

*Postcolonial Borges: Argument and Artistry*. By Robin Fiddian. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2017. 240 pp. £30. ISBN 978-0-19-879471-4.

This study takes up the challenge of assessing Borges's complex and to some extent problematic relationship with the category of the postcolonial. In doing so, it addresses the vexed question of whether a discourse articulated in relation to the Middle East and the twentieth-century decolonising struggles of Africa and Asia can be applied to Latin America. The immediate temptation is to say 'no' given that Latin America underwent a much earlier process of colonisation during the Early Modern period and experienced a first wave of decolonisation in the first few decades of the nineteenth century (with the notable exceptions of Cuba and Puerto Rico), and suffered a fraught and protracted postcolonial period marked by, first, British informal imperialism and internal colonialism and, second, by the rapid rise of US political and economic domination 'lawfully' endorsed by the Monroe Doctrine.

In spite of these manifest differences, Robin Fiddian identifies two principal conceptual frameworks that serve to reconfigure the postcolonial paradigm for both Latin American studies and, more specifically, scholarship on Borges. First, he deploys a more capacious and nuanced understanding of postcoloniality as formulated by Argentine critic Walter D. Mignolo, by which Occidentalism is predicated on the idea that the so-called 'discovery' of America midwifed modernity and Western capitalism, allowing Europe to rapidly establish itself as the world's hegemonic power. Second, Fiddian forges productive exchanges between postcolonial theory and Latin American studies and, in the process, traces the contours of a transnational epistemology centred on the geographical and ideological category of the global South.

Organised chronologically, the book meticulously reassesses Borges's vast literary production, from the youthful (albeit politically engaged) writings of the early 1920s to the mature *ficciones* of the late 1930s and early 1940s and the miscellaneous story collections of the elderly blind bard, most notably *El hacedor* (1960) and *El informe de Brodie* (1970).

Admittedly, the early *criollismo* period of the 1920s yields the most explicit ideological engagement with geopolitical issues and postcolonial concerns. By focussing on crucial issues of identity, nationality, language, and vanguardism in key early works such as *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de Enfrente* (1924), *Inquisiciones* (1925), and *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928), Fiddian elucidates Borges's important contribution to the decolonising process in Argentina during the pivotal historical period of the *Centenario*. At the same time, by re-reading these early works alongside Beatriz Sarlo's category of the *orillas*, the author offers incisive close readings that focus on the young poet's enthusiastic investment in the forging of 'an authentic creole expression' (p. 34), particularly through Borges's insistence that young countries such as Argentina have a richer and more immediate past than European ones. The modernist *criollismo* of this early Borges, Fiddian suggests, combines aesthetic innovation with anti-imperialistic sentiments, an ideological stance that lay the foundations for his subsequent iconoclastic treatment of time and history. This unique aesthetic and ethical programme achieved its most eloquent articulation in Borges's trademark irreverence for the Western archive in the seminal lecture 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' (1951).

While not as politically explicit, Fiddian convincingly makes the case for Borges's mature writing remaining enthralled by geopolitical issues, whether that be oblique critiques of the rise of totalitarian regimes (Borges was a vociferous supporter of the Allied cause) or the effort to align a young republic such as Argentina with, say, Irish decolonisation from British rule. Hence, for example, he argues that the 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' 'cries out to be read as a palimpsest where, below the surface of a story set in Ireland lies a semi-concealed narrative about the struggle for independence from Spain in the viceroyalties of Peru and the River Plate in the first quarter of the nineteenth century' (p. 98). Neither are political statements absent from the Borges's final decades, although his positions became less consistent and more problematic (e.g. his regrettable acceptance of an award from General Augusto Pinochet in

1976). Without shying away from such complexities, Fiddian nonetheless evidences how and why the authorial hallmark of engaging with the category of Occidentalism remained in place teasing out the political implications of 'El informe de Brodie' and its foregrounding of the failure of the West's civilising project: 'Brodie sees little difference between the "savages" of the African jungle with whom he had some hair-raising experiences and the purportedly civilized Christian subjects of Queen Victoria's Britain' (p. 145). An indispensable study, *Postcolonial Borges* allows us to (re-)encounter a writer sharply attuned to the vexed colonial legacies and geopolitical issues of his time, a contradictory figure whose aesthetic development was marked by a shift from youthful political activism to a detached conservative leaning.

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