

Oeuvre and Context. Jorge Luis Borges' Works Reviewed through Cultural and Epistemological Aspects and as Criticism of Power

Extract

On 9 March 2007, Matthew Beaumont published an article entitled *Baudrillard and the End of Postmodernism: What Next?* in the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Alan Kirby's essay *The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond* appeared in 2006 on philosophynow.org. Then, in 2008, Raoul Eshelman's book *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* signalled a new shift of paradigm. By enlisting these titles, I tried to suggest that even though literary periodization is uncertain, we could somehow at least vaguely point out the moment of the Postmodern's decline, and that this moment continually interests both philosophers and litterateurs. 2006-2007-2008 – why would these years (that happen to also be the years of the Postmodern's agony) coincide with the professional inquiry's visible eschew of the Argentinian „backroom boy” of the Postmodern? Why would the Postmodern paradigm's landfall engulf the Borges-oeuvre? Could this oeuvre truly be exhausted; could it only be relevant in its relationship to the Postmodern exegesis? My dissertation sets off from these questions.

Through my work, I am suggesting that these questions are worth reconsidering as related to a more general and deeper problem, i.e. the relationship of the Postmodern to the metaphysics, and the relationship of the Borges-oeuvre to this view. Even though at first sight, Postmodern might seem firmly anti-metaphysical, a second glance reveals its confidence in (self-)conscious actions, in morality based on consciousness, and in the reflection's and the (self-)reflexivity's power to neutralize suppression by power. Literary Postmodern basically keeps the fundamental certitude that we must keep on telling stories, however, the scale and perspective are shifted: to an ever smaller scale, to multiple, multiplying perspective and meta-perspective in elaborating one storyline. The Postmodern narration's text-fetish, its belief that the world can be perceived as a web of dialoguing texts, and that the aforementioned shift of perspective and scale, or (self-)irony, (self-)reflexivity can by themselves neutralize the violence of narration and language, all affix this paradigm to metaphysics' sphere. Borges proposes to provoke metaphysics on a different ground; experience, trauma, history from a highly subjective and corporeal point of view become central in his works, events that, as such, cause a discrepancy in the continuity of consciousness. The Borges-oeuvre reveals how the world unfolds itself from the regressive web of textuality, and at the same time it offers an intellectual role-model that is not content anymore with telling stories in the name of the subordinate, female, ethnical subject, but aims to represent these subjects' speech impediment, stutter or silence. To achieve this, Borges summons metaphysical mind-breakers, however, my work actually states that the role of these metaphysical mind-breakers is, sometimes, to ensure a space where the voice of the subordinate subjects can show up as an *assailant*.

My methods in order to validate the formerly enlisted hypotheses are: 1) continuous reflexion about the historical and socio-cultural contexts, the ones that frame Borges' dilemmas, and also, about the

intellectual history and the *epistemological borderlines* the oeuvre reacts to; 2) I analyse these problems in the context of the *entire oeuvre*, I intend to prove that some positions of the criticism of power can only be identified, when one forgoes looking for them in one clearly identifiable (title, date, genre etc.) text, but treats these as an interface that only reveals itself in the larger context of the oeuvre; 3) I shift, from time to time, to the *involuntary and voluntary, pre-reflective situations of self-projection and self-construction*; 4) I constantly reflect upon *the Borgesian models of revealing sense*, upon the paradox underlying in the conscious-cognitive, erotic-pre-reflective modalities of cognition in the oeuvre.

I do not rely upon one homogenous professional apparatus. I can, however, enlist some major philosophical and literary schools that fundamentally define my orientation. The Poststructural (antihumanist) school that founded the criticism of bio-political power, represented by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, later Giorgio Agamben or Zygmunt Bauman, Judith Butler had a major impact on my work, even though the appearance of Poststructuralism overshadowed phenomenology represented by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Lévinas, and later László Tengelyi, Jean-Luc Marion or Bernhard Waldenfels. Both schools were equally important in my work, and they did not, in fact, void each other. I relied with trust on the works of Jacques Derrida, generally considered a Deconstructionist, however, I must mention that I can primarily affiliate with those Derrida-texts that, somehow, lead out of the Deconstructionist landscape. I consider Postcolonialist criticism important in my work (mostly the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), and also the feminist trend (e.g. Julia Kristeva). Clearly I am unable to mention everyone's name, mostly because some people's works resist categorization (like some of the aforementioned works also step out the boundaries of the trends enlisted), but I must mention Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Wolfgang Iser, as being cardinal influences to my analysis.

The thesis has six chapters. The first one treats the question of „archetypes” in the Hungarian Borges-reception, in the forewords and epilogues following the Borges-collections or even pre-set the logic and ideology of the selection, of how the materials are prepared, how this affects our image of the author and the oeuvre, and also, the selection of the professional analysis of the works considered worth examining.

The next two chapters can be interpreted as a challenge. In both instances, I assay problems in two Borges-texts whose scope expands way over the texts themselves. However, I have considered more useful to relate my observations to the particular texts, since this provided me the opportunity to watch these sensitive problems branch out, and hence, I was offered models and directives for further analysis (and myself, too). The second chapter is about the short story *Death and the Compass*, it focuses on the question of the Hungarian Borges-translations' reliability as reference-bases. I argue the fact that the translators find themselves in a complicated situation, since the translations require the knowledge of the wider oeuvre, its philosophical, literary and (meta)narratological mapping, and also, the observation of the reference-web that links these texts to other literary works. I consider the Hungarian translations to be satisfactory in comparison to the English and Romanian translations, however, in comparison to the Spanish original, these translations show that forty-fifty years that have passed, during which literary theory,

(meta)narratology and philosophy have escaped the pressure of dictatorship in Eastern-Central Europe's countries, and the knowledge of these would offer a more accurate and sensible translation of the Borges-oeuvre.

The third chapter deals explicitly with the problem of the Borgesian self-projection, even though it only offers a peak into the more reflexive layers, and into the game of mimicry. In order to consider this problem, I have chosen a text whose genre is rarely suspicious of manifesting itself through a projected self. This is a lecture entitled *Blindness*. This lecture willingly bases on the audience's biases and expectations of the writer directly manifesting his cognition. *Blindness* constructs an incredibly exciting self, based on these biases, which willingly overshadows some assumptions about human existence to provoke desire for them.

The fourth chapter actually broadens the problem. It focuses on how a sense that is different than simple cognition can manifest itself between this conscious self-construction that appears on every layer of the Borges-oeuvre and the life-reality. It is more likely to have an empirical character, as László Tengelyi describes this category, since in his view, experience refers to a breaking point or rip in the consciousness.

The success of this experiment is strongly based on the reduction of re-inserting the self-construction in the context of the oeuvre, and then defining the oeuvre as an aspect of the narrative identity, but also avoiding assuming a self that is primary to the narrativisation and uttering of the identity and could serve as an external reference to this process. This chapter gradually arrives to the question of experience. It embeds it in a larger problem: the shifting of the question of the self into experience.

The fifth and sixth chapters are experiment to show the overshadowing of some directives of the Borges-oeuvre by evaluations that only salute his works as the rise of the metaphysical literature. Through analysing the representations of the gaucho, I will try to point out (in the sixth chapter) that the oeuvre is highly likely to have direct political and critical aspects about power, moreover, some segments can be re-read as histories ritually retold from a subjective level or local histories of the colonised existence. The beauty and hardship of this experiment is that one cannot avoid showing the dual role of culture, philosophy and literature in the questions of oppression, i.e. the fact that culture must not compete with something external, but with its own possibilities, definitions wherever it tries assuming the cause of the oppressed (see chapter five). Hence, the representations of the gaucho in Borges' work cannot simply rely on text-analysis, since questions about cultural theory, epistemology and gnoseology occur, when one tries to map the historical situation (mostly bio-political) in which these gaucho-representations react. I will map this background through the dichotomy of poetry and de-poetization.

Keywords: *Jorge Luis Borges, Postmodern, metaphysics, reflection, narration, text, self-irony, experience, trauma, subjectivity, subordinated subject, epistemology, self-construction, interface, conscious-cognitive, erotic-pre-reflective, reception, eventual, occurrence, colonialization, bio-politics, cultural theory, poetry-de-poetization*

Table of contents

Prologue 7

1. Directions in the Hungarian reception of the Borges-oeuvre 19

1.1. Foreword and epilogue as *proxenos* (the role of paratext in the reception) 19

1.2. Archetypes in the Hungarian Borges-reception 30

1.2.1. „the fantasy that was given birth to by sense” – the writer as society’s engineer 30

1.2.2. Georgie in the library, the library in Georgie (the topos of the lifeless life) 38

1.2.3. Borges, the pessimist (the failure of cognition?) 42

1.2.4. „He did not want to be a poet but a scientist” – poet vs. prosaist 51

1.3. The defence of the (strangeness of) *proxenos* 61

2. „I am Gryphius-Ginzberg-Ginsburg” – cruxes of translation in Jorge Luis Borges’ detective story *Death and the Compass* 63

2.1. Philological addition 63

2.2. „In the hypothesis that you suggest” – textual vs. sensible translation 64

2.3. „The way of the bullet” – the philosophical labyrinth of translation 67

2.4. „so strange – so rigorously strange” – the context of genre theory 69

2.5. „Gryphius-Ginzberg-Ginsburg soy yo” – an allusion to Flaubert 70

2.6. Le rouge et le noir – the contexts of the oeuvre 73

2.7. Language and its shadow – dilemmas in translating the title 75

2.8. Current situation and conclusions 76

3. The appearance and role of mimicry in Borges’ nonfiction. The paradoxical gifts of the passionate annihilation. *Blindness*, from Paul de Man’s point of view upon Derrida 78

3.1. Note to a two-tongued title 78

3.2. Wearing the historicist-mimicry, first steps in the 79

3.3. *Prosopon poiein* – the face bleeding through the mimicry 82

3.4. The needle and the river – going blind twice 85

3.5. Caring for the careless 89

4. The rhythm of the self-liberating body – the problematic of the identity in regard to Borges' oeuvre 92

4.1. Methods of the sense manifesting itself in narrative identity and self-identity 92

4.2. The formation of heterotopic spaces in the oeuvre – spaces of „the parched syntax” 94

4.2.1. The „contribution” of Michel Foucault and Umberto Eco to the Borgesian aspects of the problem 94

a.) Body and *corpus* – the heterotopic space of self-strangeness in Borges' work 99

b.) The narcissistic character of history and the detection of a fable 102

c.) Reality and imagination – presenting and detecting real and fictive 108

d.) The interaction of shape and material structure – the rehabilitation of the Deleuzian desire as related to the authorship 119

e.) The oeuvre as the warden of the lively life-reality – an allusion to Heidegger 126

5. De-poetising the gaucho – cultural and epistemological questions and dilemmas 140

5.1. Hypotheses 140

5.2. The Borgesian „documents” and temporal spectrums of an attempt to de-poetise 140

5.3. Steps to recontextualisation 141

5.4. Poetry and spatiality. Relating the questions of poetry to the stories of oppressing the living world 146

5.4.1. The aspects of the late-Enlightenment – pre-Romantic concepts of poetry about natural, subjectivity and existence 147

5.4.2. The boundaries of the narrative modelling of sense – introducing the concept of *autopoetry* in the recontextualization of cultural phenomena 151

5.4.3. The non-poetic, theological and Postcolonialist aspects of Latin-American philosophy 161

5.4.4. The importance of the competition between space and time in the metaphysical paradigm – the sketch of a typically Borgesian space-concept 168

5.5. Poetry and *politheia*. Poetry as the core of the organistic concept of the bodies forming the state and the concept of the state. Elaborating the boundaries of the perceivable and the intensification of bio-power discourses in the first third of the 20th century. 175

5.5.1. Jacques Rancière's political aesthetics 180

5.5.2. Deleuze–Guattari's concept of the body without organs 188

5.6. Notes to recontextualizing the problem 193

6. The Borgesian practices of de-poetising the gaucho 195

6.1. The formation of a specific narrator-identity in Borges' gaucho-stories 195

(Narrator as observer. Regards to analysing the observer) 195

(The war tourist, the anthropologist and the penitentiary – observer-roles in the first third of the 20th century) 204

(The war tourist – machine and techne from Kafka to Borges) 205

(The anthropologist – dangerous anthropologies at the dawn of the 20th century) 217

(The friends of the anthropologist – Hegel and Darwin) 225

(Name and bio-power – employees in the first third of the 20th century) 227

(The gaucho and the law – the appearance of the agent in the national paradigm) 231

(The feminine connotations of the employee – blackmailing the woman) 235

(The anti-anthropologist and the temptation of the reader) 238

(Two confessions – priestly secrecy where secrets have no language) 239

6.2. Gaucho and animal – the problem of transferring emotion and victimisation 242

6.3. *Mneme* and *anamnesis* in the culture – the gauchos' need for salvation 252

Conclusions 266

Bibliography 277