

Creation and Incarnation in Borges

Diane Zandstra
Calvin College
Grand Rapids, Michigan

To read Borges is to revel in the rich resonance of his works with one another. The recurring themes within this body of work give rise to a different experience of each piece by each different reader, depending on which other writings by Borges each has read. Borges himself defines a book as a dialogue between text and reader and affirms that the reader is as much a creator as the writer himself, since both discover something which already exists (“La poesía” 257). This recognition by Borges of the indispensable role of the reader validates those associations that arise in the act of reading, and incorporates them into the creation¹ of the text.

A reading of Borges’ short work “The Circular Ruins” in conjunction with his two poems, “The Golem” and “John 1:14” reveals a series of common images and ideas centered around creation and incarnation. For Borges, the writer and God are both creators whose works inspire in them both tenderness and horror. “The Circular Ruins” and “The Golem” both suggest, furthermore, a continuous circle of creation incorporating God the Creator, the artist as both creation and creator, and the created work of art. In the artist as in the work of his hands there is only limited awareness of self as a created being; nevertheless the circle of creation can move in either direction, as Borges has explained elsewhere. Although he was an agnostic, Borges’ writings express a keen sense of wonder at the incredible idea of the Holy Spirit condescending to communicate in words, which he finds to be as amazing as the notion of God becoming man (“La cábala” 269). “John 1:14” explores the implications of the Incarnation while weaving them inextricably into his meditations on the limitations of language. What I

hope to elucidate here is the connection which Borges himself makes between creation, both divine and artistic, and the incarnation of Christ—that is, between the written word and the Word made flesh.

Both “The Circular Ruins” and “The Golem” feature a central creating figure. Interestingly, there is an immediate connection between human and divine creation: the rabbi Judá León is described by Borges in his attempt to create life in the Golem as “sediento por saber lo que Dios sabe” [burning to know what God knows, line 21], and both he and the sorcerer of “The Circular Ruins” pronounce a powerful name, the name of a god, in order to give life to the “son” each has created. It is, in fact, the god of fire which gives life to the sorcerer’s creation, a fact which elicits unavoidable association, especially for those who know the Bible, with the God of the Hebrews, who has been called a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24); and with the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which enabled Christ’s disciples to speak in other tongues, and is depicted as tongues as of fire (Acts 1:3,4). Borges prefers to think of God as Creator and sees the creative endeavor as that place where human creators participate in God’s work: “‘God is in the making.’ And we are the makers” (Barnstone 102). It is this concept which led Borges to entitle one of his works *El hacedor* (*The Maker*). In the 1969 preface to *El otro, el mismo*, Borges recalls that a reader pointed out—to his delight—that “The Golem” is a variation on “The Circular Ruins.” Borges replied that the poem is “about the relationship between God and man, and perhaps between the writer and his work” (DiGiovanni 279).

The creative enterprise is not without difficulties: both rabbi and sorcerer fail repeatedly before they succeed. The longed-for son, once enlivened, turns out to be a mere simulacrum: in “The Circular Ruins” he is a ghost dreamed up by his magician-father, while the Golem never learns to speak, has the eyes of a thing more than of a dog or a man, and horrifies both the rabbi and his cat. Both figures are apprentices and thus have much to learn. Both the gray man and Rabbi Judá León feel a mixture of tenderness and regret toward their work: the magician nearly destroys all his work one afternoon and the narrator comments that he might have done better to destroy it. The rabbi looks at the Golem

... con ternura
y con algún terror. ¿Cómo (se dijo)
pude engendrar este penoso hijo
y la inacción dejé, que es la cordura? (62-64)

...fondly ... / and with some terror. How (he asked himself) / could I have engendered this grievous son, / and left off inaction, which is wisdom?

This ambivalence reflects the feelings of any artist toward his or her creation, which is a simulacrum of what that artist had hoped to create.

The horror experienced by Judá León appears in a related yet different light in "The Circular Ruins." The rabbi regrets having added one more symbol to the infinite series already in existence; the sorcerer understands with relief, with humiliation, and with terror that he himself is a simulacrum, that he has been dreamed by another (455). That is to say that the creator is now conscious that he is the creation of another. This thought apparently escapes the rabbi but is indicated by the narrative voice of the poem, perhaps Borges:

En la hora de angustia y de luz vaga
 en su Golem los ojos detenía.
 ¿Quién nos dirá las cosas que sentía
 Dios, al mirar a su rabino en Praga? (69-72)

*At the hour of anguish and vague light / he would rest his eyes
 on his Golem. / Who can tell us what God felt, / as He gazed
 on His rabbi in Prague?*

The simple language of this stanza still contains a subtle irony in that the rabbi seems unaware of his own status as the work of God and of the poet, who calls Judá León the Golem's God, thus creating one metaphor of creation inside another.

If we see "The Circular Ruins" and "The Golem" as extended metaphors of artistic creation, which for Borges would be the act of writing, then we can also imagine an infinite circle of texts engendering other texts, which in turn father new texts, like the chain of gray sorcerers dreamed by their predecessors and dreaming up their successors. This is a fruitful image since Borges has stated that his writing has grown organically out of his reading of poetry and fiction ("La belleza no es un hecho extraordinario" 66-67). The older Borges got, the less likely it seemed to him that a work of art could be truly original. As a young avant-garde poet he sought to create a new artistic language through metaphor, but as a mature poet all he hoped for was

to express something that someone else had already thought, for everything, said Borges, has already been said ("Belleza" 54).

Not only has everything already been said, but also what we say may become something quite different once it has been said. Borges here makes specific mention of the possible mixed reaction of God to his creation, which immediately reminds us, as students of the Bible, of God before the flood regretting that he had made man (Genesis 6:7), and of Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). Like God, the writer, represented here by the rabbi and the magician, is ambivalent about his work. This ambivalence reflects Borges' skepticism about the capability of language to convey that which the writer intends it to; after all, according to Borges, it is the reader much more than the writer who determines the meaning of the written word ("Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw" 747). Borges considers all languages inexpressive ("The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," Simms 102) and claims that art does no more than suggest something beyond our ability to express:

La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no habiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético. ("La muralla y los libros" 635)

Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces molded by time, certain twilights and certain places—all these are trying to tell us something, or have told us something we should not have missed, or are about to tell us something; that imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality (Simms 5).

Borges suggests that, like the sons of "The Circular Ruins" and "The Golem," literary works cannot transcend their status as simulacra because language never signifies the same thing to one person as to another, and because what is represented cannot be captured in words.

The use of dreaming in "The Circular Ruins" to symbolize the act of creating is particularly appropriate because Borges explains elsewhere that dreams are probably the first aesthetic activity ("La pesadilla" 227). The difficulty of recounting our dreams after the fact is like the

difficulty of putting into words our artistic vision; when we tell our dreams we are telling our memory of them, which may not be exactly the same thing:

Si pensamos que el sueño es una obra de ficción (yo creo que lo es) posiblemente sigamos fabulando en el momento de despertarnos y cuando, después, los contamos. ("La pesadilla" 221)

If we think that dreams are a work of fiction (I think they are) we may quite possibly continue to fable at the moment of our awaking and afterwards, when we tell them.

Since according to Borges forgetting is part of remembering ("La postulación de la realidad" 218), what we say has little to do with what we had originally wished to tell. The telling of dreams is complicated by the fact that when we dream we have an "eternal," multiple and simultaneous vision, similar to what God can see, which then has to be translated into our linear language, resulting in an impoverished memory of the original dream, hence its status as simulacrum ("La pesadilla" 222).

The structural parallels in plot and the same fundamental conceit in "The Circular Ruins" and in "The Golem" link God as Creator to the artist as creator of the written word through a metaphor of creation as dream. This metaphor resonates with Scriptural overtones since God in the Bible often makes himself known through dreams and visions. The parallel drawn by Borges between writing (a type of creation) and Incarnation echoes, in fact, the same parallel first seen in Scripture itself. Genesis 1 begins with the words "In the beginning"; the gospel of John starts with the same words ("In the beginning was the Word"). Borges' poem "John 1:14" plays extensively with the concept of the Word of God in the person of Jesus, the words of God in sacred writings, and the words of the poet as possible words of God, which leads us to reflect on the meaning of the Incarnation.

It seems logical to interpret the words of the poem, "esta hoja," as referring to the poem itself:

No será menos un enigma esta hoja
que las de Mis libros sagrados
ni aquellas otras que repiten

las bocas ignorantes
 creyéndolas de un hombre, no espejos
 oscuros del Espíritu. (lines 1-6)

*This page will be no less of an enigma / than those of My
 sacred books / nor than those other pages repeated / by
 ignorant mouths / believing them to be of man, not dark /
 mirrors of the Spirit.*

A later reference to an amanuensis (44) gives the idea that the poet is transcribing these signs (the poem), fallen from God's eternity, thus creating an enigma equal to that contained in sacred writings. The mention of mirrors reminds us not only of Borges' frequent image of man as a mirror, often a broken mirror, of God ("Los espejos," "Beppo"), but also of our limited understanding as readers (see I Corinthians 13: "Now we see in a mirror, darkly"). It also seems plausible from these lines that words repeated by ignorant lips can still be the work of God, thus the words of God.

The next lines reiterate the problem of the Incarnation in similar language to Borges' description of the difficulties of conveying a dream in human words:

Yo que soy el Es, el Fue y el Será,
 vuelvo a condescender al lenguaje,
 que es tiempo sucesivo y emblema. (7-9)

*I who am the Is, the Was and the Will Be, / condescend once
 more to language, / which is successive time and emblem.*

These words identify the speaker as Jesus. God from the burning bush which was not consumed answered Moses: "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:2.14), and Jesus scandalized the Jews by saying, "Before Abraham was, I am", causing them to accuse him of blasphemy for making himself equal to God (John 8:58-59). We see in Christ's words the inclusion of both past and present tense to describe the Word of God, as in the poem where we have past, present and future. We remember that for Borges to narrate a dream is to reduce a God-like experience—multiple, simultaneous—to the linearity of language, which is subject to the laws of time. We find here the same condescendence in the

Incarnation as in writing, as pointed out by Borges in his lecture on the Kabbalah:

Dios crea mediante palabras El Espíritu Santo ha condescendido a la literatura, lo cual es tan increíble como suponer que Dios condescendió a ser hombre. (269)

God creates through words... The Holy Spirit has condescended to literature, which is as incredible as supposing that God condescended to being man.

The condescendence of the divine to the human limits that which in itself is limitless. This limitation is expressed by the poet in terms of enchantment and enclosure:

Por obra de una magia
 nací curiosamente de un vientre.
 Viví hechizado, encarcelado en un cuerpo
 y en la humildad de un alma.
 Conocí la memoria,
 esa moneda que no es nunca la misma. (14-19)

By the working of magic / I was born curiously of a womb. / I lived enchanted, imprisoned within a body / and in the humility of a soul. / I came to know memory, / that coin which is never the same.

The reference to magic reminds us of “The Circular Ruins,” where the sorcerer has incarnated his dream in a body, that of his son, and yet his memory does not allow him to remember until the fire surrounds him that he himself has been dreamed, or imprisoned in his body, by another. The sorcerer feels humiliated by this memory, a humiliation which he seeks to keep from his son by concealing the son’s lack of real humanity: “No ser un hombre, ser la proyección del sueño de otro hombre, ¡qué humillación incomparable, qué vértigo!” (454). [Not to be a man, to be a projection of another man’s dreams—what an incomparable humiliation, what madness! Rodríguez Monegal and Reid 127] The humility of a soul is to know oneself to be created by Another.

The signs fallen from eternity and contained in time and language, both linear, are the words of the poem. The poet attempts to capture what it means to be trapped in a body through a list of physical experiences involving all five senses and a range of human emotions, including acceptance and rejection: "Fui amado, comprendido, alabado y pendí de una cruz" (27). [I was loved, understood, praised and I hung from a cross.] Borges, who was blind for decades of his adult life, reflects his own dependence on senses other than sight by spending more time on them than on what Christ would have seen. His use of the first person and of concrete, specific sensations such as the weight of metal on the palm and the sound of footsteps on the grass accentuates the fleshliness of the Incarnation in a way that the gospels do not since they are narrated by disciples, not by Christ himself and tend not to dwell as much on what Jesus felt but rather on what he said and did—although there are notable exceptions such as Christ weeping over Lazarus (John 11:35) or falling asleep on the boat (Luke 8:23).

The divine nature of Jesus is referred to in the poem not only in the "I am" statement but also when he says that he wished to play with his children. Immediately he goes on to report, "Estuve entre ellos con asombro y ternura" (13) [I was among them with wonder and tenderness.] The use of *ternura* as well as the reference to *hijos* evokes the imagery of creation as fathering a son in "The Circular Ruins" and "The Golem" and puts Christ in the position of Creator. This imagery strengthens the association suggested by Borges of the author-creator with God the Creator. In the Old Testament as well as in the New, God says of Jesus, the Word: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." (Psalm 2:7; Hebrews 1:5). Echoes of the fatherhood of the Creator are found in "The Golem," where the monster raises filial hands to his God (the Rabbi; line 57) and in "The Circular Ruins", where the coincidence of Biblical and Borgesian vocabulary is remarkable:

En general, sus días eran felices; al cerrar los ojos pensaba:
Ahora estaré con mi hijo. O, más raramente: El hijo que he
engendrado me espera y no existirá si no voy. (454)

In general, his days were happy; when he closed his eyes, he thought: Now I will be with my son. Or, more rarely: The son I have engendered [here I prefer begotten] is waiting for me and will not exist if I do not go to him (Rodríguez Monegal and Reid 126)

This passage also echoes Luke's genealogy of Christ, where Adam is called the son of God (3:38), and Genesis 3, where God walked with his son Adam in the cool of the day (vs. 8).

If the feelings of both rabbi and sorcerer toward their "sons" are bittersweet, so are Christ's: "Conocí también la amargura." [I also knew bitterness; line 38] Enrique Giordano comments about the phrase in "The Circular Ruins," "comprendió con cierta amargura que su hijo estaba listo para nacer" [With a certain bitterness, he understood that his son was ready to be born]: "comprendió que su obra era una ausencia y una exclusión" [he understood that his work was absence and exclusion] (360). Giving birth is in fact the ushering in of a state of physical separation, but it is also the birth of the possibility of rejection. The bitterness referred to in the poem "John 1:14" is that "he came to his own and his own did not receive him" (John 1:11); this is certainly an exclusion even more bitter than that experienced by the magician.

Writing a book has frequently been compared to giving birth. Since parallels based on Borges' thought about writing have been drawn in this study between artistic creation, divine creation, and the Incarnation, one can also note that an author's work comes to its own readers and is not always received, that is, it is misinterpreted or rejected. The Borgesian circle of sorcerer-artists both created and creating, mirrored in "The Golem" by the line from God to Borges to Rabbi Judá León to the Golem, can move in both directions, for in fact an author is eventually defined by his works. Borges recognizes this phenomenon in the ironic autobiography which is the epilogue to *El oro de los tigres* [*The Gold of the Tigers*]:

El renombre de que Borges gozó durante su vida ... no dejó de asombrarnos ¿Sintió Borges alguna vez la discordia íntima de su suerte? Sospechamos que sí. Descreyó del libre albedrío y le complacía repetir esta sentencia de Carlyle: "la historia universal es un texto que estamos obligados a leer y a escribir incesantemente y en el cual también nos escriben." (506-07)

The renown which Borges enjoyed during his life ... never ceased to amaze us Did Borges ever sense the intimate discord of his fate? We suspect that he did. He disbelieved free will and it pleased him to repeat this sentence by Carlyle:

"universal history is a text which we are obliged to read and to write incessantly and in which we are also inscribed.

A literary work writes or inscribes the author in the mind of his readers, who may not receive the word which he has destined for them but rather may discover another in its place. The gospel of John, in fact, is bound together by the thematic thread of misunderstanding, the misunderstanding of Jesus' words by those to whom they were spoken. Similarly, the reader recreates Borges, who recreates God. The other "maker" of the author are his precursors; as Borges rewrites philosophers and writers—and the Word of God—in his own works, we can say, as Borges has of Kafka, that he like Kafka and every writer, creates his own precursors; that is, how subsequent readers view a writer is often defined by how other writers build on them ("Kafka and his precursors," Rodríguez Monegal and Reid 243).

In his essay on Kafka, Borges compares him to the phoenix, which is resurrected from the ashes. In "The Circular Ruins," the circular temple where the sorcerer creates his son was once the color of fire and now of ashes (451). The fire which burns the magician at the end of the tale does not consume him, which alerts him to the awareness of the endless circle of dreamers. In order to dream he lies down in a sepulchral niche reminiscent of the resting places of Lazarus and of Jesus, who returned from death to life. The multiplicity of a creating God recreated in the human mind is reflected in the poet who creates through writing and is himself created by the work he has dreamed.

WORKS CITED

- Agheana, Ion. *The Meaning of Experience in the Prose of Jorge Luis Borges*. New York: Peter Lang, 1988.
- Alazraki, Jaime. "Borges: Entre la modernidad y la postmodernidad." *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 41.2 (1988): 175-79.
- Barnstone, Willis, ed. *Borges at Eighty*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982.

- Bell-Villada, Gene H. *Borges and His Fiction*. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1981.
- Benavides, Manuel. "Borges y la metafísica." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 505-07 (1992), 247-68.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "[La belleza no es un hecho extraordinario ...]" *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 505-07 (1992): 51-72.
- . "La cábala." *Siete noches. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1992.
- . "Deutsches Requiem." *El Aleph. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- . "Everything and Nothing." *El hacedor. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- . "El Golem." *El otro, el mismo. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- . "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins." *Otras inquisiciones. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- . "Juan, I, 14." *Elogio de la sombra. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- . "Kafka y sus precursores." *Otras inquisiciones. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- . "La muralla y los libros." *Otras inquisiciones. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- . "Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw." *Otras inquisiciones. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- . "La pesadilla." *Siete noches. Obras completas*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1992.

- "La poesía." *Siete noches. Obras completas.* Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1992.
- "La postulación de la realidad." *Discusión. Obras completas.* Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- "Las ruinas circulares." *Ficciones. Obras completas.* Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- Di Giovanni, Norman Thomas, ed. *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Poems 1923-1967.* [New York]: Delacorte, 1972.
- Fleming, Leonor. "Un dios múltiple: Una lectura de 'Las ruinas circulares'." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 505-07 (1992): 467-72.
- Giordano, Enrique. "El juego de la creación en Borges." *Hispanic Review* 52 (1984): 343-66.
- The Holy Bible.* New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.
- Hughes, James M. y Carlos Cortínez. "Where do You Stand with God, Ms. Dickinson, Señor Borges?" *Borges the Poet*, ed. Carlos Cortínez. Fayetteville: U Arkansas P, 1986.
- Lyon, Thomas E. "Intimations on a Possible Immortality: Ambiguity in *Elogio de la Sombra*." *Borges the Poet*, ed. Carlos Cortínez. Fayetteville: U Arkansas P, 1986.
- Penuel, Arnold M. "Paradox and Parable: The Theme of Creativity in Borges' 'The Circular Ruins'." *Latin American Literary Review* 17 (1989): 52-61.
- Rodríguez Monegal, Emir and Alastair Reid, eds. *Borges: A Reader.* New York: E.P.Dutton, 1981.
- Simms, Ruth L.C., trans. *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, by Jorge Luis Borges. Austin: U Texas P, 1964.