

# ARTURO ECHAVARRÍA FERRARI

HUMANIST OF THE YEAR 2003



Master Conference

## BORGES THE CLASSICS, THE LITERARY CANON, ITS BORDERS AND "THE SHAPE OF THE SWORD"

### *The literary canon*

Reflections about the literary canon, how relevant it is, how fair and just is the evaluation of works that are included, can be divided into two general categories: one that could be called objective and another that could be called subjective. The most extreme criticisms, those which repudiate the very existence of the canon, as we know, make claims against what is seen as the establishment of an arbitrary and exclusive literary hierarchy, based on ideological, economic, social and gender factors. Those who press these hypotheses with impatience base their arguments on a point of view that is rigorously objective, because it is easy to state, for example, the scarce representation in the literary canon of works and authors from ethnic and racial minorities, gays and women. On the other hand, at the other extreme, the most adamant defenders of the current order assume a position that we can consider subjective. In what could be characterized as a defense of the educational and formative purposes of education, they note that the current literary canon provides readers and students a wealth of basic ethical values for our society. In relation to the place Borges occupies in this controversy, I am now interested in briefly exploring two positions toward the canon, one that is based on objective principles and another based on subjective principles. It is useful to clarify that although the two occupy opposing positions with respect to each other, they are not the extremes of the polemic I am about to delineate. I refer to the positions of Harold Bloom and John Guillory<sup>1</sup>.

The position of Harold Bloom, expressed in the book *The Western Canon* (1994), a work that drew a lot of comment and, to the surprise of some, became a best-seller, can be summarized succinctly. It is certain, and he has made it clear from the beginning, that Bloom rejects the idea that the chosen works contain the ethical and moral values in line with the norms that rule established society. With the sharpness that he is known for, Bloom notes that the large majority of the works that are considered part of the canon propose, in the majority of the cases, a list of values contrary to those that govern a society in a given historical era. But while he rejects the presence of ethical norms in line with the predominant morality in the society of the time, the Yale critic affirms the existence of intrinsic "aesthetic values" in the texts belonging to the literary canon. The two outstanding characteristics of these texts are their abilities to create a feeling of "strangeness" in the reader and to communicate their originality. Reviewing the literary canon from one end to the other, Bloom comments:

*The cycle of achievement goes from The Divine Comedy [Dante] to Endgame [Samuel Beckett], from strangeness to strangeness. When you read a canonical work for the first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfillment of expectations.*

(Bloom 1994, 3)

It is clear in context that these intuitions and/or feelings reside in the experience of the person who receives them and, as such, are felt on the subjective level. The characteristic of

strangeness in a work is, in turn, linked to its originality. And the originality, in turn, is a product, according to Bloom, of a struggle. It refers to a fight without quarter with the canon that precedes it, of a battle with the literary tradition that, if successful, lets the new work subjugate and assimilate its antecedents and thus open the way toward being included in the list of canonical works.

*The burden of influence has to be borne, if significant originality is to be achieved and re-achieved within the wealth of Western literary tradition. Tradition is not only a handing-down or process of benign transmission; it is also a conflict between past genius and present aspiration, in which the prize is literary survival or canonical inclusion.*

(Bloom, 1994, 8)

Now let's move on to the contrary position as expressed by John Guillory. John Guillory, whose best known book in this context is titled *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon-Formation*, takes a route that overturns the question of the subjective value of the literary text itself with its concomitant psychic and social ingredients and starts with the question that he considers key in terms of the ways in which rigor operates in the process of establishing a literary canon. The question formulated by Guillory has to do with the mechanisms that work in particular institutional contexts that affect the preservation, reproduction and transmission of texts that later become part of the category of the "classics." From a perspective that aspires to be based on objective criteria, Guillory states the following:

*An individual's judgment that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the reproduction of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers. The work of preservation has other more complex social contexts than the immediate responses of readers of texts.*

(Guillory: 1995, 237)

And he adds that it is reasonable to conjecture that, contrary to those who assert the opinion that the canon is the result of a strategy of exclusion based on social principles, race and sexual gender, the criteria that dominate at the moment of identifying texts that are to be preserved and reproduced for posterity respond to a social agenda that is neither dogmatic nor ideological. (In that sense, his thinking is related to Harold Bloom's). The goal of this process, Guillory argues, is related to disseminating those texts that are compatible with practices related to the teaching of reading and writing.

*It has long been known by historians of literature that the process we call canon formation first appeared in ancient schools in connection with the social function of disseminating the knowledge of how to read and write. The selection of texts was a means to an end, not an end in itself.*

(Guillory: 1995, 240)

Denying the possibility that the works called "classics" are full of intrinsic aesthetic values, Guillory asserts:

*The problem of the canon is a problem of syllabus and curriculum, the institutional forms by which works are preserved as great works.*

(Guillory: 1995, 240)

And what qualities should a literary work possess to make it appropriate for use as teaching material? Here, Guillory draws a fine line, one that appears to me to be too fine. He asserts that the spoken language, as we know, experienced changes that over time distanced it from literary language. And he adds that by considering the former (spoken language) as an inferior form of the later (the written), the scholar-teachers, those of ancient Greece and Rome, for example, chose texts based on criteria of refinement and correctness, both lexically and syntactically, that served to enrich and refine the language of the youths who were the subjects of formation by bringing the written language into contact with the spoken language:

To the early teachers, the scholars of Hellenistic times, for example, who first set out to preserve the poems and plays of classical Greece, it appeared that the language of earlier ages was better, more refined, more "correct" than the language spoken in their own time. They saw their spoken language as a degeneration from that original standard of purity and correctness. So they attempted to refine their contemporary language by extracting from the written texts they preserved, the classics, a standard of usage – a syntax, a vocabulary, an orthography, in short, a "grammar." Learning to read, then, also came to mean in the Greek and Roman eras, as ever since, learning to speak a more correct, refined version of one's native tongue, a grammatical language.

(Guillory: 1995, 240-7)

Beyond the criticisms (and they do exist) of Guillory's arguments, these processes are, in a broad sense, subject to empirical verification, which is why they are called "objective" by those who follow the U.S scholar and involve themselves in the establishment of a literary canon, a list of approved books.

Borges is involved in this debate, it seems to me, in a special way. Certainly, we cannot place him among those who claim "objective" criteria for formulating a canon. As too many know, Borges was never interested in the economy or sociology as a basis for explanations and evaluations of literature and art. But curiously, nor can Borges' judgments be comfortably fit into the frame of reference of a Harold Bloom, for example. If he had to be located in this debate, he would be on the side of the "subjectives." But that opinion requires additional clarification. On multiple occasions, Borges has expressed through his essays, his stories and even his poems, above all when talking of certain authors and particular texts, appreciation for "works that endure." But the clearest statement in that respect, it seems to me, we find in the brief pages of his essay "About the Classics" (*Other Inquisitions*), pages he confesses to writing at "seventy plus years," or in other words, in full maturity.

Borges starts by considering a specific text, one that belongs to the Chinese culture: the *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes*, edited by Confucius, a text that is difficult to classify in the literary order because it is a manual of prophecy that, according to sinologist Charles O. Hucker, "has no interest as literature" (Hucker:7975,98). Borges, however, appears to have admired it, as he did other literary, philosophical and religious texts: he admired them for their ability to "say" or "not say." He linked this property to another factor: the works should communicate an essential ambiguity, a situation that led to a wealth of potential interpretations. The *Book of Changes* (the *I Ching*), Borges notes, attracted philosophers, historians and ordinary readers because, when they came into contact with it, it opened a wide range of almost infinite possible interpretations.

*Leibnitz believed he could see in the hexagrams [which are part of the book] a binary system of numeration; others an enigmatic philosophy; others, such as Wilhem, an instrument for predicting the future, as the 64 figures corresponded to the 64 phases of any enterprise or process; others, the vocabulary of a certain tribe; others, a calendar.*

(Borges: 1989, II, 150)

This approach to the book, to a book, is not determined by certain conditions inherent in the text (as we have seen proposed by Bloom), such as "beauty" as an aesthetic value, for example. Addressing this point, Borges confesses with words that are not totally without a certain irony:

*By year thirty I believed, under the influence of Macedonio Fernández, that beauty was a privilege of very few authors; now I know it is common and that it comes to us in casual pages of the ordinary or in street dialogue.*

(Borges, 1989, II, 151)

It is not too surprising, therefore, that Borges shares this opinion about the intrinsic value of literary work with one of those for whom the practice of writing is hand in hand with

theoretical thought, the novelist and playwright Herbert Quain. The person appears in a story titled "Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain." Quain's formulation about certain congenial "values" of literary work is verbally almost identical to that of Borges' essay. The difference for Quain is that we cannot be indifferent in this context. Herbert Quain does not believe in the literary canons: "He deplored with smiling sincerity 'the servile and obstinate preservation' of past books..." (Borges: 1989, I, 461) and this is due, insists Quain, to the fact that "good literature is so completely common that even dialogue in the street achieves it" (Borges, 1989, II, 151).

But if Borges, like Quain, does not believe in the inherent existence of aesthetic values in the literary text, on the other hand he is far from joining the group of the "objectives" or the nihilists, and here I refer to those who deny any value to an artistic work (and believe me, they exist). As we know, once and again Borges reaffirms the existence and value of when he calls "the aesthetic act" and even attacks the difficult task of trying to define it. In another essay, "The Wall and the Books" (*Other Inquisitions*), he calls the formulation of the "aesthetic act" as the "imminence of a revelation that does not happen" (Borges: 1989, II, 13). But we should not lose sight of the fact of what inspired the search for the "nature" of what on other occasions Borges calls the thrill of aesthetic revelation is precisely a historical text that raises in the reader the possibility of endless interpretations, a condition that he had already formulated as a characteristic of classic works in "About the Classics." It must be noted, however, that in "The Wall and the Books," artistic works are not the only things that enjoy the fortune of epiphany experienced by the viewer when experiencing the expectation of a revelation that does not happen. In addition to music, Borges lists mere "circumstantial acts" such as the faces carved by time, certain twilights and states of happiness. The list just cited places Borges, it seems to me, in the context of the dispute around the canon, decidedly on the side of the subjectives.

The subjective nature of the aesthetic experience and the repudiation of the idea that the literary work contains intrinsic aesthetic values (which separates Borges, as should be clear at this point, from the assertions of Harold Bloom) are expressed very specifically in the "Prologue" of the 1964 edition of *Poetic Work*. Imagining the possibility that the prologue could be called "The Aesthetic of Berkeley," "not because the Irish meta physicist has said so ... but because it applies to the letters of the argument that he applied to reality," Borges notes:

*The taste of the apple (Berkeley declares) is in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; analogically (I say) poetry is in the business of the poem with the reader, not in the series of symbols registered on the pages of a book. The essence is the aesthetic act, the "thrill," the physical change that arises in each reader.*

(Borges, 1964, 11)

I think it would be fair to review the basis of support for Borges' position with respect to the existence of a literary canon in the following way: first of all, as his essays, commentaries and interviews show, the Argentine is far from denying the excellence of authors and works worthy of preservation and that call us to return to them repeatedly because they stand up to multiple re-readings. Nor have I found evidence to support the idea that the order of "the classics," the establishment of a canon, is the result of ideological or dogmatic preconceptions, nor the result of procedures susceptible to empirical testing. In the essay "About the Classics," as I have indicated, Borges alludes in a general way to geographic and linguistic reasons and the "acts of faith" that characterize certain works in a way that they are "read with fervor and a mysterious loyalty" (Borges: 1989, II, 151) and thus become classics. But it is clear that to Borges, these works, whose order is changing, have to have the virtue of sustaining in the reader the sensation of the imminence of a revelation that does not happen, whether because they reveal an alternative and rich vision of the universe (the philosophers Schopenhauer, Berkeley or the poet Dante, for example), for the wealth of their invention (*One Thousand and One Nights*, *El Quijote* by Cervantes, and others), for the ways they conceive and practice the

rigorous act of writing (the experts, Gustave Flaubert, the French symbolists), or because they reveal or are about to reveal "a destiny" (the dramas of Shakespeare, the story narrated by Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*). As we can see, if there exists a "canon" to Borges, it is open, eclectic, certainly variable and only subject to sustaining the thrill of the aesthetic act in the reader.

To conclude, I would like to briefly invoke an example of how, in the context of his narrative, Borges puts into practice some of the considerations we have outlined in the preceding paragraphs. I refer to the short story "The Shape of the Sword" (*Fictions*).

Critics have often pointed to motifs and even structural principles in some of his stories that suggest the presence of great figures of the canon, both western and eastern. I only mention the most obvious: Dante in "The Aleph," 'Attár and other mystic Sufi poets in "The Zahir" and "The Approach to Almotásim," the classic mythology in "The House of Asterión," José Hernández in "Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz," E. A. Poe in "Death and the Compass," Unamuno, Mallarmé and Valéry in "Pierre Menard Author of *Quijote*." It is certain that in many cases the presence of these authors and works is inserted as a means of subversion, for the purpose of parody.

But Borges is not the only one who uses the greats in search of what we could call a "model" of inter-textual material. In conformance with the eclectic view of the canon that we have described, the Argentine uses, in search of "inspiration," sometimes in an ostentatious way, marginal writers and works that are very rarely cited by the "establishment." Perhaps the most interesting case is the "Index of Sources," a series of infamous literary authors, in his first book of stories: *Universal History of Infamy* (1935).

In a lengthy essay, which was printed in Buenos Aires (in Spanish) and Cambridge, Massachusetts (in an English version), he outlined the path he had followed to identify the two works that are direct antecedents of one of his most read stories: "The Shape of the Sword." The story of treason that Borges tells, of a treason perpetrated in the context of two fellow warriors involved in the war for the independence of Ireland who confess (one of them betrays the other by becoming the accuser), could have been inspired, without doubt, by the tragedy *Julius Caesar* by Shakespeare. And, in fact, the accuser, Vincent Moon, himself refers ironically to the indirect presence of Shakespeare in the sad plot he must perform ("...Shakespeare is in some way John Vincent Moon" [Borges: 1989, I, 494]). But between Shakespeare, the Bible (the story of the betrayal of Judas, clearly alluded to in the text) and Borges there are intermediaries. Two of them, the most direct, the film by John Ford, *The Informer*, of 1935 (which Borges reviewed in the magazine *Sur* in 1935) and the novel *The Informer* by Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty of 1925, whose plot serves as the basis of the cinematic version. Both make sometimes indirect and sometimes direct references to *Julius Caesar* by Shakespeare and the drama of Judas. The coincidences between "The Shape of the Sword" and the film by Ford are many and the differences between one and the other are of great interest, because they reveal the sharp critical eye and literary aim that we know in Borges. But this is not the place, as I have already said, to get into these details.

What I wish to emphasize here is the fact that Borges, in conformance with his flexible and extremely broad conception of the canon, of the "classics," had no problem in using as a model, or as a base text, if you will, works that do not belong to the canon. O'Flaherty's novel, although an outstanding story of great interest in the historical period in which it was written (the Irish Civil War of 1921-22) is properly not considered part of the canon of great Irish literature. Ford's film, on the other hand, although recognized (Ford won the Oscar for best director in 1935), contains turns of crude melodrama and other faults – which Borges pointed out and commented on with irony in his review – that diminish its artistic quality. As we can perhaps anticipate, Borges overcomes all. His broad artistic vision, tempered by a strong dose of relativity, his eclecticism that crosses borders and genres without ambiguity, as we know so well, frequently makes us turn our gaze to other horizons. We are invited to examine

“minor” works and authors who are at the margins of literature with new eyes, and to find those literary and artistic values that they can show to a sensitive reader who takes the chance on those who are not included in the range that others have established as “classics.”

[A version of this work was presented at the Symposium “Borges and the Canon” held at the University of Leipzig, Germany, on October 9, 2004]

---

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>En el transcurso de los últimos meses ha salido a la luz un libro de un crítico muy destacado que también versa sobre el tema y de él lamentablemente no puedo ocupar en estos momentos: Frank Kermode, *Pleasure and Change. The Aesthetics of Canon*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

#### References

Borges, Jorge Luis. (1964). *Obra poética*. Buenos Aires. Emecé.

Borges, Jorge Luis. (1989). *Obras completas* (3 vols.). Barcelona. Emecé

Bloom, Harold. (1994). *The Western Canon*. Riverhead Books. New York.

Ford, John. (1935). *The Informer*. A Radio Picture.

Guillory, John. (1995). "Canon", en: Frank Lentricchia y Thomas McLaughlin (eds.). *Critical Terms for Literary Studies*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. pp. 233-249.

Hucker, Charles O. (1975). *China's Imperial Past*. Stanford University Press. Stanford (California)

O'Flaherty, Liam. (1980). *The Informer*. New York. A Harvest Book. Harcourt.