

Jorge Luis Borges and WJ

by Jaime Nubiola

The year of the centennial of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges is probably the right time to exhume one of the links that this universal writer had with William James. In 1945, Emecé, a publisher from Buenos Aires, printed a Spanish translation of William James's book *Pragmatism*, with a foreword by Jorge Luis Borges. The book had a limited distribution. Years later, for unknown reasons, Borges refused to include that foreword in his compilation of prefaces.

The foreword, under the title *Nota preliminar (Preliminary Note)*, was scarcely four pages long, and was followed by a short biography of James and a list of his works. In this text Borges described James as an "admirable writer"¹ to the point that he was able to make attractive such a reasonable way of thinking as the pragmatism of the first two decades of our century, with "halfway solutions" and "quiet hypothesis". I want to excerpt two paragraphs from that foreword, the first and the last.

Coleridge observes that all men are born Aristotelians or Platonists. The latter feel that ideas are realities: the former, that they are generalizations. For the latter, language is nothing but a system of arbitrary symbols: for the former, it is the map of the universe. The Platonist knows that the universe is somehow a cosmos, an order; that order, for the Aristotelian, can be an error or a fiction of our partial knowledge. Across the latitudes and the epochs, the two immortal antagonists change their name and language: one is Parmenides, Plato, Anselm, Leibnitz, Kant, Francis Bradley; the other, Heraclitus, Aristotle, Roscelin, Locke, Hume, William James. (...) From 1889, this lucid tradition is enriched with William James. Like Bergson, he fights against positivism and against idealist monism. He advocates, like Bergson, in favor of immortality and freedom.²

The lucidity of the analysis of the history of philosophy contained in this paragraph —whose first part appears also in his *El ruiseñor de Keats*³— is truly impressive. In that ancient controversy Borges gives an undeniable advantage to the Platonists because "the conjectures that they propound are singular, incredi-

ble, and unforgettable". Those who battle against them run the risk of appearing to be representatives of mere, insipid common sense, but James avoided brilliantly that danger: he was, Borges writes, as astonishing as the Hegelians Bradley or Royce, but much more readable: "Like Schopenhauer, like Hume, like Berkeley, like Descartes, James was an admirable writer."

Nevertheless, these praises do not lessen the conviction of the reader that Borges places himself in the other stream. The last paragraph is a solid ground for this conviction:

The Universe of the materialists suggests an infinite sleepless fabric; the one of the Hegelians a circular labyrinth of vain mirrors, jail of a person who believes to be many, or of many who believe to be one.

while the Universe of James is a river that grows incessantly. "Pragmatism —it is said at the end of the *Nota preliminar*— does not want to restrict or to lessen the richness of the world; it wants to grow as the world"⁴.

What is the reason for this fundamental discrepancy between Borges and James? It seems to me that, following William James, it can be traced back to a basic difference of opposite temperaments or types of mental make-up: while a radical metaphysical pessimism nourishes all the Borgesian work, the work of James and with it all the American pragmatism is nourished by a radical metaphysical optimism.

Perhaps Borges, as one of the Immortals, could now raise up his voice and answer to me that no, that he was not a pessimist, but merely a well-informed optimist. With great respect, I would try to reply to him in turn that his skepticism in a philosopher would be an abdication of our personal responsibility towards humankind and its future.

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1. J. L. Borges, "Nota preliminar", en W. James, *Pragmatismo. Un nombre nuevo para algunos viejos modos de pensar*, Emecé, Buenos Aires, 1945, p. 10.

2. J. L. Borges, "Nota preliminar", p. 10.

3. J. L. Borges, *Other Inquisitions (1937-1952)*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964, p. 123.

4. J. L. Borges, "Nota preliminar", p. 12.