

## REVIEWS/RESEÑAS

### ***Borges y Cortázar: lo fantástico bilingüe***

María Amalia Barchiesi

Rome: Arance, 2010. 165 pp.

Like many Spanish-language readers, María Amalia Barchiesi makes an unintended slip in citing the title of Borges's famous story "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan." Adhering to grammatical rule, she adds an article before the noun, citing the title as "El jardín de *los* senderos que se bifurcan," a frequent mistake found even in published studies of the text. Fortuitously, Barchiesi's misprint illustrates the central tenet of her book: that Borges's and Cortázar's bilingualism intrinsically and indelibly mark the authors' work, even down to the syntax of their titles. The subconscious impulse to correct Borges's title makes clear that something is grammatically amiss. In fact, Borges's choice to leave off the article has been considered a literal transposition of the English "The Garden of Forking Paths," to which the addition of "the" before "Forking Paths" would likely be dropped by English-language readers as often as "los" is added to the Argentine title by Spanish ones. The transliteration of English into Spanish, "traslación" instead of "traducción," is one of the many features of Borges's writing that is rooted in his original bilingualism, which embed multiple perspectives within his stories. Barchiesi's text examines such rhetorical devices in Borges and Cortázar to uncover two divergent literary approaches to inscribing the semantic instability bilingualism imposes.

The book is divided into four chapters with a short introduction and conclusion. In her introduction Barchiesi informs readers that she relies on the linguistic and semiotic theories of Greimas, Kristeva, Bakhtin and Todorov, and in practice she does so to the degree that those without some background in semiotics may find themselves at a loss to exactly what is at stake in some of the examples she provides. Chapter One, "La

experiencia bilingüe” seeks to bridge the uneasy divide between empirical and literary studies of language, discussing aspects of bilingualism from semiotic, literary, language-acquisition and linguistic points of view to arrive at two conclusions that guide her approach through the rest of the book. The cited studies assert that bilingualism stimulates creativity and divergent thought in those who speak more than one language. At the same time, however, bilingual individuals often express a sense of perpetual exile; the multiple perspectives afforded them through bilingualism imply an anguishing obligation to choose between self and other. Bilinguals may thus experience a deep sense of dissatisfaction at being unable to express among monolinguals all of the signifiers they attach to any sign.

Chapter Two, “Retóricas literarias bilingües,” provides an overview of the rhetorical devices employed by multilingual writers to communicate the, “sofisticadas bifurcaciones, múltiples rutas alternativas, inusitadas conexiones y asociaciones lingüísticas, dobleces de pensamiento” that arise from moving among the multiple worlds they inhabit through language (39). Barchiesi initially looks to the work of international writers such as Julien Green, Khativi and François Cheng to examine the rhetorical uses of the double as expressed through mirrors, screens, hybrids and ghosts, and of writing as a suture that heals or at least conjoins the varying parts of identity that are fragmented through multilingualism. The author then moves on to devices employed in Spanish America, where bilingualism, she argues, necessarily implies a condition of foreignness. She distinguishes among the bilingualism of authors such as Miguel Ángel Asturias, who learn a second language as adults as a result of university or exile abroad; Borges, Carpentier, Fuentes y Cortázar who were either born outside of Spanish America or grew up in bilingual households; and that of Arguedas and Roa Bastos who came of age in bilingual indigenous/Spanish communities. These distinctions alone would make for an interesting full-length study, but they are treated only superficially here, making it hard to determine the degree to which each author’s strategy is personal idiosyncrasy or has more to do with his specific “type” of bilingualism. Finally, the author discusses bilingualism in the context of Argentina, where she says the privileging of elite languages such as English, French and German, as a response to the alarming multilingualism the accompanied the nation’s immigration waves, expressed itself through fantastic

narrative—the most propitious means by which to inscribe the morphing worlds that constituted Buenos Aires in the early to mid twentieth century.

Chapter Three, “Retóricas bilingües en las narrativas de Borges y Cortázar,” examines the biographical details of each author’s bilingualism and the devices through which it manifested itself in their work. In her discussion of Borges, Barchiesi begins to make an interesting point, citing anthropologist Edward Hall’s study of high- and low-context cultures. In high-context cultures, such as Argentina and other Latin nations, communication is indirect and circular, and meaning is often implicit, while in low-context cultures, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Scandinavian, meaning is explicit and communication more direct. The author seems to be suggesting that Borges Anglicized and Germanicized his Spanish prose, effectively transforming it low-context communication, a plausible explanation for his often sparse writing style. Yet she fails to make a solid connection between Hall’s study and her conclusion that, “Borges refrescó la lengua española; sus generosos métodos de lectura le permitieron importar al español la belleza de otras lenguas, giros de frases ingleses o la capacidad del alemán de esperar el final de una proposición para revelar su argumento” (75). There are scarce examples from Borges’s writing to show exactly what this displacement of Spanish might look like, a disappointment though one of the author’s most interesting points in the chapter. As she moves on to discuss Cortázar, Barchiesi comments at length on his career as a translator, a fact she scarcely mentions when discussing Borges, though by all accounts translation was a defining concept in the latter’s critical and creative writing. Cortázar’s bilingualism appears to have been more angst-ridden than Borges’s; Barchiesi argues that while both deployed the rhetorical devices of doubles and paradox, for Borges, these elements formed part of a single identity, the two sides of the same coin, while for Cortázar, “culmina disfóricamente con la destrucción del yo” (101).

The book’s fourth chapter, “Las bifurcaciones fantásticas del exotismo,” is by far the most compelling, providing thought-provoking readings based on an interesting theoretical model. Barchiesi establishes that an item comes to be considered exotic through a narrative-syntactic process where the subject desires an object, whose value is derived from the “passion”—most often in the form of wonder—it excites by inverting the characteristics of the subject’s society. Borges and Cortázar subvert

European conventions of exoticism as they switch the narrative syntax of their stories, the traditional desiring subject instead becoming the object. Barchiesi applies this reading at length to Borges's "El Zahir" and "El informe de Brodie" and more briefly to Cortázar's "El ídolo de las cícadas," demonstrating in each example the fantastic process by which the exotic ceases to induce passion. The thoughtful detail with which Barchiesi attends to these stories is what gives this chapter its merit; indeed, I found myself wishing the author's exciting insights had been given more room in previous chapters with longer analyses of the stories she cited.

The book's conclusion is dense but concise, and provides an excellent overview of the main points. Worth taking away is the concept of bilingualism as centrifugal and centripetal forces at work in each writer's narrative style. Language has centrifugal force in Cortázar's work, where word play, code-switching, invented language, and imperfect translation effect the annihilation of identity. In Borges, there is rather a centripetal force at work, his multiple languages cleanly delimited from one another, the Babelian chaos held at bay, as doubles—such as Lönnrot and Red Scharlach—reveal themselves to share a single identity. Barchiesi's book is ambitious, addressing many aspects of bilingualism, though perhaps at the expense of the kind of extended literary analysis Borges and Cortázar scholars would find most interesting. Regardless, the occasionally truncated examples provided in Chapter Three could prove interesting starting points for further research, and Barchiesi's admirable fourth chapter and conclusion are exciting contributions to Latin American literary studies.

*Leah Leone*

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee