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Introducing Borges to Australia

The poet Martin Johnston, Borges's earliest critic in this country, was a rare Australian example of a polyglot intellectual in the Borgesian mould. The son of the novelist, George Johnston, and the nonfiction writer, Charmian Clift, Johnston's cosmopolitan sensibility was shaped by his upbringing between Sydney, London and the Greek island of Hydra. He read and spoke fluent Greek, translated Greek poetry and, like Borges, had immersed himself in the work of Homer from childhood. Johnston's life was marked by a series of tragedies that had a profound impact on his poetic output: his mother's suicide in 1969, his father's death from tuberculosis in 1970, and his own long battle with alcoholism (Tranter xviii–xix). The strength of his introduction to Borges is the way it brings out the tragic quality of the Argentine's vision: 'we are swept along and away by a Time which we do not understand, through a life we vainly try to interpret . . . Since we must construct falsely, let us admit the fact, says Borges, and "play games with infinity"' (Johnston, 'Games' 174).

While much has been written about the influence of North American poetry on Johnston's generation of Australian poets, 'Games with Infinity' (1974) underlines the important Latin American contribution to the rise of modernist and postmodernist experimentation in Australian writing during the 1970s. The piece, originally published in Don Anderson and Stephen Knight's anthology, *Cunning Exiles: Studies of Modern Prose Writers*, embedded Borges in an explicitly modernist context, alongside essays about Christina Stead and Patrick White.

The range of European philosophical and literary figures to whom Johnston refers in his explication of Borges is deliberately Borgesian in scope: Wittgenstein, Russell, Hegel, Eliot, Beckett and many more. This is cultural terrain the Australian critic shares with Borges. But Johnston, with a poet's attentiveness to language, recognises that he is missing Borges's Latin American dimension:

Borges's interest and influence outside the Hispanic culture is ideational in the same way as that of Kafka and much of Rilke . . . We are not, most of us, particularly well versed in the pros and cons of Gongorism, the heritage of Guiraldes and Quevedo, the proper placing of gaucho usages. I'm certainly not . . . The metaphysical, symbolic and imagistic content of Borges is quite enough to keep anyone going. My Spanish is minimal. The writer with whom I am dealing is therefore Borges-in-English. (Johnston, 'Games' 166)

This focus on the 'metaphysical, symbolic, and imagistic content of Borges' set the pattern for the Argentine's reception in Australia across the Cold War period, reasserting the inherited irrealist reading. Both Johnston's essay and Greg Deakin's 'Jorge Luis Borges: An Introduction' (1976), which followed soon afterwards in *Meanjin*, cite a handful of Borges's better-known North American critics of the period – John Barth, Anthony Kerrigan, Jean

Franco, Ronald Christ – without naming a single Argentine or Latin American critic. And both mount extended readings of Borges's short story, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' that completely exclude its Argentine setting and historical context.

This eighteen-page metaphysical detective story is one of the most famous and most interpreted short stories of the twentieth century. In 'Tlön', the narrator, Borges, and a group of characters named for his real-life Buenos Aires literary acquaintances, unearth a conspiracy by a seventeenth-century secret society named Orbis Tertius. The cult, they discover, has invented a perfectly ordered fictional universe built to accord with the principals of philosophical idealism – first an imaginary country (Uqbar) and then an imaginary planet (Tlön). Orbis Tertius has secretly interpolated the histories of these invented places into various encyclopaedias and library catalogues. The story gives a plausible encyclopaedia-like summary of life on Tlön 'with its architecture and its playing cards, with the dread of its mythologies and the murmur of its languages' (*Labyrinths* 23). But just when the narrator and his friends seem to have solved the mystery, objects from the fictional universe of Tlön begin to appear in Buenos Aires (*Labyrinths* 31). Their discovery becomes a media sensation, and pirated editions of *The Encyclopaedia of Tlön* flood the world. In a postscript dated 1947 (seven years after the story's original publication), the narrator informs us that the languages of Tlön, and the study of its perfectly ordered history, are beginning to wipe conventional subjects from school curriculums. In one hundred years, he concludes ominously, 'English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön' (*Labyrinths* 33).

There are sound reasons to interpret this story as a philosophical parable about 'epistemological unreality', as Johnston and Deakin both do ('Games' 40, 49). But there are other ways to read it. Argentines first encountered 'Tlön' in *Sur* magazine, in Buenos Aires in May 1940 – the month Hitler occupied Belgium, Luxemburg and Holland – with the supposedly neutral Argentine government of Ramón Castillo more or less openly supporting the Axis powers (Aizenberg, 'El Borges Vedado' 113). At the time, Borges and his intellectual circle were involved in a vigorous critique of European fascism's Argentine sympathisers. Thus, 'Tlön' can be read, not only as a generalised attack on the harmonious ideological systems of Nazism and dialectical materialism mentioned in its pages (*Labyrinths* 33), but as a warning of the imminent rise of home-grown versions of them. The names of real Buenos Aires neighbourhoods, streets and historical figures that disappear from Australian critics' readings are vital to the story's menacing effect because they ground the dystopian future described in a recognisably local reality. Borges's 'Tlön' has often been read as a statement of the unreality of the world and of history. But it can equally be read as a warning that the nightmare of history is real, and the nightmare is coming to the South.

Such a historicised reading is not necessarily superior to Johnston's and Deakin's irrealist one; but both ought to be possible. In this instance, Australia's relative alignment to Argentina within world literary space resulted in an 'elliptical refraction' (Damrosch 281) of Borges that erased the local, and reproduced the universalist reading imported from the North.

In Australia, in the years following Johnston's and Deakin's introductory essays, Borges became synonymous with the fabulist, internationalist aesthetic championed by some younger writers. In Martin Johnston's most-anthologised poem, 'The Sea Cucumber', Borges stands for a generation-defining rupture with the dominant Australian literary tradition of journalistic realism. The poem recounts one of his last encounters with his novelist father

before George Johnston's death. The two men get drunk on whisky in a Sydney kitchen as the painter, Ray Crook, shows them his latest. An unfinished copy of Borges sits on the table throughout. Martin has loaned the book to George, but the older man will die before he finishes it. The poem is at once an elegy for the father and for his 'style of art' – a double-edged tribute voiced in the painterly, impressionistic language of the new poetry:

And we were all waiting, though not in your style of art:

more of a pointillism in time, disconnected moments,

a flash of light over an empty glass, a half-finished volume of Borges,

the cabbage palms stooping at dusk into the chimneys.

(Johnston, 'The Sea Cucumber' 13)