el mundo. A lo largo de los años puebla un espacio con imágenes de provincias, de reinos, de montañas, de bahías, de naves, de peces, de habitaciones, de instrumentos, de astros, de caballos y de personas. Poco antes de morir, descubre que ese paciente laberinto de líneas traza la imagen de su cara. (129)

As Borges’s eyesight progressively worsened and he was forced to work from memory, he increasingly used measured verse to facilitate the process. Although he never abandoned free verse (in fact, it is the predominant form in many volumes, namely *Elogio de la sombra*, *La rosa profunda* and *La cifra*), he accompanied its use with long enumerations and anaphora, a structural repetition akin in function to regular meter or rhyme. The trajectory of verse forms in the poetry of Borges and their relationship

13 In several interviews Borges indicates that he often uses this technique of donning the mask of another author to express concerns about his own work. This is the case with the poem “Gracián”, as he explained in an interview with Gonzalo Sobejano: “That is not a poem that makes fun of Baltasar Gracián. It’s a poem that makes fun of me. I am the Gracián of that poem and that poem is really an autocaricature, say. I never thought of the historical Gracián; I thought of myself” (Cortínez, 43).

to theme merits a study in and of itself. Borges repeatedly claimed that the subject dictated its verse form, and in the prologue to *La moneda de hierro*, he states: “Cada sujeto, por ocasional o tenue que sea, nos impone una estética peculiar” (70). Whether or not there is any visible pattern to his choice of verse form is a study yet to be undertaken. However, at first glance, there doesn’t appear to be a hard and fast rule. In some volumes of poetry, there is an overwhelming number of sonnets (almost evenly divided between Shakespearean and Petrarchan in *El hacedor* and *El otro, el mismo* and then increasingly Shakespearean), free verse poems, and rhymed hendecasyllable quatrains. These are gradually reduced after *La rosa* and *La moneda* and replaced primarily by free verse and unrhymed hendecasyllables as well as the occasional milonga. *El oro de los tigres* includes tanka and *La cifra* also includes haiku.

In the prologue to *La moneda de hierro*, Borges indicated his desire to further explore both free verse and the sonnet: “creo, acaso con análogo ingenuidad, que no hemos acabado de explorar las posibilidades indefinidas del proteico soneto o de las estrofas libres de Whitman” (69). Given the fact that dramatic monologues purport to capture speech (despite Borges’s predilection for a rather formal style of oral expression, as can be seen in his lexical choices), the majority (26) are written in free verse. Some of the dramatic monologues (7) abandon free verse in favor of unrhymed hendecasyllables, but it is the hendecasyllabic sonnet that is the second most common form Borges used in his dramatic monologues, especially those of *El otro, el mismo*, *La rosa profunda* and *La moneda de hierro* (10). Six are structured in the form of the Shakespearean or English sonnet (i.e. three quatrains closed by a rhyming couplet), using the final couplet either as a conclusion to the aforesaid (“Al hijo,” “Habla un busto de Jano,” “Un ciego,” “Una llave en East Lansing,” “El inquisidor”) or to surprise the reader with a climactic revelation of who the speaker actually is (“Él”). Although structurally Borges follows the English sonnet pattern of 3 quatrains and a rhyming couplet, he does not adhere strictly to the standard Shakespearian rhyme scheme of ABABDCDEFEFFGG. Rather he prefers the ABBACDDCEFFEGG pattern with enclosed ABBA rhyme common in the classical Spanish sonnet. Borges generally reserves the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet (divided into two parts: octave + sestet or the more common Spanish version of two quatrains followed by two tercets) for speak-

ers whose identity is captured in the title: “Alexander Selkirk,” “Adam Cast Forth.” In each of these poems, the quatrains present the past experience (Robinson Crusoe lost on the island; Adam recalling Paradise) and the tercets, the present (Crusoe rescued and Adam in exile on Earth). Both protagonists have dual identities; both a crucial dividing line separating their former lives from their current ones. The structure of the Petrarchan sonnet seems, therefore, more appropriate for this subject than the Shakespearean with its climactic concluding couplet. Borges aptly chooses the classical Spanish sonnet, based on the Petrarchan model, for “El conquistador,” given its Spanish theme. Borges also uses the Petrarchan sonnet with other poems of Hispanic theme: “A un viejo poeta” (Quevedo), “Son los ríos” (a reference to the “Coplas” of Jorge Manrique), and “El testigo” (Don Quijote). This, however, is not always the case, as is evident in “Sueña Alonso Quijano,” “Lectores,” “Rafael Cansinos-Assens,” and “Andalucía,” all of which are Shakespearean sonnets. Although Borges structures his sonnet in the Petrarchan fashion (either an octave and sestet or two quatrains and two tercets), he takes liberty with the standard Petrarchan rhyme scheme of ABBAABBA with its variants in the tercets. His most common rhyme scheme is ABBACDDCEEFGGF, where the rhyme pattern in the tercets implies two distinct tercets or one sestet, but the syntax of the verses at times creates a kind of couplet between the first two quatrains and the final four verses, which can be seen as a final quatrain, thereby creating a kind of hybrid between the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan sonnet. In “El ingenuo” Borges experiments with a free version of the Petrarchan sonnet: two quatrains with the same feminine rhyme in ABBA pattern followed by six verses composed of three distinctly rhymed couplets. The poem is thus efficiently divided into two parts: the quatrains capture the worldly events that highlight the day and the three concluding couplets, the intimate surprises (“me asombra”) of personal significance only to the speaker. In the dramatic monologues of *La cifra*, Borges returns to free verse using enumerations and anaphora to emphasize the theme, create the rhythm, and assist his memory.

An analysis of several representative dramatic monologues from different volumes can serve to illustrate Borges’s use of this paradigm. “Brunanburh, 937 A.D.” from *La rosa profunda* is a dramatic monologue written in free verse. As Borges’s note in the volume indicates, the speaker

is a Saxon soldier who fought in the battle that established England as an Anglo-Saxon nation, the Battle of Brunanburh between the kingdom of Wessex (the West-Saxons under King Athelstan) and a coalition of Danes, Scottish Celts and Scandinavian troops lead by the Viking Olaf, ruler of Norse Dublin. Given his penchant for the epiphanic moment of revelation, Borges has chosen a critical moment in the history of what was to become the united nation of Britain, the victory of Christian Anglo-Saxon King Althestan over his Celtic and Norse enemies, a battle that is the subject of an old English poem. Yet rather than focus on the historical importance of the event, as the title implies will be the theme, Borges chooses the seemingly trivial “intrahistoria,” the personal significance of the event as part of the human experience. The speaker addresses the wife of the enemy soldier he has just killed. Rather than exult over the historic victory of his troops, he concentrates on the personal loss his enemy’s wife will feel when she experiences her husband’s absence, finding herself alone in their marriage bed. The poem opens with a simple short five-syllable direct line: “Nadie a tu lado.” No background has been given other than the title. The speaker is not identified. Clearly, the theme is personal loss, human pain, presented out of its historical context, thereby universalizing the experience, making the particular event the archetype of human loss, a constant practice in Borges’s work. The poem continues with the speaker narrating the events in a very stark and direct prose style, capturing the bare facts with complete sentences and strong verbs: “Anoche maté a un hombre en la batalla/ La espada entró en el pecho [...] / Rodó por tierra.” The speaker refers to the enemy not as the woman’s husband but simply as the anonymous “un hombre,” once again underscoring the universality rather than the peculiarity of the experience. He pays tribute to the worth of his enemy (“Era animoso y alto, de la clara estirpe de Anlaf”), yet his description of his death emphasizes man’s ultimate insignificance as he becomes nothing more than a thing, a thing for the crows to feed on, as the repetition and line split underscore: “Rodó por tierra y fue una cosa./ una cosa del cuervo.” The next six lines address the wife, “mujer que no he visto,” again not a particular woman but the anonymous woman as wife, the archetypal role taking precedence over the individual. The lines begin with “en vano” followed by the strong “no” that initiates the subsequent lines, again emphasizing loss, over which we have no control. The penulti-

mate verses “Tu lecho está frío/ Anoche maté a un hombre en Brunanburh” return us to the beginning of the poem, framing the entire composition with the historical action and its personal consequence. The variant in the final verse now incorporates the title and completes the picture. The free verse allows the poet to narrate the actions in long verses of nine to fifteen syllable lines, while the human experience of loss and absence is captured primarily in short verses of five to seven syllables.

For “Ni siquiera soy polvo” from *Historia de la noche* Borges chose a long series of blank unrhymed hendecasyllables. The syntax is prosaic with simple direct phraseology, no hyperbatons, few adjectives, primarily verbs and nouns. The absence of rhyme contributes to the natural orality of the discourse. The choice of hendecasyllable over free verse gives the poem a somewhat classical Spanish rhythm that perhaps seemed to Borges more appropriate for the speaker, Alonso Quijano. This is a poem of multiple identities, over which the speaker has limited control. The poem begins with the stark declaration “No quiero ser quien soy”¹⁴ as Alonso Quijano rejects his historical reality (“siglo diecisiete, Castilla, hombre entrado en años”) and chooses to fulfill his dream of knighthood by becoming one of the “cristianos caballeros [que] recorrían/ los reinos de la tierra, vindicando/ el honor ultrajado o imponiendo/ justicia con los filos de a espada” (137) about whom he has read in many contexts: the Holy Grail, Mohammed, Amadís and Urganda. Quijano seeks to choose his identity rather than accept the one his historical moment has imposed upon him, and he will give himself a name: “No sé aún su nombre. Yo, Quijano,/ seré ese paladín. Seré mi sueño.” Despite the assuredness and strong will with which he creates himself, however, he recognizes that his chosen identity is only a dream, a fictitious and fragile unreality.

As in many of his detective stories, Borges does not identify his speaker. Rather he gradually unfolds specific details to allow the reader to slowly identify the speaker even before he himself finally announces his name a little more than halfway through the text. Furthermore, Quijano never

14 A line reminiscent of Neruda’s “Sucede que me canso de ser hombre,” although with a very different meaning: Borges confronts the dilemma of man’s uncontrollable destiny, whereas Neruda expresses contemporary human anguish in an absurd and meaningless society.

uses the name “don Quijote” because the flesh and blood historical reality of Alonso Quijano supersedes his intangible invented self. Despite his efforts, Man cannot choose his own identity. He is at the mercy of another who allows him to be. Borges’s speaker is not afforded Hamlet’s renowned dilemma to choose “To be or not to be.” His reality is in the hands of another. As facing mirrors technique of “Las ruinas circulares” (a duplication technique also known as the Chinese box, Russian doll, concentric circles), Borges places the parallel figures of God the creator/Cervantes the author alongside one another as they dream their creations, man/fictional character Alonso Quijano, who in turn both attempt to dream their own chosen identities, only to find that these have no substance (“Mi cara (que no he visto)/ no proyecta una cara en el espejo”), not even the humiliating Biblical dust that man ultimately becomes. The title “Ni siquiera soy polvo,” haunts the text like an echo throughout, as the speaker attempts to define his other, his chosen self. Once again, Borges’s protagonist is at once a particular individual as well as an archetype: Alonso Quijano’s fate is that of all men.

In the case of the dramatic monologues in sonnet form, it is illuminating to contrast Borges’s use of three sonnet forms: the Shakespearean sonnet (“Él” from *El otro, el mismo*), the Petrarchan (“Adam Cast Forth” from *El otro, el mismo*), and a freer version of the Petrarchan (“El ingenuo” from *La moneda de hierro*). In “Él” Borges once again hides the identity of the speaker with the generic pronoun of the title, which, as it turns out, is a reference to God, “el Eterno,” rather than to the speaker, whose identity is revealed in the closing couplet of the sonnet. The structure of the Shakespearean sonnet allows Borges to develop the main theme of the poem in the three quatrains, with their three repeated rhyme patterns, ABBA / CDDC / EFFE. Each quatrain is composed of one main phrase with the verse lines united by the enjambment of the first three lines in the first two quatrains and in the third quatrain, the first two lines. Each quatrain is capped by a summarizing clarification: “Él es la luz, lo negro y lo Amarillo;” “Las negras hidras y los tigres rojos;” “Las porfiadas raíces del profundo/ cedro y las mutaciones de la luna.” The theme of the quatrains is the constant oversight¹⁵ and presence of God (“Es y los ve”) who is all

15 Borges’s emphasis on sight as conferring reality coincides with his concept of blindness as a dream world or a world of the mind and an escape from the realities of the surrounding physical world.

and whose “incesantes ojos” see all. He sees the listener whom the speaker addresses (the still unidentified “tú” of “tu carne”), and his presence is felt in all aspects of the universe, positive and negative or simultaneously both positive and negative (“el brillo del insufrible sol”), expressed in the Biblical “Él es la luz, lo negro y lo amarillo” and the terrifying “las negras hidras y los tigres rojos.” God is not only the creator and origin of all things, but the embodiment of them as well: “No le basta crear. Es cada una/ de las criaturas de Su extraño mundo.” It is the rhyming couplet that completes the Shakespearean sonnet, however, that permits Borges to climactically reveal the identity of the speaker as Cain (and the listener as Abel) and enunciate his startling conclusion that God is present not only in Heaven but in Hell as well. The polar opposites, Cain and Abel, Heaven and Hell, are paradoxically united into those inseparable complements that characterize Borges’s world view.

For “Adam Cast Forth,” also from *El otro, el mismo*, Borges chose the Petrarchan sonnet, although he departs from the traditional rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA that tends to unite the quatrains and substitutes a rhyme scheme he often employs in his Petrarchan sonnets: ABBA CDDC followed by EEF GGF, thereby employing more than the standard Italian maximum of five rhymes. Nevertheless, the repeated pattern tends to unite the quatrains as is also the case with the two tercets, effectively dividing the poem into two parts, reflecting Adam’s dual identity (before and after the critical moment of exile from Paradise): “el pasado de que este Adán, hoy mísero, era dueño.” In the quatrains Adam recalls the Garden of Eden yet questions its true existence, given that it has become only a vague memory for him, perhaps a dream, but he goes on to affirm its reality (“Pero yo sé que existe y que perdura”) only to declare in the volta verse that initiates the tercets that despite its existence, Heaven is no longer accessible to him: his punishment has banished him from Heaven and relegated him to earth and civil (“incestuosas”) wars. The final tercet further develops this idea by uniting, in a sense, past and present with the recognition that the very experience of having once touched Heaven is truly what matters. The two part structure of the Petrarchan sonnet allows for the development of the theme of the duality of Adam’s experience. Since from the start the title identifies the speaker and his circumstance, there is no suspense or dis-

covery, thereby negating the need for the climactic revelatory culmination of the rhyming couplet that closes the Shakespearean sonnet.

Finally, in “El ingenuo” (from *La moneda de hierro*) Borges opts for a kind of free version of the Petrarchan sonnet. There are still two quatrains and two tercets (or perhaps one sestet), but the rhyme scheme and syntactical structure actually indicate an alternate arrangement that closes the sonnet with three rhyming couplets: ABBA/ABBA/CCDDEE. The traditional volta verse of the Petrarchan sonnet is the last line of the octave (“A mí sólo me inquietan las sorpresas sencillas”) that introduces the anaphoric enumeration of the “me asombra” listing. Once again the two part structure of the Petrarchan sonnet aptly captures the confrontation between the grandiose moments in history and nature and those minor, almost trivial, moments that symbolize Borges’s personal concerns: the secret and almost magical sense and logical organization of matter (“Me asombra que una llave pueda abrir una puerta,” a line that echoes several in “Una llave en East Lansing”: “Hay una cerradura que me espera/ [...] / Alguna vez empujaré la dura/ puerta y haré girar la cerradura”); the awareness of one’s actual physical reality (“me asombra que mi mano sea un cosa cierta”); the obsession with the paradox of time and space as seen in the contradiction of Zeno’s arrow simultaneously in motion and at rest (“me asombra que del griego la eleática saeta/ instantánea no alcance la inalcanzable meta”); the ambiguous nature of courage and valor in battle, cruelly violent yet heroically beautiful (“me asombra que la espada cruel pueda ser hermosa”); and finally, the merging of physical and symbolic reality in Borges’s favored symbol of the rose. The title of the poem underscores the “innocent” candor of the speaker who prefers the simple to the grandiose, a hallmark of Borges’s *ars poetica*.

Borges’s choice of different verse forms for his various dramatic monologues thus aptly illustrates his conviction that the theme drives the form. Furthermore, he carefully molded the dramatic monologue genre to his own idiosyncrasies and obsessions evident in much of his poetry. While he attempted to capture the orality of the dramatic monologue through his prosaic syntax, the avoidance of hyperbatons, and a flowing rhythm enhanced by enjambment and echo-like word repetitions, his language is a combination of direct and simple words and phrases interspersed with language characteristic of a well-educated intellectual with a predilection

for words more appropriate to written expression: “la avara suerte me ha deparado” (136), “carne célibe” (137). He often chooses verbs more commonly used in their noun form: “El año me tributa mi pasto de hombres” (28); “Cada aurora (nos dicen) maquina maravillas” (88); “fabularon los hombres...plasma el sueño” (121); “los libros que historian cabalmente las empresas (136); “Un hombre ciego en una casa hueca/ fatiga ciertos limitados rumbos” (163). His choice of adjectives, quite often as epithets preceding the noun they modify (“Cruels estrellas y propicias estrellas/ presideron la noche de mi génesis” (29); “el errante soldado” (85), “la pagana gente” (85); una vaga sobrina analfabeta (136)) reveals a preference for alliteration as well as abstraction (“la terca tierra,” “La primera de las pesadas puertas de hierro” (30); “públicas pesadillas” (88); “cristianos caballeros recorrían” (137), “adarga antigua” (137)). Borges himself recognized the nature of his poetry in the prologue to *La cifra*: “Al cabo de los años, he comprendido que me está vedado ensayar la cadencia mágica, la curiosa metáfora, la interjección, la obra sabiamente gobernada o de largo aliento. Mi suerte es lo que suele deominarse poesía intelectual” (179), and his manipulation of the genre reflects the very concerns and strategies employed in his prose works, both narrative and expository. His dramatic monologues reiterate his favorite themes and symbols and give voice to characters and historical periods repeatedly treated in his work. Furthermore, Borges’s use of the dramatic monologue is not only reflective of the emphasis on orality and the avoidance of the Romantic lyric subject characteristic of contemporary Latin American poetry after 1950, but in fact, prefigure and may even have served to ignite the revival of a genre increasingly employed by Latin American poets of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

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