

JORGE LUIS BORGES AND GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

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Among many other things, George Bernard Shaw has been accused of being directly involved in "the making of the modern mind,"¹ and this is an accusation which one feels to be equally true and useless. The term "modern mind" has no single referent and thus no literal meaning, and yet we somehow feel that there really are writers in the world who can meaningfully be described as "modern-minded" and that somehow Shaw was intimately involved in the establishment of the category to which they belong — or at least that Shaw himself can be viewed as an early representative of that category. Furthermore, it is not difficult to find specific contemporary authors who are both undeniably "modern-minded" and thoroughly familiar with Shaw's works, and it is therefore tempting to speak of the relationship between Shaw and such authors in terms of "influence." But when we do so we sometimes run into difficulties. One good case in point is that of the literary relationship between Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges and Shaw. It would be inaccurate and misleading to speak of a direct "influence" of Shaw upon Borges, at least in the usual sense in which that term is used, and yet a very definite *relationship* between the two authors does exist. Essays and stories by Borges abound in quotations from and allusions to Shaw, and in a

recent book Borges lists Shaw as one of his four favorite authors,² speaks of a "fixation" on Shaw,³ and finally laments that "Shaw seems to be the only author I've ever read."⁴ In light of such statements, and in view of the fact that Borges has consistently questioned the very existence of "literary influence" in any usual sense of the term,⁵ one wonders precisely *why* Borges feels an obvious kinship with Shaw. Therefore, in the following paragraphs I would like to examine some specific aspects of the literary relationship between Borges and Shaw.

Obviously, a good beginning point for such an examination is the essay Borges wrote on Shaw, "A Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw."⁶ This essay is only five paragraphs long and contains no *specific* analysis of any of Shaw's works; in fact, Shaw is not even mentioned until half way through the essay. Borges begins by stating a theory about the nature of literature and by examining the relationship between the author and the reader of a literary text. He asserts that

a book is more than a verbal structure or series of verbal structures; it is the dialogue it establishes with its reader and the intonation it imposes upon his voice and the changing and durable images it leaves in his memory. This dialogue is infinite (p. 213).

In this passage, Borges sounds very much like "reader critics" such as Roland Barthes, Stanley Fish, or Paul De Man; his use of the term *dialogue* implies

that the total "meaning" of a literary text cannot be determined unless equal attention is paid to the roles of the *writer* and the *reader* in creating that "meaning." One thinks here of Louise M. Rosenblatt's statement that "the *poem* is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text."⁷ Like Rosenblatt, Borges further implies that the reader is the *active* participant in the collaboration or "dialogue" which creates the meaning of a text because he is free to bring to the reading relevant knowledge or experiences which the writer either did not or could not include. Borges states this idea as follows:

A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships. One literature differs from another, prior or posterior, less because of the text than because of the way in which it is read: if I were granted the possibility of reading any present-day page — this one, for example — as it will be read in the year two thousand, I would know what the literature of the year two thousand will be like (p. 214).

At this point in the essay it begins to sound as if Borges intends to emphasize the importance of the *reader* of a text to such an extent that that of the *writer* will virtually disappear; however, this is not the case at all. When he shifts from a theoretical discussion of the nature of the relationship between writer and reader to a discussion of a specific instance of that relationship, i.e., the case of Shaw and *his* readers, the role of the writer

becomes paramount. Borges signals this shift in the following manner:

The foregoing leads us to an aesthetic problem never before posed: Can an author create characters superior to himself? I would say no and in that negation include both the intellectual and the moral. I believe that from us cannot emerge creatures more lucid or more noble than our best moments. It is on this opinion that I base my opinion of Shaw's pre-eminence. The collective and civic problems of his early works will lose their interest, or have lost it already; the jokes in the *Pleasant Plays* run the risk of becoming, some day, no less uncomfortable than those of Shakespeare . . . the ideas declared in his prologues and his eloquent tirades will be found in Schopenhauer and Samuel Butler; but Livinia, Blanco Posnet, Keegan, Shotover, Richard Dudgeon and, above all, Julius Caesar, surpass any character imagined by the art of our time (p. 215).

Borges then concludes his essay by observing that, "The work of Shaw . . . leaves one with a flavor of liberation. The flavor of the stoic doctrines and the flavor of the sagas" (p. 216).

Obviously, in view of the theory of literature stated at the beginning of his essay, the basic premise behind the lavish praise which Borges bestows upon Shaw is that Shaw's works contain a rich and fruitful source for a continuing dialogue between writer and reader. And clearly, the essay itself and the other works by Borges which contain quotations from or allusions to Shaw contribute to this "dialogue." Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Shaw himself viewed the establishment and maintenance of such a dialogue as

one of the chief goals of his art. In "How to Write a Play," Shaw makes the following comment:

If you want to flatter me you must not tell me that I have saved your soul by my philosophy. Tell me that, like Shakespeare, Moliere, Scott, Dumas, and Dickens, I have provided a gallery of characters which are realer to you than your own relations and which successive generations of actors and actresses will keep alive for centuries.⁸

If we substitute the word "readers" for "actors and actresses" we see that the views of Shaw and Borges are quite similar on the issue of writer-reader relationships; indeed, it is almost as if the praise which Borges accords to Shaw were a direct positive response, in dialogue form, to the statement of a desire for a specific kind of praise which Shaw made. However, the "dialogue" between the two writers is not always so direct and obvious. Let us look now at some other examples.

In 1976 Borges and his friend, Adolpho Bioy Casares, published *The Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*,⁹ the English translation of a book originally published in Spanish in 1967. This book is dedicated to "those three forgotten greats – Picasso, Joyce, Le Corbusier," and one of its two epigraphs is the following: "Every dream is a prophecy: every jest is an earnest in the womb of Time." This quotation is attributed, not to Shaw, who wrote the lines, but rather to the character who speaks them, "Father Keegan (1904),"

in Shaw's play *John Bull's Other Island*. The use of this particular quotation, and the silent implication that a fictional character may be more "real" than the writer who created him, set a proper tone and atmosphere for the book's contents. Borges has himself described those contents as follows:

These are articles written on imaginary, extravagantly modern artists – architects, sculptors, painters, chefs, poets, novelists, couturiers – by a devotedly modern critic. But both the author and his subjects are fools, and it is hard to tell who is taking in whom... [I think that] *The Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*... are better than anything I have published under my own name.¹⁰

Borges and his friend obviously had a great deal of sheer fun in concocting these outrageous essays, but the implication of his description of the book, as well as that of the epigraph by "Father Keegan," is obviously that there is a serious side to the extravagant foolery. This is true in particular of the "essay" in *Chronicles* entitled "On Universal Theater" in which a famous character from one of Shaw's plays serves as the central figure. In this essay we are given a further account of the life and activities of Shaw's "chocolate soldier," George-Adolphe Bluntschli, after the final curtain in *Arms and the Man*.

We learn that Bluntschli returned to his native Switzerland after the end of the play and lived a quite ordinary life until his death in 1925, but we also learn that his normal, commonplace daily activities were viewed as further

realistic "performances" by avant-garde artists of his time, and that they are so viewed by the mad narrator in the essay, Bustos Domecq. Domecq is concerned with tracing Bluntschli's supposed role in establishing an "art form" in which there is literally *no difference at all* between art and life. The narrator remarks:

It has been conclusively proved that Bluntschli was in the habit of venturing out onto the peaceful waters of Lake Geneva in a rowboat, where under cover of darkness, he would mutter a brief aside or else allow himself a yawn. Further examples of his eccentricities are on record. We now definitely know that he smiled or sometimes sighed in the funicular; and as to his conduct on streetcars, more than one witness has sworn to having seen him swagger down the aisle, ticket tucked into the band of his boater, troubling some fellow passenger for the time.¹¹

The inflated tone and meticulous attention to insignificant detail in this passage underscore the point Borges and Bioy Casares wish to make: total realism in art is as great a danger as is excessive romanticism because the function of art is to present an intelligible and meaningful *representation* of life rather than life itself — or a distorted image of life. In either extreme, no real dialogue between writer and reader is possible. Again, in Louise Rosenblatt's phrase, "the *poem* is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text and experiences as relevant to the text," but in the kind of non-art which Bustos Domecq advocates and applauds there is in effect *no*

text to guide the reader. Similarly, Shaw's attack upon excessively romantic drama was based ultimately upon the premise that such drama presented false guidance for the reader (or audience) because it consistently failed to provide relevant models of what people actually experience. In his own comments on *Arms and the Man*, Shaw made the following observation:

Historical facts are not a bit more sacred than any other class of facts. In making a play out of them you must adapt them to the stage, and that alters them at once, more or less. Why, you cannot even write a history without adapting the facts to the conditions of literary narrative, which are in some respects much more distorting than the dramatic conditions of representation on the stage. Things do not happen in the form of stories or dramas; and since they must be told in some such form, all stories, all dramatic representations, are only attempts to arrange the facts in a thinkable, intelligible, interesting form.¹²

Shaw insists, then, that the writer's task is to shape raw experience into meaningful form, and by implication the reader's task is then that of reaching through the form in order to find the essence of the original experience. The fact that Bustos Domecq does not seem to understand this provides the basis for the humor in "On Universal Theater," but it is obvious that Borges and Bioy Casares understood it very well.

Finally, let us look briefly at two other segments of the "dialogue" between Borges and Shaw. These occur in typically "Borgean" essays, and in

these essays Borges uses allusions to Shaw to tie his material together and to give meaningful frames of reference to his subject matter. In the first of these, "A New Refutation of Time," Borges examines the problem of whether sequential time is objectively real or is merely a subjective human illusion. Borges marshalls impressive logical, empirical, and literary evidence in support of each side of the question, but he finally uses a quotation from Shaw as the basis for his *personal* solution to the problem; Borges' statement of the basis for that solution runs as follows:

Is not one single repeated term sufficient to break down and confuse the series of time? Do not the fervent readers who surrender themselves to Shakespeare become, literally, Shakespeare? . . . The vociferous catastrophes of a general order – fires, wars, epidemics – are one single pain, illusorily multiplied in many mirrors. Thus Bernard Shaw sees it (*Guide to Socialism*, 86): 'What you can suffer is the maximum that can be suffered on earth. If you die of starvation, you will suffer all the starvation there has been or will be. If ten thousand people die with you, their participation in your lot will not make you ten thousand times more hungry nor multiply the time of your agony ten thousand times. Do not let yourself be overcome by the horrible sum of human sufferings; such a sum does not exist. Neither poverty nor pain are cumulative.'¹³

Borges uses the rhetorical question about the relationships between writers and readers, along with the corresponding quotation from Shaw, to establish his thesis that only the direct personal experience of time can be real

for an individual, but that "dialogues" between the individual (the reader) and a writer are clearly a part of that subjective experience, and thus objective accounts of other people's experience of time can also become subjectively real to a person who did not have those experiences first hand. In other words, the "dialogue" which a reader establishes with a writer provides what Borges calls a "mirror" for his own experiences of joy or anguish or sorrow – and thus art serves to reflect, confirm, and validate life. And the process works in reverse, too. In his essay entitled "A Comment on August 23, 1944,"¹⁴ Borges describes his attempts to make sense out of his jumbled and confused feelings upon hearing that Paris had been liberated on the date identified in the essay's title. He confesses that he doesn't quite know how to respond to Nazi-sympathizer friend who both share his joy at news of the liberation *and* maintain staunchly pro-Nazi sympathy. Finally, however, his recollection of a key passage in Shaw's *Man and Superman* provides for him a context within which his own reactions and those of his ideological adversaries become meaningful. He recalls that in Shaw's play it is posited that "the horror of hell is its unreality," and he concludes that "Nazism suffers from unreality . . . it is uninhabitable; men can die for it, lie for it, kill and wound for it. No one, in the intimate depths of his being, can wish it to triumph."¹⁵ For Borges, this passage from Shaw provides the key to understanding the feelings of people who can simultaneously celebrate a

major step in the defeat of the Nazis and yet remain pro-Nazi. And finally, he finds in the very fact that people can actually adhere to such self-contradictory and self-destructive views real-life confirmation of Shaw's theory, as expressed by Father Keegan, that "Every dream is a prophecy; every jest is an earnest in the womb of Time." Borges seems to believe, as did Shaw, that the proposition "life imitates art" is a necessary corollary to the more familiar maxim "art imitates life" because *art* and *life* are interchangeable terms in the infinite and eternal dialogue which is the essence of the relationship between writer and reader.

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Notes

¹This "accusation" is the thesis of John Gassner's essay "Bernard Shaw and the Making of the Modern Mind" in *Bernard Shaw's Plays*, ed. Warren S. Smith (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970), pp. 291-302.

²*Borges: Imágenes, Memorias, Diálogos*, ed. María Esther Vázquez (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1977), p. 59. Borges responds to the question of which authors still interest him the most by saying "Creo que Shaw, Chesterton, Emerson y, como libro, El Quijote."

³*Ibid.*, p. 113. The exact phrase used by Borges is "hoy tengo una fijación con Shaw."

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 115. The exact phrase used by Borges is "Bernard Shaw parece ser el único autor que he leído en mi vida."

⁵Borges prefers to speak of one author as a "precursor" of another rather than as an influence upon him, and it is not always necessary that an author even be aware of who his real "precursors" are. For example, in his essay "Kafka and His Precursors," [*Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 199-201] Borges lists Robert Browning as a "precursor" of Kafka, and he justifies such a listing by stating that "The fact is . . . every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (p. 201). Similarly, Borges concludes his "Preface to the First Edition" of *Doctor Brodie's Report* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1972) with the following statement: "God spare thee, reader, long prefaces. The words are Quevedo's, who, careful not to fall into an anachronism which in the long run would have been detected, never read those of Bernard Shaw" (p. 12). Borges is being playful here (Quevedo died some 210 years *before* Shaw was born), but his point is a serious one — and it is entirely consistent with his overall theory of literary "precursors."

⁶*Labyrinths*, pp. 213-216. The original Spanish title is "Una nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw," and the parenthetical use of the term "hacia" (toward) implies that the essay by Borges is merely one step in the continuing "dialogue" between Shaw and his readers.

Subsequent references to this essay are cited by page number in the text.

⁷"Towards a Transactional Theory of Reading," in *Influx: Essays on Literary Influence*, ed. Ronald Primeau (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977), p. 127.

⁸*Shaw: An Autobiography, 1898-1950*, ed. Stanley Weintraub (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1970), p. 152.

⁹New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.

¹⁰"An Autobiographical Essay" in *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1970), p. 247.

¹¹*Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*, p. 73.

¹²"Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant" in *Shaw: An Autobiography, 1856-1898*, ed. Stanley Weintraub (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 288.

¹³*Labyrinths*, p. 224.

¹⁴*Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), pp. 134-136.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 135.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF MYTH:

LES MÉMOIRES DE CLÉOPÂTRE

Sara Harris

In *Les Mémoires de Cléopâtre*, Makhali-Phal's literary incarnation of Cleopatra the woman and the legend extends the process of revivifying a concrete historical figure through imaginative reconstitution, which informs her poetic evocations of the shadowy, mythic heroes and heroines of the royal Cambodian city of ancient Angkor in her previous novels. Although Makhali-Phal views Cleopatra as one of the most intriguing and complex women in history, whose reputation increased to legendary proportions even in her own lifetime, the future "memoirs" the poet writes for the Egyptian Queen transcend the strict confines of history and create a personality of the highest order.

In order to understand *Les Mémoires de Cléopâtre*, one has to enter into the question of generic distinctions among history, memoirs, and diary, since a clear understanding of point of view is essential to the comprehension of this particular work. If Cléopâtre were writing a diary she would implicitly be accentuating the immediacy of each episode, since she would be writing down her own personal thoughts during or immediately after the event at hand. In addition, there would be little or no foreshadowing or hindsight,

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