

CHAPTER 3

Borges: The Argentine Writer and the 'Western' Tradition*

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Borges is now officially part of the 'Western canon'. Harold Bloom, expert in such matters, includes him in the long list of canonical works in the appendix to his book of the same name,¹ and features Borges (along with Neruda and Pessoa) in a chapter with the curious title 'Borges, Neruda, and Pessoa: Hispano-Portuguese Whitmans'.² (Borges is one of only nine twentieth century writers discussed in the book, and out of a total of only twenty-six writers in all, so Bloom considers him quite canonical.) I don't know what Borges would have made of the company he keeps in Bloom's book – he barely knew of Pessoa and had famously mixed feelings about Neruda – much less of the 'Hispanic Whitmans' business.³ Borges, of course, liked Whitman enough to devote several essays to him, but his writing is not very much like Whitman's, at least

* This chapter has appeared, in a different form and in Spanish, in *Cuadernos Americanos Nueva Epoca*, 64, Año XI, vol. 4 (1997), pp. 167-78.

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

² On this new version of the Holy Trinity, see Borges, 'Sobre el doblaje': 'Las posibilidades del arte de combinar no son infinitas, pero suelen ser espantosas. Los griegos engendraron la quimera, monstruo con cabeza de león, con cabeza de dragón, con cabeza de cabra; los teólogos del siglo II, la Trinidad, en la que inextricablemente se articulan el Padre, el Hijo y el Espíritu ...' (*Obras completas*, Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974, p. 283).

³ One of the many curiosities in Bloom's categorisation is this little gem of idiosyncratic, not to say mistaken, literary history:

Twentieth-century Hispanic American literature, possibly more vital than North American, has three founders: the Argentine fabulist Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986); the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (1904-1973); and the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980). Out of their matrix a host of major figures has emerged: novelists as varied as Julio Cortázar [sic], Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Carlos Fuentes; poets of international importance in César Vallejo, Octavio Paz, and Nicolás Guillén. I center on Borges and Neruda, though time may demonstrate the supremacy of Carpentier over all other Latin American writers in this era. But Carpentier was among the many indebted to Borges, and Neruda has the same founder's role for poetry that Borges occupies for both fictional and critical prose, so I examine them here both as literary fathers and representative writers (*The Western Canon*, p. 430).

At the very start of Bloom's chapter on 'Hispanic Whitmans' we encounter such bizarre and untrue notions as Vallejo's being born of Neruda, though there is a certain difficulty with chronology there.

Two other interesting examples of Bloom's ignorance of Latin American literature: he lists Sor Juana as a Spanish author (p. 503), not acknowledging that she lived in Mexico throughout her life (even if she did publish in Spain, like most of her Spanish American contemporaries), and argues vis-à-vis the historical novel: 'History writing and narrative fiction have come apart, and our sensibilities seem no longer able to accommodate them one to the other' (pp. 20-1), a statement that rings completely false for the Latin American novel. In his list of nineteenth-century canonical works (pp. 509-15) there are no Latin Americans whatsoever, not even Sarmiento or Machado de Assis.

not after about 1925.⁴

The real issue, here, is not whether Borges should be included in a 'Western canon' however limited or however large,⁵ but what Borges does to the idea of canons. I will look first at his reflections on canonicity in 'Sobre los clásicos' (1965) [On the Classics]⁶, then consider a particular example of his handling of a canonical text, Aristotle's *Poetics* (listed of course in Bloom's master list), in 'La busca de Averroes' [Averroes's Search]. Then I would like to return to 'El escritor argentino y la tradición', as suggested by my title, and ask what tradition is at stake here.

In 'Sobre los clásicos' Borges argues against an atemporal notion of the classic and the canon:

Clásico es aquel libro que una nación o un grupo de naciones o el largo tiempo han decidido leer como si en sus páginas todo fuera deliberado, fatal, profundo como el cosmos y capaz de interpretaciones sin término.⁷ Previsiblemente, esas decisiones varían. Para los alemanes y austriacos el Fausto es una obra genial; para otros, una de las más famosas formas del tedio, como el segundo Paraíso de Milton o la obra de Rabelais (*Obras completas*, p. 773).

[A book becomes a classic when a nation or a group of nations or the passage of time has resolved to read it as if every word in it were deliberate, fated, profound as the cosmos and capable of endless interpretations. Predictably, these decisions vary. For the Germans and the Austrians, *Faust* is a work of genius: for others it is one of the most famous forms of tedium, like Milton's *Paradise Regained* or the writings of Rabelais.]

He adds: 'Una preferencia bien puede ser una superstición' [A preference may well be a form of superstition] (*Obras completas*, p. 773). The word 'superstición' will remind his faithful reader of the much earlier essay 'La supersticiosa ética del lector' [The Superstitious Habits of Readers] in *Discusión*, where he proposes that a lot of what passes for imaginative reading is actually stifled by obedience to custom and convention; certainly in this essay on

⁴ Bloom does know that Borges's earliest poetry aspired to be like Whitman's, but he bizarrely argues that Borges changed direction as a writer because Neruda 'powerfully usurped' the Whitman mantle (p. 430).

⁵ I am grateful to Irene Mathews for questioning the usefulness of Bloom's book, which of course I do not mean to validate as I quote from it. I consider Bloom's book important as a phenomenon in the 'culture wars' of recent years, absurd in its claims but interesting for what it reveals about the culture where it was produced.

⁶ The essay was added to late editions of *Otras inquisiciones*, a book originally published in 1952. The edition referred to is 1964 (Austin: University of Texas Press).

⁷ Cf. Bloom: 'One ancient test for the canonical remains fiercely valid: unless it demands rereading, the work does not qualify. The inevitable analogue is the erotic one. If you are Don Giovanni and Leporello keeps the list, one brief encounter will suffice' (p. 29).

the classics the words 'superstición' and 'tedio' are allied at the pole of the conventional.

Later in 'Sobre los clásicos', he expands on this idea:

Las emociones que la literatura suscita son quizá eternas, pero los medios deben constantemente variar, siquiera de un modo levisimo, para no perder su virtud. Se gastan a medida que los reconoce el lector. De ahí el peligro de afirmar que existen obras clásicas y que lo serán para siempre (*Obras completas*, p. 773).

[The emotions that literature evokes are perhaps eternal, but the means must vary constantly, be it never so slightly, so as not to lose their effect. They become worn by familiarity with each reading. This is why it is dangerous to state that there are classical works and that they will remain so forever.]

The essay concludes: 'Clásico no es un libro ... que necesariamente posee tales o cuales méritos; es un libro que las generaciones de los hombres, urgidas por diversas razones, leen con previo fervor y con una misteriosa lealtad' [A book is not classic because it possesses certain merits; it is a book that generations, urged on by diverse reasons, read with anticipated fervour and a mysterious loyalty] (p. 773); here, one should underline the word 'diversas', a word famously used in the last sentence of 'La esfera de Pascal' ['Pascal's Sphere'].

And à propos of Pascal's circle whose centre is nowhere and whose circumference is infinite, it is worth noting that in the stark centre of the campus of the University of São Paulo in Brazil, next to the clock, there is a marker that reads: 'NO UNIVERSO DA CULTURA O CENTRO ESTA EM TODA PARTE' [In the Universe of Culture the Centre is Everywhere]. This phrase, obviously not included by Borges in his census of variations on Pascal, is just as obviously the product of someone who read the Borges essay and appropriated it for a statement on Latin American culture. The centre is everywhere: Borges would have been pleased by this particular displacement of the canon, very much in keeping with his statements on the ways traditions are forged in such essays as 'Kafka y sus precursores' ['Kafka and his Precursors'] and 'Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw' ['For Bernard Shaw'], to say nothing of the more obvious 'Sobre los clásicos' and 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' ['The Argentine Writer and Tradition'].

The notion, so passionately argued in 'Sobre los clásicos', that it is not only rereading but constant rereading with a difference, wreaks havoc with conventional ideas of the canon, including Bloom's. He is all for rereading, but rereading should merely deepen one's understanding that Shakespeare 'anchors' the canon because his characters change, that Dante is the other 'anchor' because his characters are fixed once and for all, and so forth. Of Borges, for

instance, he writes:

A dread of what Freud called the family romance and of what might be termed the family romance of literature confines Borges to repetition, and to overidealization of the writer-reader relationship. That may be precisely what made him the ideal father for modern Hispanic-American literature – his infinite suggestiveness and his detachment from cultural tangles. Yet he may be condemned to a lesser eminence, still canonical but no longer central, in modern literature. A comparison of his stories and parables to Kafka's, read side by side, is not at all flattering to him but seems inevitable, partly because Borges so frequently invokes Kafka, both overtly and implicitly. Beckett, with whom Borges shared an international prize in 1961, at his best sustains intense rereading as Borges does not. Borges' cunning is adroit but does not sustain a Schopenhauerian vision as powerfully as Beckett is able to do (*The Western Canon*, p. 438).⁸

There are several things wrong here. First, Bloom is utterly blind to the particular use that Borges makes of repetition, for repetition in Borges is – as he shows most clearly in 'Pierre Menard' – always the site of difference, of divergence. Second, the fact that Borges seems more inclined to 'embrace' than to murder his precursors makes him anathema to Bloom because he does not fit the pattern laid out so many years ago in *The Anxiety of Influence*,⁹ but does not make him a lesser writer; in fact, his manner of weaving text and allusion has proved fruitful for many other writers and artists, and fascinating to untold numbers of readers and critics. And third, the matter of rereading itself: far be it from me to say how anyone else should reread, but I have never found any text so different each time I approach it, yet again an 'undiscovered country', as Borges's.

Borges is, as Bloom recognises, central to 'the Western canon' because of his inclusive relation to it, though Bloom's tired Oedipal model questions whether this is healthy: 'Borges . . . overtly absorbs and then reflects the entire canonical tradition. Whether this open embrace of his precursors finally curtailed Borges' achievement is a difficult question' (*The Western Canon*, p. 432). Bloom sees Borges as insufficiently agonistic, and agon, as we know, is at the centre of Bloom's vision of the world. Borges's world, like Pascal's sphere or the motto at the University of São Paulo, has a moveable centre that can be anywhere.

Nowhere is this sensation of difference, of displacement, sharper than in 'La busca de Averroes', the 1947 story in *El aleph*.¹⁰ Aristotle's *Poetics* is the

* Bloom continues: 'Nevertheless, Borges' position in the Western Canon, if it prevails, will be as secure as Kafka's and Beckett's. Of all Latin American authors in this century, he is the most universal' (p. 439). What sort of 'universality' does Bloom claim for Borges?

⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetics* (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

¹⁰ What follows is an abridged version of my article 'Borges, Averroes, Aristotle: The Poetics of

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founding text of 'Western' literary criticism and theory (even if Bloom prefers as point of origin Aristophanes's reflections on Euripides (*The Western Canon*, p. 171), so it is interesting to see what Borges does with canons in this story. His Averroes, hard at work on his commentary (presumably the surviving middle commentary) on the *Poetics*, is disturbed by a 'philological' doubt related to his commentary on the *Poetics* at the moment he is penning the eleventh chapter of his *Tahafut Al-Tahafut (Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, his attack on al-Ghazali's *Tahafut Al-Filasifa (Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, in its turn an attack on philosophy as an illegitimate branch of theology. This 'philological' doubt, that serves to interrupt Averroes's philosophy for an afternoon and an evening, has to do with two unknown words, 'tragedy' and 'comedy'. Now, any reader of Aristotle's *Poetics* will concur that an inability to decipher these words will gravely impede an understanding of Aristotle's text, and Averroes shares that preoccupation: 'Esas dos palabras arcanas pululaban en el texto de la Poética; imposible eludirlas' (*Obras completas*, p. 583) [These two arcane words pululated throughout the text of the *Poetics*; it was impossible to elude them (*Labyrinths*, p. 181)].¹¹

Much of the Borges story is a discussion with Abulcásim al-Ashari (the name is based on that of one of Averroes's biographers) about whether it is better to show or to tell. Al-Ashari tells of his experience of having attended a theatre in China – 'Imaginemos que alguien muestra una historia en vez de referirla' (p. 585) [Let us imagine that someone performs a story instead of telling it. (*Labyrinths*, p. 184)] – and because he does not tell of the experience in a way that is clearly understandable (even to Averroes, who is hungry for information about precisely this art, though he may not know it), the consensus among his listeners is that it is unnecessary to use numerous people to tell a story when one would suffice. The issue arises in the *Poetics*, in the passage cited by Borges in 'El pudor de la historia' ['A Modesty of History'], when Aristotle recalls that Aeschylus increased the number of actors from one to two;¹² Borges comments on this passage at some length, finally noting:

nunca sabremos si [Esquilo] presintió, siquiera de un modo imperfecto, lo significativo de aquel pasaje del uno al dos, de la unidad a la pluralidad y así a lo infinito. Con el segundo actor entraron el diálogo y las indefinidas posibilidades de la reacción de unos caracteres sobre otros (*Obras completas*, pp. 754-5).

[we shall never know if (Aeschylus) had a prefiguring, even an imperfect one, of the importance of that passage from one to two, from unity to plurality and thus to infinity. With the second actor came the dialogue and the indefinite possibilities of the reaction of some

Poetics, which appeared in *Hispania* (1996).

¹¹ Borges, *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970).

¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. with notes and intro. by Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 6.

characters on others (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 168)].¹³

The same issue – showing versus telling – now wholly transposed into the art of narrative, preoccupied Henry James and his followers, notably Percy Lubbock. In Borges's story, Farach, the scholar of the *Koran*, says of the Chinese theatre that has been described by his guest Albuçásim: 'En tal caso ... no se requerían veinte personas. Un solo hablante puede referir cualquier cosa, por compleja que sea' (*Obras completas*, p. 586) [In that case ... twenty persons are unnecessary. One single speaker can tell anything, no matter how complicated it might be (*Labyrinths*, p. 185)].

But the central point of the story is, as the narrator states at the end, 'el proceso de una derrota, ... el caso de un hombre que se propone un fin que no está vedado a los otros, pero sí a él' (*Obras completas*, pp. 587-8) [the process of defeat ... the case of a man who sets himself a goal which is not forbidden to others, but is to him (*Labyrinths*, p. 187)]. For the narrator, and presumably for the reader, a reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* by someone without knowledge and experience of the theatre is unthinkable, but such is the case of Averroes in twelfth-century Al-Andalus. Ironically, of course, the narrator calls attention to boys in the street pretending to be muezzin and congregation (playing, that is, at the theatre), and the conversation at Farach's house, as we have seen, turns on Abulcásim's account of a visit to a theatre in China. A reading of the *Poetics* by someone who thinks that tragedy is panegyric or eulogy and comedy is satire seems ludicrous, as Renan remarks in his *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (in the same passage from which Borges took the epigraph to the story): 'Cette paraphrase accuse ... l'ignorance la plus complète de la littérature grecque'.¹⁴

Let me now confess to having read Averroes's *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*, translated into English in 1986 by Charles E. Butterworth.¹⁵ This work, as Butterworth notes, is almost unknown in the Arabic-speaking world, having only been published in the last 125 years and in scholarly editions that have apparently circulated little; the two Arabic manuscripts are preserved in libraries in Florence and Leiden. Renan knew the work through translations of translations of the original, remarking at one point that the works of Averroes that were available to him were Latin translations of Hebrew translations of a commentary made upon Arabic translations of Syriac translations of Greek originals (*Averroès*, p. 52); Averroes's inability to read Aristotle directly is more than compensated by his readers' inability (from Thomas Aquinas to Borges) to read him directly. If it were not for Butterworth's notes, Averroes's quotations from and reflections on Arabic poetry and poetics would be nearly incomprehensible for the Western non-Arabist reader (as they were for one of his medieval translators, Hermann Alemann)¹⁶, just as Averroes could not make

¹³ Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1964).

¹⁴ Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, n. d.), p. 48.

¹⁵ Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

¹⁶ See Butterworth's introduction to his translation of the *Middle Commentary* (p. xii) and Renan,

much sense of Aristotle's references to Greek poetry. But this is not entirely the point. Averroes acknowledges at the outset that Aristotle comments on aspects of Greek poetry that do not have ready analogies in Arabic poetry, or in the poetry of 'most or all nations', to use his frequent phrase; he sets as his task the adaptation of Aristotle's argument to Arabic poetry. Thus, he argues through his commentary that Aristotle did not set out the rules for all poetry and that he will not do so either; the *Poetics* and the *Middle Commentary* are particular rather than general in scope.

In one of his essays on Dante, Borges writes: 'La precisión que acabo de indicar no es un artificio retórico; es afirmación de la probidad, de la plentitud, con que cada incidente del poema ha sido imaginado' [The precision that I have just pointed out is not a rhetorical device; it is an affirmation of the probity, the plentitude, with which each incident in the poem has been imagined].¹⁷ In the case of Borges's 'Averroes', what is at stake in arguing for 'precision' is not the minimal references to the local colour of Moslem Spain – the fountain, the harem and so forth – but the intellectual rigour with which Averroes's mental world has been recreated: the right chapter of the *Tahafut* is mentioned, the names of the Arabic translators of Aristotle are correctly cited, the Hellenistic commentator on Aristotle (Alexander of Aphrodisias) is consulted at the right moment. John Sturrock gets it profoundly wrong when he calls Borges's erudition into question here, doubting the existence of Alexander of Aphrodisias and stating of the Ghazali *Tahafut* and of Averroes's reply: 'Whether these are real works of early Arabic thought, or whether Borges has made them up, I do not know. Their existence is, so to speak, immaterial'.¹⁸ On the contrary: Borges may not have known how to read Arabic or Hebrew but he made excellent use of the Latin and modern material (not, as Sturrock would have it, 'immaterial') available to him.

'Pierre Menard', like 'La fruición literaria' ['Literary Pleasures'] before it, complicates the matter of literary interpretation by insisting that the meaning of a text depends not only on the conditions of its production (who wrote it, when, and under what circumstances) but also of its reception. In this story the same idea is broached in the discussion of whether a metaphor in a classic Arabic poem (destiny seen as a blind camel) has become a mere cliché; Averroes argues to the contrary that an image penned in the Arabian desert acquires new layers of meaning centuries later in Al-Andalus: 'Dos términos tenía la figura y hoy tiene cuatro' (*Obras completas*, p. 587) [the figure had two terms then and now it has four (*Labyrinths*, p. 186)]. The two new terms added to the figure (which initially consisted of 'camel' and 'destiny') are 'Zuhair', the Arabic poet who composed the image,¹⁹ and 'nuestros pesares', the sufferings and sorrows of

Averroès (pp. 211-2).

¹⁷ Borges, *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982), p. 88.

¹⁸ John Sturrock, 'Between Commentary and Comedy: The Satirical Side of Borges', in Claude Rawson (ed.), *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 279 and 280.

¹⁹ On Zuhair, see Butterworth's note on a different quotation from this poet (*Middle Commentary*

Zuhair's Spanish readers, so distant from the Arabian desert. By the same token, Aristotle's text is enriched on being read by Averroes, and Averroes's on being read by Borges, although the 'difference' between one and another may be as invisible as that between Menard's and Cervantes's versions of 'la verdad, cuya madre es la historia' (*Obras completas*, p. 449) [truth, whose mother is history (*Labyrinths*, p. 69)].

'La busca de Averroes', then, is the story of the founding text of literary theory, as misunderstood – or better still, as reimagined – in a different cultural context. The story is cast as a tragedy in Aristotle's terms: the philosopher's quest is undone by his ignorance, and by his masking of his ignorance with a sense of superiority. For undertaking a translation of the *Poetics* without a sense of what theatre is (much less the distinction between tragedy and comedy) is surely an act of hubris. Averroes's failure ('quise narrar el proceso de una derrota' (*Obras completas*, p. 587) [I tried to narrate the process of a defeat (*Labyrinths*, p. 187)]) is mirrored in the narrator's failure, Averroes's disappearance before the mirror signalling the failure of the narrator's imagination.

Renan, reading Latin translations of Hebrew translations of an Arabic commentary on Syriac translations of a Greek original: what is interesting in this chain is not only the distance that separates Renan from Averroes, and Averroes from Aristotle, but also the sustained attention to the object at the other end of the chain. Like the rows of translators in the Inca Garcilaso's account of the de Soto expedition to Florida, this attention implies – hope against hope – the possibility of communication. Aristotle may be ultimately as distant from us as Averroes, yet Borges, with his characteristic generosity, invites us to make the crossing.

And yet in this distance or loss there is also gain: Averroes's discussion of metaphor is richer than Aristotle's (though the non-Arabist reader may have to rely on Butterworth's notes to make full sense of it), and Borges opens new discursive spaces by blurring genealogies and points of origin. When Averroes recalls his Moroccan exile in the story, he says:

Así, atormentado hace años en Marrakesh por memorias de Córdoba,
me complacía en repetir el apóstrofe que Abdurrahmán dirigió en los
jardines de Ruzafa a una palma africana:

Tú también eres, ¡oh palma!
En este suelo extranjera. . .

Singular beneficio de la poesía; palabras redactadas por un rey que
anhelaba el Oriente me sirvieron a mí, desterrado en Africa, para mi
nostalgia de España (*Obras completas*, p. 587).

[Thus when I was tormented years ago in Marrakesh by memories of Cordova, I took the pleasure in repeating the apostrophe Abdurrahman addressed in the gardens of Ruzafa to an African palm:

You too, oh palm! are
Foreign to this soil ...

The singular benefit of poetry: words composed by a king who longed for the Orient served me, exiled in Africa, to express my nostalgia for Spain (*Labyrinths*, p. 186)].

This parable within the larger story serves to sharpen the focus on the problem of origin and belonging. Does Averroes's thought 'descend' from Aristotle's? Does ours? The answer in both cases is emphatically no: there is no 'natural' line of descent possible here, only the constant reinvention of tradition, what Borges elsewhere calls the making of precursors. Averroes makes Aristotle strange because he does not have the experience of the theatre, but Aristotle is quite as strange for those of us who do, as a look at the scholarly controversies around the *Poetics* will show. And it is actually in this 'making strange' that Borges is closest to Bloom (or perhaps that Bloom is closest to Borges, since *The Anxiety of Influence* and its many sequels, including this one, arguably derive from 'Kafka y sus precusores', since Bloom argues near the end of *The Western Canon* (just before the notorious list), that 'ambivalences define centrality in a canonical context' (p. 491). Shortly after this, he adds:

a canon is an *achieved* anxiety, just as any strong literary work is its author's achieved anxiety. The literary canon does not baptize us into culture; it does not make us free of cultural anxiety. Rather, it confirms our cultural anxieties, yet helps to give them form and coherence (*The Western Canon*, p. 492).

One of the central anxieties produced by the idea of canons is that experienced by the reader, even the professional or academic reader, caused by that library of unread or half-remembered books. This problem is perhaps most acute in the New World (and in the post-colonial world in general), because of conflicts over what our cultural heritage is, the problem that Borges puzzled over in 'El escritor argentino y la tradición'. Bloom's response, like E. D. Hirsch's in *The Culture of Literacy* (and, for that matter, like Ezra Pound's in *The ABC of Reading*),²⁰ is to make a long list, which surely will only make some of his readers more anxious (and others furious). Borges displaces the question from convention or tradition to individual taste: near the end of 'Sobre los clásicos' he writes: 'Libros como el de Job, la Divina Comedia, Macbeth (y, para mí, algunas de las sagas del Norte) prometen una larga inmortalidad, pero nada sabemos del porvenir, salvo que diferirá del presente' (*Obras completas*, p. 773) [Books such as Job, the *Divine Comedy*, *Macbeth* (and for me Norse Sagas)

²⁰ C.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (London: Faber, 1991).

promise a long immortality, but we know nothing of the future other than that it will differ from the present] or later still, and in an even more personal tone: 'Yo, que me he resignado a poner en duda la indefinida perduración de Voltaire o de Shakespeare, creo (esta tarde de uno de los últimos días de 1965) en la de Schopenhauer y en la de Berkeley' (*Obras completas*, p. 773) [I, who have resigned myself to question the everlasting survival of Voltaire or Shakespeare, yet believe (on this afternoon of one of the last days of 1965) in the survival of Schopenhauer and Berkeley]. The particularity of these assertions, the fact that they are spoken in the first person singular and, in the later case, even dated, serves to displace the question of universality or even commonality onto one of personal taste and loyalty. I think there can be no doubt that Borges would have been amused by Bloom's earnest lists and furious tone, and would have begged off with a humourous aside at being canonised in this best-selling book, brushing off Bloom in the same tone he used in 'Las alarmas del doctor Américo Castro' ['Dr Americo Castro is Alarmed']: 'En la página 122, el doctor Castro ha enumerado algunos escritores [argentinos] cuyo estilo es correcto; a pesar de la inclusión de mi nombre en ese catálogo, no me creo del todo incapacitado para hablar de estilística' (*Obras completas*, p. 657) [On page 122 Dr Castro has enumerated several writers whose style is correct. In spite of the inclusion of my name on that list, I do not consider myself entirely unqualified to speak of stylistics (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 30)].

In 'El escritor argentino y la tradición', Borges writes that for such writers as Shaw, Berkeley and Swift 'les bastó el hecho de sentirse irlandeses, distintos, para innovar en la cultura inglesa' (*Obras completas*, p. 273) [it was sufficient for them to feel Irish, to feel different, in order to be innovators in English culture. (*Labyrinths*, p. 218)], and makes the same argument for the primacy of Jewish writers in Europe in general. He then continues, famously: 'Creo que los argentinos, los sudamericanos, estamos en una situación análoga; podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas' (*Obras completas*, p. 273) [I believe that we Argentines, we South Americans in general, are in an analogous situation: we can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences (*Labyrinths*, p. 218)].

And in that essay, which is of course a response to Peronist questioning of whether Borges was sufficiently Argentine as a writer,²¹ Borges sets out a programme of sorts, but it is a programme that upsets fixed ideas of canon and tradition:

²¹ See for instance Fermín Chávez's *Civilización y barbarie en la cultura argentina* (1956; 2nd. edn. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Theoría, 1965), in which Chávez attacks Borges for his 'denigración de lo original en provecho de lo espurio' [denigrating the original in favour of the spurious] (p. 41), for his 'buena literatura borgiana pero no muy argentina' [illegitimate good borgesian but not very Argentine literature] (p. 37). I am grateful to Julio Ramos for having pointed out that 'El escritor argentino y la tradición', presented in 1951, is clearly a response to the polemics among Argentine intellectuals that were provoked by the cultural nationalism of the Perón government.

no debemos temer y ... debemos pensar que nuestro patrimonio es el universo; ensayar todos los temas, y no podemos concretarnos a lo argentino para ser argentinos: porque o ser argentino es una fatalidad y en ese caso lo seremos de cualquier modo, o ser argentino es una mera afectación, una máscara. Creo que si nos abandonamos a ese sueño voluntario que se llama la creación artística, seremos argentinos y seremos, también, buenos o tolerables escritores (*Obras completas*, p. 274).

[we should not be alarmed and we should feel that our patrimony is the universe; we should essay all themes, and we cannot limit ourselves to purely Argentine subjects in order to be Argentine; for either being Argentine is an inescapable act of fate – and in that case we shall be so in all events – or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask. I believe that if we surrender ourselves to that voluntary dream which is artistic creation, we shall be Argentine and we shall be good or tolerable writers (*Labyrinths*, p. 219)].

This argument for freedom from constraint, whether nationalist or pedagogical, is Borges's response to his local version of what Bloom calls 'the School of Resentment', which probably includes most of readers of this volume, and which curiously marks him most of all, since he wears his agon on his sleeve.

In 'La fruición literaria', the 1928 essay on reading in *El idioma de los argentinos*,²² Borges anticipates in a curious way the argument of his 1947 story 'El inmortal' ['The Immortal'] (originally entitled, as here, 'Los inmortales' ['The Immortals']). After noting that 'El tiempo – amigo de Cervantes – ha sabido corregirle las pruebas' (p. 92) [Time – the friend of Cervantes – has often corrected his drafts], he adds:

En general, el destino de los inmortales es otro. Los pormenores de su sentir o de su pensar suelen desvanecerse o yacen invisibles en su labor, irrecuperables e insospechados. En cambio, su individualidad (esa simplificada idea platónica que en ningún rato de su vida fueron con pureza) se aferra como una raíz a las almas. Se vuelven pobres y perfectos como un guarismo. Se hacen abstracciones. Son apenas un manojito de sombra, pero lo son con eternidad (p. 92).

[In general, the destiny of immortals is different. The details of their feelings or of their thoughts tend to fade or to lie unnoticed in their work, irretrievable and unsuspected. Instead, their individuality (that extremely simplified Platonic idea that at no stage in their lives did they exist in a pure form) clings like a root to their souls. They become poor

²² Borges, 'La fruición literaria' in his volume *El idioma de los argentinos* (Barcelona: Gleizer, 1928), pp. 87-93.

and perfect, like a cipher. They become abstractions. They are mere shadows, but they are so eternally].

Bloom writes of 'El inmortal':

We surmise, at the story's end, that the singularly vague features are those of the Immortal, the poet Homer himself, who has merged with the Roman tribune and finally (by implication) with Borges himself, even as the story. 'The Immortal', merges Borges with his originals: De Quincey, Poe, Kafka, Shaw, Chesterton, Conrad, and several more (*The Western Canon*, pp. 439-40).

A page later he adds: 'Partly Borges is satirizing *Back to Methuselah*, but he is also savaging his own literary idealism. Without rivalry and polemic between the Immortals there is, paradoxically, no life, and literature dies'. Thanks to polemical rereadings, including Bloom's, there can be no doubt now, a decade after Borges's death in Geneva, that his work is alive.