

*Borges and I: A Critical Reflection*

The problem of identity is a philosophical conundrum that has plagued the world of philosophy for ages. Interestingly, however, it has not plagued the Christian religion. But why is this so? Is it simply because the Christian assumes that men have selves and do not halve them-selves? Or is there a clearly articulated Christian conception of man that avoids this problem altogether? The commonplace answer is the first; however, the actual answer is the second. Christianity teaches that while man is a moral agent, one who thinks according to the dispositions of his soul, and who acts in accordance with his thoughts, but who cannot, for all that, know with omniscience the depths of his own heart (i.e. mind). Significantly, therefore, it is not man who determines who he is, or who knows himself, for both of these are impossible. In passing, we may note x or y about ourselves, but who are we? In any given hypothetical world, we are actors, acting morally or immorally. The question of morality, of course, is not being dealt with here fully, but it does come into the picture. For whatever I am, I am in relation to some other self, even my own self. Hence, there is no escape from the self, although our knowledge of our self or selves, as it were, may be a nigh impossible thing to attain.

Borges' essay *Borges and I*, is a visceral representation of the fact that man *is* always morally responsible, regardless of whether or not he knows himself. What happens to man, moreover, is what *happens to him*. Borges puts it this way: "The other one, called Borges, is the one things happen to." This opening line is set in contrast to his present recording/record of what he (the author) *is* doing, *does*, and *will* do. "*I* walk," he says of himself; but "Borges" "...has *achieved* some valid pages..." In this dichotomization of the self, there is an ambiguity as to who is "real" or merely a guise, or a mask worn in the theater of existence, as the last line declares: "I do not know which of us has written this page." Yet the fact remains that the page has been written by one or the other, or perhaps both. And it is precisely in the space of experience that these two halves meet. Note Borges' language:

It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; *I live, I let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me.*

Borges presents himself as self and author, but he does not abdicate his moral responsibility thereby; instead, he increases it by acknowledging that as one half of himself (the "I") he is morally responsible to go on living *so that* Borges may write, and as the other half of himself ("Borges") he is responsible for *how* he deals with the "I."

There is no absence of identity, so to speak, but a multiplication of the identities with which one individual is

identified. Borges is himself and an-author, and at times these conflict with one another. Nevertheless, they exist side by side, and they reflect on one another's actions. "Borges" contrives literature; "the I" experiences the world, acts in it, and actively gives himself over to the-author so that the author may live. What arises in this internal self-author dialectic is the clear depiction of conflicting moral dispositions: On the one hand, "the I" wants to experience the world and accurately present it/record it for the other; on the other hand, paradoxically, "Borges" "falsifies" and "magnifies" things (i.e. events, persons, facts, etc). With regret "the I" reflects on what "Borges" *has done*, actions which are constitutive of *his* identity. He is an exaggerator, a falsifier, a teller of tales – in the most negative sense of the phrase.

And for what purpose does "Borges" treat "the I" in this way? For the sake of preserving "the I." Borges desires to save "the I," but "the I" is "destined to perish." All that "the I" is, is (a.)individually inaccessible and (b.)publically inaccessible. Hence, *Borges and I*, although it gives sinews and flesh to the internal self-author dialectic, does not do away with the self, for this is precisely *what* the self *is*: A moral agent in relation to others, even his own "self."