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THE LABYRINTH OF TIME AND PLACE IN TWO STORIES BY BORGES

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In a reappraisal of modern Latin American fiction Angel Flores stated during a lecture given at the 1954 MLA meeting that unfortunately he felt compelled to agree with Dudley Fitts' opinion that recent Spanish American prose had shown nothing but ineptitude, uncertainty and tedium, with the exception of the works produced by two writers: Jorge Luis Borges and Eduardo Mallea.¹ For Flores, these two Argentine intellectuals have been the nucleus of a group of prose writers that gave impetus to what he terms: "magical realism." Flores seems to admire these new "realists" because of their breaking away from the general trend of Latin American prose. He pays tribute to their efforts when stating: "Their mathematical precision and perspicacity may account for their strong aversion to all flabbiness, either stylistic or emotional."²

The Argentine critic Adolfo Prieto, lecturing on Borges and the new generation of writers, explains the origins of Borges' prose in rather historical terms when telling an audience in Buenos Aires:

El fracaso de las dos o tres generaciones anteriores, con dos guerras mundiales en su haber, y el caos, que por uno u otro camino introdujeron en la política, en arte y en moral, adoctrina a la nueva generación a distraerse del pasado inmediato y de no tomarlo siquiera como ejemplar negativo.³

Borges himself had earlier announced this break with the basic and then still-prevalent currents of Latin American prose, and in particular with that existing in his own country, when he affirmed that:

. . . debemos pensar que nuestro patrimonio es el universo; debemos tratar todos los temas, no debemos concretarnos para ser argentinos porque ser argentinos es una fatalidad . . .⁴

Borges could state those words with utmost sincerity since he had already given ample proof of the universal character of his prose, which also meant having escaped the shadow of "argentinismo" that had been cast over the Argentine literary scene since its beginnings. His third feat is no less admirable: He used almost exclusively the short story as a vehicle for his themes and showed himself capable of developing ideas or situations adequately within the brief span of ten to fifteen pages. Perhaps Borges felt that the *cuento* was particularly well-suited for his ever-recurring themes.

The French scholar Pierre Bénichou sees the repetition of two themes in Borges' stories: One, "le monde comme machination ou truquage dont le sens nous est refusé;" and secondly, "le monde comme labyrinthe dont la computation nous dépasse."⁵ While there is an obvious relationship between both statements, the second one seems to be aimed more directly at the image which embodies Borges' basic philosophical position. In this respect Enrique Anderson-Imbert observed quite rightly that: . . . el laberinto es el más significativo [símbolo] en toda la obra de Borges. Casi no hay cuento, poema o ensayo en que no se asome.⁶

The symbolism inherent in the labyrinth represents first of all an irrational universe whose multiplicity, or unknown factors, exemplifies a lack of order or apparent purpose. In the absence of a theological interpretation, these labyrinthic forces preclude any rational or positivistic analysis that might diminish man's bewilderment or frustration as he searches for

some sense, order or purpose in the world around him.

After Bénichou has taken a good look at Borges' universe, he feels the need to speculate about the existence of its creator whom he accuses of divine malice, since, so he reasons, "un monde fait pour tromper conduit à supposer un Esprit trompeur."⁷ But Borges, perhaps luckily, is not obsessed, or even concerned, with theological considerations when he probes into the world of phenomena. His labyrinth does not lead him to God, and the existence of a chaotic world does not constitute a proof to him that an incomprehensible divine power is lurking behind it. Borges' quest is one of knowledge and his speculations are largely concerned with epistemological problems. It is in this light that we should follow his constant wanderings through the maze that exemplifies the hopelessness of pursuing knowledge or order and only leads to a feeling of absolute futility.

Although the sequence of chaos-hopelessness-futility forms the core of many of his stories, we do not find the expected note of despair, so customary in modern writers whose ontological and moral structure has collapsed. Instead Borges is able to keep the élan of a scientifically-minded investigator who has come up with a result, although it is a negative one. Thus he is able to present us with a supra-terrestrial society whose only certainty resides in the absence of logic and reason; and he writes in what is possibly his most significant story, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*:

. . . aquí todo estado mental es irreducible: el mero hecho de nombrarlo—*id est*, de clasificarlo—importa un falseo. De ello cabría deducir que no hay ciencias en Tlön—ni siquiera razonamientos . . . los metafísicos de Tlön no buscan la verdad ni siquiera la verosimilitud: buscan el asombro.⁸

Here Borges has turned the tables and legalized absurdity, after having become resigned to the fact that a rational approach is insufficient to solve any episte-

mological problems, since the universe is governed by a multiplicity of factors which escape any attempt of order or classification. Ernesto Sábato, one of Argentina's leading intellectuals to-day, recognized Borges' primordial interest in knowledge when he compared his position towards a non-cognizable universe with that of Franz Kafka, stating:

. . . los laberintos de Borges son de tipo geométrico o ajedrecístico y producen una angustia intelectual . . . los de Kafka, en cambio, son corredores oscuros, sin fondo, inescrutables, y la angustia es una angustia de pesadilla, nacida de un absoluto desconocimiento de las fuerzas en juego.⁹

As Sábato observes, the labyrinth is a riddle of geometric proportions and progressions, recreating a multiplicity of events, choices or solutions. All of Borges' labyrinth-stories establish such a pattern. In *La biblioteca de Babel* we are confronted with the total library in which all possible combinations of the alphabet for a given number of pages have been exhausted. Ana María Barrenechea, who up to now has written the most complete and scholarly work on Borges, sees in this "biblioteca total" a tangible example of Borges' universe.

In *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan*, one of his best-known *cuentos*, the labyrinth takes on a temporal structure. Borges introduces here the concept of a novel in which every chapter exhausts all possibilities of action on the part of the protagonists. As the plot progresses to the following chapters, there would be a geometric progression due to the multiplication of each act by all of its possible sequences or solutions, thus creating "un laberinto de símbolos . . . un invisible laberinto de tiempo,"¹⁰ to use the author's own terms.

The labyrinth-stories serve the purpose of recreating a universe in miniature so that he, and the reader, can conveniently inspect it. The chaos and multiplicity of life lie within the dark corridors of the labyrinth; and it is here that Borges can

show us his protagonists as they turn obscured corners. Herein lies the dramatic element of the stories, the only climax of Borges' chess game for the detached onlooker or reader who ironically watches the protagonists as they turn at each corner in a direction unknown to them. The absurdity of their decision resides in the fact that they, unlike the reader, do not see the labyrinth and its endless ramifications that escape any intellectual comprehension. Borges has given his characters tragic proportions by showing that they act under the illusion of possessing the necessary knowledge to lift their decision out of the category of futility.

The literary critic José L. Padrón recognized Borges' concept of futility when he commented—after first having dissolved the labyrinth into an abyss:

En Jorge Luis Borges advertimos una clara comprensión—una angustiosa lucidez de la situación humana en un mundo que parece sernos ajeno, ya que sus leyes no son las nuestras . . . advertido esto, debemos admitir que toda la obra de Borges . . . está caracterizada por una desesperada certidumbre de la futilidad de nuestros esfuerzos por desasirnos del caos al que hemos sido lanzados.¹¹

One of the most tangible examples of man being confronted with this chaos appears in *El Sur*. In this story a series of coincidences, or turns in the invisible labyrinth, carry the protagonist to a most absurd final corner: namely fighting a duel a la Martín Fierro amidst the endless pampa of Southern Argentina. Borges sets his protagonist, Juan Dahlmann, in motion with a jolt: "En los últimos días de febrero de 1939, algo le aconteció"; whereupon he immediately proceeds to caution the reader about the dangers of such motion, warning: "Ciego a culpas, el destino puede ser despiadado con las mínimas distracciones."¹² Dahlmann had just bought a copy of Weil's edition of *Las mil y una noches*. Excited over the purchase of this rare book, he has no patience to wait for the elevator of the apartment building in Buenos Aires in which he lived and took

to the stairs, although the lights were out. In the darkness his forehead hits a protruding joist and suffers a deep laceration. Eight days later he undergoes surgery due to an acute case of septicemia that stemmed from an infection of his wound. To speed up his convalescence the physician wants him to complete his recovery on the *estancia* that Dahlmann had inherited from his mother's family and which was located in the South. As Dahlmann's train glides southward through the solitary pampa, the conductor informs him that on this trip the train would not make the customary stop close to his *estancia* but at a nearby point. There our traveller is directed to the only country store within many miles, where he can order a horse-drawn vehicle to finish his journey. He decides to eat at the *almacén*. There are other customers, in gaucho attire. Some pellets, made out of bread, hit his table and mischievous laughter rises from a corner. Dahlmann ignores the provocation and decides to wait outside for his transportation. But the owner interrupts his exit by saying in a loud voice:—Señor Dahlmann, no les haga caso a estos mozos que están medio alegres.¹³

Now Dahlmann feels that he must consider this incident in a new light. His family's name has been publicly mentioned, and it had been pronounced with respect around these parts for generations. He slowly turns to face his aggressor. A drunken *peón de estancia* stumbles to his feet, spouting insults at the newcomer. A knife and a challenge complete the provocation. But Dahlmann is unarmed. From the other corner an old gaucho who had been lying on the floor slides him a dagger across the planks. Dahlmann picks it up instinctively. As both men go outside to complete the inevitable, Dahlmann serenely clutches the weapon that he does not know how to handle.

It becomes obvious that each event in this *cuento* should be interpreted as if it

were part of a chain of coincidences, or turns in an invisible labyrinth. The incidents leading to the absurd duel are, in themselves, bereft of meaning. Their sole significance lies in the fact that they are agents of causality, each one offering a given number of subsequent actions or courses of which one must be selected for the sake of continuity, whereupon the whole process renews itself.

This type of determinism, then, can in no way be related to an epic, romantic or naturalistic concept of the futility of man's actions. There is no guiding power, good or evil, that directs or influences Dahlmann's steps. On the contrary, it is the absence of such causative agents, divine, hereditary or cultural, that leaves the protagonist in the hands of chance. In Dahlmann's case, the total sum of possible selections or decisions approximates that of the number of turns in the labyrinth. The total combination of letters of the alphabet in *La biblioteca de Babel* and the chances involved in the number game in *La lotería en Babilonia* present further parallels.

Dahlmann, showing that he is but a personification of his creator, calmly accepts the established sequence of turns without protest or even a trace of anguish. He has ceased to be astonished by the absence of logic and order. As he goes outside to face the challenger and his deadly *facón*, only one thought occurs to him: "No hubieron permitido en el sanatorio que pasaran estas cosas . . ." ¹⁴

In a world of exact sciences where rationality and knowledge are upheld and practiced, such a senseless act would indeed not have been tolerated. But for Borges the sanatorium is only a concrete example of man's futility of establishing an island of reason and logic in the midst of an ocean governed by irrationality and chance. One different turn in the labyrinth of time and space, and Dahlmann would have finished his sequence in London, Timbuktu or his *porteño* apartment. In

another story by Borges, *El brujo postergado*, the labyrinthic progression and its endless variations is achieved in its purest form. Here the protagonist, Dean Illán, is being shown his future course, only to be called back to the starting point in the temporal labyrinth from where he will have to take a different route the second time.

In *El Sur* Borges shows that we are condemned to act without being able to calculate the consequences in time or space. As far as the moral significance of an act is concerned, it follows that, without the possibility of a rational evaluation of an act, any rational premises to examine and judge its moral character have been voided.

Amado Alonso approaches this issue when he refers to Borges as being a writer who cultivates "la sátira de la realidad social."¹⁵ Ernesto Sábato apparently felt the need to see this problem through a kind of inverted telescope when he declared that, for him, Borges practices "la reducción al absurdo de un gran problema: el de la racionalidad de la irrealidad."¹⁶ Ana María Barrenechea throws a clearer and sharper light on this vital question when she says: "En Borges falta la idea de la culpabilidad";¹⁷ implying that for the Argentine writer the absence of an acceptable epistemological system annuls the problem of the righteousness of a given act. Thus Borges can only look with condescending irony upon the defenders of man-made political, social and moral structures, who do not hesitate to impose their pragmatic ways, although they are grounded in convenience, utilitarianism, bias, tradition, and always ignorance.

In a number of his *cuentos* Borges precludes credence in any moral or legal structure by obliterating the existence of certainty, truth and justice. One of his favorite techniques to produce a convincing argument in this respect is an obvious one: He loves to shock his readers by reversing the role of the hero and the traitor,

so stubbornly revered or condemned, as the case may be, by the believers in historical truisms and moral judgments. Thus, in some of his best-known stories: *La forma de la espada*, *Tres versiones de Judas*, *Traidor y héroe* and *Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva*, the arbitrarily-drawn demarcation line between right and wrong is dissolved.

In another, quite unique, story, *Emma Zunz*, Borges uses a different technique to present the same theme. The plot is handled with the sparseness that is characteristic of Borges' prose works. Emma Zunz, the protagonist, learns that her beloved father's exile and untimely death have been caused by the machinations of one Loewenthal, her present employer. Thereupon she conceives a plan to kill him with impunity so as to impose her own type of justice. Loewenthal is a bachelor who lives by himself in an annex of his factory. There is unrest among the workers, and Emma notifies him that she has important information about the impending strike, making an appointment to see him alone after working hours. That same afternoon she takes a streetcar to the port district of Buenos Aires where she chooses an anonymous Baltic sailor to leave his masculine imprint on her virginal body in a hotel room of "El Bajo." Later, when Loewenthal admits her into his apartment, she manages to extract a pistol from his desk and kills him. Now she can phone the police, and her story will be a simple one: She will testify that her employer had lured her to his private quarters under a pretext and then forcibly violated her. Thereafter her outraged senses had forced her to pull the trigger. The verification of the essential details pertaining to her statements on the part of the police investigators would establish her as a victim and exempt her from any official prosecution. Here the story ends, and the author reappears in the role of the commentator to close with these words:

La historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta. Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero también el ultraje que había padecido; sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios.¹⁸

Borges' insistent repetition of the adjective *verdadero* lends itself to several interpretations: First of all, it emphasizes the absolute sincerity of Emma Zunz in her attempts to create and carry out justice; secondly, it is used as an instrument to influence the judgment of those who believe that knowledge can be derived from an examination of factual data; and finally, the repetition of *verdadero* constitutes a mocking echo that Borges is sending through his labyrinthic corridors because Emma Zunz, as well as the authorities, both accept the existence of a truth and knowledge that are meaningful only within the framework of their particular moral and legal system.

Such conclusions have been foreshadowed earlier in the story. Even before the protagonist has begun to carry out her retribution, the narration reads:

Referir con alguna realidad los hechos de esa tarde sería difícil y quizá impropio. Un atributo de lo infernal es la irrealidad, un atributo que parece mitigar sus terrores y que los agrava tal vez.¹⁹

The use of the term *infernal* is unfortunate because of its theological connotations; but any systematic reader of Borges' prose could hardly fail to interpret this word as a symbol of impotence on the part of man to relate a given act to a universal structure of knowledge. Having rejected the possibility of attaining knowledge, Borges cannot allow himself to recognize the validity of any moral system, since their tenets are based on sense data, reasoning or intuition, none of which can be verified in Borges' view. Thus he can continue the story:

Los hechos graves están fuera del tiempo, ya porque en ellos el pasado inmediato queda como tronchado del porvenir, ya porque no parecen consecutivas las partes que los forman.²⁰

For Borges, man's lack of knowledge of phenomena and of their relation to time and place allows for a many-faceted reality. This multiple reality annuls objectivity and could not possibly serve as the basis for a universally-true system of ethics; and Borges declines to rely on knowledge obtained from metaphysical-theological interpretations. Thus, all existing moral structures or codes are held voidable, and their defenders are considered practitioners of the absurd.

Borges has taken pains to show that Emma Zunz' moral conduct is unassailable within the boundaries of the ethical system established in her mind. She does not attempt simply to murder Loewenthal after having received the news of her father's death; for that would have been pure revenge, and she must have justice on her side. According to her interpretation of justice, she only acquires the right to kill after suffering a physical wrong that in the light of the concept of justice prevailing in Argentina would give her the right to pull the trigger. Borges knows only too well that Spanish culture and its judgment-values have usually allowed Argentine judges to pronounce as innocent any woman who killed the man that violated her body and caused her dishonor. The person that committed this crime against her womanhood was not the Nordic sailor (. . . fué una herramienta para Emma . . . pero sirvió para la justicia . . .)²¹ but the man who forced her to submit to the anonymous masculinity.

Emma Zunz believes she has done justice. If we analyze her procedure, we find that she actually borrows an arbitrarily-established concept of crime and punishment: the one upheld by Argentine society, and then incorporates certain elements of it into another completely arbitrary system of justice: her own. Like in the hero-and-traitor stories, Borges has demonstrated that the concepts of crime, punishment and justice are as capricious as the different

moral codes that foster them.

Due to Borges' skeptical position with regards to the validity of any moral system and his inability to separate right from wrong, his *cuentos* can be and have been related to the existentialist literature which only too often frequents the dead-end street of despair and absurdity.²² Some Argentine critics have carried Borges' relationship to the existentialist school so far as to depict him as an anguished idealist in search of a safe shore where certainty and credibility reign. Ernesto Sábato, for example, cautiously asks himself: "Borges admira al hombre capaz de *todas* opiniones . . . ¿no admirará . . . nostálgicamente la fe y la fuerza?"²³

Anderson-Imbert subscribes to Ana María Barrenechea's view that in the Borgesian universe an incomprehensible God has abandoned his own creation to chaos and chance. Looking at the protagonist of Borges' story: *La casa de Asterión*, Anderson-Imbert sees a lonely, perplexed and anguished Minotaur who is lost in the Cretan labyrinth, and he concludes: "El minotauro—es Borges."²⁴

The most belligerent view of Borges' supposedly existentialist leanings was taken by Enrique Perroni who interprets Borges' negation of a logical universe as a desperate stand of a mind that experiences a secret psychological pleasure in doing so.²⁵

It is quite possible that Borges' rejection of epistemological and moral systems, whose foundations seem pragmatic and capricious to him, implicitly shows the idealist's yearning for a Lost Paradise. But Borges is no Unamuno. He has examined moral systems and their dreaded children: guilt and punishment. But, unlike most of his existentialist cousins in the field of literature, he went on to examine appearance and reality outside of the fields of ethics and culture. His deep concern for epistemology seems to have spared him the anguish that besets so many moralists

in their desperate search for absolute values. Borges is used to living with his lack of knowledge which reduces the universe to an incomprehensible creation and prevents him from judging man's actions. Such a position is an honest one, especially in the light of the endless attempts throughout history to use this lack of knowledge to impose or justify a given set of moral interpretations. Borges' labyrinth of time and space is more than a refuge. It is his sole certainty.

NOTES

- ¹ Angel Flores' speech was later published in *Hispania* under the title: "Magical realism in Spanish American Fiction," xxxviii (May 1955). The quote is from page 188.
- ² *Op. cit.*, p. 192.
- ³ Adolfo Prieto, *Borges y la nueva generación* (Buenos Aires: Letras Universitarias, 1954), p. 19.
- ⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 24.
- ⁵ Pierre Bénichou, "Le monde et l'esprit chez Jorge Luis Borges," *Les Lettres Nouvelles* (Nov. 1954), 681.
- ⁶ Enrique Anderson-Imbert, "Un cuento de Borges, la casa de Asterión," *Revista Iberoamericana*, xxv (1960), 41.
- ⁷ Bénichou, loc. cit.
- ⁸ Borges, *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1958), pp. 22-23.
- ⁹ Ernesto Sábato, "Los relatos de Jorge Luis Borges," *Sur*, cxxv (March 1945), 71.
- ¹⁰ *Ficciones*, p. 109.
- ¹¹ José L. Ríos Padrón, *Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: La Mandrágora, 1955), p. 29.
- ¹² *Ficciones*, p. 188.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Amado Alonso, "Desagravio a Borges," *Sur*, xciv (July, 1942), 17. Besides Alonso, the "desagravio" was signed by these prominent Latin American men of letters: Francisco Romero, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Enrique Anderson-Imbert, Enrique Amorim and Ernesto Sábato. This group believed that Borges should have been awarded the National Prize of Literature in 1942. In later years Borges was given due recognition in his native country as well as abroad. Very recently, in May of 1961, he won the International Publishers' Prize, sharing it with Samuel Beckett.
- ¹⁶ Sábato, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
- ¹⁷ Ana María Barrenechea, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (México: El Colegio de México, 1957), p. 49.
- ¹⁸ Borges, *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957), pp. 65-66.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- ²² See, for instance, Walter Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoevski to Sartre*, especially chapter I and the references to Nietzsche's concept of the relativity of cultural and moral values.
- ²³ Sábato, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- ²⁴ Anderson-Imbert, loc. cit.
- ²⁵ Enrique Perroni, "Aproximaciones al último libro de Borges," *Sur*, ccxvii (Nov. 1952), 123.

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