

Borges, Tlön and the Third Tiger: Towards a Poetics of Experience

Carlos Abreu Mendoza, Texas State University

*Readers tend to think of Jorge Luis Borges as a writer of abstractions and obscure cultural references, the inventor of imaginary planets and infinite libraries. However, a great deal of Borges's work is rooted in an empathetic and concrete understanding of the world. This paper analyses *The Maker*, a 1960 collection of texts that marks Borges's rediscovery of the human experience as the source of poetic inspiration.*

All peoples who possess a history have a paradise, a state of innocence, a golden age; indeed, every man has his paradise, his golden age, which he recalls, according as he has more or less of the poetic in his nature, with more or less inspiration.

—Friedrich von Schiller, *Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, (148)

In 1964 Paul de Man complained about the lack of substantial contributions to the interpretation of Jorge Luis Borges's work, inviting critics to produce "serious critical studies worthy of this great writer" (10). Fifty years and countless books and articles later, it is obvious that Borges is today the modern master de Man once envisioned. When reading about Borges, one thing that stands out is the critics' preference for bellicose images full of dialectical elements. Among the preferred battles played out in the Borgesian ring are those fought by the canonical dualities of civilization versus barbarism, feeling versus reason, Eurocentrism versus *criollismo*, and youth versus old age. This last opposition, based on the correlation of age and maturity, has created a periodization of Borges's work that overwhelmingly favors those texts written in the late forties and early fifties, particularly *Ficciones* (1944), *El Aleph* (1949) and *Otras Inquisiciones* (1952). Despite critics and readers' strong preference for these collections, one can still find dissident voices, who, like Borges' biographer

Edwin Williamson, prefer to pay attention to earlier and later periods in his production and thus "generate new perspectives and new readings without detracting from the philosophical and theoretical dimension of his writing" (276). In similar fashion, Chilean historian Víctor Farías has located in the Borges of the nineteen twenties a vitalist and humanist writer, one enthralled by friendship, love, and desire. By contraposing the localist poetics of the suburb, an aesthetic which characterizes Borges' earlier literary production, with the dehumanized metaphysics of the labyrinth and the planet Tlön which the critical community names as Borges's true symbols, Farías has provided readers with a rich interpretive tool for understanding his work.

The Argentine writer Juan José Saer, one of Borges's most brilliant exegetes, has read these tensions within Borges's critical reception to argue that the fundamental conflict within Borges's work lies between the tendencies of classicism and the avant-garde. The latter artistic movement characteristic of Borges' poetry of the nineteen twenties is especially marked in books like *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), and *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929). In these works Borges discovers a new aesthetic dimension in the space of the *orillas*, those indeterminate landscapes and vacant wastelands, patios, *pulperías* (grocery stores) and streetcorners which separate the countryside from the beginning of the city. According to cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo, for the young Borges these aesthetic enterprises served to transform the suburb "into a legitimate topic for Argentine literature, a topic that can be written according to the poetics of the avant-garde" (n. pag). Alongside this avant-garde tendency to innovate and break with normative artistic practices, we find quite an opposite inclination in Borges's classicist approach to literature, one guided by tradition and the promise of immortality. Saer suggests that Borges's affinity with both artistic movements coexists until the 1960 publication of *The Maker* (*El hacedor*), a sundry collection of prose and poetry in which "a certain tendency towards classicism, visible in all of Borges's work, ceases to be a simple tendency to become a voluntary practice (that later, in its worst moments, will become willful)" (190).¹

Expanding on Saer's reflection, I suggest that *The Maker* is also a milestone in Borges's work inasmuch as the compilation can be read as a poetics of creation rooted in experience.² In texts like "Dreamtigers," "Parable of the Palace," and "The Other Tiger," poetry aspires not only to represent the world but also to create it. Despite the feeling of insufficiency that haunts the poet, Borges' craft is driven by its determined pursuit of creation. If many years before, in his 1916 "Ars Poetica," the Chilean Vicente Huidobro demanded that poets stop singing the rose in order to let it flower in the poem, Borges expresses a similar aesthetic principle in "The Other Tiger." After imagining his poetic tiger in the dimly lit library, the poet discovers that

[...] the fact of naming it,
And conjecturing its circumstance
Makes it a figment of art and no creature,
Living among those that walk the earth. (71)

¹ Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own.

² When quoting works from this book I am using an edition titled *Dreamtigers*, but I prefer the more literal translation of *The Maker* and use this title throughout the essay.

The poem concludes that poetry's destiny is the search for the third tiger, the real tiger, the other tiger "which is not in verse" (71). The third tiger is not that which inhabits the universe of archetypes and shadows; nor the universal tiger that fuels the creation of the poem in the "vast and busy library" (70). Rather the third tiger is a poetic lament over language's inability to capture the materiality of the world; once the poet's Adamic mission is fulfilled by the act of naming, the tiger is rendered a fiction.

This sense of mourning provoked by poetry's insufficiency to capture the true essence of the world seems to contradict all of those joyful postulates that have become a sort of hallmark of Borges's art: the affirmation of reality as something granted by books and the understanding of the universe as a library composed of an endless number of corridors, which are the premises of several of his most well-known stories including "The Library of Babel" (1941), "Averroës's Search" (1947), and "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1940). In the latter story, books are capable of generating a purely spiritual planet, a world devoid of time and space where the tiger that disappoints Borges in "The Other Tiger" roams wondrously free.

The German philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, one of the few who argues for a post-metaphysical reading of Borges, invites us to realize that "*Orbis Tertius*, the world of *Tlön*, would be a world impossible to inhabit" (188-89). Following on the heels of Gumbrecht's idea, I propose an alternative to illuminate Borges's unanimous night by confronting the ghostly and mirrored world of Tlön with the real and tangible universe that Borges longs for in "The Other Tiger." In "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the narrator proposes that Tlön will replace our physical and limited universe. But what is Tlön? A planet created and arranged by men destined to be deciphered by men. The reality of Tlön emerges from the written word, that is, from the voluminous tomes of an encyclopedia. Borges has frequently played with the idea of literature's superiority over what we may agree to call "reality." Following the logic of this belief, a planet created by men, written by men, whose linguistic and ontological structures are organized and arranged by men, will always be superior to our precarious reality, about which we cannot affirm anything, not even its existence. Inevitably, our material reality is superseded by the world of the written word, since creation, in the Borgesian poetics, is the only thing that allows man to get closer to God—the maker of possible and conjecturable realities. Moreover, a frequent *leitmotif* in Borges's work is the search for a way of transmitting the infinite—eternity, God, the universe—through language. In "A New Refutation of Time" (1952), he writes, "all language is of a successive nature; it does not lend itself to reasoning on eternal, intemporal matters" (53). When faced with the formidable task of communicating an experience that transcends the limits of human understanding, such as apprehending, naming, and describing a planet, Borges resorts to humor and, one by one, the narrator of "Tlön" breaks down the disciplines that men have employed to comprehend the world: geography, linguistics, grammar, and metaphysics. In essence, Borges plays with the inherent contradictions of these very disciplines designed to organize the world by pointing to the incongruences of a reality that can be plural and multiple; a reality that can surrender itself to man's will because, in the act of inventing a planet, one mimics that same freedom which moved God the first day of creation. The story transmits a sense of joy in the exercise of such freedom and, despite the imminent coming of Tlön, the narrator elects to be indifferent: "The world will be Tlön. That makes very little difference to me; through my quiet days in this hotel in Adrogué, I go on (though I never intend to publish) an indecisive translation in the style of Quevedo of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Buriall*" (81). An analogous tone of contented indifference can be found in the

ending of "The Library of Babel," when the narrator faces a similar substitution of the human species by the written word and, instead of lamenting the approaching annihilation, affirms: "My solitude is cheered by that elegant hope" (118).

Perhaps for Borges the idea of an exclusively written world that exists in the multiple editions of the Encyclopedia Britannica is nothing but the best possible substitution for our own vulnerable reality. Was not Borges the man who time and time again played with the idea of a book that contained the universe? Did he not populate his fictions with characters who lose themselves in the madness of such a pursuit? For Borges, would an entry in the Encyclopedia Britannica be an undesirable destiny for mankind? These hypothetical destinies seem to be where his commentators want to find Borges, but I suggest that we make use of one of his own beloved tricks and proceed to isolate the author in a specific period of time, in order to imagine possible alternatives to the official Borgesian posterity. For instance, the Borges of 1960, the one who, according to Saer, begins to unconditionally embrace classicism, does not seem to have a definitive response to the aforementioned questions. In *The Maker*, Borges is more preoccupied with the task of creating than with the results of that activity. The book constitutes a pointed reflection on poetic creation, that secret alchemy that has enthralled poets throughout time. The very title of *The Maker* embraces the idea of creation as Aristotelian *techne*; in fact, William Shakespeare and Homer are the protagonists of several of its emblematic texts, thus constructing a strategically designed poetic genealogy. Finally, as Saer has duly noted, in *The Maker* the affective and emotional elements—which he defines as "confessional"—are more present than the cultural and intellectual ones (190), a fact which points to the experiential as the main source of poetic creation.

Unlike "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in which Borges's thematic preoccupation could be described as metaphysical, throughout *The Maker* the author is searching for a more humble cosmology that takes place in poetry, an art that is "immortal and a pauper" ("Ars Poetica" 89). The elusive quality of the reality that the poem seeks to flower invites the poet to persevere in "this quest / Undefined, senseless and ancient" ("The Other Tiger" 71) that is poetry. The Borges from *The Maker* does not rejoice in the coming of a universe made of letters that will replace the world; for this 1960 Borges the world is still the fount of emotion, and, above all, a birthplace of poetry. In the planet Tlön, neither the fierce tiger, nor the knife's glint in the hour of the brave, nor the guitar's strum, nor the woman's light in the afternoon, survive. In Tlön's universe of invading pages, the third tiger will never be revealed to its future ostensible inhabitants.

Praised for its miscellaneous nature, *The Maker* has been considered Borges's last great work (Saer 190), but what stands out as we read this collection is the feeling that Borges has suddenly rediscovered that poetry is indeed the universal destiny of mankind. Such a destiny can be limned, for instance, in the text that gives its name to the collection, in which the Greek poet Homer serves as protagonist. As it happens frequently in Borges' work, rather than the individual's life as a compilation of experience, Borges is interested in those epiphanic instants of profound self-discovery. At the moment when the Greek bard is rendered blind, he more fully realizes his destiny as a poet. Notably, Borges's Homer does not discover inspiration in cultural or intellectual elements such as tradition or mythology, but rather his poetry is birthed from the memory of his lived experience. By anchoring Homer's poetry in lived experience Borges situates himself within a poetic genealogy; like the Greek poet, Borges points to his own blindness as a source of experience and, therefore, a source of poetry:

it is a way of life [...] that is not entirely wretched. A writer, and I believe that, in reality, every man should think that everything that happens to him is an instrument. All things have been given to us for one end and this is something that an artist should feel with greater intensity. Everything that happens to us, even the humiliations, the misfortunes, the disgraces, everything is given to us as material, or as clay, so we can shape our art. (Alifano 202)

In the story, Homer's poetry emerges from similar clay and, when he discerns "the murmur of the Odysseys and Iliads" (23), his poetry is said to come from something that belongs to every other mortal: the astonishment of finding the first woman that "the gods set aside for him" (23) and the feeling of excitement that precedes "the rude combat" (23). Moreover, as noted by Gumbrecht, Borges "refers to his own verses as something that happened to him, something that therefore could have occurred and happened to somebody else, something also and above all that he feels obliged to embrace, to 'edit' ('redactar'), almost in spite of himself, because it happened to happen to him" (194-95).

A simple search with the words "Jorge Luis Borges" in the Modern Language Association International Bibliography bears 4,312 results, most of which are articles in academic journals. Despite Gumbrecht's warnings about the dangers of the metaphysical mirrors of Tlön, a quick look at the titles of these articles shows that we critics keep searching for Borges in the contours of that remote, uninhabitable planet of literary invention. In *The Maker's* "Epilogue" Borges wrote that what a man discovers behind the "patient labyrinth of lines" that make up his work is "the image of his face" (93). The image of the writer was one of Borges's greatest obsessions and, with his work, he drew a complex self-portrait marked by contradiction and mirrored in duality. What we tend to ignore when reading Borges and contemplating his literary portrait is that his image is not relegated to the metaphysical mirror, the terrible mirror of the intellect that discovers its monstrosity by multiplying the number of men, but it is also reflected in that other mirror, the silver-plated mirror of bewilderment that first astonished us in our childhood when we waved back at our own image at the other side of the world. This primordial mirror of wonder that each of us has glimpsed, real as the third tiger that the poem longs for, exists as an aspiration of Borges's work. Its haunting presence in *The Maker* reminds us that, in order to ascend to Borges's metaphysical heights, we must first descend to the most transparent depths of the human experience.

Abreu Mendoza, Carlos. "Borges, Tlön and the Third Tiger: Towards a Poetics of Experience". *Readings* 1.1 (2015)

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