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Perspectives

Borges is a world of complex and paradoxical perceptions and dimensions. He can be seen as an author of purely archetypal literary texts; as a bookish and almost unreal individual; as a harbinger of major trends in structuralist, post-structuralist and post-modern thought; as a cosmopolitan, universal writer; as an essentially Argentine author deeply concerned with both his country's literary classics and its history; as a writer engaging with the historical and ideological issues facing the Western world from the twenties to the Cold War. A glance at a number of these dimensions may serve as a preliminary and impressionistic introduction to the phenomenon of Jorge Luis Borges. An essay, 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', will serve to introduce Borges's use of paradox and polemics, his preoccupation with cultural transmission and translation, his quirkily irreverent use and misuse of others' texts, and his thoughts on the status of Argentine, and Latin American, culture.

Read in France in the early fifties in the translation of Roger Caillois, or as *Labyrinths* in the USA in the sixties, the stories of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* seemed almost eternal, rounded, and mysterious: perfect intellectual fables without precedent or provenance. Symptomatically, Caillois excised texts with specifically Argentinian themes, such as 'The South', 'El Sur', from his edition.¹ The truth is that they emerge, miraculously but laboriously, from the vast nebula of Borges's previous production, firmly grounded in the literary and political reality of Buenos Aires: poetry, literary and political polemics, four published collections of essays, intense if eclectic reading of the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and the endless slog of literary reviewing over two decades. Borges edited journals such as *Proa* and *Prisma*, produced a string of influential anthologies (of *ultraísta* poetry, of fantastic literature, of detective fiction), penned endless short introductions to world literary figures in the pages of the popular women's magazine *El Hogar*, and reviewed an inconceivable number of texts in the pages of journals as diverse as *Nosotros* and *Martín Fierro*. Borges was a professional reader before he

¹ See Jason Wilson, *Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 123.

became the successful story-writer, and these two dimensions are inseparable in his thought and literary practice. The stories emerge as a genetic mutation almost, when the literary review becomes story, mystical quest and metatextual game in 1939, with 'The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim', 'El acercamiento a Almotásim'.

Similarly, from photographs and physical descriptions of Borges, there emerge for me two very different figures. A 1939 photograph with Haydée Lange shows a bearded and thick-set Borges with a Basque beret hiding scars from a recent head wound, and a tightly stretched double-breasted suit. On the back, he wrote: 'Wounded Tapir', suggesting a man ill at ease with his body, alienated and alone (V 165). He might almost have written 'wounded minotaur'. Leopoldo Marechal, a one-time friend and literary collaborator, who had become hostile to Borges over disagreements on nationalism, Irigoyen, and Peronism, described his avatar Luis Pereda in his 1949 novel *Adán Buenosayres* as 'theoretical defender of local colour ... a man as stocky and lurching as a blind wild boar'.² In photographs of the final decades of his life, however, a blind, white-haired, stylized Borges, face turned upward towards the light, hands resting on a cane, is classical, seraphic almost, a twentieth-century Homer: 'a blind old poet serenely facing the world of shadows'.³

Beatriz Sarlo, who has done more than most to situate Borges in the cultural reality of Argentina and Buenos Aires, comments that he has become 'a cult writer for literary critics who discover in him the Platonic forms of their concerns: the theory of intertextuality, the limits of the referential illusion, the relationship between knowledge and language, the dilemmas of representation and of narration' (Sarlo, *Borges*, 5). He has been seen as the inspirer of the systems of Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), of Roland Barthes's 'death of the author' (1967), and even, in his labyrinthine libraries and endless recombination of references, as precursor of the worldwide-web. Borges is all this, but it is a vision which should be tempered by studies such as those of John King in *Sur*, who situates Borges in the context of Argentinian literary journals, and Daniel Balderston, in *Out of Context*, who brings out the precise and complex sources behind seemingly abstract or playful pieces: his detailed use, for example, of Indian and Irish history, and the historiography of the two World Wars. A certain Argentine left, of course, has painted Borges with broad brush-strokes as a product and cham-

² 'criollista teórico ... hombre fortachón y bamboleante como un jabalí ciego' (*Adán Buenosayres*, 163).

³ 'un viejo poeta ciego, enfrentando, erguido, el mundo de la sombra' (V 215).

pion of a reactionary upper middle-class establishment.⁴ More recently, his stand against fascism has been considered in detail.⁵

In Fanny Haslam, Borges has an English grandmother, and in Guillermo Borges, an anglophile father; and after a period in the twenties of *nacionalismo criollo*, a literary championing of the aesthetics of the Buenos Aires suburbs, largely suppressed by the author during his lifetime, he published articles and many of his best stories in the pages of the cosmopolitan and patrician journal *Sur*, a local version of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* or Ortega y Gasset's *Revista de Occidente*. This, together with the fantastic and philosophical dimensions of his work, attracted accusations from the nationalist right that he was 'extranjerizante', tending to the foreign and European. The Cuban socialist Roberto Fernández Retamar, while hostile to Borges's project and social class, sees him not as European, but as the final vestiges of a colonial Latin American: 'his writing ... is more like a reading. Borges is not a European writer: there is no European writer like Borges. ... Apart from a few literature professors who receive a salary for it, there is only one sort of person who knows European literature truly and comprehensively: the colonial.'⁶ Retamar could have found a less choleric version of this analysis in Borges's own essay 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', 'El escritor argentino y la tradición', delivered as a lecture in 1951, published in *Sur* in 1955 in the final months of Perón's regime as a rebuttal of nationalist literature, and finally included in later editions of *Discusión*, originally published in 1932.

The piece is an example of Borges at his polemical and paradoxical best. His starting point is José Hernández's narrative poem *Martín Fierro*, the two parts of which came out in 1872 and 1879, and which recounts the ill treatment of the *gauchos*, *mestizo* cowboys, at the hands of the government in a stylized, literary version of the *gaucho* dialect. Often seen as the canonical Argentinian text, it had become a literary and ideological battle ground. Leopoldo Lugones, the grand patriarch of Argentinian poetry during Borges's youth, a late example of the *modernismo* of Rubén Darío, who moved later in

⁴ Typical of such criticism is David Viñas, in *De Sarmiento a Cortázar* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1971)

⁵ See, for example, Annick Louis, *Borges ante el fascismo* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).

⁶ '[su] acto de escritura ... se parece más a un acto de lectura. Borges no es un escritor europeo: no hay ningún escritor europeo como Borges. ... Fuera de algunos profesores de filología que reciben un salario por ello, no hay más que un tipo de hombre que conozca de veras, en su conjunto, la literatura europea: el colonial' (Fernández Retamar, 117–18). For an interesting discussion of Borges's Argentinianess, see Sábato's novel *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, 174.

his life towards nationalism and fascism, presented the *gaucho*, in his 1916 *El payador*, as the foundation of Argentinian nationhood, and the poem as the national epic. In *Discusión*, Borges had argued that the work belonged more to the novel than to the epic.⁷ Here he argues that to look to national themes for literature, and reject foreign ones, would have been inconceivable for Racine or Shakespeare, and concludes that local colour is in fact a foreign import: 'The Argentine cult of local color is a recent European cult that nationalists should reject as a foreign import' (TL 423).⁸ He approvingly notes Gibbon's comments that there are no mentions of camels in the Koran. Enrique Banchs, writing sonnets about nightingales and pitched roofs in Buenos Aires, where neither exist, is in fact demonstrating the essential Argentine trait of reserve, *pudor*. He easily shows that another work often considered uniquely Argentinian, Ricardo Güiraldes's 1926 *Bildungsroman* of a young *gaucho*-become-landowner, derives much not only from symbolist French poetry, but also from Kipling's *Kim*, which in turn descends from *Huckleberry Finn*. To the argument that national literature should espouse Hispanic values, he counters that few Argentinians can actually cope with Spanish literature, and that 'Argentine history can confidently be described as an attempt to move away from Spain.'⁹ To confront the essayists (Mallea, Scalabrini Ortiz, Martínez Estrada, Manuel Gálvez) who in the thirties and beyond argue about the Argentinian as alone, without history, and split away from Europe, Borges alludes to the passions aroused in Argentina by the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. The Argentine tradition is the whole of Western culture, more so than in the case of individual European countries, immersed in their own particular national culture: 'I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western tradition or another may have' (TL 426).¹⁰ Like the Irish whose difference, belonging and not belonging, allowed them to innovate in English literature, the South Americans can handle European culture in a new way: 'I believe that Argentines, and South Americans in general, are in an analogous

⁷ See 'La poesía gauchesca' (I 198).

⁸ 'El culto argentino del color local es un reciente culto europeo que los nacionalistas deberían rechazar por foráneo' (I 270).

⁹ 'la historia argentina puede definirse sin equivocación como un querer apartarse de España' (I 271).

¹⁰ 'Creo que nuestra tradición es toda la cultura occidental, y creo también que tenemos derecho a esa tradición, mayor que el que pueden tener los habitantes de una u otra nación occidental' (I 272).

situation; we can take on all the European subjects, take them on without superstition and with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences' (TL 426).¹¹

¹¹ 'Creo que los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general, estamos en una situación análoga; podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas.' (I 273).

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