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Hernán Díaz. *Borges, between History and Eternity*. London/New York: Continuum, 2012. 208 pp

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Abstract

Review of Hernán Díaz. *Borges, between History and Eternity*. London/New York: Continuum, 2012. 208 pp.

Keywords

Jorge Luis Borges

Hernán Díaz. *Borges, between History and Eternity*. London/New York: Continuum, 2012. 208 pp.

When Borges published his *Historia de la eternidad (History of Eternity)* in 1936, he had left behind his initial avant-garde period, in which he wrote three volumes of poetry that were intensely modified in the following years, and three anthologies of essays that were eliminated from the corpus by Borges himself, due to the fact that he refused to revise them. The book that Hernán Díaz presents now seeks to explore, one more time, the ambiguity of the Borgesian title. But, if the oxymoron is a literary figure consisting in the combination of two expressions with opposite meanings articulated in the same structure, the title Díaz uses for his book combines two opposite terms connected through a simple copulative: *Borges, between History and Eternity*, while in the case of Borges a subordination of elements, both objective and subjective, is implied: in fact, in “history of eternity” not only the historical narrative, a product of eternity, but the eternity itself subdued to the rigors of history is uncovered. For Díaz, who employs coordination between the two equivalent elements, it is a matter of the union of binary opposites that establishes a different version of taxonomy and allows characterizing the human and the non-human elements of the set. As a consequence, this lends support for his fundamental thesis, which asserts the chiasmic relationship between political and metaphysical interests in Borgesian literature.

Following this perspective, we are not surprised to find that the distribution of the work is symmetrical. The critical material is organized into two sections, preceded by its “Preface,” and divided in two parts, each one initiated by an introductory note, as responding precisely to a construction of oppositions. As the author observes in the preface, the two lines postulated as essential for understanding Borges’s production—“the ‘historical’ vision of Borges is context-saturated, while the ‘eternal’ view is context-deprived” (viii)—are found intertwined: “the main purpose of the following two sections [“God and country”, 11-33, and “When fiction lives in fiction”, 34-70] is to reveal how certain basic political concepts present *in* Borges’s texts (such as his ideas of nation, power, and representation) relate to the view of metaphysics present in his texts (such as his concern about idealism and his syncretic approach to theology)” (9). The second part of the text contains two sections: 1. “Edgar Allan Poe (on murder considered as metaphysics)” and 2. “Walt Whitman, an American, a kosmos.” In Borges’s writings, the political texts go from the early poems to the Russian revolution, which the writer chose not to republish, up to his last works, including some of the essays written in the 1920s, numerous historical poems related to both national and international situations, fictive texts, not only his own but also collaborative. In “When fiction lives in fiction,” Díaz describes cases of “fractal

configuration” (xiv), in which the universe is manifested through philosophy and religion and which Borges employed abundantly. In fact, short stories such as “La forma de la espada” (“The Shape of the Sword”), “Tema del traidor y del héroe” (“The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero”), “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva” (“Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden”), and “La intrusa” (“The Intruder”), to mention a few examples, explore the fractal structure of worlds within the world: “A significant portion of his fiction, if not the majority of it, is shaped on the premise that there is another reality beyond (or nested within) reality” (57).

A point of departure for the second part is that, no matter the many mentions of the English canon in which the Argentine writer is known to be prolific, the work of Borges could “not have taken its shape without two North American authors—Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman” (73). Here we find an unjustified exaggeration on Díaz’s part as, in order to lay the foundations of his hypothesis, he enumerates from Abraham Lincoln to Eugene O’Neill, joined with famous cinematographic artists and directors, who constitute the principal references by Borges to American culture. But, to tell the truth, other cultural interests may be held as no less fundamental in understanding Borges’s literature: the period of the Quixote, especially Miguel de Cervantes and Francisco de Quevedo, Dante Alighieri and the Medieval Ages, William Shakespeare, Anglo-Saxon and Nordic literatures, etc. In the “Preface,” Díaz emphasizes that “Poe and Whitman, each in his own fashion, provided Borges with a way to articulate America and the ‘kosmos,’ the historical and the eternal.” With regard to Poe, he establishes that the American writer joined the intellectual order with the world of physical violence, another form of the conflict between arms and literature, and because of that he became a decisive influence in Borges.

Committed to one of the critical narratives that Argentine literature has constructed to deal with Borges, which has as a nodal point the writing of Beatriz Sarlo, followed by Alan Pauls, Díaz establishes that an essential element is “El vaivén” (backward and forward motion or fluctuation, but also the knife used in a duel), a subtitle he includes in the Afterword, where he sustains that Borges, who denied going in a single direction, “refuses to subordinate the eternal to the historical, and denies that transcendental issues are necessarily conditioned by contextual determination. Reciprocally, he consistently avoids the idea that eternity trumps history” (161). As a consequence, his political literature tends to follow the metaphysical path and his metaphysical fiction always has a strong political substratum.

How are we going to read Borges’s writings? As a compact work that supports an individual with a firmly distinctive quality, or as a set of texts that corresponds to a succession of person(alitie)s that may be taken to reveal various projects on the basis of Borges’s own development, of his convictions that are

replaced one after the other during his intellectual and affective life, in the history of his country and of the world? This is why Díaz's book turns out to be somewhat schematic, despite its detailed observations, pointed out with meticulousness. In fact, some of his observations have been established in general criticism on the writer, for example: "Borges not only wrote detective stories that helped redefine the genre but also theorized extensively on the *policial* (as detective fiction is known in Argentina) and even transgressed its boundaries" (77).

In some cases, a particular bibliographical reference is not included in the Works Cited (for instance, see the quote in page 80 which refers to the edition by Willis Barnstone of *Borges at Eighty. Conversations*, published in Bloomington by Indiana University Press in 1982). Finally, I want to mention that Díaz omits a fundamental text that deals with the same topics of *Borges, between History and Eternity*. It is *Borges: Una forma de felicidad* by Rolando Costa Picazo, printed in Buenos Aires by the Fundación Internacional Jorge Luis Borges in 2001. There the connection between Borges and American literature, in particular Poe and Whitman, is fully considered.

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