Reading Borges at Iguazu Falls

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An observer at Iguazu Falls tries to make sense of the inexpressible natural wonder through the texts of Jorge Luis Borges's essays and poems. Borges's paradoxes of time, immortality, and eternity give meaning to the vision, while the natural wonder gives substance to those idealist concepts derived from Berkeley. As a reader of Borges's fictions, I yield up my personal identity to an impersonal dreaming consciousness that resembles Berkeley's mind as a consciousness sustaining the reality I perceive. Borges writes in his poem "Dawning" that "ideas are not like marble, everlasting, but ever-renewing like a forest or a river". The cataracts of Iguazu are both eternal and immortal, eternal in the sense of removing our consciousness of time and confusing past, present, and future in constant repetition, and immortal in the sense of only existing in individual drops of water constantly disappearing and renewing in infinite repetition. The cataracts are perfect emblems of this immortality. The cataracts are time, infinite moments of immortality, moving forward, accelerating, repeating themselves identically, until they achieve a certain eternity, no motion, suspended in time. I am Berkeley's Eternal Spirit, the consciousness evoked by Borges in his essay, "A New Refutation of Time". Distance from the immediate impact of the Falls helps transform fear and horror into sublimity. The closer to the Falls, the more the observer feels fear and anguish at his own insignificance, a fear of annihilation. Aesthetic distance requires an image or word, something that exempts us from immediate contact, and allows us to descend into the whirlpool and come back to the calm surface. The vision evoked in writing and reading fiction is both prior and subsequent to the reading. Our vision of the universe is always inexpressible, a problem of accommodating something overwhelming to the limited schemata we use to grasp existence.

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Introduction

This is a ghost story. The ghosts are writers who only exist as texts already read in the mind of a reader. The reader, an observer, is also a ghost or a fiction who has surrendered up her personal identity to an act of consciousness that resembles one of Borges' favorite idealist concepts, Berkeley's perceiving mind. As quoted by Borges in "A New Refutation of Time":

...All the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth...have not any subsistence without a mind—that their *being* is to be perceived or known; that consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit—. (Rodriguez & Reid, 1981, p. 187)

As a Reader of Borges' fictions, the observer yields up her personal identity to an impersonal dreaming consciousness that resembles Berkeley's mind. Every vision of the world requires a dreamer; every fiction

requires a reader. The reader dreams a vision of the universe into existence as she reads a fiction, and her dreaming is dreamed in turn. This is the logic of Borges' poetics of infinite regress. The observer evokes Borges' words on the late afternoon of August 3, 1998, as she stands in front of the cataracts of Iguazu on the Parana River in Tres Fronteras at the borders of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.

Time, Immortality, Eternity

At first she only sees smoke towering up over the low tops of tree canopy in the rainforest. But the smoke is mist rising from the Falls, and she is aware as she gets closer that the earth has split open in deep canyons, and she is witnessing a catastrophe, a slow-motion catastrophe, almost like a volcano. Something overwhelming, indifferent to her presence as a human spectator, something that cannot be encompassed in the camera she holds before her eyes to try to reduce the cataracts to human scale. Although the Falls seem timeless and ageless, as a geological phenomenon they are very young, and their sharp, annihilating beauty reflects the violence and speed of this on-going event. Soon the cataracts will grind through the cliffs and vanish to make way for another landscape, another form of life, another climate. Quiroga is no help now. He has taken refuge in children's stories about a forgiving, loving jungle that betray his own horrified insight into Nature's cruel, ironic indifference. Only an idea or concept is large enough to apprehend reality at Iguazu Falls.

Once in a poem, "Dawning", Borges has written that "ideas are not like marble, everlasting, but ever-renewing like a forest or a river" (Di Giovanni, 1971, p. 21). Wholly and completely a man of the city, Borges despises actual contact with nature. Now in the chaos of this falling, cutting, smoking water, the observer recognizes the Archetype of those literary rivers and forests she imagined previously. Eternity-like-marble implies an existence outside of time, suspended, unchanging. The simultaneous possession of past, present, and future. Borges' immortality is that of a Nominalist for whom reality exists only in particular things rather than in the general idea. The Forest exists, not as an idea separate or autonomous from time, change, and the individual tree, but only in a perpetual repetition of individual trees emerging into existence, growing old, and disappearing, only to reappear again in other individual trees. The cataracts are both eternal and immortal, eternal in the sense of removing her consciousness of time and confusing past, present, and future in constant repetition, and immortal in the sense of only existing in individual drops of water constantly disappearing and renewing in infinite repetition.

The cataracts are perfect emblems of this immortality. The din of crashing water drowns out all possible sounds. After a while the ear refuses to hear the crashing din, and for moments on ends a silence of too much sound takes over her consciousness. Mist, blowing spray, silent suspended pools of water flowing in to plunging, falling sheets of water impossibly moving, too rapidly for the eye to follow create a chaos her eyes, accustomed to a normal scale of water, rock, and sky, cannot take in. Look up. A toucan, its black wings held steady like a tightrope walker, holds its long bill like the hull of a fishing boat out of water, crosses the canyons and white water, high above the forest and settles into a strangler fig on the Brazilian side.

The whirlpool under the cataracts boils up water and vapor from a witch's cauldron of rocks, water, shaggy, green clumps of grass blown and twisted by spray, twigs stripped of leaves. Blurred and softened by heavy mist, curtains of water are white as angels' wings. Above the edge of the cliff, where the river sweeps down broad, slow, and flat, vapor smokes up, moving fast, from cataracts on one of the many forking channels of water. The immediate impact of the scene is too overwhelming for eyes accommodated to a smaller scale of reality. The observer holds up her binoculars to distance her confounded eyes from the immediate impact of

this crashing reality. She recoils from the blown spray, the crushing columns of water. She is caught up in a demonic metamorphosis of creation and destruction, both Ovid's air, earth, fire, and water clashing in the Chaos prior to Creation, and these same cosmic elements made harmonious by constant repetition. She uses her binoculars to isolate parts of the total process of destruction and creation, water, turning water, in all its possible metamorphoses from air to water to earth to fire. A strong setting sun backlights long columns of water, filling their transparency with light.

This is a world of inundation, a vast over-flowing and tipping of rock, sky, and river, everywhere overflowing and in motion. Watching the water pour down around the observer is like watching sand pouring through an hourglass. Cutting canyons down through the sides of cliffs, the cataracts are the geological chisel of a vast river spilling over red stone cliffs left by previous volcanic eruptions. Brick-red stone cliffs cracked into blocks stacked one on another. Along one wall of rock, a large hole has eroded out leaving an empty window through which white sheets of water can be seen far off on the other side of the ravine. A palm tree shakes green fronds like slim cutting sabers next to the falling plumes of water on this same red canyon wall. It is heavy with black vultures, drying their wings before flopping off and swerving into the rising thermals. After an accelerating slide down the cliff face, a solid column of water hits the bottom and explodes upwards. The constant motion annihilates all motion, suspends the columns of water, makes them seem to move both up and down simultaneously. This cosmogonic drama disorients and annihilates all consciousness of a ordinary self looking out at a familiar world of ordinary dimensions and directions.

Air is muffled in mist. The explosion of water into muffled roar dominates every other sound until the ear is no longer conscious of any sound at all. The cataracts are not pure white. Their teeth have ground out long steaks of red in the white curtain of falling water. Above the cataract, the water is red, muddy, and deceptively quiet, unmoving, hesitating, and holding back, as if the passing moments of time can momentarily be suspended, drawn back, then the annihilating plunge. Clumps of grass are glistening, catching the sunlight, blown flat by the spray, never to rise upright again, but still streaming. The cataracts are time, infinite moments of immortality, moving forward, accelerating, repeating themselves identically, until they achieve a certain eternity, no motion, suspended in time.

Berkeley's Eternal Spirit and the Observer's Sustaining Consciousness

She is all eyes, an extension of eye, taking in all other senses, the roar, the wet mist, the cold water, the smell of grass, salty taste of blood, as visual spectacle. She is Berkeley's eternal spirit, the consciousness evoked by Borges approvingly in "A New Refutation of Time". The water moves at different speeds, patterns, always changing, but always the same. An erupting volcano of water perpetuating its catastrophe in each moment, infinitely changing, never the same, yet somehow suspended, identically repeated each time, the same spray wets the same rock and subsides into the same counter-current.

Now the observer looks up. The afternoon light has deepened the water to gold curtains. As the day passes, the cataracts are constantly changing in the light. She looks across a jumbled, wet clumps of grass and rock toward a cliff full of cascades like a white mirage in a desert of water drops. A rainbow stretches over a hidden valley between us, and soft white clouds ride up over the cliffs past the rising water vapor through a deep blue sky. Light glistens from palms. Black wings stir. Closer down, whizzing past her face, quick swallows carve out slices of air, exempt from the rock and water, rolling across and down the huge ribbons and ridges of water, swallows appearing from below in the ravines, flying into her face, over her head, landing on the spray-blown

grassy cliffs under and around the cascades. A swirl and spiral of swallows, thousands, uncountable, and beyond and above them, in the late afternoon light, in the flat, washed out, blue sky, a spiral of thousands more. Flocks of egrets, lines of toucans, slowly move up the canyons, over the smoking mists of the island, moving like banks of fog. The moon, pale blue in the still blue sky, soars up over curtains of rolling water.

In this light, the Falls are less anarchic, more melancholy, and distant, like the memory of a Vermeer painting of a girl looking back over her shoulder. Distance from the immediate impact of the vision helps transform fear and horror into sublimity. The closer the observer stands to the falls and feel the cold spray wash over her face, the more she feels fear and anguish at her own insignificance, a fear of annihilation. Aesthetic distance requires an image or word, something that exempts the observer from immediate contact, and allows her to descend into the whirlpool and come back to the calm surface. Borges's dreaming magicians and Berkeleyan minds remind her that if the pressure of reality on individual identity is too over-whelming, she can survive by annihilating herself in a prior text, a prior dreaming. The repetition of reading saves her, though it drains her of reality; she exists, a consciousness in the act of dreaming a world into existence.

Dreaming a Vision of the World Into Existence

What kind of fiction or image of the world does a reader dream into existence? Borges writes in "The Wall and the Books":

...All arts aspire to the state of music, which is pure form. Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon. (Borges, 1966, pp. 3-4)

Form is not spatial, but temporal, a process of dreaming a vision into existence in a process of representation. The world requires a perceiving mind; reality exists only as an idea subsisting in the eternal mind. In analogous fashion the fiction, the work of art requires a reader or an observer as well, one who completes the imminent revelation. And why is this revelation both imminent and prior or past? Does Borges not music, certain places "try to tell us something or have said something we should not have missed"? The vision evoked in writing and in reading fiction is both prior and subsequent to the reading.

What might be called Borges' poetics of inexpressibility when applied sounds like the old Longinian aesthetics of the sublime. Paradoxically, Borges' nominalist version of Berkeley's idealism, the individual word, the text, assumes more importance than the vision. If the Universal does not exist or is inexpressible except through the image or fiction through which "imminent revelations" emerge only in an individual reader's act of reading, then the vision that we dream into existence is perilously dependent on the actual writing and reading of the fiction. The locus of existence and meaning is in a text that is both prior and subsequent to the writing and reading of the work. There is no vision of the universe, at least an inexpressible universe, which is not mediated. Instead of producing a poetics of mysticism, an ecstatic release from individual, material existence, such a poetics of inexpressibility requires attention to the problem of mediation and the medium of poetry as an art, an attention to how the choice and "constructing" of each contingent word or textual element determines the vision the reader dreams into existence.

Conclusion

Seeing is a rhythm of schema and correction. For the idealist, the Neoplatonist, the observer exists by

dreaming, by the act of representation. Existing is a kind of writing and reading, a response to the problem of inexpressibility she suffers from her soul's with impact with reality. Her vision of the universe is always inexpressible, a problem of accommodating something overwhelming to the limited schemata she uses to grasp existence. Writers are ghosts in the mind of a reader. The reader is a ghost who surrenders up his personal identity to an act of consciousness that resembles Borges' idealist version of Berkeley's perceiving mind. As a Reader of Borges' fictions, she yields up my personal identity to an impersonal dreaming consciousness that resembles Berkeley's mind. Every fiction requires a reader; every vision of the world requires a dreamer. The observer dreams a vision of the universe into existence as she reads a fiction, and her dreaming is dreamed in turn. This is the logic of Borges' poetics of infinite regress.

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