

6. Jorge Luis Borges, “Heraclitus” (1969 and 1976)

References to Heraclitus and the simile of the river into which one cannot step twice occur frequently in the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges.¹ Borges understood the river to represent both the inevitable passage of time and the constantly changing nature of human existence. While he conceded the reality of change, Borges sought also to defuse the threat it posed to his sense of himself as an enduring entity. He both embraced Heraclitus as his *alter ego* and resisted the doctrine of flux.

In an early poem, “Year’s End” (1923), Borges takes the turning of the year as an occasion to consider how “something in us” endures, despite the fact that we are products of “infinite random possibilities” and “droplets in the stream of Heraclitus”:

It is not the emblematic detail
of replacing a two with a three,
nor that barren metaphor
that brings together a time that dies and another coming up
nor yet the rounding out of some astronomical process
that stuns and undermines
the altiplano² of this night,

¹ “...the water moving in that river/ where Heraclitus saw our madness mirrored” (“The Hourglass,” 1960); “...the unending river,/ going yet staying, mirror of the same inconsistent Heraclitus...” (“The Art of Poetry,” 1960); “...that river’s time/ In whose glass Heraclitus saw the symbol of the fleeting day...” (“Heraclitus,” 1969); “Night of time, which will go on forever./ The river of Heraclitus, the Riddling One...” (“Cosmogony,” 1975); “You are that other I the Greek defined./ You lie in wait forever. In the glass/ Of swaying water or of steady glass...” (“The Looking Glass,” 1975); “We hear his voice pronouncing: ‘Nobody can step twice into the waters/ Of the same river’” (“Heraclitus,” 1976); “First of all the metaphors is the river...” (“History of the Night,” 1977); “What luck to be the invulnerable water/ That flows in Heraclitus’ parable...” (“Adam is your Ashes,” 1977); “We are the river that you once invoked,/ Heraclitus...” (“The Maker,” 1981); “We are the much renowned/ Saying of Heraclitus the Obscure...” (“They are Rivers,” 1985). Selections from Borges’ poetry are taken from *The Collected Poems of Jorge Luis Borges*, trans. R. Mezey and R. Barnes, cited as “Borges.”

² The altiplano or “high plain” of Bolivia is a vast expanse which includes Lake Titicaca and the world’s largest salt flats, the Salar de Uyuni. Here, as often elsewhere, Borges speaks of the night as a vast and empty expanse marked only by the tolling of the hours (cf. “Insomnia” (Borges, 130): “The universe of this night is as vast/ as oblivion...”).

and compels us to keep listening for
 those twelve irreparable tollings of a bell.
 The true cause
 is a vague, pervasive apprehension
 of Time's enigma;
 a certain awe before the miracle
 that in spite of infinite random possibilities,
 in spite of the fact that we ourselves
 are droplets in the stream of Heraclitus,
 there is something in us that endures:
 something unbudgeable,
 that didn't find what it was looking for.

In another early poem, "Truco" (Borges, 8), Borges introduces a view of time he will contrast to Heraclitus' view of time as an irreversible sequence, later crediting the alternative conception to Pythagoras, the Stoics, Hume, and Nietzsche. Here Borges employs a chaotic card game³ as a model for the way in which life displays the "infinite random possibilities" alluded to in "Year's End":

Forty playing cards have taken the place of life
 Brightly colored talismans of pasteboard
 they make us forgetful of our fates...

Balky hesitations
 keep interrupting the words,
 and just as all the possible decisions
 come up again and again,
 the men playing tonight
 repeat the ancient tricks...

Borges will later write of this poem (Borges, 554):

On this page of questionable worth, an idea that has always disturbed me appears for the first time. Its fullest statement is in "A New Refutation of Time"...

That "disturbing" idea, expressed here in the lines "all the possible decisions/ come up again and again," is the view of time as circular—i.e. that all events will reoccur in the

³ Truco is a popular poker-like game in which fast play, intentional distractions, bluffing, deceptions, and humorous pranks are all regarded as fair game.

future as they have already occurred an infinite number of times.⁴ Although Borges here rejects this idea since it rests on what he characterizes as the false assumption “that time is composed of individual instants which can be distinguished from one another”, his rejection is less than definitive. As he will explain in the two later essays (1944 and 1946) he mischievously⁵ entitled “A New Refutation of Time” (1966, 181):

In the course of a life dedicated to literature and, occasionally, to metaphysical perplexity, I have perceived or sensed a refutation of time, which I myself disbelieve, but which comes to visit me at night and in the weary dawn with the force of an axiom. That refutation is in all my books in one way or another...

In the first of his two essays Borges expresses his admiration for the cleverness with which Heraclitus crafted his simile of the river, yet cites his own recollection of that simile as one reason for rejecting the reality of time. He begins by reminding the reader of the idealism of Bishop Berkeley (which holds that only minds and their contents exist), as well as the skepticism of David Hume (which finds no basis for belief in the existence of any subject behind our impressions and ideas). He then sets the stage for his conclusion by describing his own frequently repeated experiences and recollections:

Let us consider a life in which repetitions are abundant: mine, for example. I never pass Recoleta cemetery without remembering that my father, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents are buried there, as I shall be; then I remember that I have already remembered that, many times before. I cannot walk down my neighborhood streets in the solitude of the night without thinking that night is pleasing to us because, like memory, it erases idle details. I cannot mourn the loss of a love or a friendship without meditating that one can lose only what one has really never had. Each time I come to a certain place in the South, I think of you, Helen; each time the air brings me the smell of eucalyptus, I think of

⁴ Borges’ references to “the circularity of time” sometimes include two other views: (1) that sooner or later all possible events will occur; and (2) that time (itself) repeats itself. But what he usually has in mind is the idea that whatever events have occurred and are now occurring will reoccur in precisely the same order *ad infinitum*.

⁵ As Borges 1966, 181 explained, “...to say that a refutation is new (or old) is to attribute to it a predicate of a temporal nature, which restores the notion that the subject attempts to destroy.”

Adrogué, in my childhood; each time I remember Fragment 91 of Heraclitus "You will not go down twice to the same river," I admire his dialectical skill, because the facility with which we accept the first meaning ("The river is different") clandestinely imposes the second one ("I am different") and gives us the illusion of having invented it. Each time I hear a Germanophile vituperating Yiddish, I pause and think that Yiddish is, after all, a German dialect, barely maculated by the language of the Holy Spirit. (Borges 1966, 186-87)

Borges appears here to be making two distinct assertions: (1) that some events have occurred so many times it is no longer possible to distinguish between the original experience and the subsequent recollection; and (2) that despite the fact that some experiences appear to follow upon one another in a forceful manner, it is impossible for us to tell whether their ordering reflects objective reality or is merely our own creation. (Borges cites as an example the fact that we cannot tell whether the connection between the two meanings present in Heraclitus' aphorism imposes itself upon us or whether we invent it ourselves.) So if Berkeley was correct in denying the existence of material substances, and Hume was correct in denying that we have any basis for believing in the existence of a self, we must conclude that we have no basis on which to identify any particular experience as occurring prior to, simultaneously with, or subsequently to any other experience: (Borges 1966, 190):⁶

...that pure representation of homogeneous facts—clear night, limpid wall, rural scent of honeysuckle, elemental clay—is not merely identical to the scene on that corner so many years ago; it is, without similarities or repetitions, the same. If we can perceive that identity, time is a delusion: the indifference and inseparability of one moment of time's apparent yesterday and another of its apparent today are enough to disintegrate it.⁷

⁶ For an alternative analysis of Borges' argument, see Van Cleve 2002. Van Cleve treats idealism and the thesis of the identity of indiscernibles as two separate lines of argument, whereas I regard them as two phases within a single argument.

⁷ Technically, what Borges' argument would establish is not that belief in time is a delusion (or that there can be no objective order of events), but only that we cannot know whether there is any such order. In any case, since Borges does not here provides grounds for accepting the views he attributes to Berkeley, Hume, and Schopenhauer, his

But, remarkably, having just dismissed time as a delusion, Borges proceeds to embrace Schopenhauer's characterization of time as circular (Borges 1966, 196):

By the dialectic of Berkeley and Hume I have arrived at Schopenhauer's statement: "The form of the appearance of the will is only the present, not the past or the future...Time is like an infinitely rotating circle; the descending arc is the past, the ascending one is the future; above, there is an indivisible point that touches the tangent and is the now.

Borges next quotes from Buddhist texts that reduce time to a series of present moments just "as a carriage wheel touches the ground in only one place when it turns", but concludes by admitting that his refutation is unbelievable (Borges 1966, 197):

And yet, and yet—to deny temporal succession, to deny the ego, to deny the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret assuagements. Our destiny...is not horrible because of its unreality; it is horrible because it is irreversible and iron bound. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me but I am the fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges.

While it would be tempting to suppose on the basis of this last comment that Borges found his "refutation of time" unpersuasive, the idea of circular time will reappear in other Borges poems. In "The Cyclical Night" (published in 1964, two decades after "The New Refutation of Time"), he credits such a view to the early Greek thinker Pythagoras and his followers (Borges, 132):

They knew, the stern disciples of Pythagoras,
That stars and men are always cyclically returning,
And the fatal atoms endlessly repeat the burning
Golden Aphrodite, Thebans, agoras...

"refutation" remains merely hypothetical. Borges elsewhere expressed the view that the truth of idealism is confirmed by the Kantian antinomies of reason and Zeno's paradoxes (see the essay "Avatars of the Tortoise" in Borges 1966, 114-20).

Every insomnia will come back, just as it was.
 From the very same womb the hand that is writing this
 Will be reborn, Iron armies will build their own abyss.
 (This is what David Hume of Edinburgh says)...⁸

In his final published collection of verse, appropriately entitled *The Number of Times* (1981), Borges again alludes to the idea of circular time. In his “Note for a Fantastic Tale”(Borges, 464) he invokes the tradition according to which Pythagoras lived multiple lives. In another lifetime, so Borges imagines:

...the eight thousand Saxons at Hastings will defeat the Normans, as they had earlier defeated the Norwegians, and in a temple hall of Argos. Pythagoras will not recognize the shield he carried when he was Euphorbus.⁹

Similarly, in “Hymn” Borges speaks of “this morning” in which: “Pythagoras reveals to the Greeks/ that time has a shape: the circle...” And in “The Scheme of Things” he mentions that: “The Stoics thought that this iron scheme/ arose from fire/ that like the Phoenix dies and is reborn...” On occasion, Borges admits to a certain lack of seriousness on this topic:

I am fond of the circular form. That does not mean that I believe in circular time, in the hypothesis of Pythagoras, Hume, Nietzsche, or many others. The Stoics also held that history repeats itself in exactly the same fashion. I do nothing but take advantage, to the best of my ability, of the literary possibilities of this hypothesis Nietzsche thought he had invented. (Camp, 63)

As one might expect on the basis of his half-hearted commitment to circular time, Borges also displays some ambivalence in connection with the view of time as an irreversible sequence of events. In the first of two poems entitled “Heraclitus” (1969)

⁸ Di Giovanni notes (Borges 1972, 296) that Borges replaced an original reference to “the philologist Nietzsche” with this reference to David Hume: “Borges found that, long before Nietzsche, Hume had stated and justified the Stoic theory of cyclical time in the eighth of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.”

⁹ The story that Pythagoras lived many lives, including one life as Euphorbus, a warrior who fought at Troy, appears in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (VIII, 4-5).

Borges weaves together the themes of a succession of days and nights, sleeplessness, purification and oblivion, the river of time, time as a “web of was, is, and will be”, and the self as “a sliding substance” that is identical with time (Borges, 250):

The second twilight.
 The night sinking deeper into sleep.
 Purification and oblivion.
 The first twilight.
 The morning that was the dawn.
 Broad day that once was the morning.
 The luxuriant day that will become a threadbare dusk.
 The second twilight.
 That other of time’s guises, night.
 Purification and oblivion.
 The first twilight...
 The stealthy dawn and in the dawn
 the Greek’s dismay.
 What is this web
 of will be, is, and was?
 What river is this
 through which the Ganges flows?
 What river is this whose source we cannot imagine?
 What river is this
 that washes away mythologies and swords?
 Sleep is useless—
 it flows through sleep, through the desert, through the cellar.
 The river carries me away and I am the river.
 Of some sliding substance am I made, unfathomable time.
 Perhaps the wellspring brims in me.
 Perhaps from my darkness
 arise the mortal and phantasmorgoric days.

There is no suggestion here that the view of time Borges associates with Heraclitus (“the Greek”) is anything less than true: we must accept the reality of time and acknowledge the inherently temporal character of our existence. There is some suggestion that time remains mysterious, and that the division between days and nights is a distinction we import into our experience of the world. But Borges evinces no sign of dissatisfaction with this “Heraclitean” perspective on time. Similarly, in “The Hourglass” (Borges, 88-

89) Borges accepts an hourglass along with Heraclitus' moving river as appropriate symbols and measures of time's passage. He also accepts the flow of time as "entirely and all too human", and notes that while memory attempts to imprison time, "Lethe's magic flood [i.e. forgetfulness] keeps on dissolving." The poet concedes: "Nor am I fated to save myself, a chance/ Creature of time, which is a stuff that slides."¹⁰

Elsewhere, however, Borges indicates that a Heraclitean identification of our personal existence with the incessant flow of a river cannot be the whole story: not everything passes away. As he had earlier suggested in his early poem "Year's End" (Borges, 16), "there is something in us that endures:/something unbudgeable/ that didn't find what it was looking for." The late poem "They Are Rivers" (Borges, 500) reaches a similar conclusion. For all but its last two lines "They Are Rivers" tells the usual story of unceasing change and dissolution:

We are the time. We are the much renowned
saying of Heraclitus the obscure.
We are water, not diamonds that endure;
what ebbs and passes, not what holds its ground.
We are that Greek who sees himself in the stream;
We are the stream. His brief reflection shimmers
in water which is made of shimmering mirrors,
in the dark glass that shimmers like a flame.
We are the stream, predestined and vain,
heading down to the sea pursued by shadows.
Everything said goodbye, everything goes.
Memory no longer mints its coin.¹¹

But the poem's final two lines, like those of "Year's End," strike a contrasting note:

And nevertheless there is something that remains,

¹⁰ An acceptance of time's remorselessness and of the inevitability of death appears also in "To the One Reading Me" (Borges, 193); "Cosmogony" (Borges, 331); and "Adam Is Your Ashes" (Borges, 444).

¹¹ As in "The Hourglass", no experience bears an unmistakable indication of when it occurred.

and nevertheless there is something that complains.

In “The Art of Poetry” (Borges, 120) provides the first of two suggestions as to the identity of what remains as well as how it manages to do so. First of all, the poetic art endures—it is able “to transmute the insult of the years/Into a music, a murmuring, a symbol”:

To see in death a sleep, or in the sunset
A golden sadness—such is poetry,
Beggared yet immortal, poetry
That comes back like the dawn and sunset...

They say Ulysses, sick and tired of marvels,
Wept with love at the sight of Ithaca,
Green and simple. Art is that Ithaca
Of simple, green eternity, not marvels...

In addition, as Borges indicates in “The Maker” (1981), if the poetic art has a claim on immortality, then so, at least to some extent, does its creator:

I am nothing but this pack of images
That chance shuffles and tedium gives names.
Out of them, although blind and all but broken,
I have to forge the incorruptible verse
And (it is my duty) save myself.

It is in that sense, as Borges affirms in the opening lines of “The Maker”, “we”—i.e.

Heraclitus and Borges—are the river; they fashion the words that withstand the passage of time:

We are the river that you once invoked,
Heraclitus. We are time, whose current
Carries along lions and mountain ranges,
The tears of love, the ashes of our pleasure,
Insidious and interminable hope;
The vaunting names of empires now dust;
Hexameters of the Greek and of the Roman...

Thus, in spite of the fact that “we are droplets in the stream of Heraclitus,” it is not the case that “everything goes.” There is something in us that “endures,” “is unbudgeable,” “didn’t find what it was looking for,” “nevertheless remains,” and “complains.”

One aspect of Borges’ belief in the enduring significance of the poet is his repeated identification of himself with Heraclitus. At one point (Borges, 122) he speaks of himself in the first person and of “having been so many [men]”, and expresses regret over an unconsummated love affair:

I, who have been so many, have never been
That man in whose arms Matilde Urbach swooned.

And although it does not appear that Matilde Urbach was Greek¹², Borges entitles this recollection “Le regret d’ Héraclite”. In “The Art of Poetry” he speaks of “Inconstant Heraclitus, who is the same/ And yet another...” And in a late poem also entitled “Heraclitus” (Borges 402), combines references to Heraclitus with references to himself in various periods of his life:

Heraclitus is walking in the evening stillness
Of Ephesus. The evening has just brought him,
Without his having consciously decided,
Along the green bank of a river
Whose name and distinct course he doesn’t know.
There is a stone Janus¹³, and some poplars¹⁴.

¹² While declarations of unrequited love appear often in Borges’ poetry, Matilde Urbach appears to be as fictional as the author from whom Borges “quotes” this remark (“Gaspar Camerarius in *Deliciae Poetarum Borrusiae*, VII, 16”). One student of Borges’ work, Juan Bonilla, has found a reference to a Matilde Urbach in the novel *Man with Four Lives* by William Joyce Cowen (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934).

¹³ Janus is the ancient Roman god of beginnings and transitions, both temporal and spatial (thus “the god of doorways”). In “Limits” (Borges, 148), from *The Other Man, The Same Man* (1964), Borges notes the presence of a four-faced stone statue of Janus in the Southside neighborhood in which he made his nightly walks. In “A Bust of Janus Speaks” (Borges, 350) the statue expresses the idea that past and future never meet.

¹⁴ Another characteristic feature of Buenos Aires (cf. “memories of poplars” (Borges, 29) in “Long Walk,” from *Passion for Buenos Aires*, 1923).

Eying himself in the fast flowing mirror,
 He brings to light and polishes the sentence
 That all the many generations of men
 Will not let die. We hear his voice pronouncing:
*Nobody can step twice into the waters
 Of the same river.* He pauses. And he feels,
 With the astonishment of a sacred horror,
 That he is both a river and a fleeing.
 He wishes to retrieve, somehow, that morning,
 The previous night and evening; but he cannot.
 He speaks the sentence once again. He sees it
 Printed clearly in its future letters
 On one of the printed pages of Burnet¹⁵.
 Heraclitus does not know Greek. And Janus,
 The god of doorways, is a Latin god.
 Heraclitus has no present and no past.
 He is merely an artifice dreamed up
 By a grey man on the banks of the Red Cedar¹⁶,
 A man who weaves hendecasyllables¹⁷
 So as not to dwell too much on Buenos Aires
 And its beloved faces. One is missing.¹⁸

Borges, characteristically, both embraced and repudiated what he took to be the message embedded in Heraclitus' river simile, much as he had both embraced and rejected the view of time as circular. The temporal character of human existence justifies the likening of our reality to the flow of a stream. But not everything passes away; the poet who walks along the bank of the river ponders, complains, creates, and through that creative act, endures.

¹⁵ The reference is to John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1st ed. 1892; and many later editions. Of course, the ancient Heraclitus "knew Greek"; it is the modern Argentinean Heraclitus who does not.

¹⁶ The Red Cedar River flows through the campus of Michigan State University at East Lansing, Michigan, where Borges was in residence during the winter term of 1976-77.

¹⁷ The hendecasyllable, a line of eleven syllables, is commonly used in Greek and Latin verse. Borges frequently refers to himself as the creator of hendecasyllables. (Cf. "and the practiced weaving of hendecasyllables" in "That One" (Borges, 460).

¹⁸ "One is missing" would appear to be a reference to Borges' mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges, who died in the previous year.