

EMBLEMS OF READING: CERVANTES' *EL COLOQUIO DE LOS PERROS* AND BORGES' *LA BIBLIOTECA DE BABEL*

Michael Scham

In an article titled "The Primacy of the Literary Imagination, or Which Came First: The Critic or the Author?" Paul Cantor makes the following observation:

Creative writers seem doomed to a strange fate: by extending the frontiers of literature, they bequeath new literary concepts to critics; the critics then use the concepts to re-read the whole history of literature and show that earlier works have in fact always embodied these principles; these critics thereby end up undermining the claims to novelty with which the innovative authors began. (131)

Cantor cites Borges' observation of such processes in "Kafka y sus precursores" (*Otras inquisiciones*), and discusses how an author like Beckett introduced basic elements of what became deconstruction; deconstructionist critics, in turn, proceed to demonstrate how undesirability is at the heart of all texts, thus making virtually any author a precursor to Beckett. Indeed, one critic, who describes existence in Cervantes' *El coloquio de los perros* as "a doggish one, determined from the inside by blindness, and from the outside by chance," would make Cervantes one of the Irish author's more deliberate forebears (Nerlich 321). My present examination of the striking—and at times quite similar—innovations of Cervantes and Borges involves a reconsideration of some fundamental differences between the two, differences to which Borges himself was quite sensitive. In so doing, I

hope to reaffirm not only the originality of each author, but also his connection to his respective literary-historical context.

As many have pointed out, seventeenth-century Spain has produced some of the artworks, which most vividly express fundamental concerns of the early modern mind. Calderón's *La vida es sueño* and Velázquez' *Las meninas* come to mind alongside Cervantes' *Don Quijote* as the seminal self-reflexive works in their media: a play about theatricality, a painting about painting, and a novel about writing and reading.¹ Such works brilliantly document and explore the consciousness of rupture, of disjunction between signs and things, of the illusory, conjectural quality of perception and knowledge. It is therefore no surprise that an author like Borges, who delights in seeing such concepts through their most radical implications, should be drawn to the metaliterary aspects of Cervantes' masterpiece. Devices such as the discovery of *La Galatea* in *Don Quijote*'s library and the reading of Part I by characters in Part II would profoundly resonate with some of the Argentine writer's central concerns: "tales inversiones sugieren que si los caracteres de una ficción pueden ser lectores o espectadores, nosotros, sus lectores o espectadores, podemos ser ficticios" (*Otras inquisiciones* 55).

While *Don Quijote* is by far Cervantes' most famous self-reflexive narrative, his short novel, *El coloquio de los perros*, together with its "frame-tale," *El casamiento engañoso*, explores many of the same narrative and metaphysical quandaries which so fascinated Borges.² Its relative compactness makes for a more tidy comparison with a Borges story than the lengthy *Don Quijote*, but there are also numerous specific similarities with regard to structure, theme and image. *El coloquio de los perros* is a story of two dogs who embark on a dialogue in order to determine how they have so implausibly found themselves with speech; they suspect that the elucidation of this mystery will also shed light on their identity; their verbal-epistemological quest involves various attempts to interpret the prophetic words of a witch, and it ends indecisively; the scribe of the dialogue is a convalescent, a syphilitic soldier who claims to have overheard the dogs and recorded their words faithfully, and he sleeps while his skeptical friend reads the manuscript. While any of a number of Borges' stories would serve well to

demonstrate his concern with fictionality, identity and interpretation, *La Biblioteca de Babel* is a particularly good example of how Borges built upon certain early modern themes, and it also illustrates a basic difference between Borges' and Cervantes' conception of the relationship between the text and the world. To anticipate my conclusion: while Borges' story, enveloping the reader, collapses into inescapable solipsism, dooming any attempt to make sense of the world, Cervantes' tale ultimately opens out to an external reality and to the possibility of knowing something about one's relationship to reality, however tenuous its characteristics may be. But first, let us examine the alluring parallels between the two works.

Man finds himself in a vast library, and sets out to discover its structure and meaning; two dogs find they are able to speak, and attempt to make sense of their world and identities through narrating their autobiographies. Both stories portray epistemological quests, and images of books and interpretation abound. Obviously, such is the central metaphor of *La Biblioteca de Babel*, whose inhabitants are "bibliotecarios imperfectos," attempting to organize and interpret the material of their universe. The book is also a central image in *El coloquio de los perros*, from the initial image of the dubious manuscript that the ensign Campuzano offers to his friend, to the famous grammar books (the *Nebrijas*) which the gleeful schoolchildren exchange for food so that they can play with Berganza. One effect of such self-reflexivity is that the readers find themselves in the position of mimicking the characters: as Peralta reads (and the "author," Campuzano, sleeps), we read; as the librarians decipher their universe, so we attempt to decipher Borges' text.

At the heart of the matter is the question of interpretation. In his depiction of the myriad approaches employed by the librarians to make sense of their library, Borges mischievously surveys familiar modes of cognition: the "clásicos," "místicos," and "idealistas" offer their explanations alongside curious figures like the "descifradores ambulantes," "Purificadores," and the ubiquitous "supersticiosos." One of Borges' main points, of course, is that *any* attempt to derive meaning from the arbitrary, primal chaos is "superstitious," resulting in "magic"

chains of cause-effect, of associations—that is, the stuff of fiction.³ To this he adds his characteristic range of conjecture, plausibility, certainty and preposterousness to the statements set forth: “unos insinuaron que...” (93); “es verdad que...” (92); “yo afirmo que...” (90); “suelen inferir...que...” (90); “no me parece inverosímil que...”; “Ese dictamen...no es del todo falaz” (92); “universalmente esa conjetura ha sido aceptada, aunque no en el sentido en que la formularon sus inventores” (93); and, “prefiero soñar que...” (90). What is the prime material from which these propositions arise? As one ingenious librarian (“un bibliotecario de genio”) deduced:

Todo: la historia minuciosa del porvenir, las autobiografías de los arcángeles, el catálogo fiel de la Biblioteca, miles y miles de catálogos falsos, la demostración de la falacia de esos catálogos, la demostración de la falacia del catálogo verdadero, el evangelio gnóstico de Basírides, el comentario de ese evangelio, el comentario del comentario de ese evangelio, la relación verídica de tu muerte, la versión de cada libro a todas las lenguas, las interpolaciones de cada libro en todos los libros. (94)

Here Borges achieves one of his favorite sensations and conceptual categories, *el vértigo*: the head-spinning realization that the meaning, structure or solution being sought does, in fact, exist, but only as one of countless other meanings, structures and solutions.

Perhaps Cervantes' most famous instant of cognitive vertigo occurs in *Don Quijote II*, when his protagonists have don Álvaro Tarfe, a character introduced in Avellaneda's apocryphal continuation, swear that the characters he sees before him are authentic, and that his own past experiences are fictitious (Ch. 72). *El coloquio de los perros* also contains moments of vertigo, both epistemological and physical. The traditional *topos* of *el mundo al revés* causes disorientation for Berganza when he discovers that the shepherds, charged with protecting the flock, are actually the wolf-like murderers of the sheep. The witch Cañizares willingly induces a sort of narcotic vertigo as she joins the

ecstatic demonic orgies in the Pyrenees through her “anointings.” After the horrified Berganza, disgusted at the sight of the naked, unconscious Cañizares, drags her out into a courtyard, the array of perspectives of those attempting to make sense of the situation calls to mind the conjectural, quasi-perspectivistic technique often employed by Borges: Unos decían:

‘Ya la bendita Cañizares está muerta’...otros, más considerados, la tomaron el pulso...otros hubo que dijeron: ‘Esta puta vieja, sin duda debe de ser bruja...’ Curiosos hubo que se llegaron a hincarle alfileres por las carnes...(344-45)

The most vertiginous moment, however, occurs as the two dogs confront a central text, the prophecy handed down to Berganza by Cañizares. The old witch, who claims that the dogs are the thwarted offspring of another witch, la Montiel, says that Berganza and Cipión will regain human form when the conditions of the prophecy are fulfilled:

Volverán a su forma verdadera
 Cuando vieren con presta diligencia
 Derribar los soberbios levantados
 y alzar a los humildes abatidos
 por mano poderosa para hacello. (346)

Thus the dogs find themselves in the enviable situation of having actually found their “Vindicación,” the justifying text so sought-after by the inhabitants of Borges’ *Biblioteca*. But, like Borges, Cervantes shows that this is only half the battle, for there remains the question of interpretation. Cipión is annoyed at the so-called prophecy, although he entertains the possibility that the words should be taken figuratively:

Considera en cuán vanas cosas y en cuán tontos puntos
 dijo la Camacha que consistía nuestra restauración...si no

es que sus palabras se han de tomar en un sentido que he oído decir se llama alegórico, el cual sentido no quiere decir lo que la letra suena, sino otra cosa, que, aunque diferente, le haga semejanza... (347)

This leads him, quite reasonably, to interpret the text as a reference to the Wheel of Fortune. Unfortunately, such an interpretation proves unsatisfactory when held up to the empirical experience of the dogs, and so Cipión is compelled to modify his approach:

Y si en esto consistiera volver nosotros a la forma que dices, ya lo hemos visto y lo vemos a cada paso; por do me doy a entender que no en el sentido alegórico, sino en el literal, se han de tomar los versos de la Camacha; ni tampoco en éste consiste nuestro remedio, pues muchas veces hemos visto lo que dicen y nos estamos tan perros como ves; así, que la Camacha fue burladora falsa, y la Cañizares emhustera, y la Monticla tonta, maliciosa y bellaca, con perdón sea dicho, si acaso es nuestra madre. Digo, pues, que el verdadero sentido es un juego de bolos, donde con presta diligencia derriban los que están de pie y vuelven a alzar los caídos, y esto por la mano de quien lo puede hacer. Mira, pues, si hemos visto por esto haber vuelto a ser hombres, si es que los somos. (347)

Having arrived at this impasse, Cipión's sense of identity, momentarily fortified by the promise of Berganza's story, begins to waver. Berganza concurs, offering one of Cervantes' most delightfully bourgeois moments: "Digo que tienes razón, Cipión hermano, y que eres más discreto de lo que pensaba; y de lo que has dicho vengo a pensar y creer en todo lo que hasta aquí hemos pasado y lo que estamos pasando es sueño, y que somos perros" (347).⁴ From the initial notion of the dogs' colloquy being a creation of the sleeping Campuzano, the tables are now turned: the entire dialogue, and, by extension, the humans reading it, become figments of a canine imagination.

The "life-as-dream" idea is an established convention of Baroque thought and aesthetics, but there are other oniric elements in *El coloquio de los perros* that seem strikingly modern. The consistency of imagery between the frame tale and the colloquy makes for some visual symbolism worthy of Buñuel, as when Berganza, carrying a choice cut of meat in a basket for his first master's mistress, is intercepted by a young beauty, who exchanges the morsel for an old shoe:

Llegueme a ella, como si fucra a ver lo que me queria, que no fue otra cosa que quitarme lo que llevaba en la cesta y ponerme en su lugar un chapin viejo. Entoncecs dije entre mi: "La carne se ha ido a la carne..." Bien pudiera yo volver a quitar lo que me quitó: pero no quise, por no poner mi boca jifera y sucia en aquellas manos limpias y blancas. (304-305)

Campuzano's sickness, we recall, was occasioned by his carnal encounter with doña Estefanía in the frame tale, and it was her hands which initially captivated him: "Yo quedé abrasado por las manos de nieve que había visto..." (*El casamiento engañoso* 284.) And at the end of his narration, Berganza incurs a painful beating when he attempts to intervene in a discussion about the prevalent "mozas vagamundas," whose activities populate the hospitals with the likes of the syphilitic Campuzano:

Digo que queriendo decírselo, alcé la voz, pensando que tenía habla, y en lugar de pronunciar razones concertadas ladré con tanta priesa y con tan levantado tono, que, enfadado el Corregidor, dio voces a sus criados que me ccbasen de la sala a palos. (358)

Scenes such as these confirm Berganza's role as Campuzano's subconscious surrogate, and give the "unrealistic" dogs' colloquy its own sort of verisimilitude, informed by the logic of the dream.

What does Cervantes mean to suggest, then, with the radically subjective, illusory and corrupt world inhabited by the dogs? The witch Cañizares is not overly-concerned with the dubious reality of her drug-induced escapades: “quiero decir que aunque los gustos que nos da el demonio son aparentes y falsos, todavía nos parecen gustos, y el deleite mucho mayor es imaginado que gozado, aunque en los verdaderos gustos debe de ser al contrario” (343). Not so for the alchemist, poet, mathematician and “arbitrista” observed by Berganza in the hospital: their various pursuits, including finding the fixed point, solving the Crown’s economic woes, and writing a supplement to an Arthurian legend in complicated metre excluding verbs, have landed them in the psychiatrie ward.⁵ It is a world, as Nerlich suggests, which “drives the systematist to despair.” Surely the increasing incidence of melancholy and suicide in *La Biblioteca de Babel* is comparable, for what are librarians, if not systematists? We also recall that it was Campuzano’s misinterpretation of the mysterious doña Estefanía (not rich and virtuous, but poor and diseased) that threatened his life, causing the ghost-like appearance that so shocked his friend in the beginning of the frame narrative, *El casamiento engañoso*.

The dogs, of course, are the heroes of our epistemological adventure, and we have already seen some of the exegetical anguish resulting from the challenge of the witch’s prophecy. Returning, however, to that vertiginous moment when the exasperated canines reject the various interpretations and concede they may merely be dreaming, we see that their attitudes remain quite positive:

Berganza.—...vengo a pensar y creer en todo lo que hasta aquí hemos pasado y lo que estamos pasando es sueño, y que somos perros; pero no por esto dejemos de gozar deste bien de la habla que tenemos y de la excelencia tan grande de tener discurso humano todo el tiempo que pudiéramos, y así, no te canse el oírme contar lo que pasó con los gitanos que me escondieron en la cueva.

Cipión.—De buena gana te escucho, por obligarte a que

me escuches cuando te cuente, si el cielo fuere servido, los sucesos de mi vida.

Do we have here a sort of “humorous-fatalistic acceptance of blindness,” in an existence “determined from the inside by blindness, and from the outside by chance,” as Nerlich suggests (297, 307)? Perhaps this is largely the case within the nightmare world of the dogs, but such an assessment fails to adequately account for the relationship between the colloquy and the frame tale. The initially reluctant Peralta (our surrogate reader) is won over, the convalescing Campuzano awakens from his nap, and the two friends leave the manuscript and head back out into the real world. We readers necessarily imitate this gesture, since it marks the end of the story:

Yo alcanzo el artificio del *Coloquio* y la invención, y basta.
 Vámonos al Espolón a recrear los ojos del cuerpo, pues ya
 he recreado los del entendimiento.
 —Vamos - dijo el Alférez.
 Y con esto, se fueron.

The reader and author affirm the value of a fictional work presenting an imaginative descent into a venal and deceitful world, that is, a world that grotesquely parallels that of the fallen Campuzano. The affirmation is accompanied by a sense of aperture, of the text opening out toward the public sphere and a renewed sociability for the two friends. In this sense, the image of the manuscript as recreation corresponds most fully not to the game of nine-pins (the corollary to the witch's prophecy), but to the entertaining and edifying gaming table that Cervantes presents, in his prologue to the *Novelas*, in a public space.⁶ The emphasis on self-reflection *and* sociability, both abiding concerns of Cervantes, is best understood within the tradition of humanist thought.⁷ *El coloquio de los perros* expresses a deep skepticism, both moral (the tenuousness of humanity) and epistemological (the confusing relationship between fiction and reality), but we are given no borgesian game of infinite regress accompanied by a final subjectivity and solitude. The story ultimately defends

literature's capacity to contribute knowledge about the world and the self, and it stops short of suggesting that our sense of reality is merely a construction.

As Borges observed, "para Cervantes son antinomias lo real y lo poético," and that has much to do with why he calls the early modern author's magic "partial" (*Otras inquisiciones* 52). Borges, of course, was fascinated with the idea that there is no meaningful distinction between fiction and reality. As a result, in contrast to the finale of Cervantes' story, *La Biblioteca de Babel* collapses inward at the end, with the solitary protagonist contemplating infinitude, and the footnote appending the impossible, inescapable image of the *total book*: "la inconcebible hoja central no tendría revés." As Molloy has eloquently pointed out, Borges' readers are trapped because there is no "outside;" in fact, beyond solipsistically projecting meaning in acts of reading and writing, they come to discover that they are merely fragments, variables of a meaningless master text.⁸ In contrast to the participatory, sociable attitude of the befuddled dogs and humans of Cervantes' tale, Borges' narrator remains essentially alone, albeit with the sense of humor intact: "Mi soledad se alegra con esa elegante esperanza." With the opening citation about the relationship between authors and critics in mind, I would like to conclude by suggesting that the works of Cervantes and Borges resoundingly affirm the workings of an informing intelligence, a distinctive authorial voice which communicates with and challenges readers. Furthermore, a collection like *Ficciones*, containing a number of brilliant variations on a few main concepts, is particularly effective as didactic entertainment: anyone with a certain degree of reading competence appreciates Borges' manipulation of codes, his undermining of expectations, his meditations upon logical paradoxes. That is to say, Borges' texts are essentially very clear—perhaps much more so than a work like Cervantes' *El coloquio de los perros*, the enigmatic exemplarity of which continues to spawn disparate interpretations. For these reasons, it always strikes me as peculiar when critics present Borges as providing some sort of "proof" of the fundamental undecidability of the text, the constructed nature of meaning, the death of the author, etc. Borges quite *intentionally* creates

his texts in this manner and, in so doing, not only creates his own precursors, but also precedes many of the exponents of postmodernism. As a reader who still favors primary works of imaginative literature over criticism, I say, in the vein of the narrator of *La Biblioteca de Babel*, that “mi soledad se alegra con esa elegante ironía.”

St. John's University / College of St. Benedict

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Maravall (409), Foucault (Part I, Ch. 1).

² Nerlich suggests it functions as a sort of “in-text” to the first part of *Don Quijote* (287). In a study of similarities of narrative dynamics in Cervantes and Borges, Madrid makes a similar observation: “Si tomamos en cuenta todos los niveles discursivos que se actualizan desde *El casamiento engañoso* para culminar y enriquecerse cuantitativa y cualitativamente en *El coloquio de los perros*, llegamos a concluir, de manera similar al *Quijote*, el coloquio (como *novella*) está retraduciéndose a sí permanentemente a través de confrontaciones dialógicas también parecidas a las que ocurren en el *Quijote*” (95).

³ See “El arte narrativo y la magia” (*Discusión*).

⁴ Notice the parallel with the Tarfe episode: “y vuelvo a decir y me afirmo que no he visto lo que he visto ni ha pasado por mí lo que ha pasado” (*Don Quijote* II, Ch. 72).

⁵ “Trata de lo que dejó de escribir el Arzobispo Turpín del Rey Artús de Inglaterra, con otro suplemento de la *Historia de la demanda del Santo Brial*, y todo en verso heroico, parte en octavas y parte en verso suelto; pero todo esdrújulamente, digo, en esdrújulos de nombres sustantivos, sin admitir verbo alguno” (355). Indeed, the lunatic poet’s project would be a perfectly plausible text in Borges’ *Biblioteca*, and is also similar to the language of his *Tlön*.

⁶ “Mi intento ha sido poner en la plaza de nuestra república una mesa de trucos, donde cada uno pueda llegar a entretenerse, sin daño de barras; digo sin daño del alma ni del cuerpo, porque los ejercicios honestos y agradables, antes aprovechan que dañan” (52).

⁷ The most thorough and convincing cases for Cervantes' connection to humanism even in such a seemingly cynical work like *El coloquio de los perros* have been made by Forcione (1984, 1989).

*"For Borges's characters (and even for their author), reading is more than a circumstantial activity, it is an emblematic representation, expressly referring to their own texture" (34). The realization that this texture is not coherent, or does not signify the totality they had assumed, is what leads to the demise of many borgesian readers: "Cutting reductive readings short by putting an end, effectively, to the reader, Borges criticizes the latter's excessive respect for texts wrongly considered quiescent. Death highlights a misguided fidelity that is, after all, a form of readerly inattention" (35). Many cervantine texts may also be seen as lessons in reading, although Cervantes is a more forgiving teacher: after learning to appreciate the dog's colloquy, Peralta and Campuzano optimistically return to society; and Sancho Panza appreciates the life-giving power of imaginative literature as he tearfully beseeches his dying master to join him in a foray into the pastoral mode.

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