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IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

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Octuple Allusion in Borges's *Inquisiciones*

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In Buddhist doctrine, the Noble Eightfold Path consists of: Right Views, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. This Eightfold Path is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the origin of suffering, the annihilation of suffering, and the path to the annihilation of suffering, that is the Eightfold Path itself. In his little book on Buddhism, Borges paraphrases Paul Deussen on the odd circularity of this definition, which is a victim of Russell's paradox. Deussen deduces from this circularity that the Four Noble Truths must have been codified long after the Eightfold Path itself (*Obras completas en colaboración*, 749). The circularity could also be seen as a deliberate attempt to show the arbitrariness of the whole endeavor of codifying a path to the annihilation of suffering: of self, of mind. With a like arbitrariness, let us codify Borges's practice of an Eightfold Path: not, indeed, the Buddhist one, but what we shall call "the Noble Path of Octuple Allusion."

Already in these early essays Borges proposes that reality is verbal, that all is allusion. Where Buddhism conceives of reality not as entities but as process and relation, Borges will similarly view experience as idea and sensation. Language and literature, which will be the focus of his attention, matter not as things in themselves (or as things at all) but as instruments of knowledge. The self will be seen to consist of a logical artifice, being nothing in itself (an idea derived from Schopenhauer and through him ultimately from Buddhist doctrine). The process of inquisition into reality will be one of stripping away the layers of artifice and allusion, an emptying-out of signification. In the "Profesión de fe literaria" which closes *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, Borges writes: "Yo he conquistado ya mi pobreza" (153). He has found the few words, the page, which express him, "la que sea abreviatura de mi destino" (153): a destiny which is abstract, almost impersonal.

Right Views. In the preface to *Inquisiciones* Borges says that he uses the title *inquisitiones* irreverently, "por aliviar alguna vez la palabra de sambenitos y humareda" (5). He does, however, cast himself as Inquisitor in the last essay in the book, "Ejecución de tres palabras," where he burns in an *auto da fé* the three words which for him mark the worst of "poetic" poetry: "inefable," "misterio" and "azul." Similarly he "executes" in passing such poetasters as Rafael Alberto Arrieta. As Inquisitor, Borges is not as ferocious as, say, Groussac, except perhaps toward himself, though this kind of irony is not as strongly expressed in *Inquisiciones* as it will be later.

Right Resolve. All literature, Borges writes in *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, is autobiographical (146): it comes into being through an individual act of writing. By the same token, though, writing in glory of the self seems to Borges a particularly empty and

Octuple Allusion in Borges's *Inquisiciones*

futile act: vanity. He celebrates those who write out of their own experience without wallowing in it, without becoming idolaters in the cult of self, as he says (91). In *Inquisiciones* there are eloquent examples of this in the essays on Torres Villarreal, Norah Lange and González Lanuza. Of Torres Villarreal's autobiography he writes that it is a "documento insatisfactorio, ajeno de franqueza espiritual y que como todos sus libros, tiene mucho de naípe de tatur y casi nada de intimidad de corazón" (9), though he celebrates in it the author's "ahinco... en declararse igual a cuantos lo leen."

Right Speech. In the final note to *Inquisiciones* he speaks of these essays as part of a project of a new rhetoric, "que partiese, no del arreglamiento de los sucesos literarios actuales o las formas ya prefijadas de la doctrina clásica, sino de su directa contemplación" (160). This new rhetoric is one of the main themes of *Inquisiciones*, and can only be discussed here sketchily. It consists of a celebration of the new language of the avant-garde, but a tempering of the more extreme innovations. He proposes, for instance, a moderate use of neologism (106-7); a use of metaphor to break the rigidity of the verbal world but not a reliance on metaphor alone (27-28); an avoidance of rhyme, which he will characterize in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* as counter-poetic for its calling attention to the verbal game (150); an aspiration toward universality and clarity (37) and an attack on obscurity as an end in itself. Similarly, in *El tamaño*, in response to Manuel Gálvez, he will observe that there is no such thing as a "plain style" (152), though in *Inquisiciones* he calls for a poetry of the everyday: "la síntesis de una emoción cualquiera, ...si es clara y precisa" (155-156). In his new rhetoric he uses a tag from St. Augustine: "In verbis verum amare non verba," love the truth in words, not the words themselves.

Right Conduct. Borges is concerned already here with the excess of the avant-garde. He criticizes Gerardo Diego for slavishly imitating Vicente Huidobro; he finds Maples Arce's poetry, otherwise acceptable, spoiled by the presence of estridentismo; he praises Argentine ultraism for its intimacy of tone and implicitly criticizes Spanish ultraism for its lack of intimacy. Just as the Buddha recommended a Middle Way, to avoid the excesses of license and the excesses of asceticism, so Borges recommends a Middle Way between the old and the new (145).

Right Livelihood. Right livelihood is here understood as one that does no harm to any life: not arms, perhaps, but letters. It is already clear to Borges that his profession is that of letters; his main activities in life will be reading and writing. He writes: "Yo no sé si hay literatura, pero yo sé que el barajar esa disciplina posible es una urgencia de mi ser" (5). His sense of vocation, like that of Rilke (whom he mentions here, 148), derives from the hope not for fame or money but for the certain intensity achieved when words spring alive. In the essay on German expressionism he mentions that this may be disharmonious (146), but he implies that the intensity justifies the disharmony.

Right Effort. In one of the few references in *Inquisiciones* to his own work, he says that the "duradera inquietación metafísica" is one of the shortcomings of *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (99). Nonetheless he celebrates Unamuno as a philosophical poet: "a pesar de no lograr nunca la invención metafísica, es un filósofo esencialmente: quiero decir un sentidor de la dificultad metafísica" (103). Thus he celebrates in Unamuno what he criticizes in himself: a restless philosophical inquisitiveness.

Right Mindfulness. The most important of the philosophical essays in *Inquisiciones* is no doubt "La nadería de la personalidad," in which Borges argues forcefully (using examples from Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, Schopenhauer,

Whitman, Torres Villarreal and others) that the first person singular "I" is a convention of the logic of discourse which denotes or signifies nothing. He quotes Schopenhauer:

Un tiempo infinito ha precedido a mi nacimiento;
¿qué fui yo mientras tanto? Metafísicamente podría quizá
contestarme: Yo siempre fui yo; es decir, todos aquellos que
dijeron yo durante ese tiempo, fueron yo en hecho de verdad.
(93)

Thus, Borges begins the process which is so characteristic of his writing: the emptying-out of the self.

Right Concentration. This phrase is understood as "concentration on a single object," a step in meditation necessary to the purification of the mind necessary to the understanding of the self and the world, and thus to an understanding that the self is an illusion (*The Path of the Buddha*, 107-110). Borges comes closest to this step in his preface, where he contemplates the single object: the book, *Inquisiciones*, writing: "La prefación es aquel rato del libro en que el autor es menos autor" (5). He adds: "Es ya casi un leyente y goza de los derechos de tal: alejamiento, sorna y elogio" (5).

Twenty-five years after the publication of *Inquisiciones*, Borges published an essay in *Sur*, "La personalidad y el Buddha." Near the end of this essay, Borges casts Gautama Buddha as a contemporary critic of Western literature. "Léon Bloy o Francis Thompson," he writes, "hubieran sido para el Buddha ejemplos cabales de hombres extraviados y erróneos, no sólo por la creencia de merecer atenciones divinas sino por su tarea de elaborar, dentro del lenguaje común, un pequeño y vanidoso dialecto." (*Sur* 192-194, December 1950, 34). He adds, "No es indispensable ser budista para entenderlo así; todos sentimos que el estilo de Bloy, en el que cada frase busca un asombro, es moralmente inferior al de Gide, que es, o simula ser, genérico" (34). He thus invokes the Buddha as potential commentator on his own activity: every writer, we might say (paraphrasing Borges) creates his own commentators.

One imagines the Buddha commenting with approval on some passages in Borges's work: on the story "Los teólogos," a parable on the renunciation of the will; on the concept of an anonymous or impersonal tradition; on the phrase which heralds the imminence of enlightenment, defining beauty or the "hecho estético" as "la inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce" (*Obras completas*, 635); on Tzinacán's renunciation of the power given him by the sacred name; and perhaps most strongly on this passage on Funes's attempt to forget himself and so to sleep:

Hacia el Este, en un trecho no amanzanado, había casa nuevas,
desconocidas. Funes las imaginaba negras, compactas,
hechas de tiniebla homogénea; en esa dirección volvía la cara
para dormir. También solía imaginarse en el fondo del río,
mecido y anulado por la corriente. (*Obras completas*, 490)

Here Funes--without, as far as we know, any knowledge of Buddhist doctrine--has found his way to the Fourth of the Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path itself, the path to the annihilation of suffering.

Borges himself, of course, is eloquent also in his testimony to the difficulty of

Octuple Allusion in Borges's *Inquisiciones*

renunciation, at least at this stage of being. If the most important philosophical essay in *Inquisiciones* is clearly "La nadería de la personalidad," its counterpart in *Otras Inquisiciones* (linked by title to the earlier book) is just as certainly "Nueva refutación del tiempo," the first edition of which ends with the famous line:

El tiempo es la substancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebató, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges. (*Obras Completas*, 771).

The allusion here to self serves as part of a dialectical process toward the overcoming of self, since the reality attested to by the name (Borges) is both unfortunate and ephemeral. In *Inquisiciones* Borges associates this dialectic with Buddhism when he writes, quoting Grimm, who in turn is quoting Schopenhauer: "el yo es un punto cuya inmovilidad es eficaz para determinar por contraste la cargada fuga del tiempo" (95). The self, an illusion, is also an allusion to all that is not self (what the Buddhists call anatta), perhaps an octuple allusion.

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