

Postmodern or Post-Auschwitz Borges and the Limits of Representation

The list of “firsts” is well known by now: Borges, father of the New Novel, the nouveau roman, the Boom; Borges, forerunner of the hypertext, early magical realist, proto-deconstructionist, postmodernist pioneer. The list is well known, but it may omit the most significant encomium: Borges, founder of literature after Auschwitz, a literature that challenges our orders of knowledge through the fractured mirror of one of the century’s defining events.

Fashions and prejudices ingrained in several critical communities have obscured Borges’s role as a passionate precursor of many later intellectuals -from Weisel to Blanchot, from Amery to Lyotard. This omission has hindered Borges research, preventing it from contributing to major theoretical currents and areas of inquiry. My aim is to confront this lack. I want to rub Borges and the Holocaust together in order to unsettle critical verities, meditate on the limits of representation, foster dialogue between disciplines -and perhaps make a few sparks fly.

A shaper of the contemporary imagination, Borges serves as a touchstone for concepts of literary reality and unreality, for problems of knowledge and representation, for critical and philosophical debates on totalizing systems and postmodern esthetics, for discussions on centers and peripheries, colonialism and postcolonialism. Investigating the Holocaust in Borges can advance our broadest thinking on these questions, and at the same time strengthen specific disciplines, most particularly Borges scholarship, Holocaust studies, and Latin American literary criticism. It is to these disciplines that I now turn.

The community of Borges commentators, be it for formalist or political reasons, has long focused on his “irreality.” For many, this was a badge of honor. Paul de Man, in “A Modern Master,” one of the earliest essays on Borges in the English-speaking world (1964), encapsulated this attitude aphoristically: Borges’s “stories are about the style in which they are written” (Alazraki, *Critical* 57). Morality or representation had

no place in these narrations, de Man wrote, but that made Borges a "great writer" (61).

De Man's fascination with Borgesian irreality, a fascination that helped convert Borges into a poststructuralist-deconstructionist guru, was one side of the coin. The other saw Borges as equally irrealist -no quibbling there. But to Marxist critics, who were primarily although not exclusively Borges's Latin American fellows, irrealism was a scarlet letter, a sign of shame marking the sins of escapism, cosmopolitanism, and irrelevance. García Márquez couldn't have put it more succinctly about the same time that de Man was lauding the Argentine master: Borges "is a writer I detest." Borges's verbal violin was extraordinary, the future Nobel Laureate admitted, but, in the final analysis, he was "sheer evasion" (Alazraki, *Critical* 6) Adolfo Prieto, Noé Jitrik, David Viñas, and many of their Argentine and Latin American confrères echoed this rejection.

As evidenced in García Márquez's statement, the irreality tag shifted rapidly from Borges's work to Borges himself: Borges the man lived in irreality, in dreams, in books, without people, divorced from his environment. Jaime Alarazki, a personal friend of the writer, gave voice to this view when he asserted: Borges has largely "avoided human experience" (3).

Small wonder, then, that in 1992 the German writer Gerhard Kopf published a novel entitled *Borges gibt es nicht* (There Is No Borges) in which the author is an imaginary creature, something out of his fantastic zoologies, like a unicorn, a salamander, or a sphinx (20).

All of this talk of unreality was fine and good, except for one little problem -it wasn't true. The fantasists, I suggest, were Borges's commentators more than Borges or his work. And here is where the Holocaust-as-challenge gains importance. For if Borges lived in "irreality," how could his writings from the World War II period, writings that pointed unambiguously to its horrors, really be about those horrors? How could reality have anything to do with the articles, stories, and essays that denounced fascism, the maiming of German culture, the fall of Paris, or the death camps? Borges was vehement and morally crystalline on these polemical topics in *El Hogar*, where he had a regular column, as well as in *Sur*, where many of his famous narrations were first published between 1939 and 1946. He was equally ardent in his translations of anti-Nazi German literature, and in his introductions to poetry by Judeo-Argentine authors (see *Revista Multicolor* and *Mester de judería*). His attitude stood in stark contrast to the now-revealed moral and political equivocations of seminal intellectual figures. How then could reality have anything to do with writings that pointed so directly to reality?

The question seems pivotal, but for a long time it was moot. As the “unreal” Borges became entrenched, the evidence on the page gave way to a censoring of permitted readings of Borges from which we are only now emerging.

Blindspots in the community of Holocaust scholars likewise hindered a balanced and fruitful reading of Borges. Even a cursory look at the mammoth volume, *Holocaust Literature: A Handbook of Critical, Historical, and Literary Writings* (1993), indicates a complete absence of material on Latin America. In this vast and definitive survey, a maremagnum of scholarship, there is *not a single article* on anything or anybody south of the U.S. border; Latin America does not even appear in the index! Columbus and Vespucci may have brought the southern “New World” into our consciousness five centuries ago, but for the handbook of Holocaust studies, edited by Saul Friedman, Latin America remains off the map. The stance, I am sorry to say, is representative of the field.

Latin America is generally not present in discussions on the history and psychology of the Holocaust, and on literary responses to the disaster, as if Latin Americans had no role in the immigration politics of the period, or in the imitation and condemnation of Hitler, or in writing compelling fiction about what took place. For example, the handbook’s survey of creative literature begins in the sixties, with European authors. The same occurs in another important essay collection, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”*, edited by Saul Friedlander and in Berel Lang’s equally significant, *Writing and the Holocaust*. What about the much earlier “Death and the Compass,” “The Secret Miracle,” and “Deutsches Requiem,” published in 1942, 1943, and 1946, respectively, in the very heat of the events, way before the supposed “discovery” of the Holocaust as an esthetic and philosophical challenge?

On the pages of these fictions Borges probes the limits of representation, and grapples with related questions that have since gained importance. I will return to this topic. Suffice it to note that if many Borges critics ignored his treatment of the Holocaust because of their unrealistic postures, Holocaust critics were -and largely are- blinkered by their Euro-U.S.-centrism.

The opposite face of the coin is the frequent localness of Latin American studies. Partly in defensive response to metropolitan neglect, Latin Americanists have tended to emphasize the distinctive and particular -how Latin America differed. (I am thinking primarily, although not exclusively, of cultural-literary critics.) Why study the repercussions of

the Second World War in, say, Argentina, when you could stress topics that appeared much more “autochthonous” -the indigenous, gauchesque, or magical real, for instance. In an intellectual frame that focused on “national” culture, Borges seemed foreign -“cosmopolitan” and “universalist” were the usual expletives- what with his writings about authoritarians in Babylon and hunted intellectuals in Prague (see Moraña).

Never mind that at the time he was writing a pro-fascist government was ruling in the Babel that was Buenos Aires, a cosmopolitan city of immigrants frequently characterized by the Mesopotamian cognomen, or that the far-right newspaper, *Crisol* [Crucible], was shrieking in its allegedly literary column: “We have already unmasked Borges’s Jewish ancestry, maliciously hidden, but poorly disguised” [“A Borges le hemos reconocido...su ascendencia judía, maliciosamente oculta, pero mal disimulada”] (*Crisol* 30 Jan. 1934). Borges’s delicious retort to this inquisitorial witchhunt is the now-acclaimed gem, “I, a Jew” [“Yo, judío”], where he picks apart the blood-purity canards with exquisite irony and unabashed partisanship. I am not sure, however, how acclaimed his position was in the Buenos Aires of the thirties, where, to cite an significant example, the anti-Semitic Director of the National Library, Gustavo Martínez Zuviría, who wrote under the pseudonym Hugo Wast, published a volume, *Buenos Aires, futura Babilonia*, in which he railed against the Israelite heretics threatening to take over the already too “foreignized” and defenseless capital of the Argentine (see Aizenberg 42-43; Hugo Wast, *Buenos Aires: futura Babilonia* 38).

What worked against Borges in Latin American studies were essentialized definitions of “Latin Americanness,” coupled with an inability to creatively engage the complex web of relations between geographies and cultures, within and without the usually artificial boundaries we call “nations.” Borges dealt with this very problem in his 1951 lecture-essay, “El escritor argentino y la tradición” [“The Argentine Writer and Tradition”], where he presents his ideas for such a fruitful engagement, precisely under the all-too-real shadow of the Second World War. I quote: “Everything that has taken place in Europe, the dramatic happenings of the last few years in Europe, have had profound resonance here. The fact that a person was a sympathizer of Franco or of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War, or a sympathizer of the Nazis or the Allies, has in many cases caused very grave quarrels and animosity. This would not occur if we were cut off from Europe” (*Labyrinths* 183)

Fifty years after the end of the war, when *recent* dramatic events in Europe again resonate in Argentina, as everywhere, Borges’s words are

especially insightful. They help explain why the critical milieu is more propitious for breaking out of the bounds of doctrinaire Latin American localism.

Examining the Holocaust in Borges would therefore help lift several critical veils and encourage forward-moving dialogue. I now wish to outline how.

First, Borges studies. Scholars have finally begun to question the long-regnant tenet of extreme "unreality." When I dared broach this subject over a decade ago in my book, *The Aleph Weaver*, I was taken to task. I recall one exchange, when I suggested that a reading of many of the fictions might be enriched by considering their original site of publication-pages of *Sur* full of articles on fascism and the war, many by Borges. The response: context doesn't count, and, anyhow, that's no way to read Borges. But the theoretical climate has changed, in part because diligent research has unmasked the obscured context of some inspirers and practitioners of anti-contextual criticism -the case of Paul de Man is only one salient instance (see Hirsch). A volume such as Daniel Balderston's, with the once-heretical title, *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (1993), signals the broader winds.

Since the Argentine master wrote his pathbreaking fictions around the war years, and took a strong stand in these narrations, in his essays, and in his political activism (he was a member of the Committee Against Racism and Anti-Semitism), a study of the topic would promote a more balanced understanding of the multiple registers in Borges, and, by extension, in contemporary literary discourse, where representation and history have been a scandal.

I am not advocating sanctifying Borges, or ignoring his lacks. Nor am I failing to take into account the problems that surround capturing "history" or "reality" in any text -let alone Borges. But it seems to me that it is one thing to recognize these difficulties, and quite another to continue to sustain that as early as 1930 Borges retreated into an irrevocable "irreality" (see Fariás).

Let me move to the second area, Holocaust studies. This discipline would benefit not merely by correcting its disregard for Latin America, a stance that has no place in a discourse devoted to chronicling the ultimate consequences of grievous ethnic hatred. At a time of postcolonial rethinking of frontiers, examining Borges would enlarge the discipline's horizon of inquiry, demonstrating that World War II and the Holocaust indeed had global consequences. Borges's writings can serve

as a stimulus to examine the cultural responses of other overlooked regions, such as Africa. I am thinking here of *Camp de Thiaroye* (1989), a powerful film by the great Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene, about the 1944 French colonial massacre of repatriated Franco-African infantrymen. Some had been prisoners of war in concentration camps; all were victims of European racism. The movie is an indictment from one so-called periphery, just as Borges's writings are from another.

In fact, Borges early on grappled with issues that have since become central to Holocaust research, issues with much greater implications, of course. One of these is the question of the limits of representation.

"To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," Theodor Adorno wrote in a much-quoted statement (34). His larger boundary-question is: Given the artifice of any work of art, how can one adequately, and ethically, represent the catastrophe? Berel Lang, glossing on Adorno, argues that to keep silent would be worse, that the imagination must do its work of insightful recreation. Certain apprehensions do, however, exert pressure on imaginative writing, and account for some recurrent features of Holocaust fiction. These are the incorporation of historical discourse as a means of underlining truthfulness, and, at the same time, an allusive or distanced telling with gaps. (see Lang 2-3; 10; 12; 23; 34; Friedlander, *Probing* 17; and Langer 176).

"The Secret Miracle" exemplifies those traits. Precise historical anchoring marks the tale, as a way of indicating the unmistakable circumstances; for example, the fiction opens with a chillingly exact time and place: Prague on the dawn of March 14, 1939, the day the armored vanguard of the Third Reich occupied the city (Borges, *OC* 1: 508). These references are not just "datum points," generators of verisimilitude in a non-referential text, as has often been argued (Balderston 57). On the contrary, Borges tests the agonizing tensions between reality and representation, as the victim Jaromir Hladik struggles, through his drama, to at once articulate and evade the terror, to rescue some shred of humanity. His efforts recall the testimony of Alfred Kantor on his secret artistic endeavors in the camps: "My commitment to drawing came out of a deep instinct of self-preservation and undoubtedly helped me to deny the unimaginable horrors of that time. By taking the role of an 'observer,' I could for a few moments detach myself...and better hold together the threads of sanity" (qtd. in Langer 54).

"The Secret Miracle" brings us into the presence of a human being searching for a discourse commensurate with his dilemma -the threat of extermination. It is to Borges's credit that he attempts to imagine the

dilemma and to find a language adequate to express it (Langer 166; 81). We remember Lyotard's much later words concerning the difficulties of "expressing" Auschwitz: how does one measure an earthquake which has destroyed all instruments of measurement? (*Le Différend*; also qtd. in Friedlander, "The Shoah" 58)

Borges's story is perhaps best known for its much-cited line, "la irrealidad ...es la condición del arte" ["irreality...is the condition of art"] used repeatedly as proof for Borges's you-know-what (510). But, again, you cannot take it out of context, for the quote comes from a tale that *problematizes* the notion of art for art's sake, that depends for its force on the contamination of art by reality, and the anticipation of reality by art. Friedlander speaks of the hybridity of Holocaust fiction, where "reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter" (*Probing* 17). This is exactly what happens in Borges's fiction, where Hladk's -and Borges's- mental work unsays yet says the horror. The narration's final line is uncategorical: "Jaromir Hladik died on March 29" (*OC* 1: 513). I cannot but think here of Belgian survivor Jean Amery's description of life in the lager "Nowhere in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere was reality so real. A glance at the watchtowers, a sniff of burnt fat from the crematories sufficed [to recognize this]" (19).

In "Deutsches Requiem," published only months after the Nuremberg Trials, Borges's imaginative beacon turns from the victim to the perpetrator. He takes up the almost impossible endeavor of creating a Nazi leading figure -a rare instance in Holocaust fiction (Langer 10). With considerable gall, if we think about it, he attempts to provide insight into the nature of the genocidal impulse through the consciousness of a condemned war criminal. Borges once more walks the fine line between mimetism and transfiguration, between historical loci and symbolic dramatizations. On the one hand, he endows Otto Dietrich zur Linde with a detailed biography; on the other, he charges zur Linde with the doctrinal mythology that, in Borges's view, was the motor behind the destructive enterprise: the notion that the world was "dying" of Judaism, and its "sickness," Christianity. (Of course, the "mythology" itself can be understood as terribly real, since the words from the story uncannily echo Heinrich Himmler's assertion in a 1943 address: "We had the moral right, we had the duty... to do away with these people who wanted to do away with us...Because we extirpate a bacillus, we should not become sick from this bacillus (Wolfe 251.)

At times, Borges's narration sounds like the sharply-etched capsule portraits in Raul Hilberg's *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, portraits intended to underscore that individuals did the labor of annihilation, and to witness through an accumulation of documented minutiae. Such minutiae *hinder* the interpretive substitution that can lead to trivialization or even denial of what occurred. It is the mode that Claude Lanzmann, following Hilberg, uses in his film, *Shoah* (see Lanzmann: *Shoah* 70-72; "Raul Hilberg" 185-187; Brinkley and Youra 111). At other moments, however, "Deutsches Requiem" resonates with the theological-metaphysical constructs that George Steiner has identified as the only possible elucidation for the enormity of what transpired; the fiction drips with interpretation, in other words (Lang 159).

Borges thus touches the two crucial and difficult poles of effective Holocaust art: he tries to recreate at least a limited authentic image - what Andreas Huyssen has called "mimetic approximation" -and he ventures some insight, some approach to the ontological event (Langer 176; Huyssen 16). Does he succeed? I believe that, in the forties, at a moment when the various orders of knowledge were just beginning to respond to the challenge posed by the Holocaust, by the break that the Holocaust represented in totalizing systems, Borges knew how to ask the right questions and to confront the relevant artistic issues. Indeed, one might argue that his innovative fictional voice, which came to fruition precisely in the heat of Second World War, was constructed by the catastrophe (see Friedlander, *Probing* 10).

Borges's early, poetic voice was generated under the impact of expressionism, born out of the trenches of the First World War; his mature narrative expression, poised between a fractured history and a problematic representation, articulating reality and evading it, was the product of the Holocaust era, seen with penetrating lucidity from his position as "mere" Argentine. Much before Lyotard, who in his meditations on the Holocaust points to the necessity and the impossibility of representing the disaster, Borges inscribed this double movement in his prose.

It is important to underline the double movement. For the Holocaust in Borges puts to rest the idea of Borgesian writing as no more than a self-referential simulacrum. Baudrillard may cite Borges to buttress his disquisitions of postmodern simulation, where all is image and surface, but these lines on Heidegger by the French thinker run *counter* to the spirit of Borges: "Heidegger is accused of being a Nazi. In point of fact it barely matters whether the aim is to indict him or defend him on this charge" (90). In Borges's story, "Guayaquil," the German philosopher's

pro-Nazism is not dismissed so lightly. The larger point is that Borges questions the limits of representation as a way of finding a new discourse commensurate with a new genocidal reality, not as a means of liberation from any relation to reality.

Hence the hesitation, the back and forth, the “postscript” about dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, and Nazism that closes his 1940 dystopian tale “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” and the famous “and yet” that ends his 1946 “A New Refutation of Time.” I quote: “And yet, and yet... Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. [Remember what Jaromir Hladik did in the face of extermination.] Our destiny...is not frightful by being unreal...; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad...The world, unfortunately is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges” (*Labyrinths* 234).

Read through the Holocaust, Borges can be understood as an early practitioner of what David Hirsch has called “post-Auschwitz,” rather than “postmodern,” writing. The first term, argues Hirsch, is more historically-grounded. It names the terrors of the era and unmasks the link between those terrors and certain tendencies of “posthistorical” relativism and deconstructive indeterminacy (245). If I may gloss on Hirsch, I would say that post-Auschwitz literature, as in Borges, often shares postmodernism’s doubts about the possibilities of knowledge, and frequently employs “postmodern” textual strategies -denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe. And yet. Like other discourses of suffering -postcolonial fiction or minority narrative- post-Auschwitz literature refuses to become unmoored from a destiny frightful not because it is unreal, but because it is irreversible and iron.-clad. The crematories were, unfortunately, real, and Borges, despite his canonization in the metropolis as the banisher par excellence of the *être référentiel* (Baudrillard), was a man from the margins, who like his Latin American companions, worked towards an inscription of reality *within* an awareness of referential slippage.

The Holocaust in Borges reveals a writer who was profoundly Latin American, since the continent’s literature has been characterized by a referentiality that operates alongside a nonreferential pyrotechnic energy.

By positing Borges as deeply of his immediate circumstance I have circled back to Latin American studies, where I will end. For sorry reasons that I need not detail, the Holocaust reverberates in current fiction from the continent. Phantoms of the Third Reich walk the pages of books by established narrators -Abel Posse, Ariel Dorfman, Roberto Drum-

mond- and also haunt lines by newer writers -Ramón Díaz Eterovic, Vicente Battista, and Roberto di Marco. In Díaz Eterovic's *Nadie sabe más que los muertos* [No One Knows More Than the Dead] (Chile, 1993), Battista's *Sucesos argentinos* [Argentine Events] (Argentina, 1995), and di Marco's *El fantasma del Reich* (Argentina, 1994), shades from the past extend their bony, yet still mighty hands into the present, inciting persecutions, murder, rape, updating this list of horrors Borges penned in 1941, inscribing a Latin American history unfortunately too real ("Las alarmas del doctor Américo Castro," *OC* 1: 653).

Why not, then, reflect on Borges's precursory role, and put to rest the truism that his tropes, not his topics, echo in his successors? Gabriel García Márquez's self-congratulatory assertion, quoted earlier, about Borges's expressive, but detestable literature of evasion is belied by a contemporary author like di Marco, who pays touching homage to that "dramatist condemned to die before a barbaric firing squad for whom God stopped time, allowing him to finish his opus" (di Marco 9). Di Marco reworks "The Secret Miracle," for his protagonist, too, writes his opus as a means of symbolically overcoming sure murder at the hands of racist thugs during the killer dictatorship of the nineteen seventies. (Borges's tale of criollo fascism in the early Peronist era, "La fiesta del monstruo" ["Monsterfest," 1947], written together with Adolfo Bioy Casares under the H. Bustos Domecq pseudonym, likewise lurks in the background.) For di Marco and his confrères exploring the repercussions of the Holocaust in, say, Argentina, no longer seems escapist, and Borges no longer seems unreal, but prescient.

We see signs of a rethinking among critics as well. Beatriz Sarlo's *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* begins to strip away layers of received interpretation, when she says: "Against all forms of fanaticism, Borgs's work offers the ideal of tolerance. This feature has not always been identified with sufficient emphasis" (5). Borges's fictions, Sarlo goes on, many written when fascism was at its zenith, pose questions about the interplay of social order and individual freedom. Borges himself sometimes points us in the direction of reading the stories as political fiction (77). Written upon the ruins of a brutalized Argentina, Sarlo's work is a major step in the kind of reconsideration I have been advocating.

I must note that precisely when his relevance to the milieu was finally acknowledged by the intellectual community, Borges made imprudent comments and decisions, appearing, in his final years, to condone varieties of what he had spent so long combating. Borges was challenged for this, openly admitted his misjudgements, and firmly restated his

long-held position: the military live in an artificial world of orders, blind obedience, arrests (Vázquez 237). Decades later, the 1941 list of horrors remained horrific after all.

As di Marco and Sarlo evidence, Latin Americanists would engage their reality more acutely by studying the Holocaust in Borges, while indicating beyond their pale that Latin Americans were hardly marginal to the elaboration of its enduring consequences. In this, as in so much else, Borges is central to the orders of knowledge of our time.

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