Borges in the Wilderness: Turning a Critical Eye to an Author Hitherto Neglected in Mormon Studies

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In his book *People of Paradox*, Mormon scholar Terryl Givens interprets a passage from the Book of Revelation as a paradigm for a Mormon understanding of the Great Apostasy (340). In it, Truth is withdrawn from the world into a dark wilderness (the world without the gospel), and yet is nourished and protected there until such time as it is ready to emerge again in its splendor (in the Restoration). The truth is not obliterated or completely lost, but merely withdrawn from the forefront of events and mainstream thought, still accessible in some form to individuals who diligently seek it. Because of this idea, Mormons can confidently understand and accept the truths of other ages and cultures as portions of the light that we now possess, or as slightly misunderstood versions of the reality we now understand, or simply as unequivocally good ideas.

Using this critical paradigm, I present here a short analysis of a one of the works of Jorge Luis Borges. Borges (1899–1986) was an author and poet from Argentina whose works are known for their metaphysical explorations and profound insights on the nature of reality and the mysteries underlying our experience of the universe. I believe that in the work of Borges we can see literary versions of many great but highly controversial truths that are part of the LDS Restoration. Borges did not learn these truths from Mormonism, and from the point of view of non-LDS Borges readers everywhere, he, not Joseph Smith, was the one responsible for bringing these truths out of the wilderness and into the modern dialogue of ideas. I suggest that Mormon scholars rather view Borges (and others like him) as an

unwitting part or agent of the Restoration, putting important truths into literary form and thus making them more palatable to scholars who would otherwise scorn them as strictly Mormon, and therefore untenable, ideas. Indirectly, Borges made Mormonism more reasonable to the intellectual world. I believe that Borges' great success in presenting truths of the Restoration to the world—bringing the infant Truth out of the wilderness as it were—should make his work the object of our deep study and enthusiastic emulation.

Rather than taking on the entire corpus of Borges' work, I will focus here on one short story, "The Circular Ruins," that contains in its few pages many of the most essential, yet controversial, ideas we also find in Mormon theology, mostly about apotheosis and preexistence. Many of Borges' other stories have strong affinity with Mormon ideas without having the densely-packed, striking parallels we see in "Ruins."

Examining "The Circular Ruins"

The story "The Circular Ruins" is quite short—less than six pages in my edition of *Ficciones* (39–44). It is told without dialogue or significant interaction between characters. It is unevenly paced and peppered with imponderable phrases, as if from a Zen koan. It refers to events known to the protagonist that are probably not meant to be understood by readers at all. The plot is the creation of a man by a sort of god, as told through the experiences and reflections of the unnamed creator. The story's details, from beginning to end, echo with uncanny accuracy many of the aspects of creation and godhood according to Mormon theology.

The first "Mormon-esque" features of the story can be found in examining the character and personality of the story's protagonist, a creator who is not a distant, part-less, passion-less god, but rather is a supernaturally-advanced human subject to the rules and forces of his universe. We know that he is susceptible to ordinary human feelings: he is described as feeling fear, misgivings, anger, emotional attachment, and bitterness at various times in the story, and at the end

of his life, simultaneous relief, humiliation, and terror. He performs temple worship to deities we do not know, even as he is given a sort of worshipful tribute from others. He has a vulnerability to and mystical regard for outside forces (in this case, usually fire).

As for what is referred to as his "former life," we know he has endured great tribulations: his act of creation is immediately preceded by pulling blades out of his flesh and crawling, "nauseated and blood-stained," into a temple. We also find that he is highly educated, or at least enough to teach some preexistent spirits "anatomy, cosmography, and magic," and later to create each minute anatomical detail of a man.

In these regards, we see that this creator is as far from the traditional Christian conception of the Creator that Borges would have grown up with as he is close to a creator that Mormons could easily imagine and understand. He is simply a highly developed human, who has passed from a "former life," and maybe even one who has performed an atonement (could this explain the mysterious blades in his flesh?). He is not omnipotent and possesses a place, lower than that of an absolute monarch, in some sort of cosmic hierarchy. He finds fulfillment in teaching preexistent spirits to learn what he knows and do what he does. We even find that he is capable of mistakes: after the bulk of the creative labor is done, he decides to remake his creation's right shoulder, which he finds "defective." In all of these regards he is arguably a Mormon God rather than a traditional Christian God.

As mentioned earlier, the story alludes to the preexistence of spirits, and specifically to those whom the creator takes under his wing as his "pupils" to prepare for mortal life. As in Abraham's account of preexistence in the LDS canon, this God finds some individuals more intelligent and excellent than others. Mirroring the story of the one-third part not given the privilege of mortality, Borges' creator believes that only some could "ascend to the level of [mortal] individuals" and that, in fact, only one would be "worthy to participate in the universe." Borges here seems to imply a belief that mortal life is a privilege for spirits who have proved their worth, a very Mormon idea. And paralleling the Mormon understanding of the veil and the preexistence, we have this from Borges about the moment just before bringing the created

man into the world: "he destroyed in him all memory of his years of apprenticeship."

The creator does not create with his hands or during his waking hours, but rather with his mind and exclusively in dreams (dreams fascinated Borges). Nevertheless, it seems that his creation is able to take on physical form, and that even before he does so, the creator feels a personal affection for him, as if he is a person with a spirit. We see here a sort of spiritual creation and education preceding the physical one. The idea that something created in the mind of a human and without a physical manifestation can have a spirit that is worthy of real love is a radical one, though one that is not far from a Mormon view of human life that encompasses preexistence, spirit creation, and apotheosis.

Just like many Borges stories, this one ends with an epiphany. In this case it is the creator's—he realizes that just as he has created a man, so too he is a creation, the product of another creator who endowed him with the same power that he gave to his own "son." Like many LDS thinkers all the way back to Joseph Smith, Borges flirts with the idea of an infinite genealogy of gods. He has, all the way to the end, created a work rich in parallels with Mormon theology.

A Note on the Parallels

"The Circular Ruins," though extraordinary in the degree of its affinity with unique Mormon ideas, is by no means unique in Borges' written corpus. "The Other," for example, deals with the possibility of creating a person in one's mind (*Collected Fictions* 411–417). "Inferno, I, 32" expresses the idea (also advanced by Joseph Smith) that animals have spirits and are cared for by God (*Collected Fictions* 323). The incident at the beginning of "The Rose of Paracelsus" of a master praying for and receiving a divinely guided disciple (*Collected Fictions* 504–507) is almost comically similar to the story of Joseph Smith meeting Newell K. Whitney ("you have prayed me here, now what do you want of me?"), just to take three examples.

The degree and level of detail to which this extremely short Borges story parallels the Mormon theology of apotheosis cannot be merely a coincidence or a critical overreach. On the other hand, nor is it evidence that Borges was a crypto-Mormon. Rather, the theologies, as it were, of Borges and Joseph Smith have such affinity because they sprang from similar imaginative "heresies." Both theologies incorporate elements of what must be called a pagan sensibility, eschewing pious monotheism and Christian-Hellenistic immaterialism, and viewing the universe as a great and substantive mystery rather than an entirely comprehensible reality. The setting of "The Circular Ruins" is one in which "the Zend language has not been contaminated by Greek" (*Ficciones* 39), just as Joseph Smith's revelations seem uncontaminated by the Hellenism and Neo-Platonism that have accompanied mainstream Christianity since the early Church Fathers.

Borges as a Subject of Mormon Studies and an Example to Mormon Artists

Since the affinities between the work of Borges and Mormon theology are significant, what does this mean for Mormon thinkers and writers? For one thing, it means that Borges should be studied. Young, curious Mormons should pick up Borges early and often in order to understand and explore his thoughts—those similar to LDS thoughts especially. Secondly, Borges should be emulated. His profundity and mature toleration of uncertainty could be welcome additions to our Mormon literature, which too often lacks both. Mormonism has so many more remarkable metaphysical ideas than today's mainstream Christianity, and our literature should present and vigorously explore these ideas. They could be such fertile sources of literary inspiration, but so far a timid Argentine librarian of the last century has done much better than our rising global generation at employing them.

To conclude, I'd like to compare Borges and another thinker outside of Mormonism whose work also seemed to have great affinity with LDS thought: the British author and favorite among many

Mormons, C.S. Lewis. We can see Borges and C.S. Lewis as presenting visions of the universe that were at two ends of a spectrum: Borges was an unreligious freethinking Gnostic neo-pagan of sorts, while Lewis was a devout, traditional Christian. Joseph Smith and the early Mormon theologians carved out a set of ideas that veered between the extremes represented by these thinkers. On the one hand, Mormonism advocates ideas of eternal questing and progression, a fundamental similarity and uncreated nature of all spirits, including God, and other radical ideas that have parallels in unorthodox mystical spiritual traditions like Kabbalah. On the other hand, Mormons affirm the reality of core Christian concepts like the Atonement, Resurrection, and other claims of the Bible.

To quote Terryl Givens once again, Mormonism constantly negotiates powerful tensions between opposites, like "the rhetoric and promise of theological certainty … [and its] opposite and salutary temptation in … the boundlessness of eternal progress and learning" (344). The searching/certainty paradox is not the only one that is apparent in comparisons between Lewis and Borges, but it is one of the more prominent. It can be comforting to read C.S. Lewis and to feel certainty in a faithful answer to everything, to feel that our destinies are sewn-up by a God who controls and optimizes even the most insignificant parts of our lives. At the same time, it can be thrilling to read Borges and thereby peer into the abyss, to imagine the possibilities of an open-ended, uncertain universe and a primarily self-directed climb to godhood. The beauty and strength of Mormonism lies in its ability to fully embrace both searching and certainty, both Borges and Lewis, and the multitude of believers who find one more appealing or compelling than the other as they strive to resolve the tension between them. As thinking Mormons, let us not entirely forget the wonder of Borges in our eagerness to enjoy the orthodoxies of Lewis.

Indeed, I believe that Borges could become a C.S. Lewis-like figure to intellectual Mormons, a sort of "honorary Mormon," who flirted productively with LDS ideas without quite fully accepting the doctrine, providing for us on the way a rich and imaginative body of

profound thought. An examination of Borges' work, even at a cursory level, provides proof that Truth has been nourished even in the wilderness of disbelief. It will be up to Mormon thinkers and writers of the future to examine his work more fully, and to give his work the treatment and integration into Mormon thought that has been afforded to the work of other thinkers like Lewis. As Mormons do so, they will enrich both themselves and the Mormon literature they seek to produce and perfect.

Works Cited

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