

No, Really

Explorations and Manipulations of Reality in the Works of Saint John Perse and Jorge Luis Borges

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Though born just a decade apart at the end of the 19th century, at first glance one might interpret more differences than similarities between Guadeloupean author Saint John Perse and Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. In addition to coming from different regions, their individual writing styles – the intricately constructed fictional short stories Borges was best known for and Perse’s lyrical abstract poetry (which earned him the 1960 Nobel Prize for Literature) – initially appear to contrast greatly. However, a closer examination of the works and various perspectives of each figure, including Perse’s poems “Pictures for Crusoe” and “To Celebrate a Childhood” and Borges’s short story *The Library of Babel*, reveals a great deal of similarities in terms of the intent, form, and effect with which both authors wrote. Both authors express belief in literature’s ability to heighten humanity’s understanding of its place in the universe using elements of surreal language in the form of abstract imagery and fantasy, respectively. Additionally, Borges’ use of concrete and accessible language within the mode of fantasy effectively raises philosophical questions about the nature of mankind's

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place in the universe, making him as deserving of global recognition as Perse.

Both authors believed in language's ability to manipulate reality within literature to heighten humanity's understanding of its place in the universe. In his Nobel Prize lecture, Saint John Perse emphasizes the way in which "through the grace of a language into which the very rhythm of Being has been translated, the poet invests himself with a surreality which cannot be that of science" (Perse). He goes on to claim that "it is the poet's task to retrieve metaphysics" and reveal poetry as "the true daughter of wonders" (Perse). By connecting "the grace of language" with "the very rhythm of being," Perse praises language's ability to push the boundaries of reality, and subsequently explore metaphysical concepts. Like Perse, Borges claimed to be "a man who has tried to explore the literary possibility of metaphysics in religion" in the forward to his book of poems, *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Poems* (xiii). In a Harvard Lecture entitled "The Poet's Creed," Borges describes his belief in the importance of literature:

When I write something, I think of it not as being factually true (mere fact is a web of circumstances and accidents), but as being true to something deeper. When I write a story, I write it because somehow I believe in it — not as one believes in mere history, but rather as one believes in a dream or in an idea. (114)

Borges recognizes the ability of language and literature to transcend "mere history" and the relation of facts — rather, he writes with the purpose of creating literature "true to something deeper" (114). Thus, both Perse and Borges share the view that literature is an effective tool which, through the manipulation of reality, can reveal higher truths about humanity.

Though both authors use modes of writing that push the bounds of reality, Perse evokes emotional aspects of the human experience, such as memory and isolation, through the use of abstract imagery. In contrast, Borges explores more intellectual and philosophical aspects of the human experience, such as time and knowledge, with fantasy narrative structure. In his collection of poems, "Pictures for Crusoe," Perse portrays various objects associated with Robinson Crusoe, a character from Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*, including "The Bells," "The Bow," and "The Seed." Literary critic Joseph Acquisto notes Perse's use of abstract imagery in place of concrete narrative structure in these poems. He writes, "Chronological time, however, is disrupted in this poem by a refusal to adhere to the narrative's chronology, in place of which is substituted the series of objects through which Robinson is constituted" (Acquisto 347). Acquisto emphasizes that Perse's use of various "symbolic objects" related to Robinson Crusoe's journey causes Crusoe to be "revealed as lyric subject," of the poem. He identifies this view of Crusoe's story, in which the objects and the specific emotions they evoke from Crusoe replace a chronological storyline, as representing "a return from Crusoe as utilitarian moral tale to Crusoe as a literary subject" (Acquisto 347). Similarly, Perse's poem "To Celebrate a Childhood" pushes the boundaries of reality by not following a chronological, concrete narrative structure, but rather by featuring a long series of images and exclamations which convey the emotions the narrator associates with his remembrance of childhood. For example, the narrator describes his "nurse" who "smelled of castor bean," and "had glistening sweat on her forehead," and his "yellowing grandmother," because of whom he associates beauty with "when there comes through the shutters the wise flower of fire towards your long

eyelids of ivory" (Perse 2). Additionally, the poem is scattered with interjections of "Palms!" and, "O I have cause to praise!" (Perse 3). Perse's portrayal of disjointed remembrances of people and experience, interspersed with memories of smells and sight, conveys the fragmented but joyous nature of nostalgia associated with one's memory of childhood.

Similarly to Perse, Borges utilizes the ability of language to push outside the boundaries of reality. However, he does so by creating elaborate fictional worlds which explore more intellectual metaphysical aspects of the human experience, such as the nature of time and knowledge. In his short story the *Library of Babel*, Borges presents a universe in which a mysterious and unfamiliar reality is accepted as objective truth, conveying the fallibility of our own understanding of knowledge and reality. In this story, the universe is contained within an endless library consisting of identical hexagonal rooms filled with an infinite number of books. The library is populated by librarians who spend their lives researching and attempting to discover the mysteries of the library. In the short story, the narrator recalls "a few axioms" presented as truth - the first being that "the library has existed ab aeternitate," and "can only be the handiwork of a god," a "truth" which "no rational mind can doubt" (Borges 113). The next accepted truth is that "there are twenty-five orthographic symbols," twenty-two letters of the alphabet, the comma, the period, and the space. By presenting the existence of only twenty-two letters — a statement the reader knows to be false — as an irreproachable truth within the fictional universe, Borges questions the truth of our own perceptions about the world. Additionally, by presenting this false axiom in parallel with the idea that the library is endless and made by a higher power, Borges implies that our own philosophies and ideologies may be based on

faulty assumptions. Both Perse and Borges use forms which defy reality – a collection of vivid, non-chronological images and intricately constructed fictional worlds, respectively – to convey metaphysical concepts of humanity’s experience in the world. However, Perse explores a more abstract dimension of metaphysics, emotion and memory, while Borges explores more intellectual aspects, such as humanity’s perception of reality and the universe.

Just as Perse effectively uses imagery to convey the emotional relationship of humanity with concepts such as memory, Borges’s creation of fantastical universes provides an effective framework for the reader’s exploration of metaphysical concepts. Though some critics characterize Perse’s poetry as being difficult to decipher at times, described by Roderick Little as being due to his “highly individual approach to symbol and image” (132), the Nobel prize committee praised the “soaring flight and the evocative imagery of his poetry which in a visionary fashion reflects the conditions of our time” (“The Nobel Prize in Literature 1960”). This encapsulates the power of Perse’s poetry, which is shared by Borges’s short stories: both have the ability to inspire in the reader a higher understanding of the world around them. In his analysis of Borges’s relationship with realism in literature, critic Earl Fitz states:

Borges wants his reader to actively interpret the various semantic possibilities the text, her own imagination, and her own experience reveal to her and not simply, and passively, glom onto the one she believes (and is told, by would-be authorities) the author intends her to have. (9)

The notion that Borges’s innovative use of language within the framework of the fictional universe provides “various semantic possibilities” which may lead to multiple different meanings further supports the idea that Borges’s short stories are, like

Perse's poems, an effective medium for exploration of metaphysics.

Though they did so with contrasting styles, Saint John Perse and Jorge Luis Borges both pushed the boundaries of reality to powerfully explore metaphysical themes of memory, emotion, and existence itself. Perse achieved this by employing surreal lyrical poetry which rejected the structure of a traditional narrative to evoke emotion associated with various experiences in his many poems, as exemplified in "Pictures for Crusoe" and "To Celebrate a childhood." In contrast, Perse adhered strongly to narrative structure within his short stories, instead creating complex fictional universes which effectively exposed the reader to metaphysical questions, including those about the nature of reality and knowledge exemplified in *The Library of Babel*. Ultimately, for their individual successful investigations of metaphysics through literature, the works of both authors were deserving of recognition.

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