

## Three "New" Avant-garde Poems of Jorge Luis Borges



By Linda S. Maier

Despite his standing as one of the premier Latin American, indeed universal, authors of all time, it is often overlooked that Jorge Luis Borges made his literary debut as an avant-garde poet in Spain. The cryptic nature of Borges' Spanish period is further complicated by the inaccessibility of many of the primary texts, a difficulty the author himself has done nothing to alleviate and in which he actively participates. But as Carlos Meneses states in his study of the *Poesía juvenil de Jorge Luis Borges* (1978), the Argentine's Spanish production, however limited in scope, may shed new light on Borges' later work:

[E]se grupo de poemas merece gran atención, porque aunque escritos inmediatamente después de la adolescencia, contienen algunos aciertos e, indudablemente, dan la pista para mejor interpretación de algunas de las obsesiones que harán crisis más tarde, o descifrar las oscuras cuitas que, solamente en los años setenta, el propio Borges comenzará a aclarar.

Podrá parecer innecesario el haber revuelto hemerotecas y archivos en busca de este material olvidado, o considerar un atrevimiento el haber exhumado estos pecados de juventud, que el propio autor siempre ha deseado saber sepultados muy al fondo de todas las memorias. Pero es el caso que algunos poemas, o tal vez sólo algunos versos, dan las claves necesarias para desentrañar misterios.<sup>1</sup>

In order to decipher any mysteries, however, Borges' total Spanish output must be made available, and this task remains incomplete, notwithstanding the efforts of diligent literary scholars and historians, such as Meneses,<sup>2</sup> Guillermo de Torre,<sup>3</sup> and Gloria Videla.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1919 and 1926,<sup>5</sup> Borges contributed to nine Spanish literary journals: *Alfar* (La Coruña), *Baleares* (Palma de Mallorca), *Cervantes* (Madrid), *Cosmópolis* (Madrid), *Grecia* (Seville-Madrid), *Reflector* (Madrid), *Revista de Occidente* (Madrid), *Tableros* (Madrid), and *Ultra* (Madrid). Many of

these periodicals were organs of the synthetic Spanish brand of the avant-garde known as Ultraism,<sup>6</sup> to which Borges briefly, but fervently subscribed during his early formative years. A catalog of Borges' publications in Spain during those years reveals that the Argentine published thirty poems,<sup>7</sup> three literary manifestoes,<sup>8</sup> six annotated compilations of Latin American and German Expressionist poetry and prose,<sup>9</sup> three essays on the metaphor,<sup>10</sup> and six miscellaneous articles.<sup>11</sup> Very few of these poems and essays have ever been incorporated into subsequent collections<sup>12</sup> and have therefore remained inadvertently neglected by many Borges scholars. Indeed, the existence of three poems—"Hermanos," "Señal," and "Fiesta"—has entirely escaped detection until now. These three poems, which have not been reprinted since Borges' Ultraist fervor, are reproduced below:

#### Hermanos

Crucificados en el tiempo  
 callábamos a lo largo de los ponientes gastados  
 que nos miraban con sus viejos ojos de ofidio,  
 y nuestros labios eran cicatrices

Quién desgarró el conjuro.

Asombrada de azul  
 el alma destechó a los astros la casa  
 y nuestros corazones fueron guitarras de mil cuerdas  
 que se desangran hoy

en la otra herida  
 de sombras y planetas.<sup>13</sup>

#### Fiesta

Por la mañana suelta  
 se desperezan miles de banderas

La luz  
 como una enredadera  
 pende de las paredes

El viento late  
 Los edificios enhiestos son estandartes de piedra  
 Una canción sin música ni versos  
 de pie sobre mi pecho  
 ha sacudido el corazón del cielo<sup>14</sup>

#### Señal

A Maurice Claude.

Cuántas noches maduras  
 se desgajaron sobre nuestras frentes hermano  
 Fuimos abriendo como ramas las calles  
 Nuestras risas rodando se rompieron  
 frescos juguetes en los cristales del fondo  
 Tus manos beben el cercano silencio  
 Las melopeas  
 El piano late como un torrente enyugado

Tus manos arden en la luz de los sonos  
 Alguien  
 junto al farol decapitado  
 ha de ceñirnos un collar de estepas<sup>15</sup>

According to Zunilda Gertel, Borges' early poetry displays three thematic currents: 1) war and Socialist ideology, 2) the modern city with its accompanying technological progress, and 3) intellectualized or temporalized landscapes.<sup>16</sup> A textual analysis of each of these three "new" avant-garde poems by Borges shows that they perfectly illustrate each of his early themes.

In "Hermanos," Borges depicts the universal suffering of the "brotherhood" of Man which occurred during World War I. This theme is underscored by repeated images of pain and anguish which reflect the influence of German Expressionism. Suffering in silent agony, the poet and his "brothers" are "[c]rucificados" (v. 1), and what were once their lips are now "cicatrices" (v. 4).<sup>17</sup> Their hearts, metaphorically likened to one thousand-stringed serenading guitars (v. 8), bleed ("se desangran" in v. 9) in the vast cosmic wound ("herida"-v. 10) resulting from the strife. The violence is further highlighted in verses 5-7: "Quién *desgarró* el conjuro./ *Asombrada* de azul el alma *destechó* a los astros la casa". (Emphasis added.) The human suffering caused by the struggle is witnessed by a personified sun with the evil, treacherous eyes of a serpent: ". . . los ponientes gastados/ . . . nos miraban con sus viejos ojos de ofidio."

In contrast to such despair, "Fiesta" paints a lighthearted picture of a typical holiday with flags blowing in a gentle breeze, sunlight, and music.<sup>18</sup> Here, the poet participates in the "euphoria of the modern world"<sup>19</sup> and is obviously moved by the experience, as evidenced in the beating of the wind ("El viento late"-v. 6) and the "corazón del cielo" (v. 10) which mirror the poet's own beating heart ("mi pecho"-v. 9). Even the buildings are stone banners ("estandartes de piedra"-v. 7), and the sunlight resembles a clinging vine hanging from the walls (vv. 3-5). On this special occasion objects take on human characteristics to join in the celebration: thousands of flags "stretch their limbs" ("se desperezan"-v. 2) as they are unfurled, a song is "standing" ("de pie"-v. 9), and the sky even possesses a "heart" (v. 10).

The cityscape is viewed by night, instead of the clear light of day, in "Señal," and the overall metaphor, the "primordial element" of modern lyric,<sup>20</sup> compares the poet and his friend, to whom the initial apostrophe is directed, spending the night together in the city to two boys playing among the fruit trees in the country. Their late nights are "ripe" fruit which "falls" from the trees ("Cuántas noches *maduras* se *desgajaron* sobre nuestras frentes"-vv. 1-2), and their laughter is also like fruit which "rolls" after falling to the ground ("Nuestras risas *rodando* . . ."-v. 4). The city takes on the elements of Nature: the streets are likened to the branches of a tree in verse three ("Fuimos abriendo como *ramas* las calles"<sup>21</sup>), and a

piano sounds like a waterfall in verse eight ("El piano late como *un torrente enyugado*"). The city landscape has been transformed by the sheer power of the poet's imagination.

In form, all three poems respect the avant-garde penchant for free verse, varying from ten to twelve lines of unrhymed verse. Borges experiments with typography in all three and fails to provide proper punctuation marks, although he does tolerate the use of capitalization.

In conclusion, these three "new" avant-garde poems by Jorge Luis Borges, plainly illustrative of the Argentine's early themes, deserve to be restored to the author's peninsular canon in order to yield a fuller understanding of his total *oeuvre*, and especially of his long-suppressed Spanish period.<sup>22</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Carlos Meneses, *Poesía juvenil de Jorge Luis Borges* (Barcelona: José J. de Olañeta, Editor, 1978), p. 37.
- 2 In addition to the previously cited work, Meneses has contributed several other valuable publications on Borges' Spanish period: *Escritores latinoamericanos en Mallorca* (Palma de Mallorca: Ediciones Cort, 1974), pp. 57-68; "Los manifiestos y otros trabajos ultraístas de Borges," *Razón y Fábula*, no. 23 (Jan.-Feb. 1971), pp. 118-121; "Trabajos olvidados de Jorge Luis Borges" *El Nacional* (Caracas), 16 Nov. 1969.
- 3 Guillermo de Torre *Historia de las literaturas de vanguardia* (Madrid: Caro Raggio, 1925) and "Para la prehistoria ultraísta de Borges," *Hispania*, vol. 47 (1964), pp. 457-463.
- 4 Gloria Videla, "Anticipos del mundo literario de Borges en su prehistoria ultraísta," *Iberoromania*, No. 3, Nueva Serie (1975), pp. 173-195; "Formas y prosas olvidadas de Borges," *Revista de Literatura Argentina e Iberoamericana*, N° 3 (Dec. 1961); *El Ultraísmo: Estudios sobre movimientos poéticos de vanguardia en España* (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, S. A., 1971).
- 5 Borges actually only resided in Spain from 1919-21 and 1923-24, but he continued to publish in Spanish journals after his definitive return to Buenos Aires. The Borges family arrived in Spain in 1919 from Switzerland, where they had spent the war years. They wintered in Seville, but by early spring 1920, they were in Madrid, where Borges met the young Ultraist Guillermo de Torre. In March or April 1920, Borges travelled to Mallorca, where he lived in Palma and Valldemosa. In January 1921, he returned to Madrid and in late March 1921, the family sailed back to Buenos Aires.

In 1923, Borges returned to Spain by way of England, France, and Switzerland. During his second visit he again stayed in Madrid and travelled through Andalusia and Mallorca. By mid-1924, he was back in Buenos Aires, where in August 1924, he founded a new *Proa* with Ricardo Güiraldes and Pablo Rojas Paz.

For more information about Borges' two visits to Spain, see Meneses, *Poesía juvenil*, pp. 17-23, and *Escritores latinoamericanos*, pp. 57-68, as well as Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P.

Dutton, 1978). There is some disagreement as to Borges' exact itinerary in Spain, but from all accounts, the above chronology is accurate.

- 6 For a complete account of this movement, see Videla's seminal work, *El Ultraísmo*. De Torre's *Literaturas europeas*, pp. 37-83, as well as Manuel de la Peña, *El Ultraísmo en España* (Madrid: Colección Clásicos y Modernos, 1925) provide an interesting perspective on peninsular Ultraism by two of Borges' contemporaries.

For an account of Argentine Ultraism, see Néstor Ibarra, *La nueva poesía argentina: Ensayo crítico sobre el Ultraísmo 1921-1929* (Buenos Aires: Molinari e Hijos, 1930) and Thorpe Running, *Borges' Ultraist Movement and its Poets* (Lathrup Village, Michigan: International Book Publishers, Inc., 1981).

- 7 The poems, with their corresponding issue and date of publication, appeared in these journals: 1) *Alfar*: "Alejamiento" (no. 36, Jan. 1924), "Las Palmas" and "Villa Urquiza" (no. 59, July 1926); 2) *Baleares*: "Poema" (no. 121, Sept. 15, 1920), "Catedral" (no. 131, Feb. 15, 1921; later reprinted in *Ultra*); 3) *Cosmópolis*: "Arrabal" (no. 32, Aug. 1921); 4) *Grecia*: "Himno del mar" (no. 37, Dec. 31, 1919), "Trinchera" (no. 43, June 1, 1920), "Hermanos" (no. 45, July 1, 1920), "Señal" (no. 46, July 15, 1920), "Rusia" (no. 48, Sept. 1, 1920), "Insomnio" (no. 49, Sept. 15, 1920); 5) *Tableros*: "Guardia roja" (no. 1, Nov. 15, 1921; previously published in *Ultra*), "Montaña" (no. 2, Dec. 15, 1921), "Escaparaté" (no. 3, Jan. 15, 1922); 6) *Ultra*: "Mañana" (no. 1, Jan. 27, 1921), "Aldea" (no. 2, Feb. 10, 1921), "Gesta maximalista" (no. 3, Feb. 20, 1921), "Prismas" (no. 4, March 1, 1921), "Guardia roja" (no. 5, March 17, 1921; later reprinted in *Tableros*), "Tranvías" (no. 6, March 30, 1921), "Norte" (no. 7, April 10, 1921), "Cingladura" (no. 8, April 20, 1921), "Distancia" (no. 9, April 30, 1921), "Fiesta" (no. 15, June 30, 1921), "Catedral" (no. 19, Dec. 1, 1921; previously published in *Baleares*), "Ultimo rojo sol" (no. 20, Dec. 15, 1921), "Aldea" (no. 21, Jan. 1, 1922), "Prismas: Sala vacía" (no. 22, Jan. 15, 1922), "Siesta" (no. 24, March 15, 1924). Two poems identified by Meneses, *La poesía juvenil*, p. 38—"Europa de rojo" and "Salmo"—remain unlocated.
- 8 "Al margen de la moderna lírica," *Grecia*, no. 39 (Jan. 31, 1920); "Manifiesto del Ultra," *Baleares*, no. 131 (Feb. 15, 1921); "Proclama," *Ultra*, no. 21 (Jan. 1, 1922), which was reprinted from the mural magazine *Prisma*, no. 1 (Dec. 1921). Borges published a fourth, and perhaps his most well-known, Ultraist manifesto "Ultraísmo" in Buenos Aires in *Nosotros*, Año XV, Tomo XXXIX (1921), pp. 466-471.
- 9 Borges published two articles on Latin American prose and poetry in *Cosmópolis*: "La lírica argentina contemporánea: Selección y notas de Jorge-Luis Borges," no. 36 (Dec. 1921), pp. 640-651, and "Nuevos prosistas americanos. Apuntes críticas," no. 44 (Aug. 1922), pp. 320-323. He published four articles on German Expressionism: "Antología expresionista," *Cervantes*, Oct. 1920, pp. 100-112; "Lírica expresionista," *Grecia*, no. 47 (Aug. 1, 1920), pp. 10-11; "Lírica expresionista: Wilhelm Klemm," *Grecia*, no. 50 (Nov. 1, 1920), pp. 10-11; "Horizontes: *Die Aktions-Lyrik—1914-1916*.—Berlin," *Ultra*, no. 16 (Oct. 20, 1921).
- 10 Borges first published "La metáfora" in *Cosmópolis*, no. 35 (Nov. 1921), pp. 395-402, then "Examen de metáforas," *Alfar*, no. 40 (May 1924), pp. 11-12, and "Examen de metáforas: Su ordenación," *Alfar*, no. 41 (June-July 1924), pp. 4-5. The latter two articles were combined as "Examen de metáforas" in Borges' first book of essays, *Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1925), pp. 65-75.
- 11 In *Grecia*, "Paréntesis pasional," no. 38 (Jan. 20, 1920) and "La llama," no. 41 (Feb. 29, 1920); "Vertical," *Reflector*, no. 11 (May 20, 1921); "Menoscabo y grandeza de Quevedo," *Revista de Occidente*, Año II, N° XVII (Nov. 1924), pp.

249-255; in *Ultra*, "Anatomía de mi Ultra," no. 11 (May 20, 1921) and "Casa Elena (Hacia una estética del lupanar en España)," no. 17 (Oct. 30, 1921).

- 12 Borges had completed two works in Spain, *Los naipes del tahur* and *Los ritmos rojos* or *Los salmos rojos*, but he destroyed them before returning to Buenos Aires. See "An Autobiographical Essay," in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970), p. 223. De Torre, in "Para la prehistoria ultraísta," p. 461, states that "Rusia" and "Gesta maximalista" were intended to form part of *Los salmos rojos*; similar in theme, the poems "Trinchera," "Hermanos," and "Guardia roja" may have been marked for inclusion in this hypothetical collection as well.

A few of Borges' Spanish publications, however, eventually found a place in subsequent collections. "Aldea" (*Ultra*, no. 21), "Arrabal," "Prismas: Sala vacía," and "La llama" were incorporated in slightly revised form as "Campos atardecidos" of "Atardeceres," "Arrabal," "Sala vacía," and "Llamarada" respectively in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: privately printed, 1923). *Fervor* also includes a poem entitled "Villa Urquiza," but it in no way resembles the poem of the same title which appeared in *Alfar*, no. 59.

Again, the poem "Singladura" which appears in *Luna de enfrente* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1925), p. 20, bears no resemblance to "Cingladura," published in *Ultra*, no. 8.

*Inquisiciones* (1925) reprints "Menoscabo y grandeza de Quevedo," pp. 39-45, and "Examen de metáforas," as previously mentioned. The essay "Acerca del Expresionismo," pp. 146-152, also reproduces several previously published translations of German Expressionist poems.

- 13 *Grecia*, no. 45 (July 1, 1920), p. 14.  
 14 *Ultra*, no. 15 (June 30, 1921).  
 15 *Grecia*, no. 46 (July 15, 1920), p. 13.  
 16 Zunilda Gertel, *Borges y su retorno a la poesía* (New York: The Univ. of Iowa and Las Américas Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 54-56.  
 17 Borges incorporated this same image in the poem "Judería" in *Fervor* in the following verse: "Desangradas antaño en vanas palabras hoy se cicatrizaron las bocas/ Mudas . . ."  
 18 Borges appears to have borrowed the imagery of this poem to include in vv. 19-22 of "Las calles" in *Fervor*:

Hacia los cuatro puntos cardinales  
 se van desplegando como banderas las calles;  
 ojalá en mis versos enhiestos  
 vuelan esas banderas.

- 19 Juan Cano Ballesta, *Literatura y tecnología (Las letras españolas ante la revolución industrial: 1900-1933)* (Madrid: Editorial Origenes, S. A., 1981), p. 93.  
 20 One of the four principle elements of Ultraist esthetics mentioned by Borges in "Ultraismo," *Nosotros*, p. 468. The other three are: 1) the elimination of connecting phrases and useless adjectives, 2) the abolition of ornamental elements, confessionalism, preaching, and vagueness, and 3) the synthesis of two or more images in one.  
 21 Borges again borrowed from his Spanish poetry in the composition of *Fervor*; verse 22 of "Benares" reads "la luz va abriendo como ramas las calles." This line is also included in "Prismas" (*Ultra*, no. 4, v. 8): "vamos abriendo como ramas las calles." This tendency to cite himself is a common feature in all of Borges' works.  
 22 I am grateful to the Program for Cultural Cooperation Spain—U.S.A. and the University of Virginia for providing the necessary funding which made possible my research in Spain and allowed me to uncover these previously "lost" poems.