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# BORGES AS HISTORIAN OF AMERICAN LITERATURE: HIS THEORY OF OUR TWO REALISMS

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Late in a 1952 essay[1] on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Borges mentions what he describes, quite unexpectedly, as "the curious veneration North Americans render to realistic"[2] works of literature (*Other Inquisitions* 64). But then, having tantalized his reader with this hitherto unexamined (though not unrelated) tidbit, he drops it, only to return to it a couple of lines later by suggesting that it implies the need for a mysterious and as yet non-existent comparison between realistic writing in the United States and Argentina.

To further his point (but without clarifying it), Borges prods what would have been, in 1952, our still parochial sense of American (read U.S.-centric) literary history with this: "In comparison with the literature of the United States, which has produced several men of genius and has had its influence felt in England and France, our Argentine literature may possibly seem somewhat provincial.[3] "Nevertheless," he continues, still more provocatively, "in the nineteenth century we produced some admirable works of realism—by Echeverría,

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[1] The essay comes from a lecture Borges had delivered three years earlier, on the same topic, at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, in Buenos Aires.

[2] The translation, by Ruth Simms, is quite reliable. The original Spanish reads "la curiosa veneración que tributan los norteamericanos a las obras realistas" (94), and while one might choose a slightly different rendition of this quote and others (and especially with regard to issues of syntax and punctuation, which often go hand in hand), what Simms offers us is does not alter the gist of Borges's message.

[3] For the reader trained in the literature of Spanish America but also knowledgeable about the culture of the United States, this word, "provincial" (*Other Inquisitions* 64) / "provincial" (*Otras inquisiciones* 94), is explosive, for it hearkens up a long history of disparagement of Latin America by the United States. Writing at the end of World War II, and the beginning of what many hoped would be a new and egalitarian approach to inter-American relations, Borges is pleading here for a more enlightened view of Spanish American literature in the U.S. The endlessly erudite Argentine is the opposite of provincial, and, one can convincingly argue, so is the literature of Spanish America, which, like Borges, is deeply cosmopolitan. This same cosmopolitanism was, in fact, one of the qualities that most astonished U.S. readers about Julio Cortázar's novel, *Hopscotch*, when it appeared (via Gregory Rabassa's brilliant translation) in 1966.

Ascasubi, Hernández, and the forgotten Eduardo Gutiérrez—the North Americans have not surpassed (perhaps have not equaled) them to this day" (*Other Inquisitions* 64).[4] At this point, and without discussing the issue any further, he brings his disquisition on Hawthorne to an abrupt close—but not, in vintage Borges fashion, without once again touching on, with what I suspect is deliberate slyness, the same still unnamed study, one he now allows may be done either by himself or in collaboration with his reader[5] "at some future time" (*Other Inquisitions* 65).[6]

What is the great Argentine writer up to here? What is he telling us? To understand, we have to know that more than a bit of trickery and misdirection is involved and that this is a defining characteristic of the mature Borges, who is fond of luring the reader in one direction only to then surprise her with artfully hidden clues[7] that, upon closer consideration, pull her back in another. This same technique is fully deployed here, in the essay on Hawthorne, the opening sentence of which includes a reference not to the U.S. writer, as one might expect, since he is the subject of the study, but to "the history of American literature" (47). Borges is keenly cognizant here of another study he wants to write, or of another idea he wants us to consider, one comparative and inter-American in nature and that deals, I believe, with nothing less than a contrastive examination of realism in American literature,

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[4] Borges then compares the Argentine writer to Fenimore Cooper, who is described as "infinitely inferior" to the U.S. writer (*Other Inquisitions* 48). But, except for its demonstration of the plausibility of the comparison of U.S. fiction and that of Argentina (to say nothing of either Canada or Brazil), this essay is not about Gutiérrez and Cooper.

[5] It is the shift here from the first-person singular to the first-person plural that marks this final suggestion (65). Given the importance Borges ascribes to reading and the power of the imagination, one feels confident that it is this collaborative relationship, between author, text, and reader, that he wants to encourage.

[6] Here, Simms's translation departs a bit from the original Spanish, which reads "En la próxima clase estudiaremos [...]" (95). A more literal, though also more pedestrian, rendering of this might be "In the/our next class we will study [...]." In Simms's version, this same idea comes across as "At some future time we shall study [...]" (65), which, one could argue, stresses the role futurity plays in the essay at, perhaps, the expense of the collaborative relationship that is implied. Such are the interpretive decisions a translator must make.

[7] The first of these clues is that, in the very first line, Borges speaks not of Hawthorne but "the history of American literature" (*Other Inquisitions* 47). Others include the fact that he speaks of Eduardo Gutiérrez not once but twice, first to open his essay (48) and later to close it (64), thus showing us (but not telling us) the importance of structure to his text; his later reference to Hawthorne as a writer (like himself) of "fantastic stories" (49); his repeated use of examples that seem to refer to unnamed "ficciones" he has already written ("The Circular Ruins," for example, 51; 58; 62); the frequent references to the interplay of the "real world" and the "imaginative world," a tactic that constantly begs the question: What does the word, "realism," really mean? (52); the many affinities between Hawthorne and Borges that the essay raises (but does not identify as such; 63-64, for example); and, finally, the enumeration, here and there in the text, of the basic Borges motifs: the labyrinth, Time, the infinite, dreams, art versus reality; the philosophy of Idealism; the importance of reading; the imagination; and how the various parts of a structure relate to the whole, and vice versa.

an entity he conceives of as being the province of both North and South America. And he uses Hawthorne, a writer whose sense of literary language use he greatly admires,[8] to make his point. If I am correct in my reading of this essay, Borges, whose English was excellent and who taught the literature of the United States for many years at the University of Buenos Aires,[9] wants his audience[10] to envision a new and expanded approach to American literary history,[11] which he understands, already in the lecture of 1949 and in the essay it becomes in 1952, not as the exclusive province of a single nation but in its hemispheric sense.

In this essay, I will argue this position—that Borges is inviting us here to view what are, for him, American literature's two very different conceptions of literary realism: one, the old, traditional kind so venerated (claims Borges) by North Americans and the other a new and more language-based kind, one known, famously, in Latin American literary circles as "la nueva narrativa," the "new narrative," and one actualized, for the first time in Spanish America, by Borges in his "ficciones," which were published as separate pieces during the 1930s and early 1940s.[12] My thesis is that, in "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Borges is trying to get us to set up a future comparative study of realism in the U. S. literary tradition and in that of Argentina, which, by extension, we should read as Spanish America. In doing this, we see

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[8] It is interesting that Borges is not in the least interested in Hawthorne's defining themes or in his sense of Puritan guilt. What interests Borges is how Hawthorne views language, its relationship to reality, and its literary nature. It is this concern with language as a semantically mercurial semiotic system that intrigues Borges and that had driven him to write his "ficciones" some two decades earlier. (See also Guibert 81).

[9] Borges was a professor of English and American literature and, for a time, department chair.

[10] In the talk of 1949 and again in the essay of 1952, Borges's primary audience would have been his students at the University of Buenos Aires and those who attended his Colegio Libre lecture. He received acclaim in the English-speaking world only after 1961, when, having shared the international publisher's prize, the Formentor, with Samuel Beckett, he began to be translated into English. We can conclude, therefore, that, even though Canada and Brazil are not here considered, the concept of approaching American literature in a comparative and integrated fashion begins not with an expanded and more international sense of "American Studies" emanating from the United States in the 1980s but from a vision Borges has already in 1949.

[11] In his 1967 study, *Introducción a la literatura norteamericana*, later (in 1971) to be translated as *An Introduction to American Literature*, Borges makes five points of interest to the historian of American literature: that U.S. literature, the last to develop in our New World context, offers a great many points of comparison with Argentine and Spanish American letters; that there exist not only similarities but important differences as well and that these must be accounted for; that Borges likes and admires the tradition of U.S. letters; that he understands and defends it as yet another of our New World literatures (implicit here is the well-grounded belief that readers, scholars, and critics in the U.S. ought not to look down their noses at Latin American or Canadian literature); and that the comparative method offers us the best mechanism for considering American letters in this larger, hemispheric context.

[12] In 1944, they were collected and published together as *Ficciones*.

the emergence of Borges's theory of American narrative history, that—with certain exceptions—(Hawthorne, Poe, and Faulkner)[13]—U. S. fiction has remained too closely aligned with traditional notions of western realism while the fiction of Argentina (and Spanish America) has not. While this well-known essay is, indeed, about the narrative art of Hawthorne (an author Borges lauds here for his cultivation of the allegorical method), it is also—though much less obviously—about something else, a theory Borges has about the nature of literary realism in the Americas.

But there is more. In both his lecture and his essay on the same topic, Borges is writing about a new kind of realism that *he himself* had invented. Or believed he had (more on this in a moment). In terms of Borges's theory of American realism, then, it is crucial to remember that it is less a matter of his being an advocate of fantastic[14] or magical[15] texts or even a precursor of "realismo mágico" (Zamora and Spitta 198-99) than it is of Borges being one of the first in the Western tradition to demonstrate what the defining concepts of

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[13] While it is Hawthorne who gets the bulk of the attention, Faulkner and Poe are also referenced, though in a much more limited fashion. For those who know Borges's critical studies of U.S. literature well, however, this 1949/1952 emphasis on Hawthorne only intensifies his long standing arguments about the similar importance of Poe and Faulkner to the history of narrative in the United States. His 1932 article, "El arte narrativo y la magia," in the Argentine journal, *Discusión*, about Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* (1838), sets out the importance to American narrative theory that Borges ascribes to Poe while Faulkner's experimentations with time, structure, and point of view, along with what he took to be Faulkner's belief in narrative as "verbal artifice," had been instrumental in his own development as a writer (Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges*, 372).

[14] In his book-length study of American literature, Borges speaks approvingly of Hawthorne for writing "fantastic tales" (*An Introduction to American Literature* 19). Borges also suggests here that Hawthorne sees the power of structures, or "systems," to determine who we (think we) are and how we (think we) know things (20). He also briefly touches on Hawthorne's story, "Wakefield," which he had earlier discussed at more length in the 1949 talk and the 1952 essay (19-20).

[15] It is imperative to remember that Borges's interest in magic was not the theatrical, "pull a rabbit out of a hat" kind but that dealt with by anthropologists, like Claude Lévi-Strauss, who, influenced by structural linguistics, saw in magic and myth the creation of structures of thought and being that, because they were not dependent on reality (which is always deceptive and changing), could be perfect, immutable, and suffering from no exceptions or "loose ends" (Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges*, 248). For Borges, magic, understood in this anthropological sense, had its analogue in the world of narrative art. It was the structure that was important, the structure being defined by the relationships between the various parts that constitute it; a word, for example, gained meaning/s in relation to its position relative to the other words in the same structure. For Borges, a writer could find in carefully crafted verbal structure a kind of perfection, or magic, that did not exist in either reality or standard realism. This was the theoretical basis for Borges's "new narrative," which he develops in his "ficciones" and which serves as the lens through which he considers Hawthorne, as well as, in other studies, Poe and Faulkner.

structuralism would look like if they were written up as literature rather than as theory.[16] If one accepts this explanation, it becomes easier to understand why, in the 1950s and early 1960s, and via translations into French, Borges and his "fictions" were so celebrated by the French structuralists,[17] who, empowered by Saussurean linguistics, saw in them the literary manifestations of the kind of theoretical divagations they were then concerned with. The "ficciones" were not revolutionary, then, because of their content; they were revolutionary because of their author's conviction that self-referential structuring was the crucial factor in a literary text's production of meaning.

Since the *Quixote* (1605;[18] 1615), a certain strain in Spanish American fiction (like Borges's own "ficciones") has concerned itself not so much with a mere imitation of nature but with the infinitely fluid nature of meaning in language – and with the inescapable status of a literary text as "artifice, a verbal object," one that may only have a tangential relationship to what we call reality (Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges*, 382). And while *Don Quixote* did not always produce literary progeny in Spanish America that mimicked it, the seed had been planted. The example was there, and the author of the "ficciones" knew what to do with it. Borges, who was well aware of Spanish America's realistic tradition, saw even more clearly the potential for narrative experimentation represented by Cervantes' great novel.

A prime example of what this looks like in actual Borgesian practice comes from the famous "fiction," "La Biblioteca de Babel," known, in English translation, as "The Library of Babel." Appearing in 1941, this chilling text deals with a fantastic library, one which contains all the knowledge in the universe but which is organized (structured, one might say) in ways that make it impossible to obtain or understand. The name of this fabulous repository of all knowledge is, of course, expressive of its fraught reality; all understanding is there, but it lies forever beyond our grasp. We cannot reach it. Although described in precise, geometric terms, and by a sober, sometimes fatalistic narrative voice, this library is nevertheless not "real"—except, of course, as a verbal construct, as literary art. In spite of

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[16] Borges, I believe, chose to call his texts not "cuentos" but "ficciones," or "fictions," to emphasize their reality as language-based art, that is, as narrative art that was built not so much on the telling of a story but on the ways language systems actually produce meaning. To have termed them "cuentos," or "stories," would have suggested to their readers that they were simply more examples, albeit odd ones, of traditional realism, which was a kind of writing he wanted to get away from. To call them "ficciones," then, was to tip the reader off that something was up, something new.

[17] Two of the most influential of Borges's French advocates were Roger Caillois and Gérard Genette. And John Sturrock has called "The Library of Babel" "the bad dream of a Structuralist" (xviii).

[18] With part one appearing in 1605, the impact of Cervantes's metafictional masterpiece precedes the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, and the first permanent English settlement in the New World. It requires no effort to understand how the theoretical and technical breakthroughs achieved in *Don Quixote* were able to exert a long and productive influence on Spanish American writers and to inculcate in them an appreciation of the unstable relationship that exists between language and reality. Indeed, the great scholar and translator, Gregory Rabassa, liked to say that the first "new novel" in Spanish America was *Don Quixote*.

this, however, the alert reader can extrapolate meanings from it; she sees, for example, that, in its own, allegorical way,[19] it alludes to both Argentine politics (the Perón era) and to world politics (specifically, the rise of the Nazis). More darkly, this same reader is also led to think about the Nazi book burnings of the 1930s and, most horrifyingly of all, their murderous "final solution," their bloody desire for "purification," in books and in human society. So while "The Library of Babel" is unquestionably a work of fiction (no such library really exists), it is put together in such a way that the reader can ponder reality in it; she can use something that is not "real" to contemplate something that is real. This, Borges would say, illustrates how language, and most especially literary language, really works. And, ironically enough (but befitting Borges, a deep dyed ironist), if a writer truly wishes to be "realistic," then this is how she or he must write. Traditional realism, by contrast, is less realistic (and more misleading) than the one he is practicing. What seems to be the case is, Borges shows us, not the case.

Borges, like his great but (by U.S.-based scholars, at least) egregiously under celebrated predecessor, the Brazilian Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, believed that, because it is made of language, a self-referential and endlessly productive semiotic system, a literary text cannot have a single, stable meaning, one just waiting for a reader to divine it. With this belief, one influenced, quite possibly, by the linguistic theories of Saussure,[20] and with the writing of his "ficciones" behind him, Borges could easily, by 1952, have been teaching his classes on American fiction while cogitating on how different it was (again, certain writers, one of whom was Hawthorne, excepted) from his own Spanish American tradition, one he himself had revolutionized, in his short fictions and in his later poetry.[21]

Albeit cast in ironic terms, and festooned in learning, Borges posits (if obliquely) in his essay on Hawthorne that, in the Americas, we have two quite distinct narrative traditions; one, predominant in the United States, hews closer to orthodox realism and a belief that we can find and understand the message, or theme, the author wants to impart to us, while the

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[19] This, I would say, is the connection between Borges's praise of Hawthorne (pages 49 and 57, for example) and his own cultivation of this kind of writing.

[20] Between 1914 and 1918, Borges was a student at a French school in Geneva, which means that he was physically present, and intellectually engaged, at the time Saussure was there giving classes on his new linguistics. So it is quite possible, even probable, that he (Borges) knew of them. For more on this, see Fitz, *Inter-American*, 355-58. Another influence was the English writer and mathematician, Lewis Carroll, whose *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) provides us with an epigraph for the famous "ficción," "Las ruinas circulares," "The Circular Ruins," a text that Borges seems to reference, but without identifying it, in the essay on Hawthorne (63-64). It is perhaps simply too delicious to speculate that the great Borges was influenced by Humpty Dumpty, the specific character in *Through the Looking-Glass* who delivers the lines about the problem of meaning in words, specifically that meaning does not stem from some essential quality in the things they refer to and that, in fact, words mean whatever we want them to mean. At the same time, I suspect that Borges, whose work can evince a wicked sense of humor on its author's part, would have been delighted that his readers contemplated this very possibility.

[21] "El otro tigre," for example ("The Other Tiger"), appearing in 1960, recasts, in poetic terms, what Borges does in several of his earlier "ficciones."

other, issuing forth from Spanish America (and built on both *Don Quixote* and Baroque, as opposed to Puritan, poetics), stresses neither the God-like authority of the author nor the rote imitation of reality but the semantic play of language and the interpretatively creative role of the imaginative, engaged reader. To put this another way, Borges wants his reader to actively interpret the various semantic possibilities the text, her own imagination, and her own experience reveal to her and not simply, and passively, glom onto the one she believes (and is told, by would-be authorities) the author intends her to have.

This argument gains credibility when one considers the landmark essay written by Uruguayan critic, Emir Rodríguez Monegal, from his post at Yale, in 1969. Entitled "The New Latin American Novelists," Rodríguez Monegal elucidates the linguistic nature of both the "new narrative," as pioneered by Borges,[22] and the somewhat later occurring "new novel," given form by such masters as Juan Rulfo, of Mexico, Julio Cortázar, of Argentina, and, of course, Gabriel García Márquez, of Colombia. Arguing essentially that, for the emerging Latin American writers of the time, the true nature of language was more fundamental to their texts than such issues as theme, style, and characterization, Rodríguez Monegal also took pains to underscore the importance of Faulkner, another writer Borges taught, knew well, greatly respected, and had even translated into Spanish (see Fitz and Fitz). Today, scholars of Spanish American letters tend to agree that the roots of the "new novel," if not necessarily of narrative itself (this would be Borges's achievement), go back to the work of certain writers (Miguel Ángel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, and Leopoldo Marechal, among others) in and around 1940 and that the theoretical orientations (heavily French in nature) that guided their thinking about language and the technical innovations they made would come to full fruition in the 1960s, a period of time known as the "Boom" era.[23] As

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[22] On this point, it is worth remembering that Borges, who favored shorter narrative forms, never wrote a novel.

[23] The reception in the United States of what was widely, if inaccurately, described as "Latin American" literature (Brazilian literature was almost entirely ignored in the context of the "Boom") was more fraught than is often thought today. A key player in this effort to educate people in the U.S. about the value of writing from Spanish America and Brazil, Emir Rodríguez Monegal complained, scathingly, about the "blind literary prejudice" that prevailed in the United States and that made it difficult for such writers as Borges, Ernesto Sábato, Julio Cortázar, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra, Guimarães Rosa, and others (like Clarice Lispector) to be accepted and admired ("The New Latin American Literature in the USA" 3). Exasperated, I think, Rodríguez Monegal specifically mentions both Lionel Trilling, whom he describes as having "a most perceptive mind," for telling one of his students that "he had read Latin American literature, and that in his judgement it had only an anthropological value" (3) and Edmund Wilson, who, he writes, "has steadfastly refused to learn Spanish, because he was and still is convinced that nothing has been written in the language that would justify his exertions" (3). On the other hand, Johnny Payne, a critic working years later (though still speaking of "Latin American" literature as if that term meant Spanish American only) would argue that the energy, political consciousness, and creativity of "Latin American" literature (he mentions no Brazilian texts) saved U.S. fiction from the state of decadence and inertia that, in the 1960s, had consumed it. "An infusion of the tropic,"

Rodríguez Monegal would conclude, "Language is the ultimate 'reality' of the novel," a point with which Borges would have enthusiastically concurred ("The New Latin American Novelists" 28).

But the historian of hemispheric American narrative must be careful here, for antedating all of these brilliant Spanish American writers on this same point, the importance of language, and especially structure, to the nature of narrative, was Brazil's Machado de Assis, whose also iconoclastic narrative breakthroughs between 1880 and 1908 are much less known and appreciated than are those of Borges. Beginning with *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1880, serialized version; 1881 book), Machado breaks with orthodox realism and begins to experiment with what I have argued elsewhere is not only America's first "new narrative" but a kind of fiction writing that challenges our thinking about language and its entire relationship with literary imitation and creativity (see Fitz, *Machado de Assis*).[24] One huge difference between what Machado achieved in the closing decades of the nineteenth-century and what Borges achieved in the 1930s is that the Brazilian did not have the linguistic theories of Saussure to build upon. Borges did. And yet Machado, rejecting orthodox realism at least by 1879, began to formulate his own theory of narrative, one that, eerily similar to that of the later Borges, can be said to anticipate the basic tenets of Saussure's revolutionary linguistics. While both came to the same conclusion—that language was a self-referential semiotic system in which meaning was never static but always in flux and in which the reader's active, engaged role was the crucial factor—they came at it from different directions, at different times, and from different American vantage points.[25] Moreover, as modern historians of American literature now know, they also changed the ways we think about narrative fiction, in the Americas and, as their fame continues to spread, globally (Fitz, *Machado de Assis*, 10, 26, 167-69).

Rodríguez Monegal, a comparatist and a scholar well acquainted with Brazilian literature, does not, in the 1969 essay, discuss Machado,[26] though he might well have, for he

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he writes, unfortunately equating "Latin American" writing to a geographical region, "staved off the entropic" (Payne 15).

[24] As Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis writes in 1879, "a realidade é boa, o realismo é que não presta para nada"/"reality is good, realism is what isn't worth anything" (*Obra Completa*, 830; trans. mine).

[25] The question of how familiar—if at all—Borges was with Machado and his work remains unknown, though it strains credulity to think that he (Borges) was not at least conversant with the earlier achievements of his Brazilian counterpart. As renowned Borges scholar, Dan Balderston, points out, while "Borges knew more about Brazilian literature than he let on," the University of Pittsburgh Finder's Guide, at its Borges Center, shows no references by Borges to Machado in any published work. Since there are hundreds of interviews with Borges that are not indexed here, however, it is possible that, somewhere, Borges did mention Machado (Balderston).

[26] He does, however, celebrate Machado's revolutionary genius and his importance as a precursor to the later appearing new Latin American novel in his 1972 book, *El Boom de la novela latinoamericana*.

exemplifies the argument Rodríguez Monegal is making.[27] Instead, Rodríguez Monegal references (in addition to a host of Spanish American novelists of the time) such later Brazilian innovators as Guimarães Rosa, Clarice Lispector, and Nélida Piñon. So important is Rodríguez Monegal's study to understanding both of Latin American literature's grand traditions, the Spanish American and the Brazilian, that I regard it as essential reading for all comparative Americanists and most especially those concerned with the history of narrative in the Americas.

We are fortunate to live in a time when the concept of American literature is expanding to include our entire hemisphere. As I have sought to show, this is the perspective, comparative and contrastive in nature, that animates what we might call the "other" argument Borges makes in his famous essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne. And while Brazil's Machado de Assis may have been the first American writer to create a "new narrative," one based, moreover, on a new theory of language, it was Argentina's Jorge Luis Borges who, with his own new narrative, placed it squarely in our hemispheric context.

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[27] Why, the reader might well ask, do I bring up the case of Machado de Assis in an essay devoted to Jorge Luis Borges? The answer is simple: the revolutionary work done by Machado during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth are absolutely essential to a proper understanding of American literary history. Moreover, he began his experimentations some fifty years before the better known Borges began his. To believe, then, that Borges was the first in the Americas to consider a new and distinctly non-realistic kind of narrative fiction is to embrace a deeply flawed view of our New World narrative tradition.

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