

Borges's "Ulrike"— Signature of a Literary Life

by Alice E. H. Petersen

When readers of Borges reach for his later works, they are often a little disappointed by what they find. Collections like *The Book of Sand* (which contains the short story "Ulrike") and *Doctor Brodie's Report*, which both appeared in the 1970s, are often passed over because they lack the obvious touches of "Borges" associated with metaphysical whimsy and the yellow tigers that stalked the works of an earlier age. Many critics resort to paraphrase instead of analysis, as if there is no more to be done with Borges but reiterate his own tales. Writing about *The Book of Sand*, Gene Bell-Villada complains that there are "no over-arching concerns, thematic or otherwise Although certain subjects do recur, they do not add up to any systematic set of preoccupations" (Bell-Villada 255).

I suggest that the line of Borges's narrative development precludes the explicit statement of "over-arching concerns." Over the years, the concerns of Borges have become so familiar to both author and reader that the barest hint of a personal preoccupation in the text suffices to recall a vast expanse of meaning. The preoccupations remain the same, but the manner of revoicing them has changed. In "The Fearful Sphere of Pascal," Borges comments: "it may be that history is the history of the different intonation given a handful of metaphors" (*Labyrinths* 227). It would not be untrue to suggest that the history Borges speaks of is not just literary history but also the personal history of a literary career. It may be that Borges's last works are not his greatest, but they are nonetheless the signature of a lifetime of significant literary activity.

Borges's consciousness of the past involved not just an awareness of literary tradition but also a sense of his own career as it developed within that tradition. He saw that he was not unaltered by his creative life, writing, "I

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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. (*Labyrinths* 223)

As the author becomes older, and his sense of tradition stronger, the fragility of the contemporary text becomes more pronounced; the voice that reiterates is both humbled by its forbears, but at the same time borne up by their example. To return to a dominant theme in Borges's work—there are very few metaphors, and these few are merely renewed by successive generations after the manner that most pleases them. However, the manner of renewing the metaphor must be in keeping with the simplicity of the ideal archetype, and this is the responsibility and the prerogative of the individual voice. One of the strengths of Borges's late works lies in his espousal of the simplicity required by the basic forms of tradition. At the age of 80, he verbally renounced the willful obscurity and baroque style of earlier days: "now I am daring and I write in a straightforward way and use no word to send a reader to the dictionary, and avoid violent metaphors" (Barnstone 123).

"Ulrike" demonstrates both the simplicity that characterizes the later narratives of Borges and the strength that these tales draw from the concept of a Platonic tradition of literary forms. It is a new emanation of a very old tale, and as such, it is driven by its precursor, demonstrating the Platonic push forward toward the next revelation of the text. At the same time, however, it is infused with Borges's particular intonation and his language of personal symbols.

In the tale, Borges rewrites a section of William Morris's translation of the *Saga of the Volsungs* using a contemporary English setting. In the Morris work, the warrior-maid Brynhild has vowed to wed Sigurd the dragon-slayer, the only man with enough courage to brave the wall of flames surrounding her castle. However, before the marriage can take place, Sigurd is beguiled into marrying Queen Gudrun. The Queen's brother Gunnar becomes enamored of Brynhild but lacks the courage to pass through the flames surrounding her castle. Sigurd, to aid Gunnar's cause, changes forms with Gunnar, so that Sigurd's spirit of courage within Gunnar's body plunges through the fire. Gunnar, having proved his "courage" betroths himself to Brynhild, and lies with her, although Sigurd's sword Gram physically separates them. Eventually Brynhild discovers the deception. She is distraught, but steadfast in her decision to remain true to her oath to Gunnar or die. Brynhild refuses Sigurd's rather belated offer to install her as Queen in place of Gudrun, and instead she organizes his death.

Borges identifies the section of the tale that he is choosing to revoice in the epigraph to "Ulrike": "He took the sword Gram and laid it naked be-

from her companion: "Brynhild, you're walking as if you wished a sword lay between us in bed" (*The Book of Sand* 14).

As the moment of physical consummation approaches, the temporal convergence of the ancient and contemporary tales escalates. Specific details of setting link the two texts, telescoping the distance between them. The cry of the wolf is heard again, a sound from outside the time-frame of the contemporary narrative: "From the top of the stairs Ulrike called down to me, 'Did you hear the wolf? There are no longer any wolves in England. Hurry'" (*The Book of Sand* 14).

The pair climb to an upstairs room papered after the style of William Morris. It is not often that the bedroom wallpaper has a bearing upon a romantic union. However, given the knowledge that William Morris was both a designer of interiors and an unwearying rewriter of Icelandic sagas, the wallpaper becomes a crucial factor, binding the text to its precursor and emphasizing the unification of contemporary Ulrike with the Brynhild of the past. The wallpaper is one of those points at which the contemporary text articulates with Morris's text and its antecedents. The characters are inside a William Morris room: the reader is inside the originating text.

"Ulrike" is one of the few tales in which Borges links the physical aspects of love to some emotional feeling. In fact, the consummation of the relationship between Javier and Ulrike constitutes a rare moment of unalloyed sentiment from the author of such a tale as "The Sect of the Phoenix" in which the sexual act is reduced to an obscure clandestine code. When Javier comes together with Ulrike, he feels complete—in a dimension beyond time. The sword Gram, signifying the obstacle to the unification of Sigurd and Brynhild, is removed:

The awaited bed was duplicated in a dim mirror, and the polished mahogany reminded me of the looking glass of the scriptures. Ulrike had already undressed. She called me by my real name—Javier. I felt that the snow was falling faster. Now there were no longer any mirrors or furniture. There was no sword between us. Time passed like the sands. In the darkness, centuries old, love flowed, and for the first and last time I possessed Ulrike's image. (*The Book of Sand* 14)

The bed is "awaited," a word suggestive not only of the anticipation of the protagonists but also of the inevitability of the chosen moment. For the narrator, the moment is one of heightened apprehension: "She called me by my real name—Javier"—a name which Ulrike had found too difficult to pronounce but a moment before. No longer acting under the semblance of being Sigurd and Brynhild, Javier is now *truly* known—a point emphasized by the reference to the "looking glass of the scriptures" found in I Corinthians 13: 12: "For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I have been known."

A tale like "Ulrike" affirms that the voice of Borges with its own particular intonation lived on in later life, despite the movement away from the glitzy metaphysical speculations of *Other Inquisitions* and the acute eye for absurdity and historical aptness displayed in the essays. The late works are those of a mature writer—one who has nothing new to tell the reader or himself. In these works speaks the voice of one who recognizes that he merely reiterates a set of personal symbols that describe his own experience within life quietly, and modestly, without the need to be explicit.

Gene Bell-Villada has claimed that Borges's later stories are "an unfortunate instance of a genius no longer animated by a grander conception of life and no longer holding a vital link with common experience" (Bell-Villada 261). Perhaps Bell-Villada fails to recognize that these last works are those of a man who has sought out the symbols that underlie his own conception of common experience and has refined and internalized them to the point at which even single words become active in promoting the hidden inner life.

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