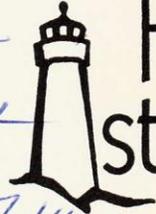


For Norman Daly
whose exhibit on Iliados triggered
this paper,

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JORGE LUIS BORGES' PANTHEISTIC PREOCCUPATION with the concept that all authors are one author, although they may live in various eras and locations and are known by different names, is too well known to be insisted upon. That concept is but one facet of a more general idea entertained by Borges: a supreme and eternal Mind conceives thoughts in the abstract and then translates them into the world as we know it through the instrumentality of human beings. Of the many possible examples of Borges' work which illustrate this blend of Platonism and Pantheism, two will suffice for the purpose of this brief study: "El enigma de Edward FitzGerald" and "El sueño-10 de Coleridge."¹

In the essay on FitzGerald, the point is made that through some "fortuitous conjunction of a Persian astronomer who condescended to engage in poetry with an eccentric Englishman somewhat familiar with Oriental and Hispanic books, perchance without completely understanding them, there results an extraordinary poet resembling neither of the first two [Edward FitzGerald and Omar Khayyām]" (p. 112). Borges comments on the belief held by some critics that FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* is truly an English poem with Persian points of reference. He adds: "FitzGerald interpolated, refined and invented, but his *Rubáiyát* require our reading of them as Persian and ancient" (p. 112). Borges reminds us that Omar himself professed the doctrine (which is both Platonic and Pythagorean) that the soul may lodge in several different bodies at various points in time, and that the *Rubáiyát* is highly pantheistic in expressing the idea that the history of the universe is a spectacle conceived, represented, and contemplated by God. Borges muses that the latter concept would allow for a re-creation of the Persian by the Englishman, "since both were, essentially, God or momentary faces of God" (p.112). Borges ends the essay reflecting on the mystery of all forms of collaboration, affirming that this particular case is more mysterious than others because the two men were so completely different

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1960). The translation from the Spanish is mine, as are all subsequent translations. Pagination is indicated in parentheses.

one from the other that they probably would not have become friends had they known each other in life; therefore, death as well as vicissitudes and the passage of time actually served the purpose of merging the two men into a single poet. This essay, then, is highly representative of a theme repeatedly insisted on in the work of the Argentinian writer.

The essay "El sueño de Coleridge" concentrates on the fact that in 1816 the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge published "Kubla Khan" based on the unfinished poem which had come to him as a revelation, in a series of visual images as well as their verbal counterpart, in a dream he experienced in 1797. Borges goes on to mention that it was only twenty years *after* the publication of "Kubla Khan" that the first western translation of a universal history (the *Compendium of History* by Rashid ed-Din, dating from the fourteenth century) appeared in Paris with the information that Kublai Khan's palace at Shang-tu (Xanadu) was built in accordance with a plan which the Emperor had seen *in a dream*. There is absolutely no evidence of any text which Coleridge could have read *before* the publication of his own work with the information that the palace itself was built in accordance with the inspiration of a dream. Therefore, in spite of the fact that Coleridge "received" his poem in a dream only after reading a passage describing the construction of the palace at Xanadu, what fascinates and mystifies Borges is the fact that in the thirteenth century the Emperor of the Mongols built a palace according to his vision of it in a dream and that an English poet living five centuries later, who had no idea that the edifice was the result of a dream, himself dreamed a poem concerning that structure.

"The first dream added a palace to reality; the second, produced five centuries later, a poem (or the beginning of a poem) suggested by the palace . . ." (p. 29). Borges believes that there is some sort of definite plan operating on the production of two dreams of such great similarity and that, based on the huge length of time intervening between the two dreams, a superhuman originator is indicated. The Argentinian author comments on the futility of attempting to ascertain the purpose motivating the being he describes as "immortal or long-lived" but declares that that purpose probably has not been attained as yet. It was confirmed in 1691 that all that was left of the Khan's palace were ruins. It is a fact that only fifty lines of the three hundred-verse poem dreamed by Coleridge have been set down on paper. Borges draws the conclusion that the series of visions and the works resulting from them have not ended. He muses: "Perhaps the series of dreams

has no end; perhaps the clew resides in the last dream" (p. 29). However, Borges then postulates another explanation: an archetype not yet revealed to men, an eternal object (to use Whitehead's terminology) is gradually entering the world; its first manifestation was the palace; its second was the poem. Anyone comparing them would have seen that they were essentially equal" (p. 30). In this essay on Coleridge's dream, we are presented once more with two men who create basically the same entity, or rather, two facets of that entity. Furthermore, these two men, separated in time and space, are seen to be the instruments of either a divine intelligence or of an archetype which employs individuals for the purpose of transferring this ideal into the real world.

At this point it would be of interest to point out that Borges himself is involved in the processes described in both "El enigma de Edward FitzGerald" and "El sueño de Coleridge." The first essay in the collection *Otras inquisiciones* ("La muralla y los libros") ponders the possible motivation for and the philosophic implications of the actions of Shih Huang Ti, first Emperor of China, who performed two prodigious feats: he ordered the construction of the Great Wall and the burning of all books written before he was Emperor. Shih Huang Ti, referred to as the "first" Emperor (his destruction of history erased previous emperors), attempted to isolate China in space (by the Wall) and in time (by the destruction of the past). The fact should not be allowed to pass unnoticed that the series of essays here referred to is entitled *Otras inquisiciones* in spite of the fact that one will not be able to find in the complete works of J. L. Borges, as might be expected, a prior collection called *Inquisiciones*. Why are there "other" inquiries if there were no earlier inquiries? The truth is that Borges' first volume of essays bore the name *Inquisiciones*. However, now considering those original *Inquisiciones* to be nothing more than exercises in *avant-garde* writing which were both dogmatic and affected, Borges refuses to include them in his *Obras corapietas* (Complete Works). Furthermore, he not only will not allow reprinting of that book but buys up all the copies of them he can locate for the purpose of destroying them.²

Perhaps the similarity of behavior observed in the destruction of books by the Emperor and by Borges is somewhat more than superficial. In the first paragraph of "La muralla y los libros," Borges states his motives for pondering this

² See Irby's introduction to Jorge Luis Borjes, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, translated by Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. ix.

case. The fact that those two formidable projects (construction of an immense wall against the barbarians and the abolition of the past) "were initiated by one person and in some way were attributes that person, inexplicably satisfied me and, at the same time, disturbed me" (p. 9). In trying to comprehend the conflicting emotions (satisfaction and disturbance) engendered in him by the facts mentioned, he wanders through a maze of philosophical thought as well as historical and esthetical discussion. It is possible that the usually cerebral, unemotional Borges experiences emotion in contemplating Shih Huang Ti because the Emperor and the writer are more closely linked than appears. Some of the conjectures in the essay could apply to Borges' motives for erasing the memory of his *Inquisiciones* just as well as they might apply to the motives of the Emperor for obliterating history. "Shih Huang Ti, perhaps, wished to obliterate the canonical books because they were his accusers; Shih Huang Ti, perhaps, wished to abolish the entire past in order to abolish one single memory . . ." (p. 10); ". . . the image of a disillusioned king who destroyed what he used to defend" (p. 11). As the monarch destroyed records of the past to enhance the value of his newer accomplishments, so does Borges. As the king caused the disappearance of books and in doing so destroyed, in his disillusionment, what he used to defend, the writer destroys books which contain a style of writing which he used to defend and with which he is disillusioned. The emperor built as he destroyed, and for the same purpose: the enhancement of his glory. Borges has created, too: the work he has produced since the first collection of essays. This work, without any doubt, has made him justly renowned. One may wonder, then, if the strange emotion produced in Borges, one composed of satisfaction and of disturbance, inexplicable to Borges himself, was not produced because Borges sensed that he was, in some way, intimately associated with Shih Huang Ti in the introduction of an archetype (as yet undefined) into the real world.

In a manner much more obvious and startling than Borges' relation to the Chinese emperor may be seen Borges' relation to Norman Daly, creator of Llhuros. Before proceeding to discuss Daly's work, however, it is necessary to glance at one of Borges' fictional works. "Thon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is a thought-provoking tale of the fantastic presented in the form of notes dealing with non-existent books.³ Briefly stated, Borges

³ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emece Editores, 1956).

claims he finds references to a country in an obscure encyclopedia. He has never heard of such a country and can neither accurately locate its geographic position nor find mention of it in any other set of the same encyclopedia. Similarly, no indication of the minutely described Uqbar is to be found in other reference books either. Some years later he happens upon what appears to be one volume of an extensive encyclopedia dealing with an otherwise unknown planet. Borges provides a summary of the architecture, philosophy, linguistic features, geography, mythology, history, literature, and other features of the arts and sciences of the planet, which in addition to being highly imaginative while at the same time plausible and, therefore, intellectually disconcerting, possess the advantage of being greatly ordered and logical. Furthermore, while unquestionably exotic, indeed alien to our experience, this planet's literary concepts and philosophy are presented in a manner which appeals to our esthetic sensibilities.

Borges finally informs us of the origin of the singular encyclopedias: a secret benevolent society in Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century, whose members included individuals learned in various fields, decided to invent a country. Later, realizing that one generation would not be equal to a task of such magnitude, each of the masters would choose a disciple to continue the task. In the nineteenth century the organization turns up in the United States, where a millionaire decides the project of inventing a country is too modest and convinces the others to expand the task to that of inventing an entire planet. Briefly, then, this is the explanation for the appearance of the books and encyclopedias on a non-existent country and on an equally non-existent planet in such convincing style.

The labor of the secret society reaches the point in which objects begin to appear mysteriously, at times engraved with letters corresponding to one of the alphabets of Tlön. The number of these strange objects increases as time goes by. The increase in the appearance of artifacts from the non-existent planet is accompanied by the printing of manuals, anthologies, translations, and reprints dealing with various features of that planet. Under the pressure of all this evidence, "reality began to yield in more than one point. The truth is that it yearned to yield" (*Ficciones*, p. 33). The reason for this predisposition of the truth to give way to the fiction is that in recent years

any kind of symmetry with the appearance of order . . . has been sufficient to fascinate mankind. How could one not submit to Tlön, to the detailed vast body of evidence of an orderly planet? It is useless to respond that Reality is orderly too. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws—I translate: with nonhuman laws—which we never quite

manage to perceive. Tlön may well be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth planned by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men. (*Ficciones*, pp. 33-34)

In other words, humankind, yearning to live in a world it is capable of understanding, prefers the man-made world to the real world. The languages, the harmonious history, pharmacology, and several other sciences of Tlön are already being taught in the schools. In fact, the history of Tlön being disseminated by the department of Education has wiped out the history which Borges was taught in his youth. "A fictitious past takes the place of another past in the memory of all . . ." (*Ficciones*, p. 34). (This is somewhat reminiscent of the results desired by the Chinese emperor.) The world has been completely changed by a group of individuals, and the efforts continue. Borges foresees the disappearance of the Spanish language from Earth as well as that of French and English. "The world will be Tlön " (*Ficciones*, p. 34).

Unknown to Borges, some of the first steps in a process eerily similar to that described in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" have been taken. Furthermore, the process has been initiated by a man who has not read the story concerning Tlön.⁴ In February of 1972, the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art (Cornell University) in Ithaca, New York, presented what appeared to be an archeological display dealing with the "lost" civilization of Llhuros. Included in "The Civilization of Llhuros" were exotic artifacts of wood, ceramic, and metal. These urns, religious objects, and weapons could be found fixed to walls or in glass cases and appeared to be quite ancient, judging from the corrosion in evidence. Labels informed the visitor that the "fragment of a mural" was unearthed at Houndee or that the "trallib" (Llhuroscian for "vessel for holding oil") was unearthed at a dig in Vanibo. The exposition contained over 100 items, including a map of the excavated area and a menstrual chart.

Needless to say, or perhaps not so needless, the display was a good-humored hoax deriding archeological exhibits. This ingenious bit of craftsmanship was created painstakingly during the five years preceding the exhibition by Norman Daly, an artist who has invented an entire civilization, presenting the public with "relics" of that culture. The "remains" of Llhuroscian society were

⁴ Norman Daly, in a letter to me dated June 21, 1973, stated he had not read "Tlön."

manufactured for the most part out of the debris of our twentieth-century industrialized and commercialized society (detergent bottles, styrofoam, packing boxes, retouched photographs, etc.) transformed by Daly's ingenuity and deftness with the use of acrylic paints (for "corroding" surfaces).

The exhibit was not limited to artifacts; Daly composed highly evocative music, which was executed electronically on the Moog synthesizer, and had it piped in, thereby setting a mood which might be thought of as otherworldly. There was even a "scholarly" catalogue filled with examples of the amorous poetry of Llhuros.

Although "The Civilization of Llhuros" is a burlesque, its creator sees in it another dimension: "On one level, the show is meant to appeal to people's need to suspend reality, to their nostalgia for things they've never experienced. And by using objects of modern civilization, I've tried to get people to rediscover the beauty of our own industrial designs."⁵ The rationale expressed here is startlingly similar to that expressed by Borges for the truth's predisposition to yield to man-made Tlön. Daly adds: "I really don't think Llhuros is fictitious at all."⁶ The reality of Llhuros may impose itself on many of the visitors to the exhibit, which would affect not only the Ithaca area, because the show has since moved on to other museums and continues to do so.⁷ At the showing in Rochester, the present writer heard comments by at least three persons indicating their belief in the authenticity of Llhuros, while admitting their previous ignorance of that civilization.

Conclusion: From the foregoing, it is not inadmissible to glimpse the involvement, *unknown to Borges*, of Borges in the "real" world with the concepts he entertains in his writings, be they fiction or essay (and it is difficult to draw a distinct dividing line between those two genres in his work). The essays, "El enigma de Edward FitzGerald" and "El sueño de Coleridge," operating along lines showing affinities with both Plato and Spinoza, present the idea that all poets are but one poet and that eternal objects or archetypes, the products of an Infinite Mind, force their way into

⁵ Charles Michener, "The Fabulous Llhurocians," *Newsweek*, Feb. 28, 1972, p.93

⁶ Michener, p. 93.

⁷ The exhibit has appeared in museums in Akron (September, 1972), Rochester (November, 1972), Albany (January, 1973), and is scheduled to open at Indianapolis and at Binghamton in the unspecified future, according to Daly's letter.

the "real" world by the instrumentality of human beings, who, although seemingly distinct individuals, are linked as are the various instruments of an orchestra in producing (or receiving and reproducing) a symphony.

The essay "La muralla y los libros" is the first tenuous indication that Borges may be involved in the phenomena he contemplates. However, it is when one considers the fictional "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (in which an "archetype" in the tradition of Kublai Khan's palace gradually enters the world to the extent that the world becomes that archetype) and there becomes aware of Norman Daly's construction, Llhuros, that this involvement of Borges becomes impossible to overlook. In addition, if we accept the possibility of the concepts discussed in the essays dealing with FitzGerald-Omar Khayyām and with Coleridge-Kublai Khan, we might be tempted (keeping in mind that Borges does not know of Norman Daly and that Daly has not read "Tlön") to conceive of the Emperor Shih Huang Ti, the poet Jorge Luis Borges, and the artist Norman Daly as being different facets of one being or several instruments of one idea in the process of entering the world. The identity of that idea is not yet known, but in achieving its end it destroys the past while constructing something new. Daly destroys detergent containers and packing boxes to create *trallibs* and bronze doors, thereby imposing Llhuros upon Earth just as Tlön replaces Earth. Furthermore, Daly has stated that he does not believe Llhuros is fictional at all some observers of the exhibit share that feeling. It would be of interest to learn Borges' reaction upon hearing of Llhuros.

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