

INTRODUCTION

It was told that just before his death, Plato had a dream in which he appeared as a marvelous white swan – the bird sacred to the god Apollo – jumping from tree to tree, evading hunters who strove in vain to hunt him down with their arrows. Simmias, one of Socrates' followers, interpreted the hunters in Plato's dream to represent those who attempt and fail to decipher his thought.¹ I assume that this interpretation of Plato's dream can be applied to Borges' labyrinthine work and thought as well. In the present study I intend, figuratively speaking, to let the two swans fly while attempting to observe their heavenly interplay, or rather – if I may use the title of one of Borges' imaginary books – to track their 'game with shifting mirrors.'

Indeed, Borges' 'philosophical fiction' and Plato's 'intellectual dramas' are perhaps the most intricate records in Western history of attempts to artfully interweave *mythos* and *logos*, argumentation and narrative, thought and imagination. Their juxtaposition first aims to demonstrate the connections between classical and modern literature and thought. Additionally, and more specifically, the Platonic viewpoint will shed light on Borges' essayist and fictional work, providing what Wittgenstein calls an 'aspect change' in considering Borges' literary and intellectual work as a whole textual corpus. It will show the extent to which Borges' thought is deeply rooted in classical doctrines and Platonic themes, and this will provide new interpretations to his stories and poems. However, I do not intend to claim that Borges is a 'Platonic writer,' but rather, I will strive to show that both of their works stem from the same questions: from the same intellectual tensions. Consequently, dominant Borgesian symbols such as the mirror, the tiger, the double, the other, subjective identity, and the labyrinth will be interpreted as manifestations of Platonic dominant issues, such as the mimetic relation (*mimesis*), the incessant quest for knowledge (*suzêtêsis*), and the archetypal paradigm (*paradeigma*).

¹ Olympiodorus *In Alcib.* Quoted in: J. E. Woodbridge. *The Son of Apollo*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929, p. 31. Another story compares Plato to a swan in Socrates' dream: "It is stated that Socrates in a dream saw a swan on his knees, which all at once put forth plumage, and flew away after uttering a loud sweet note. And the next day Plato was introduced as a pupil, and thereupon he recognized in him the swan of his dreams." (Diogenes Laertius: 3.5).

I believe that this novel outlook on Borges' work and thought will challenge the view of Borges as a modern Sophist and a dogmatic skeptic, and instead portray him as a Socratic writer who is driven – besides his aesthetic motives – by what he calls the 'intellectual instinct.' This will not reduce Borgesian works to mere philosophic descriptions, but will hopefully contribute to a wider and richer philosophic interpretation of the Borgesian texts while abstaining from the temptations of over-interpretation and over-systematization.

My general working hypothesis is that Borges' and Plato's works should be considered using a holistic approach. Borges' admission that he is 'not a thinker' does not mean that he is incapable of abstract reflections; it only indicates that he disqualifies systematic thought. I assume that Borges does possess a group of loosely related ideas, like dew on a spiderweb, and that these ideas constitute the philosophical basis or the thematic layer of both his fictional and his literary work. On the other hand, I generally accept the modern approach to Plato's works, which has increasingly recognized that attention to dramatic or literary details and structures may lead to a richer and more comprehensive interpretation of his dialogues. As Press indicates, this approach comprises three main presumptions:² (1) that the dramatic and literary characteristics of the Platonic dialogues must be taken into consideration in order to interpret them and to understand Plato's philosophical thought as it is expressed in them; (2) that the thought rightly attributable to the Platonic dialogues is likely to be something other than the traditional set of dogmas or doctrines that are found both in textbooks and scholarly writings, that is, the philosophical system called 'Platonism;' and finally (3) that the dialogues must be understood in their own historical context.

In other words, I assume that it would be inappropriate to disregard the intellectual aspect of Borges' work, to the same extent that it would be inappropriate to overlook the literary aspects of Plato's oeuvre. In both cases, the attempt to distill systematic thought – nihilistically systematic in Borges' case, logically systematic in Plato's – should be replaced by carefully delineating a set of fundamental ideas (which, sometimes, contradict each other – as seen, for instance, in the tension between the concepts of inspiration and artistic representation in Plato's work).

This approach entails two methodical guidelines: a thematic slicing of Plato's dialogues, and an inner-intertextual investigation of Borges' texts. The thematic

² Press, G.A. (Ed.). *Plato's Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993, pp. 5-6.

slicing of Plato's work means that while dealing with a certain Platonic issue (e.g., the nature of the book), I will focus on the set of the dialogues that discuss or manifest this issue in a detailed manner, without overlooking the conceptual inconsistencies between them and with special attention given to their dramatic aspects. The inner-intertextual investigation of Borges' work means that I will highlight the meaning of key concepts in his works (e.g., 'labyrinth,' 'aesthetic event,' and 'eternity') based on his own reflection – sometimes imperfect, inconsistent, or even paradoxical – regarding these concepts. In this way, his own abstract writing will serve as an Ariadne's thread to his fictional and poetic texts, so that the quite complex internal relations between his theoretical and fictional writing, between his thought and imagination, will be revealed. My last and most general working hypothesis is quite obvious: that an adequate textual comparison will reveal both the similarities and dissimilarities of the compared texts, and that it will shed new light on both sides of the comparison. Consequently, I assume that, following the present study, Borges' texts will gain some Platonic tinge, whereas Plato's dialogues will appear as somewhat Borgesian.

The book comprises two parts. Part I, including Chapters 1 to 3, deals with metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological questions. Chapter 1 deals with the interrelations between *logos* and *mythos*, pointing out, first, how Borges and Plato theoretically conceived the relations between these concepts, and second, how each of them uniquely interweaves these aspects into his work. Chapter 2 focuses on Skepticism and the quest for knowledge. Based on a dichotomy between dogmatic and methodic skepticism, it highlights Plato's notion of *suzêtêsis* (ongoing shared search) and compares it to Borges' notion of the 'intellectual instinct' (*el instinto intelectual*) that forms the basis of his pivotal symbol of the labyrinth. Chapter 3 investigates Plato's theory of the archetypes, focusing on the tension between the concepts *idea* and *eidos*, which draws a complex connection among ontology, epistemology, and sight; the second part probes Borges' attitude toward Platonic realism and its effect on his thought and writing, as well as his more personal views of blindness, sight, and thought, which are related to the theme of the archetype or the general form.

Whereas Part I of the book deals with pure philosophical notions, Part II – including Chapters 4 to 7 – focuses on aesthetical and literary themes. Chapter 4 discusses the nature of artistic representation. Based on Plato's critical approach to mimetic arts in the *Republic*, it delineates the Borgesian crisis of artistic representation and his shift from the ideal of total expression to a more modest principle of allusion. Chapter 5 deals with artistic inspiration, focusing on Plato's discussion in the *Ion*, which strictly conceives the inspiration of the poet as a pas-

sive, irrational, and unreflective act that opposes the active investigation of the philosopher. The second part demonstrates the Borgesian dichotomy between Plato's irrational inspiration and Edgar Allan Poe's purely rational philosophy of composition, and it points out Borges' tendency to finally combine the theories, applying them to his own experience of inspiration. Chapter 6 investigates the nature of the identity of the artistic creator. It shows how Plato, when considering the poet's personality, moves from the symbol of the *demiourgos* (wise craftsman) to the mythical image of the multi-formed Egyptian god *Proteus*. This shift can be compared to the severe Borgesian tension that exists between narrative identity and subjectivity, between "Borges" and the "I," which is manifested in his essays, stories, and poems through the images of Walt Whitman and William Shakespeare. Chapter 7 probes the notions of the book, reading, and writing as seen in Plato's *Phaedrus*, vis-à-vis Borges' cult of books and his peculiar notion of the aesthetic event.

In order to make my discussions easier to read, I used English translations for both Plato and Borges' quotations. Nonetheless, I underscored the Greek etymological meaning for all the Platonic key concepts, and regarding quotations of Borgesian poems, I added the Spanish original in a footnote. I believe that, besides its methodical aspects, this textual English-based approach will be useful in exposing Borges' and Plato's works to wider circles of readers and thus it might encourage a fruitful cross-disciplinary dialogue.

Borges indicates that the reader has the privilege of extending the thoughts of the writer and to enrich the meaning of the text that he reads. I hope that in this study, which was written with deep intellectual pleasure, I have managed to handle this privilege properly. Lastly, I aspire that my investigation has fairly escaped the gloomy faith of (to use Borges' criticism of books in aesthetics) 'astronomers who never looked at the stars;' that my reading has revealed, to some extent, 'the modest and secret complexity' (*la modesta y secreta complejidad*)³ of Borges' work.

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³ OC: II, 236.