

## AN AMERICAN HISTORY OF INFAMY

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According to Borges's bibliographic index at the end of *Historia universal de la infamia*, the main sources for "El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell" are Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* and Bernard DeVoto's *Mark Twain's America* (1: 367) "El atroz redentor" does in fact take entire passages from Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, but I will argue that Borges's primary operation in the text is neither the translation nor fictionalization of the historical account presented in *Life on the Mississippi*, but rather the deployment of a subtle and oblique confrontation of U. S. and Latin American historiographic and political models. A close reading of the first paragraphs of "El atroz redentor" will suggest that Borges's revision of Twain's text must be read in dialogue with a line of *americanista* thinkers from Simón Bolívar to José Martí to José Enrique Rodó, who struggled to define and defend a Spanish American political and cultural patrimony against both Europe and the United States, the "vecino formidable" to the north that was viewed by Martí as "el peligro mayor de nuestra América" and to whom the recently radicalized Darío of the poem "A Roosevelt" just said "No" (Martí, 38). By resituating Borges with respect to these intransigent *americanista* thinkers, I aim to call into question the sunny and unproblematic view of the United States and American literature that Borges professed in his 1970 *Autobiographical Essay*, first published (in English) in the *New Yorker* in 1970 and often cited as an index of Borges's disposition toward the "other America." In Borges's later years the formidable neighbor may have been "el país más amistoso, más tolerante y más generoso que había visto jamás," but for the Borges of the early 1930s, there

is something rotten in the United States (*Un ensayo autobiográfico*, 95). My analysis owes a large debt to Daniel Balderston's critical method in *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* of reconstructing the historical moment from which and about which Borges writes.<sup>1</sup> It is my hope that this analysis will contribute to the critical reevaluation of *Historia universal*, a work that, far from being "entirely devoted to fiction" as the early Borges critic Ronald Christ would have it, is characterized by an obsession with history, as the title suggests (Christ, 54).

One of the first aspects of the *Historia universal* that any historical or political reading must contend with is Borges's own commentary on the work, which he referred to in the 1935 prologue as a mere "ejercicio de prosa narrativa" and in the 1954 prologue as an "irremediable juego" (1: 305, 307). The 1954 prologue to the *Historia universal* introduces the collection with the following words:

Ya el excesivo título de estas páginas proclama su naturaleza barroca. Atenuarlas hubiera equivalido a destruirlas; por eso prefiero, esta vez, invocar la sentencia *quod scripsi, scripsi* (Juan, 19, 22) y reimprimirlas tal cual. Son el irresponsable juego de un tímido que no se animó a escribir cuentos y que se distrajo en falsear y tergiversar (sin justificación estética alguna vez) ajenas historias...bajo los tumultos no hay nada. No es otra cosa que apariencia, que una superficie de imágenes. (1: 307)

At first glance, the disparaging tone of the prologue might lead one to sense that Borges was de-authorizing his own text, but a closer look reveals that the apparent dismissal of the text is in fact an attempt to determine our reading of it. To begin to unravel the authorial strategies that lay behind Borges's rhetoric, it is helpful to situate the 1954 prologue within the oeuvre of Borges, and with regard to his historical trajectory. In the mid-1950s Borges was just beginning to achieve international fame as a major writer of fantastic literature, and his reputation in Argentina as the consummate *ajedrecista*—intellectual, anti-mimetic, meta, an endless falsifier and fictionalizer, a universalist more concerned with foreign literary than everyday Argentine life—was already being cemented in the

1 C.f. also the chapter "El cuento breve: selección, exageración, caricatura" of *El precursor velado: R.L. Stevenson en la obra de Borges*, where Balderston studies the specific ways that Borges rewrites his source materials in the second text of the *Historia universal*, "El impostor inverosímil Tom Castro."

wake of the publications of *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949). At the same time as he was composing the *historias* of *Historia universal* in the 1930s, Borges had begun to defend the genre of fantastic literature using well-rehearsed arguments from the “art for art’s sake” doctrine elaborated throughout the 19th century in Germany, France, and Britain. In the prologue to Adolfo Bioy Casares’s *La invención de Morel* as well as the essays “La postulación de la realidad” and “El arte narrativo y la magia,” Borges elaborates a theory of the literary work as autotelic, powered by an internal logic distinct from the causal processes of reality. The literary work was, as Borges would write of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “un orbe autónomo de corroboraciones, de presagios, de monumentos” (1: 244). Professing an allergic reaction to all notions of literary realism, Borges would staunchly defend the adventure novel, the classical detective novel, and other genres of non-mimetic fiction defined more by their rigorous plot structure (“un riguroso argumento”) than the attempt to “transcribe” reality (“Prólogo” to *La invención de Morel*, 8). The story “Funes el memorioso” is, as Beatriz Sarlo has argued, a text designed to illustrate the “devastating effects of absolute realism” (67). To truly devote oneself to mimesis, as Funes does in his day-long reconstructions of a single day, is not to unlock the secret life of things but rather to confine oneself to the “insipidness of everyday reality,” a phrase that Borges employs in the prologue to *La invención de Morel* to attack Proust and the 19<sup>th</sup> century realists.

If one looks closely at the language that Borges uses in the 1954 prologue—its insistence on sport or play (*juego*), on the text as mere appearance, and on the effect of its reading as a kind of hall of mirrors (“una superficie de imágenes”)—it becomes clear how much Borges is contributing to his own stereotype as a meta-literary writer and practitioner of fantastic fiction known precisely for his escapism and his predilection for games and illusions. The use of words like *juego*, *apariencia*, and *superficie* must be understood as attempts to establish a consonance with Borges’s major stories of the late 1930s and the 1940s such as “La lotería en Babilonia,” where the sordid machinations of the all-powerful Company leave the exasperated narrator to wonder if “Babilonia no es otra cosa que un infinito juego de azares” (1: 493). And it is not by accident that Borges retrospectively imputes to the text of *Historia universal* the same properties that he had given to the mythical Tlön, a parallel universe governed by

the idealist doctrine (outlined in “Nueva refutación del tiempo”) that the empirical world is “un mundo de impresiones evanescentes; un mundo sin materia ni espíritu” (2: 147). The combined force of the two prologues is to present *Historia universal* as a series of training exercises (“ejercicios de prosa narrativa”) that serve only as a preparation for Borges’s later works of fantastic fiction: “el irresponsable juego de un tímido que no se animó a escribir cuentos” (1: 307). By casting his earlier self as a literary *parvenu* whose sole purpose was to distract himself by “falsea[ndo] y tergiversa[ndo]...ajenas historias”, Borges is selling his own myth of the escapist writer dedicated to the world of fiction (and fictionalization) (1: 307). Borges guides us, in other words, to read “la historia” as “story” rather than “history.” This self-generated interpretation of the term *historia* was crucial in determining Borges’s criticism as late as the 1990s, not only in Latin America, but also in the United States, where Ronald Christ could describe the *Historia universal* as “entirely devoted to fiction” (54), and in France, where the name Borges would become synonymous with simulacrum.<sup>2</sup>

But where Borges’s 1954 prologue would instruct us to scour the *Historia universal* for falsifications and distortions, what we find instead in an initial examination of “El atroz redentor” are corrections and emendations of Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*. The story as related by Twain is of the American criminal John Murell (spelled Murel in Twain’s text and Morell in the text of Borges), who in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century concocted a brutal and elaborate money-making scheme in which he freed slaves in the US South, sold them repeatedly, and then killed them after reaping the profits. The (pseudo) redeeming quality of Murell, which will be crucial to my later analysis, is that he paradoxically spent the final years of his life attempting to incite these very same slaves to revolt and help him take over New Orleans, thus becoming an unintentional and ironic precursor to abolitionists like John Brown, whose radical militancy contributed to the onset of the US Civil War and the end of slavery. Borges’s corrections of Twain’s narrative begin on the basic level of the historical record: where Twain wrongly claims that Hernando de Soto was “the first white man who ever saw the Mississippi River,” Borges accurately emends that it was

2 C.f. Balderston’s *Out of Context*, 1-17.

Álvarez de Pineda who discovered the Mississippi while its first *explorer* was de Soto (Twain 5; Borges 1: 312).<sup>3</sup> This simple historical correction is concomitant with a general tonal revision of the text of *Life on the Mississippi*. As was typical of 19<sup>th</sup> century North American writers, Twain presents the history of the Mississippi as “our Mississippi” (read, “our American Mississippi”) and portrays the early Spanish explorers in accordance with the so-called “Black Legend,” the anti-Spanish view of the Conquest that prevailed in Protestant nineteenth-century America during the build-up to the Spanish-American War. Twain characterizes the Spanish as “robbing, slaughtering, enslaving and converting the [Indians],” a sharp contrast to his picture of the more benevolently bartering British (8). This description is of a piece with what the “reformed” Twain would later call his “red-hot imperialism” of the 1800s, a hawkishly pro-U. S. stance that culminated in his full support for the government’s aims in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Borges’s reaction to Twain’s clear anti-Spanish bias is sly but nevertheless striking when we juxtapose the two texts. Describing the physical history of the Mississippi River, Twain writes:

An article in the New Orleans Times-Democrat, based upon reports of able engineers, states that the river annually empties four hundred and six million tons of mud into the Gulf of Mexico—which brings to mind Captain Marryat’s rude name for the Mississippi—“The Great Sewer.” This mud, solidified, would make a mass a mile square and two hundred and forty-one feet high (2).

Borges translates, improvises, and elaborates:

El Mississippi es río de pecho ancho; es un infinito y oscuro hermano del Paraná, del Uruguay, del Amazonas y del Orinoco. Es un río de aguas mulatas; más de cuatrocientos millones de toneladas de fango *insultan* anualmente el Golfo de Méjico, descargadas por él. Tanta basura venerable y antigua ha construido un delta, donde los gigantes cypreses de los

3 In this case, it was Borges the “fabulist” who turned out to be the more diligent scholar. As David Weber writes in *The Spanish Frontier in North America*: “Setting out from Jamaica in early 1519, Álvarez de Pineda coasted westward along the shallow waters of the unexplored northern shores of the Gulf. Along the way he noted several large rivers, including the Mississippi, which he may have seen on the feast of the Pentecost and named the Espíritu Santo. Whatever name he gave it, it was Álvarez de Pineda who discovered the Mississippi, not the later expeditions of Hernando de Soto or La Salle as is commonly believed” (34).

pantanos crecen de los despojos de un continente en perpetua disolución, y donde laberintos de barro, de pescados muertos y de juncos, dilatan las fronteras y la paz de su *fétido imperio*. (1: 312, emphasis added)

Both writers are describing the way the accumulation of mud extends the North American territory southward along the Mississippi River Delta into the Gulf of Mexico. But Twain's simple landscape description becomes motivated in Borges's translation. In Borges's version, the incessant southward flow of muddy water from the Mississippi into the Gulf of Mexico becomes a symbol of the aggressive interventionist relationship of North America toward its Latin American neighbors: whereas in Twain the river neutrally "empties" mud into the Gulf of Mexico, in Borges's translation it angrily "insults" the Gulf. And while in Twain's version the river's derogatory nickname, "The Great Sewer," is merely alluded to, in Borges's translation the nickname provokes an elaborate image of mountains of waste that expand the borders and the "peace" (which Borges knew to be anything but actual amity) of a fetid empire. The literal referent of the "fetid empire" is most likely the Mississippi, but there is a clear attempt on the part of Borges to link the rotting deposits of the Mississippi Delta with the rotten imperialism of a United States whose encroachment upon Latin America was increasingly felt in the wake of the War of 1898. Not only that. By turning the Mississippi into a mere sibling of the great rivers of South America, and a bad-tempered sibling at that, Borges has also effectively eroded Twain's most unique and lasting literary symbol: the Mississippi River. Any reader of the *Life on the Mississippi*, or *Huckleberry Finn* for that matter, knows how intimately the name Twain has come to be associated with the river—*Life on the Mississippi* opens, in the semi-naïve tone typical of Twain, with the assertion that "The Mississippi is well worth reading about. It is not a commonplace river, but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable" (1). An excerpt from *Harper's Magazine* included as a preface to the text expresses the patriotic sentiment inherent in Twain's through a more explicit synecdoche: "But the *basin of the Mississippi is the BODY OF THE NATION*" [emphasis in original] (1). Borges's ironic description of the Mississippi undercuts Twain's rhetoric of exceptionalism, first by forcibly broadening the geographic vista to include the Amazon and the Orinoco, and then by highlighting the expansionary tendencies of the river's waters. Borges's text, in other words, is not simply playing with Twain's

version for literary—or meta-literary—purposes; rather, it is at times vi-  
 tiating and at times satirizing the confident nationalist tone of *Life on the  
 Mississippi*.

What is impossible to deny in “El atroz redentor,” I would argue, is  
 how close Borges brings the text to the historiographic debates central  
 to an Argentine audience while setting the text in the distant land of the  
 United States. The most jarring emendation by far to the text of Twain is  
 Borges’s addition of a single paragraph at the very beginning of the text  
 that identifies Bartolomé de las Casas, the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish priest and  
 tireless champion of the rights of the indigenous people before the Span-  
 ish Crown, as the “remote cause” of the infamous criminal Lazarus Morell.  
 The text reads:

En 1517 el Padre Bartolomé de las Casas tuvo mucha lástima de los in-  
 dios que se extenuaban en los laboriosos infiernos de la minas de oro  
 antillanas, y propuso al emperador Carlos V la importación de negros, que  
 se extenuaran en los laboriosos infiernos de las minas de oro antillanas. A  
 esa curiosa variación de un filántropo debemos infinitos hechos. (1: 311)

Borges goes on to cite as effects of this “variation” by Las Casas—who  
 seems anything but a philanthropist on the subject of black slaves—near-  
 ly all of the major events in political and cultural history of the African  
 diaspora in the Western Hemisphere, from the Haitian Revolution to the  
 U. S. Civil War, ending with the “culpable y magnífica existencia del atroz  
 redentor Lazarus Morell” (1: 311). This is one of the most forceful first sen-  
 tences in all of Borges’s work. On the one hand, it already begins the task  
 of dislocating the local North American history of Murell as told by Twain  
 and re-centering it in the broader macro-history of the *Americas*: the crimi-  
 nality of Murell becomes inseparable from a shared history that implicates  
 both the United States and Latin America. On the other hand, Borges cuts  
 through the same dogmatic *americanista* discourse from which he will  
 borrow just a few pages later, exploding a long-standing tradition among  
*americanistas*, stretching back to Bolívar and beyond, of viewing Las Casas  
 as a savior among the slaughterers of the Conquest. This passage exhibits  
 Borges’s iconoclasm at its best. At the same time as he distances himself  
 from the nationalist and inward-looking discourse of Twain, he shows  
 that the *americanista* discourse that has itself fallen victim to the same  
 types of “distortions” and “falsifications” as Twain’s American exception-

alist discourse. While it would certainly be an exaggeration to claim that Bartolomé de las Casas was the sole responsible party for the importation of slaves into the Americas, it is a true if often overlooked fact that in his 1516 “Memorial de remedios” Las Casas did in fact suggest to Charles V that the dying population of indigenous mine workers be replaced with black slaves.<sup>4</sup> The emendation of Twain’s errors and oversights is balanced here by the “rectification” of this elision in *americanista* thought. By highlighting the insufficiencies of both of these opposing discursive regimes, Borges restores continuity to the history of the Americas and allows it to be seen in its fully paradoxical nature. Indeed, the degree to which this inconvenient “variation” is crucial to our reading of the Borges text can be seen not only by tracing the chronology/genealogy from Las Casas to Murell, as Borges does in the first paragraph, but also simply by reading the oxymoronic epithet in the title: “atroz redentor.” The very epithet applied to Murell—the infamous man who killed black slaves only to paradoxically attempt to redeem them after inciting them to rebellion—becomes equally applicable to Bartolomé de las Casas, the “cruel redeemer” who tried to save the indigenous people of the Americas by offering black European and African slaves in their place. In Borges’s truly panoramic scheme, the atrocious acts of the “cruel redeemer” Murell are the distant echoes of a history of hemispheric infamy, radiating outward from Las Casas’s “Memorial de remedios” in all directions, from the Caribbean to the United States to the Argentina of Borges’s day.<sup>5</sup>

4 The eleventh “remedy” in Las Casas’s “Memorial de remedios” includes the suggestion that, “en lugar de los indios que había de tener [en] las dichas comunidades, sustente Su Alteza en cada una veinte negros, o otros esclavos en las minas, de comida la que hobiere menester, y será muy mayor servicio para Su Alteza y ganancia, porque se cogerá mucho más oro que se cogerá teniendo doblados indios de los que había de tener en ellas” (28). Las Casas’s rationale for advocating the importation of slaves and the degree to which he envisioned the slave trade in racial terms have been the subject of endless debate. What is certain is that as late as 1531, in his “Carta al Consejo de Indias,” Las Casas actively supported the importation of slaves in no uncertain terms: “El remedio de los cristianos es este, muy cierto; que S.M. tenga por bien de prestar a cada una de estas islas quinientos e seiscientos negros...” (79).

5 Ronald Christ has pointed out that the *Historia universal* “abounds in oxymora of the simple verbal kind”; here, however, the oxymoron does not function as a stylistic flourish but instead reveals a historiographic blind spot: the racial debates in early 16th century Spain, of which Las Casas was undoubtedly a part, that would help to determine the geography as well as the demography of the New World.



Sylvia Molloy has suggested that the opening passage of “El cruel reductor Lazarus Morell” corroborates Borges’s affirmation in the 1935 prologue that he “abused” the narrative mechanism of “las enumeraciones dispaes.” The vertiginous list of the “infinitos hechos” of Las Casas’s “curious variation” runs as follows:

los blues de Handy, el éxito logrado en París por el pintor doctor oriental D. Pedro Figari, la buena prosa cimarrona del también oriental D. Vicente Rossi, el tamaño mitológico de Abraham Lincoln, los quinientos mil muertos de la Guerra de Secesión, los tres mil trescientos millones gastados en pensiones militares, la estatua del imaginario Falucho, la admisión del verbo *linchar* en la decimotercera edición del *Diccionario de la Academia*, el impetuoso film *Aléluya*, la fornida carga a la bayoneta llevada por Soler al frente de sus *Pardos y Morenos* en el Cerrito, la gracia de la señorita de Tal, el moreno que asesinó a Martín Fierro, la deplorable rumba *El Manisero*, el napoleonismo arrestado y encalabozado de Toussaint Louverture, la cruz y la serpiente en Haití, la sangre de las cabras degolladas por el machete del *papaloi*, la habanera madre del tango, el candombe. (1: 311)

Characterizing this list as a series of narrative *disjecta membra* that leaves us without the possibility of assimilating all of the elements of the series, Molloy argues that the passage anticipates the “enumeraciones eruditas, e igualmente dispaes, en otros textos borgeanos” (34-35). From the perspective of stylistic/narrative analysis, this is an impeccable statement, and the passage does certainly anticipate the compositional principles of (among other things) the description of the Aleph, where the equally lengthy list of objects includes the impossible image of the face of the reader. But when one analyzes the content with an eye to the cultural translation that I have identified above, the passage, for all of its disparate images, appears to have a more concrete function. I have already argued that the unity of the passage is given under the heading of the major events in black diaspora history arising from the “curious variation” of Las Casas—what I would like to add here is that this concatenation of images seems also to be itself a curious variation on a passage in Twain. Almost immediately after (wrongly) identifying Hernando de Soto as the first white man who ever saw the Mississippi—a passage that Borges translates and amends—Twain insists that he must contextualize the very remote date of the discovery (1542) so that his readers can fully appreciate it:

The world and the books are so accustomed to use, and over-use, the word “new” in connection with our country, that we early get and permanently retain the impression that there is nothing old about it... The date 1542, standing by itself, means little or nothing to us; but when one groups a few neighboring historical dates and facts around it, he adds perspective and color, and then realizes that this is one of the American dates which is quite respectable for age. (5)

Before proceeding to quote Twain’s list of these historical dates and facts around it, it is important to highlight Twain’s elision of the fact that in 1542, the Mississippi was not part of “our country,” nor was this an “American date” in the sense in which Twain uses that term. The list begins:

For instance, when the Mississippi was first seen by a white man, less than a quarter of a century had elapsed since Francis I.’s defeat at Pavia; the death of Raphael; the death of Bayard, *sans peur et sans reproche*; the driving out of the Knights-Hospitallers from Rhodes by the Turks; and the placarding of the Ninety-five Propositions—the act which began the Reformation. When De Soto took his glimpse of the river, Ignatius Loyola was an obscure name; the order of the Jesuits was not yet a year old; Michael Angelo’s paint was not yet dry on the “Last Judgment” in the Sistine Chapel; Mary Queen of Scots was not yet born, but would be before the year closed. Catherine Medici was a child; Elizabeth of England was not yet in her teens; Calvin, Benvenuto Cellini, and the Emperor Charles V. were at the top of their fame, and each was manufacturing history after his own peculiar fashion; Margaret of Navarre was writing the “Heptameron” and some religious books—the first survives, the others are forgotten, wit and indelicacy being sometimes better literature-preservers than holiness; lax court morals and the absurd chivalry business were in full feather, and the joust and the tournament were the frequent pastime of titled fine gentlemen who could fight better than they could spell, while religion was the passion of their ladies, and the classifying their offspring into children of full rank and children by brevet their pastime. In fact, all around, religion was in a peculiarly blooming condition: the Council of Trent was being called; the Spanish Inquisition was roasting, and racking, and burning, with a free hand; elsewhere on the Continent the nations were being persuaded to holy living by the sword and fire; in England, Henry VIII. had suppressed monasteries, burned Fisher and another bishop or two, and was getting his English Reformation and his harem effectively started. (5-6)

I have quoted the passage at great length (it goes on for another long sentence) to show how closely it resembles Borges’s passage in all respects,

satisfying, in fact, the conditions of the “*bricolage* histriónico” and historical that Molloy locates in Borges, mixing “el dato histórico recuperable,” “la alusión literaria,” and “la arbitraria opinión personal” (34-35). Like Borges’s passage, this *bricolage* is assembled around a rhetorical purpose, namely, the establishment of a connection between the history of the Mississippi—and, in Twain’s words, “our country”—and the “respectably old” events of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. What is missing from this synchronic list of historic events is, of course, any notion that the discovery of the Mississippi was concurrent with the other events of the Spanish colonial project, a fact that Borges brings home by recalling that Hernando de Soto was the “antiguo conquistador del Perú, que distrajo los meses de prisión del Inca Atahualpa...” (1: 311). Equally significantly, after detailing the excesses and *estafas* of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Spanish and French territorial conquests of the Mississippi, Twain’s history fast-forwards through the entire period of U.S. independence and expansion in the region, mentioning only obliquely and in passing the monumental 1803 Louisiana Purchase through which the entire Mississippi River region officially became part of “our country.” Twain’s buildup to the history of Murell—and in particular his own “enumeración dispar” of the historical events that “add perspective and color” to the discovery of the Mississippi—is therefore characterized by two lacunae: one geographic (the omission of the full context of the conquest of the New World) and one chronological (the omission of the history of the territorial conquests of the U.S.). The addition by Borges of the paragraph about Bartolomé de las Casas (and the consequences of his actions) reconfigures the plane on which we will read the story of Murell, not necessarily by filling in Twain’s gaps, but by situating Murell within the *longue durée* of the history of the Americas. More specifically, it inscribes Murell’s actions in the history of the combative hemispheric race relations that would flare up with Murell and finally explode in the US Civil War, represented in the “consequences” section by “los quinientos mil muertos de la Guerra de Secesión” and the “el tamaño mitológico de Abraham Lincoln.” This amounts to an argument that the conditions of possibility for Morell’s crimes cannot be sought exclusively in the historical trajectory of “our America” (Twain’s) or in “nuestra América” (Martí’s), but rather in the convergence of the two: a United States whose roots must be followed back to the Spanish

conquest and a Latin America that cannot escape the equally “*infinitos hechos*” of its formidable neighbor to the north.

When reading “*El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell*,” it should not be forgotten that the Buenos Aires of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not only the site of heated debates about national versus cosmopolitan culture, debates that Sarlo and others have illuminated, but also the center of equally vigorous debates surrounding the *americanismo* movements, which had increasingly sought to promote Latin American unity through resistance to the United States’s hemispheric hegemony. Martí’s 1891 “*Nuestra América*” and Rodó’s 1900 *Ariel* both sought to map a route for Latin American intellectuals that would avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of European cultural hegemony and the United States’s growing military and economic muscle, namely, the belief that Latin America’s only chance for political and cultural relevance would come from an adaptation, rather than an imitation, of foreign models. It is important to recall, for the purposes of my argument, that the resistance model of these *americanista* thinkers implied not only a cultural politics but also a *textual* politics, that is, a strategy for reading non-Latin American books in ways that would further rather than inhibit Latin American intellectual and political development. It is well-known that Rodó’s allegorical rendering of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* casts Latin America in the role of the spiritual Ariel, while the United States represented the strong-armed “utilitarianism” of Caliban (a casting that Retamar, among others, would reverse in the 1960s), thereby framing the problem of the two Americas in cultural terms. But it was Martí, undeniably the more politically active of the two thinkers, who understood that the struggle for Latin American autonomy would range from the battlefield to the page, and that a new praxis of reading and writing was required so as to remove the enemy from the gates. Thus, in an implicit challenge to the belief of the 19th century Argentine writer-cum-statesman Domingo Sarmiento that the importation of European books (as well as immigrants) would solve the problems of fledgling Latin American nations, Martí writes in “*Nuestra América*” that “Ni el libro europeo, ni el libro yanqui, daban la clave del enigma hispanoamericano” and later argues that the new and true Latin American “Leen para aplicar, pero no para copiar” (36-37). While it is true that Martí will go on to say that the “libro importado” has been defeated by the “hombre natural” of Latin America, he nevertheless

frames the intellectual as a mediator between literature and the masses,<sup>6</sup> the one who must disentangle the complex figures of the text in order to present it not as rhetorical artifice but as true, and even more important, local/autochthonous. On the surface, Martí's program for resisting the "imported book" could not be further from Borges's practice in *Historia universal*, and in fact, Borges might seem to embody the very "bibliógenos redentores" and "letrados artificiales" against which Martí rails. But the reading I have proposed above suggests otherwise, since Borges's translation/modification silently but repeatedly "tests" Twain's texts not only against the Latin American historical context but also the commonsense empirical knowledge of its inhabitants. To give only the most obvious example, how could one "translate" the exceptionalism of the Mississippi River for a readership that inhabits a continent divided by the largest river in the world? Similarly, while one could certainly imagine a justification of Twain's portrayal of the Conquest—Bolívar is equally vehement in his condemnation of the *conquistadores*—based on a reasoned historical assessment, Twain's mistake about the discoverer of the Mississippi cannot be attributed to anything other than an oversight; it is the type of error that might not register for a US reader, but would jar any Latin American reader with the degree of historical knowledge possessed by Borges. Indeed, Twain's oversights appear, in the context of the entirety of *Life on the Mississippi*, to be part of a more general carelessness with regard to the Spanish pre-history in the United States. As a Latin American, Borges cannot help but emend Twain.<sup>7</sup>

6 For a detailed and incisive study of Martí's conception of the role of the intellectual as mediator in "Nuestra América," cf. Julio Ramos, 239.

7 The most detailed elaboration of the significance of the Bartolomé de las Casas passage is in Sergio Waisman's *Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery*. Waisman persuasively argues that the opening of the text "serves to place the villain of the story within an American historical context" and "provides us a glimpse into an 'other' universal history of the Americas" (90-91). Waisman is also right to contend that Borges shifts the universal history "from the U.S., out of the pages of Mark Twain's text, to the shores of the Río de la Plata" (91). I add to Waisman's observations, which follow Sarlo in reading these displacements as a response to the Argentine tradition (Sarmiento, Gutiérrez, Hernández), the argument that the text must also be read in dialogue with the *americanista* tradition (Bello, Martí, Rodó).

The difficulties of translation that we have seen in Borges's rendering of Twain—difficulties that, as I have argued, transcend the merely linguistic and must be sought on the planes of culture and history—are specifically addressed in one of Borges's best-known stories, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote." In her analysis of the text, Sarlo argues that "Pierre Menard" functions as a meditation on the possibility of narrating from the margins, the problem not only of writing in general but of writing in and from Argentina (31). Interpreting the text as an allegory of the displaced reader, Sarlo claims that the "displacement and anachronism" of Menard's "version" of *Don Quijote* enriches the original by foregrounding the necessary intrusion of the historical context of a work in any act of reading. In his "astonishing" attempt to recreate the 17th century Spanish text as a 20<sup>th</sup> century Frenchman, Menard forces the reader (and the narrator) to confront the fact that "all texts are read against a cultural background" and that "the process of enunciation modifies any statement" (32-33). The shift in the contextual frame from the 17th to the 20th century activates an interpretation of the language such that the "mere rhetorical praise of history" in Cervantes's phrase "historia, madre de la verdad" becomes in Menard's (identical) rendering a radical statement about the relativity of history. The actual words remain the same but the meaning changes with the position from which we read it. The thrust of this linguistic "change without a change" is similar to that of the phrase "el Mississippi, Padre de las Aguas" in Borges's "El cruel redentor," where Borges's literal translation of Twain's epithet takes on an ironic aspect for the simple reason that Borges's place of enunciation is the continent that possesses the largest river in the world, the Amazon—a continent from which Twain's Mississippi could be described, at best, as a paternalistic brother. The only difference between these two paradigms of cultural translation, perhaps, is that while "Pierre Menard" remains a theoretical speculation, whose allegorical nature is underscored by the absurdity of the premise that a contemporary Frenchman with a shaky grasp of Spanish *could* rewrite the masterpiece of Castilian Golden Age literature, "El atroz redentor" serves as a practical example of how cultural difference is registered in nearly every word. We should recall that it is not Menard but the narrator who imbues Menard's version of the Quijote with new meanings, while Menard himself stubbornly sets out to erase those cultural differences that might appear in an

“updated” or “modern” version of the *Don Quijote*. Although the narrator reads into the text of *Don Quijote* a radical reconceptualization of the notion of history, Menard is content to simply repeat Cervantes’s *historia*, to the point of suppressing all evidence of his process of enunciation by destroying all of his rough drafts (“no queda un solo borrador,” 1: 478). In my reading of “Pierre Menard,” there is a genuine dialectical tension between what might be called Menardism—the desire to submit oneself absolutely to the source text—and the more “culturally aware” perspective of the narrator, who realizes that Menard’s position will come through regardless of how well he hides himself in reproducing Cervantes’s text. It takes Menard’s useless, utopian, and conservative (in the strongest sense of the word) gesture for the narrator to realize how drastically the context of a work determines our reading of it. It is this second, more aware position that manifests itself in “El atroz redentor,” and it may very well be the first tendency at play in Borges’s use of the word “prose exercise” to describe the *Historia universal* in the 1935 prologue, as if the *historias* were so many “rough drafts” in a process of cultural and literal translation that became increasingly “fictional” and increasingly distant from the Americas both temporally and geographically.

It is interesting to note that one of the two later *historias* in the collection that deal with American criminals, “El proveedor de iniquidades Monk Eastman,” begins by comparing the archetypal bad guys of “esta América,” the Argentine *cuchilleros*, with “los de la otra,” the New York gangsters as described by Herbert Asbury in *Gangs of New York* (1: 328). The cultural juxtaposition of these texts shows us a Borges far from the Menardism that would lead him to characterize the *Historia universal* as a “superficie de imágenes,” to claim later in life that he had always wished he could have been an English-language writer, and to state in an interview with the America writer Daniel Bourne: “When I translate, I try not to intrude” (Bourne). The desire to *be* the foreign writer, analogous to Menard’s “initial” plan to recreate Don Quijote by literally becoming Miguel de Cervantes (“conocer bien el español, recuperar la fe católica, guerrear contra los moros o contra el turco, olvidar la historia de Europa entre los años de 1602 y de 1918, ser Miguel de Cervantes,” 1: 478), surfaces again and again in Borges’s texts and interviews. The ultimate impossibility of a completely faithful rendering of the source text is, as Menard’s conundrum

suggests, both textual and vital: to translate Twain's text without intruding, Borges would have to *become* Twain. This illusion of linguistic metamorphosis disappears, however, in the very labor of translation, where the Latin American Borges cannot help but do battle with the contentions and accentuations of the American Twain. In "El atroz redentor Lazarus Morell," this battle is brief. I have purposely focused on the opening pages of the text, because later on Borges's rendering of Twain's account becomes less adversarial. But here, by treating Twain's text as a kind of photographic negative, we are able to recover a snapshot of Borges in the process of translation, trying on his own brand of *americanismo* before returning to the habits of the dutiful translator.

I want to conclude this article by advocating for a renewed examination of the role that the debates about Latin American identity, Pan-Americanism, and the history of the Americas had in shaping Borges's work. One of the most interesting critical shifts in the past thirty years has been an increasing emphasis on the local aspects of Borges's texts, both their material conditions of production in Argentina and their intervention in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural debates about literary *costumbrismo*, political nationalism, and *argentinidad* between such figures as Leopoldo Lugones, Ricardo Rojas, and Ricardo Güiraldes. This line of criticism, which is seen perhaps most intensely in Ricardo Piglia, Beatriz Sarlo, and Graciela Montaldo, has produced compelling theoretical readings and critical insights. By framing Borges's problematic as one of local versus global, these critics have combined to delimit and deconstruct the parameters of Borges's so-called "cosmopolitanism," and afforded new insight into such canonical texts as the 1951 "El escritor argentino y la tradición." Yet the great project of the day was, for many of Borges's generation writing in the teens and twenties, a critical assessment of the cultural output of the Americas, from the Conquest to the present to match the politico-artistic manifestos of Martí and Rodó. As critical models influential to the young Borges, one might oppose to the names of Lugones and Rojas in Argentina those of Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Alfonso Reyes, two writer/scholars who dedicated much of their energies to studying the literature and history of the Americas. Reyes's influence is particularly crucial, not only because Borges once referred to him as the greatest prose stylist in Spanish, but also because his 1920 *Retratos reales e imaginarios* was most likely one of the sources for the *Historia universal*.<sup>8</sup> It is

8 Regarding Borges's debt to Reyes, Emir Rodríguez Monegal has written: "Como epílogo quiero contar algo más. Volví a enredarme en la obra de Reyes cuando me puse a



instructive to juxtapose Borges's famous lines from "El escritor argentino y la tradición," that "podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas" (1: 288), with Reyes's assertion in "Presagio de América" that

hoy, ante los desastres del Antiguo Mundo, América cobra el valor de una esperanza. Su mismo origen colonial, que la obliga a buscar fuera de sí misma las razones de su acción y de su cultura, la ha dotado precozmente de un sentido internacional, de una elasticidad envidiable para concebir el vasto panorama humano en especie de unidad y conjunto. La cultura americana es la única que podrá ignorar, en principio, las murallas nacionales y étnicas. (97)

Here one would be inclined to comment not only on the similarity of style but also the similarity of theme: the cosmopolitanism attainable only outside of the walls of the major cities of Europe, away from its travails as well as its traditions. If Graciela Montaldo has written that "el criollismo [de Borges] como programa significa aliviar los discursos sobre la argentina de la pesada ortodoxia nacionalista y quitarle el patrimonio cultural argentina a Rojas y Lugones," it would be well to explore when and how Borges engages in a similar process of alternately borrowing from and distancing himself from the *americanista* movement (184). Such a project would necessarily entail a study of Borges's relationship to U.S. writers from Whitman to Twain to Faulkner, examining not only—or even primarily—his literary debt to these writers, but the way he positioned himself with *and* against them, from his first reading of Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to his "real" interactions with American writers and intellectuals in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

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preparar la biografía literaria de Borges que se publicó el año pasado en Estados Unidos. Aunque sabía que habían sido amigos en la época que el escritor mexicano era Embajador en Buenos Aires y hasta había leído las cartas que se habían cruzado entre ambos (extraordinarias cartas de Borges a quien fue su maestro), no había podido medir la extensión de la deuda de Borges con Reyes hasta que me puse al trabajo menudo de documentarla. Pude ver entonces que, en efecto, y como ha dicho Borges reiteradamente, fue Reyes el que lo ayudó a salir de la fase expresionista y barroca, ya agotada en los años veinte, y lo llevó hasta el clasicismo de su mejor período" (41).

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