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Jullien, Dominique

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Dominique Jullien

IN PRAISE OF MISTRANSLATION: THE MELANCHOLY COSMOPOLITANISM OF JORGE LUIS BORGES

Jorge Luis Borges, we are told, devoted the last few weeks of his life to learning Arabic, with the help of an Egyptian teacher living in Switzerland.¹ In this most appropriately enigmatic of Borgesian endings, it is tempting to read two contradictory aspects of Borges. On the one hand, this sense of an ending is in character with Borges the unrelenting cosmopolitan, who would die far from his native Buenos Aires, and who, having mastered English and Spanish since birth, French, German and Latin in his teenage years in Geneva, Italian along the way,² and old Norse in his sixties, was attempting, in the face of death, to acquire the rudiments of an ultimate, and ultimately foreign, language. On the other hand, this exemplary anecdote leaves us with the much more melancholy image of an old man defeated. How much of the Arabic language could an eighty-seven year old blind man, dying of liver cancer, hope to learn in a few lessons?

This study attempts to explore this sort of duality in some of Borges's writings, with particular emphasis on the story translated as "Averroës' Search" (first published in *Sur* in 1947, then included in *El Aleph* in 1949), and on the essay written shortly thereafter, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition." The essay proudly claims cosmopolitanism as the quintessential dimension of the writer's experience. Borges refuses to be limited to narrowly local or national themes and characters, but instead borrows from all periods of history and all cultures. "Our patrimony is the universe,"³ he boldly asserts: the essay

1. Pablo Tornielli reflects on Borges's enigmatic decision in "Algunos motivos árabes e islámicos en la obra de Borges," *Borges Studies Online*, 2001. The anecdote about Borges learning Arabic in the last weeks of his life was revealed by Héctor D'Amico, in the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación* in an article dated November 20, 1993, 7.

2. At least for reading knowledge, although one should not necessarily take Borges at his word when he claims that he has "read and reread *The Divine Comedy* in more than a dozen different editions [and also] Ariosto, Tasso, Croce, and Gentile," but that he is "quite unable to speak Italian or to follow an Italian play or film" Jorge Luis Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," in Jaime Alazraki, ed., *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987) 29.

3. "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, (New Directions, 1964) 185. In the original: "Nuestro patrimonio es el universo." "El escritor argentino y la tradición," *Obras completas* (Barcelona: Emecé,

claims for the Argentine writer the right and indeed the privilege to derive inspiration and find subjects in any culture he chooses, a declaration that flew in the face of the nationalistic politics of literature at that time in Perón's Argentina. Originally given as a lecture in 1951, the essay is Borges's response to criticism that demonized him as a foreigner, a "European," indifferent to and ignorant of the local reality—attacks coming from both sides of the political spectrum which would dog him all his life.⁴ Borges argues that the Argentine writer's marginal status with respect to the Western tradition is what paradoxically enables him to play freely with all world literature: "I believe that we Argentines, we South Americans in general [. . .] can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences" (*Labyrinths*, p. 184).⁵ Borges compares the situation of Argentines (of Latin Americans in general) to that of Jews with respect to Western culture, or Irish writers with respect to English literature—feeling marginal, he claims, enables them to be innovative. Decades before Deleuze and Guattari's influential theory of *littérature mineure* (minor literature, defined by the French philosophers as "celle qu'une minorité fait dans une langue majeure"),⁶ Borges develops the same idea—that the artist's marginality is a prerequisite for his universality. To the extent that it is remote and postcolonial, the literature of Argentina achieves the "deterritorialization" that Deleuze and Guattari see as characteristic of minor literature. Although Deleuze and Guattari do not quote Borges in their essay, their idea of minor literature is practically identical to Borges's marginal universality: "Kafka dit précisément qu'une littérature mineure est beaucoup plus apte à travailler la matière,"⁷ they write. As to Beckett and Joyce, "tous deux, Irlandais, sont dans les conditions géniales d'une littérature mineure.

1989, I, 274). All references to Borges's text in the original Spanish are to this three-volume edition unless otherwise noted.

4. On the context of this essay, and the debate between Borges and nationalist critics, see in particular James Woodall, *Borges, A Life*, (New York: Basic Books, 1996) 185–186.

5. "Creo que los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general [. . .] podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas" (I, 273).

6. "Une littérature mineure n'est pas celle d'une langue mineure, plutôt celle qu'une minorité fait dans une langue majeure. Mais le premier caractère est de toute façon que la langue y est affectée d'un fort coefficient de déterritorialisation," Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*, (Paris: Minuit, 1975) 29. Alfonso de Toro also compares Borges's theory of marginality with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature: see "La 'literatura menor,' concepción borgesiana del 'Oriente' y el juego de las referencias. Algunos problemas de nuevas tendencias en la investigación de la obra de Borges," *Iberoromania*, 53 (2001) 68–110.

7. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*, 34.

C'est la gloire d'une telle littérature d'être mineure, c'est-à-dire révolutionnaire pour toute littérature."⁸ Thus Borges defiantly turns a handicap into an asset, while also claiming for himself a kinship with the writers he admires, Joyce, Kafka and other "marginals" whose irreverence became a source of innovation.⁹

Other famous essays by Borges also promote cosmopolitanism. In "Kafka and his Precursors," literary influence is derived backwards. "Every writer creates his precursors":¹⁰ this often-quoted line of the essay focuses on the reception rather than the production, the reader rather than the writer, a fact which effectively argues for a retrospective cosmopolitan component in reading and writing, since in the reader's eyes, Han Yu, the ninth-century Chinese writer, becomes a legitimate precursor of the late nineteenth-century Prague Jew. Because the act of reading makes time reversible—so that Han Yu's description of the unicorn reminds a late twentieth-century reader of Kafka—it also disregards spatial and cultural boundaries: "If I am not mistaken, concludes Borges, the heterogeneous pieces I have enumerated resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other" (201).¹¹

In Borges's essays on questions of translation, praise of cosmopolitanism reaches paradoxical extremes. His not knowing Greek, Borges claims, is a blessing in disguise, for it transforms the Homeric epics into a potentially infinite corpus, a virtual Library of Babel: "The *Quixote*, due to my congenital practice of Spanish, is a uniform monument, with no other variations except those provided by the publisher, the bookbinder, and the typesetter; the *Odyssey*, thanks to my opportune ignorance of Greek, is an international bookstore of works in prose and verse."¹² Borges's view is the polar opposite

8. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *op. cit.*, 35. For a lucid discussion of the Deleuze and Guattari theory of minor literature as a "flagrant but insightful misreading" of Kafka's 1911 diary entry on "small literatures," see Mark Anderson's introduction to *Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics and the Fin de siècle* (Mark Anderson, Ed., New York: Schocken Books, 1989) 10–11.

9. "The irreverent position that Borges postulates for the periphery in "El escritor argentino y la tradición" challenges the major/minor and center/periphery categories and the distinctions that serve to reinforce canonical traditions," states Sergio Waisman. "[. . .] Because he works consciously in the periphery, in a geopolitically "minor" country, Borges sees himself in a privileged position to innovate," transforming "seeming limitations into potential merit," Sergio Waisman, *Borges and Translation: the Irreverence of the Periphery* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005) 132.

10. "Kafka and his Precursors," *Labyrinths*, 201. "Cada escritor crea a sus precursores," "Kafka y sus precursores," *Otras inquisiciones, Obras completas*, II, 90.

11. "Si no me equivoco, las heterogéneas piezas que he enumerado se parecen a Kafka; si no me equivoco, no todas se parecen entre sí" (II, 89).

12. "The Homeric Versions," translated by Eliot Weinberger, in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, (New York: Viking, 1999) 70. In the original: "El Quijote,

of traditional scholarly principles based on philological accuracy. Removing the original (Homer's Greek, which Borges cannot read) from the chain of Homeric translations gives the series of *Odysseys* unlimited freedom from the constraints of literalness, effectively turning versions into independent texts, a situation that parallels the paradoxical status of the *Arabian Nights*.

In the same way, another Borgesian favorite, *The Thousand and One Nights*, is an endless treasure-trove of beautifully unfaithful versions of a highly problematic original. Borges grants very little merit to the traditional virtues of fidelity to the original. In fact, he judges Enno Littmann's 1928 version, contemporary with Borges's 1935 essay, to be the most faithful but the least interesting: "He is always lucid, readable, mediocre [. . .] In Littmann, who like Washington cannot tell a lie, there is nothing but the probity of Germany. This is so little, so very little."¹³ For Borges, the real measure of a translation's success is the cross-cultural encounter it allows: "The commerce between Germany and the *Nights* should have produced something more."¹⁴ He laments the fact that Enno Littmann's merely faithful translation did not produce such an encounter. A translation is good not so much when it is faithful as when it is fertile. Borges's assessment of Galland's version is exemplary in this respect: "Word for word, Galland's version is the most poorly written of them all, the least faithful, and the weakest, but it was the most widely read"(93).¹⁵ Galland's version, despite its obvious infidelity, was the best read, and thus opened up an infinite kingdom of enchantment for the following generations of writers and readers,¹⁶ which is why Borges ultimately ranks it above Mardrus's "happy

debido a mi ejercicio congénito del español, es un monumento uniforme, sin otras variaciones que las deparadas por el editor, el encuadernador y el cajista; la Odisea, gracias a mi oportuno desconocimiento del griego, es una librería internacional de obras en prosa y verso. . ." ("Las versiones homéricas," *Discusión, Obras completas*, I, 240).

13. "The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*," in Eliot Weinberger, ed., *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions* (Penguin Classics, 1999) 108. In the original: "Es siempre lúcido, legible, mediocre [. . .] En Littmann, incapaz como Washington de mentir, no hay otra cosa que la probidad de Alemania. Es tan poco, es poquísimo," "Los traductores de las 1001 noches," *Historia de la eternidad, Obras completas*, I, 412.

14. *Ibid.* "El comercio de las Noches y de Alemania debió producir algo más" (I, 412).

15. "Palabra por palabra, la versión de Galland es la peor escrita de todas, la más embustera y la más débil, pero fue la mejor leída" (I, 398). We should note—against the translation—that Borges emphasizes the quality of the reading rather than the number of readers (the best read, as opposed to the most widely read), although both are probably true of Galland's version.

16. Borges deliberately downplays the erotic appeal of the *Nights* in favor of their magical appeal. "Littmann observes that *The Thousand and One Nights* is, above all, a repertory of marvels. The universal imposition of this assumption on every Western mind is Galland's work; let there be no doubt on that score." (98). "Littmann observa que las 1001 Noches es, más que nada, un repertorio

and creative infidelity" (106),¹⁷ and even above Burton, whose "heterogeneous style" (101)¹⁸ paradoxically makes his translation "the most readable of them all" (106), just ahead of Mardrus's.¹⁹

These essays by Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," "Kafka and his precursors," "The Homeric versions," "The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*," all convey an optimistic, even triumphant view of cosmopolitanism. This justifies the common—if somewhat oversimplified—reputation of Borges as a writer saturated with foreign intellectual influences, "a countryless writer" (another questionable definition since *countryless* and *cosmopolitan* are hardly synonymous), "one foreign to the literature and the realities of his homeland,"²⁰ "cleansed of nationality,"²¹ whose work is a universal repository of stories without a national center.²² The table of contents in *El Aleph*, where the Averroës story is included, is very suggestive of this. Next to stories with an Islamic theme, such as "Averroës' Search" and "The Zahir," we find a gaucho tragedy derived from the national epic, the *Martín Fierro*, ("Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz"), a story set during Argentina's Indian wars paired up with a story about a fourth-century Barbarian invading Ravenna ("Story of the Warrior and the Captive"), a story about the Greek Minotaur ("The House of Asterion"), a story about the Nazi Holocaust ("*Deutsches Requiem*"), etc.²³

de maravillas. La imposición universal de ese parecer en todas las mentes occidentales, es obra de Galland. Que ello no quede en duda" (I, 401).

17. "Su infidelidad creadora y feliz" (I, 410).

18. "Heterogéneo estilo" (I, 406).

19. "La más legible de todas" (I, 410).

20. Humberto M. Rasi. "The Final Creole: Borges's View of Argentine History," *Tri-Quarterly* 25 (Fall, 1972) 149.

21. Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London; New York: Verso, 1993) 2.

22. Whether they view this cosmopolitanism as a feature to be blamed or praised, critics exhibit a remarkable consensus. In his preface to *Labyrinths*, Maurois also describes Borges as "Argentine by birth and temperament, but nurtured on universal literature, [having] no spiritual homeland" (*Labyrinths*, p. ix). Michel Berveiller claims that, having devoted his early poems and essays to a celebration of Buenos Aires and Argentina, and feeling sufficiently rooted in his homeland, Borges, in his thirties, felt free to move beyond themes of national identity in his subsequent writing. See M. Berveiller, *Le Cosmopolitisme de Jorge Luis Borges* (Paris: Didier, 1973) 96–97.

23. Beatriz Sarlo argues that "Borges's cosmopolitanism is a condition that allows him to invent a strategy for Argentine literature," which is to say that he *deteritorializes* (to use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology) both literary traditions at once. "By reinventing a national tradition, she writes, Borges also offers Argentine culture an oblique reading of Western literatures. From the edge of

"Averroës' Search," however, conveys a far more paradoxical, ambiguous and melancholy view than the triumphant cosmopolitanism prevalent in those essays. Although Borges claimed that no difference should be made between his essays and his stories, in fact the undeniable thematic affinity between the two generic categories cannot blind us to the fact that the story expresses a sense of doubt and anxiety that the essays, especially when they were originally written as public lectures (as is the case for "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," for example) typically eschew.

"Averroës' Search" is an exemplary tale about cultural misunderstanding and a failed attempt at translating cultural differences. To summarize very briefly a well-known story: thinking about his great commentary on Aristotle, Averroës, the twelfth-century Arab philosopher, the translator of Aristotle and the hero of Borges's story, is troubled by two Greek words he does not understand, *tragedy* and *comedy*, unknown to Islamic culture. He is briefly distracted from his work by the cries of children playing outside his window. They are impersonating the muezzin's call for prayer. The analogy between this crude form of theater and what Aristotle was referring to escapes him, however. Later that day, at dinner with some friends, he again fails to understand the description of the Chinese theater offered by one of the guests. Averroës has missed all the clues; in the morning, "with a firm and careful calligraphy" he confidently writes: "Aristu (Aristotle) calls panegyrics by the name of tragedy, and satires and anathemas he calls comedies. The Koran abounds in remarkable tragedies and comedies . . ." ²⁴

The failure in this story is double: first of all, the character, Averroës, notoriously fails to grasp the meaning of Aristotle's "comedy" and "tragedy," because Islamic culture has no equivalent of these art forms; secondly, the narrator, "Borges," fails to believe in his own attempt to recapture through fiction the nature of his character's predicament. "I sensed that Averroës, striving to imagine a drama without ever having suspected what a theater was, was no more absurd than I, who strove to imagine Averroës with no material other than some fragments from Renan, Lane and Asín Palacios [. . .] The instant I stop believing in him, "Averroës" disappears" (110). ²⁵

the West, Borges achieves a literature that is related to foreign literature but not in any subordinate way," *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, 5.

24. *A Personal Anthology*, 109. The original reads: "Con firme y cuidadosa caligrafía agregé estas líneas al manuscrito: *Aristú* (Aristóteles) *denomina tragedia a los panegíricos y comedias a las sátiras y anatemas. Admirables tragedias y comedias abundan en las páginas del Corán . . .*" (I, 587).

25. "Sentí que Averroës, queriendo imaginar lo que es un drama sin haber sospechado lo que es un teatro, no era más absurdo que yo, queriendo imaginar a Averroës, sin otro material que unos adarmes de Renan, de Lane y de Asín Palacios [. . .] (En el instante en que yo dejo de creer en él, "Averroës" desaparece)" (I, 588).

The story is one of cultural mistranslation and miscommunication, mirroring perhaps Borges's own sense of being a cultural misfit, an Englishman exiled in an anglophobic Argentina, close not to the gaucho epic but rather to the innumerable English books he read in the privacy of the high-walled family home. The *Autobiographical Essay* paints a famously vivid picture of the primeval Borge-sian locus, the library: "At home, both English and Spanish were commonly used. If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library. I can still picture it. It was in a room of its own, with glass-fronted shelves, and must have contained several thousand volumes."²⁶ Cut off from the outside world—a rough, illiterate world, where street urchins play in the dust and knife-wielding hoodlums lurk on streetcorners—Borges and his fictional alter ego, Averroës, confined in their claustrophobic libraries, fantasize about an outside reality that ignores them as thoroughly as they misunderstand it. The Averroës "legend" that Borges gives us in his story is one that reflects Borges's own life.²⁷

The Red-Haired Slave Girl

A minor yet intriguing detail of the story "Averroës' Search" concerns a red-haired slave girl who, during her master's absence at the dinner party, is tortured by the other slaves: "In the harem, the raven-haired slave girls had been torturing a red-haired slave girl, but Averroës wouldn't know about this until that afternoon" (109).²⁸ Although the text does not elaborate further, the elusive character—if one can call her that—comes up again in the story's conclusion, as the narrator, "Borges," feels that his story is escaping him and his characters are vanishing: "[Averroës] suddenly disappeared [. . .] with him disappeared the house and the invisible fountain and the books and the manuscripts and the doves and the many raven-haired slave girls and the quivering red-haired slave girl and Farach and Abulcasim and the rose trees

26. Jorge Luis Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," in Jaime Alazraki ed., *Critical Essays on Jorge Luis Borges* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987) 24. The epilogue to *A History of Night* (1977) repeats this, but with an added literary twist that identifies Borges with Cervantes's hero: "Might I be allowed to repeat that my father's library was the capital event in my life? The truth is that I have never come out of it, just as Alonso Quijano never came out of his" (translation mine). In the original: "Me será permitido repetir que que la biblioteca de mi padre ha sido el hecho capital de mi vida? La verdad es que nunca he salido de ella, como no salió nunca de la suya Alonso Quijano." *Historia de la noche, Obras completas* (III, 202).

27. On the identification process between Borges and his writer-characters, and on biography as "self-searching," see Suzanne Jill Levine, "Notes to Borges's Notes on Joyce: Infinite Affinities" *Comparative Literature* 49, no. 4 (Fall 1997) 346.

28. "En el harén, las esclavas de pelo negro habían torturado a una esclava de pelo rojo, pero él no lo sabría sino a la tarde." (I, 587).

and perhaps even the Guadalquivir" (109).²⁹ The allusion to the particulars of Averroës's domestic life is but one of several details that lend historical verisimilitude to the story, but it is much less developed than other anecdotal elements, such as the boys playing outside Averroës's window, or later, the conversations at the dinner party, which mingle questions of Coranic interpretation with discussions on Arabic poetry and evocations of Andalusian rose gardens. What then are we to make of the elusive yet insistent red-haired slave? In this story of cultural miscommunication, the slave takes on a symbolic function, as her obvious physical difference (red hair) and probable cultural difference leads to rejection and persecution by the other women. Edward Lane, cited in the story's conclusion as one of three sources—along with Asín Palacios and Renan, to whom we will return later—is a likely origin of this anecdote. In his volume on *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages*, the chapter devoted to slaves notes that in the Muslim world slaves are generally well treated—far better, say, than slaves in the ancient world or in the New World—but only after they have been forcibly converted to Islam: "Slaves of either sex are generally treated with kindness; but at first they are usually importuned, and not unfrequently used with much harshness, to induce them to embrace the Mohammadan faith; which almost all of them do."³⁰ Perhaps the torture endured by Borges's red-haired slave is just such a forced conversion. Furthermore, since Averroës is attempting to grasp the meaning of "tragedy" and "comedy," it provides an example of the former, and as such is yet another missed clue. Not unlike Oedipus—the main example, as we recall, in Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*—Averroës, for all his intelligence, is blind to the evil that lies at the heart of his own house. The thematic similarities between Oedipus and Averroës (their metaphorical blindness, the fact that, despite their remarkable intellect, they are doomed because of hubris and ignorance mixed together) lead us to read this story about tragedy as a tragedy.³¹

29. "[Averroës] desapareció bruscamente [. . .] con él desaparecieron la casa y el invisible surtidor y los libros y los manuscritos y las palomas y las muchas esclavas de pelo negro y la trémula esclava de pelo rojo y Farach y Abulcásim y los rosales y tal vez el Guadalquivir" (I, 587).

30. Edward Lane, *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages; Studies from the Thousand and One Nights* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883) 253.

31. Daniel Balderston reads the story as a tragedy of the intellect: "The story is cast as a tragedy in Aristotle's terms: the philosopher's quest is undone by his ignorance [. . .] For undertaking a translation of the *Poetics* without a sense of what theatre is (much less the distinction between tragedy and comedy) is surely an act of hubris." "Borges: the Argentine Writer and the 'Western' Tradition," in Evelyn Fishburn, ed., *Borges and Europe Revisited*, (University of London, Institute of Latin American Studies, 1998) 44. While this is true, however, it would seem that the fleeting yet haunting detail of the tortured slave girl takes the tragedy far beyond the realm of the intellect.

The red-haired slave girl can also be taken to represent a group of people traditionally oppressed: the Jews. In his review of Hilaire Belloc's *The Jews*, published in *El Hogar* in 1938,³² Borges recalls the famous speech made in 1829 in the House of Commons, by Thomas Babington Macaulay, in defense of the emancipation of the Jews. Seeking to expose the fallacy of England's anti-Jewish laws, Macaulay imagined a "transparent parable,"³³ in Borges's terms, whereby the red-haired part of the population (an obvious metaphor for the Jews) was relentlessly persecuted.

"The English Jews," Macaulay wrote, "are, as far as we can see, precisely what our government has made them. They are precisely what any sect, what any class of men, treated as they have been treated, would have been. If all the red-haired people in Europe had, during centuries, been outraged and oppressed, banished from this place, imprisoned in that, deprived of their money, deprived of their teeth, convicted of the most improbable crimes on the feeblest evidence, dragged at horses' tails, hanged, tortured, burned alive, if, when manners became milder, they had still been subject to debasing restrictions and exposed to vulgar insults, locked up in particular streets in some countries, pelted and ducked by the rabble in others, excluded everywhere from magistracies and honours, what would be the patriotism of gentlemen with red hair?"³⁴

Thus the detail of the red hair for Averroës's slave girl connects her with Macaulay's parable, written a century before Hilaire Belloc's book and Borges's review of it, which itself was written shortly before the onset of the war and the Holocaust. The common theme of intolerance runs through the story of Averroës and the review of Hilaire Belloc's book: both evoke persecution of

32. Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos cautivos: ensayos y reseñas en "El Hogar,"* (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 1990). March 4, 1938, review no.119, 210-211.

33. "Límpida parábola" (*Textos cautivos*, 210); translation mine.

34. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Civil Disabilities of the Jews*. Borges opens his review of Hilaire Belloc's *The Jews* with a Spanish translation of this parable: "Macaulay, hace bastante más de cien años, imaginó una historia fantástica. Imaginó que durante muchas generaciones todos los hombres de cabello rojo que hay en Europa habían sido ultrajados y oprimidos, encerrados en barrios infames, expulsados aquí, encarcelados allá, privados de su dinero, privados de sus dientes, acusados de crímenes improbables, arrastrados por caballos furiosos, ahorcados, torturados, quemados vivos, excluidos del ejército y del gobierno, apedreados y tirados al río por la gentuza. Después imaginó que un inglés se condolía de ese destino extraño, y que le replicaba otro inglés: 'Imposible franquear los cargos públicos a los hombres de pelo rojo. Esos bribones, apenas si se juzgan ingleses. Al primer francés pelirrojo lo consideran más allegado que a un rubio de su misma parroquia. Basta que un soberano extranjero patrocine o tolere el pelo rojo, para que lo quieran más que a su rey. No son ingleses, no pueden ser ingleses. La naturaleza lo veda y la experiencia ha demostrado que es imposible.'" (*Textos cautivos*, 210).

an individual or a group for reasons of difference, whether physical, religious or cultural. If we recall that the stories of *The Aleph* were written during the Second World War, we can see how "Averroës' Search," despite its twelfth century theme, obliquely connects to current historical events, one tragedy replicating another on a smaller domestic scale.³⁵

Missed Clues, or, the Framework Effect

Let us return to the other missed clues. As Averroës is working on "the eleventh chapter of the *Tahafut al Tahafut*" (101),³⁶ his mind wanders off course, to another monumental work of his, the commentary on Aristotle. He is reminded of the two incomprehensible words that Aristotle uses repeatedly in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*. "On the previous evening, he had been nonplussed by two equivocal words at the beginning of the *Poetics*: the words *tragedy* and *comedy*. He had encountered them years before in the third book of the *Rhetoric*. No one within the compass of Islam intuited what they meant" (102).³⁷ From that meditation, he is briefly distracted by the sing-song voices of children. Looking down into the street, he observes the boys play-acting. Averroës is utterly oblivious to what is glaringly obvious for the reader: that in this little scene lies the solution to the mystery tormenting him, for these boys are performing a primitive form of comedy before his very eyes. The epiphany is narrowly escaped, and Averroës returns to his refutation. Similarly, when he hears the morning call for prayer upon returning from the party, he does not recall the earlier scene with the children, and again misses the opportunity to discover the truth. The "cultural conversion," so to speak, does not take place.

In this ironic rewriting—this inversion—of Augustine's famous garden scene, we have here a protagonist who fails to listen to the message in the children's singsong voice, and consequently fails to hear the revelation. In book eight of the *Confessions*, Augustine sitting in his garden was converted upon hearing the voice of a child singing the words "pick up and read," which he interpreted as a divine command to read the Bible: "As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again 'Pick up and read, pick up

35. On Borges's "wartime alienation from his fellow Argentines" during the years when he was writing his greatest stories, see Suzanne Jill Levine, "Notes to Borges's Notes on Joyce: Infinite Affinities," 348.

36. "El undécimo capítulo de la obra *Tahafut-ul-Tahafut*" (I, 582).

37. "La víspera, dos palabras dudosas lo habían detenido en el principio de la *Poética*. Esas palabras eran *tragedia* y *comedia*. Las había encontrado años atrás, en el libro tercero de la *Retórica*; nadie, en el ámbito del Islam, barruntaba lo que querían decir" (I, 583).

and read'. [. . .] I interpreted it solely as a divine command to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. [. . .] At once, with the last words [of Paul's *Letter to the Romans* on which Augustine alights], it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled."³⁸

Conversely here, Averroës is in the house, an apt metaphor of his self closed to the outside world, and the children's voices lead him to misread rather than read the book (here Aristotle's *Poetics*). The scene vividly illustrates the portrayal of Averroës as "closed within the orb of Islam."³⁹ Augustine's autobiography tells of reaching beyond one's culture, and opening oneself to the strange new ideas and images of Christianity. Where Augustine relates a turning away from pagan philosophy in order to embrace the Christian religion, Averroës, instead, is defeated in his attempt to move beyond the circle of Islam and comprehend pagan philosophy. He is also impervious to the vivid example of cultural hybridization that unfolds before him: "Averroës heard them arguing in *gross* dialect: that is, in the incipient Spanish of the Peninsula's Moslem plebs" (103).⁴⁰ The boys' coarse dialect, unworthy of Averroës's attention, is emblematic of the hybrid culture which blossomed for a couple of centuries in Al-Andalus, in the Islamicate, eventually producing Spanish, the language of Cervantes and Borges.

The other clue is even more narrowly missed by Averroës. He listens to the account by Abulcasim, who has traveled to the far-away empire of China and has seen a most indescribable and incomprehensible spectacle—something that the reader alone understands to be a theatrical performance. The technique of defamiliarization Borges uses in his description is comparable to Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, in which the Persian narrator, Rica, describes an evening at the Parisian *comédie* for the benefit and entertainment of his interlocutor who has never traveled out of Persia and hence has no notion of theater. "Je vis hier une chose assez singulière, quoiqu'elle se passe tous les jours à Paris. Tout le peuple s'assemble sur la fin de l'après-dînée et va jouer une espèce de scène que j'ai entendu appeler *comédie*. Le grand mouvement est sur une estrade, qu'on nomme le *théâtre*. Aux deux côtés, on voit, dans de petits réduits qu'on nomme *loges*, des hommes et des femmes qui jouent ensemble des scènes muettes, à peu près comme celles qui sont en usage en notre Perse."⁴¹ The satirical effect is obtained by defamiliarizing a reality that would have been

38. Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII. xii (29), tr. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 152–153.

39. "Averroës' Search," 155. In the original: "encerrado en el ámbito del islam," I, 588.

40. "Averroës los oyó disputar en dialecto *grosero*, vale decir en el incipiente español de la plebe musulmana de la Península" (I, 583).

41. Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, l. XXVII, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964, 61. The entire letter consists of this playful confusion of stage and house.

commonplace to the eighteenth-century Parisian reader, and by having the *faux naïf* Rica appear not to grasp the difference between the stage and the house, since *la comédie* is played everywhere. Spectators, Montesquieu slyly implies, are also involved, less in watching the comedy on the stage and more in staging their own sexual and political intrigues from box to box.

In the Borgesian episode however, the aim is not to make the readers perceive that they are dealing with a satirical portrayal of French immorality, but rather to render Averroës's and the other guests' non-receptiveness more striking. Abulcasim initially gives such an obscure description of the Chinese tragedy that his interlocutors think he is referring to madmen. In that wooden house, he says, some people were eating and drinking, some playing music, some, wearing masks, "were praying, singing, and conversing. They suffered imprisonment, but no one could see the prison; they rode on horseback, but no one saw the horse; they fought in combat, but their swords were reeds; they died and then stood up again" (106)—to which another guest replies "The activity of madmen goes beyond the previsions of the sane."⁴² This is, of course, Montesquieu's style. But then Abulcasim goes on to explain all too clearly what he means, and again Averroës comes very close to a possible revelation: "Let us imagine that someone shows a story instead of telling it,"⁴³ Abulcasim explains, and he proceeds to give his audience an example based on the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (106).

The revelation, however, is blocked by virtue of what philosopher Karl Popper calls the "framework effect." Entrenched in the absolute certainty of their own cultural superiority, these men are unable to conceive of the possibility that something entirely new, and perhaps worth knowing, exists beyond the circle of Islamic culture. "There was no need for *twenty* people. A single speaker can relate anything, however complex it might be" (107).⁴⁴ Averroës himself, although paradoxically steeped in the cross-cultural attempt to acclimatize Aristotelian philosophy into the context of Islam, is no different from the others. He joins them in their nationalistic complacency: "Everyone approved this dictum. The virtues of Arabic were next extolled, for it is the language used by God to direct the angels; and Arabic poetry was praised" (107).⁴⁵ Later,

42. "... Rezaban, cantaban y dialogaban. Padecían prisiones, y nadie veía la cárcel; cabalgaban, pero no se percibía el caballo; combatían, pero las espadas eran de caña; morían y después estaban de pie.

—Los actos de los locos—dijo Farach—exceden las previsiones del hombre cuerdo" (I, 585).

43. "Imaginemos que alguien muestra una historia en vez de referirla" (I, 585).

44. "No se requerían *veinte* personas. Un solo hablante puede referir cualquier cosa, por compleja que sea" (I, 586).

45. "Todos aprobaron ese dictamen. Se encarecieron las virtudes del árabe, que es el idioma que usa Dios para dirigir a los ángeles; luego, de la poesía de los árabes" (I, 586).

upon returning home, possessed by a delusion of understanding, he confidently mistranslates "tragedy" as panegyric and "comedy" as satire.

The framework effect, the very kind of cultural blindness that Karl Popper denounces as a myth in the case of scientific discoveries, is here all-powerful. In his *The Myth of the Framework: in Defence of Science and Rationality*, Popper claims, against cultural relativism, that reason and logic are universals. It is a myth, he argues, to believe that people are enclosed in their different cultural frameworks to the point of being unable to understand ideas that lie outside of them: "One of the components of modern irrationalism is relativism (the doctrine that truth is relative to our intellectual background, which is supposed to determine somehow the framework within which we are able to think: that truth may change from one framework to another), and, in particular, the doctrine of the impossibility of mutual understanding between different cultures, generations, or historical periods—even within science, even within physics."⁴⁶ Popper concludes his essay by reaffirming the possibility of intercultural communication: "To sum up, frameworks, like languages, may be barriers. They may even be prisons. But a strange conceptual framework, just like a foreign language, is no absolute barrier: we can break into it, just as we can break out of our own framework, our own prison."⁴⁷

Translation, however, is an art, and not a science. Borges's story demonstrates—albeit in a negative fashion—Popper's claim of the universality of reason, for contrary to Aristotle's purely scientific or logical writings (which were in fact incorporated unproblematically into Islamic culture), understanding his *Poetics* required stepping out of the cultural framework, something which the character Averroës, "ultimately limited to the epistemological categories of his culture,"⁴⁸ notoriously failed to do.⁴⁹

Renan, Reader of Borges

In his conclusion, Borges mentions as his sources "fragments of Renan, Lane, and Asín Palacios."⁵⁰ Evidence points to Ernest Renan's biography of Averroës, *Averroës et l'averroïsme* (first written as a thesis in 1852, and

46. Karl R. Popper, *The Myth of the Framework: in Defence of Science Rationality* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994) 33.

47. *The Myth of the Framework* 61.

48. Jon Stewart, "Borges on Language and Translation," *Philosophy and Literature* 19.2 (1995) 327.

49. Silvia Dapía also refers to Popper's framework theory in connection with this story, but she reaches different conclusions. She argues that the framework effect is not achieved here, since the foreign cultural experience (in this case the Chinese theater) can be at least described by Abulcasim. See Silvia Dapía, "The Myth of the Framework in Borges's 'Averroës' Search'" *Variaciones Borges* 7 (1999) 146–165.

50. "Unos adarmes de Renan, de Lane y de Asín Palacios" (I, 588).

subsequently published in an 1861 revised edition), as the principal source of Borges's story. His epigraph is borrowed from Renan's disparaging comment on Averroës's ignorance of the Greek language and culture: "S'imaginant que la tragédie n'est autre chose que l'art de louer." The Arabs, Renan observed, knew only the philosophical and scientific writings of the Greeks. Greek literature, however, entirely escaped them. Averroës's blunders in this matter seem comical to Renan. Being totally unaware of the generic format of a play, Averroës focused solely on ideological content, reducing tragedy to the art of encomium and comedy to that of censure. This led him to claim that tragedies and comedies could be found in Arabic literature: "Les Arabes n'ont connu de la Grèce que les philosophes et les auteurs scientifiques. Pas un seul des écrivains vraiment caractéristiques du génie grec n'est venu jusqu'à eux [. . .] les bévues d'Ibn-Roschd, en fait de littérature grecque, sont vraiment de nature à faire sourire. S'imaginant, par exemple, que la tragédie n'est autre chose que l'art de louer, et la comédie l'art de blâmer, il prétend trouver des tragédies et des comédies dans les panégyriques et les satires des Arabes, et même dans le Coran!"⁵¹

Renan warns that Averroës's commentaries on Aristotle are worthless for the modern reader: "Ajoutons, cependant, que ces commentaires ne peuvent avoir pour nous qu'un intérêt historique, et qu'on perdrait sa peine, si l'on cherchait à en tirer quelque lumière pour l'interprétation d'Aristote. Autant vaudrait, pour mieux comprendre Racine, le lire dans une traduction turque ou chinoise . . ." To think that Averroës's commentaries might enlighten our understanding of Aristotle's philosophy in any way would be as absurd as reading Racine in Chinese or Turkish translation in order to better understand him—a ludicrous suggestion for Renan, but one that Borges could well have turned into a serious and productive literary method in *Tlön*, alongside deliberate anachronism and erroneous attribution of works.⁵²

Beyond this superficial irony, however, Renan's portrayal of his character is deeply sympathetic. More importantly, Renan's Averroës is a man with whom Borges would inevitably identify. For Renan, who evidently read his own predicament into his subject's biography, Averroës is an early champion—or martyr—of rationalism and atheism. While it is unlikely that the real Averroës was anything like that, the process of self-projection (or as Jill Levine puts it, "self-searching")

51. Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (Rennes: Ennoia, 2003) 51.

52. *Averroès et l'averroïsme*, 55. In fact, translations for Borges can very well be superior to the original, and they certainly can enlighten our understanding of the original. On this important point of Borges's aesthetic, see Efraín Kristal's introduction to his *Invisible Work*: "The idea that literary translations are inherently inferior to their originals is, for Borges, based on the false assumption that some works of literature must be assumed definitive [. . .] Borges was certain that a translation could enrich or surpass an original." Efraín Kristal, *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002) 1–2.

at work in Renan's portrayal of Averroës is what interests us in this discussion.⁵³ Positivistic, passionately agnostic Renan—who had himself been the victim of vicious attacks from the Catholic establishment for his writings on Jesus—saw in Averroës a character after his heart, a rationalist in an increasingly fanatical world, a champion of logic and philosophy in the face of growing dogmatism, religious intolerance and a viciously obscurantist form of Islam that would eventually triumph, snuffing out the brilliant, open, and peaceful culture of Al-Andalus, where the three religions lived in harmony and built a common civilization: “Le goût de la science et des belles choses avait établi au X^e siècle, dans ce coin privilégié du monde, une tolérance dont les temps modernes peuvent à peine nous offrir un exemple. Chrétiens, juifs, musulmans parlaient la même langue, chantaient les mêmes poésies, participaient aux mêmes études littéraires et scientifiques. Toutes les barrières qui séparent les hommes étaient tombées; tous travaillaient d'un même accord à l'œuvre de la civilisation commune.”⁵⁴

Thus Averroës, who came at the end of a golden age of enlightenment, becomes a particularly pathetic figure for his biographer Renan, and also for Borges, because he was not only the victim of a rising tide of intolerance and barbarism, but also the product of the end of a civilization. Averroës's death in 1198 coincided with “le triomphe du Coran sur la libre pensée,” Renan writes in his introduction (11). Living and writing at the very end of Islam's period of brilliance, exiled and persecuted as a “philosopher,” a term which the religious fanatics now in power had turned into one of abuse, Averroës was also, in Renan's vision, a man who came too late, at a time when originality had become impossible, a commentator rather than a creator: “Venu après une époque de grande culture intellectuelle, au moment où cette culture s'affaissait pour ainsi dire sur lui-même [. . .] Averroës est [. . .] un de ces derniers venus, compensant par le caractère encyclopédique de leurs œuvres ce qui leur manque en originalité, discutant, commentant, parce qu'il est trop tard pour créer, derniers soutiens en un mot d'une civilisation qui s'écroule . . .”⁵⁵

Borges, who repeatedly described himself as a reader, a copyist, a “rewriter” rather than a writer, could identify only too well with Averroës the resigned commentator. In a radio interview with French critic Jacques Chancel, Borges firmly placed himself among the latecomers for whom invention is not an option: “Je n'écris, pas, je réécris, c'est ma mémoire qui déroule les phrases [. . .] Nous sommes tous les héritiers de millions de scribes qui ont raconté l'essentiel

53. Robert Irwin points out the historical inaccuracy of Renan's view of Averroës: “His book is less a serious study of Islamic philosophy and more a fable about the rise of rationalism in the West. Arabists who later worked on Averroës found that Renan's view that the Muslim philosopher was a secret atheist to be unfounded.” *For Lust of Knowing: Orientalists and their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2006) 167.

54. Renan, *Averroës et l'averroïsme*, 13–14.

55. Renan, *op. cit.*, 11–12.

bien avant nous. Nous sommes des copieurs [. . .] Toutes les histoires que nous inventons ont déjà été racontées. Il n'y a plus d'idées originales."⁵⁶ The process of self-projection is multiplied, as Renan refashions his Averroës into a disillusioned champion of rational thought in the midst of fanatical intolerance, and Borges refashions his Averroës into a melancholy latecomer estranged from the world around him and even from his own translator's task. The attempt at fictional biography reverts into involuntary self-portrait, something that may perhaps explain the climactic failure of the story. The epilogue to the 1960 collection of texts entitled *The Maker (El hacedor)* recounts a similar failure in parable form, as the man who set out to picture the world realizes at the moment of dying that he has only drawn a self-portrait.⁵⁷

Averroës vanishes; "Borges" fails to grasp the reality of this legendary but elusive character. Both failures echo and mirror each other.⁵⁸ By a paradoxical twist, the beauty of the story lies in its very failure. The reader is reminded of the melancholy definition of the aesthetic phenomenon in the conclusion to another contemporary essay, "The Wall and the Books": "Music, states of happiness,

56. Jacques Chancel, *Jorge Luis Borges: Radioscopie* (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1999) 74–76. Fifty years earlier, the prologue to the first edition of the *Universal History of Infamy* (1935) already expressed the same idea: "Reading, obviously, is an activity which comes after that of writing; it is more modest, more unobtrusive, more intellectual." Jorge Luis Borges, *A Universal History of Infamy*, translated by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, [New York: Dutton, 1972] 13. The original is somewhat more melancholy: "Leer, por lo pronto, es una actividad posterior a la de escribir: más resignada, más civil, más intelectual" (I, 289).

57. "Un hombre se propone la tarea de dibujar el mundo [. . .] Poco antes de morir, descubre que ese paciente laberinto de líneas traza la imagen de su cara" (*El hacedor, Obras completas*, II, 232). Borges was acutely aware of the limitations of his imaginative capacity: "The fact is that I cannot create characters. I am always writing about myself in impossible situations." *Borges at Eighty. Conversations with Willis Barnstone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982) 161.

58. Ian Almond, "Borges the Post-Orientalist: Images of Islam from the Edge of the West," *Modern Fiction Studies*, volume 50, number 2 (Summer 2004) 435–459. Almond interprets the failure in terms of Borges's critical suspicion of the Orientalist sources from which he derives his fictional material. In "a final realization of the fictitious foundations and illusory claims of the Orientalist project," Almond writes, "Borges seems to have stumbled upon Edward Said's main point: that whenever Westerners write about the Orient, they invariably end up writing about themselves—their fantasies, their longings, and their failures" (451). While this "saidian" interpretation of "Averroës' Search" is appealing, it seems nevertheless more likely that the experience of failure Borges describes is more existential in its scope, namely, the impossibility not just to depict the Orient, but generally to reach beyond the self.

mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon."⁵⁹ Averroës's misunderstanding of Aristotle's key terms (tragedy and comedy) was ultimately inevitable, since, as Renan pointed out, and as Borges repeats, "Averroës, who had no knowledge of Syriac or Greek, was working on the translation of a translation" (102).⁶⁰ Lost in the maze of translations and languages, this Averroës runs into the Immortal, the hero of yet another famous Borges story, and the one that opens *The Aleph*. The author and his original work disappear behind the many layers of translations and mistranslations. Like Cartaphilus the Wandering Jew, Averroës—or his words—have wandered from one place of exile to another: "Words, displaced and mutilated words, words of others, were the poor pittance left him by the hours and the centuries."⁶¹ Banned and destroyed in his native Andalusia, his works survived to enter Western culture only through translations into Hebrew, then Latin.⁶² This makes for many mistranslations, no more absurd, perhaps, than the one narrated by Borges. In fact the history of averroism is altogether a

59. "The Wall and the Books," in *Labyrinths*, 188. "La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético," in "La muralla y los libros," *Otras inquisiciones, Obras completas*, II, 13.

60. "Averroës, ignorante del siríaco y del griego, trabajaba sobre la traducción de una traducción" (I, 582–583). On the contextual ambiguities of the story, see Abdelfattah Kilitto, "Borges et Averroës," *Horizons maghrébins: le droit à la mémoire* no. 41, (1999) 13–16. Averroës read the *Poetics* in abu-Bashar Mata's tenth-century Arabic translation made from the earlier Syriac translation (now lost) of the Greek original. In that Arabic translation the words "tragedy" and "comedy" are already mistranslated as panegyric and satire. Averroës did not have to translate them. Yet Borges's story is ambiguous, as Kilitto points out; it reads as if Averroës encountered the two terms in the original and was faced with the challenge of translating them, which of course he was not, since he was writing a commentary and not a translation. Kilitto sees Borges's Averroës as an Orpheus figure that fails to bring "Eurydice" (Greek literature) back from the dead.

61. "The Immortal," in *Labyrinths*, 118. In the original: "Palabras, palabras desplazadas y mutiladas, palabras de otros, fue la pobre limosna que le dejaron las horas y los siglos" "El inmortal, *El aleph*," *Obras completas*, I, 544.

62. Renan, once again, points out the Babel-like fate of Averroës's writings: "les éditions imprimées de ses œuvres n'offrent qu'une traduction latine d'une traduction hébraïque d'un commentaire fait sur une traduction arabe d'une traduction syriaque d'un texte grec . . ." (54; emphasis is in the text). Daniel Balderston comments on the parallelism between Averroës and Renan, both separated from their source texts by layers of mistranslations: see his "Borges, Averroës, Aristotle: the Poetics of Poetics" *Hispania* 79.2 (1996), 204.

vast mistranslation, muses Renan.⁶³ And yet . . . Because literature, according to Borges, is nothing but the endless overlap of misreadings and rewritings, it is produced only in this fertile interplay of mistranslations. These errors play a vital role in our intellectual history: Renan speaks of "une sorte de nécessité du contresens dans le développement religieux et philosophique de l'humanité."⁶⁴ "On ne crée rien avec un texte que l'on comprend trop exactement"—one creates nothing with a text that one understands too exactly:⁶⁵ these melancholy words in praise of misreading are not a French translation of Borges or Harold Bloom; they are, of course, Renan's own, in the conclusion to his biography of this most cosmopolitan of Immortals.

University of California, Santa Barbara

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63. "L'histoire de l'averroïsme n'est, à proprement parler, que l'histoire d'un vaste contre-sens" (373).

64. Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme*, 373.

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CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Michael Bell is Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies as well as the current Director of the Centre for Research in Philosophy and Literature at University of Warwick. His many books include *Gabriel Garcia Marquez: Solitude and Solidarity* (1993) and *Literature, Modernism and Myth* (1997) and his latest work is *Open Secrets: Literature, Education and Authority from J. J. Rousseau to J. M. Coetzee* to be published by Oxford UP in 2007.

Bruno Bosteels is Associate Professor in the Department of Romance Studies at Cornell University. Currently he also serves as general editor of *Diacritics*.

Jorge Luis Castillo (Ph.D. Harvard University, 1995) is Associate Professor of Spanish American Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His publications include a critical book (*El lenguaje y la poesía de Julio Herrera y Reissig*, 1999), and a PEN Club Award winning collection of short stories (*La vida vulgar*, 2004). Currently he is working on a study of the poetry of Spanish American Posmodernismo.

Patrick Dove is Assistant Professor in Spanish and Portuguese at Indiana University. He is author of *The Catastrophe of Modernity: Tragedy and the Nation in Latin American Literature* (Bucknell University Press, 2004) as well as various articles on contemporary cultural production and critical thinking in Latin America.

Robin Fiddian is Professor of Spanish at Oxford University and Fellow of Wadham College. Working in the fields of Spanish literature and cinema, he also has published books on Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Carlos Fuentes, and articles on authors ranging from Jorge Luis Borges to Leopoldo Zea.

Dominique Jullien is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has written extensively on modern French literature and she has also published several articles on Borges. She is currently finishing a book on the *Thousand and One Nights* in Western literature.

Efraín Kristal is Professor of Spanish and comparative literature at UCLA. He is author of *Temptation of the Word: The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa*

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