

REVIEWS - RESEÑAS

Borges, Between History and Eternity.

Hernán Díaz

Continuum, 2012.

This is a mixed-bag of a book. On the one hand, it reiterates with a twist the eternal debate about history and fiction in Borges; and on the other, it dispenses with the most elementary tools of critical inquiry such as citing those who studied the subject previously.

The first part of the volume, “Political Theology,” takes up the question of history and fiction (or eternity, as Díaz calls it), an old topic in Borges studies and one that in recent years seems to have been put to rest. Díaz retains the dichotomy, and in this sense his study is old-fashioned, but he gives it an interesting if not entirely new angle. In his view Borges’ most historical-political stories are really his most transcendental, and conversely, the metaphysical writings contain his political philosophy, or theology. Again, the strict dichotomy is somewhat passé, and other critics have noticed before that Borges’ fantasies are often political, so Díaz is not revolutionary here but he does bring both different texts and a particular insistence to his arguments. For those who don’t know much about Borges this insistence can be useful.

The second half of Díaz’s book is entitled “The United States of America.” Here, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman are the center of attention, becoming case studies of the crossover thesis presented in the book’s first half. In that vein the “decadent” Poe “provides Borges with the foundation for his more political fiction” (162). And Whitman, the singer of democracy, turns out to inspire Borges’s transcendental literature.

Díaz first makes an argument for the importance of American literature for Borges, who saw in this writing a kindred residue of barbarism—

violence, brutality, and slavery. Poe's invention of detective fiction feeds off this gore, since it civilizes crime. Order imposed on disorder, and the idea that our lives are ciphered, are both political in nature so the Poe of art for art's sake in fact drives Borges' political writing. Whitman, on the other hand, the founder of social poetry, and the believer in the active reader, ends up singing not one man but all men, and thus encourages the transcendental aspirations of Borges's work.

In this second part of the volume Díaz's thesis gains some gravitas but the author completely neglects any earlier research on the topics of Poe, Whitman, and Borges. John Irwin's masterful *The Mystery to a Solution* on Borges and Poe comes to mind, as well as many articles on Borges and Whitman. Acknowledging and building on these predecessors would not only have been proper but would have also enriched Díaz's book.

Díaz completes the volume with a meditation on the coming and going typical to Borges, who refuses to subordinate the eternal to the historical, and the historical to the eternal. If the swinging goes on long enough, Díaz says, the distinction between "to" and "fro" is rendered in irrelevant (161). So even though Borges assigns a set of values to Poe and Whitman, he also undoes this opposition.

This discussion of coming and going also threatens to undo what Díaz has written in the previous sections of the book, where strict oppositions guided the commentary. The result is somewhat confusing. If Borges topples the dichotomy, why use it to frame the book?

More on the mark in the coming and going section is the discussion of Borges's impact on American literature. Díaz mentions not only how but also why Borges succeeded, noting that the growth of comparative literature departments fostered his popularity. Had this material been expanded and worked into earlier sections it would have made for an interesting conversation across various authors and eras.

Díaz deserves credit for concluding on the note that literature overflows classifications. This comment underlines both the weaknesses and strengths of his book.

Edna Aizenberg
Marymount Manhattan College