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Borges's Real Concern

Few authors inspire admiration and abhorrence like Jorge Luis Borges. Borges uses his varied and complex stories to expound upon metaphysical questions, such as the nature of the universe and of human existence. His strong opinions and distinctive style leave many readers to either find great relevance in his writings or to only find pessimism and confusion in them. John Updike, however, finds something of a middle ground. He praises Borges's skill with language and bold ideas, but criticizes him for an apparent disinterest in the lives of human beings. Updike believes that Borges's fascination with incomprehensible concepts comes at the exclusion of an element of humanity, and implies that emotions are downplayed to the point that readers cannot relate to the stories. Updike, however, simply has not looked closely enough at Borges's work, for its main interest involves a very prominent aspect of the human experience. Borges does use his stories to explore abstract philosophical ideas, but his writing truly focuses on the human response to these ideas and the human quest to understand the mysteries of the universe.

One can easily see how Updike could interpret Borges's work as "going beyond psychology, beyond the human" (Updike 189). Readers do not encounter a collection of love stories and family saga when examining Borges's oeuvre. The "Library of Babel" features no dialogue between characters and virtually no human interaction of any kind. Many of the other stories contain fantastic settings and mythological events that may seem to have little relevance to most individuals' day-to-day lives. Borges avoids waxing poetic about human emotions and experiences. Still, for all of their focus on metaphysical questions, the stories are not merely

creative essays on the nature of the universe. Borges truly intends to explore the way people react when they are forced to confront unanswerable questions and the way they seek to understand their own existence. Borges is not afraid to present his readers with philosophical questions about the nature of existence and the chaos of the universe, even if those questions are somewhat discomfiting and nearly impossible to answer. Few endeavors are more essentially human than the search for knowledge, and Borges's concentration on this search firmly roots his stories in the human experience.

Some of Borges's works, such as "The Circular Ruins" (Borges 96 – 100) are actually very centered on their characters' emotions, and Updike neglects to consider these works when he criticizes Borges. In the story, readers follow the protagonist, a sorcerer, as he attempts to bring to life a man he creates in his dreams. The story is structured in a fairly straightforward manner and has an omniscient narrator allows readers to share in the protagonist's emotions. The sorcerer feels a sense of fear after arriving at the ruins of a temple and realizing that he is being watched by the natives. He experiences intense frustration when his first attempts at creating another man fail. At the end of the story, when he realizes that he, too, is another man's dream, he feels overwhelmed "with relief, with humiliation, with terror" (Borges 100). Although the story involves elements of magic and fantasy, any readers who have felt the urge to create, who have let a loved one go to live his or her own life, or who have questioned the purpose or value of their own lives can relate to the sorcerer. Yes, "The Circular Ruins" probes the concepts of existence and reality, but it does so through the story of a man who feels many of the same desires and emotions that ordinary people experience throughout their lives.

Borges sometimes appears to attribute little significance to the lives of individuals, which seem inconsequential when compared to the vastness of the universe. In “The Immortal,” however, Borges asserts that the brevity of life gives it great value, value that would be lost if human beings achieved immortality. A Roman soldier narrates this work and recounts his search for a river that “purifies men of death” (Borges 184). He finds this river and attains immortality, but ultimately discovers that life without death loses its worth. Some readers might find it surprising that Borges does not present immortality as a desirable state. After all, would not eternal life allow people the chance to eventually come to understand the cosmos? Borges writes, “Death (or reference to death) makes men precious and pathetic,” and that “everything in the world of mortals has the value of the irrecoverable and contingent” (Borges 192). The reality that even the most inconsequential actions and feelings pass so quickly grants them a great significance. With an eternity to do so, people could experience all things, but all experience would ultimately lose its meaning. Borges recognizes that with mortality’s limitations, individuals can never truly complete their knowledge of the world, despite their best efforts. Still, even though they cannot complete their ultimate quest, people’s lives have worth. Humans seem very small in the grand scheme of the universe, but this gives them a value perhaps even greater than that of the knowledge that they seek.

The “Library of Babel,” the specific text criticized by Updike for excluding “discouragingly large areas of truth” (Updike 189), contains much more than an elaborate mathematical metaphor for the universe. It tells the tale of humanity’s quest, throughout the ages, to find the ultimate answers. The Library itself, the universe, is only the setting for human activities. The librarians’ pursuit for the books of the “Crimson Hexagon,” books that hold the keys to understand the immense library and its incomprehensible books, parallels western

civilization's search to understand the world and humanity's place in it. When the librarians realize that the knowledge they seek waits hidden somewhere within the library, "the first reaction was unbounded joy" (Borges 115). However, upon realizing that in an infinite library, finding any particular book would be virtually impossible, the librarians turn to desperation. Some seek out a mythical "Book-Man," a prophet-like figure who has supposedly read the true catalogue of the library. Others seek to recreate the book through the random arrangement of letters. Still others turn to violence, destroying books and each other (Borges 116-117). Just like Borges's librarians, people throughout history have turned to religion, science, various philosophies, and even violence in their attempts to understand themselves, each other, and the world in which they live. Like "The Immortal," "The Library of Babel" proposes that mortal beings simply cannot find the answers to all of their questions. However, the story's speaker believes that the library includes "not a single absolute piece of nonsense" (Borges 117), for people themselves give meaning to the books. If read allegorically and in light of personal experiences, even the most jumbled books hold some message. Mortal human beings give the books their meaning, just as humans give meaning to the universe. "The Library of Babel" tells the story of what it means to question and search. Far from being "beyond the human," it tells the story of what it means to be human.

Even the very structure of Borges's stories relates to the human quest for knowledge. Borges's stories are often written as though they have passed through many hands before they reach the reader. "The Immortal" supposedly consists of an article found by a princess in a used copy of Pope's *Iliad*, with introductory comments and a postscript by an unknown editor. "The Library of Babel" features footnotes, also added by an unknown editor. Updike might feel that this detachment that characterizes Borges's work only serves to further remove readers from the

narrator and from a human voice with which they can empathize. However, by constructing stories in which readers cannot be certain where all of the information is coming from and in which many voices have added their own perspective on events, Borges manages to capture humanity's collective quest for enlightenment in the structure of his writings. This process symbolizes the way people receive much of what they believe, as information filtered through many minds throughout many generations. That Borges's structures parallel humanity's search for knowledge provides further evidence that it is this quest, not the knowledge itself, that truly concerns Borges. The quest for understanding has value in and of itself, despite the fact that it can never be completed, and this universal human experience is captured in almost every aspect of Borges's stories.

Borges works are not about the secrets of life and the universe; they are about people's relationship with these secrets, about their attempts to find the answers to their questions and the meaning in their lives. Updike fails to see beyond Borges's literary tricks and complex symbolism to recognize Borges's deep concern for people. As illustrated in "The Library of Babel," philosophies often change with the times. People lose certainty in their old beliefs and begin to formulate new ones. Metaphors that once allowed clear insights grow vague and mysterious. As it ages, Borges's writing will no longer be considered revolutionary, and perhaps his metaphors and symbolism will lose some of their impact. Nevertheless, "The Library of Babel" and Borges's other stories, will endure and continue to resonate with readers, for they deal with more than the nature of the universe. They deal with the nature of humanity itself, a topic that will remain relevant as long as people continue to ponder life's biggest questions.

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