



Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) and the “Borges Paradox”

Jorge Luis Borges was born in the poor Palermo region of Buenos Aires in 1899 but went on to become one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. His mode of writing and perspective are so distinctive that his work is hard to classify, but it is clearly a combination of fantasy with logical and philosophical themes. Borges is best known for writing poems, translations, essays, literary criticism and short fiction. His best-known books, *Ficciones* (*Fictions*) and *El Aleph* (*The Aleph*), both published in the 1940's, are collections of short stories bound together by common themes, including time, free will, infinity, dreams, labyrinths, authorship, identity, nominalism vs realism, realism vs idealism, skepticism, libraries, mirrors, fictional writers, microcosms, paradox, religion and mythology. His works are informed by numerous “oriental” influences, including Buddhism, China, Japan, Judaism and Islam – including a generous helping of heretics and mystics. Comparisons have been made between Borges and Wittgenstein on the ideas of the labyrinth of language and the limits of language (see McDonough 2018; Shlomy 2004 and 2017). Borges is sometime said to be the founder of “magic realism,” roughly, the genre that blends magical or “fabulist” elements into human life, but others claim that he is better seen as a precursor to it.¹ In 1961 Borges achieved international status when he received the first *Formentor Prize* which he shared with Samuel Beckett. In 1971 he won the *Jerusalem Prize*. The famous writer J.M. Coetzee said that Borges more than anyone else “renovated the language of fiction and opened the way to a remarkable generation of Spanish-American” writers including Mario Vargas Llosa, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar’s short stories, César Aira’s novels and the eerie twilight-zone feeling of Roberto Bolaño’s works.²

Biography

Borges' father, a lawyer who wrote a novel *El Caudillo*, which Borges saw as a failure, was of Spanish, Portuguese and English descent. Borges' mother was from a traditional Uruguayan family of Spanish and possibly some Indian descent. Her family had been involved in the "Argentine War of Independence" and she spoke often of their heroism. As a result of a family crisis involving his father, Borges family moved when he was aged 15 to Switzerland in 1914 where he studied at the *Collège de Genève*. During this time, the family travelled widely through Spain and other parts of Europe. When he returned to Argentina in 1921, he worked as a librarian and a public lecturer and began publishing poems and essays in surrealist literary journals. In 1955 he was appointed director of the *National Public Library* and a professor of English Literature at the *University of Buenos Aires*. He wrote in his autobiography of his being ashamed, unlike his heroic ancestors, of being a bookish man, a coward, and not a "man of action."³ Borges described himself as an agnostic: "Being an agnostic means all things are possible, even God, even the Holy Trinity. This world is so strange that anything may happen, or may not happen."⁴ Just as his father and grandfather went blind at an early age, Borges became completely blind by the age of 55. He married twice. Neither seemed to be marriages of love. The first, to Elsa Astete Millán, which was arranged by his mother to take care of her blind son, lasted only 3 years. In the second, a few months before his death, he married his personal assistant Maria Kodama, an Argentine woman 38 years his junior of Japanese and German ancestry, in what appears to be a formality. It is worth noting that in Borges' works women are almost entirely absent except as distant unattainable beauties.⁵ Finally, Borges often complained that he deserved a Nobel prize in literature, an opinion shared by many, but that he was not Scandinavian enough to be awarded the prize (an obvious reference to his Southern Hemisphere Latino heritage). Others have suggested that his conservative political views may have been a factor, or, perhaps, because he had accepted an honor from Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.⁶

Borges' "Philosophy"

Borges works replete with references to philosophers as diverse as Lao Tzu, Plato, Spinoza, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and James as well as to a plethora of literary figures like Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare. He had a particular passion for

ancient Greek philosophy, including the Ionian Pre-Socratics, the skepticism of the Sophists, and the logical paradoxes of Zeno of Elea. One will not find a “philosophy” in Borges in the sense of arguments for a definite set of philosophical theses. Borges is interested in Leibniz’ principle of the identity of indiscernibles but he is not attempting to write the definitive paper on it. It is difficult to know precisely how to interpret Borges’ works, but one central theme is the philosophical significance of idealism, the view that the world is mental in nature, which, in Borges, becomes the question whether one can distinguish between dreams and reality. In his story “The Zahir” he states that “to live and to dream are synonymous.” Borges uses philosophical ideas, logical paradoxes and other imaginative techniques to construct worlds that partake of this dreamlike quality. Is human life a dream or is it real, is it reality as such or as reflected in a mirror, is it reality or mythology, is it reality or a labyrinth that separates one from genuine reality on the outside, is it reality as such or reality as seen through a library, another labyrinth of words, that can never, by a shy bookish boy who cannot relate to women except as unattainable beauties in a story, be escaped?⁷ Borges’ works never provide the answer. They aim to disclose the unseen labyrinths of human existence, not show the way out. Perhaps, unlike the ancient Cretan labyrinth, there is no way out of Borges’ labyrinths. That may be the point.

The “Borges-Paradox”

Despite the fact that he does not advance philosophical theses, Borges’ works have inspired some major philosophers. Consider what Savile calls the “Borges-Paradox.” The background is the common assumption that the artwork is identical with the text. For example, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* just *is* the text he wrote. However, Borges sketches a situation that undermines that seemingly commonsense view in his story “Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote.” In this story, Pierre Menard, a fictional French polymath, sets out to become so engrossed in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* that he is able to reproduce it, not by simple copying, but by memory, word for word. Nelson Goodman holds that what Menard produces is merely another instance of the same artwork. However, given Menard’s vastly different history and context, the meaning of Menard’s text *must* be different from Cervantes’s text. The “paradox” is that despite being verbally identical, the two texts must *represent* different artworks! One might develop a similar argument for paintings, musical compositions and other kinds of artworks. The “Borges-paradox” is another example of Borges’ fascination with mirrors and with Leibniz’ principle of the identity

of indiscernibles. What is Menard's text? Is it just a copy of Cervantes' text or is it a different artwork reflected in the mirror of another mind? Is it perhaps a dream of Cervantes' work?

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- ⁵ Brant. "The Queer Use of Communal Women"
- ⁶ Feldman, Burton. 2000. *The Nobel Prize: A History of Genius, Controversy and Prestige*. Arcade Publishing, para. 81. For Kodama's unique perspective on Borges' life and controversies see Luciano Sáliche. Feb. 2020. "Secretos y anécdotas de Borges por María Kodama." *Cultura*. URL: <https://www.infobae.com/america/cultura/2019/09/29/secretos-y-anecdotas-de-borges-por-maria-kodama-una-reencarnacion-de-a-dos-los-celos-la-traicion-de-bioy-y-el-motivo-por-el-cual-nunca-gano-el-nobel/>
- ⁷ Carter, "Women in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges"