

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Macedonio Fernández and Jorge Luis Borges

Jorge Luis Borges loses no opportunity to show admiration for his predecessor. Even in a recent film for which he wrote the script, Borges reserves for Macedonio a leading role: "The central character is based upon a friend of mine named Fernández; a humorist, but a metaphysical humorist."¹

No doubt it is this aspect of Fernández's life and work which most captivated Borges. Fernández belonged to the generation of Borges's father. They first met when Fernández was awaiting the return of Borges's family from Europe in 1921, at the port. Fernández himself was returning from Paraguay where he had founded an anarcho-Christian community that had failed for unknown reasons.² From that day on, Borges was to encounter Fernández regularly until the latter's death in 1953.

The Fernández he liked was more the man than the writer. This Borges confessed in an interview with Victoria Ocampo:

I remember Macedonio Fernández—one of the persons who most impressed me in my life, less for his written work, which I find now a bit tangled and inextricable, than for his dialogues—; Macedonio Fernández was the best talker I ever met, and—what seems incompatible—also the most laconic. One could spend two or three hours with him. Macedonio would make two or three remarks in low voice, and, for reasons of modesty, in an inquiring tone, and these three or four questions of Macedonio Fernández's were then shining in the memory, and would remain forever in our minds.³

In the available work of Macedonio Fernández we find few allusions to Borges other than a very interesting "letter" contained in *Papeles de Recienvenido*.⁴ Despite its brevity, it is nevertheless a jewel of humor which deserves to be analyzed.

Fernández begins by telling Borges that he will visit him and remain for dinner, if this is an inconvenience, (and not the opposite) which, besides denoting a certain familiarity, shows that Fernández's humor proceeds by antithesis. They are supposed to work together, but Fernández is more likely to be willing to dine than to work. Fernández adds that he is sorry for not having visited him the night before, confessing that he was so absent-minded that while walking to his destination he perceived that he had remained at home. He says that these distractions are a shame, but that sometimes he even forgets to be ashamed. He is also worried about the letter he wrote Borges the previous day. He had put it into a stamped envelope and put the contents in his pocket. He suspects that, lacking the address, one more letter is lost. Fernández suggests that the best solution would be to have his correspondents come to his house to read the letters addressed to them.

As paradoxical as this humor may be, it is the kind which not only Borges but, later, even Cortázar employed in some of his narrations. One is reminded of Homer's absentmindedness in "El Inmortal," by Borges, or of some of the *Historias de Cronopios y Famas* by Cortázar. The nature of these stories is varied, but an evident unifying element is the denial of common sense, the overturn of logic. In his writings, Fernández plays with the obvious, with banal objects or situations of everyday life: sugar bowls which do not pour sugar, elevator buttons that when pushed stop at the wrong floor, flights of stairs with irregular steps. Refuting common logic, Fernández introduces into reality an element of uncertainty, of jest, and sometimes a bit of madness. He resorts also to fantasies, as in the case when an appointment is missed because the street has disappeared. This aspect may have influenced Bioy-Casares's imaginary universe. From Macedonio Fernández began, in fact, several paths which invaded contemporary Argentine literature. We could describe Buenos Aires as a labyrinth created by Borges, in which walk "Cronopios" and "Famas" (the imaginary beings of Cortázar) and which in fact does not exist because it has been imagined by Bioy-Casares.

Borges has dedicated a study to Macedonio Fernández⁵ and has given a lecture on him.⁶ It is interesting to compare them, in order to distinguish the role actually played by Fernández from the one that Borges invents for him. A comparison of these two sources is symptomatic. Borges relates in his article the story of the dissertation by Fernández about the qualities of the "alfajores" (typical Argentine pastries) compared to those of the meringues. In his lecture he adds that he offered the delicious "alfajores" to his friends to taste, and when he was certain that he had convinced them of his thesis, he revealed that those pastries were all meringues.

In this same lecture, Borges related perhaps the most celebrated example of Fernández's humor. According to Borges, Fernández, at one point, attempted to convince his friends that he wanted to become President of the Republic. In fact, Fernández opined, this should be easier to do than to open a tobacco shop, which needs a special authorization, difficult to obtain. Statistically, there are fewer candidates for the presidency than men entering the tobacco monopoly; therefore, it should be easier to become a president than a smoke merchant. He convinced his friends with this rationale, but said that he did not want to resort to campaigning or other kinds of political expediency. His propaganda should be subliminal. For months, all Buenos Aires was filled (theaters, cafés, bathrooms, public transportation) with business cards bearing only the inscription of "Macedonio." In a second period, the same was done with the name "Fernández," in such a way that the people would start to associate these two names and wait for a new revelation.

The climatic day arrives. From a fifth floor window, a baby is leaning out and in danger of falling. A crowd gradually assembles and stares helplessly. Suddenly a tall man, well dressed, takes from his pocket a big orange and starts playing with it, launching it higher and higher into the air. Suddenly, the baby jumps as if to catch the orange, which seems to him a nice ball. The unknown man, prepared for this raises his arms and catches the small, light baby . . . suspense . . . the crowd applauds. But after the first reaction, people start thinking and decide that the man is a sadist. He attracted the baby to the fall: without the orange-ball perhaps the baby would have remained on the window sill and somebody could have entered the apartment and saved him with less risk. The crowd starts murmuring and finally a policeman interpellates the unknown gentleman. The latter elegantly presents his business

card on which the name Macedonio Fernández is printed. The guard suddenly stands at attention, bewildered. The crowd, informed, sighs with relief first, then with admiration, then exultation: "Macedonia Fernandez is a hero, he will be President of the Republic!"

Needless to say, the projected collective book that was to have contained this story was never published nor is it cited in the inventory of Fernández's unpublished manuscripts.⁷ Borges mentions, nonchalantly, that an obscure friend may have kept its first two chapters. As a matter of fact, Borges's written version in 1960 of this story is less rich in detail than the oral version of 1966. No allusion is made to the episode of the baby and the orange in the former. But Borges warns the reader in his article: "These anecdotes may seem ridiculous, as in fact they seemed to us at that time, when we divulged them, sometimes exaggerating a little . . ."⁸

Here is probably the key: a slight exaggeration. One suspects that Borges is fabricating on Fernández as he does with everything and everybody. Let us not forget that Borges is the author of *Manual de Zoología Fantástica*, in which he invents imaginary animals but makes them credible by accumulating all kinds of scientific data and properties for each one of them. Later he published also *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios*; besides, many of the characters in his tales are presented as if they were historical persons, and it is sometimes arduous to distinguish what in them is real and what is legend.

The exegesis of Macedonio Fernández is still very scarce, and mostly based on Borges's portraits. At this point, it is impossible to accomplish a scholarly research on his actual role in Argentinian letters, but one should not forget that the figure of the *payador* is typically Argentinian, and that oral literature and oral tradition are very much alive there. The debt of Borges to Macedonio is, therefore, still difficult to ascertain. Only suppositions are possible. One point in favor of Borges's characterization is that Fernández was really a very intuitive kind of person and writer. His culture was deliberately limited and he used to read only some authors, such as Twain and Spencer, the former for his humor and the latter for his social ideas. His public life was very discreet: he was a lawyer without clients and a writer without readers, as he used to say. His five published books, only one of which has been reprinted a few times, distinguish themselves by their voluntary lack of organization: letters, short stories, some polemics. The only thread crossing them all is humor.

Even when Macedonio writes, he talks. His sentences are rather incoherent, mostly oneiric (even though it is doubtful that he had read the surrealists). There is, as later in Cortazar, an abundance of parentheses. The parenthesis is rarely a comment, but mostly a contradiction of what is affirmed out of brackets, or a pun. Paradox is frequent, as in the several articles for an *Oral Review*, and a rejection of written culture is recurrent in Fernández's works. Books, he said, are useless: "Bookstores would save us time and fatigue if they sold some books already read. Even better, they could sell a good book already returned from lending friends."⁹

Fernández cultivates humor as he cultivates literature: in a mystical way. Not that he believed very much in the power of literature, at least not his. But he was diligently devoted to humor *and* literature or humor *in* literature. Borges, as we saw, calls him a metaphysical humorist. What does this metaphysics lead to? Towards Nothingness. Fernández is obsessed by the problem of

Nothingness.¹⁰ In this Nothingness everything loses its value. There is no more contradiction between reality and imagination than there is between life and death. The anxiety of death common to all metaphysical thinkers does not become anguish in Fernández's world. Borges states that the idea of suicide was frequently present in their Saturday discussions, and that: "Well! I don't remember exactly if we committed suicide or not, that afternoon,"¹¹ which echoes this thought of Macedonio Fernández: "I am not dead; because as I always go around with a small notebook and a pencil to note everything, if this had happened to me I would have annotated it."¹²

As a matter of fact, Fernández did not believe in death, but in the immortality of soul. Borges felt himself in harmony with Fernández's thought when, at his funeral, he went walking to the cemetery telling jokes along the road. Shall we believe Borges when he says that Fernández thought intensively the essential things, and that even if he did not invent anything, he has been the first Argentinian to learn how to think?

Pietro Ferrua
Lewis and Clark College

NOTES

¹Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*, (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 7. The film mentioned is *La Invasión* by Hugo Santiago, released in Argentina in 1969. Despite its importance, this film is not projected in the United States, nor is it announced in film catalogues.

²Macedonia Fernández had developed a kind of mystical anarchism tempered by Spencerian social ideas. His son reveals that he didn't belong to any formal organization (anarchists were fairly strong in unions at that time and operated two daily newspapers in Buenos Aires) but followed a sort of individualism à la Spencer and favored a society in which the state, before disappearing, would have the least power. See: Adolfo de Obieta, ed., *Papeles de Macedonio Fernández* (Buenos Aires: C.E.D.A.L., 1966).

³Victoria Ocampo, *Dialogo con Borges* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1969), pp. 46-48; the translation is mine.

⁴Macedonio Fernández, *Papeles de Recienvenido* (Buenos Aires: C.E.D.A.L., 1967), pp. 90-91. Fernández's other works are *No toda es vigilia la de ojos abiertos* (Buenos Aires: C.E.D.A.L., 1968); *Una novela que comienza* (Chile, 1941); *Continuación de la Nada* (1944); *Poemas* (México: 1953).

⁵Jorge Luis Borges, "Macedonio Fernández," transl. Roger Caillois, *L'Herne*, 4, 1964, pp. 65-70.

⁶Lecture given at the Ateneo Cultural "Inquietud" in Remedios de Escalada, province of Buenos Aires, on Friday, March 25, 1966.

⁷See: Adolfo de Obieta, ed., *Papeles de Macedonio Fernández*, pp. 8-9.

⁸*L'Herne*, p. 67, note 5.

⁹Macedonio Fernández, *Papeles de Recienvenido*, p. 62.

¹⁰See Macedonio Fernández, *Papeles de Recienvenido*, p. 113.

¹¹Lecture on Macedonio Fernández, March 25, 1966.

¹²Macedonio Fernández, *Papeles de Recienvenido*, p. 75.