

Shifting Territories: Borges and Hawthorne on Neutral Ground

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Abstract

Jorge Luis Borges was an ardent fan of American Literature and of Nathaniel Hawthorne in particular. This essay will examine Borges' lengthy essay "Nathaniel Hawthorne," originally delivered as a lecture in 1949. Borges provides several important insights into Hawthorne's aesthetic practices, much of which are relatable to his observation that Hawthorne was more of a sentimental or imagistic artist, than an intellectual or abstract writer. The essay will trace out the basic features of Borges' argumentative engagement with Hawthorne and will consider whether or not Hawthorne's romantic aesthetics and Borges' postmodernist practices find a common ground in the neutral territory of the imagination as it was described by Hawthorne. In particular, Borges' tale, "*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*" will be, albeit briefly, compared to Hawthorne's "*Wakefield*," a tale for which Borges had a particular affinity. Ultimately, although they may be situated on opposing sides of the modern-postmodern *différend* elaborated by Lyotard, their mutual respect for the irresolvable difference between metaphysical genres binds them in common.

Keywords: *Borges, Hawthorne, Tlön, Wakefield, différend*

Territorios cambiantes: Borges y Hawthorne en terreno neutral

Resumen

Jorge Luis Borges fue un entusiasta de la literatura estadounidense y de Nathaniel Hawthorne en particular. Este ensayo examinará el extenso ensayo de Borges "Nathaniel Hawthorne", originalmente presentado como una conferencia en 1949. Borges proporciona una serie de ideas importantes sobre las prácticas estéticas de Hawthorne, muchas de las cuales se relacionan con su observación de que este autor era más un artista sentimental o imaginario que un escritor intelectual o abstracto. El ensayo trazará las características básicas del compromiso argumentativo de Borges con Hawthorne, y considerará si la estética romántica de éste y las prácticas posmodernas de aquel encuentran un terreno común en el territorio neutral de la imaginación, como lo describió Hawthorne.

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En particular, el cuento de Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* será comparado, aunque brevemente, con *Wakefield* de Hawthorne, un cuento por el cual Borges tenía una afinidad particular. En última instancia, aunque pueden estar situados en lados opuestos del *différend* posmoderno moderno elaborado por Lyotard, su respeto mutuo por la diferencia irresoluble entre los géneros metafísicos los une en común.

Palabras clave: *Borges, Hawthorne, Tlön, Wakefield, différend*

A philosophical storyteller inspired by the likes of Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka before him, anticipating post-structuralist and postmodernist theorists like Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard after him, Borges' fictions time and again exploit the fact that we inhabit a universe of signs, and that reality is merely a simulacrum or an appearance that has no original or transcendent point of reference.

Of course, this does not prevent many of his narrators from attempting to scale the Tower of Babel as it were, to uncover the sacred aleph or secret shibboleth that will unlock for them the mysteries of the world, the one Word that will comprehend them all. True to form, however, Borges transforms the biblical tower into an archival library whose inner recesses recede out of sight, all the while being in plain sight, like an M. C. Escher sketch that has no beginning or end and provides only the illusion of depth and reversal.

In the best of his metaphysical detective fictions, and *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1961) may certainly be counted among them, words are finally caught up and scattered in the wind, like so much misbegotten, testamentary evidence. They become a mass of shifting typographical substitutions useless for determining any first cause or final purpose. The hermeneutical analyst who would seek to augur their oracular significance is left to interpret a spiraling moebius strip that forms, deforms, and reforms around him, like a flock of starlings swirling in patterns of flight as elegant and incalculable as they are determined and finite.

At the end of *Tlön*, Borges appends something that appears to be close to a moral, "Tlön may be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth plotted by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men". The same could be said of Borges' oeuvre, but whether it be the invention of an angel or a chess master I will leave indeterminate for, after all is said and done, might it not be indeterminable?

I owe my initial discovery of Borges, some twenty years ago, to the conjunction of the English publication of *Labyrinths* (1964) and Lacan's 1955-56 *Seminar on the Psychoses* (1993). As Borges helped to propel my study of literature at the doctoral level, I was later gratified to learn of his immense apprecia-

tion for American Literature, and especially of the authors of the American Renaissance. Authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson (the latter of whom he admired more than he did Poe), Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Borges' longest essay on American Literature is his lecture on *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (1949).

Since I would eventually write my dissertation on Hawthorne, I find this confluence of interests between Borges and I to be entirely satisfactory. Indeed, Borges' glowing recognition of his predecessor's literary accomplishments truly does an honor to Hawthorne's life and work (some of which Borges translated into Spanish). Of course, Borges had many literary precursors, as every polyamorous bibliophile ought, and I do not mean to exaggerate Hawthorne's importance for him. What I do find interesting are Borges' peculiar insights into Hawthorne's romantic aesthetics, as Borges was by large an outsider to American Literature at the time he wrote *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (he consulted only a few critical studies and a single biography for his lecture), much in the same way that I am an outsider to the Latin American tradition. Although I am a huge fan of Borges' essays and fictions, I can hardly call myself an informed critic of his work, let alone a scholarly expert. Fortunately, I am in a somewhat better of a position to offer some limited commentary on his evaluation of Hawthorne and American Literature.

Despite his acknowledgement of Hawthorne's greatness, the American author was not without his characteristic flaw, and the Argentine critic does not leave this stone unturned. According to Borges (1949/1995), "One aesthetic error debased him: The Puritan desire to make a fable out of each imagining induced him to add morals and sometimes to falsify and to deform them" (p.51). Of course, several of Hawthorne's contemporaries had already beaten Borges to the punch on this score, and Hawthorne had on several occasions admitted to the shortcomings of his allegorical method.

Borges further contends that Hawthorne was more of a situational author than he was a craftsman of character. He accordingly deems Hawthorne's short stories superior to his novels, because in the short story, situation is of central importance, whereas in

the novel, the plot takes a background to the development of character. Harkening back to Aristotle, it could be said that Hawthorne's poetics were more classical than modern in kind, or at the very least, that the short story is more akin to a play (or a feature-length film) than it is to a novel (or an episodic melodrama), the essential lineaments of the latter being more closely affiliated with epic poetry.

Poe advances much the same argument in his *Philosophy of Composition* (1846). Borges approaches the problem from a somewhat different angle, however. He characterizes Hawthorne as having a "sentimental" genius. Undoubtedly, Borges would have deemed his own artistic practice to be more "intellectual" by design. Importantly, Borges makes no value judgment on this difference between respective types of artistic genius: "One writer thinks in images (Shakespeare or Donne or Victor Hugo, say), and another writer thinks in abstractions (Benda or Bertrand Russell); a priori, the former are just as estimable as the latter" (Borges, 1949/1995, p. 51). Indeed, Hawthorne's sentimental predilections are part of what make his short stories more successful than his novels, at least to Borges' mind. Stories do not need complex characters since characters are stock tropes or imagistic embodiments of abstract ideas (in a Hegelian sense). They thus serve to advance the plot, and to represent humans thinking and acting in a variety of contexts, but as such, they do not need to "live and breathe" to accomplish their functions. The same could be said of Borges' characters, which is no slight on their author.

Borges' distinction between the sentimental and intellectual genius is essentialist in nature and far more porous than his rhetorical oversimplification would make it appear. But if one were to accept the basic premise of his argument, there are further consequences to be drawn. One question to consider: might it not have been Hawthorne's romantic sensibility, and not merely his Puritan desire, that induced him to add a moral to his every imagining? The sentimental-intellectual divide between Hawthorne and Borges mirrors the irresolvable difference of opinion, or *différend*, that Jean-François Lyotard elaborates between modernism and postmodernism in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979/1984). The sentimental "modernist" clings to his nostalgic illusions (or simply cannot move beyond their loss), while the intellectual "postmodernist" has done with such sentiments and instead treads intrepidly ahead with only his dialectical mechanism to guide him. While Borges does not promote intellectual or abstract genius over its sentimental or imagistic counterpart, one does feel that he finds Hawthorne's artistry to be somewhat wanting in

finds Hawthorne's artistry to be somewhat wanting in this regard. Borges affirms Hegel's pronouncement of "the death of art" by viewing philosophical abstraction as the teleological end of the dialectic of spirit (which had to pass through the foreign territory of images on the way to its analytical self-recognition). Borges is close to Plato in this regard, who ostracized the poets from the republic. Of course, the *différend* between head and heart is permeable at best. The poets and philosophers are never done fraternizing and are always closer than they might believe.

Even in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), some critics (Borges is hardly alone in this regard) have found that Hawthorne's characters are invested with an aura of unreality. Hawthorne admits as much himself when, in his "Custom-House" introduction to the novel, he details the struggles he had to overcome. As a result of his day job, his imagination had become tarnished.

It would not reflect, or only with miserable dimness, the figures with which I did my best to people it. The characters of the narrative would not be warmed and rendered malleable, by any heat that I could kindle at my intellectual forge. They would take neither the glow of passion nor the tenderness of sentiment, but retained all the rigidity of dead corpses, and stared me in the face with a fixed and ghastly grin of contemptuous defiance. (Hawthorne, 1850/1971, p. 34).

Hawthorne had great admiration for contemporary novelists like William Thackeray, but the social-realist aesthetic that he admired in them was foreign to his own native genius. He called his novelistic productions "historical romances" for they were more sentimental than natural, no matter how much he aimed for psychological authenticity. Borges' and Hawthorne's narrators are similar in this respect. Their narrators are the most lifelike of all their characters and are often hard to disentangle from the authors themselves (hence, Borges' exquisitely Hegelian reflections in "Borges and I"). Their narrators are their fictional personas (literally, the fictional masks they don). Hawthorne's presence, in his tales and novels, not to mention his many sketches and addresses to his readers, is heavy in this regard, no matter how reticent he was to serve up his heart "delicately fried" replete with "brain sauce" for his "beloved public" (Hawthorne, 1850/1971, p.33).

In *The Custom-House*, Hawthorne famously provides an aesthetic self-manifesto in which he observes that there is a "neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (Hawthorne, 1850/1971, p.36). His neutral territory corresponds to the space of the imagination, inasmuch as it is a scene of writing

where inside and outside converge. As such, the entire creative experience takes place in a dreamworld of sorts and all upon the same "flat" stage of representation. He finds moonlight to be the most suitable medium for the romantic writer to become acquainted with his illusory guests. Most important among this illustrious company are, of course, the characters that populate his fanciful world.

Under the light of the moon, actual substances lose their material definiteness and become transfigured into spiritualized things of the mind. Hawthorne further insists that the "somewhat dim coal-fire has an essential influence" upon the scene as well.

This warmer light mingles itself with the cold spirituality of the moonbeams, and communicates, as it were, a heart and sensibilities of human tenderness to the forms which fancy summons up. It converts them from snow-images into men and women (Hawthorne, 1850/1971, p.36).

Characters not invested with a sentimental heart are like the lacework patterns the protagonist of *The Haunted Mind* (1836/1974) finds frescoed upon his windowpanes one wintry Salem morning. He peeps through his curtains to discover the glass "ornamented with fanciful devices in frost-work, and that each pane presents something like a frozen dream" (Hawthorne, 1836, p.305). The dream, originally invested with the imagination of the dreamer, has since departed, and all that is left are the frozen images that the dreamer is just barely able to recollect. The dreamer is thus left with only a copy of what was originally only a "copy" of waking reality in the first place. Hawthorne's characteristic struggle amounts to the same difficulty: how to represent people in their imaginative vitality, instead of reducing them to fanciful images, recollections of a dream deprived of its substance.

Hawthorne returned to this topic the year after he published *The Scarlet Letter*, in *The Snow-Image* (1864), the lead tale in his final collection of stories. Here, two children fashion a playmate out of snow and, whether miraculously or through the dynamic power of the imagination (i.e., not just "fancy" in the Coleridgean or diminutive sense), it becomes invested with spiritual life. When the children's utilitarian father invites the snow-image (which he mistakes for a creature of flesh and blood) into their home, the warmth radiated by the stove causes their playmate to melt before their eyes, not unlike the disastrous fate visited upon Owen Warland's butterfly in *The Artist of the Beautiful* (1844).

Hawthorne would revisit this theme again in *Feathertop* (1854), except for this time his eponymous protagonist is a scarecrow that has only the

of intellectual life, because it has no heart and soul. We are thus led inexorably from *Frosty the Snowman* (1950) to *Pinocchio* (1883) to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and so on to all of the other notable liars that have made a name for themselves in that noble tradition of the same inaugurated by Plato. Hawthorne's romantic aesthetics induced him to overcome the opposition between the sentiment and the intellect, and likewise the antinomy between the heart and the head. The creative power of the imagination was the vehicle he proposed for accomplishing their more complete union in a happy reconciliation of the type prophesied by Hegel.

The imagination is thus the "neutral territory" of creation, for it is the faculty where the head and the heart meet and intermingle, and it is only through their synthesis that a recognizable human character may be conceived. How successful Hawthorne was in this struggle may be left unsettled for the moment. But what was at stake for him was whether his characters embodied both the intellectual and sentimental depths of the human experience, for if they fell short on either measure, all romantic verisimilitude was lost.

As for Hawthorne's incessant moralism, Borges finds this tendency already in full display in the author's notebooks, wherein he recorded ideas for his stories. Indeed, many of his published works come replete with heavy-handed subtitles and clearly defined morals at their conclusions. As for his notebook entries, Borges (1949/1995) observes, "Better are those pure fantasies that do not look for a justification or moral and that seem to have no other substance than an obscure terror" (p.51). He records a few notable instances and favors particularly those entries that would strike us as "postmodern." Borges himself refers to them as "modern," but he points out that such modern devices are at least as ancient as Homer. The postmodern theme of Hawthorne's most curious sketches "is the coincidence of the aesthetic plane and the common plane, of art and reality. ... These games, these momentary confluences of the imaginative world and the real world—the world we pretend is real when we read—are, or seem to us, modern" (Borges, 1949/1995, p.52). He then paraphrases the plot of *Wakefield* (1835). Wakefield tells the tale of a man who leaves his wife one morning, moves across town without telling her of his intentions, and then spends the next twenty years living in secrecy estranged from her, all the while being only a few blocks away. Our wayward protagonist finally returns home after his sojourn, and the author leaves him there on the threshold. Hawthorne concludes his tale thus: "Wakefield has left us much food for thought, a portion of which

shall lend its wisdom to a moral; and be shaped into a figure”.

Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe. (Borges, 1949/1995, p.140)

Borges (1949/1995) tells us that this brief and ominous parable inaugurates the world of Melville and Kafka, “a world of enigmatic punishments and indecipherable sins” (p.56). Wakefield’s triviality only makes his fate the more profound, but so too does it disturb any easy reading of the tale’s moral. At any rate, Borges deems Hawthorne to be akin to Poe, who exalted the dream in the form of the nightmare, and to Faulkner, whose brutality he describes as being of the infernal and hallucinatory sort; “the kind that issues from dreams, the kind inaugurated by Hawthorne” (p.64).

By way of closing my itinerant reflections on the many ties that bind Hawthorne to Borges, I would like now to return to the threshold of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” which is precisely where Borges leaves us at the end of his tale. His narrator writes on the cusp of a total revolution in thought and world, and he needs no divining rod to help him to determine the eventual outcome. “If our forecasts are not in error,” he projects, “a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the *Second Encyclopedia of Tlön*. Then English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön” (Borges, 1961/1964, p.18).

As opposed to “Wakefield,” where the protagonist steps outside of the systems that adjust our mutual relations to the world and with each other, Borges’ narrator (and the rest of Earth’s population besides him) has been forcibly ejected from these same systems by the *tlönistas*, or the members of the secret society known only as Orbis Tertius. As Emerson puts it in *Nature* (1836), the world is divided between what is *me* and what is *not me*, and the universal systems mentioned by Hawthorne and Borges would certainly correspond to that which is not mine.

Emerson believed that our moral freedom distinguishes us from the rest of the natural universe and thus makes us supernatural and divine. Poe, working from the same premises, argued that our exceptional status only renders us unnatural and perverse (but no less ethical for all that, and no less material, either). Wakefield is thus a freak of nature who is closer to Poe (or to Bartleby) than he is to Emerson. Likewise, Borges’ insistence upon the human-all-too-human nature of Tlön’s artificers aligns the anti-moral of his fable

more closely with postmodernist aesthetic practices than it does with the romantico-modernist ethos inhabited by Hawthorne

According to the Kantian logic that undergirds Lyotard’s definition in *The Différend* (1983/1988),

(...) a differend would be the case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy (p.ix).

I believe that it was Borges’ and Hawthorne’s shared respect for this metaphysical law, namely, “that a universal rule of judgment between heterogeneous genres is lacking in general” (Lyotard, 1983/1988, p.xi), that made them kindred spirits of the same dreamworld, despite the continental divide that separated them and the many material differences in their artistic practices.

Indeed, perhaps it is in this unnavigable distance where the real *différend* between Hawthorne and Borges resides? If so, then it would not be so much a matter of personal preference, of siding with the head over the heart, the intellect over the sentiment, the ideal over the material, the abstract over the image, or even the moral over the amoral. Nor would it be a matter of forcing a too hasty reconciliation between them, in the name of the romantic imagination say, or some other even more discordant resolution. As Nietzsche puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), “If you could imagine dissonance assuming human form—and what else is man?—this dissonance would need, to be able to live, a magnificent illusion which would spread a veil of beauty over its own nature” (p. 154).

Borges and Hawthorne were both aware of our Apollonian need for beautiful illusions, and neither of them shied away from the Dionysian discordance of our human condition. They just went about negotiating this modern-postmodern *différend* in *different* ways. In short, whether they obeyed the rigor of angels or chess players in their respective disciplines, they both indulged in the same aesthetic game.

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