

# **The Secret Miracle: Borges' Transcendental Inspiration.**

**By: Shlomy Mualem.  
Bar-Ilan University<sup>1</sup>.**

מרכז הספרות והמחקר / אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

## **Abstract:**

The writings of Jorge Luis Borges have come to represent in our time a point of reference, providing a categorical label for a type of literary composition whose blend of style, tone, and vision mark it in a singular fashion. Yet, the critical writings about Borges tend to consider him skeptic. In the critic's opinion, the Borgesian text is a labyrinth of skeptical ideas, or a mere game of words that uses philosophical systems for literary purposes. Nevertheless, in contrast to the critics' view, there is a clear similarity between Borges' thinking, and Plato's *transcendental poetic inspiration* doctrine. Both Borges and Plato, specifically speak of a divine external power that suddenly inspires the poet. This view bears a positive conception, which digresses skepticism. Hence, this is a different understanding of Borges' thinking, which can give a new perspective of his writings.

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## **Introduction**

The enigmatic writing of Borges invites critical commentary. Thus there are more than 1,200 studies on Borges' writings. These studies can be divided into two thematic sections: the first tends to find meaning in the texts, which is influenced by skeptic philosophical doctrines such as nihilism or relativism; the second considers Borges' writings as a mere closed linguistic game, with no philosophical meaning. Therefore, the common tendency of the critical studies is to deny from Borges' writings any positive meaning.

Yet, a close look at the Borgesian essays and dialogues will find traces of positive, non-skeptic, aesthetic and philosophic themes. The main goal of this article will be to expose a positive theme in the Borgesian thinking, through a comparison with Plato's **transcendental poetic inspiration** doctrine, and to investigate the philosophical outcome of this theme through a comparison with *Rene Descartes* philosophy. Finally, the presence of this theme will be demonstrated in different Borgesian texts.

## **Theoretical background: Plato's Inspiration Doctrine**

To underscore Plato's total centrality in the Western culture, *A.N. Whitehead* once remarked that the European philosophical tradition could be viewed as 'A series of footnotes to Plato' ( Whitehead 63). The same can be said about Plato's aesthetic doctrine, which has a profound influence on the history of western aesthetics, for Plato was the first philosopher who raised aesthetic questions, although not systematically. One of Plato's most important aesthetic themes, is the theme of the *transcendental poetic inspiration*.

In his famous dialogue 'Ion', Plato drafts the process of poetic inspiration (534b) : the transcendental divinity, God or the muses, removes the poet's mind and speaks through his throat. Hence, the poet becomes some kind of spiritual '*magnet*', which transfers his poetic powers to the souls of his listeners. The poet, then, does not possess any skill or knowledge; he is nothing but a passive vessel of external divinity, a mere arbitrator of transcendental powers:

*Seeing then that it is not by art that they [the poets] compose and utter so many fine things about the deeds of men -as you do about Homer- but by a divine dispensation, each is able only to compose that to which the Muse has stirred him. (Plato 423)*

## **(I). Critical Studies About Borges**

An examination of the critical studies concerning Borges' writings, found two major trends, both of them tend to view Borges as a skeptic. The first trend searched for **extra-literal meaning** in the Borgesian text. *D.T. Jaen* remarks:

*The basic intent of this criticism is the analysis of stylistic devices as conveyors of meaning. A common tendency is to read Borges' texts as expressions of philosophical...or transcendental intuitions. The method often involves two steps: (1) the study of style per se, as the significant characteristic of an art form, and (2) the study of style as meaning. In other words, style is conceived as containing the meaning of a work of art, with stylistic devices appearing as significant marks in a literary language that expresses certain intuitions. Thus, the initial purpose of the analysis is to underscore the individual characteristics of the work, but the ultimate objective is the reading of meaning in the text. (Jaen xv.)*

Moreover, this trend tended to find the ultimate meaning of Borges' texts as skeptic, and attached those texts to negative philosophical doctrines, such as relativism, skepticism, or nihilism. A demonstration to this tendency is the conclusion of an important book about Borges, "*Borges the Labyrinth Maker*":

*His work does not contain the coherent evolution of metaphysical thought, nor a doctrine which he adopts as the single and real key to the universe because Borges is convinced that nothing in man's destiny has any meaning. (Barrenechea 144)*

The second trend is the **linguistic** one. It concentrated on internal reading of Borges' writings. Hence, the texts were considered as a closed linguistic systems, a mere literary game of words and ideas. Therefore, this approach denied apriory any possibility of philosophical linkage. *D.T. Jaen* remarks:

*This approach rejects the idea of a transcendental dimension to literature and language. Literary texts find their justification (and explanation) in themselves ... These studies stress the idea that Borges' texts do not convey philosophical, metaphysical or transcendental meaning but instead deal mainly with literary problems. Such approach attempt to separate religious or philosophical connotations from purely literary or aesthetic effects. (Jaen xviii)*

## **(II). Transcendental Poetic Inspiration**

Throughout reading and re-reading Borges' texts, I found some interesting sayings of the writer, concerning the poetic inspiration. These sayings were clearly transcendental, thus reminded Plato's philosophy. One example is the preface of Borges himself to the book "*Borges the Labyrinth Maker*":

*Writers are but tools of the spirit...the Holy Ghost is the author not only of the Holy Writ but of all books, and this, of course, is the feeling that underlies Homer's and Milton's invocation to the heavenly Muse. (vii)*

In another prologue to his book "*El informe de Brodie*", Borges relates his thinking directly to the Platonic view of inspiration:

*El ejercicio de las letras es misterioso; lo que opinamos es infimero y apto por la tesis platónica de la musa y no por la de Poe, que razono, o fingio razonar, que la escritura de un poema es una operacion de la inteligencia. (Obras Completas, II, 339)*

In contrast to the critics' view that Borges does not have any positive theme, he expressly holds the Platonic theme of poetic inspiration. Now, two points must be cleared : what is the exact link between Borges' and Plato's transcendental poetic inspiration, and what is the philosophical meaning of this theme.

## **(III). Borges and Plato**

Borges shares Plato's transcendental poetic inspiration. Nevertheless, a thorough examination is needed in order to have a tangible comparison between them. This examination will be based upon two texts: the Platonic dialogue "*Ion*"<sup>2</sup>, and the Borgesian lecture given in a convention dedicated to his writing at Columbia University in 1971.

Plato's "*Ion*" drafts the 'mechanism' of inspiration (534c):

*For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence; since, if they had fully learned by art to speak on one kind of theme, they would know how to speak on all. And for this reason God takes away the mind of these men and uses them as his ministers, just as he does soothsayers*

<sup>2</sup> There are other dialogues in Plato related to the theme of poetic inspiration : 'Apology', 'Meno', 'Phaedrus', 'Laws'. However, in the 'Ion' the theme is most clearly demonstrated.

*and godly seers, in order that we who hear them may know that it is not they who utter these words of great price, when they are out of their wits, but that it is God himself who speaks and addresses us through them.*

(plato 423)

Thus, the inspiration in Plato's outlook shares the following characteristics:

- (1). The poet is totally passive.
- (2). The Divinity speaks directly through him.
- (3). The inspiration is specific to one genre (dithyrambs, etc.).
- (4). The Divinity is called "God" or "Muse".
- (5). The poet is totally deprived of his critical awareness.
- (6). The poet is compared to the religious man (seer).
- (7). There is a contradiction between *art* and *divine influence*.

On a convention dedicated to his writing, at Columbia University, 1971, Borges was asked to make some general comments about the writing of his poetry. He replied as follows:

*... This is a kind of central mystery- how my poems get written. I may be walking down the street, or up and down the staircase of the National Library...and suddenly I know that something is about to happen. Then I sit back. I have to be attentive to what is about to happen. It may be a story, or it may be a poem, either in free verse or in some form. The important thing at this point is not to tamper. We must, lest we be ambitious, let the Holy Ghost, or the Muse, or the subconscious- if you prefer modern mythology- have its way with us. Then, in due time, if I have not bamboozling myself, I am given a line, or maybe some hazy notion -a glimpse perhaps- of a poem, a long way off. Often, I can barely make it out; then that dim shape, that dim cloud, falls into shape, and I hear my inner voice saying something. From the rhythm of what I first hear, I know whether or not I am on the brink of committing a poem, be it in the sonnet form or free verse...All this boils down to a simple statement: poetry is given to the poet. I don't think a poet can sit down at will and write. If he does, nothing worthwhile can come of it. I do my best to resist this temptation. I often wonder how I've come to write several volumes of verse! But I let the poems insist, and sometimes they are very tenacious and stubborn, and they have their way with me. It is then that I think, "If I don't write this down, it will keep on pushing and worrying me; the best thing to do is to write it down". Once it's down, I take the advise of Horace, and I lay it aside for a week or ten days. And then, of course, I find that I have made many glaring mistakes, so I go over them. After three or four tries, I find that I can't do it any better and that any more variations may damage it. It is then that I publish it.*

(Borges on writing 72-73)

The inspiration in Borges' understanding shares , then, the following characteristics:

- (1). Inspiration is transcendental.
- (2). The poet strives not to interfere. He is not denied of his awareness.
- (3). Inspiration comes in a dim shape, in a "cloud". Then it gets clearer.
- (4). The dimension of time is essential.
- (5). Various kinds of genres are possible (poem, story, etc.).
- (6). After writing, comes an intellectual stage of polishing and re-polishing.
- (7). The giver is called "Holy Ghost", "Muse", "Subconscious".<sup>3</sup>

The similarities and differences between these views can be displayed in the following table:

<b>Borges</b>	<b>Plato</b>	Transcendental Poetic Inspiration
yes	yes	<b>Inspiration is transcendental</b>
Poet is passive in receiving the shape, but active in polishing and correcting the text.	Poet is totally passive	<b>Activity and passivity</b>
Poet keeps his awareness. He strives not to interfere.	Poet is totally unaware of his inspiration.	<b>Awareness situation</b>
"Holy Ghost"/ "Muse"/ "Subconscious"	"God"/ "Muse"	<b>The giver's name</b>
The divinity initiates the inspiration	The divinity initiates the inspiration	<b>Initiative</b>
Various genres are possible: poem, story etc.	Specific Genre to each poet	<b>Genre</b>
The poem is given as a obscure shape. Time is essential to clarify the final poem.	The poem is given complete.	<b>The Poem</b>

<sup>3</sup> The word 'subconscious' is followed by an ironic remark : "if you prefer modern mythology". This remark reduces psychology as a kind of mythology, i.e., the subconscious is not a serious alternative to the transcendental explanation.

Collaboration between the poet and the divinity.	The divinity is exclusively responsible to the poem.	<b>Responsibility</b>
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#### **(IV). The philosophical meaning**

The poetic inspiration according to Borges is, then, explicitly transcendental. Therefore, Borges expressly holds a positive theme. The philosophical outcome of such a theme, held by someone who is considered as a total skeptic, oversteps skepticism.

This argument contains the following steps:

- 1). Borges' startpoint is skeptic.
- 2). Borges holds the Platonic theme of transcendental poetic inspiration.
- 3). This theme assumes that inspiration is given from external divinity.
- 4). Therefore, external divinity exists.
- 5). Therefore, Borges implicitly holds the positive theme of external divinity.
- 6). Therefore, Borges' thinking oversteps skepticism.

This digression from skepticism in Borges' thinking can be illustrated by an analogy to *Rene Descartes*. In his famous book "*Meditations on first philosophy*", Descartes moves from a startpoint of skepticism to a solid transcendental certitude. The first step of Descartes is the conclusion, that if there is a doubt therefore there must be an 'I' that doubts. Since doubt is a part of thinking, then '*Cogito Ergo Sum*': 'I think therefore I exist'(chapter two). The next step is to analyze the meaning of the mental-concept of a 'God' that the Cogito possesses. How, Descartes asks, can I, a finite being, possibly have in my mind such a concept of a 'God', an infinite being? It cannot come from the I for the finite I cannot think of something that he is not, that is, infinite. Therefore, this mental concept must have been inserted from outside . Furthermore, the external giver must be infinite in itself, that is, a God (chapter four). Hence, in Descartes' philosophy, the existing of the 'I', which contains the mental concept of a God, implicates the existing of divinity. This argument is known as the anthropological proof of the existing of divinity.

The similarity between Descartes and Borges, is that they both share the startpoint of skepticism, and they both hold a theme that leads to the existing of divinity. In other words, they both move from skepticism to non-skepticism.

#### **(v). Literary application**

The theme of the transcendental poetic inspiration can be illustrated in some of Borges' texts that speak of the themes of creation and inspiration.

In the Borgesian story "*El milango secreto*", the protagonist, *Jaromir Hladik*, a Jewish author from Prague, is sentenced to death by the nazis. One night before his execution he remembered that he did not finish writing his play "The Enemies". He then prayed to God to grant him one year to finish his writing:

*Si de algun modo existo, si no soy una de tus repeticiones y erratas, existo como autor de Los enemigos. Para llevar a termino ese drama, que puede justificarme y justificarte, requiro un ano mas. Otorgame esos dias, Tu de Quien son los siglos y el tiempo. (Obras Completas, I, 511)*

By miracle, the time was given to the author; time had stopped for one year in order to assist the author to finish his writing. What is relevant here is that the act of writing is accompanied, and facilitated, by transcendental divinity. Moreover, this act justifies both the author and the divinity.

In another Borgesian text, '*Inferno, I, 32*', God spoke to a caged leopard in his dream, and came out as the supreme supervisor of Dante's writing:

*Vives y moriras en esta prision, para que un hombre que yo se te mire un numero determinado de veces y no te olvide y ponga tu figura y tu simbolo en un poema, que tiene su preciso lugar en la trama del universo. Padeces cautiverio, pero habras dado una palabra al poema.*  
(Obras Completas, II, 185)

In another famous Borgesian story, '*Las ruinas circulares*', the protagonist decided to create a man. He failed and despaired. Then the god of fire appeared in his dream:

*Ese multiple dios le revelo que su nombre terrenal era Fuego, que en ese templo circular (y en otros iguales)le habian rendido sacrificios y culto y que magicamente animaria al fantasma sonado, de suerte que todas las criaturas, exepto el Fuego mismo y el sonador, lo pensaran un hombre de carne y hueso. (Obras Completas, I, 453)*

The act of creation in Borges' view, is possible only by the assistance of a divinity. Thus, the human creation is a collaboration between man and divinity.



There are, however, other kinds of writers in Borges' texts. These writers represent the mechanistic, intellectual form of writing such as Edgar Allan Poe's "*The Philosophy Of Composition*". Plato himself remarked, in the famous passage of the *Phaedrus* that deals with the poetic mania (245a), that the poet who relies on skill (*techne*), pales into insignificance beside the one whose soul is possessed by the Muses. Borges seems to follow this idea. When a technical-intellectual writer is mentioned in the text, an ironic remark is likely to be followed. An example is the story "*Examen De La Obra De Herbert Quain*", the imaginative mechanistic narrator. Borges remarks there:

*De esa estroctura cabe repetir lo que declaro Schopenhauer de las doce categorias kantianas: todo lo sacrifica a aun furur simetrico.*  
(Obras Completas, I, 463)

Another sharp example, which confronts the over-intellectual poet with the light of transcendental truth, is the poem "*Baltasar Gracian*". The poet described as a word-player :

*Laberintos, retruecanos, emblemas,  
Helada y laboriosa naderia  
Fue para este jesuita la poesia,  
Reducida por el a estratagemas."*

Then the dead poet met the divine truth, and received his punishment by either regretting his spiritual blindness, or maintaining it:

*... El alma de Gracian entro en la gloria.*

*?Que habra sentido al contemplar de frente  
Los Arquetipos y los Esplendores?  
Quizá lloro y se dijo: Vanamente  
Busque alimento en sombras y en errores.*

*?Que sucedio cuando el inexorable  
Sol de Dios, La Verdad, mostro su fuego?  
Quizá la luz de Dios lo dejo ciego  
En mitad de la gloria interminable.*

*Se de otra conclusion. Dedo a sus temas  
Minusculos, Gracian no vio la gloria  
Y sigue resolviendo en la mamoria  
Laberintos, retruecanos, y emblemas.*

(Obras Completes, II, 259)

### **(VI). Conclusion**

Critical studies view Borges as a skeptic. The Borgesian texts, in the eyes of the critics, either convey skeptical doctrines, or are disconnected from any external meaning. Nevertheless, there is an explicit similarity between Borges and Plato's transcendental poetic inspiration. They both clearly speak of an external power that suddenly grants inspiration to the poet. Yet, while Plato's poet is totally passive, Borges' poetry is a collaboration between divinity and the poet. Therefore Borges holds the positive Platonic view of the transcendental inspiration. The philosophical meaning of such a view, like in Rene Descartes philosophy, digresses skepticism and establishes the existence of a transcendental divinity. Thus, this is a totally different understanding of Borges' thinking, and a new positive look at the Borgesian texts.

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