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The Eye of the Mind: Borges and Wallace Stevens

I don't know what mysterious reason Borges had in his 1967 *Introduction to American Literature* by not mentioning the name of Wallace Stevens; to solve the enigma is irrelevant. Nevertheless, it is this omission that impelled me to do a simultaneous reading of the two poets.

In 1944, the literary magazine *Sur* published a translation of the famous Stevens poem "Sunday Morning"; the translators were Bioy Casares and Borges, and some lines from this poem are very close to Borges' own poetry:

What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?

At the end of the poem, once more, the obscurity so dear to the author of *In Praise of Darkness* appears in all of its sublimity:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

In the twenties, two poetic works were created over the foundations of European verse that would play a preponderent role among American and European writers. Robert Alter, in his article "Borges and Stevens: a Note on Post-Symbolist Writing" (*Prose for Borges*), points out the affinity between Borges and Stevens as part of post-modern literature and its

anti-symbolist movement. He writes: "Borges and Stevens are great imaginists whose exercise of imagination—in Borges' case, often fantastical—is directed by a fine skepticism not only about the world of brute matter but also about the imagination itself."

Borges writes about himself, about men and their activities as the splendor and mockery of a god, of gods; Stevens, with irony, writes about the splendor of the world and the presence of the "I" as a mind surrounded by beings created through poetry. Both are solitary poets, but generous in their gifts, and with their poetry they give us abundant fruits of the mind.

In "Poem of the Gifts" Borges writes:

Let no one debase with pity or reprove
This declaration of God's mastery
Who with magnificent irony
Gave me at once books and the night. . . .
Within my darkness I slowly explore
The hollow half light with hesitant cane,
I who always imagined Paradise
To be a sort of library.

Stevens, in "Of Mere Being," writes that Paradise is

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze decor
A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

We are facing here a humanistic philosophy, but paradoxically, the human being is absent, and it is his achievements and his imagination that create an Eden for these poets.

As Borges states in his "Ars Poetica," poetry is "humble and immortal," "Art is that Ithaca, / of green eternity." But what does Borges mean by eternity? To what place does the finger of his poetry point? Is a library his eternity, his Paradise? And after all, doesn't a library provide the only surviving visions of the minds of writers from the past? In *The Necessary Angel* Wallace Stevens writes: "The mind of the poet describes itself as constantly in his poems."

But in the poems of Stevens that Borges translated, a more drastic

dichotomy appears; blood is a symbol of life which opens a possible space for Paradise:

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?

The answer to Stevens' question is given by Borges in his article "Valéry as Symbol." This article is most illuminating and if we replace the name of the French poet with that of Stevens: ". . . a man who, in an age that worships the chaotic idols of blood, earth and passion, preferred always the lucid pleasures of thought and the secret adventures of order."

Indeed, both poets are the last consequence of a certain faith in the human mind, not as a reasoning form, but rather as an imagining reason. They are the last members of the aristocracy of an imagining wisdom.

Borges and Stevens represent the other side and the ultimate expression of Romantic poetic thought. For both poets the domesticated imagination occupies a principal place in their poetry. In this way, they have overcome the long debate between imagination and reason, and have created the imagining reason.

The two poets have the tendency to claim for their poetry the same essential outlook: one that appears to the eyes as it is—the ordinary, everyday scene. At the same time, this commonplace is projected into an imaginative level, fabulous and mythical. Borges, for example, refers to "the celestial moon of every day," but nevertheless believes that "better than real nighttime moons, I can / recall the moons of poetry" ("The Moon"). Stevens, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" writes: "The moon rose in the mind . . ."

What moon is this that looks like the ordinary moon but is not? What eye that looks like the ordinary eye but is not, describes these moons? It is the moon of the mind, the eye of the mind and it is the sun "half sun, half thinking of the sun; half sky, / Half desire for indifference about sky" ("Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas"). As a result of this, Stevens writes: "the mind / is the eye, and . . . this landscape of the mind / is a landscape only of the eye" ("Crude Foyer").

For both poets, the poem is a kind of iceberg in which the world seen or thought has been frozen, making it always available to the reader's

eyes. For Borges and Stevens poetry is also a sort of window in which the frame creates specific limits. Things are perceived by means of their changing aspects, with their lights and shadows, but circumscribed by a frame, by the boundaries of a precise form. This window can be a book, a word, a painting, a song, a legend or a myth: in any case, always with very clearly defined outlines.

Borges, as a poet, describes himself as someone sitting in a dark room from which he observes the outside world or the world of the mind. And from the darkness he can see without being seen. Stevens, in "Of Modern Poetry," refers to poetry as "metaphysician in the dark." The poet as well as the poem, for both writers, represents poetic form, art and the world, its limitations, its *trompe l'oeil*. In truth, the ultimate *raison d'être* for writers is a longing to find themselves or a description of the mind that does this.

Borges in his "Ars Poetica" writes:

Sometimes at evening there's a face
that sees us from the deeps of a mirror.
Art must be that sort of mirror,
disclosing to each of us his face.

Stevens in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" views "reality as a thing seen by the mind" and continues:

Not that which is but that which is apprehended,
A mirror, a lake of reflections in a room,
A glassy ocean lying at the door, . . .

And it is because the eye of the mind is what we see reflected in the poem, that every object described in it is sustained by the self of the poet. Simultaneously the separation of the otherness and the self has vanished into the new space of poetic fiction.

Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves,
So that they become an impalpable town, full of
Impalpable bells, transparencies of sound.

The attitude of the two poets originated in an *a priori*: that of a "confidence in language as self sufficient" (as Guillermo Sucre has pointed out in *Borges el poeta*). But it is not a faith in the tautological values of language. Harold Bloom writes in *Figures of Capable Imagination*: "what Wittgenstein means when he speaks of a *deep* tautology, which leads to a true

realism, Stevens too knows, as Emerson knew, that what he *says* is wrong, but that his meaning is right."

When Borges wants to talk about the tiger "El otro tigre" ("The Other Tiger") he establishes that his tiger is "a system and arrangement of human language." Conscious about the fallacy of poetic fiction he says:

. . . I keep on looking
throughout the afternoon for the other tiger,
the other tiger which is not in this poem.

Stevens also describes a tiger as "lamed by nothingness and frost." Therefore a faith in language indicates at the same time a distrust of the world that conceived it. This tragic consciousness of an excision between language and world, and the consequent retreat of the poet into an imagining reason, is resolved by Borges and Stevens through irony and sarcasm.

The works of the two poets is modulated by the eye of the mind that sees the world in its totality. This may be sensorial and intellectual in the way of Wallace Stevens, or profoundly intellectual in the manner of Jorge Luis Borges. To quote Borges, though he was talking about Valéry, both poets are: ". . . the symbol of [men] infinitely sensitive to every phenomenon and for whom every phenomenon is a stimulus capable of provoking an infinite series of thoughts."

The concept of the eye of the mind is the ultimate result of the creative impulse formulated by the emotional eye of the Romantic movement. It is possible that the poetry of Borges and Stevens derives from the "Majestic Intellect" mentioned by William Wordsworth in the poem of the same title:

When into air had partially dissolved
That vision, given to spirits of the night
And three chance human wanderers, in calm thought
Reflected, it appeared to me the type
Of a majestic intellect, its acts
And its possessions, what it has and craves,
What in itself it is, and would become . . .

If, as Borges said in his poem "Cambridge,"

We are our memory,
we are this chimerical museum of shifting forms,
this heap of broken mirrors,

I am convinced that in some remote region of his memory Wallace Stevens is looking at Borges with consciousness from the eye of the mind.

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