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978-0-521-19339-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges

Edited by Edwin Williamson

Excerpt

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EDWIN WILLIAMSON

Introduction

Jorge Luis Borges was one of the great writers of the twentieth century and the most influential author in the Spanish language of modern times. He had a seminal influence on Latin American literature and a lasting impact on literary fiction in many other languages. Although a poet and essayist, he was best known for his *ficciones* – short stories or prose texts whose brevity condensed mental play into reverberating images and situations. Rejecting the constraints of psychological or social realism, Borges encouraged writers to accept fiction as a self-conscious artifact, susceptible to fantasy and to overtly intellectual, and even philosophical, concerns. Borges challenged the supremacy of the novel in the hierarchy of modern literature: he favored modes of storytelling which had long preceded the novel – fable, epic, parable, and folktale – as well as subgenres such as thrillers, science fiction, and detective stories. He also blurred generic categories by bringing book reviews, scholarly essays, and footnotes within the bounds of fiction. Even metaphysics and theology, he famously observed, could be regarded as branches of the literature of fantasy.

Borges's interest in metaphysics and literary ideas fostered the impression that his work belonged in a kind of literary utopia, divorced from personal experience or historical reality. This impression was underscored by the blindness which afflicted him a few years before he became famous, and which lent him the aura of an otherworldly, sightless bard. He was, however, no disembodied, bloodless intellectual, but rather a man riven by inner conflicts, including amorous and sexual conflicts, and far from living in an ivory tower, he was deeply imbued with a sense of history, and was indeed a leading public intellectual in Argentina for most of his literary career.

Borges was born at the height of Argentina's golden age, when the country was among the most prosperous in the world, but he was to witness its descent into appalling violence and economic failure. This may account for his erratic political allegiances in the course of his life. In his youth he was an enthusiastic advocate of liberal democracy and a progressive

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nationalist – indeed, he was among the earliest cultural nationalists in Latin America; in the 1930s he became a public critic of fascism in Argentina and Nazism in Europe, and supported the Allied struggle against Hitler during World War II; he opposed Juan Perón’s authoritarian regime in the 1940s and 1950s, but as Peronism continued to dominate Argentine politics after its leader’s overthrow in 1955, his unyielding anti-Peronism led him to adopt conservative and, for a while, anti-democratic positions, including support for the military juntas that ruled Argentina in the 1970s. This pro-military stance, aggravated in 1976 by unwise declarations in favor of General Pinochet’s brutal regime in Chile, reputedly cost him the Nobel Prize. However, the Falklands/Malvinas war in 1982 and the consequent fall of the military junta were to bring about a change of heart. When the atrocities committed during the vicious “Dirty War” against Marxist guerrillas came to light in the media, Borges publicly denounced the “disappearances” and torture of opponents by the military regime and called for the punishment of the officers responsible for those crimes. He welcomed the return to democracy in 1983, and in his last years described himself as a pacifist and an “inoffensive anarchist” who hoped for the eventual disappearance of the state and of frontiers between states.

Borges’s international reputation still rests largely on three collections – *Fictions* (1944), *The Aleph* (1949), and *The Maker* (1960) – together with a book of critical essays, *Other Inquisitions* (1952). In other words, his best-known work dates from the 1940s and 1950s. The work from the mid 1960s, both in fiction and in poetry, still remains comparatively neglected and undervalued. His writing before the mid 1930s has received even less attention. This was largely due to the fact that he preferred to play down, if not disown altogether, this phase of his career. He revised the texts of the three poetry collections of the 1920s for the publication of his collected poems in Spanish in 1943, purging them of local color and even omitting a good number altogether, and he kept on changing them in successive editions of the *Obras completas* until these early books became all but unrecognizable in relation to the originals of the 1920s. As for the three books of essays which he published in that decade, he opted for total suppression, steadfastly refusing to have them reprinted in his lifetime. To add to the confusion, he had a habit of appending additional texts to later editions of his books, texts which had often been written years before, or indeed after, those books had first been published.

The reception of his work has been affected by the vagaries of publication and translation. For many years, the *Obras completas* that the Argentine publishing house Emecé had published in successively expanding editions since 1974, omitted the original texts of the work of the 1920s, giving only

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the later revised versions. Things began to improve when, in the early 1990s, the three collections of essays of the 1920s (but not the three original collections of poetry) were reprinted, and in the last couple of decades most of Borges's articles and reviews for magazines and newspapers have begun to be collected and published under various imprints. In English, except for an early edition of *Ficciones* and *El hacedor* (translated as *Dreamtigers*), Borges is accessible only through a number of anthologies put together from more or less random selections of his work, largely from the middle period, although Penguin's *Collected Fictions* does contain the volumes of his stories in the form and sequence in which they were originally published in Spanish. The situation with regard to French is much better thanks to Gallimard's two-volume Pléiade edition, which offers most of the books in the chronological order of their original publication.

Given the patchy availability of Borges's output, there has been little sense until recently of the evolution and range of his writing. Criticism, scholarship, and commentary have tended to concentrate on the middle period, an emphasis which has produced a somewhat restricted and arguably distorted view of Borges: it is still difficult to see him whole. The primary aim of this *Companion*, therefore, is to provide a more comprehensive account of Borges's *œuvre* than has generally been available so far. Thus, in addition to critical assessments of the "canonical" volumes of the middle years (1935-60), there are chapters that deal with the poetry of his youth and with the later poetry and fiction. Another aim of this *Companion* is to reflect the extraordinary diversity of his writing. The first chapter, by Clive Griffin, discusses his strikingly innovative use of philosophical ideas. Some of these stories, as Floyd Merrell shows in Chapter 2, are remarkable for the ways in which their inventive treatment of philosophical issues suggest scientific or mathematical ideas. In Chapter 3, Michael Wood discusses how French poststructuralist theorists and critics found in Borges's fictions and essays an anticipation of some of their key concerns. Suzanne Jill Levine writes in Chapter 4 about his revolutionary impact on contemporary translation theory. There follow two chapters which focus on Borges's idiosyncratic incorporation of theological concepts and religious symbols in his writing. Evelyn Fishburn deals with the Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic themes that recur in his work, studying their subversive and countercultural intent, and the way in which they are used to convey the mysterious character of the universe. Luce López-Baralt demonstrates his extensive knowledge and subtle use of Islamic culture. In Chapter 7 Philip Swanson sheds light on his interest in popular culture, ranging from the hoodlums of old Buenos Aires to the movies of Hollywood's heyday. In Chapter 8 Robin Fiddian considers his work in the light of post-colonial theory, given his peripheral

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relation as an Argentine to the dominant cultures of Europe and North America.

The following chapters discuss the main collections of stories. Daniel Balderston analyzes the intellectually dazzling ways the great stories collected in *Fictions* play on the relations between fiction and non-fiction. Roberto González Echevarría approaches *The Aleph* as a “kaleidoscope” of Borges’s major themes, stressing the underlying coherence of this collection, rooted as it is in a stance of stoical courage and ironic humor. Alfred MacAdam shows how the miscellaneous prose vignettes and poems of *The Maker* revolve around questions about writing and the self. Arturo Echavarría reveals the sophistication underlying the more direct, “realistic” style of *Brodie’s Report*, a collection which represents a critique of Argentine society. Efraín Kristal questions whether the stories of *The Book of Sand* and *Shakespeare’s Memory* show evidence of declining powers, and makes a case for their being regarded as his most accomplished and emotionally intense works of fiction. The next two chapters concentrate on the poetry, which is still not sufficiently well known or appreciated either in the Spanish-speaking world or beyond. Rafael Olea Franco shows the young poet in the 1920s selectively adapting avant-garde techniques in his search for a specifically Argentine voice. After 1929, Borges virtually gave up poetry but returned to it in the late 1950s and wrote prolifically until the end of his days. In Chapter 15 Jason Wilson brings out the predominant concerns of this large, heterogeneous body of later poems. The final chapter argues that Borges’s writing, and its evolution, were influenced by personal circumstances.

The critical views represented in this *Companion* may at times conflict with one another, but these disagreements testify to the continuing vitality of Borges studies, for the Argentine master has lost none of the power to fascinate and provoke his readers that marked his career as a writer.

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CLIVE GRIFFIN

Philosophy and fiction

Borges was not a philosopher, and never considered himself to be one. His father was particularly interested in metaphysics and introduced the young Borges to the basic tenets of idealism, as well as to Zeno the Eleatic's paradoxes (see p. 13 below). As a youth in Switzerland Borges learned German and, after finding Kant intractable, read for the first time the philosopher whom he would come to regard above all others, Schopenhauer.¹ He subsequently read, or read about, many major thinkers, claiming in later life that there was a good deal in their writings that he did not understand and describing himself, in "A New Refutation of Time," as "an Argentine adrift on a sea of metaphysics" (*SNF* 317). Largely self-taught, he acquired a broad knowledge of philosophy from general guides, such as Lewes's *Biographical History of Philosophy*, Mauthner's *Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (*Dictionary of Philosophy*), and Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, from reading works of the philosophers themselves, and from discussions with his father's friend Macedonio Fernández.² Nevertheless, he returned time and again to the same thinkers – Heraclitus, Zeno, Plato, Spinoza, Berkeley, Hume, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche – and to the same, predominantly metaphysical, problems: substance (matter or reality), time, identity, the limits of human understanding, language, infinity, eternity, death, causality, determinism and chance, and the question of design in the universe, as well as to mathematical and theological questions (he was particularly interested in Buddhism and in Swedenborg's mysticism). He published a number of essays on philosophical issues, the longest and best known being "A New Refutation of Time," and he planned a book on Spinoza which he never wrote.³

His enquiries into metaphysics were quirky, and he invariably treated philosophers, and the systems they proposed, with irony. Indeed, the humor that characterizes much of his writing reflects his agnosticism and skepticism; he is especially ironic about his own enquiries. In "A New Refutation of Time," for

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instance, he builds upon the arguments of the British empiricists Berkeley and Hume to question the objective existence of the material world, the self, and the continuum of time. Yet he teasingly states from the outset that, as this is his second version of the essay in which he questions time, it therefore presupposes it, for without time there could not be an earlier or a later version. He ends this essay recognizing his failure to achieve his aims: "To deny temporal succession, to deny the self, to deny the astronomical universe, appear to be acts of desperation and are secret consolations ... Time is a river that sweeps me along ... The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges" (*SNF* 332).

He included philosophical meditations, notably "The Nothingness of Personality" and "Berkeley's Crossroads," in his first book of essays, *Inquisitions*, which appeared in 1925, several years before he published any fiction. Nevertheless, philosophy for him was not a question of personal belief. He famously admitted that he tended to be "interested in religious or philosophical ideas for their aesthetic value and even for their strange and marvelous elements," and had some of his invented philosophers treat metaphysics as "a branch of the literature of fantasy."⁴ Rather than using his stories as vehicles for philosophical ideas, he often used those ideas as the starting point for fiction, and the literary use he made of them is more important than the ideas themselves.

It was principally Berkeley, Hume, and Schopenhauer whom Borges referred to when discussing the idealism that was so important for his imaginative writing, and they stimulated his interest in three questions: substance, identity (or self), and time. As early as 1923, in his poem "Break of Day," from the collection *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, he wrote:

Curious about the shadows
and daunted by the threat of dawn,
I recalled the dreadful conjecture
of Schopenhauer and Berkeley
which declares that the world
is a mental activity,
a dream of souls,
without foundation, purpose, weight or shape. (*SP* 23)

The speculation that the material world does not exist outside the mind of the perceiver (solipsism) underlies many of his stories. In "The Shape of the Sword" John Vincent Moon misleads the narrator and the reader by maintaining that he was the victim of treachery when, it transpires, Moon himself was the traitor. He is a liar: the story he tells does not reflect any reality outside his own mind, and so it should come as no surprise to learn that the farm on which the events of his story take place is owned by a fellow Irishman called Berkeley (the philosopher George Berkeley was Bishop

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of Cloyne, in County Cork, Ireland). In “Averroës’ Search” Borges tries to conjure up the medieval Arab philosopher Averroës, but is aware that this Averroës is merely a shallow product of his mind and so, when he ceases to imagine him, Averroës simply disappears. Even though Borges’s characters may think that they are real, they can turn out to be the figment of others’ imaginations. For example, the magus of “The Circular Ruins” dreams into existence a son, hoping to conceal from this invented offspring his invulnerability to fire, which would alert him to his fictiveness. However, when a fire breaks out, the magus discovers that he, too, is invulnerable and must also be the product of somebody else’s dream.

Dream and reality can merge in Borges’s stories, so that any notion of an objective reality outside the mind is questioned. This is what happens in “The Wait” where the character who adopts the name Villari incorporates his pursuers into his dream. In a more enigmatic tale, “The South,” we are never certain whether Juan Dahlmann dies in the gaucho knife fight that, as a second-generation immigrant, he conceives as being a truly Argentine death or whether such an end was the effect of hallucination as he lay dying in an operating theatre in Buenos Aires.

Borges thus finds it intriguing (if not convincing) to question the objective existence of things, and this is important not only for his own imaginative writing but also for his ideas about literature. If the world exists only in our minds, then mimetic realism is based upon a false premise. This provides him with a philosophical underpinning for his predilection for fantasy and for the rejection of realism in most of his fiction; it is not for nothing that he entitled his major collection *Fictions* and one section of it *Artifices*. It could even be argued that literature is intrinsically idealist: writers of fiction use words to convey something conjured up in their imaginations and, when we read those words, we in turn create from them events and characters which have no real substance. Writing and reading fiction is philosophical idealism put into practice. Indeed, Borges’s particular emphasis on the role of the reader in shaping the meanings of texts parallels idealist thought. In the prologue to one of his collections of poetry he writes:

This preface might be termed the aesthetics of Berkeley, not because the Irish metaphysician ... actually ever professed it, but because it applies to literature the same argument Berkeley applied to the outer world. The taste of the apple (states Berkeley) lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way (I would say), poetry lies in the meeting of poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the pages of a book.⁵

In his earliest essays, such as “The Nothingness of Personality” (*SNF* 3–9), Borges challenged the notion of the self, and a continuing desire to do so runs through much of his writing. His argument starts from Berkeley and

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leads on to Hume's more radical conclusion: if, as Berkeley maintained, the world exists only insofar as it is perceived, then the mind exists only as a series of successive acts of perception. This casts doubt upon any continuum of identity we could call the "self" lying behind those momentary and shifting perceptions, and has direct consequences for Borges's fiction. He is skeptical of psychology – in particular that of Freud – which he associates with the nineteenth century and realist novels: if the very notion of identity is unfounded, then psychology is an empty study.

Such an argument provides a philosophical basis for Borges's stated antipathy toward psychological portraits in literature and the scarcity of credible individuals among Borges's own characters. This antipathy can be seen in several ways in his stories. First, Hume's argument that we are merely a series of perceptions is illustrated by the Mayan priest Tzinacán of "The Writing of the God," who is depicted as clusters of apparently random perceptions when he undergoes a mystical experience. Second, while authors often use names to characterize or particularize their creatures, many of Borges's figures share the same ones: for example, Otálora in "The Dead Man" and Otárola in "Ulrikke"; Nolan from "The Other Duel" and "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero"; Runeberg in "Three Versions of Judas" and "The Garden of Forking Paths." Third, he sometimes leaves his characters' names vague: the brutish brothers of "The Interloper" are the Nelsons or the Nilsens; the narrator of the story "The Encounter" cannot remember whether one of the characters is called Acevedo or Acébal; the "real" name of the corrupt British official in "The Man on the Threshold" is kept from us, the narrator choosing to refer to him as David Alexander Glencairn because the names David and Alexander are symbolic of ruthless rulers. Fourth, some characters exist only insofar as they are doubles or rivals of somebody else rather than having any being in their own right. Although the two enemies in "The Theologians" believe that the theological opinions which characterized them are so different that one has the other burnt as a heretic, God is unable to distinguish between them. Finally, the archetypal nature of many of Borges's characters is all of a piece with his questioning of identity, as well as recalling his interest in Platonic archetypes. Baltasar Espinosa, of "The Gospel according to Mark," is not only "a Buenos Aires youth like so many others" (CF 397), but a reincarnation of one example of the self-sacrificing god, Jesus, whose fate we are led to believe Espinosa will share. Perhaps the most striking example of his portrayal of characters as archetypes is to be found in the stories "The South" and "The Man on the Threshold" where Borges uses exactly the same words to describe two old men, one an archetypal gaucho and the other an archetypal Indian. He draws our attention to this by emphasizing in both cases that his description is "essential"

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in the sense both of important and describing an essence. His speculations on pantheism, reflecting his reading of Spinoza and Schopenhauer, lead to a further dissolution of identity as he suggests that all men are one man, and one man all men.

Again, philosophical speculation not only underlies Borges's own practice, but also his more general theories about literature. His questioning of self parallels a downplaying of the importance of authors and their lives, stressing from his *ultraísta* period onward how unimportant are the innovations introduced by any one author and how much literature owes to tradition. He concentrates instead on texts and how they are read. So in "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," emphasis is once more laid on the reader's role in forging meaning in a text.

Of all the metaphysical questions that absorbed Borges, the most important for him was time. He frequently refers to Heraclitus when invoking the inexorability of change, and he quotes the Greek philosopher's image likening time to a flowing river into which no person can step twice because that river is constantly transformed (Borges notes that so is the bather). However, speculation that questions the lethal onrush of time mitigates its horror for Borges. Building upon idealism, he suggests that time, like substance and identity, is subjective. In "The Secret Miracle," the Czech writer Jaromir Hladík is condemned to death. As he counts the days left him before his execution, he unsurprisingly shares his author's desire – and for both this is emotional as much as intellectual – to deny the successive nature of time. His conjectures, based as they are on wishful thinking, are those that Borges would discuss at greater length in his essay "A New Refutation of Time," but the story is principally an illustration of the subjective nature of time. As Hladík faces the firing squad and the order to shoot him is given, time freezes for a whole year during which he finishes the mental composition of a play. At the moment that he finds the final epithet, time unfreezes and the bullets kill him. The year's grace has passed in his mind only. Borges's original epigraph to this tale was: "The story is well known of the monk who, going out into the wood to meditate, was detained there by the song of a bird for 300 years, which to his consciousness passed in only one hour."⁶

A somewhat similar idea is posited in a footnote which appears in the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius": the hypothesis borrowed from (and rejected by) Russell that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, peopled by those who "remembered" a wholly unreal past (CF 74). This, yet again, parallels the process of writing and reading literature. Writers create characters and, when they do so, they invent a fictitious past for them. The events recounted in a story may cover hours, days, weeks, or years, but that period is often reconstructed in the reader's mind in only a few minutes.

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A consequence of the notion of subjective time is the suggestion that it exists only in the present, the past consisting of present memories and the future of present hopes or fears. Borges investigates this in his story “The Other Death,” which alludes to the thesis propounded by the medieval theologian Pier Damiani that, as God is omnipotent, he can make what once existed never to have been. Borges playfully suggests that if the past is constituted solely of memories, then it changes as those memories change. His character Pedro Damián, an Argentine farm laborer, broods all his life on his youthful cowardice during the heat of battle. Borges hypothesizes that in old age Damián managed to change his shameful past: the only surviving witnesses of that battle forget his cowardice and later recall his heroic death leading a charge as a young soldier.

Not all of Borges’s meditations on time have their roots in idealism, but they invariably challenge successive time. In his “The Garden of Forking Paths” the English sinologist Stephen Albert suggests that the Chinese author Ts’ui Pên “did not believe in a uniform and absolute time: he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent and parallel times” (CF 127). Yet Borges ironizes this speculation by placing it in a story the plot of which is rigidly linear. In “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” and “The Plot,” on the other hand, there is a suggestion that time may be cyclical as the Pythagoreans and, later, Nietzsche postulated.

The hypothesis that time is circular again has repercussions not only for Borges’s own practice but also for his ideas about literature. He suggests that authors do not invent new stories but recycle old ones, and that there is no sense of progress in literature. As for idealist time, his substitution of linear by subjective time parallels his suggestion that it matters less when works were written than the order in which we read them. A further consequence of his questioning of successive time is that as, according to one hypothesis, the past exists only as it is perceived in the present, he can subvert our usual assumption that past writers influence their successors and claim instead, as he does in “Kafka and His Precursors,” that writers create their own precursors in the present.

Borges’s fascination with idealism is central to one of his longest stories, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” It is a “what if?” think-piece: if the idealists’ speculations really were true, what would a world based upon them be like? It is an imaginary place written into existence by a secret society of such philosophers, an early member of which was Berkeley. The project grows over the generations thanks to the munificence of Berkeley’s near namesake, one Buckley, an American millionaire. The story begins with a mirror and an entry in a rogue copy of an encyclopedia, both idealist images: the mirror because what we see in mirrors has no substance but is a just a product