

RE-READING THE PAST:  
FICTION AND HISTORICAL DISCOURSE  
IN BORGES AND RODOLFO USIGLI'S  
*EL GESTICULADOR* AND *CORONA DE SOMBRA*

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Jorge Luis Borges has often been mentioned as one of the first postmodernists or as a precursor to postmodernism. One of the most significant of the postmodern turns concerns universal history and historical discourse, and the shift in general in the way historians, scholars, and writers view and represent the past. Borges's writings have played a significant role in this shift of focus in historical discourse. His stories and essays challenge the representations of universal history and affirm the subjective nature of all historical narrative. Rodolfo Usigli comes to view history in much the same way at about the same time, and perhaps even before Borges. His plays, *El gesticulador* and *Corona de sombra*, challenge the official view of history, underscores the subjective nature of history, and suggest that history, fiction, legend, and myth, often prove indistinguishable. The confluence of views of these two writers from opposite ends of the Americas argues that the postmodern vision has roots in Latin America rather than being an import from Europe or the U.S. and that that approach has crossed the Atlantic from the Americas.

Postmodern discourse has problematized our understanding of history. It has challenged the ability to distinguish between "fact" and "fiction" and has questioned whether true objectivity is possible in historical discourse. It has emphasized that one's time and place, one's nationality, and culture as well as one's personal and family background all influ-

ence any historical perspective. While the definitions of postmodern are many and diverse, when I use the term, I have in mind a shift away from monistic models and toward philosophical pluralism in many if not all aspects of Western culture and intellectual thought. In regard to history, it has argued that the writing of history is always subjective and that historians often employ rhetorical language and literary tropes, techniques and methods to formulate and frame their historical texts. This redefinition has encouraged marginalized groups whose histories were not heard previously or whose histories were written for them to move toward the center and speak in their own voices. It has laid the foundation for postcolonial discourse. At the same time, it has challenged the basic assumptions of universal histories. This debate has broad political implications as well.

One prominent historian, Hayden White has written extensively on the theoretical issues that link literary and historical discourse. Much like Borges and Usigli, he emphasizes the similarities between literary and historical writing. In "Fictions of Factual Representation," he asserts: "What should interest us in the discussion of the 'literature of fact' or, as I have chosen to call it, 'the fictions of factual representation' is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the writer of imaginative fictions overlap, resemble or correspond with each other" (White 21). He explains that, prior to the French Revolution, historians and scholars recognized that historiography as a literary art, as a branch of rhetoric, and they acknowledged that historians freely used fictive methods to represent real events. However, early in the nineteenth century, historical discourse began to identify truth with fact and regard fiction as the opposite of truth (White "Fictions," 24-25). White asserts that the difficulty with the "truth" of past experience is that it can no longer be experienced. Consequently, history becomes a construction of the imagination although the historian may be convinced himself and may attempt to persuade the reader that his account is true. In contrast, White contends that history becomes rhetorical in its performance and must assume an attitude toward textuality that gives it neither more nor less authority than literature (White, *Content* 147). He argues that present day historians give meaning to the past by projecting their imagination upon it, and that they "will" backward and reformulate accounts of the past to fit into the present. Consequently, the past is endowed with different meanings (*Content*, 150-52).

White also challenges the objectivity of the historian and emphasizes the role of the imagination in historical discourse. In his *Metahistory*, he writes:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by “finding,” “identifying” or “uncovering” the “stories” that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between “history” and “fiction” resides in the fact that the historian “finds” his stories, whereas the fiction writer “invents” his. This conception of the historian’s task, however obscures the extent to which “invention” also plays a part in the historian’s operations. (6-7)

He argues that the study of history is not innocent ideologically. By discriminating between left, right, and center, the historian, in part, disciplines the study but eliminates the possibility that history may be meaningless (White, *Content* 82). Furthermore, although the historian may think of himself as “objective,” as he projects himself into the minds of the historical figures and assumes motives, intentions, and values that may be totally contrary to his own, the imagination comes into play (*Content* 67).

Borges’s writings have played a key role in challenging the nineteenth Century view of history and redefining historical discourse. The Argentine writer clearly and extensively engages questions dealing with historiography and fiction and with the nature of universal history. While some poststructuralist, postcolonial or postmodernist critics may acknowledge an empirical past, Borges would probably express more skepticism. For Borges, not only is the past illusory from the vantage point of the present but also as it is occurring. Historical and literary myth and legend very much blend into our notion of the past. Time often seems to follow cyclical patterns and challenges the notion of “progress” as certain mythic experiences repeat themselves. One cannot separate the “empirical past” from how we know all “reality.” Furthermore, for Borges, all reality is a dream-like illusion. The limitations of the senses and our abilities to comprehend the totality of existence all taint any perception of “reality.” No perception, no empirical experience proves trustworthy. There is always another point of view, a different way of looking at things. In Borges’s world all knowledge is subjective and provisional. Time and place and

human limitations mold our understanding of the past and make it next to impossible to speak of truly objective and empirical historical data.

Examples and references to these attitudes abound in his works. In “El Sur” the reader cannot be certain whether Juan Dahlmann dies in the sanatorium or in the South. In the story “El Aleph,” the narrator, “Borges,” after having seen the Aleph, questions whether it was the authentic Aleph. In “La casa de Asterión,” Asterión closes his eyes and pretends to sleep, but admits that he sometimes probably does sleep. In “La otra muerte,” the narrator, unable to resolve the totally contradictory explanations about the life and actions of Pedro Damián, resorts to supernatural explanations to resolve the conflicts. Over and over again, a doubt lingers about whether occurrences in the past actually happened.

Borges confronts two different aspects of historical knowledge: the way in which we understand historical events and the existence or non-existence of a universal history or universal histories. A central theme running through both of these discussions concerns the differences between human and divine understanding. Human beings are not God (assuming God exists), and our comprehension of the world cannot approach that of the divine in its totality nor objectivity. He affirms the value of our attempts to understand and explain our world while he questions our ability to obtain universality and objectivity. A closer look at some of his stories can help clarify these themes.

The story “La otra muerte” from *El Aleph* subtly and imaginatively questions the nature of historical discourse. The story brings together different people’s contradictory accounts of Pedro Damián. While some assert he was a hero, others call him a coward. To resolve these conflicts, the narrator resorts to fantasy and magic. He contends that Damián acted cowardly at first, but was granted his wish to relive the battle and undo the resulting contingencies. The second time around, he dies fighting courageously. The story has a number of implications. Like “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” it posits that there may be alternative realities where competing choices are played out. It questions whether an objective, empirical history is possible. Memories are not dependable. Accounts often differ. Historians desire a rational, objective version, but the accounts are often imprecise, not verifiable and contradictory, and behavior is often irrational.

“Deutsches Requiem” from *El Aleph*, which also deals with versions of universal history and the biases of historians, provides another example of this. The narrator, Otto Dietrich zur Linde, is an anti-Semitic German Nazi at the end of World War II. He was a believer and an advocate of Hitler’s vision of the Third Reich, the thousand year empire that was predestined, but is now forced to admit the errors of his ways. He comes to realize that individual actions work in ways that humans cannot and do not ultimately understand nor expect. The story highlights that the powerful and victorious write history, that they often write it to their liking, and that there are other histories and other stories. It also challenges the concept of universal history.

“El espejo y la máscara” from *El libro de arena* also emphasizes how the passage of time alters our understanding of history. The Irish King commissions Olla, his poet, to praise his accomplishments. The poet does as he is instructed, but as the King’s fortunes become bleaker, the poet’s words become fewer and his meanings more incomprehensible. The King presents him with three gifts, a mirror, a mask, and a dagger. The mirror suggests that there are alternative perspectives and visions of the world. The mask underscores that we play roles in acting out our lives. The dagger symbolizes death, the end of our time, the changing of our fortunes, the great equalizer. They all underscore the uncertainty of predicting one’s fortunes and future, and thus our limits in understanding our world. The fact that the King becomes a beggar and Ollan’s poems are no longer sung emphasize that the powerful write both literary and political history. Time turns the “truths” of history on its head.

The essay, “Kafka y sus precursores” from *Otras inquisiciones*, provides some keen insights into the nature of literary history. In calling attention to writers who may have influenced Kafka, Borges concludes that we, in the present, create our pasts. We help formulate which writers or actors on the literary or historical stage and what themes in the past carry importance. This is extremely important to all aspects of history. It emphasizes that the past and our understanding of it are constantly being redefined by the present, a central theme in Usigli’s works as well.

“Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” reiterates this message as well. In recreating the Spanish classic, the French Menard must somehow free himself of all the subtle influences of time and place on his being and

totally absorb all the vision, attitudes, and cultural nuances of sixteenth century Spain. His incredible feat underscores the impossibility of our achieving that.

The story, “Tema del traidor y del héroe,” also emphasizes that history and literature have much in common. This was one of the first stories in which Borges delves in some depth into the nature of historical discourse. Ryan Kilpatrick, a historian and biographer, investigates the mysterious death in 1824 of his great-grandfather, Fergus Kilpatrick, who led their struggle for independence, and was an Irish national hero. Ryan discovers that his great-grandfather was actually a traitor and that his fellow rebels, led by James Nolan, tried him and found him guilty. Worried about disillusioning the supporters and dissipating the revolutionary fervor, they use the structure of Shakespeare’s play, *Julius Caesar*, and the format of a Swiss Festsspiele to act out and carry out his death sentence. As a result, the “official” historical version of his death recorded that he died at the hands of an unknown assassin while sitting in a theater.

The story underscores that historical discourse is replete with fictional, textual, and dramatic qualities. It suggests that historical figures are much like actors playing roles and acting out scripts on a stage. It contends that “objective,” “definitive” histories may be beyond the reach of human beings. Like detectives, historians attempt to piece together complex puzzles with some missing parts. Nolan’s role in directing and orchestrating this history has led some to compare him symbolically with a Divine Being writing universal histories. His organizing of the details so that a future historian would discover the truth suggests that one’s point in time molds and colors one’s view of the past. The story, like the essay “Kafka y sus precusores,” underscores that the present determines what aspects of the past merit emphasis and deserve recognition. The parallels between Kilpatrick’s execution and Julius Caesar’s assassination as portrayed by Shakespeare, and the foreshadowing of the Lincoln assassination, suggest that history is repetitive and that the lines between “objective,” “truth,” or “fact” and “subjective,” “fiction,” or “story” and between “literature” and “history” are imprecise and blurred and those “opposites” often run and flow together.

Ryan chose not to bring his great-grandfather’s treason to light both to protect his family name and his country. This underscores how history

is composed of national and personal narratives and argues for the need to approach historical discourse with skepticism. By setting the actions of the story in “un país oprimido y tenaz” Borges emphasizes that the powerful write history and they write it to their liking, and illustrates how the national history and the personal and individual family history often flow together (OC 496). Before the revolution, their oppressor wrote and defined their history. Like the elaborate Festspiele that Nolan arranged, Ryan, through his study, plays a role in giving voice to this subjugated people and defining it. Like Nolan, he decides to help keep alive the revolutionary spirit by hiding the truth of his grandfather’s betrayal. Of course, Ryan has personal motivations for protecting his family’s name as well.

#### EL GESTICULADOR AND HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

Rodolfo Usigli’s play, *El gesticulador*, also challenges the nineteenth century attitude toward historical discourse and suggests that there may be alternatives to the “official” history. In the play, César Rubio, a professor of Latin American history and of the Mexican Revolution in particular, has recently lost his job and moved from Mexico City to a small village in northern Mexico where he was born. He hopes to use his information of the Mexican Revolution to influence certain politicians, and in particular, Navarro, to restart his career. His son, Miguel, and daughter, Julia, are not very happy with the move, as it has altered their lives. Miguel, who is obsessed with “Truth,” is strongly critical of César and his wife for their emphasis on appearances and their hypocrisy. Bolton, a Harvard professor who came to Mexico to do research on the Revolution and on the fates of Ambrose Bierce and César Rubio, a popular, young General who disappeared during the Revolution, wanders into their home after his car breaks down. César sees an opportunity to receive compensation in exchange for his knowledge and information on the Revolution and shares some of his knowledge. After Bolton expresses disbelief that César Rubio, the revolutionary, was assassinated by an assistant, César suggests that he is César Rubio, the revolutionary, quietly completing the work of the Revolution through his professorial work. Bolton agrees to never disclose his identity, but goes back on word and releases the information to the press. This revelation immediately catapults César, despite of his and his wife’s resistance, into the primary campaign for Governor of the region,

and he is seen as a strong, future candidate for president as well. Navarro, who originally killed César Rubio the revolutionary, arranges for the professor's assassination as well and manipulates his death to promote his own candidacy.

The drama plays with the ambiguity of "truth," challenges the nineteenth century modernist attitudes toward "truth," history, and objectivity, and suggests that "official" histories are written by the victors to suit their needs. Bolton, Miguel, César, and Navarro all figure prominently in Usigli's redefining of historical discourse.

Bolton, as a young historian, has certain set ideas about what "History" is that reflect back on nineteenth century attitudes. When César tells him that César Rubio was killed by one of his assistants, the response of Bolton is telling: "Tampoco es lógico, sobre todo. Usted sabe qué hombre era César Rubio... el caudillo total, el hombre elegido. ¿Y qué me da? Un hombre como él matado a tiros en una emboscada por su ayudante favorito..." (*Obras de teatro* 24).

For Bolton, history must be logical, rational, to be truthful. When César asks Bolton what Bolton wants him to tell him, Bolton responds: "La verdad... si es que usted la sabe. Una verdad que corresponde al carácter de César Rubio, a la lógica de las cosas. La verdad siempre es lógica" (*Obras de teatro* 25). Bolton is a throwback to the nineteenth century historian who assumes that history is logical, rational, positivistic, and perhaps that universal history is within our grasp.

César's views stand in contrast to Bolton's. While Bolton asserts that history is not a novel and that his students want and pay for "los hechos y la filosofía de los hechos... no por un sueño, un... mito," César counters with: "La historia no es más que un sueño. Los que la hicieron soñaron con cosas que no se realizaron; los que la estudian sueñan con cosas pasadas; los que la enseñan (*con una sonrisa*) sueñan que poseen la verdad y que la entregan" (*Obras de teatro* 26).

César represents the pluralist, the postmodernist, the postcolonialist who contends that truth and history are not singular and definable. He contends that there are alternatives, other perspectives to the "official history" that contain other truths. The suggestion is that the powerful write history, and they write it to their liking.

Miguel and Navarro represent even more extreme expressions of these opposing attitudes. Miguel is so obsessed with Truth with a capital “T” that he harshly criticizes everyone. He tells César and Elena at the beginning of the play: “Quiero vivir la verdad porque estoy harto de apariencias” (*Obras de teatro* 11). He sharply criticizes his parents’ insistence on appearances and their hypocrisy, and asserts: “Todo el mundo lo sabía, y si no se reían de ustedes era porque ellos vivían igual y hacían lo mismo” (*Obras de teatro* 12). Nonetheless, he seems to be harshest with his own family. When he hears César admit to Navarro that he is not César the revolutionary hero, he is so distraught and critical of his father that he ignores Navarro’s threat against César’s life. As Elena says to him: “Tu padre está en peligro, y tú lo sabías, y te has quedado aquí a decir esas cosas de él” (*Obras de teatro* 72). Miguel shows very little growth in that respect throughout the play. He seems unable to live with any ambiguity. As he moves out the door with his suitcase, his and the play’s last words, “la verdad,” reflect that obsession.

Navarro’s attitude toward “truth” contrasts sharply with Miguel’s. Navarro is an unscrupulous figure who manipulates the truth to serve his own personal needs and lust for power. He denies having killed César the revolutionary when César accuses him. He denies any role in assassinating César the professor. Although he knows full well that César Rubio the candidate for governor was not César Rubio the revolutionary hero, he praises him as such in order to enhance his own candidacy and power grab. Much as Mark Antony does in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, he uses his eulogistic speech to serve his own political ends. Like César, truth is relative, but for Navarro, the ends justify the means, and there are no moral or ethical values.

Unlike Navarro, César’s actions and comments suggest that while truth may be unknowable for us, certain ethical values are definable. He rejects the murderous methods of Navarro, and risks and ultimately sacrifices his own life to stop him from becoming Governor. He hopes to serve the people, avoid the corruption that now infests the government, and help fulfill their revolutionary ideals.

Rodolfo Usigli's play, *Corona de sombra*, also challenges the nineteenth century attitude toward historical discourse and suggests once again that there may be alternatives to the "official" history. *Corona de sombra* is a drama about the Emperor Maximiliano and his wife, the Empress Carlota. The play opens in Brussels in 1927, shortly before Carlota's death. Erasmo, a Mexican historian, has travelled to Europe hoping to interview Carlota before she dies. He is troubled by the demeaning stories and distortions that have been popularized about the royal couple, their life and their political downfall, although he has come to accept some of those. He has heard that she has gone mad, and he hopes to talk with her before her death. Usigli employs creative methods of staging and lighting to create cinematic cuts in time and space and produce theatrical flashbacks as Carlota narrates her story. The drama, which Usigli refers to as a "Pieza Antihistórica en Tres Actos," has several major thrusts revolving around the questions of history. It revisits and reinterprets the Carlota and Maximiliano episode in Mexican history from a present day (1927), post-revolutionary perspective. It represents Maximiliano and Carlota as characters and as humans in a positive light, calling attention to their devotion to each other, and their democratic ideals and their victimized, tragic situation. At the same time it does not ignore their human qualities and their faults. Furthermore, the play affirms the role of literature and theater in interpreting and helping to understand history, argues that history is more than a collection of facts, suggests that the powerful write history, and they write it to their liking, and in general problematizes and calls into question the lines demarcating history and literature. As such, it speaks to many of the issues that Borges does in regard to history at about the same time as Borges engaged the issue.

The place and function of history, historical discourse, and literary treatments of history play a central role in all aspects of this drama. Usigli's fascination with the issues relating to historical discourse and literature are clearly expressed in this play, and also in the "Prólogo" and "Advertencias" that he wrote concerning this work. In regard to the play, the role of professor Erasmo Ramírez, the historian, is central to these themes. While Erasmo Ramírez suggests that history is balanced, objective, and evenhanded, he comes to visit Carlota with certain preconceived notions

about Maximiliano and Carlota and their role in Mexican history. When the porter who is giving him access to the castle requests that he not speak badly in his book about Carlota, Erasmo replies: “Yo soy historiadador, amigo. La historia no habla mal de nadie, a menos que se trate de alguien malo. Esta mujer era una ambiciosa, causó la muerte de su esposo, y acarreó muchas enormes desgracias. Era orgullosa y mala” (I.2). Erasmo’s last name, Ramírez, underscores his Mexican heritage while his first name is European, suggesting that he is part of both worlds and underscores his function in the play of reinterpreting and integrating the two perspectives (Raffi Bérout 149). The stage notes indicate that he has distinctly Zapotec Indian features. Along with his knowledge of the history, those lead Carlota in her advanced age to confuse him with Benito Juárez, and as a result, she speaks more freely and openly than she might otherwise (Rodríguez 39).

In many ways, this play is about Erasmo Ramírez. As Raffi Bérout states, “A mi modo de ver Ramírez es el sujeto de la obra en su totalidad y su objeto es alcanzar la verdad sobre Carlota y lo que pasó” (150). In Act I, scene 1, Erasmo Ramírez asks the question that provokes and stimulates her to tell her view of events, “Señora, ¿por qué fueron Uds. a México?” (Raffi-Bérout 150). When Carlota asks him to narrate how Maximiliano died, Erasmo gains insights into these two principal characters, puts the pieces together and ultimately reinterprets “the official history” in light of these new revelations. When Carlota suggests that he, as a representative of Mexico, hates her, he replies “Yo no os odio. Ahora lo veo claramente” (III.4). When she asks what she should tell Maximiliano when she is united with him after death, he says to tell him that “México consumió su independencia en 1867 gracias a él” (III.4). He goes on to say that Mexico had a revolution that is still continuing, and that “la revolución acabará un día cuando los mexicanos comprendan lo que significa la muerte de Maximiliano” (III.4). A bit later he states that Maximiliano achieved his objective and explains: “Quiero decir que si el Emperador no se hubiera interpuesto, Juárez habría muerto antes de tiempo, a manos de otro mexicano” (III.4). The implication is that, from the present vantage point, Erasmo realizes that Maximiliano’s and Carlota’s intervention helped unify the Mexican people, that without them true independence would not have been possible, and furthermore Maximiliano’s death is a lesson that the ideals of the Mexican Revolution will only be realized when Mexicans stop

killing each other. He also has come to see the Emperor and the Empress in a much more favorable light. As Peter Beardsell asserts, Usigli is trying to portray Maximiliano as a more heroic, more sympathetic figure to the Mexican people and is reducing although not eliminating Carlota's culpability (67). According to Usigli, with Maximiliano's death European greed dies and Mexican national identity is born ("Prólogo" 151). Like Borges's "Kafka y sus precursores," Erasmo's role emphasizes that the present rewrites and reinterprets the past to correspond with its priorities.

Several of Usigli's theatrical techniques and symbols speak to this theme about history as well. Beardsell asserts that Usigli links Carlota's madness to her frustration in getting Napoleon III's cooperation (8). In the "Prólogo" Usigli says as much when he affirms that Napoleon III poisons her, but it is not with a chemical agent, but rather the poison of power (152). In her perceptive article on the multiple connotations and associations of light and darkness in the play, Kirsten Nigro emphasizes that when Maximiliano faces the firing squad, the light of day rushes through the open door, and at that moment the pieces fall into place for Erasmo (33). This light symbolizes Erasmo's new insight and reinterpretation of the official history. Similarly Meléndez contends that the light symbolizes Carlota gradually recovering her sanity (60).

Usigli's comments in the "Prólogo" and also in the later "Advertencia" also call attention to the centrality of issues of historical discourse and emphasize how the present reinterprets the past. Usigli asserts: "En México se cree que la historia es ayer, cuando en realidad la historia es hoy y es siempre" ("Prólogo" 144). He stresses that the historical facts are important, but any good dramatist must privilege the imagination over historical facts in writing a historical theatrical work (142). His conception is Aristotelian, he says, and derives from the *Poetics*, and his role is to consider it from an artistic point of view. "O sea que un tema histórico trasladado a la escena debe ser tratado sobre todo teatralmente, del primer lugar al último. O sea que el poeta no es el esclavo, sino el intérprete del acontecimiento histórico" ("Advertencia" xv). Like White and Borges, he also takes issue with the historicism of his day: "También operó en mi pensamiento una vieja protesta contra el ciego, obcecado historicismo de que sufren los escritores de los países tan radicalmente históricos como

México” (“Advertencia” xv). He brings all of these issues together in clarifying the use of the term “Antihistórico:”

Antihistórico, en suma, no significa para mí enmendar la historia, que se compone de hechos acaecidos, sino rectificar la interpretación historicista y limitada de los hechos y poner éstos al nivel del hombre, que es quien los crea y es a la vez piedra fundamental de la más humana de todas las formas del arte: la poesía dramática. (“Advertencia” xvi)

At about the same time, both Borges and Usigli challenge the nineteenth century objective, definable truth as well as the historian’s role in defining that truth. In 1935, Borges published a collection of stories, *Historia universal de la infamia*. Borges takes some biographies and embellishes them using his imagination. They have some implications for historical discourse, but they do not engage the discussion in a serious way. They move on a different interpretive plane than the “Tema del traidor y del héroe” or Usigli’s plays. Those innovations by themselves do not seriously challenge the conventional historical discourse of that time. Usigli develops the characters of Carlota and Maximiliano in a similar way in *Corona de sombra*, as he admits in the Prologue, reinterpreting them from the perspective of the present and as literary and theatrical characters. One of Borges’s first stories to undermine modernist attitudes toward historical discourse was “Tema del traidor y del héroe.” It was first published in *Sur* 112 (February 1944), and later in *Ficciones*. Edwin Williamson states that Borges composed the story in the months after Norah Lange’s wedding, which was July 16th, 1942 (266-67).

*Corona de sombra* was written, according to most accounts, in 1943. In the “Prólogo” to the play, Usigli says that the idea of writing a theatrical work on Carlota first captured his imagination in 1927 (137). Usigli engages many of these same issues concerning historical discourse in his earlier play as well, *El gesticulador*. While there is some debate about exactly when *El gesticulador* was written, it appears to have been composed in 1938. Daniel Meyran points out in *Teatro completo* that Usigli confirms that was the year of composition (52-53). Meyran also cites Usigli’s comments in “Gaceta de clausura sobre *El gesticulador*” in 1961, and “Breve noticia sobre *El gesticulador*” in 1972, where he states that he conceived the work in 1937-38 (52-53). *El gesticulador* was first published in 1943 in three parts in the journal *El Hijo Pródigo*. However, because of its controversial

criticism of Mexico and its politicians, *El gesticulador* was not allowed to be performed until 1947. Thus, Borges is well known as one of the first of the postmoderns or a precursor of postmodernism, and Usigli appears to have engaged postmodern historical discourse in a serious way at about the same time or perhaps even a few years before him.

One possible explanation for this parallel development is that they had similar precursors. Usigli acknowledges Aristotle's contribution to his concept of history ("Advertencia" xv), and Ramón Layera mentions the contributions of Hegel's and Nietzsche's writings on history and literature and art as impacting Usigli. Those are almost certainly readings that Borges knew. Certainly, they both were sensitive to the implications of colonialism on their native Latin American countries.

The fact that Usigli arrived at a complex postmodern/postcolonial conception of historical discourse in a literary work before the more prominent Borges matters little in general. It does help to elevate the literary stature of Usigli, although Usigli has a significant reputation in his own right as a first-rate playwright. Since Usigli did not publish either play until 1943 and have *El gesticulador* performed until 1947, it is unlikely that Borges was familiar with the play before writing his short story "Tema del traidor y del héroe." Borges was more successful in extending the reach of the theme, carrying it beyond the borders of Latin America and reaching Europe and other developing countries. Nonetheless, this parallel development highlights that pluralism and postmodern / postcolonial perspectives are very much a part of the history and cultural identity of the Americas. Thus, it is not surprising that someone like Borges would be one of the first to provide the metaphors, techniques, and the vision to give it literary expression.

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