

# The poet and his poetic persona: two sonnets by Jorge Luis Borges

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How does one approach so complex a subject as the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges? One possible key to the appreciation of his poetic work, itself often a meditation on poetry and the relationship between the poet and his work, lies in the many statements that he made about poetry. We find these not only in his poems, but also in lectures, interviews and essays where he expounded his ideas on the subject. Poetry was magical and beyond reason for Borges<sup>1</sup>, and therefore he never formulated a rigid poetic theory; however, in the prologues to his collections of verse, we find what almost amounts to an aesthetics of poetry.

To gain a perspective on the two poems which we shall examine, which concern the relationship between the poet and his poetry, a recurring theme in Borges' poetry, it is perhaps useful to have a rough outline of the figure of the poet as it appears elsewhere in Borges's writings. The first poem we shall examine, 'Camden, 1892', was first published in the collection *El otro, el mismo* (1964). In this volume there is a poem about poetry and the poet, 'Arte poetica'. According to it, the central justification of poetry, and the poet's task, is:

convertir el ultraje de los años  
en una música, un rumor y un símbolo.<sup>2</sup>

The fictionalization of reality, turning it into literature, is not

unique to poetry; this process is also part of the prose writer's craft. However, the poet must also transform 'the outrage of the years' into a form of music. Music was perhaps, for Borges, the one art form in which form and content were one and the same thing, inseparable. In the prologue to *El otro, el mismo* he expanded this idea:

Pater escribió que todas las artes propenden a la condición de la música, acaso porque en ella el fondo es la forma, ya que no podemos referir una melodía como podemos las líneas generales de un cuento.<sup>3</sup>

Poetry is, then, a type of writing more essential than prose, where the form of the poem does not point to something outside of itself, but rather points to itself, the poem.

The poet has to convert his experience of reality into material for poetry: for Borges, poetry was not only an occupation, a particular form of writing, but also a way of seeing, of thinking. In the prologue to *El oro de los tigres* (1972), he wrote:

Para un verdadero poeta, cada momento de la vida, cada hecho, debería ser poético, ya que profundamente lo es.<sup>4</sup>

The ideal poet would have poetry as the center of his existence. Poetry does not come from the poet himself, according to Borges, but "is given to the poet"<sup>5</sup>, probably by the Muse, or perhaps by the Holy Spirit or the subconscious; Borges considered the poet to be the instrument of the Muse.<sup>6</sup>

Poetry is, then, a presence, an awareness and a mystery which takes over an individual's life and transforms it. The man who writes the poems (the poet) becomes the figure in the poems (the poetic persona); the latter survives the former. In both the sonnets which we shall examine, we can see this process taking place: in 'Camden, 1892' we read of the poet Whitman, and in the later 'On his blindness' we read of Borges himself.

'Camden, 1892,'<sup>7</sup> is a typical example of Borges's use of the sonnet form. In this poem he uses plain language to write about a poet, Walt Whitman, about whom he has said in interview:

Walt Whitman is compounded of Walt Whitman, the man, of Walt Whitman the myth, and also of the reader, because he thought of the reader as being also the hero of the book.<sup>8</sup>

In the present poem we have the three aspects — the poet, the poetic persona and the poet as reader — of Whitman, the North American poet of democracy, who died in 1892. The poem is written in a style recalling a cinematic technique; our gaze is directed around the room, absorbing the atmosphere, until it finally rests upon Whitman in the final line, where the poem finds its climax. Perhaps because the cinema had its 'golden age' as a mass medium in North America this technique is particularly apt here.

Let us examine the poem. It is written in strict sonnet form, with the rhyme scheme *abba cddc effe gg*. The last two lines are divided from the previous twelve by means of their sound: they end in a consonant, while the others end in vowels. These lines are spoken by 'Whitman':

Casi no soy, pero mis versos ritman  
La vida y su esplendor. Yo fui Walt Whitman.

These lines have a defiance about them because the poet, tired and worn out, is near his death; however, the poet is confident of the poetic persona he has created continuing. The dying poet admits to being near the end, but his verses — which will outlast him — 'ritman/ la vida y su esplendor', things which the poet will shortly be no longer able to experience. This leaving behind of life, with all its richness, itself the subject of much of Whitman's poetry, is heightened, not with sorrow, but with a dignity expressed by the verb in the last sentence: 'Yo fui Walt Whitman'. No more; the poet is about to die, old but fulfilled, because when he dies his poems shall bear his name.

Ironically, the poem about the poet at the end of his life begins with images of the morning; although the poet is dying, the poetic persona is beginning its autonomous existence. Whitman — like Borges — tended to incorporate changes in successive editions of his work, and when the poet died, his interfering in the poetic persona's existence would end. The only existence of the poet would be in his poetry, as a poetic persona; Borges is writing about this aspect of Whitman, as he could only know Whitman through what the poet left as poems, the poetic persona.

The morning imagery is contrasted with the tired old man. The first line concerns smell; this of course does not fit in with

the visual cinematic technique we find here, but 'el olor del cafe' could be suggested, alluded to visually in a film, just as the smell can only be alluded to in words. The second image, the smell of the newspapers, is doubly significant: Whitman, the vagabond poet, was in real life a journalist. This journalist — unlike the poetic persona he created, for whom life was a stimulating experience — would know 'El domingo y su tedio'. Sunday is characterized here as a tedious day; this contrasts with the coffee and the fresh newspaper, which point not to tedium but to input and stimulus.

So far we have the two Whitmans; although the poet is about to die, for the poetic persona it is the beginning of a new day, and in the newspaper there is 'esa vana/ publicación de versos alegóricos/ de un colega feliz'. Here we have Whitman as a reader, and as the reader of his own work; the poet reads the work of his 'colega feliz', of his poetic persona. In contrast to the freshness of the preceding images, there is the 'vana publicación'; 'vana' as although the poems were published by the poet, their publication cannot ease the physical process of ageing, and they help only the survival of the poetic persona. The next image is also contrastive: after all the newness we find

. . . El Hombre viejo  
Está postrado y blanco en su decente  
Habitación de pobre.

The poet is tired and poor; the verses which he is so proud of at the end have brought him no material reward. 'Ociosamente/ mira su cara en el cansado espejo' is the last line in this section of the poem. The man is 'postrado' in bed; the mirror he looks in is the verses which were written by 'un colega feliz'. Here we have Whitman as the reader of his own work, viewing his own face — his identity, which only exists in his poetry — in the 'cansado espejo'. The mirror is the allegory of the verses, 'versos alegóricos', which is tired because his poetic work is almost finished, exhausted. The verses have come in with the new newspaper, fresh and at the beginning of the day, of their life, while he, at the end of his, has finished.

At this moment the poet has a realization:

Piensa, ya sin asombro, que esa cara  
Es él. La distraída mano toca  
La turbia barba y la saqueada boca.

He finds himself in the poems; he is no longer surprised by this as he has spent a long time as a poet, creating a poetic persona throughout his work. The hand which wrote the poems touches the mouth that figuratively speaks in the poems, 'saqueada' symbolizing the idea that although the poetry, the poetic persona, has benefited from this relationship, it has been at the expense of the poet. The next line intensifies this image:

No está lejos el fin. Su voz declara:  
Casi no soy, pero mis versos ritman  
La vida y su esplendor. Yo fui Walt Whitman.

The 'vana publicación' has not alleviated the poet's suffering, on a physical level; however, the man sees himself reflected in the poems, recognizes himself in them. The poet's ultimate aim is to be the poetic persona; the act of dying destroys the poet, leaving the poetry, the poetic persona in its purest form. As the old poet discovers himself to be more a textual phenomenon than a physical person, he can die happily at one with himself.

In 'Camden, 1892' Borges writes of a poet about to die; in *Los Conjurados* (1985) his last book of poems, there is a poem, 'On his blindness', which deals with Borges himself in a similar light. This poem is also written as a sonnet, with the same rhyme scheme as 'Camden, 1892' and again the final couplet is used to make a statement which sums up and punctuates the poem, a climactic device. In 'Camden, 1892' Whitman searches for and finds his poetic self in his poetry; there Borges writes of a character which he knows through poetry. In the present poem he writes of the relationship between himself and his poetic persona; Borges has always maintained that the two have a symbiotic relationship.

The poem opens at the end of the poet's life:

Al cabo de los años me rodea  
una terca neblina luminosa

que reduce las cosas a una cosa  
sin forma ni color. Casi a una idea.

The poet's world through blindness has become abstract and non visual; his is a world inhabited by ideas. The poem continues:

La vasta noche elemental y el día  
lleno de gente son esa neblina  
de luz dudosa y fiel que no declina  
y que acecha en el alba.

The blind poet finds his life reduced to doubt, a faithful doubt which accompanies him, day and night. Night is often a symbol in Borges for fiction, imagination, the filling in of a gap in man's world by his imagination or creative powers. This idea is particularly developed in his *Historia de la noche* (1977). Both our subconscious, irrational imagination, and our more rational side, the 'día/lleño de gente', our interior and external selves, constitute this 'neblina'. The image of 'día/ lleño de gente' suggests Borges's life as a celebrity in Argentina, ironically so, as his fame was on account of his contribution to the world of 'la noche', to literature. Beyond fact and fiction, day and night respectively, Borges sees the same thing: the 'neblina de luz dudosa y fiel'.

In contrast to the image of Whitman seeing himself in the 'cansado espejo', here we find:

. . . Yo querría  
ver una cara alguna vez. Ignoro  
la inexplorada enciclopedia, el goce  
de libros que mi mano reconoce,  
las altas aves y las lunas de oro.

The reward for years spent writing poetry is not here a confirmation, or a revelation, of the poet's identity; rather it is a growing doubt, which further burdens the poet losing his power of sight. This prevents him from appreciating fully both the world of 'day', 'el día/ lleño de gente', here also expressed as 'las altas aves', and the world of the 'night', literature. Unable

to read, the latter has become a sensation only for his hands; both worlds are symbolized in 'las lunas de oro' and in the 'enciclopedia'. These are frequent images in Borges's poetry. The encyclopaedia, apart from being an entertainment, is also a way of attempting to order the universe, like a library, and is a rewriting, a fictionalization of observations which in his single lifetime an individual could not make, but which have been deposited over the ages by mankind. Borges, in being separated from the encyclopaedia, is cut off from civilization, from a particular view of the world, and is left to his 'neblina' with its doubt. The 'lunas de oro' are both moons and poetry; the moon is a frequent symbol of poetry in Borges, while 'oro' is a symbol of literary genius. As the blind Borges relies on other people to dictate his poems to, as he cannot see to write, his blindness may also have cost him lines of poetry which he has forgotten before he has the chance to dictate them. Of course, a blind man cannot read or reread his favourite books. And, he cannot see his friends either: 'Yo querría/ ver una cara alguna vez'.

The last couplet of the poem expresses concisely the situation of the blind poet, for whom books were like friends:

A los otros les queda el universo;  
a mi penumbra, el hábito del verso.

Here we do not read of the poet writing, but of his 'penumbra', which suggests his shadow, his poetic persona. In these lines we see the apparition of the poetic persona, overpowering the poet, the man upon whom he depends. Both the poet and his poetic persona suffer from blindness, but while for the former it is a practical problem, for the latter it is a source of inspiration, an intellectual, philosophical stimulus: part of the 'outrage of the years' which the poet has to convert into 'oro'. In this poem we see both the poet's and the poetic persona's reactions to blindness. In its last couplet, the poetic persona finds the writing of verses is his sole activity, as all that surrounds him is a vague cloud, which is almost an idea. The poet has had his physical horizons narrowed by his blindness; however, 'a los otros les queda el universo', and the blind poet is one of these 'otros', as in his later years he travelled a great deal, and wrote a book of travel memories, *Atlas*<sup>11</sup>, with — ironically, for a blind poet — photographs. Although blind, visual images are frequent in

Borges's poems, as in the case in 'Camden, 1892'; in the later poems, there is a tendency toward images of opaque bleakness as in the initial section of 'On his blindness'. It is this sense of bleakness and doubt that signifies the decline of the poet and the rise of the poetic persona which he has created in his poems, and which bears his name.

These two sonnets show us the vitality of this traditional poetic form and its ability to express modern ideas in the hands of a gifted poet. In both poems we have seen that the poet has as a unique destiny and purpose one thing: he must create and, ultimately, become a poetic persona. Also, in both poems we have the idea of the poetic persona who progresses to an existence without the individual poem, in the complete works of the poet. It is this Whitman that Borges writes of in 'Camden, 1892'; in 'On his blindness' we add to the picture we have of Borges in the context of the works of his that we have read. Whitman, as he appears in 'Camden, 1892', and Milton, as he is alluded to in 'On his blindness', become part of Borges's poetic persona.

Although there exist, then, two Borges, a poet and his poetic persona, these sonnets show that they have a symbiotic relationship. It is impossible in practice to separate the figure of Borges the poet from the texts, and the poet from his poetic persona. It is also impossible to separate the texts themselves from our experience of them as readers, as, implicit in the poetry, is the idea that poetry is part of life, a vital function, and not a static grouping of words printed on a page. The complexity of the relationship between poet and poetic persona is central to the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges: just as the poet transforms 'the outrage of the years/into a music, a distant murmur and a symbol', poetry itself turns the man writing the verses into a poetic persona, a symbol.

## Notes

1. He tells us this, for example, in the epilogue to *Historia de la noche*, Buenos Aires 1977.
2. J. L. Borges, *Obra poetica 1923 — 1977*, Madrid 1983: p. 161. ('To convert the outrage of the years/ Into a music, a distant murmur and a symbol.')
3. J. L. Borges, op. cit., pp. 174 — 175. ('Pater wrote that all the arts tend toward the condition of music, perhaps because there the form is all, as we cannot retell a melody as we can retell the general lines of a story.')
4. J. L. Borges, op. cit., p. 365. ('For a real poet, every moment of life, every act, ought to be poetic, since profoundly, it is.')
5. Di Giovanni, Halpern and MacShane (eds.), *Borges on Writing*, London, 1974: p. 73.
6. J. L. Borges, op. cit., p. 419: "Por Musa debemos entender lo que los hebreos y Milton llamaron el Espiritu y lo que nuestra triste mitologia llama lo subconsciente." ('By Muse we must understand what the Hebrews and Milton called the Holy Spirit and what our sad mythology calls the subconscious.')
7. J. L. Borges, op. cit., p. 239.
8. Willis Barnstone (ed.), *Borges at Eighty*, Indiana University Press 1982: p. 136.
9. J. L. Borges, *Los Conjurados*, Madrid 1985: P. 59. Borges takes the title of this poem from Milton's sonnet of the same name. In that sonnet, we read of an acquiescence before blindness and ageing similar to that in the present poem; this opens the question that the present poem might be about Milton, not Borges. However, whereas Borges finds poetry a justification for his blind existence here, Milton finds as justification that he can still serve God in this acquiescence: "They also serve who only stand and wait." The final couplet of his poem is also recalled in the Borges poem, in that in the penultimate line we read what is left for others, and in the last line, what is left for the blind poet. It would be possible therefore to see Borges's 'On his blindness' as about Milton, but for the differing justifications the two poets have for their blindness, and the references to typical bourgeois themes in the poem (encyclopaedias, 'lunas de oro', books). These suggest that the poet in 'On his blindness' is Borges himself. The figure of Milton in this poem symbolizes what Borges perceives as a tradition of blind poets (he discusses this in his book *Siete Noches*, Madrid 1980: pp. 143 . . .) which includes Homer, Groussac and Goethe, among others; by alluding to Milton here, Borges attaches himself to this tradition.
10. In 'Arte poetica', for example, we have the image of the poet as alchemist, making 'oro' out of 'el ultraje de los anos'.
11. J. L. Borges, *Atlas*, Editorial Sudamericana, Buenos Aires 1984. Also in English: Viking Press, London 1986.