

*The Argentine Writer and Tradition**Humberto Núñez-Faraco*

In a lecture delivered in 1951 at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores in Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges questioned the assumption that, in order to be authentic, Argentine writers should follow the stylistic and thematic norms exemplified in gauchesque literature. Argentine writers, he contended, have legitimate access to a multiplicity of traditions; therefore, they should not confine themselves to local or nationalistic themes.¹ This attitude, which may seem paradoxical when set against the linguistic and poetic tenets he held during the 1920s, reflects Borges's European kinship, a consequence not only of his heterodox family background but also of his school years in Switzerland and his broad humanist education. At the same time, the existence of a large library in the Borges household consolidated from an early age his enthusiasm for all sorts of books. British writers, including Stevenson, Chesterton, Kipling, and Shaw, figured among his favourite and most lasting influences. This circumstance enabled him to perceive world literature as 'an adventure into an endless variety of styles' in which the reader is free to create meaningful connections between distant authors and texts.² Borges reorganized the canon of Western literature not only by subverting the hierarchical conventions of literary history, which assigns fixed formal and genealogical characteristics to the works of the present in relation to those of the past, but also by bringing to the forefront a number of non-Western traditions (both secular and religious) with which he initiated challenging and innovative readings. Borges was eclectic in his conception of literary history just as he was sceptical about the formulation of a poetic creed that did not allow for change and renewal. As he put it: 'Literature is a game with tacit conventions; to violate them partially or entirely is one of the many joys (one of the many obligations) of a game of unknown limits.'³ For him, reordering the library, placing Homer after Virgil or a French symbolist poet next to Cervantes is a form of literary criticism available to every reader.

In a wider historical perspective, Borges was aware of the fact that because of its international trade and commerce, its liberal economic policies, and its openness to European immigration since the second half of the nineteenth century, Argentine society at large had for more than a hundred years been receptive to Europe and the wider world. Rejecting the xenophobic tendency prevalent among nationalist circles throughout the 1930s and 1940s (which perceived non-Catholic and non-Romance-speaking immigrants as a threat to the survival of the country's core values and ethnic identity), Borges regarded modern Argentina as the product of a rich process of cultural miscegenation to which different ethnic and religious groups had made a positive contribution. Because of this, he argued, Argentine writers enjoy a privileged position vis-à-vis the European cultural legacy, one that allows them to interact with the Western literary tradition as a whole: '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 nation or another may have' (426). Although this premise is susceptible to criticism (On what basis can Argentinian intellectuals claim to have a greater right to the Western tradition than those who have forged it?), it reveals a logic of its own if read within the ideological context in which it was written: the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores where Borges delivered the talk was known for its liberal, anti-Peronist stance. Thus, Borges scorned a nationalist version of Argentine literature that sought to eliminate the notion of writing as a complex web of cultural influences. The formation of a writer, he suggests, requires the capacity to appreciate and assimilate different periods and styles, and this cannot exist – let alone flourish – without an adequate contact with other literatures and cultures.

Putting aside the issue of postcolonial cultural dependency that is at the centre of the confrontation between national and foreign literatures, a debate that was particularly intense in Argentina throughout the nineteenth century, what is important to note here is Borges's defence of literary creation as a free and active engagement with the tradition (or traditions) within which a writer *chooses* to work. As he put it elsewhere, through the process of appropriation, each writer reinvents his or her own predecessors ('The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors', *TTL* p. 365, italics in the original). Thus, by attacking the Argentine nationalists, Borges subverts the deterministic view of cultural heritage as the expression of a people's unique identity. Argentine writers – he suggests – should be characterized by their openness to a variety of influences, one that involves a dynamic process of interpretation, transformation, and subversion.

Nationalist ideologies, on the other hand, lead to the actions of intransigent regimes that end up building walls or burning books, as Borges eloquently illustrates in the essay 'The Wall and the Books' (1950) (included in *TTL* 344–346).

If artistic freedom has been shown to be an enriching factor in the development of the Western literary tradition, the idea of protecting specific aspects of a national literature against the corrosive effects of foreign influences (as maintained by cultural nationalists) is a limiting and ineffectual imposition that disempowers the capacity of Argentine writers to engage with broader aspects of human existence. Yet, if Borges defended the autonomy of the writer vis-à-vis the constraints of nationalist allegiances, this by no means implied in him a break with the Argentine literary tradition nor an aesthetic rejection of the vernacular models he always held in great esteem, for these, too, carry their own dimension of truth. For Borges, the works of the past constitute an endless source of creativity insofar as they remain open to a process of interpretation in which new meanings are generated. In the universal order of literary discourse imagined by him, what is borrowed and what is created anew become relative notions because of their interaction in the *interpretative* process: in Borges there is always an expansion rather than a limitation of creative freedom.

Borges's views on the question of a national literary tradition begin to take shape after his return to Argentina in the early 1920s, at a time in which the debate about language and identity in Argentine culture and society had acquired new impetus. Indeed, the concern in academic circles regarding the widespread neglect of Peninsular Spanish led to the creation, in 1922, of the Institute of Philology at the University of Buenos Aires. Its first director, Américo Castro, was a fierce advocate of linguistic orthodoxy. As a young writer with moderate nationalist sympathies, however, Borges promoted the defence of the vernacular in its capacity to supply the Argentine writer with a valuable set of linguistic tools. Thus, he rejected the adoption of standard Castilian together with the stylistic precepts of Spanish grammarians, although in his poetic practice Borges did not rule out their applicability. Indeed, because of his previous involvement with the Spanish Ultraist movement, it is possible to find in his early poetry a good number of verses conceived in a clear Castilian vein. Nevertheless, for the kind of cultural nationalism Borges was beginning to embrace at this time, it was evident that the rules and norms of Peninsular Spanish could not constitute the basis of a national literary praxis.

While discarding the value of marginal urban dialects to fulfil the requirements of a refined poetic expression (dialects such as the *lunfardo* and the *arrabalero* were by then making their way into popular music, poetry, and narrative under the disapproving gaze of the traditional creole elite), Borges finds in the nineteenth-century vernacular a firm basis upon which a true poetic tradition might be rooted. In contrast to the poverty of language and thought that, in his view, dominated the contemporary scene (he was particularly critical of the legacy of Nicaraguan poet, Rubén Darío), Borges discovers in the literary tradition of the Argentine creole – as manifested in writers such as Sarmiento, Echeverría, Mansilla, and others – the existence of a fertile ground which not only integrated but also dignified the dialect of its time. Borges's linguistic perspective during these years seems to indicate his desire to preserve a national character against the overwhelming cosmopolitanism of Buenos Aires through the consolidation of a unifying literary language. By drawing attention to the emotional transparency of the vernacular, Borges proclaimed his faith in the realization of a literary project that would bring to fruition its own mode of existence. And yet, despite his *criollista* standpoint Borges was far from supporting a literary practice that would do away with a reciprocal exchange of ideas and influences with other cultures around the world.

Notwithstanding his optimism about the expressive possibilities of the vernacular, Borges was soon to abandon the linguistic project he had forged during the 1920s in order to elaborate the highly artistic prose to which future generations of Spanish American writers are indebted. As he entered a new phase in his artistic development during the 1940s, his engagement with European languages and world literatures acquired a greater prominence; and when he returned to poetry in the 1960s, he put the study of Anglo-Saxon at the centre of his linguistic concerns. Nowhere is the passage from the particular to the universal made clearer than in Borges's interaction with language. In a talk on the theme of blindness delivered at the Teatro Coliseo in Buenos Aires in 1977, for example, he describes how the study of Anglo-Saxon facilitated a recuperation of his ancestral history. Elsewhere, he says (with Emerson) that 'all words are metaphors – or fossil poetry', by which he suggests the presence of an *archaic* poetic symbolism in language.⁴ Inasmuch as metaphor lies at the heart of human discourse and indeed constitutes the primitive means of awareness and articulation, poetry becomes the space where man can recognize himself as part of a tradition that unfolds in and through the temporality of language. This view of poetry as a shared experience

embedded in language rests on Borges's conviction that literary activity consists less in a capacity for invention than in the expression of a common reality for which the writer is simply an effective medium: 'A language is a tradition, a way of grasping reality, not an arbitrary assemblage of symbols.'⁵

As I have already mentioned, Borges believed that cultural diversity spreads the seeds of a fertile literary practice. Following Thorstein Veblen's postulate about the primacy of Jewish thought in Modern Europe, which hinges on the question of Jewish assimilation, Zionism, and multiculturalism ('It appears to be only when the gifted Jew escapes from the cultural environment created and fed by the particular genius of his own people . . . that he comes into his own as a creative leader in the world's intellectual enterprise'),⁶ Borges argues in 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition' that the contribution of the Jews to Western civilization has a socio-historical, rather than biological explanation due to the way in which Jewish scientists and intellectuals were able to create a hyphenate or interstitial status between their own ethnic and religious identity, and gentile society. That is to say, their peculiar place within the adopted culture allowed them to interact freely with different traditions and thus to contribute positively to the development of Western civilization. He also mentions the case of Shaw, Berkeley, and Swift (Joyce is, surprisingly, omitted from the list), who, as Irishmen, were able to make innovations in the English literary and philosophical tradition because of their intermediary position with respect to the dominant culture. According to Borges, Argentine writers are in a similar situation with regard to the West, a circumstance that allows them to take on all aspects of European thought and culture 'without superstition and with an irreverence that can have, and already has had, fortunate consequences' (426). However, in order to do this, he also perceived the need to overcome the cultural and psychological sense of inferiority created by the colonial experience, an issue that had already been denounced by prominent Latin American intellectuals from the 1920s onwards, so that Spanish American writers might approach the Western tradition without the inhibitions implanted by the dominant culture throughout four centuries of colonial rule; it was necessary, in short, to overcome the habit of servile imitation that had characterized Spanish American thought until then. The time to do so was ripe, given the moral crisis and socio-political divisions created in Europe by the rise of fascism, which forced Spanish American intellectuals to formulate their own ideological position both in the national and the international arenas. Thus, literature became the battlefield of a proxy war between antagonistic

political factions, a struggle that in itself was beneficial for the awakening of the Latin American social conscience.

By way of conclusion: literary tradition, as a vital force, must feed on the past and, at the same time, aim towards the future. In doing so, it needs to keep a balance between those two poles. An excessive dependence on rules and norms erodes the tradition's vitality; an abrupt departure from its roots renders it meaningless. From this perspective, writers have a double responsibility: first, to assert their own voice in a way that is consistent with their literary tradition (or traditions), and, secondly, to be in control of the intellectual and expressive means that will guarantee the significance of their work. In his canonical story 'Death and the Compass' (1942), Borges signals the moment of tension between the past and the present in which a new artistic expression comes to life. What he had searched for in vain in his earlier work through the use and abuse of local colour had finally crystalized in a more authentic form. In it, I would argue, Borges found a metaphorical description for the kind of writing he had forged in *The Garden of Forking Paths*, his first ground-breaking collection of stories whose merits, nevertheless, failed to impress the pro-nationalist jury of the National Literary Prize to which he submitted the work in 1942. As Borges puts it in the story: 'the odious double-faced Janus *who gazes toward the twilights of dusk and dawn* terrorized my dreams and my waking'. Then he adds: 'I swore by the god who sees from two faces ... to weave a labyrinth around the man who had imprisoned my brother. I have woven it, and it holds: the materials are a dead writer on heresies, a compass, an eighteenth-century sect, a Greek word, a dagger, the rhombs of a paint shop.'⁷

While the heterogeneous elements used in the creation of 'Death and the Compass' reveal the hybrid nature of its narrative – which, like a dream (one of Borges's preferred analogies for literary creation), is both deeply unsettling and strangely familiar – the Janus-faced figure reminds the reader of both the continuity and the innovation that are at play in the work. The essays, short stories, and poems written during the course of his life lend credence to the poetics of irreverence Borges so fervently upheld in the conference of 1951. However, far from requiring a mere parodic treatment of Western culture, Borges's own work bears witness to the fact that the notion of irreverence – which is akin to his interest in the eccentric and the unorthodox – does not merely entail mockery or derision but a critical posture that seeks to imprint the writer's own voice as the expression of artistic freedom and intellectual autonomy.

Notes

1. 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', in Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction, 1922–1986*, pp. 420–427. Subsequent page references are cited in the text.
2. Seamus Heaney and Richard Kearney, 'Borges and the World of Fiction: An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges', *The Crane Bag*, 7 (1983), 71–78 (p. 73).
3. 'Preliminary note', in Thomas Carlyle: *Sartor Resartus* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1945), pp. 9–15 (p. 9); my translation.
4. Willis Barnstone, ed., *Borges at Eighty: Conversations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 165.
5. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Gold of the Tigers: Selected Later Poems*, ed. and trans. Alastair Reid (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), p. 8.
6. Thorsten Veblen, 'The Intellectual Pre-Eminence of Jews in Modern Europe', *Political Science Quarterly*, 34, 1 (1919), pp. 33–42 (p. 38).
7. Jorge Luis Borges, *A Personal Anthology*, ed. and trans. Anthony Kerrigan et al. (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 1–14 (p. 11).