

Modern Critical Views

JORGE LUIS BORGES

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Harold Bloom

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JORGE LUIS BORGES

Modern Critical Views

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Editor's Note

This book offers a representative selection of the best criticism so far devoted to the writings of the Argentine master, Jorge Luis Borges. It begins with the editor's introduction, originally published in 1969, but presenting a view of both the strength and limitations of Borges' achievement that still seems valid today.

The volume then reprints, in chronological order of publication, a major sequence of what can be called *Borgesian* receptions. This begins with Thomas R. Hart, Jr.'s account of Borges' own literary criticism, emphasizing the powerful skepticism that the criticism shares with Borges' fictions. Paul de Man's astute, characteristically ironic apprehension of *Borgesian* irony follows, setting a standard that subsequent criticism of Borges has failed to attain, but then de Man increasingly is seen as one of the handful of major critics in our time.

The readings of "Death and the Compass," "Emma Zunz" and "The God's Script" by Louis Murillo, and of "The Immortal" by Ronald J. Christ, share a concern for *Borgesian* hermeticism, whether metaphysical or literary. Ultimate hermeticism, the Jewish Kabbalah, is charted by Jaime Alazraki, who finds in Kabbalah the principle of reading old texts afresh that generates *Borgesian* writing. James E. Irby, studying the *Borgesian* idealism in relation to the vision of Utopia, centers upon the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," which he reads in the mode of his epigraph from Derrida: "There is nothing outside the text."

The later phase of Borges' stories, from 1966 on, is the subject of Carter Wheelock's essay, which finds both gain and loss in the later, more direct mode of narration. Emir Rodríguez-Monegal, the leading authority on Borges, also emphasizes issues of transition in *Borgesian* symbolism, as its maker himself wearies of such prevalence and yet cannot write in its absence.

Borges, as the precursor of post-Structuralist criticism, has inspired such criticism from the early response of Paul de Man through the recent comparison of Borges to Derrida by the Cuban-American deconstructionist Roberto

González-Echevarría. Two such commentaries, by Alicia Borinsky on Borgesian repetition, and by John Sturrock on disjunctions and doublings in Borges, complement one another in advancing our awareness of Borges' labyrinthine language-traps.

In a reading of three Borgesian sonnets, Nancy B. Mandlove returns us to Borges' conviction that only the most traditional metaphors are valid, a conviction featured also in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's examination of doubles and counterparts in the crucial tale "The Garden of Forking Paths." A brief analysis of the Borgesian labyrinth, by Ricardo Gutiérrez-Mouat, reaches a parallel conclusion that there never can be an arrival at the center in Borges' work.

With the account of Borges' early Ultraist poetry by Thorpe Running, we are returned to the question of Borgesian origins. Finally, the essay by Roberto González-Echevarría, translated by the author and published here in English for the first time, brings together Borges and Derrida as heroic reconstructors of literature, despite all appearances otherwise.

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Introduction

For the gnostic in Borges, as for the heresiarch in his mythic Uqbar, "mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and disseminate that universe," the visible but illusory labyrinth of men. Gnostics rightly feel at ease with Jung, and very unhappy with Freud, as Borges does, and no one need be surprised when the ordinarily gentlemanly and subtle Argentine dismisses Freud "either as a charlatan or as a madman," for whom "it all boils down to a few rather unpleasant facts." Masters of the tale and the parable ought to avoid the tape-recorder, but as Borges succumbed, an admirer may be grateful for the gleaning of a few connections between images.

The gnostic gazes into the mirror of the fallen world and sees, not himself, but his dark double, the shadowy hunter of his phantasmagoria. Since the ambivalent God of the gnostics balances good and evil in himself, the writer dominated by a gnostic vision is morally ambivalent also. Borges is imaginatively a gnostic, but intellectually a skeptical and naturalistic humanist. This division, which has impeded his art, making of him a far lesser figure than gnostic writers like Yeats and Kafka, nevertheless has made him also an admirably firm moralist, as these taped conversations show.

Borges has written largely in the spirit of Emerson's remark that the hint of the dialectic is more valuable than the dialectic itself. My own favorite among his tales, the cabbalistic "Death and the Compass," traces the destruction of the Dupin-like Erik Lönnrot, whose "reckless discernment" draws him into the labyrinthine trap set by Red Scharlach the Dandy, a gangster worthy to consort with Babel's Benya Krik. The greatness of Borges is in the aesthetic dignity both of Lönnrot, who at the point of death criticizes the labyrinth of his entrapment as having redundant lines, and of Scharlach, who just before firing promises the detective a better labyrinth, when he hunts him in some other incarnation.

The critics of the admirable Borges do him violence by hunting him as Lönnrot pursued Scharlach, with a compass, but he has obliged us to choose

his own images for analysis. Freud tells us that: "In a psychoanalysis the physician always gives his patient (sometimes to a greater and sometimes to a lesser extent) the conscious anticipatory image by the help of which he is put in a position to recognise and to grasp the unconscious material." We are to remember that Freud speaks of therapy, and of the work of altering ourselves, so that the analogue we may find between the images of physician and romancer must be an imperfect one. The skillful analyst moreover, on Freud's example, gives us a single image, and Borges gives his reader a myriad; but only mirror, labyrinth, compass will be gazed at here.

Borges remarks of the first story he wrote, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," that it gives a sensation of tiredness and skepticism, of "coming at the end of a very long literary period." It is revelatory that this was his first tale, exposing his weariness of the living labyrinth of fiction even as he ventured into it. Borges is a great theorist of poetic influence; he has taught us to read Browning as a precursor of Kafka, and in the spirit of this teaching we may see Borges himself as another Childe Roland coming to the Dark Tower, while consciously not desiring to accomplish the Quest. Are we also condemned to see him finally more as a critic of romance than as a romancer? When we read Borges—whether his essays, poems, parables, or tales—do we not read glosses upon romance, and particularly on the skeptic's self-protection against the enchantments of romance?

Borges thinks he has invented one new subject for a poem—in his poem "Limits"—the subject being the sense of doing something for the last time, seeing something for the last time. It is extraordinary that so deeply read a man-of-letters should think this, since most strong poets who live to be quite old have written on just this subject, though often with displacement or concealment. But it is profoundly self-revelatory that a theorist of poetic influence should come to think of this subject as his own invention, for Borges has been always the celebrator of things-in-their-farewell, always a poet of loss. Though he has comforted himself, and his readers, with the wisdom that we can lose only what we never had, he has suffered the discomfort also of knowing that we come to recognize only what we have encountered before, and that all recognition is self-recognition. All loss is of ourselves, and even the loss of falling-out of love is, as Borges would say, the pain of returning to others, not to the self. Is this the wisdom of romance, or of another mode entirely?

What Borges lacks, despite the illusive cunning of his labyrinths, is precisely the extravagance of the romancer; he does not trust his own vagrant impulses. He sees himself as a modestly apt self-marshaller, but he is another Oedipal self-destroyer. His addiction to the self-protective economy and overt knowingness of his art is his own variety of the Oedipal anxiety, and the pattern

of his tales betrays throughout an implicit dread of family-romance. The gnostic mirror of nature reflects for him only Lönnrot's labyrinth "of a single line which is invisible and unceasing," the line of all those enchanted mean streets that fade into the horizon of the Buenos Aires of his phantasmagoria. The reckless discerner who is held by the symmetries of his own mythic compass has never been reckless enough to lose himself in a story, to our loss, if not to his. His extravagance, if it still comes, will be a fictive movement away from the theme of recognition, even against that theme, and towards a larger art. His favorite story, he says, is Hawthorne's "Wakefield," which he describes as being "about the man who stays away from home all those years."

THOMAS R. HART, JR.

Borges' Literary Criticism

Outside the Spanish-speaking world, Jorge Luis Borges is known almost exclusively as a writer of short stories. His books of essays, with a few exceptions, have not yet been translated. Yet the short stories, as Ana María Barrenechea has pointed out, form a relatively small part of Borges' work; most of them were written during a period of some fifteen years, from the middle thirties to the early fifties. Borges' career as an essayist, on the other hand, begins with the publication of *Inquisiciones* [*Inquisitions*] in 1925 and continues without a breakdown to the publication of *El bacedor* [*Dreamtigers*] in 1960. Though he has written, or at least published, hardly any new works of fiction in the past ten years, he remains active as a poet and essayist.

The value of Borges' essays has been, and continues to be, hotly debated by critics. There is surely much less agreement about their worth than about that of his short stories. While the lasting value of the essays may well be largely in the light they throw on the mind of the artist who created the stories, they are, nevertheless, of considerable interest in themselves. Many of the themes found in Borges' poems and stories appear also in the essays; some, already present in his youthful writings, recur again and again in his later books. Borges' thought, however, has not remained static. In this paper I shall attempt to trace the development of some of his central ideas on the nature of literature and of literary criticism.

The most important influence on Borges' literary criticism is doubtless that of Benedetto Croce. Borges, however, has not followed Croce slavishly. Some superficially Crocean passages in his essays reveal important differences in point

of view, and Borges has not hesitated to make explicit his disagreement with Croce on particular issues. It is, nevertheless, true that Croce is mentioned in Borges' essays more often than any other critic; true, too, that, while Borges' attitude toward certain features of Croce's doctrine has changed with the years, his critical practice has remained consistently true to Crocean principles.

Borges' first book of essays, *Inquisiciones*, published in 1925, presents an apparent exception. Croce is not mentioned and the idea of poetry which Borges defends does not seem specifically Crocean. There are, however, as we shall see, a number of passages in the book which, if not drawn from Croce himself, do suggest substantial agreement with his views.

Borges explicitly declares his adherence to Croce's theory of art as expression in an essay, "La simulación de la imagen" ["The Simulation of the Image"], first published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Prensa* on December 25, 1927, and incorporated in his second book of essays, *El idioma de los argentinos* [*The Language of the Argentines*], in the following year: "Indagar ¿qué es lo estético? es indagar ¿qué otra cosa es lo estético, qué única otra cosa es lo estético? Lo expresivo, nos ha contestado Croce, ya para siempre. El arte es expresión y sólo expresión, postularé aquí [To ask, what is aesthetics?, is to ask, what single other thing is aesthetics? The expressive element, has been Croce's answer. Art is expression and only expression, I will propose here]." In another essay included in the same collection, "Indagación de la palabra" ["Inquiry into the Word"], Borges is just as explicit in *dissenting* from Croce's theory that the ultimate unit of speech is not the word but the sentence and that the latter must be understood, not in the usual grammatical way, but as an expressive organism whose meaning is complete, and which, therefore, may extend from a single exclamation to a long poem. Such a view, Borges insists, is

psicológicamente . . . insostenible [y] una equivocación psicológica no puede ser un acierto estético. Además, ¿no dejó dicho Schopenhauer que la forma de nuestra inteligencia es el tiempo, línea angostísima que sólo nos presenta la cosas una por una? Lo espantoso de esa estrechez es que los poemas a que alude reverencialmente Montoliú-Croce alcanzan unidad en la flaqueza de nuestra memoria, pero no en la tarea sucesiva de quien los escribió ni en la de quien los lee. (Dije espantoso, porque esa heterogeneidad de la sucesión despedaza no sólo las dilatadas composiciones, sino toda página escrita.)

[psychologically . . . unsustainable (and) a psychological error cannot be a good aesthetic judgment. Besides, did not Schopenhauer say that the shape of our intelligence is time, narrowest of lines that

only presents things to us one by one? The horror of this narrowness is that the poems to which Montoliu-Croce allude reverentially attain unity in the feebleness of our memory, but not in the successive labor of the writer or the reader. (I said "the horror" because that heterogeneity of succession fragments not only the extensive compositions, but any written page.)]

Twelve years later, in the short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," we find Borges writing that on his imaginary planet Tlön, "hay poemas famosos compuestos de una sola enorme palabra. Esta palabra integra un *objeto poético* creado por el autor [there are famous poems made up of one enormous word, a word which in truth forms a poetic *object*, the creation of the writer]" (*Ficciones*; [*Ficciones*, tr. A. Reid]).

Croce's identification of art with expression which Borges accepts in this essay is questioned in "La postulación de la realidad" ["The Postulation of Reality"], published in the review *Azul* in 1931. The difference in tone between the two essays is striking. "Hume notó para siempre," Borges begins,

que los argumentos de Berkeley no admiten la menor réplica y no producen la menor convicción; yo desearía, para eliminar los de Croce, una sentencia no menos educada y mortal. La de Hume no me sirve, porque la diáfana doctrina de Croce tiene la facultad de persuadir, aunque ésta sea la única. Su defecto es ser inmanejable; sirve para cortar una discusión, no para resolverla.

Su fórmula—recordará mi lector—es la identidad de lo estético y de lo expresivo. No la rechazo, pero quiero observar que los escritores de hábito clásico más bien rehuyen lo expresivo.

[Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments do not admit the slightest reply and do not produce the slightest conviction. I would like, in order to eliminate Croce's arguments, a no less gracious and mortal sentence. Hume's does not serve my purpose because Croce's diaphanous doctrine has the power of persuasion, if nothing more. The result is unmanageability: it serves to cut short a discussion, not to resolve it. Croce's formula, my reader will recall, is the identity of the aesthetic and the expressive.]

(*Discusión*; [*Borges, A Reader*, tr. E. R. Monegal and A. Reid])

"Classical" here, as Borges goes on to explain, does not designate the writers of a particular historical period. The classical writer is one who has confidence in the power of the accepted language to say anything he may wish to say: "Distraingo aquí de toda connotación histórica las palabras *clásico* y *romántico*,

entiendo por ellas dos arquetipos de escritor (dos procederes). El clásico no desconfía del lenguaje, cree en la suficiente virtud de cada uno de sus signos [I diverge here from all historical connotations of the words 'classicist' and 'romantic'; by them I understand two archetypes of the writer (two approaches). The classicist does not distrust language, he believes in the adequate virtue of each one of its signs].” The classical writer “no escribe los primeros contactos de la realidad, sino su elaboración final en conceptos [does not write of initial contacts with reality, but rather of their final conceptual elaboration]”; as examples, Borges cites Gibbon, Voltaire, Swift, and Cervantes. Such a view is obviously very different from the Crocean doctrine of intuition, as Borges himself makes clear: “Pasajes como los anteriores, forman la extensa mayoría de la literatura mundial, y aun la menos indigna. Repudiarlos para no incomodar a una fórmula, sería inconducente y ruinoso. Dentro de su notoria ineficacia, son eficaces; falta resolver esa contradicción [Passages like the previous one make up the greater part of world literature, even of that which is least unworthy. To repudiate them in order to accommodate a formula would be misleading and ruinous. Within their notorious inefficacy, they are efficacious; that contradiction must be resolved].” Borges attempts to resolve it with the argument that

la imprecisión es tolerable o verosímil en la literatura, porque a ella propendemos siempre en la realidad. . . . El hecho mismo de percibir, de atender, es de orden selectivo: toda atención, toda fijación de nuestra conciencia, comporta una deliberada omisión de lo no interesante. . . . Nuestro vivir es una serie de adaptaciones, vale decir, una educación del olvido.

[imprecision is tolerable or plausible in literature because we are always inclined to reality. . . . The very act of perceiving, of heeding, is of a selective order; every attention, every fixation of our conscience, implies a deliberate omission of that which is uninteresting. . . . Our lives are a series of adaptations, that is to say, the educating of forgetfulness.]

Readers of Borges' stories may recall the case of Funes *el memorioso* [*the memorious*], who was incapable of forgetting anything he had once experienced and equally incapable of grouping his experiences—we might say, in Crocean language and not without a certain malice, his *intuizioni*—into any more general categories. As a result poor Funes “no era muy capaz de pensar. Pensar es olvidar diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer. En el abarrotado mundo de Funes no había sino detalles, casi inmediatos [was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world