

La fe en el universo literario de Jorge Luis Borges.

Ruth Fine & Daniel Blaustein, eds. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag AG, 2012.

In their introduction, Ruth Fine and Daniel Blaustein—probing readers of Borges and of literature’s theoretical underpinnings—rightly point out that extant bibliographical entries and inquiries into Borges’ world somehow have glossed over the very issue of faith. That is precisely what led The Hebrew University’s Ruth Fine to hold the 2010 conference at The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and to publish its results. It is not, I believe, that many slighted that motif; rather, that the focus has been directed towards the other end of the spectrum: reason, and Borges’s avowed emphasis on the joy of rational comprehension. “¡Oh dicha de entender, mayor que la de imaginar o la de sentir!” [“Oh, joy of understanding, greater than the joy of imagining or feeling”]—uttered the priestly magician Tzinacán upon uncovering “The God’s Script”; of understanding and *not* of believing: reason over faith.

La fe en el universo literario de Jorge Luis Borges offers eight mostly different approaches to his approach to “faith;” or perhaps I should rather say, to how “faith” appears in, or is read through, Borges’s prose fiction and poetry. These readings range from a sustained anchoring in philosophical references, that Alfonso de Toro launched from “Las versiones homéricas” in order to address an appropriately described reflective, thinking expression of belief, to more pointed presentations of how Borges addressed

Jewish spirituality at times of existential crises through the Kabbalah and Hasidism (Arturo Echavarría), to Borges’s fascination with the Orient as it appears through Arab literature in a couple of his stories, “El Zahir” and “El acercamiento a Al’motasim” (Luce López-Baralt); to his reading of the Gospels as fiction (Lucrecia Romera). The act of writing, the telling itself, seems to lead to the moment or the instance that may lead to an epiphany, as Evelyn Fishburn weaves together “Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz” and “Deutsches Requiem,” or to unveil a preference for a paradoxical hell over the more conventional notion of a morality that dictates a set of postmortem rewards and punishments (Ignacio Padilla). Then we also have the more encompassing understanding, as the volume’s editors ascertain that in Borges, all issues, all disciplines ultimately lead to meta-literary considerations. It is along such an approach that in reading Averroes and his attempt to translate two concepts alien to his culture (comedy and tragedy), that Ruth Fine considers faith as a meta-poetic principle, ponders its aesthetic possibilities, and links it to other notions of “faith,” including the religious. Ultimately, fiction’s autonomy is exalted; it is the repository of faith, and, within the literary realm, of salvation itself.

Acute close readings lead us to question the multiple meanings of faith itself. This is the case whether we cut across centuries of philosophical and theological treatises or fall back on more recent exercises to understand the following: whereas “faith” and, beyond it, its various and codified theological and dogmatic practices, are matters of life and death—that we continue to witness on a daily basis—in Borges it all boils down (and up, as it were) to a playful game, to logical teasers. A serious game, nevertheless, as almost anything could become a pre-text to texts that inquire the very reason for seemingly extravagant notions. The core is language and language’s ability to name even that which is alien to the human experience. How can I share in a language that is consecutive that which is simultaneous?—wonders the narrator of “El Aleph” upon discovering the point that is the sum total of space and time. And so, both directly and indirectly he conveys upon language a tenet that is also common to the faithful: sharing. Sharing the secrets of the hidden universe is not to be confused with the goals of a secretive cadre of men bent on imposing or transfixing the human world into a version that suits totalitarianism, as

Borges explored in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”—a site where metaphysics is but a branch of fantastic literature.

Borges’s world is crafted by heterodoxy and the absence of dogmatism. (Joining the Argentine conservative party in his later years, as he once joked, was in itself an expression of skepticism.) Faith tends to project itself into norms that shape a creed that in time will be codified and enforced; a priestly class of sorts will then mandate a mode of life that, in turn, will be questioned by Borges. Truth is not necessarily the sole object of inquiry—aesthetic pleasure and coherence rise above it. That is why he questioned the normative version of Judas in “Tres versiones de Judas”; and why he understood the Kabbalists’s practices in “Vindicación de la Cábala”: a text that emanates from the Absolute Being is not subject to the arbitrary use of language; accordingly, he reasons, the exhaustive readings Kabbalists undertake when seeking the hidden in the Torah are fully justified and compelling.

Furthermore, whereas faith-transformed-into-religious practices foretells and demands acceptance of articles of faith and hierarchical obedience, Borges’s literary universe erects itself on questioning conventions, on breaking down dogmas (*Inquisiciones*, *Otras inquisiciones*, *Discusión* are in themselves an aesthetic platform predicated on intellectual challenges). In “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins”, moreover, he explicitly toys with variations on the precise rules of chess; in “Funes el memorioso” with the arbitrariness of naming, the need for abstraction, and the ability to reason.

Whereas an act of faith precludes doubt, Borges’s texts sow questions and inquiries and shatter the very foundations on which we settle to achieve some semblance of order. Even as they exalt reason, his pages push the limits of certainty. While reason and logical conclusions may provide a semblance of peace, desire is fulfilled through hypotheses woven with aesthetic pleasure. This path may lead to death, as Lönnrot discovered in “Death and the Compass,” but that is one of the risks ran by those who fall into the spider’s web or into a labyrinth without an exit clause.

At the beginning, I briefly alluded to seven of the eight authors whose essays appear in this volume. From the eighth, my own, I would like to share one notion: the one that alludes to Borges’s rigorous practical faith in a salvation that comes through from weaving together intelligence, ethics, and art. Immortality, one of the major forces that tie faith, commu-

nity, fulfillment of given religious exercises, and hope, is grounded by Borges with the following words: “...la inmortalidad está en la memoria de los otros y en la obra que dejamos” [“immortality resides in the memory that others hold and in the work we leave behind”]¹

Reading Borges, always for the first time, is an enlightening addiction; reading about Borges is, and in the case of this volume, an academic must. It is not a matter of trust or faith; it is a fact.

Saúl Sosnowski
University of Maryland, College Park

¹ *Borges, oral*. 1979. *Obras completas*. 1975-1988. vol. 4. Buenos Aires: Emecé, p.178, respectivamente.