

Books and Terror : Anxieties of the Infinite in Wordsworth, Borges, and Stevens

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Abstract

This paper deals with the way three writers, who fall within the parameters of the modern tradition in Western literature, reflect on one theme: the manner by which books (as repositories of knowledge) generate fears of infinity and human extinction. The three writers, the English William Wordsworth, the American Wallace Stevens, and the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, look at books from the standpoint where they unleash images of terrifying scenarios threatening the existence of man himself, if not the physical existence, at least the psychological and intellectual well-being of mankind.

The three writers are not identical or equal in their responses to the dilemma projected in their work. Whereas Wordsworth is afraid that human imagination might outlast man's life on earth, Borges is worried about the possibility of man's bewilderment in the labyrinth of knowledge: Stevens, on the other hand, sees a similar, unsettling possibility, yet is more submissive at the prospect of its materialization. These differences fall, however, within a generally homogenous context of an increasingly secularized culture. As the quotations from Nietzsche suggest, secularization has resulted in a situation in which man claims a central position in the universe, yet is worried about the consequences of his claim.

"I want, once and for all,
not to know many things.
Wisdom sets limits to
knowledge too."

Neitzsche,

Twilight of the Idols

The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges is well known among major twentieth-century writers for his interest in exploring the most complex philosophical issues, in terms and settings astonishingly simple and familiar. His short story "The Book of Sand" is one example of such an amazing interest. It is a specimen of what has come to be known as "magic realism," which allows the writer to mix fantastic and realistic elements, thus providing the appropriate setting for the exploration of complex philosophical questions in astonishingly simple circumstances. At the center of the narrative is Borges himself as a character narrating the story of how he came to acquire a book that symbolizes infinity, "because neither the book nor the sand has any beginning or end" (119). "A true bibliophile," Borges had earlier acquired another book that suggests infinity: *The Thousand and One Nights*. But the new book, 'The Book of Sand', which is told by a religious Scot turns out to be a more horrifying trap in infinity, and although Borges eventually succeeds in freeing himself and getting rid of the book by 'losing' it in the infinity of a library, the story does not end before unleashing the very awesome potentials of the search for knowledge.

A number of writers, besides Borges, have been similarly concerned with the relationship between books and infinity. Borges names Valéry and Mallarmé among others. Yet one should note that the emphasis of those two French writers does not seem to fall on books as terrifying symbols of the infinite, but on their function as links of human sympathy. For both Mallarmé and Valéry, books symbolize the unity of all the minds that wrote them, "for the creative spirit in us has no name," as Valéry put it (Paul Valéry 118). The spirit that creates books, in other words, is so diffused among people that all distinctions among them disappear. From a different standpoint, books appear to Wallace Stevens to be much more independent from the minds that

created them. Books, says the American poet, are capable of outlasting the physical existence of man in the infinity, rather than the sympathy, of the mind: "The house will crumble and the books will burn/They are at ease in a shelter of the mind" ("The Auroras of Autumn," ii, 14-15).

The philosophical concern with the meaning and role of books has already been anticipated by the English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. In Book V of the *Prelude*, Wordsworth adopts an attitude towards books, comparable in many ways to that of Borges. Book V of the *Prelude* is a highly significant discourse on books; and as I discuss it here, it shows how the Romantic poet relates to the two major twentieth-century writers in quite unexpected ways. Those ways I have found difficult to justify on pure historical or cultural grounds. The presence of shared elements, such as the use of exotic Arab or non-Arab figures and/or books, may provide a linking motif, but it falls short of explaining the similarity of interest in how books, or knowledge in general, relate to fear of infinity. The shared elements among the texts discussed here seem to take place on a combination of philosophical and cultural levels. More particularly, I am referring to the process of secularization in Western culture, the process whereby man, rather than God, has come to be the ultimate source of knowledge, and which in more recent times has come to result in destabilizing developments that included Michel Foucault's prediction that man himself is about to be displaced (*The Order of Things*, xxiii). As far as literature is concerned, this process of secularization has been studied at great length by critics such as M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism*, and J. Hillis Miller in *The Disappearance of God*.

My following discussion of the three writers: Wordsworth, Stevens and Borges, is thus aimed at exploring the points where their works intersect under the impact of shared cultural and philosophical concerns. The fact that these writers come from different historical and literary backgrounds should demonstrate the continuing relevance of certain issues within the larger, and otherwise diverse, contexts of Western culture.

1. The *Prelude* (1805) is Wordsworth's semi-fictional autobiography. To use Wordsworth's phrase for the announced theme of the poem, Book V describes the impact of books on the 'growth of the poet's mind' and this impact varied according to the type of books the poet read. In Book V we are

told about two groups of books. The first group includes books that Wordsworth alludes to in favorable terms because of their good effect on the child while moving from "innocence to experience," to use the famous Blakean terms. This group includes Don Quixote, the Arabian Nights, and the verses of Shakespeare and Milton (ll. 60-61, 87, 486). The second group comprises books that have a negative effect, but no titles are given in their case (ll. 350-363). Geoffrey Hartman, whose explication de texte of the Prelude, I largely draw upon, notices the distinction the poet makes between good and bad books, and goes on to say that Wordsworth is not so much concerned about the books themselves as he is about an experience in which the reading of a book results in a terrifying dream which leaves the "mind... bereft of nature and the imagination stands revealed as a free power" (229). It is a situation that clearly goes beyond the more recent, but somewhat simplistic assessment of Book V by Stephen Gill, as reaffirming "the primacy of the Imagination, grounded in Nature, fostered and strengthened by books" (66); far from being 'grounded in nature', the imagination in Book V looms as a source of horrifying solipsistic existence where nature is no more.

The dream, the most important and most dramatic, part of Book V, is introduced as an incident that the young Wordsworth once related to one of his friends (ll. 56-140) in the context of the poet's anxiety about the perishability of books. The incident, says the poet, began while he was lying beside the sea and reading Don Quixote:

While I was seated in a rocky cave
By the sea-side, perusing, so it chanced,
The history of the errant knight
Recorded by Cervantes these same thoughts
Beset me ... and, having closed
The book, had turned my eyes toward the wide sea.
... and at length, my senses yielding to the sultry air
Sleep seized me, and I passed into a dream. (ll. 56-70)

If dreams are essentially unrealistic, the fact that the dream narrated here comes after reading a book of 'imaginary' adventures is bound to

increase the element of fictionality in that dream. If so, this must have something to do with the poet's psychological condition, his feeling, as Hartman has observed, of both fear and desire: "I shall propose that the dream is sent by Imagination to lead the poet to recognize its power, and that what the dreamer desires and fears is a direct encounter with Imagination" (229). I shall come to this point shortly; for the moment, other elements require immediate attention.

The first important feature of the dream is the shift in scenery. After "the wide sea," we move to a "boundless plain of sandy wilderness, all black and void." The direct psychological effect of this sudden shift is "distress and fear," Yet, still, there is hope. A "semi-Quixotic because, like Don Quixote, "a lance he bore," and unlike him, he had "underneath one arm/A stone, and in the opposite hand a shell/of a surpassing brightness." These two, the stone and the shell, relate to another more significant aspect of the relationship: they are 'books'. And this identification makes the bedouin a Quixote on two levels: first, because of the nature of his mission which, though admirable, is ironically comic, undertaken, as in Don Quixote's case, under the impact of books. Second, the bedouin relates to Cervantes's book as a result of certain details in Cervantes's work that makes the Arabs "preservers" of books, details which may have been in Wordsworth's mind at the time of composing the dream text. For the Romantic poet may well have noticed that in chapter 9 of *Don Quixote* Cervantes refers to "Cide Hamete Benengeli, Arabic historian" (77) as the one who preserved the adventures of the Knight of la Mancha: "Blessed be Cide Hamete who has left us the history of your great deeds recorded ...," as the Bachelor says later on in the narrative (486).

As the narrative progresses we are told that upon inquiring about the stone and the shell, the Arab tells Wordsworth that the stone was "Euclid's Elements," and the shell contains an "ode" inside. Unlike Euclid's book, the shell is significantly more emphasized:

... "This," said he,
"Is something of more worth;" and at the word
Stretched forth the shell, so beautiful in shape,
In color so resplendent, with command
That I should hold it to my ear. I did so,

And heard that instant in an unknown tongue,
Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,
A loud prophetic blast of harmony;
An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold
Destruction to the children of the earth
By deluge, now at hand. (V, 88-98)

In addition, the shell also:

... was a god, yea many gods,
Had voices more than all the winds, with power
To exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe,
Through every clime, the heart of human kind. (V, 106-09).

The word "power" in the description of the shell is highly significant; elsewhere the imagination is described as "That awful *Power*" which rises "from the mind's abyss / Like an unfathered vapor that enwraps,/ At once, some lonely traveler" (the Prelude, VI, 594-96; italics added). An embodiment of imaginative power, the shell/poem has the immediate effect of concretizing what it has just prophesied. Wordsworth realizes the looming threat as he looked at the Arab to whom he was trying to cleave:

His countenance, meanwhile, grew more disturbed;
And looking backwards when he looked, mine eyes
Saw, over half the wilderness diffused,
A bed of glittering light: I asked the cause:
"It is," said he, "waters of the deep
Gathering upon us;" ... (V, 126-131)

Both Wordsworth and the Arab share the fear of being engulfed in the deluge; but when read in the context of the stone and the shell, this fear acquires a deeper dimension, one that concerns the central question behind the dream, the question Wordsworth once expressed to a friend and on the occasion of which the dream was told:

Oh! why hath not the Mind
Some element to stamp her image on
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
Why gifted with such powers to send abroad
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail? (V, 45-49).

The stone/book and shell/ode come to fulfill such a speculation, but the realization of the fulfillment in the dream has an implicitly disturbing discovery: the mind or imagination has indeed found more powerful shrines to lodge in. Both the book and the poem have saved themselves from destruction; they have protected themselves by transforming into death-resistant forms (a stone and a shell): the shell is of course more at home in the water, and 'Euclid's Elements' may have joined the stars with which they "held acquaintance" (V, 103). What has remained without security is the human body behind the book and the poem, a Wordsworth or an Arab running Quixote-like in order to save works of the imagination.

On closer inspection, both the stone/book and the shell/poem carry memories of dead authors, a Euclid and an Arab poet long deceased and followed by still breathing works. For Wordsworth, the Arab poet is both more interesting and more terrifying. After all the poet was the one who foretold the deluge from which only his poem, including the prophecy of course, was to find a refuge. But why wonder if the shell has turned out to be the residence of "a god, yea many gods" with so many voices and such an unsurpassed power, as Wordsworth himself has come to realize. It is not the stone and the shell which need a savior, but the bedouin and his inventor, the poet Wordsworth.

As Harold Bloom has observed, Wordsworth and the Arab reach a point of identification with one another (151). Both are concerned for the well being of human culture, and both are faced with the terrifying conclusion that it is their personal survival that they should worry about. The bedouin's dromedary provides some help for him, and Wordsworth has the only means a dreamer has to save himself:

... Whereat I walked in terror,
And saw the sea before me, and the book,

In which I had been reading, at my side. (V, 138-140).

The presence of the sea and Cervantes's book beside the poet provides a link between the dream and reality: the sea relates to the deluge, and the book, which existed before the dream and which is recalled in the Quixotic Arab, is still there. This results in keeping the anxieties of the dream open to repetition in reality, and in reducing the possibilities of escape from the unsettling of those anxieties.

The chain and circles of books involved here is indeed enough to bewilder the mind and press the point that it is not the imagination, but nature and the bodily existence of man, which stand open to the potential of destruction. From Book V of the Prelude, the book of books, to a friend interested in books, to the nightmare and terror a book can engender, to the books in the nightmare (the books which prophecy the destruction of books), and back to Cervantes's book, throughout this long chain of intellectual creation an infinity unfolds to include much more than the works mentioned. Book V is after all one of fourteen books that constitute one long poem, which in turn stands on the shelves of the library beside the

poor earthly casket of immortal verse,

Shakespeare, or Milton, labourers divine! (V, 165-66)

If there is any indication that Wordsworth was aware of the irony implicit in his anxiety, it must be in his reference here to a verse which is already immortalized, the verse of Shakespeare and Milton, whereas the "labourers divine" themselves have ceased to exist. The earthly caskets will find some place in a library.

2. Wordsworth's awareness of the ironies of destruction remains implicit at least in comparison to the declared dilemmas in the postmodern story by Borges that I sketched out at the beginning of this discussion. Beginning with the title, the story is an explicit confrontation with the terrifying and mysterious countenance of knowledge. As the narrative gradually but forcefully unravels, we begin to realize that 'The Book of Sand' is a declared, though reversed, account of the dilemmatic state already faced by Wordsworth. Reversing the solidity of the book-as-a-stone, the fluid book of sand assumes another shocking state of existence equally impossible to mortals.

Like the English Romantic poet, the Argentine writer chose at the outset

to situate his narrative in a state of exotic circumstances. Wordsworth's bedouin is replaced by a Scot "from the Orkneys," "a foreigner." The man's physique was even more awe-inspiring than Wordsworth's Arab: "He was a tall man with nondescript features Dressed in gray and carrying a gray suitcase in his hand, he had an unassuming look about him" (117). Color is important too, though the details are too minute to notice: he was between blond and white. In short, the man was as slippery as the book of sand he came to sell. Yet the difference from Wordsworth's Arab remains visible: Borges's episode and characters are not part of a dream, but of a strange yet seemingly unmediated reality, the reality of fantasy, or magic reality, where "fantastic or mythical elements [are] matter-of-factly [incorporated] into otherwise realistic fiction" (Encyclopedia of Literature, 713). According to theorists of postmodernism, such as Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale, these are outstanding characteristics of postmodernist fiction.

The Scot begins by trying to sell bibles to Borges, but soon discovers that the customer is a bibliophile, a collector in particular. "The Book of Sand" thus comes next as a more interesting item, and Borges buys it. Then comes the terrifying discovery that the purchased book is a symbol of infinite knowledge, a book that defies the reader's ability to return to any page once he leaves it. With this specific trait, the book has neither end nor beginning. The narrator's initial fascination soon turns into a nightmarish isolation and fervent attempts to get rid of the book. Eventually, the shelf of a public library provides the proper place for the Book of Sand to disappear into.

As these extraordinary events unfold, it becomes clear that if anything comes close to Borges's fear it is his amazement at the Scot's self-assured stance towards the book, a stance that emanates from the man's philosophical outlook. Unlike Wordsworth's bedouin, Borges's Scot is widely different from his creator, a difference that becomes clear as soon as Borges learns that the man remains religious despite his awareness of the nature of the book of sand. When Borges asks: "You are religious, no doubt?" the man's emphatic answer:

Yes, I'm a Presbyterian. My conscience is clear. I am reasonably sure of not having cheated the native man when I gave him the word of God in exchange for his devilish book. (120)

The man's presbyterianism, particularly his religious belief that the book

is devilish, is ostensibly the reason why he does not show the same anxiety towards the book; he is shielded by his religious convictions against the philosophically unsettling implications plaguing the narrator:

Then as if he were thinking aloud, he said, "If space is infinite, we may be at any point in time". (119)

Yet the man's acceptance of this philosophical possibility is still at odds with his faith in God, for the infinity of time and space contradicts the chronological time taught by religions such as Christianity, the time that begins with an act of creation and ends with a Doomsday. The fact that he has no sense of such a contradiction adds to his mystery in the eyes of Borges who obviously cannot share such a combination of views. Borges's is a shortcoming that rather quickly leads to his bordering on the verge of collapse and his decision to terminate the unhappy venture by leaving the book in a public library.

Borges's attitude toward the terror implicit in books is what brings his story close to Wordsworth's poetic narrative. Like his Romantic precursor, Borges is very much worried by the specter of infinity, and this is not limited to "The Book of sand," but is in fact the ongoing thematic concern of a great deal of the Argentine writer's work, as shown by his well-known anthologies such as *Ficciones*, and *Other Inquisitions*. "The object of Borges' writing is to combat the chaos and all-devouring quagmire which is infinity," writes Djelal Kadir (467) who has also explored the "Intimations of terror in Borges' metaphysics". Yet this similarity hardly reduces the outstanding differences between the two with respect to the very issue discussed here. One obvious difference is the one I have alluded to earlier; namely, that Borges's story brings to the open what can only be described as latent in Wordsworth's poem. This is part of a self-conscious writing that typifies a great deal of modern Western Literature. Self-consciousness here takes the form of a self-involved writing which is always looking inward, into its own problems, including its fictionality, and has a title to hide. Borges is one leading figure of this trend which has been described by the American novelist John Barth as "the literature of exhaustion."

3. The American poet Wallace Stevens is another highly self-conscious poet who shares some basic convictions with the fiction writers when he explores the problem of fictionality and raises doubts about the meaning of

reality. In the poem entitled "Of Modern Poetry" he describes the modern poet as "a metaphysician in the dark" who hears only himself as he "speaks words that in the ear/... repeat, exactly, that which it wants to hear." This state of self-involution, however, does not scare the poet but impels him to quest for order and meaning. And it is in this that Stevens' awareness of terrifying infinity sets him apart in comparison not only with Wordsworth, but with Borges as well.

The anxiety that Stevens shares with the other two writers regarding books and the terrifying implications of infinity, is greatly qualified in his case by a serene acceptance that he articulates in a number of works. In "Esthetique du Mal," one of Stevens' major poems, the poet perceives the tragic reality of the world and accept it as " a fragmentary tragedy/ Within the universal whole" (xiii). The flood that Wordsworth and his bedouin try to escape is no more than:

... A loud, large water [which]
Bubbles up in the night and drowns the crickets' sound.
It is a declaration, a primitive ecstasy,
Truth's favors sonorously exhibited. (ix)

The cricket's sound is not, however, the only victim of the water; also drowned is the sound of the poet, along with the poet himself:

We say: at night an Arabian in my room
With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
Inscribes a primitive astronomy
Across the unscrawled faces the future casts
And throws his stars around the floor. By day
The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo
And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.

Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation. ("Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction, I, 3; hereafter "Notes")

Like the Arab poet behind the ode in Wordsworth's poem, Stevens' Arabian has been destroyed by the material forces of nature, by the ocean of fact that separates him, with the dove, from us. Yet the imagination of both Arabian poet-singers has outlived destruction. The sound they have made is still with us because it is still repeated by the ocean: "The partakes of that which changes him" ("Notes," ii, 9). That the sound is unintelligible is very significant in both Wordsworth and Stevens. But whereas Wordsworth realistically ascribes the unintelligibility to the foreignness of the language he hears, Steven sees in it a broader phenomenon, a symptom of poetry of all time: "The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to/ the gibberish of the vulgate and back again" ("Notes," ii, 9). Coming closer to an understanding of himself, Crispin in "The Comedian as the letter C" perceives:

That coolness for his heat came suddenly

And only, in the fables that he scrawled

With his own quill, in its indigenous dew,

Of an aesthetic tough ...

Green barbarism turning paradigm. (ii, 30-36)

Irrationality is the first stage in the development of the artist and his work towards supremacy. It is a stage of stripping away, of taking off all names and outworn concepts. "The sun/ Must bear no name" ("Notes," I, 2); the figure referred to by Stevens as "the major man" (a version of the Nietzschean superman) must also be seen as something new and different. Thus the ephebe is instructed to regard "the major man":

Yet look not at his colored eyes. Give him

No names. Dismiss him from your images. ("Notes," I, 8)

This stripping away of familiar reality is part of the progress towards the 'supreme fiction', (the fiction in which "the human blessed rage for order," as Stevens says in "The Idea of Order at Key West"), is imposed on natural barbarism and accepted as fictional order.

The Arabian is one of a series of figures in Stevens' poetry, who impose their sense of order on natural chaos. Among such figures are the Comedian, the woman in "The Idea of Order at Key West", the man with the blue guitar,

Canon Aspirin. Each hears "the dark voice" of the sea, yet is invested with the "Maker's rage to order the words of the sea ... " ("The Idea of Order"). This dark voice may very well be the voice of catastrophe threatening both the maker and his creation, the song. In the Arabian's case, the song began as "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how"; however, by the time the dove carried it on, it was reduced to a single "hoobla-hoo." Furthermore, the process went on until by the end only "hoo" remained of the nonsensical phrase.

In her commentary on this passage in "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," Helen Vendler writes: "the Arabian is described maniacally, the dove nostalgically, the ocean matter-of-factly..." (188). Yet it seems to me that even the Arabian is described nostalgically, for he too is lost in a manner that relates to the tragic lot of man which Stevens elsewhere describes in a tone not devoid of pain:

Children picking up our bones
will never know that these were once
As quick as foxes on the hill;
... The spring clouds blow
Above the shuttered mansion-house,
Beyond our gate and the windy sky
Cries out a literate despair. ("A postcard from the Volcano")

Although the recognition of this nostalgia does not radically change the insistent note in Stevens' poetry, that acceptance should be the human response to the specter of loss, it nevertheless suggests that even Stevens cannot treat human pain matter-of-factly. On the whole, however, he remains far from Wordsworth's anxieties toward loss, and this is what makes him both comparable and different in the context discussed here.

"Esthetique du Mal" is perhaps Stevens' clearest statement on the nature of pain and catastrophe in relation to books and knowledge. The poet writes his letters, listens to the sounds of terror in reality, and does not shrink:

... His book
Made sure of the most correct catastrophe.

Except for us, Vesuvius might consume
In solid fire the utmost earth and know
no pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up
To die). This is part of the sublime
From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,
The total past felt nothing when destroyed. (I, 14-21)

Unlike Wordsworth's stone/book and Borges's book of sand, Stevens' book cannot be lost in a dream or in a library. It has to accept reality: "things as they are." Scholars who people Stevens' poetry, and who are most of the time Stevens himself, feel afraid, in the same way as Wordsworth or Borges do, but they do not shrink, as we are told in "The Auroras of Autumn":

... He opens the door of his house
On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid. (vi, 21-24)

What the scholar sees is a natural phenomenon, the Aurora Borealis, which is part of an awesome reality potentially threatening the work he is producing under the candlelight, threatening the work by simply evading the artist and rising far above the work, like the moon in "Esthetique du Mal" which rises beyond the poet's meditation as "part of supremacy always above him" (ii, 31). In that supremacy there appears the specter of an infinity which terrifies by threatening to engulf humans and their output in a flood of indifference and oblivion.

The specter of infinity that Stevens realized and accepted had been announced with a great deal of anxiety towards the end of the Nineteenth century. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche's madman announced the death of God, accompanied by these deeply unsettling questions: "Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?" (*The Portable Nietzsche*, 95). This very anxiety was behind Wordsworth's earlier announcement in the

"Prospectus" to this partially realized epic "The Recluse," that "I must tread on shadowy ground" (Works, 590), on the ground of universal uncertainty that is. And in few other places in Wordsworth's poetry do the poet's worries about the consequences of treading on those shadowy grounds appear more clearly than in the dream of the Arab discussed above. His narrative of the dream is a seminal text which, through the imagination/ reality conflict, shows the Romantic poet struggling against the terrifying implications of a solipsistic imagination surviving in an inhuman and godless universe.

As this same universe continues to engulf a twentieth-century fiction writer such as Borges, the response to its impact changes mainly in the realization of its worrying consequences. The nightmare comes 'true', and the suspension of disbelief gives way to heightened self-consciousness which hardly leaves anything uncovered. Thus the latent worries are exposed, and the literary form used to articulate that exposition is based on the transformation of what is familiar, into a fantasy of terrifying labyrinths. And it is this labyrinth, as we have seen, that the third writer in this series, Wallace Stevens, accepts with an astonishing serenity. Stevens, writes Frank Kermode, "was capable of a fair degree of rapture at the poetic possibilities opened up by the death of God" (84).

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