

## INTRODUCTION

*Borges in Context, Context in Borges**Robin Fiddian*

The award of the inaugural International Publishers' Prize for literary excellence, in 1961, jointly to Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges for *Trilogy* and *Fictions* respectively, signals a milestone in Borges's accession to the rank of world author. Born in Buenos Aires in 1899, Borges had published the twin collections, *Ficciones* and *Artificios*, in the early-to-mid-1940s and, as the 1950s came to a close, was better known in France and Italy, and latterly, Germany, than in Spain, the United Kingdom, or the USA. Within a couple of years, the picture had changed dramatically: around the time of the announcement of the award of the International Publishers' Prize, Borges would receive an invitation to take up a visiting position at the University of Texas at Austin – the first of many such invitations and acts of recognition, by a major university in the USA, of his stature as a creative writer. Meanwhile, in the Hispano-phone world, the peculiar, hybrid narratives of *Fictions* had elaborated significantly on a long-established River Plate tradition and would provide the seeds, along with works by other contemporary authors from Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, etc., for a flowering of narrative across Spanish America; this occurred, first, in the 1940s and 1950s (the decades of *la nueva narrativa*), and then, in the literary Boom of the 1960s, an explosion in the production and sales of prose fiction (mainly), that was accompanied by widespread critical acclaim. By the end of that heady decade, translations of works by Borges into several languages and the high-profile adaptation of one of his most enigmatic *ficciones* by Italian film director Bernardo Bertolucci in *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970), testified to Borges's undeniable status as an international cultural icon and source of inspiration for many.

On top of his reputation, Borges's claim on a place in a Writers in Context series is further cemented by the modelling, in one of his best known early fictions, of the very idea of 'context'. In 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero', Borges analyses the multiple kinds of context that can shape a narrative subject, including its reception. As is well known, Borges, in this

fiction, presents the reader, not with a complete and fully rounded story, but with the kernel or skeleton of one that he suggests he may develop at some point in the future. Essential to the story's intelligibility is the relation between historical particularities and multiple possible scenarios. Introducing his subject (one of the meanings of 'tema' in the Spanish language), the narrator, whom we shall call 'Borges', specifies the date of narration as 3 January 1944. A quotation from a section of *The Tower* by William Butler Yeats referring to the cycles of the 'Platonic Year' chimes in with the idea of renewal; the image, in the same verses, of men vividly dancing to 'the barbarous clangour of a gong' evokes a scene of irrationality redolent, to the contemporary reader in Buenos Aires and beyond, of the barbarism of the Second World War. Through the date, 3 January 1944, Borges inscribes his work in a historical context that is immediate and charged with significance.

Moving into retrospective mode, although still writing in the present tense, the narrative entertains a multiplicity of historical moments and locations as potentially suitable for its story, which consequently takes on a speculative air: 'The action takes place in an oppressed and tenacious country: Poland, Ireland, the Venetian Republic, some South American or Balkan state.' After some suspended points (which heighten the sense of imprecision), the narrator elaborates: 'Or rather, it has taken place, since, though the narrator is contemporary, his story occurred towards the middle or the beginning of the nineteenth century' (*Lab*, p. 102). There is considerable slippage and ambiguity in this formulation. First, it is difficult to dissociate the narrator Borges from the second-order narrator inside his blueprint of a fiction; the qualification of that narrator as 'contemporary' begs the question as to whether his function is contemporary with events or with the moment of narration – a question which by implication also attaches to the primary narrator of 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero': the Argentinian author, Jorge Luis Borges.

The ambiguities inherent in the use of the term 'contemporary' are compounded by the inexactness of the temporal markers 'towards the middle or the beginning of the nineteenth century'. Borges abandons the precise historical grounding of the narrative frame in favour of a formulation that is both accommodating and strange, inasmuch as it inverts the normal chronological order of the beginning and later points of a century. The temporal coordinates of his story-to-be match, in their vagueness, those of its geography, which freely accommodate northern Europe, Eastern and Central Europe, and South America.

Sensitive, no doubt, to the requirement that his – and any – historical story or subject should have a precise temporal and geographical location, Borges now pinpoints Ireland, in 1824; yet the reason for this, he adds, is ‘narrative convenience’. A spirit of playfulness is at work here, but a no less important factor is what we might call the dialectic of the One and the Many. By settling on Ireland in 1824 as the setting for his story, Borges certainly complies with some readers’ expectations. However, the choice of one out of many possible scenarios is not intended to erase the others; it actually keeps them all in play. Poland, the Venetian Republic, or a Balkan state such as Greece are equally suited to the design and purpose of Borges’s story. In philosophical terms, he interleaves Aristotle with Plato, the individual case (here, Ireland in 1824) with the type, of which he cites several instances.

The type to which I allude is the political and cultural phenomenon of early nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism. Associated with writers and political activists such as Adam Bernard Mickiewicz (Lithuania 1798–1855), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Lord Byron (1788–1824), and Victor Hugo (1802–1885), Romantic nationalism is common to all the locations in Borges’s roster of ‘oppressed and tenacious countries’ at the start of the nineteenth century. Although they are not named in Borges’s story, Wolfe Tone (1763–1798) and Daniel O’Connell (1775–1847) are emblematic figures in modern Irish history who instigated rebellion against British rule at the end of the eighteenth century – with Wolfe Tone leading the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and O’Connell inheriting his mantle and, with it, the sobriquets of ‘The Emancipator’ and ‘The Liberator’. Passed off deceptively as a tool of ‘narrative convenience’, Ireland in fact stands out at one and the same time as a unique instance of a people’s historical aspirations and an example of a wider phenomenon consisting in the break-up of the geopolitical order of imperial Europe.

Within these coordinates, Borges fleshes out the contextual details of the narrative that he imagines writing one day. In ‘Theme of the Traitor and the Hero’ he sketches a two-tiered trans-historical plot involving two Irishmen, who are blood relatives. One, Ryan, is a writer and the narrator’s mid-twentieth-century contemporary; the other is his great-grandfather, Fergus Kilpatrick, a much-revered man and leader in the struggle against the British, who was assassinated in Dublin in 1824. As he researches Kilpatrick’s death, Ryan stumbles across inconsistencies in the historical record which bring him to the realization that, far from acting as a true patriot, his great-grandfather actually betrayed the Irish cause and was assassinated by his fellow-conspirators in a cover-up. Borges goes so far as

to imagine a date and a location for Kilpatrick's execution, which is scripted and stage-managed as a theatrical event that takes place in Dublin on 6 August. The circumstances of Kilpatrick's death are seen as prefiguring those of Abraham Lincoln, who would be assassinated, likewise, in a theatre, in Washington DC on 14 April 1865 – suggesting an archetypal connection between the two deaths.

Cast in a melodramatic mould, Kilpatrick's story is over-determined and somewhat blasé about the protocols of historical realism (most importantly – and curiously–, Ireland experienced no 'victorious revolt' or definitive liberation from the British in 1824 . . .). However, the choice of date for the evidently fictional and pun-named Kilpatrick's execution, in a Dublin theatre, has resounding relevance for South America, since it was on 6 August 1824 that the Battle of Junín was fought and won, high up in the Andes, by an army of loyalists under the joint command of Venezuela's General Simón Bolívar and General José Sucre of Peru. Followed shortly by the Battle of Ayacucho, the Battle of Junín precipitated the end of Spanish rule in South America and prepared the way for the emergence, throughout the sub-continent, of a number of budding nation-states, starting with Colombia and Venezuela in the north and going all the way down to Chile and Argentina in the south. Although Borges situates his kernel of a story in colonial Ireland, he calls up the crucial moment in Argentine (and Peruvian) history when those two countries acceded to modernity, breaking with the vice-regal structures of Spain. Contextual detail thereby does double duty, operating at one and the same time through entirely plausible (but inexact) reference to early nineteenth-century Ireland, and by analogy to a roster of countries that in fact experienced political upheaval in South America and beyond.

As the mention of Victor Hugo, W.B. Yeats and others illustrates, Borges's story draws on a cultural matrix comprising not only the history of ideas (Romantic nationalism, Condorcet, Vico . . .) but also genres of literature and forms of art. Of these, poetry and drama are woven most conspicuously into the fabric of 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero', where Robert Browning and Victor Hugo are credited with authorship of some verses celebrating Kilpatrick's status as Romantic hero. However, it is the works of Shakespeare, especially *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, that provide the scaffolding for the theatrical performance in which Kilpatrick, whose treachery has been exposed, is dealt with by his peers. In the course of his investigations, Ryan recognizes certain words uttered by a beggar in conversation with Kilpatrick on the day he dies, as having been copied from a passage in *Macbeth*. For his part, the narrator informs

us that James Alexander Nolan, the patriot who masterminds Kilpatrick's demise, freely plagiarized 'the English enemy, William Shakespeare' (*Lab*, p. 105) in scripting the scenario of Kilpatrick's death, while preserving intact both his public reputation as a hero, and the cause of Irish freedom. Through these extravagances of plot, Borges acknowledges the power of a tradition of political tragedy epitomized by Shakespeare; at the same time, he sets his own story of rebellion and betrayal within the context of Romantic drama as exemplified by Victor Hugo, Adam Bernard Mickiewicz, and Spain's Duke of Rivas: all of them, recognized champions of freedom in their politics and creative writing.

The blueprint of a story set in the period of Romantic nationalism in Ireland and elsewhere reveals a connection with Borges's own family history – which is a further context that informs 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero'. In casting the relationship between Ryan and Kilpatrick as one between a great-grandson and his great-grandfather, Borges brings his own ancestor, Colonel Isidoro Suárez, into the frame, with himself, a writer in his early forties, in the roles of sleuth and scion of a family that distinguished itself in the wars of independence from imperial Spain. The analogy goes only so far: the historical archive includes no mention of any act of betrayal or cowardice on the part of Isidoro Suárez, who consequently emerges every inch a hero from a comparison with Fergus Kilpatrick; nor is any cause given for his great-grandson to feel anything but pride and admiration towards him. A parallel exists, certainly, between Borges and Isidoro Suárez and Ryan and Kilpatrick, the ultimate motivation of which, I suggest, is Borges's desire to inscribe the history of both his family and his country in a grand narrative: one which asserts the heroic foundations of modern nation-states such as Poland, Greece, Argentina, and Peru, and (a full century later) Ireland.

A further context that is embedded in 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' concerns the afterlife of an author and the impact his or her narrative may have on readers at some point in future time. At the end of Borges's story, Ryan comes to picture Nolan as a spider-like figure who in 1824 set a trap, not only for the traitor, Kilpatrick, but also for the person who subsequently would take it upon himself to investigate the story of the traitor and the hero. More than a century after the revelations concerning his great-grandfather, Ryan feels disinclined to divulge the truth about his treachery, and he effectively acquiesces in Nolan's scheme. This is clearly problematic and raises thorny ethical questions: was Ryan really bound to silence the truth? Could he not have acted differently? Did he have to publish a book dedicated to the glorious memory of an inglorious man?

The text leaves these and other questions hanging in mid-air . . . Putting judgement of Ryan to one side, we have to acknowledge the scale and cunning of Nolan's master-plot, including the anticipation of a moment when someone, somewhere, will come face to face with the disquieting truth about Kilpatrick and his fellow-conspirators. The context of reception is thus an integral part of Kilpatrick, Nolan, and Ryan's stories, and one that is destined to remain a source of puzzlement, and vicarious embarrassment, for generations of readers to come.

The history of the world and of the Argentine nation; family history and specific cultural matrices; the afterlife of a text and the conditions of its reception: these are the principal building blocks of *context* as modelled in 'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' by Jorge Luis Borges. Acknowledging their value and usefulness, I adopt them here as a framework and rationale for the 32 chapters of *Jorge Luis Borges in Context*, which I divide into two, roughly symmetrical, parts.

Part One of *Jorge Luis Borges in Context* comprises 16 essays, arranged in two groups. The essays in the first group (Chapters 1–7) focus on family and personal history, the history of the River Plate, and that of the wider world, as Borges engaged with, and was shaped by, it over the nine decades of his life. The development of modern Argentina runs like a thread through these opening essays, which range from the early nineteenth century to the War of the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982. The Battle of Junín in 1824, the years of terror of Juan Manuel Rosas, relations between modern Argentina and Uruguay, and the effects of two World Wars, frame some of the most dramatic experiences in the lives of the Borges family and their famous son.

The essays in the second group (Chapters 8–16) centre on the cultural context of Argentina, from the mid-nineteenth century (with particular reference to works by Sarmiento and *The Gaucho Martín Fierro*), until the end of the twentieth century. This context embraces writing, art, music, social and political affairs, and popular culture. An essay on the responses to Borges of a pair of late twentieth-century Argentine writers moves beyond his lifetime, at the same time as it anticipates further studies of the topic of reception included in Part Two.

The essays in Part Two divide, once more, into two groups, the first of which (Chapters 17–24) acknowledge the impact, on Borges, of the Western literary canon. Starting with Cervantes and Shakespeare (for Dante, see the later chapter, 'Borges in Italy'), the essays proceed via the English Romantics and the early Avant Garde in Spain to Borges's contemporaries, James Joyce and Kafka. The philosophical tradition of

Idealism receives attention on account of its centrality in modern Western thought and its intrinsic importance to Borges. The topic of 'Borges and the Bible' also features, as a reflection of Judeo-Christianity's prominence within the Western tradition, its relationships with other belief systems, and Borges's post-Orientalist deconstruction of the Bible in the context of East-West relations.

Chapters 25–27 address the topics of Borges and Judaism, Borges and Buddhism, and his engagement with Persian literature. The triplet elaborates on the theme of the Middle East and its manifold cultural heritage. Some readers will regret the absence of an essay on Borges and Islam, which would have been a natural complement to those on Judaism, the Bible, and Buddhism; recent work by Luce Baralt and Ian Almond, amongst others, goes some way towards compensating for this lack (see Further Reading).

Rounding off the volume, contexts of reception and 'afterlife' are illuminated in a set of five essays (Chapters 28–32) which document the depth and breadth of Borges's influence on writing and society. The principal authors of the Latin American 'Boom' acknowledged a debt to Borges; his reception in Cuba and in Argentina around the time of the Cuban Revolution is the subject of a valuable new study here. From the 1980s, younger generations of writers and critics construct a 'Borges' more in tune with their poetics and politics – be they Argentine (cf. the essay by Geraghty referred to above) or non-Argentine. In this latter category, Borges appeals once more to contemporary writers of Italy and Portugal (he had first made an impact there in the 1960s) and to Anglophone writers from both hemispheres: see, for example, Paul Auster, whose novel, *4,3,2,1* (2017) is conspicuously Borgesian in conception, and J.M. Coetzee representing the Global South (see Chapter 30). In the chapters on Portugal and Italy, Borges's contemporary impact is set against the history of his prior engagement, as a reader, with Dante, Camões, and other landmarks of the literary traditions of Portugal and Italy.

Without doubt, the biggest challenge of this compendium has been to provide coverage of the various contexts surrounding a major world author, while ensuring a sharpness of focus in each of the essays included here. Inevitably, there are some gaps in coverage: Homer, Anglo-Saxon literature, Quevedo, Pascal, and Hawthorne are notable absentees. Fans of Bolaño may justifiably argue that he is no less worthy of mention than Piglia, for example; or, that the topic of Borges and film is intrinsically less interesting than the Argentine author's thoughts about Paul Groussac or G.K. Chesterton . . . Considering the topics that *are* dealt with, I would argue that they have an incontestable bearing on the core subject, which

they illuminate in a variety of ways. In spite of their considerable number, all 32 essays adhere with remarkable closeness to one or more aspects of the model of *context* outlined in ‘Theme of the Traitor and the Hero’. Individually and collectively, they thereby justify their place in the volume’s design. Suggestions for further study can be found in the concluding section of *Jorge Luis Borges in Context*.



PART I

*Self, Family, and the Argentine Nation*

## CHAPTER I

*Borges and the Question of Argentine Identity**Edwin Williamson*

Borges conceived the War of Independence as ‘an act of faith’ in the possibility of creating a national identity distinct from that of Spain.<sup>1</sup> But the nature of that identity was a contentious issue which had come to be associated with the figure of the gaucho thanks to two foundational texts of Argentine literature – *Facundo, or Civilization and Barbarism* (1845), by Domingo Sarmiento, and José Hernández’s narrative poem *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* (Part 1, 1872; Part 2, 1879).

*Facundo* was the biography of a blood-thirsty *caudillo* who was active in the turbulent aftermath of independence. Sarmiento argued that the country could only be saved from this ‘barbarism’ by adopting the Enlightenment values of European ‘civilization’, championed by the liberal elite of Buenos Aires, who had given intellectual and political leadership to the independence movement. Barbarism, he believed, was rooted in the underpopulated pampas because the gauchos lacked the ‘sociability’ required for a law-abiding society. He epitomized the plight of Argentina in the image of a gaucho’s dagger stuck in the heart of liberal Buenos Aires, for *caudillos* like Facundo had used the gaucho as a tool in the power-struggles which had brought endemic lawlessness to the young republic. Even so, Sarmiento betrayed a certain admiration for the gaucho’s skills as a horseman, tracker, and wandering troubadour but he nevertheless rejected his way of life as a pattern for modern Argentina. This was ‘a missed ideological opportunity’ because the gaucho’s rugged individualism could have been portrayed as the cornerstone of a liberal society, as would occur in the case of the cowboy in the USA.<sup>2</sup> The gaucho thus became an ambivalent figure in Argentine culture, for he may well have been a ‘barbarian’ but he was also a son of the native soil who represented whatever distinctive identity the young republic could claim to possess in relation to Spain.

The ambivalence of the gaucho is evident in Hernández’s *Martín Fierro*, which crystallized an anxiety about progress, a fear that the country might