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Ficciones by Jorge Luis Borges: A Concoction of Post-human Wisdom

Abstract

Jorge Luis Borges was an Argentine author, poet, essayist and philosopher who greatly influenced the Latin American Boom, a literary movement that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century wherein Latin American literature became highly popular all around the world. Julio Cortázar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa were some of the writers associated with the Boom Latinamericano. The influence of the then avant-garde ultraísmo movement that strongly influenced Borges and which he introduced to South American literary circles and which ultimately even influenced Marxist poetry can be spotted throughout his works. The movement advocated emphasis on stark intellectualism and experimentation which form an integral part of Borges' writing. The indistinguishability of reality and fiction, author and writer, public persona and inner self are themes that resound in his labyrinthine works. Questions raised and mysteries developed in his stories never achieve a satisfactory answer or solution. The nature of his fiction represented the nature of the universe-enigmatic, unfathomable and inexplicable. Language is used as a tool by him to rewrite his own version of history, literature, mythology, reality and theology. He blurred the

lines between fact and fiction, reality and hyperreality and even genres such as poetry and prose. His short stories are so intricately designed, allusive and symbolic that they are often called prose poems.

In his critical essay, “Kafka and His Precursors” Borges expounded upon one of his main philosophies: “The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future”. To prove this, he set out to locate Kafka’s voice in six works belonging to diverse literary periods- Zeno’s paradoxes, Han Yu’s apologues, the writings of Kierkegaard, Robert Browning’s poem *Fears and Scruples*, Léon Bloy’s *Histoires désobligeantes* or Disagreeable Tales, and Lord Dunsany’s *Carcassonne*. He concluded the essay with the startling declaration that Kafka’s own early writings are less ‘Kafkaesque’ than certain works by Lord Dunsany and Robert Browning.

In *Three Versions of Judas*, Borges created a protagonist, Nils Runeberg, a fictitious writer who subverts conventional theological beliefs by elevating Judas to the level of Christ or, in other words, demoting Christ to a Satanic level. Judas’ sacrifice is revealed to be the ultimate one as it entails an eternity in hell as compared to Christ’s short-lived sacrifice. Judas is presented as the human representation of Jesus and of all mankind. Runeberg, amidst blame, rewrites Judas as the ultimate ascetic who willingly renounces pleasure and peace for the sake of redeeming humanity. Finally, Runeberg presents him as the personification of Christ, who did not limit himself to one afternoon of agony but chose eternal damnation. The Son willingly took the role of Judas to repay the debt owed by mankind to God.

In *Borges and I*, a metafictional short story which forms part of a collection called *The Maker*, an unnamed narrator who implies that his name is Borges by referring to a person he knows as “the other Borges” attempts to distinguish between his public persona, a.k.a. author and inner self, a.k.a. writer. In “The Decompression of Meta-Borges in *Borges and I*”

Kane X. Faucher ponders upon the question of who the 'author' really is in 'Borges and I'. Even the author's attempt is unsuccessful as the story concludes with the sentence "I do not know which of us has written this page" revealing that the amalgamation of the outer and inner selves is irreversible. The identity of one is subordinated to the other. The two voices, authorial and narratorial cannot co-exist without one superseding the other. The work serves as an autobiographical stream-of-consciousness through which the writer attempts to distinguish between his many roles-narrator, writer and character.

The collections *Ficciones* and *Labyrinths* contain assorted stories and critical essays by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, who is, controversially believed to have founded the magical criticism genre with his *A Universal History of Infamy*, according to renowned critic Angel Flores. Nearly all his works are replete with intertextuality. In *The House of Asterion*, Borges re-imagines the life of the mythical minotaur, Asterion. He presents the minotaur as a literary subaltern and looks at the situation from its point of view. Many writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have begun to re-describe legends, myths, folk and fairy tales from the perspective of the characters who have thus far been ignored in literary history. The minotaur is a mythical creature who is "part man and part bull" in the words of Ovid who dwells at the centre of the labyrinth built for King Minos of Crete. The labyrinth's function was to contain the monstrous minotaur. Even the creator of the labyrinth found it difficult to escape from the baffling structure. The minotaur's birth is the result of Pasiphae's adulterous affair with a white bull. Due to its monstrous size and the fact that it feeds on human beings, it is reviled by all those whom it comes across. Mythologically, the creature was eventually killed by Theseus who used the sword of Aegeus to perform the task. Theseus' act is traditionally seen as a heroic and virtuous act. Dante portrays him as the gatekeeper of the seventh circle of hell in *Inferno*. Boccaccio describes the minotaur as a cruel executioner who serves out punishment for the worst breed of criminals.

It is not merely in literature but in art as well that the creature is seen as an evil assailant, not an ever-suffering victim. Spanish painter Pablo Picasso drew him alternately as a violent instigator of crimes and righteously punished for his crimes in his 'Vollard Suite' collection of etchings. The idea of a happy ending for the creature eludes artists and writers alike. Even Borges himself could not envision anything happier than a quasi-euthanasia for the misbegotten creature. In Borges' *The House of Asterion* the antagonistic minotaur finally becomes a literary protagonist. The short story was inspired by George Frederick Watt's painting *The Minotaur* in which the creature is seen gazing pensively into the distance, possibly awaiting redemption. Borges describes the creature's immense loneliness which eventually results in a loss of mind, hallucinations and delusions. It is a heart-rending tale of a being anxiously awaiting his own demise which he sees as a form of redemption. The creature is so filled with self-loathing that it doesn't even attempt to defend itself from Theseus, the antagonist in this particular version. On the contrary, Asterion, who is anxiously awaiting salvation meets his executioner Theseus with the utmost gratitude for relieving his suffering.

The tale is told from the Minotaur's perspective who attempts to find meaning in his seemingly futile existence. His miserable condition instills in him the delusion that his aim is to "free them of all evil" by killing them, them being human beings. His existence is so bleak that he automatically equates death with freedom and salvation. The opening lines, like the rest of the story are in the form of a dialogue uttered by Asterion, "I know they accuse me of arrogance, and perhaps misanthropy, and perhaps of madness". He logically points out that he has not been incarcerated as 'locked doors' are an integral part of prisons. The labyrinth has no locked doors, therefore, it is not a prison. He walked out once but returned when he saw the dismay on the faces of the people around him. The other Asterion he pictures in his hallucinations could likely be the King of Minos, his captor. As an explanation for his forsaken condition he even wonders if he is the creator of the universe. Theseus' astonishing

words at the end of the story reveal that the unfortunate creature eagerly embraced death, which he considered an act of mercy on a tormented and lonely soul, an end to bleak existence entirely devoid of meaning. The revelation comes at the end when the readers are conveyed that Asterion embraced death as a form of the salvation he had been waiting for so long. The narrator is Asterion and the tale is told in the first person. Asterion emerges as a sympathetic character while Theseus' callous description of the murder and the victim's reaction portrays that he is the true beast in this particular narrative.

In *The Other*, the narrator named Borges meets a younger version of himself who ironically mentions reading Dostoevsky's novella about doppelgängers, *The Double*. The narrator inexplicably reaches the bizarre conclusion that the encounter was real for him but a dream for the younger version.

Thus, the man who was once derided by being made 'inspector of chickens and rabbits' by the dictator Juan Domingo Peron has had a tremendous influence on the growth and development of English literature and language, both on critics such as Harold Bloom and writers like Octavio Paz, Julio Cortázar and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In the words of lexicographer Alberto Julián Pérez, "With his exemplary literary advances and the reflective sharpness of his metaliterature, he has effectively influenced the destiny of literature."

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