

Literary Writing and Personal Identity in Borges and Pessoa

Shlomy Mualem
Bar Ilan University, Israel

Abstract

In a famous passage in “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes describes the writing process as embodying the disintegration of the author’s personal identity: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (142).¹ This postmodern position is deeply rooted in classical Greek thought, in particular Plato’s harsh critique of poetic inspiration, conceived as “holy madness.” Is this equation valid, however? Does writing necessarily serve as the ultimate act of self-negation? This essay seeks to elucidate Jorge Luis Borges’ and Fernando Pessoa’s alternative views of authorial subjectivity. Borges and Pessoa – arguably two of the greatest writers of the twentieth century – conceive the interplay between writing and self-identity in rather complex fashion. Pessoa’s term “heteronym” relates to the way in which an author’s subjectivity abruptly gives way to an idiosyncratic identity who composes the poem. This recalls the Kabbalistic idea of God’s contraction (*tzimzum*), the creator preserving his or her passive self-identity while giving birth to other beings from his or her inner void. Discussing Shakespeare and Whitman, Borges proposes that the act of writing is a form of self-creation in which the writer begets a unique narrative identity out of himself or herself that, transfigured, is simultaneously both the same and the other.

Keywords: Jorge Luis Borges, comparative literature, heteronym, literary theory, personal identity, Fernando Pessoa, self-creation

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of Barthes’ treatise and its reception, see Seymour, 2017.

Subjectivity and Personal Identity in Borges

In his essay “On the Nothingness of Personality” (1922), Borges appears to take an uncompromisingly nihilistic attitude towards this issue in his reading of Buddhist works, Schopenhauer, Berkeley, and David Hume. He announces his intention right from the outset: “I propose to prove that personality is a mirage maintained by conceit and custom, without a metaphysical foundation of visceral reality” (*SNF*, p. 3). It comes as no surprise that in “A New Refutation of Time” (1947) he starts off by rebutting the I in Hume’s philosophy – to which he adds the possibility of refuting linear time. He concludes his discussion, however, with the baffling statement:

*And yet, and yet ... Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny ... is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges.*²

Rather than categorically denying identity à la Hume or adopting the Buddhist metaphysical concept of the non-self,³ Borges worries at the question of subjectivity throughout his works, giving time a central place in every treatment of it, as reflected in this passage. While not propounding a systematic theory of time and subjectivity, his writings reveal much regarding his fascination with these issues. Thus, in his essay “Time” (1978) he recalls one of his favorite *SNF*:

We are always like Heraclitus watching himself reflected in the river and thinking that the river is not the same because its water flow and that he is not the same Heraclitus because he had been so many people since he saw himself in the river the last time. The meaning of this is that we are something that changes and something permanent. We are essentially something mysterious ... This is a problem we have never been able to solve: the problem of identity subject to changes. Perhaps the word “change” is sufficient. Because if we speak of a change in something, we are not saying that it has been replaced by something else ... The intention is that this is the idea of the permanent within the transient. (*OC*, 3:205)⁴

The tension of time-bound subjectivity thus lies in the dialectic of permanence and transience. As is his wont, Borges treats these irresolvable philosophical conundrums via the spinning of fantastical stories – in a type of *Gedankenexperiment*.

Thus, for instance, in “The Other” (1975) Borges addresses the issue of the continuous identity of the self by adducing a fantastical encounter engendered by the intersection of past and present – the “wrinkle in time.” In February 1969, the protagonist – called “Borges” – sits on a bench by the banks of the Charles River in Cambridge, MA. The flowing water inevitably

² <http://heavysideindustries.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/borges-a-new-refutation-of-time.pdf>

³ “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception” (Hume, *Treatise*, 1.4.6.3). For a phenomenological analysis of the anātman or anatta, see Rāhula, 1974, pp. 51–67.

⁴ All English translations from *Obras Completas* are mine.

prompts him to think of “time ... Heraclitus’ ancient image” (*OC*, 3:11). A young stranger sits down on the bench next to him, whose voice, when they strike up a conversation, Borges uncannily recognizes as his own. Learning that he is living at his old address in Geneva, he declares: “In that case, your name is Jorge Luis Borges. I too am Jorge Luis Borges. We are in 1969, in the city of Cambridge.” The younger man demurs: “‘No,’ he answered in my own, slightly distant, voice, ‘I am here in Geneva, on a bench, a few steps from the Rhône.’ Then, after a moment, he went on: ‘It is odd that we look so much alike, but you are much older than I, and you have gray hair’” (*OC*, 2:12).

The disturbing question arising from this meeting is whether or not the old man is identical to his young self. Borges answers dialectically and ambivalently – both yes and no. In the afterward to the story he thus observes that “My duty was to ensure that the interlocutors were different enough from each other to be two, yet similar enough to each other to be one” (*CF*, p. 484).

Borges primarily approaches the enigma of personal identity, however, in the context of what he calls “literary fate,” investigating the delicate balance between creative writing and the author’s subjective personality – as might be expected from a man who has devoted his entire life to reading and writing. After all, as he attests in his “Autobiographical Essay” (1987), when he was young the whole family tacitly assumed that he would become a writer, the “central event of his childhood” being his self-quarantining in his father’s extensive library. Here, identity-formation is seamlessly interwoven with literature, writing, and authorship – a link that recurs throughout his fictional and poetic *oeuvre*.⁵

In order to explore the fundamental features of Borges’ perception and treatment of the tangled writing/personal identity link, I shall compare below his attitude with that of the person who, perhaps more than any other in the modern era, is identified with this issue: the twentieth century preeminent Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, responsible for introducing the term “heteronym” into modern vocabulary.

Created Figures

The central difficulty in interpreting Fernando Pessoa’s poetry derives not only from the fact that he is a very prolific and multifaceted author who employs diverse literary styles and fine Portuguese nuances (“My one, true homeland”), but, above all, from his peculiar tendency to create other poets and writers – an entire literary universe – whom he uncannily regards as the real authors of most of his texts. Frequently, the created figures clash with one another, arguing and reconciling; in a particularly odd case, one composes a moving elegy for another upon his death. Most significantly, each possesses his own artistic preferences and idiosyncratic literary styles that differ, so Pessoa insists, from his own – namely, from the few texts he published under his own name.

Pessoa thus deliberately transformed himself into what he calls a *drama em gente* – drama of people – in an ironical interpretation of his name, which derives from the Latin *persona*. This was a mask worn by an actor through which he projected his voice on the stage: *per-sonare*. Hereby, Pessoa stressed what he liked to call the “alterity” of these figures – namely, their

⁵ For a detailed and illuminating study of the function and nature of subjectivity in Borges’ writings, see Nahson, 2000, Chap. 3.

essential difference from his own personality. As he wrote in the introduction to one of the books he published under his own name:

The human author of these books has no personality of his own. Whenever he feels a personality well up inside, he quickly realizes that this new being, though similar, is distinct from him – an intellectual son, perhaps, with inherited characteristics, but also with differences that make him someone else. (Zenith, 2021, p. 2)

This passage is complex – clearly not adducing a one-dimensional process of the erasure of subjectivity when entering language, à la Ronald Barthes’ “Death of the Author” (1967). In a certain sense, it signifies the precise opposite. At the point of departure – the putting of pen to paper – the author has no self-identity. Following Pessoa’s own lead, we may refer to this as “depersonalization” (though not, of course, in the sense this term carries in the psychoanalytic context). While this phenomenon must still be investigated, we may observe at this stage that, while writing, Pessoa experiences a vivid *presence* of a personality that somehow rises up and emerges from within him.

Pessoa identifies this peculiar presence as someone essentially other than himself, an entity that differs from his own subjectivity – thus transpiring to possess a separate individual sense of subjective self. The identification of this entity as “other” and “separate” indicates, both logically and psychologically, that Pessoa necessarily retains some awareness of his own personal identity, the latter serving as a point of reference for establishing the otherness of the heteronym. In other words, no one can identify another being as other than oneself unless one harbors a certain amount of awareness of his or her own personal subjectivity.

Referring to these as his “intellectual sons,” these images thus embody the tension between identity and alterity within the narrator’s subjectivity. Although the “son” exemplifies the attributes he inherits from his “father” – Pessoa himself – he is, at the same time, someone entirely different. Pessoa refers to this identity-separation tension that appears during the act of writing as an emergence of the “heteronym.” Of the dozens of heteronyms he created, three are of note due to their prominence in his universe: Alberto Caeiro – a naturalist and spiritual teacher who guides, among other disciples, Pessoa himself; the marine engineer Álvaro de Campos; and the latent pagan, Dr Ricardo Reis.

Pessoa’s work has inspired and intrigued generations of scholars, and special critical attention was given to the phenomenon of the heteronym.⁶ Generally speaking, the study of the heteronyms centers around the fundamental question of personal identity. Two interlocking themes are most dominant here: the interplay between creator (Pessoa) and literary creations (heteronyms), and the implications of these interactions on the boundaries of personal identity

⁶ To name a few, Jacinto do Prado Coelho has published a pioneering study on the poet’s oeuvre, *Diversidade e Unidade em Fernando Pessoa*, back in 1949. Years later, with the cooperation of Georg Rudolf Lind, he went on to publish a collection of Pessoa’s personal papers, *Páginas de estética e de teoria e crítica literárias*, in 1966. João Gaspar Simões publishes the first biography of the poet, *Vida e obra de Fernando Pessoa: História de uma geração*, in 1951. Jorge de Sena published a noteworthy study regarding the Pessoa heteronyms, *Fernando Pessoa & C^a Heterónima*, in 1982. Among the studies assisting in divulging Pessoa’s work beyond the borders of Portugal stand out Angel Crespo’s Spanish translation of *The Book of Disquiet* in 1984 and his following critiques on the poet’s life and work. Also notable is Richard Zenith’s contribution to the scholarly literature of Pessoa’s work. His work has exposed the poet and his heteronyms to generations of English-speaking readers, both through various English translations (the most prominent of which is *The Book of Disquiet*) and through his erudite literary studies, led by Pessoa’s most recent and in-depth biography published in 2021.

and authorship. A secondary focus of study developed around Pessoa's best known literary work, *The Book of Disquiet*, attributed to the semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares.

As Pessoa explains, the term "heteronym" is comprised of the Greek nouns *hetero* (other) and *onoma* (name). It thus highlights the strange alterity of heteronymic identity. With regard to its theoretical significance, however, the heteronym appears to constitute a Pessoaan variation on the term "pseudonym" – literally a "false name." A short comparison of these terms will be useful for our investigation. Writers from antiquity through to the present have employed pseudonyms to conceal their identity for several reasons.⁷ The pseudonym is not a simple pseudo epigraphical phenomenon, however. In precisely the same way as the theatre actor's identity behind the mask is known, so the reader is usually well aware of the person who stands behind the author's pseudonym. The split between the writer and his or her pseudonym serves pedagogic or hermeneutical goals, the pseudonym forming part of a discrete system of allusions which signs the writer sends to the reader.

With heteronyms, however, the drama plays out between the writer and himself, between his or her self-identity and other, alien identities emerging from the depth of it. What essential relationship do they possess with the writer's own subjectivity? This is a key question in our discussion. Pessoa remarks that they bear a relationship similar to that between father and son; However, we still need to clarify how exactly he perceives this unique interaction between the author and his heteronymous figure. In fact, he spreads some remarks and explanations regarding this author/heteronym relationship in various texts that have come out under his hand. However, there is a particular Pessoaan text which is of special importance to us, as it stands out in its most comprehensive treatment of the subject. This text will now stand in our spotlight.

In a well-known letter he sent at the end of his life to the young poet Adolfo Monteiro, Pessoa rarely refers to the intimate mechanism of creating the most prominent figures of his heteronyms – namely, Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reiss, and Álvaro de Campos (Zenith, 2021, pp. 251–261). Here we may find a key to the obscure heteronymical riddle. He initially adopts a seemingly psychiatric approach, asserting that "My heteronyms have their origin in a deep-seated form of hysteria ... [a] relentless organic tendency to depersonalization and simulation" (p. 254).

Fortunately, he continues, he has internalized this tendency mentally, the hysterical symptoms thus only erupting inside him. Hysteria primarily affecting the inner psyche in men, "it all ends in silence and poetry" (Zenith, 2021, p. 254). He then proceeds to describe how, like many other children, he had imaginary friends who accompanied him through his lonely childhood. Experiencing these with an inexplicable intensity, as though they truly existed in reality, he wittily remarks: "I can't be sure, of course, if they really existed, or if it's me who doesn't exist. In this matter, as in any other, we shouldn't be dogmatic" (Zenith, 2021, p. 254).

Although his tone is quite ironic here, an ontological hesitation relating to the question of the reality of identity seems to underlie this statement. On the one hand, he experienced imaginary figures in lucid clarity, as reality itself; on the other, he remains uncertain as to which are really real – his own self or the heteronyms. This dialectical tension increases when he addresses the heart of the matter – the heteronyms' abrupt emergence during the act of writing. Ricardo Reis,

⁷ A subtle philosophical usage of this pseudonymical strategy appears, for instance, in some of Kierkegaard's writings, each of which published under different name that alludes to its inner meaning (as in the case of Johannes de silentio, "author" of Fear and Trembling).

for example, assumed form in him as a “hazy, shadowy portrait of the person who wrote those verses”: “Unbeknownst to me, Ricardo Reis had been born” (p. 256).

While Reis’ appearance is vague and nebulous, Alvaro de Campos – the most striking and intriguing of all the Pessoa heteronyms, responsible for the *Keeper of the Sheep* poetic cycle and the “person” Pessoa calls *meu mestre* (“my master”) – emanates in a quite different form:

A year and a half or two years later, it one day occurred to me to play a joke on Sá-Carneiro—to invent a rather complicated bucolic poet whom I would present in some guise of reality that I’ve since forgotten. I spent a few days trying in vain to envision this poet. One day when I’d finally given up—it was March 8th, 1914—I walked over to a high chest of drawers, took a sheet of paper, and began to write standing up, as I do whenever I can. And I wrote thirty-some poems at once, in a kind of ecstasy I’m unable to describe. It was the triumphal day of my life, and I can never have another one like it. I began with a title, “The Keeper of Sheep”. This was followed by the appearance in me of someone whom I instantly named Alberto Caeiro. Excuse the absurdity of this statement: my master had appeared in me. That was what I immediately felt, and so strong was the feeling that, as soon as those thirty-odd poems were written, I grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and wrote, again all at once, the six poems that constitute “Slanting Rain,” by Fernando Pessoa. All at once and with total concentration ... It was the return of Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro to Fernando Pessoa himself. Or rather, it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his nonexistence as Alberto Caeiro. Once Alberto Caeiro had appeared, I instinctively and subconsciously tried to find disciples for him. (Zenith, 2021, p. 256)

As a matter of fact, the heteronyms always manifest themselves during the act of writing – what Pessoa perceives as the “ecstasy” of literary creation. This fact is essential for their formation as part of the creation of the text, author and artefact materializing simultaneously. Hereby occurs the dramatic “appearance in me of someone whom I instantly named Alberto Caeiro”: the other persona emerges from the depth of subjectivity and takes form as a strange but rather solid ontological entity. As an observer, Pessoa immediately gives it a name. The strangeness and paradoxical strength of the dialectic is clearly expressed in the following baffling statement: “my master had appeared in me.” This can be understood in logical terms as an example of Hofstadter’s “strange loop” (2007) – a linear logical move that transpires to be circular, the created entity lying both within and without that which created it, the creator similarly being both its producer and its outcome.

The appearance of this heteronym immediately prompts Pessoa to take another sheet of paper and write his own song cycle. What is the significance of this response? Pessoa tells us that “it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his nonexistence as Alberto Caeiro.” Here, the dialectical tension that erupts between the identities reaches its climax, each fighting for its own existence – one rising as the other fades, one withdrawing when the other appears, as in Jacob’s struggle with Esau.⁸

The heteronyms thus embody a circumstance in which one identity creates another within it, separate yet closely and fiercely interacting. In a certain sense, the two identities constitute a form of circular ontological dialectic in which existence and non-existence, activity and

⁸ “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other” (Gen 25:23).

passivity, exterior and interior, blend and merge, comprising one another à la the Chinese concept of yin-yang. Unlike Barthes' absolute effacement of one-dimensional subjectivity and radical proclamation of "the death of the author," Pessoa – creating as a separate persona – does not expunge himself altogether.

In the continuation of the letter, he sums up his subtle attitude towards his "cosmos" of heteronyms:

And so I created a nonexistent coterie, placing it all in a framework of reality. I ascertained the influences at work and the friendships between them, I listened in myself to their discussions and divergent points of view, and in all of this it seems that I, who created them all, was the one who was least there. It seems that it all went on without me. And thus it seems to go on still.

Pessoa signifies himself here as an empty space, a sort of cosmic zone, peopled with figures and characters. Although he appears to take an active part in this creative event, he then immediately assumes the role of pure observer (what Schopenhauer calls "a clear mirror" or "will-less pure subject" [1909, 1.1.34]), everything happening within him without being initiated by him. Herein, the biblical omnipotence of the "Creator of all" retreats into a passive space within which things seem to "happen by themselves."

I suggest that this theologically-oriented Pessoaan depiction, seen from an interdisciplinary perspective, is reminiscent of Lurianic Kabbalistic ideas regarding the creation of the world. According to this view, in order to make room for the chain of worlds, God had to "contract" into Himself (*tzimtzum*), creating a sort of an empty "womb" for the birth of a separate universe (Scholem, 1971, pp. 37–48). This revolutionary idea of Lurianic Kabbalah assumes that the dialectical movement of creation and evacuation, activity and passivity, was the only way in which the world could have emerged as an "Other" – not part of God but nevertheless created within and out of Him. And so it is dramatically depicted in Rabbi Chaim Vital's *Etz Chaim*:

Prior to Creation, there was only the Infinite Divine Light (*Or Ein Sof*) filling all existence. When it arose in G-d's Will to create worlds and emanate the emanated [...] He contracted (*tzimtzum*) Himself in the point at the center, in the very center of His light. He restricted that light, distancing it to the sides surrounding the central point, so that there remained a void, a hollow empty space, away from the central point [...] After this contraction [...] He drew down from the Infinite Divine Light a single straight line [of light] from His light surrounding [the void] from above to below [into the void], and it chained down descending into that void. [...] In the space of that void He emanated, created, formed and made all the worlds.⁹

Pessoa, who refers to himself as a "rationalist mystic" and was acquainted with Kabbalistic ideas, presents us with a similar mechanism of narrative contraction, subjective identity withdrawing in order to create a space in which the heteronyms could create themselves within and produce their own artefacts– giving birth to the Pessoaan universe.¹⁰

⁹ Etz Chaim, Heichal A"K, anaf 2.

(https://web.archive.org/web/20050124202729/http://www.kabbalaonline.org/Safedteachings/sfari/Ari_Basics_2_1st_Constriction.asp).

¹⁰ Pessoa's desire to decipher the mysteries of the universe has aroused his deep interest in esotericism, which played an essential role in the poet's thought and work. His study of occultism (Pessoa appeared to have studied and practiced astrology, alchemy, Gnosticism, and theosophy) also led him to the gates of Jewish mysticism,

Summarizing the theoretical aspects of the Pessoaan heteronyms, we may say that the “other” signifies for him first and foremost the alterity of the separate figure who forms himself within the author’s subjective personality, as the latter engages in the act of writing. In Heideggerian terms (2008), this might be formulated as an act of writing that enables the development of an open space (*Lichtung*) in the depths of the writing subject’s personality, whence burst forth – representing themselves in their individual presence – particular entities that actually write the text. This sharply diverges from the Barthesian notion of the “death of the author” because, in contrast to the author’s absolute effacement and annihilation of subjectivity when he or she enters language and writes, it relates to the birth of alternative identities whose alterity derives from their intricate, dialectical relation to the still-existing personal identity of the writer.

The heteronym also differs from the pseudonym, whose firm subjective identity is merely hidden behind a mask – the latter becoming the negative mirror-image of the creator in the case of ironic writing. The mask being directed towards the reader and the free space of interpretation, the reader identifies the personality lying behind it as well as the gap between them. Hereby, the essential element of the construction of the text’s meaning emerges. In contrast, the heteronym acts in the introversive space between the creator and his creation, opening up a sort of liminal space between them, thus allowing for a dizzying plethora of other personas rather than a single mask covering (and intensifying to a certain degree) his or her own face.

The heteronym is thus informed by the logical paradox of the “strange loop” in which the creator and the created stand in a paradoxical circular relationship. Subjective identity functions here as a vacuum that recedes into itself during a kabbalistic-like act of *tzimtzum*, the other identities bursting forth out of it and forming independent entities, the temporary emptiness of subjectivity making room for the emergence of other, self-sustaining entities. In terms of ontological presence, this forms a dynamically and perpetually-created dialectic tension between generative subjective identity and the life-assuming heteronyms. While the writing subject is the prerequisite for this creative process, the withdrawal and evacuation of self-identity allows the heteronyms to appear and create their own works.

The emptying-out of self-identity and voiding of subjectivity can thus be understood as a form of “creative effacement” that resembles the Kabbalistic idea of *tzimtzum*, Romantic theories of inspiration, and Zen Buddhist notion of subjectivity. Rather than the complete deconstruction of subjectivity – the death of the author in his entirety – it is a *temporary and functional* creative withdrawal of personality into itself as the precondition for the creation of separate identities. In a certain sense, the subject who begets the heteronym – or more accurately, lets it be formed within him or herself – plays the role of passive space, out of which his or her “narrative sons” are born and proceed to produce their own artwork.

This Kabbalistic-like stance is clearly reflected in one of the most eloquent poems in *The Keeper of Sheep*:

focusing on the Kabbalah. Due to his quite limited knowledge of the Kabbalah, Kabbalistic doctrines appear in his writings circumstantially, usually linked to Freemasonry theories. This affinity led him to declare himself in 1935, the year of his death, loyal to the “secret tradition of Christianity, which has intimate ties with the secret tradition of Israel (holy Kabbalah) and with the hidden essence of Freemasons.”

I write verses in the paper only in my mind,
 I feel a staff in my hands
 And see an outline of myself
 High on a hill,
 Looking down at my flock and seeing my ideas,
 Or looking at my ideas and seeing my flock,
 And vaguely smiling, not understanding what is said,
 Just pretending to understand ...¹¹

Subjectivity

Our present interest here, however, lies less with the heteronym per se, than the subjectivity that generates it from the depths of its void in the act of writing. Borges embodies this issue in the enigmatic figure of William Shakespeare, the riddle of whose creativity is bound up, in his view, with the bard's ability to breathe life into each one of his characters (Mualem, 2012). In his essay "The Enigma of Shakespeare," he appeals to this competence in order to refute the well-known claim that "Shakespeare" was in fact none other than Christopher Marlowe. While only the protagonists are real in Marlowe's writing, all of Shakespeare's characters come to life. This is true even of those who only make a fleeting appearance – such as Yorick, whose sole existence lies in the brief words spoken by Hamlet as he holds the dead jester's skull.¹² Shakespeare thus being the example *par excellence* of infinite creative fecundity, Borges confesses that he tends to think of him "not as a man but as a multitude."

Borges develops this notion in "From Someone to No One" (1950) in light of the Romantic perception of Shakespeare – Hazlitt claiming the bard to be "nothing in himself, and yet he was all that others were, or that could become" and Victor Hugo comparing him to the ocean, "the seedbed of all possible forms" (*SNF*, p. 342). Coleridge went furthest in depicting Shakespeare as embodying the force Spinoza attributed to the divine – the *natura naturans* that creates all creatures and objects.

These ideas all remain within Pessoa's basic structure, in which the author's subjectivity constitutes the formless ontological zero point out of which an endless array of figures emerges. Borges correctly compares them with the negative theologies propounded by such thinkers as John Scotus Erigena, in whose mystical thought *creatio ex nihilo* signifies God as the "nihilistic" source of all creation. Borges refines the view that the author's nihilism produces an infinity – mathematically speaking, an eternal produced by the zero – by asserting: "To be one thing is inexorably not to be all other things; the confused intuition of this truth has induced man to imagine that not to be is more than to be something, and that, in some way, is to be everything" (*SNF*, p. 342).

In both the Borgesian Shakespeare and the Pessoaan heteronyms creative subjectivity is thus nullified in the act of writing, this void giving rise to endless forms. Being in and of itself a formless or a fixed entity, the narrator's subjectivity is ontologically void. The plethora of

¹¹ http://www.umfernandopessoa.com/uploads/1/6/1/3/16136746/gr_eng.pdf (accessed 30.3.17).

¹² "Let me see. (*takes the skull*) Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen?" (*Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 1, page 8).

forms cast out from it as a projection forwards can take shape in the act of writing – in the dizzying multitude of Shakespearean figures and the strange alterity of the Pessoa heteronyms.

Borges's Shakespeare and Pessoa's heteronyms differ strikingly in at least one aspect, however. While Shakespeare's vacuity and depersonalization are permanent states, his self-identity being essentially and perpetually voided, Pessoa's heteronyms are formed by the temporary, functional contraction of personality into itself in order to allow separate entities to take shape and spring forth during the act of writing. In the case of Shakespeare, the disparity is one between absolute ontological effacement; in Pessoa's writing, a functional, dynamic withdrawal of self occurs at the climax of the creative process.¹³

But how does Borges himself relate to the status of the subjective self during the creative process? In a statement made in a lecture given at Texas University, he draws an illuminating link between authorial subjectivity and writing:

Every writer undertakes two quite different works at the same time. One is the particular line he is writing, the particular story he is telling, the particular fable that came to him in a dream, and the other is the image he creates of himself. Perhaps the second task that goes on throughout life is the most important. (Barnstone, 1982, p. 143)

Unlike Shakespeare, this circumstance adduces neither a uni- nor a bi-directional relationship between the writer and his characters – nor even the flourishing of heteronyms from blank subjectivity, as with Pessoa. Here, the move is more encompassing and bold, the author creating a *self-image* via his writing over the course of his life. In other words, his self-image stems from his whole oeuvre. The Archimedean point here is thus not the relationship between the writer and his alien characters; the drama rather unfolds within the author's own subjectivity during the act of writing.

What, then, is the writer's relationship to this weird "image he creates of himself" as he writes? Borges associates this issue above all with the literary experiment of Walt Whitman, whom he regarded as the ideal poetic archetype in his youth.¹⁴ In his early essay "A Note on Walt Whitman" (1932), Borges already hints at the nature of this "experiment" in alluding to the "two Whitmans" – "the amiable, eloquent wild writer, and the poor man of letters" (*OC*, 1:206). One is a hard-up wretch, a barren subject devoted to the writings of Hegel and Emerson, the other the symbol of nascent American democracy. The two antithetical personalities are nonetheless indivisibly connected to one another via the same "great literary experiment." In a lecture delivered at Indiana University, Borges explained that

The central character would be called after the author, Walt Whitman, but he was, firstly, Walt Whitman, the human being, the very unhappy man who wrote *Leaves of Grass*. Then a *magnification, or transmogrification* of that Walt Whitman, who was not the real Walt Whitman at all, or at least not the Whitman his contemporaries knew, but a divine vagabond. (Barnstone, 1982, p. 136 [original italics])

¹³ Here we find in fact two distinct theological orientations. As we have noted, Pessoa's heteronyms recall Lurianic Kabbalistic thought, specifically the notion of God's constriction onto himself [tzimtzum]), while Shakespeare's vacuity resembles John Scotus Erigena's nihilistic mystical idea of God as nothing(ness).

¹⁴ As he puts it in his "Autobiographical Essay": "I thought of Whitman not as a great poet, but as the *only* poet. I thought that all poets the world over had been merely leading up to Whitman" (1987, p. 30).

Whitman the down-and-out human becomes Whitman the divine roamer. The uncertainty in which the meaning of the split into the two personalities is shrouded is not coincidental. While “magnification” extols the subject in the service of subjectivity in the framework of the self-identical, “transmogrification” embodies an essential metamorphosis – the alterity within subjectivity.

This dialectic forms the key to the palace, as it were. Only here do we find an essential alterity that exists in the drama of the split identity within the depths of subjectivity – the drama of “the other that is the same.” According to Borges’ interpretation of Whitman, during his literary creation an *identity* gradually forms that is simultaneously both his self-glorification and something entirely different.

We are thus faced here with three unprecedented principles. Firstly, identity splits into two, so that the author’s image – or shall we say, his or her narrative personality – stands in a dynamic relationship to his or her subjectivity, which actually creates it. Secondly, the created image is *at once* identical and Other in its relation to the author’s subjectivity. Thirdly, the ongoing act of writing is the force that drives the process as a whole.

Borges’ boldness is epitomized in the idea that this dialectic of birth and alterity exists within subjectivity in an introversive move, in which the other emerges from within in the act of writing. Significantly, rather than diverging categorically from the subjectivity that creates it, the identity generated complements, augments, and reorganizes the original: the other also being the self. Here, the dialectical tension appears to reach its zenith. Rather than the ontological annihilation of self-identity à la Shakespeare or the circular motion of two entities appearing and withdrawing à la Pessoaan heteronyms, the relationship here is between one who gives birth and another who, while being totally other, is *also* him or herself – a dual movement of alterity and self-creation taking place simultaneously.

Authorial Subjectivity

Barthes describes the writing process as representing the disintegration of the author: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (p. 142). Contrarily, herein I have sought to elucidate Borges and Pessoa’s views of authorial subjectivity – or, we might say, the way in which they fight for their lives as subjects destined to be writers. Taking a Heraclitean perspective in which identity runs like a river – dialectic, dynamic, and fluid – we have arrived at a complex, fuzzy perception of the status of self-identity in the writing process. While Pessoa creates new heteronyms separate from the writer’s subjectivity during the act of writing, Borges presents a more dialectical phenomenon in which the self is also the other.

For Pessoa, the drama is a byproduct of the act of writing, the author’s subjectivity self-gathering itself within itself and turning itself into an empty scope that allows the heteronym to emerge, in similar fashion to the Kabbalistic doctrine of contraction (*tzimzum*). Rather than eradicating subjectivity, however, the writer merely withdraws to the passive position of an observer, organizer, and implementer. Borges similarly asserts that the act of writing creates a “split personality” à la “great Whitmanian literary experiment.” As he or she writes, the author creates what we may call a “narrative self,” a figure of this self-arising from his or her oeuvre. This narrative self is simultaneously the same and the other vis-à-vis the authors’ “actual” personal self-identity, the relationship between the two being dramatic, stormy, synergistic, symbiotic, and ambivalent all at once.

The narrative self is thus an augmentation or transformation of the writer's self-identity, the act of writing in its entirety transpiring to be an intimate act of self-creation and self-destruction alike. Here, subjectivity itself takes center stage: while for Pessoa it withdraws in order to let the heteronyms emerge, in Borges the narrative-self reshapes the essence of it, perpetually fashioning it in a subtle yet fiery dialectic between destruction and creation, identity and alterity. Opposing postmodern flat notion of the total annihilation of the author, Borges and Pessoa thus offer more subtle and complex structures regarding the extreme dynamic interplay between writing and self-identity.

References

- Barthes, R. (1977). The death of the author. In *Image–Music–Text* (pp. 142–148). Hill and Wang.
- Barnstone, W. (Ed.). (1982). *Borges at eighty: Conversations*. Indiana University Press.
- Borges, J. L. (1964). *Dreamtigers* (Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Borges, J. L. (1987). An autobiographical essay. In *Critical essays on Jorge Luis Borges* (pp. 21–55). (Jaime Alazraki, Ed.). G. K. Hall.
- Borges, J. L. (1989). *Obras completas, 1975–1985*. Emecé (OC 2).
- Borges, J. L. (1996). *Obras completas*. Emecé (OC 3).
- Borges, J. L. (1999). *Selected non-fictions* (Eliot Weinberger, Ed.). Penguin (SNF).
- Borges, J. L. (2000). *Collected fictions* (Eliot Weinberger, Ed.). Penguin.
- Coelho, Jacinto P. (2007). *Diversidade e Unidade em Fernando Pessoa*. Verbo.
- Crespo, Á. (1984). *Estudios sobre Pessoa*. Bruguera.
- Creegan, C. L. (1989). *Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard: Religion, individuality, and philosophical method*. Routledge.
- García, J. M. (1982). A biographical-bibliographical note on Pessoa.” In George Monteiro (Ed.), *The man who never was: Essays on Fernando Pessoa* (pp. 192–206). Gávea-Brown.
- Hampton, Timothy. (2016). What is a colony before colonialism: Humanist and antihumanist concepts of governmentality from Foucault to Montaigne. In Jan Miernowski (Ed.), *Early modern humanism and postmodern antihumanism in dialogue* (pp. 93–116). Palgrave Macmillan: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32276-6_5
- Heidegger, M. (2008). On the origin of the work of art. In *Basic Writings* (pp. 143–212) (David Farrell Krell, Ed.) HarperCollins.
- Hofstadter, D. (2007). *I am a strange loop*. Basic.
- Hong, H. V., & Hong E. H. (Eds.). (1967). *Søren Kierkegaard's journals and papers*. Indiana University Press. Vol. 1.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1941). *Concluding unscientific postscript* (D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie, Eds.). Princeton University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1991). *Totality and infinity* (A. Lingis, Ed.). Kluwer Academic Publishers
- Manheimer, R. J. (1977). *Kierkegaard as educator*. University of California Press.
- Mieke, B. (1985). *Introduction to the theory of narratology*. Toronto University Press.
- Mualem, S. (2006). The literary Proteus: The literary image of Shakespeare in the work of Jorge Luis Borges. *Latin American Literary Review*, 68(34), 83–105.
- Mualem, S. (2017). *Mazes and amazements: Borges and western philosophy*. Peter Lang.
- Nahson, D. (2000). *La Crítica del Mito: Borges y la Literatura como Sueño de Vida*. Iberoamericana/Vervuert.
- Pessoa, F. (2001). *The selected prose of Fernando Pessoa*. Grove Press.

- Rāhula, W. (1974). *What the Buddha taught*. Grove Press.
- Scholem, G. (1971). *The messianic idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish spirituality*. Schocken.
- Sena, J. de. (1982). *Fernando Pessoa & C^a Heterónima*. 2 vol. Edições 70.
- Sheinfeld, S. (2013). “The Pseudepigrapha in Current Research.” *Religion Compass*, 7(5), 149–156. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12043>
- Schopenhauer, A. (1909). *The world as will and representation* (R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, Eds.). Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co.
- Seymour, L. (2017). *An Analysis of Roland Barthes's The Death of the Author*. Macat Library.
- Simões, Gaspar. (1950). *Vida e obra de Fernando Pessoa: História de uma geração*. Livraria Bertrand.
- Taylor, M. C. (1975). *Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship*. Princeton University Press.
- Whitehead, A. N. (2010). *Process and reality: An essay in Cosmology*. Simon and Schuster [1929].
- Zenith, R. (Ed.). (2001). *The selected prose of Fernando Pessoa*. Grove Press.
- Zenith, R. (2021). *Pessoa: A Biography*. Liveright Publishing.

Corresponding Author: Shlomy Mualem

Email: shlomy.mualem@biu.ac.il