

PRESENT AND ABSENT RUSSIA IN
THE WORKS OF JORGE LUIS
BORGES

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In his story “El otro” (1972), seventy-three-year old Borges described a mysterious encounter with his younger self on the bank of the Charles River. Inspired by the successful class he has conducted at Harvard that morning, elderly Borges gives the young poet a brief but dogmatic lecture about the pillars of refined literary taste. In particular, the old writer is troubled by his interlocutor’s enchantment with Dostoevsky. Challenging the young man’s belief that the great Russian writer has penetrated more deeply than any other man into the labyrinths of the Slavic soul, the old Borges asks him “si al leerlos distinguía bien los personajes” (16). “La verdad es que no,” -- answers the young poet, yielding to the literary authority of the world-renowned writer (16).

This dialogue encapsulates the evolution of Borges’ attitudes towards Dostoevsky and even towards Russian literature as such. If at the early stages of his literary career Borges greatly admired Dostoevsky’s oeuvre, the mature writer frequently declared his disapproval of “los rusos” for excessive psychological delving and fruitless aspirations towards verisimilitude. Figuratively speaking, Russian literature, which lay close to the center in young Borges’ personal republic of

letters, was banished to the farthest periphery in the intellectual universe of the mature author.

It is surprising, to say the least, that such an omnivorous reader and prolific writer as Borges, who suffused his work with references to both the classical works of the Western canon and to those “outside” the literary sanctuary, would expunge the influential Russian author from his “reading list.” Even more surprising is the fact that Borges maintained solemn silence not only towards Russian literature, but also towards Russia in general, only occasionally passing a disparaging comment about Soviet politics. “Rusia está apoderándose del planeta” -- tells the narrator of “El Otro” to his younger self, who applauds the Bolshevik revolution and works on a book of poetry *Salmos Rojos*, which is meant to be a hymn to the brotherhood of all mankind” (15). As is known, the real Borges had never published and even physically destroyed these early poetic experiments when he grew disillusioned with revolutionary ideas. In fact, the trajectory of the author’s changing attitudes towards the Great Russian Classics ran parallel with his evolving views on Soviet ideology: if the young Borges embraced and eulogized Dostoevsky and the Bolshevik revolution, the old writer renounced Russian literature and politics all together.

In “El Otro”, Borges insinuates that there is a correlation between his position vis-à-vis Russian authors and his stance in respect to Soviet ideology. In the aforementioned story, the old writer presses his younger self to reconsider the mere two beliefs that hinder their mutual understanding – his admiration for Dostoevsky and his view of the socialist revolution as an utopian helpmeet to “masa de oprimidos y de parias” (14). Strangely, the elderly Borges does not warn the young poet against excessive verbosity and stylistic inconsistency, poetic naiveté and random literary affiliations, or any other sophomoric mistakes that the mature writer wished to redress.

Ostensibly, then, Russian literature and Soviet politics are the only bone of contention between the young and the old Borges.

Thus, in "El Otro" elucidates Borges' analytical frame of reference in relation to Russia's cultural products. In what follows, I will show that this interpretative frame is informed, on the one hand, by Borges' disapprobation of psychological excess in the works of Russian writers, and by his critical view of Soviet politics, on the other. I will argue that Borges' relationship vis-à-vis Russian literature, and Dostoevsky in particular, is tantamount to the so-called "allegorical mode of reading," advocated by Jameson as the optimal approach to texts from places located on the periphery of the western field of cultural production. In the allegorical mode of reading, the reader treats what Jameson calls "third-world texts" as national allegories, in which "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the third-world culture and society" (69). Specifically, the allegorical mode impels the reader to interpret *3* was produced. For example, in the course of such an approach, Raskolnikov's or Goliadkin's personal dramas stand for totalizing and faithful representations of what young Borges in "El Otro" describes as "the labyrinths of the Slavic soul" (1998, 414).

Borges' reading of Russian literature thus illustrates the limitations of Jameson's much-criticized interpretative frame, which takes into consideration only those "third-world" works that yield to allegorical readings, and, as a result fails, according to Zhang Longxi "to do justice to the rich variety of heterogeneous texts worthy of the name of a literary tradition" (123). Much like Jameson, who was frequently criticized for using a writer (Lu Xun), who easily yields to his analysis, to prove his theory, Borges chose only few Russian writers (mainly, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy) in making judgments about Russian literature. Although for Jameson Borges is not a first-

world reader, since the post-colonial Argentina belongs to his third category of countries that “have suffered colonialism and imperialism”), Borges’ position in relation to Dostoevsky is parallel to that of a western reader in Jameson’s understanding of the term. Since Russian literature lay on the periphery of Borges’ universe of letters, he approaches it as a reader, who tries to grapple with a third-world text without substantial knowledge of its political context and little interest in its formal values, and, most importantly, believes, as Jameson does, that “the third-world novel will not offer the satisfaction of Proust or Joyce” (Jameson 65).

Remarkably, this “allegorical” mode of reading is characteristic of the young and the old Borges alike. In his youth, Borges admired Dostoevsky for capturing the psychological complexities of the Slavic soul, that is, for articulating the essence of the national Russian character, which was produced under particular socio-political circumstances. In his later writings, Borges reproached the Russian classics for doing exactly the same thing – attempting to provide a faithful account of external reality by delving into the disturbed psyches of the protagonists. Thus, very early in his literary career Borges had created an “ideal type” of Russia, to quote the Indian scholar Aijaz Ahmad, who contested Jameson’s theory of third-world literature in “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’” (1987, 4).

This chapter attempts to systematize “the Russian theme” in Borges’ writing as it explores the gradual evolution of the Argentine writer from a connoisseur of Russian letters and an advocate of the Soviet Revolution into an antagonist of Russian literature and politics. It will discuss the ways in which Borges’ changing sentiments towards Russian culture reflected and, as I hope to demonstrate, in certain cases even influenced the elaboration of his literary philosophy. And, finally, it will read between the lines of Borges’ texts, such as

“La lotería en Babilonia” and “Las noches de Goliadkin” in order to re-construct his image of the country. Since virtually every stage in Borges’ development as a writer corresponded with shifts in his views of Russian culture, a chronological analysis of the “Russian theme” in his works seems most appropriate for the purposes of this chapter. My examination will concentrate on what I define as the three phases of Borges’ relationship with Russia: the earliest European years (1914-1921), marked by the poet’s fascination with Dostoevsky and the Soviet Revolution; the formative “Argentine” stage (1921-1930), characterized by his literary nationalism and gradual disillusionment with communism; and the “mature” period from 1930 to the late 1970s – the time of his most ardent antagonism towards Russia.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH RUSSIA

To the best of my knowledge, Borges’ fraught relationship with Russian culture started as early as 1914, when his family moved from Buenos Aires to Geneva. Fourteen-year-old Borges and his family settled in a house on Rue de Malagnou in front of the Russian Orthodox Church and soon found themselves in the cloistered atmosphere of a belligerent Europe. Among his first companions was Alexandre Stalkine, whom Borges called a “Russian from Odessa” in his 1916 letter to Roberto Godel.¹ Around the same time, Borges formed life-long friendships with Maurice Abramowicz and Simón Jichlinsky, both Polish Jews, although Alejandro Vaccaro says that some registers indicate Jichlinsky’s nationality as Russian (1996, 5). Abramowicz and Jichlinsky, whom Borges would remember as “bosom friends” in his 1970 “Autobiographical Essay” (1970, 215), inspired some of Borges’ early intellectual discoveries.² It comes as no surprise that Borges, who claims to have heard Rimbaud’s “Le bateau ivre” for the first time

when Abramowitz read it to him, calls one of his earliest poetic experiments "Poème pour être récité avec un accent russe" (1919). "As I knew I wrote a foreigner's French," – Borges explains in the "Autobiographical Essay" -- I thought a Russian accent better than Argentine one" (218). It is not unlikely, however, that such a title was motivated by something greater than a pursuit of a poetic estrangement from the French language: Borges' poem pays homage to the country that at the time captivated the young Argentine and his friends, who were fervent opponents of the Western capitalism. Together with his father, who in his youth planned to found an anarchist community in Paraguay, Borges anxiously followed the ongoing Russian Revolution and hoped that it might give rise to anti-capitalist uprisings. In his letter to Godel from December 4th, 1917, Borges writes:

Yo empiezo a creer más y más en la posibilidad de una revolución en Alemania. No sé si el pueblo alemán está listo para ello. Sin embargo algunos acontecimientos recientes, la tentativa de sublevación en la flota, los motines en Berlín y el magnifico ejemplo de la Revolución Rusa me dan esperanza. Yo deseo esta revolución con toda mi alma.

Borges' fascination with the Soviet revolution inspired him to undertake the study of the Russian language, alas, without success. Although Borges would later attribute this failure to the difficulty of the language³, it seems that the real reason why he had never learned Russian was the brevity of his interest in the country. Unlike his comrades Abramowicz and Jichlinsky, who remained communists, Borges' political views would change when he decided that the Soviet revolution had nothing to do with "the beginning of peace among all men"⁴ and was, instead, the beginning of a totalitarian regime (1982, 7).

Yet despite its brevity, Borges' affair with Russia played an important role in his development as a poet. Borges' early

poetic experiments are replete with references to the Soviet revolution and cultural symbols that he must have associated with Russia: the steppe, the Kremlin, an abundance of the color red. These poems, which Borges intended to publish under the title *Salmos Rojos* or *Ritmos Rojos*⁵ expose the influence of “Ultraísmo”⁶. The theme of Russian Revolution perfectly matched Borges’ ultraist orientation: modern, romantic and violent, it impelled the Argentine poet to compose free-flowing verse without rhyme, to poeticize trenches, to experiment with effusive, violent and even erotic metaphors that would be completely absent from his mature work. His poem “Rusia”, published in the ultraist magazine *Grecia* (1918-1920), issued in Madrid and Seville, in 1920, adequately reflects Borges’ political and aesthetic programs:

La trinchera avanzada es en la estepa un barco al abordaje
 con gallardetes de hurras: mediodías estallan en los ojos. Bajo
 estandartes de silencio pasan las muchedumbres y el sol
 crucificado en los ponientes se pluraliza en la vocinglería de
 las torres del Kreml (sic). El mar vendrá nadando a esos ejér-
 citos que envolverán sus torsos en todas las praderas del conti-
 nente. En el cuerno salvaje de un arco iris clamaremos su
 gesta bayonetas que portan en la punta las mañanas. (1997, 57)

Ecstatic and celebratory, Borges’ poetic voice endeavors to breach linguistic barriers: he spells “Kremlin” as “Kreml,” which, according to Balderston is not a misspelling, but an intentional attempt to reproduce the Russian-sounding soft consonant at the end of the word (2008, 33, 35), his invitation to cry out “our salute” positions his narrative “I” within the romantic and exotic crowd. Revolution in Borges’ poem is a long and arduous struggle that ultimately leads to an ecstatic victory. The length of the battle is illustrated by the temporal progression in the poem: in the first sentence the masses pass through the blinding “middays,” in the second – the sunset on the Western horizon reflects in Kremlin’s towers, and, lastly, in

the fourth sentence, morning is carried on the tips of the bayonets, symbolizing the dawn of universal brotherhood. The silence, transported on the banners (an image that, arguably, signifies diligent and concentrated struggle) is broken with the crowds' salute in the last sentence. Moreover, references to vast spaces, such as the steppe and sea evoke Borges' view of the October Revolution as

The images of revolutionary masses joining into a single all-powerful stream that annihilates the old regime permeate other *Salmos Rojos* as well: in "Gesta maximalista" "Gesta maximalista" (1921), bayonets form "el candelabro de los mil y un falos" (1997, 89); in "Hermanos" (1920), "nuestros corazones fueron guitarras de mil cuerdas" (50); in "Trinchera" "hombres color de tierra naufragan en la grieta más baja" (49). According to Balderston, the symbols in Borges' early poems reveal his familiarity with the Russian avant-garde: his tendency to aggrandize poetic imagery, e.g. compare a cathedral to a plane ("la catedral es un avión de piedra" (88) in "Catedral" (1921), or describing the Soviet flag as a red bird flying the banner (Pájaro rojo vuela un estandarte..." (89) in "Gesta maximalista", may evoke the influence of the Soviet constructivist school (2008, 34). Moreover, Balderston argues that the figure of a crucifix amidst the revolutionary euphoria in "Gesta maximalista]" (y de las cruces pende Jesús-Cristo/ como un cartel sobre los mundos) is the best evidence that Borges knew Russian poetry of 1917-1918, since the same image appears in Sergei Esenin's "Tovarishch" [Comrade] (1917) and at the end of Alexandr Blok's "Dvenadzat" [The Twelve] (1918) (35). While it is unlikely that Borges was familiar with Esenin's poem, translated into languages the Argentine poet could read only after the Borges wrote the poem⁷, "The Twelve" was available to him in French, English and German.⁸ The fact that Borges read and even appreciated some representatives of the Soviet avant-garde, specifically, Blok and Vladimir Mayakovsky, is

confirmed by his references to these poets in his later writings. On several occasions Borges compared Blok and Mayakovsky to Whitman, whom he considered the foremost poet during the earliest stages of his own literary career. Specifically, in Blok's poetry Borges recognized "el acento peculiar de Walt Whitman" (1980, 35), as he put it in his 1932 essay "Street Scene," and listed Mayakovsky among numerous imitators of the North American poet in the prologue to his own Spanish translation of *Leaves of Grass* (1969, 22).

However, it was not the Russian avant-garde that inspired the young poet the most. For Borges, who at the time believed in a strong connection between literature and politics and longed for the creation of "a poetic school that rhymes with the reality and the psychology of our century,"⁹ the literary movement that befitted the revolutionary spirit of the epoch was German expressionism. Closely associated with revolutionary tendencies,¹⁰ German expressionism represented for Borges a successful venture to "ejercer una influencia paralelamente anarquizante sobre los dos opuestos sectores de la estética y la cuestión social...." as he put it in his 1920 essay "'Lírica Expresionista: Síntesis" (52). The expressionist war poetry conveyed to the young Borges the same "hope for a universal brotherhood" that he associated with the Russian Revolution (qtd. in Monegal 1978, 56), and it is only natural that Borges employed "Russian symbols" in discussing the poetry of Ernst Stadler, August Stramm and Wilhelm Klemm in the said essay on expressionism: "El expresionismo tomó ese carácter dostoiévskiano, utópico, místico y maximalista a la vez..." (52).

By evoking Dostoevsky's name alongside militant communists, Borges hints at his belief in the anachronistic confluence of Russian classical literature and ideals of the Soviet Revolution that share – as the aforementioned quote suggests – a utopian and mystic character. Borges' association of Dostoevsky with the Bolsheviks may be explained by the

simple fact that he was reading the Russian classic around the time of the Soviet Revolution and felt equal admiration for the country's political and literary figures. During his European sojourn, Borges greedily delved into Dostoevsky's novels, which he preferred to "Tolstoy's 'incompréhensions éblouies'", as he wrote in his letter to Abramowitz (150). Borges allegedly read *The Possessed* and *The Double* among other novels¹¹, but the work that impressed him most was *Crime and Punishment*, which he characterized as "la mejor novela que se ha escrito jamás" in a letter to Jacobo Sureda (1999, 193).¹² Nevertheless, whether because his interest in Dostoevsky's novels and the Soviet Revolution developed simultaneously, or because he genuinely believed in the affinity between the two, Borges would grow comfortably accustomed to this marriage that he matched up in his youth and that prevented him from reading Russian literature outside of the political frame of reference. Throughout his career, Borges persisted in viewing Russian literature in conjunction with Soviet politics and reading the Russian authors as social fables who project "a political dimension in the form of national allegory," to quote Jameson (1986, 69). Thus, this short-lived affair with the Soviet Revolution and Dostoevsky would have a continuous, though subtle resonance throughout Borges' development as a writer, as he struggled to correct his youthful mistakes, to find his own voice in poetry and prose and to distance himself from Soviet politics and Russian literature.

THE ARGENTINE AUTHOR

In 1921, Borges returned to Buenos Aires, which he found very different from the city he claimed to have remembered from seven years ago: over that time, it had significantly expanded and its urban population became more diverse. Yet despite modernization and urban growth, the cultural

climate of Buenos Aires was rather dull for him in comparison to the vibrant literary life in Spain. In a letter to Sureda from Buenos Aires, Borges confessed that he felt like an orphan of ultraism, lost among the “dreadful” Argentine poets who compose “versitos mansos sobre los niños y las vacas y el lago Nahuel-Huapí” (1999, 198). Yet this nostalgia did not last long: Borges started forming new friendships and got involved in variegated literary projects, among them a fantastic novel *El hombre que será presidente* that he was planning to write with Macedonio Fernández (1874-1952), an anarchist friend of his father. In a letter to Sureda from June 22, 1921, Borges wrote:

El argumento, ideado por mí y todavía muy esquemático y fragmentario, trata de los medios empleados por los maximalistas para provocar una neurastenia general en todos los habitantes de Buenos Aires y abrir así camino al bolchevismo. El título, elegido no por su problemática belleza, sino en vista del público es: El hombre que será presidente. El medio empleado por los maximalistas es la multiplicación de muchas pequeñas molestias que, insignificantes cada una en sí, carcomerían combinadas los ánimos de todos. (198)

Evidently, Borges was losing interest in the Soviet Revolution: in the letter, he speaks of the Bolsheviks with piquant irony, describing their methods of gaining political power as meddling irritations that lead to neurasthenia. Compared to the image of the October Revolution in his earlier poetry as an arduous, and, most importantly, silent struggle, his current vision of the Bolsheviks’ uprising as a pragmatic method comprised of “small annoyances” is particularly outstanding and evokes Borges’ disillusionment in the very process and making of the revolution. In addition, on his way from Europe to Buenos Aires, Borges destroyed his *Salmo Rojo*, as if abdicating the transitory European fling with the Russian Revolution: “This book I destroyed in Spain on the eve of our

departure. I was then ready to go home,” recalled Borges in his “Autobiographical Essay” (1970, 223).

Borges’ rediscovery of Buenos Aires would gradually push him to a resolute break with the revolutionary ideas he had developed in Europe. Upon his return, Borges realized that his “native town had grown and that it was now a very large, sprawling, and almost endless city of low buildings with flat roofs, stretching west towards what geographers and literary hands call the pampa...” (1970, 224). The mixture of epochs, reflected by the discrepancy between the modern center and peripheral neighborhoods, the blend of ethnicities and languages spoken in the street, required the poet to develop a particular approach in order to grasp the essence of Buenos Aires. Effusive imagery, exclamatory intonations and violent metaphors of Borges earliest poetry no longer befitted his new aesthetic goals to create poetry for Buenos Aires and to develop appropriate linguistic registers -- all in hope of preserving the memory of the town he had remembered from his childhood. In the first few years after returning from Europe, Borges was clearly frustrated with the changing ethno-linguistic landscape of his native city and infused his poetry with verbal regionalism of urban argot. For instance, he frequently eliminated the final or intervocalic “d,” e.x. “ciudá,” “realidá,” “incredulidá,” “rosao,” “colorao; omitted vocals or consonants to imitate rapid speech (as in antiyer instead of antiayer) substituted “j” for “g” (even in his own name – Jorje Luis); used “i” instead of “y.”

Consequently, Borges’ hope for universal brotherhood was supplanted with the desire to protect ethnic and linguistic landscape of Buenos Aires from the foreign invasions, as his focus shifted from the distant land of victorious communism to the socio-political problems in his own country. The poet turned to the peripheral areas of his native city, where the “authentic” old criollo voices were preserved intact. In *Fervor*

de Buenos Aires, Borges eulogizes the remote corners in the urban outskirts, which Sarlo defined as “the ambiguous region where the end of the countryside and the outline of the city became blurred” (1993, 20).

Las calles de Buenos Aires ya son mi entraña. No las ávidas calles, incómodas de turba y ajetreo, sino las calles desgarnadas del barrio,

Strikingly different from his early hymns to “hirsuta muchedumbre extática” in *Gesta Maximalista* (89), the poetry Borges wrote during the first few years after his return to Buenos Aires meditates on desolate urban spaces practically devoid of human characters. Leaving the Spanish avant-garde behind, Borges started to cultivate his own version of ultraismo, which diverted from its European prototype in its lack of political themes (other than those that were directly related to Buenos Aires) and revolutionary rhetoric.¹³

At the same time, it seems that Borges, who had declared his distaste for socially engaged art with his first collection of poetry, had not decidedly finalized his flirtations with revolutionary ideas. His intellectual affiliations surfaced in the debate between Florida and Boedo that represented, respectively, the cultural downtown and the working-class neighborhoods. In 1924, Borges expressed his interest in joining Boedo: “I’d have preferred to be in the Boedo group, since I was writing about the old Northside and slums, sadness and sunset” (1970, 238). Although Borges looked back at the rivalry between the two groups as a joke,¹⁴ his affiliation with Boedo would have suggested his support of revolutionary communism, since many writers of the group were associated with the emerging Argentine Communist Party. When he was rejected by Boedo for what Rodríguez-Monegal described as Borges’ “patrician origins, for his European sophistication, and for his concept of literature as nonpolitical” (1970, 65), the Argentine writer had no choice but to join Florida and thus

take his stand in the intellectual debate. One may only wonder how Borges' political and literary attitudes would have developed had he joined the Boedo group, oriented towards proletarian art.

Although in his new "Argentine" poetry Borges abstained from direct political statements, he still nurtured the belief in the interconnectedness between literature and politics. His determination to develop the poetic voice for Buenos Aires, which was for him "más que una ciudad (sic.), es un país" (1926, 7), amounts to the project to cleanse the urban argot of foreign influences, to create a unified, "national" culture and language. In his poetry and prose, he was trying to mirror "heterogénea lengua vernacula de la charla porteña" (7), literally translating from his erudite Spanish into the Argentine vernacular with the help of the dictionary of argentinisms:

Incurrí en la arriesgada adquisición de uno o dos diccionarios de argentinismos, que me suministraron palabras que hoy puedo apenas describir: madrejón, espandaña, estaca pampa. (1974, 55)

This preoccupation with grasping the quintessence of his native city is characteristic of Borges' literary and political agendas. On the one hand, Borges calls on his countrymen to contribute to the creation of "la poesía y la música y la pintura y la religión y la metafísica" (1926, x) that would stimulate the city's cultural development. On the other, in late 1920s, he invests his hopes in Hipólito Irigoyen (1852-1933), the leader of the Radical Civic Union and former president of Argentina (1916-1922) who, according to Borges, successfully "embraced the soul of Buenos Aires" (qtd. in Rodríguez-Monegal 1978, 59). According to Rodríguez-Monegal, for Borges, *criollismo* "had nothing to do with the [...] tango lyrics, already contaminated by Galician or Italian melancholy" (59). Instead, the *criollismo* that Borges tried to grasp in his poetry and that he admired in Irigoyen, was the "scoff of theatricality," abstinence from

pompous affectations and pretense (59). His sympathy for the *criollo* politician inspired the young poet to actively participate in Irigoyen's electoral campaign in 1928.

In 1928 Irigoyen was elected president for the second time. However, his second term in office was unsuccessful and disappointed his most devoted supporters, resulting in a military coup led by General José Félix Uriburu (1868–1932). Disillusioned in his political idol and troubled by the new military regime, Borges assumed a decidedly skeptical position towards radical revolutions. The only revolution that Borges would ever accept was, by his own confession, “the true revolution that excludes propaganda, in which politicians are not public characters” (Mejia and Molachino 1996, 49).

In his fiction, Borges would repeatedly come back to the theme of political subversion, achieved either through the machinations of an underground conspiracy, or revolutionary uprising, but inevitably resulting in a nightmarish climate of despotic control. For instance, in “La lotería en Babilonia” (1941), the secret institution with the inconspicuous title “The Company” seizes power over Babylon through a game of chance, gradually gains total control over people's lives and establishes the omnipotent institution of the lottery. Military uprisings in Borges' stories are invested with treason and cowardice and, therefore, are as iniquitous as clandestine schemes against government. For instance, in “La forma de la espada” (1942), the character of John Vincent Moon, who “cursado con fervor y con vanidad casi todas las páginas de no sé qué manual comunista” (131) and actively fought for the revolutionary cause in Ireland, turns out to be a dejected traitor. Consequently, for the mature Borges, revolutionary activity of any form came to represent treason, sedition and lust for power, rather than the romantic union of agitated masses that the author praised in his youth.

From the 1930 on, Borges would repeatedly position

himself as an exceedingly discriminating creator of fantastic plots replete with multivalent symbolism, erudition that intermingles with invention, references to existing and non-existing lands and languages. As if responding to the political entropy that seemed to engulf the world, Borges would create perfect geometrical constructions, as in the “Biblioteca de Babel” (1941). Relinquishing his determination to create a poetic language based on specifically Argentine linguistic registers, Borges began to eulogize the principle of quasi-mathematical linguistic precision that, according to Sarlo, was tantamount to a “reaction to a disorderly world that in the 1930s seemed to be tottering on the edge of irrationality,” triggered by the rise of fascism and communism in Europe, as well as military coup-de-etat of 1930 in Argentina (1993, 53). Borges would profess the idea that art and politics are two different worlds, which should merge under no circumstances. In 1933, Borges declared, announcing his position in relation to the proverbial issue of politically engaged literature in the third issue of the leftist journal *Contra*, founded by Raúl González Tuñón in 1933:

Es una insípida y notoria verdad que el arte no debe estar al servicio de la política. Hablar de arte social es como hablar de geometría vegetariana o de repostería endecasílaba. (qtd. in Sarlo 1988, 145)

In this statement against political art, which in itself can be read as an articulation of a political position, Borges did not merely reiterate Florida’s criticism of Boedo’s socially engaged literature. As Annick Louis explains in her book *Borges ante el fascismo* (2007), before 1933-1934, the question of political art implied preoccupation with *social* topics – socio-economic conflicts, inequality between classes, etc; however, with the international surge of fascism in mid-1930s, the issue of literature’s engagement in politics came to signify art’s involvement in the current political context (79).

MATURE BORGES

In 1932, Borges published an article titled “Street Scene” in which he criticized the new Soviet cinema, specifically, *Wings of a Serf* by Yuri Tarich, and Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potyomkin* and *October*, in *Sur* magazine: “The Russians discovered that the oblique – and consequently – distorted shot of a bottle, a bull’s neck, or a column had greater visual value than Hollywood’s thousand and one extras” (145). Unimpressed with the discoveries of the Russians, Borges pleaded allegiance to American filmmaking. For him, Hollywood was a “vast and complete literature,” a rich self-sufficient tradition that remained indifferent to the popular craze “over the Russians” (qtd. in Cozarinsky, 27). This depreciation of the Soviet cinema might seem surprising: as Eduardo González observed, “as a fan of movies about “violence,” Borges had to admire Eisenstein’s work” (1998, 117). What is the reason for Borges’ preference for Hollywood and for his doctrinaire distaste for the Soviet school? According to Eduardo González, Borges valued Hollywood for its established conventionality, which he saw as antonymous to the Soviet filmmaking:

He seemed to be attracted to the idea that there is a tradition of film practice that is handed down from one generation of Hollywood directors to the next, whereas the Soviet school — like modernist artistic movements in general — represents for him a group of filmmakers whose originality is based on breaking with the past, on a negation of tradition (1998, 118).

As his argument in “Street Scene” demonstrates, Borges believed that the goal of the Soviet school was to prevail over “a steady fare from California” and to wage war on “Midwestern clichés” (145). Consequently, in its determination to uproot tradition, to set new rules and standards worldwide, Soviet experimental cinema imitated the Russian Revolution that Borges had come to abhor.

Moreover, as the following discourse delivered in an interview with Richard Burgin illustrates, Borges reproached Soviet cinema for its failed efforts to imitate reality – the same flaw he observed in the Russian classics, as well:

I liked that film about the battleship. *Potemkin*. And then I saw it after several years and I thought it quite bad. I thought it was supposed to be a realistic film. I suppose it is. And yet the whole thing is quite unreal. [...] That would be good in a fantastic film, but in a real film I suppose that if there's a battleship within some hundred yards of us and it fires, it should kill somebody, but of course it can't kill anybody or it would ruin the sympathy of the audience, so they merely kill a stone lion. I don't think the Russians are good at realism [...] Melodrama and perhaps a kind of hallucination. But somehow, one never feels anything in a Russian novel to be true because the characters are always explaining themselves to each other [...] in Dostoevsky, for example, the characters are bound to loud explanations. I don't think people do that kind of thing, but perhaps they do in Russia [...] (1969, 86-87).

Thus, Borges' attitudes towards Soviet cinema may serve as a litmus test that reveals the contours of his frame of reference in relation to Russia and its cultural products, which the Argentine author viewed as derivative of militant communism and failed realism. Borges seemed to believe that Russian literature and film were exhaustively defined by realism; which for him implied the necessary condition of verisimilitude. In other words, he approached Dostoevsky's novels and Eisenstein's films as "conscious and overt national allegories" (1986, 80), to use Jameson's characterization of third-world texts, which are tightly linked to the political contexts in which they were produced. Since neither Eisenstein nor Dostoevsky satisfied his expectation of accurate verisimilitude – the fictional "Potemkin" does not kill as many people as the real one, characters in Russian novels do not behave as real people do –

Borges concluded that “Russians are not good at realism” and that “one never feels anything in a Russian novel to be true.”

Along these lines, Borges, who allegedly disliked novels and even predicted that this genre would disappear, viewed the entirety of Russian literature as an endlessly moralizing and realistic “morosa novela de caracteres” (1932, 230). From Tolstoy to Nabokov, whose novel *Lolita* he refused to read because of the “longitud del género novelesco” (1959, 308), Russian literature symbolized for Borges a failed attempt at the realistic depiction of psychological complexities. In the prologue to *La Invención de Morel* (1940) by Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914-1999), Borges levels an explicit critique against Russian novels:

Los rusos y los discípulos de los rusos han demostrado hasta el hastío que nadie es imposible: suicidas por felicidad, asesinos por benevolencia; personas que se adoran hasta el punto de separarse, delatores por fervor o por humildad. Esa libertad plena acaba por equivaler al pleno desorden. Por otra parte, la novela “psicológica” quiere ser también novela “realista”: prefiere que olvidemos su carácter de artificio verbal y hace de toda vana precisión (o de toda lánguida vaguedad) un rasgo verosímil. (43)

The act of writing a prologue to a new novel rendered Borges the role of an agent of cultural consecration and added significance and weight to his judgment. That is to say, his view of Russian literature was not merely the personal position of Borges-the-writer, but an important message addressed not only to the Argentine writers, but also to the cultural producers. It seems that here Russian literature served him as an antagonist for the way of writing he sought to promote in Argentina.

If Russian literature vexed Borges with the excessive and chaotic liberties, Soviet politics upset him with the lack of thereof. To divorce himself from Russia – “una nación medio

asiática" (Molachino 1996, 49), where "no hay individuos, que no se producen gustos ni disgustos individuales" (*Ibid.*, 52), Borges would take strong public stances. He distanced himself from his communist friends, among them César Tiempo, a Russian-born writer with leftist views, spoke out against the Soviet Union and declined invitations to visit socialist countries.¹⁵

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) his aversion to communism and totalitarianism, Borges was obviously fascinated with homogeneous societies where individuals are fully subordinated to the will of authority. In his "La lotería en Babilonia," the phantasmagoric social dystopia is based on the ephemeral principle of social equality: all citizens surrender their individual volitions to the omnipotent power of pure chance that provides them with a semblance of order:

Otra inquietud cundía en los barrios bajos. Los miembros del colegio sacerdotal multiplicaban las puestas y gozaban de todas las vicisitudes del terror y de la esperanza; los pobres (con envidia razonable o inevitable) se sabían excluidos de ese vaivén, notoriamente delicioso. El justo anhelo de que todos, pobres y ricos, participasen por igual en la lotería, inspiró una indignada agitación, cuya memoria no han desdibujado los años. Algunos obstinados no comprendieron (o simulaban no comprender) que se trataba de un orden nuevo, de una etapa histórica necesaria... Un esclavo robó un billete carmesí, que en el sorteo lo hizo acreedor a que le quemaran la lengua. El código fijaba esa misma pena para el que robaba un billete. Algunos babilonios argumentaban que merecía el hierro candente, en su calidad de ladrón; otros, magnánimos, que el verdugo debía aplicárselo porque así lo había determinado el azar... Hubo disturbios, hubo efusiones lamentables de sangre; pero la gente babilónica impuso finalmente su voluntad, contra la oposición de los ricos. El pueblo consiguió con plenitud sus fines generosos. En primer término,

logró que la Compañía aceptara la suma del poder público.
(458)

The society of Babylon bears clear resemblance to Borges' mental image of the Soviet Union. Like in Borges' hypothetical Russia, in Babylon the political order, in which only the upper classes could enjoy the Lottery, came to an end as a result of the protests of the poor. Borges' skepticism about revolutionary changes is articulated in his description of the lower classes' "fair and reasonable" desire for equality, which, actually, is merely an obstinate wish for something obscure that they cannot have. This absurd longing, fueled by envy, is tantamount to the aforementioned "general neurasthenia," which Borges hoped to describe in the novel *El hombre que será presidente* in 1921, but never actually wrote. Thus, in a way, the "La lotería en Babilonia" fulfilled the plan of the novel he intended to produce immediately after his disillusionment in the October Revolution: in the story, the "neurasthenia" of the poor, masked under the legitimate desire for equality, results in social uprisings that lead to totalitarian regime. The "Company" becomes the "president" of Babylon, assuming totalitarian control over people's lives in a manner similar to how the Bolsheviks, in Borges' mind, had taken over Russia. Moreover, in the "La lotería en Babilonia" the Babylonians are initially enthusiastic about the new social order – much like Borges during his European sojourn – but the Company's regime soon turns into passive compliance with the social roles assigned by the Lottery.

Notwithstanding his professed disinterest in Russian culture, Borges was somewhat familiar with the state of things on the Soviet literary market. In the 1930s, he writes two brief notes announcing the publication of the English translation Gorky's *El espectro* (May 27, 1938) in the literary section of the popular women's magazine *El Hogar* (founded in 1904), where he was working at the time. While it is unclear whether

Borges actually read this translation, he certainly considered it important enough to introduce them to the broad audience of *El Hogar*. Moreover, as I have mentioned before, Borges referred in passing to the names of such Russian writers and poets as Blok and Mayakovski in his essays and interviews. However, at the same time, Estela Canto, who met Borges in the 1940s, testified that the Argentine writer with a penetrating knowledge of world's literature flaunted "the unjust indifference, almost hostile, which he demonstrated for Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and minor Russians. According to her, he showed "la indeferencia injusta, casi hostil, que mostraba por Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, Chejov y rusos menores. Para él toda la literatura rusa se reducía a La dama de pica, de Pushkin" (Canto 1999, 89). One may only wonder whether Borges' proclaimed ignorance of Russian literature was merely a public gesture: if communism embodied the worst socio-political evil, Russian novels epitomized everything he reprobated in literature.

Striving to avoid the flaws of the Russian classics, Borges demonstratively refrained from inquires into psychological domains, which, he believed, would impair the plot. Contenting that Dostoevsky's characters "exacerbadamente se complacen en el moroso análisis de sus actos" (1970, 142), Borges silences his characters' inner monologues to bring the plot into focus. For instance, the narrator in "*Tlön, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius*" refrains from describing his own feelings to avoid digressions from the central storyline: "Me puse a hojearlo y sentí un vértigo asombrado y ligero que no describiré, porque ésta no es la historia de mis emociones sino la de Uqbar y Tlön y Orbis Tertius" (434). Not only the inner soliloquies, but also the interpersonal verbal communication is muted in Borges' prose. For instance, "La Intrusa" (1970) – a tale of psychological intensity that may compete with the most sweltering chapters of *The Brothers Karamazov* – is almost devoid of dialogues between two brothers who save their

fraternal bond by killing the woman they both love. When the brothers do talk to each other, they do so to conceal their true feelings:

Entre ellos, los hermanos no pronunciaban el nombre de Juliana, ni siquiera para llamarla, pero buscaban, y encontraban razones para no estar de acuerdo. Discutían la venta de unos cueros, pero lo que discutían era otra cosa.

Criticizing Dostoevsky as the representative of realism and raconteur of psychological tales that are supposed to represent Russian reality, Borges ignored fantastic elements in the works of the Russian Classic. In fact, Dostoevsky's narrative methods that the Russian writer himself described as "fantastic realism" bear strong semblance to the mode of writing that Borges practiced in his prose and hoped to popularize in Argentina. For Borges, whose fictions blur the borders between real and fantastic worlds,¹⁶ magic was the keystone of effective writing. In his essay "El arte narrativo y la magia" (1932) Borges argued that fantastic texts sustains more plausible cause-and-effect relationships than realistic writing, whose logical clauses "es el resultado incesante de incontables e infinitas operaciones] (1974, 232). Unlike realism, which establishes the credibility of the narrated events by mimicking the outside world, fantastic literature relies on the laws circumscribed within the text itself to certify the integrity of fictional exploits. Negating real-world criteria for truth and falsehood, the "magical" text must create independent principles of its own reality, within which it must construct "una fuerte apariencia de veracidad, si no absoluta, capaz a lo menos de producir esa espontánea suspensión de la duda" (226). The formula for the "suspension of disbelief" that would later become the underlying principle of magical realism involves such detailed descriptions of the fantastic reality that the reader is forced to abandon conventional expectations of truth and surrender to

the internal laws of marvelous universes. In his “El arte narrativo y la magia,” Borges at length discussed William Morris’s ten-thousand line poem “Life and Death of Jason” (1867) as a fine example of a fantastic text that ignites and sustains reader’s belief in the mythical creatures it describes. To earn the reader’s trust, Morris foreshadows the apparition of the fantastic creatures and scrupulously describes them: “[L]a misma precisión insistente de sus colores – los bordes amarillos de la playa, la dorada espuma, la roca gris- nos puede enternecer, porque parecen frágilmente salvados de ese antiguo crepúsculo” (229). For Borges, Morris’ narrative techniques were infinitely superior to a “naturalistic” narrative mode that “finge o dispone una concatenación de motivos que se proponen no diferir de los del mundo real” (230).

Obviously, this critique is aimed at Dostoevsky and other Russian classics, whom Borges scorned for excessive, yet implausible, realism. However, his invective does not do justice to Dostoevsky, who shared Borges’ views on the fantastic in literature. Like Borges, Dostoevsky professed the idea that the barriers between fantasy and truth are often blurred; consequently, realism by itself appeared to him as an inept instrument for articulating this mixture of reality and magic. In a letter to A. Maikov from December 11, 1868, Dostoevsky wrote:

Совершенно другие я понятия имею о действительности и реализме, чем наши реалисты и критики. Мой идеализм реальнее ихнего. Господи! Порассказать толково то, что мы все, русские, пережили в последние 10 лет в нашем духовном развитии, да разве не закричат реалисты, что это фантазия? А между тем это исконный, настоящий реализм. Это-то и есть реализм, только глубже, а у них мелко плавает [...] Ихним реализмом сотовой доли реальных, действительно случившихся фактов

не объяснишь. А мы нашим идеализмом пророчили даже факты. Случалось (390).

My understanding of realism is completely different from that of our realists and critics. My idealism is more real than theirs. If we were to comprehensively tell about what we, the Russians, have lived through in the last ten years of our spiritual development – would not the realists shout that it has been a fantasy? And yet, it is the true, genuine realism. It is precisely this one that *is* realism, but a deeper one, theirs swims on the surface [...] With their realism one can't explain even a morsel of authentic facts that really occurred. And with our idealism we even predicted facts. That happened (*my translation*).

For Dostoevsky, “idealism,” synonymous with “realism in the highest sense,” was a narrative method that aspires to unveil the esoteric forces behind the tangible reality: “I am [...] a realist in a higher sense, i.e., I depict all the depths of the human soul,” as he wrote in his notebook (1880, 63). To capture the “magic” that weaves itself into the fabric of everyday life, this “realism in the highest sense” must interpolate fantastic elements in order to produce “an intelligible account of the spiritual development of a society or nation,” to use the quote of Malcolm V. Jones (3). Thus, in the anachronistically Borge-sian line of thought, Dostoevsky believed that external reality could be articulated more faithfully through narrative methods that incorporate fantastic elements, rather than through the conventional realism practiced by his contemporaries. Moreover, like Borges, Dostoevsky postulated that fantasy should stay within the confines of the believable, gradually establishing its credibility to make the reader “almost believe” in the magical events described. If for Borges Morris' epic poem was the exemplar of the effective magical narrative, Dostoevsky praised Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* as a masterpiece of fantastic art that successfully maneuvers the

reader into suspending his doubt. In the letter to Iurii Abaza from June 15 1880, Dostoevsky wrote:

Пусть это фантастическая сказка, но ведь фантастическое в искусстве имеет предел и правила. Фантастическое должно до того соприкасаться с реальным, что Вы должны *почти* поверить ему. Пушкин, давший нам почти все формы искусства, написал "Пиковую даму" - верх искусства фантастического. И Вы верите, что Германн действительно имел видение, и именно сообразное с его мировоззрением, а между тем, в конце повести, то есть прочтя ее, Вы не знаете, как решить... (1959, 178).

Even though it is a fantastic tale, the fantastic in art has its limits and rules. The fantastic must be so close to reality that you must *almost* believe it. Pushkin, who gave us almost all forms of art, wrote "The Queen of Spades" – the crown of fantastic art. And you believe that Hermann really had a vision, a vision in line with his world-view, and yet, at the end of the novella, after you've finished reading it, you don't know what to decide... (*my translation*).

Dostoevsky interpolated this confluence of the fantastic and the real into his original prose, working scrupulously to establish the credibility of the magical elements. For instance, in *The Double*, the miraculous event – the apparition of Goliadkin Junior – is circumscribed within the trivial reality of Petersburg's society. Dostoevsky's depiction of the fantastic occurrence is as "realistic" as his description of the mundane matters. Apart from his sudden and inexplicable appearance, there is decidedly nothing fantastic in the figure of Goliadkin Junior, who organically blends into the bureaucratic world of petty clerks. In fact, nobody except for Goliadkin Senior notices the fantastic newcomer.

Mr. Goliadkin's first movement was to look quickly about him, to see whether there were any whispering, any office joke being cracked on the subject, whether anyone's face was agape

with wonder, whether, indeed, someone had not fallen under the table from terror. But to his intense astonishment there was no sign of anything of the sort (104).

This collective nonchalance towards the miracle influences the reader in contradicting ways: on the one hand, it attunes him to Dostoevsky's cherished idea that the everyday reality is essentially fantastic, but it takes a keen eye to detect the magic; on the other, it makes the reader wonder whether the double is only a product of Goliadkin's imagination. Dostoevsky encourages both interpretations: detailed descriptions and verisimilar dialogues support the view of Goliadkin Junior as a "real" miracle thrust into the streets of St. Petersburg, while Goliadkin Senior drifts in and out of dreams, his visits to a psychiatrist, and even his doubts of his own self-existence, suggest that his double is a nightmarish hallucination.

The reader faces a similar conundrum in Borges' stories, where fantasy mixes with reality and dreams grant access to alternative universes, which are as palpable as the material world. For example, "The South" (1944) tells the story of Juan Dahlmann, who, like Goliadkin, is but an ordinary man who exists in an utterly mundane world of "passing years, a certain lack of spiritedness and solitude" (174). One day, engrossed in reading of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Dahlmann crashes into the edge of a recently painted door and wounds his forehead. Long days and nights of delirium ensued, opening doors to dreams and fantasies until the "the promised day arrived": Dahlmann recovers and leaves the hospital to embark on a journey to his ranch house in the South – a place he has never visited, but that supplied his indolent life in Buenos Aires with meaning. On his way to the ranch, he picks a knight fight with the gauchos:

...he felt that [...] dying in a knife fight under the open sky, grappling with his adversary, would have been a liberation, a

joy, and a fiesta. He sensed that had he been able to choose or dream his death that night, this is the death he would have dreamed or chosen (179).

Did Dahlmann die the death of his dreams or was the knight fight with the gauchos a deathbed vision? Borges' tale supports both interpretations, endorsed by "juxtaposition throughout the story of overly precise, objective, expository style and the transformation, without distortions, of reality into a dream world," – to quote Seymour Menton (1982, 422). Borges' succinct, all-encompassing and quasi-encyclopedic descriptions, satiated with precise dates and places of Dahlmann's personal history and nuisances of his short life after convalescence, establish the veracity of his fatal journey. On the other hand, Dahlmann constantly goes in and out of sleep; the shopkeeper of the general store facially resembles one of the male nurses in the sanatorium; and, most importantly, the protagonist's complete lack of surprise at the miraculous events that happen to him – as in a dream, when everything is taken for granted – create an eerie atmosphere of hallucination. As Borges himself suggested in an interview to James Irby: "Todo lo que sucede después que Dahlmann sale del sanatorio puede interpretarse como una alucinación suya en el momento de morir de la septicemia, como una visión fantástica de cómo él hubiera preferido morir" (1968, 34). Consequently, Dahlmann's death in "The South" conjures up a bewildering effect akin to that of Dostoevsky's *The Double*: the indissoluble fusion of fantasy and reality that does not yield to a single interpretation.

Ignoring the proximity of Dostoevsky's narrative methods to his own, Borges was nevertheless attracted to various themes raised by the Russian classic. The Argentine writer was deeply impressed with the episode in Dostoevsky's life when the writer was acquitted of the death sentence minutes before the planned execution. In the prologue to Dostoevsky's

Demons, Borges writes: “Envuelto en una vaga conspiración, fue condenado a muerte. Casi al pie de patíbulo, donde habían sido ejecutados sus compañeros, la sentencia fue conmutada...” (33). Arguably, Borges’ story “El milagro secreto” (1944) was inspired – at least in part – by the experience of the Russian writer.

Similarly to Dostoevsky, who reflected on his own near-death experience in *The Idiot*, Jewish playwright named Jaromir Hladík, receives the invaluable gift of time and immediately puts it to use: he weaves a “lofty invisible labyrinth” of letters. According to Peter Earle, the passage from *The Idiot* that describes the last minutes of the sentenced man’s life might have inspired Borges’ inquiry into “the mental effects of imminent death” (2003, 2): “Oh, I have a long, long time yet. Three streets of life yet!” (61) – thinks Dostoevsky’s prisoner, reflecting on the intensity of time that virtually comes to a halt in the face of impending death. In “El milagro secreto” “el universo físico se detuvo” (165)” as Hladik prepares himself for an execution (161).

Another interest that Borges shared with Dostoevsky is the phenomenon of the double – the theme that the Argentine author frequently discussed in his essays and stories. It is not unlikely that the meeting of the two doubles – the younger and the older – in “El Otro” and “Agosto 25, 1983” [August 25, 1983] (1983) was informed by the famous tussle between Goliadkin Senior and Goliadkin Junior in Dostoevsky’s novel the *Double*, which Borges read during his European sojourn. The most obvious and eccentric tribute to Dostoevsky’s ingenious doubles is the jocular detective story “Las noches de Goliadkin” that Borges wrote in collaboration with Bioy Casares under the pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq, and included in the collection of detective stories *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* (1942). As the title of the story implies, the central hero of this literary pastiche is named after the diso-

riented petty clerk from *The Double*. While a superficial reading of “Las noches de Goliadkin” may suggest that the Russian and the Argentine Goliadkins have nothing in common except their last name, an analysis of their literary DNAs reveals a strong kinship between the two and provides clues for reading the story as a parody of Dostoevsky's novel.

In fact, Borges' remorseful *picaro* and diamond trafficker could be the same old Yakov Petrovich Goliadkin, who chased his double through the streets of St. Petersburg. Frivolous literary antics worked their wonders and brought Dostoevsky's Goliadkin into a carriage of the train that travels from Bolivia to Buenos Aires without making stops. On the train, Goliadkin shares his compartment with the narrator of Borges story – a vainglorious actor Gervasio Montenegro. Affected by the atmosphere of intimacy and companionship, Goliadkin tells Montenegro his curious autobiography: back in tsarist Russia, he was first a servant and then a lover of some apocryphal princess Clavdia Fiodorovna. Abusing the princess' trust, Goliadkin robbed her of a magnificent diamond. But history took its toll on the audacious swindler and his hoodwinked lover: “la ola roja había expulsado del Imperio de los Zares a la gran dama despojada y al caballerizo infidente” (55). Stripped of her fortune, the princess embarked upon an immigrant odyssey; driven by pangs of repentance, Goliadkin tried to find her and return the precious stone. To Goliadkin's despair, the princess was nowhere to be found: neither in the mines of South Africa, nor in Brasil or Bolivia. Buenos Aires was Goliadkin's last hope to find the princess, who with the passage of time came to represent for him “el símbolo de esa Rusia amable y fastuosa, pisoteada por los palafreneros y los utopistas”(55).

Thus, Borges and Bioy Casares – under the disguise and pen name of Bustos Domecq – picked up the story of Goliadkin where Dostoevsky left it off and wrote an alterna-

tive history of Goliadkin, building his narrative on the conditional clause – what would have happened to the petty clerk had he lived to witness the Bolshevik Revolution? By the benediction of the Argentine writers, Goliadkin's life spans more than a century. Indeed, in a hundred years Dostoevsky's hero could not have been left unchanged. As a matter of fact, he became a Jew, defined almost exclusively by his “notorio aspecto israelita” (46). Apart from this religious conversion, which would have surprised the original creator of Goliadkin, the Russian hero remains essentially the same: the same plain, unremarkable appearance “cuya impronta en la placa fotográfica de mi memoria es decididamente débil” (47), the same “apologetic manners”: “se daba su lugar: se precipitaba siempre a abrirme las puertas” (47), the same anxious fidgeting and clumsy gait that, in the words of Dostoevsky, “plainly said: ‘Don't touch me and I won't touch you’” (45). More importantly, in South America, the hero is still haunted by his evil double, or, rather, by the past machinations of Goliadkin Junior that Goliadkin Senior must atone for. Specifically, Goliadkin-Senior is determined to return the diamond, stolen by his double (since, of course, the real Goliadkin could not have committed such an act), to Clavdia Fiodorovna and thus retribute her affronted honor. Actually, Clavdia Fiodorona, could be a metamorphosed daughter of a Russian nobleman Klara Olsufyevna, to whom Dostoevsky refers as “queen of the fete” (26), organized on the occasion of her birthday. With the assistance of Borges' pen, the birthday queen was promoted to princess, while Goliadkin succeeded in his amorous pursuits of her. However, the nightmarish masquerade that Goliadkin is thrust into at the end of *The Double* does not cease, and his tormented soul in its South American reincarnation must continue the battle against fake appearances. “Nowadays it is hard to recognize the man beneath the mask,” (66) – complains Dostoevsky's hero as he haphazardly invests his

trust in people who ultimately unveil their true ugly faces. In South America, Goliadkin finds himself in the midst of similar carnivalesque deception: every passenger he meets on the train, with the exception of Montenegro, conceals his real identity and takes part in a clandestine conspiracy to steal the diamond.

To save the diamond, Goliadkin resorts to the same principle of duplicity that was responsible for all his troubles in Russia and Argentina. He publicly exhibits two diamond cases to trick the thieves into believing that he has two diamonds, one real, and one fake, and loses one of the diamond to Montenegro in a game of poker. Believing that the Russian wanted to convince them that “*les quería hacer creer que había perdido la alhaja verdadera*” (65), the thieves searched Goliadkin and found nothing, since the precious stone was in the hands of Montenegro. As a result of these machinations, the Argentine actor inherits the diamond after Goliadkin, who lost his life in the battle with masks. Determined to deliver the precious stone to the princess (who would later become his wife), Montenegro symbolically overtakes Goliadkin's fate and identity and becomes his double. In the words of Biagio D'Angelo, at the end of the story Montenegro is “*goliadkinizado*,” “*vuelto un compañero del ruso por un extraño destino similar de vagabundo*” (116).

Consequently, the stratagem of bifurcating doubles in “*Las noches de Goliadkin*” further complicated by the dual authorship of the story, brings about a figurative rebirth of the Russian protagonist into a conceited Argentine actor, thus saving him from the burgeoning games of pretense. Moreover, with their literary pastiche, which also happened to be one of the first twentieth century detective stories in South America, Borges and Bioy Casares reintroduce Dostoevsky's protagonist to the Argentine readers, catering to their pleasure of recognizing the familiar character.

CONCLUSION

Only towards the end of his life, Borges reconsidered his stigmatization of Russian literature as realistic, psychological, and, ultimately, futile, and recognized that its scope extended beyond the novelistic genre. He published three stories by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Leonid Andreiev as "Cuentos Rusos" in "Biblioteca de Babel" series, produced by the Madrid-based publishing house Siruela in 1986. With this thin collection of stories, Borges manifested his admiration not only for the fantastic bend in Dostoevsky's "Crocodile" and for Andreev's retelling of the Biblical legend in "Lazarus," but also for the psychological realism in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." Surprisingly, Borges – the convinced antagonist of psychological introspection – applauded Tolstoy for masterful description of "la revelación sobrenatural nos llega al final, inevitable y asombrosa, como la última experiencia de un alma". Moreover, in the interview with Antonio Carrizo, Borges praised the simplicity of Tolstoy's late fiction that epitomized for him "textos muy sencillos, casi anónimos" (1982, 238). It seems that in his old age Borges himself was aspiring towards stylistic simplicity, as he left behind complex mental constructions and fantastic universes that infiltrate his earlier stories. "I believe that in my latest books there is a certain simplicity, a certain deliberate poverty of vocabulary," said Borges in an interview, declaring his departure from the fantastic literature. "I believe too that I've contributed to the boom in fantastic literature in this country, a literature which others cultivate now certainly with better luck than I" (Sorrentino 1982, 163). It is therefore not unlikely that Borges' return to the Russian classics was instigated by his re-evaluation of realism and his retirement from the fantastic genre. According to Rodríguez Monegal, Borges "siempre tuvo una nostalgia por la vieja y querida literatura realista [...] Pero sólo en su vejez, cuando

las teorías y las invenciones le importaban menos, se sintió con fuerzas como para volver a intentar narraciones realistas” (1985, 363).

Feasibly, Borges’ absolution of realism, evident in such stories as “La Intrusa” and “Ulrike,” was related to the modification of his interpretative frame in relation to the Russian literature. As his 1985 prologue to Dostoevsky’s *Demons* aptly illustrates, the old Borges no longer approached Russian novels as tale-telling allegories that faithfully describe their country’s obscure realities:

Leer un libro de Dostoevsky es penetrar en una gran ciudad, que ignoramos, o en la sombra de una batalla. *Crimen y Castigo* me había revelado, entre otras cosas, un mundo ajeno a mí. Inicié la lectura de *Los Demonios* y algo extraño ocurrió. Sentí que había regresado a la patria. La estepa de la obra era una magnificación de la Pampa. Varvara Petrovna y Stepan Trofimovich Verjovenski eran, pese a sus incómodos nombres, viejos argentinos irresponsables. (1998, 54)

Instead of treating Dostoevsky’s novel as a specifically Russian cultural product that has practically no value (other than that of presenting the reader with exotic and unbelievable aberrations of Slavic characters), Borges now identified the elements of the Russian text that relate to his own cultural landscape, and thus disentangles himself from the sense of effort he had allegedly felt in reading the Russian classics. Like Arlt, who in the 1920s discovered that Dostoevsky’s themes and characters were as relevant in the Argentine context as in the Russian one (“a porteño Foma is the same as a Russian or Bulgarian Foma”), Borges recognized in *The Demons* the virtue of universality. To pay homage to Dostoevsky’s novel, Borges, who towards the end of his life assumed, more openly than ever, the role of the agent of cultural distribution, included the prologue to *The Demons* into his “Biblioteca Personal”— a collection of prologues to

canonical and non-canonical texts, “cuya lectura fue una dicha para nosotros y que nos gustaría compartir” with the Spanish-speaking audience (1998, 11). Therefore, by integrating *The Demons* into his “biblioteca de preferencias” (11) and by compiling the aforementioned “Russian Stories,” Borges invited Russian literature back into his personal reading list and, consequently, into the Argentine cultural field.

As this chapter has shown, Borges' relationship with Russian literature came full circle. Having traversed a path from enthusiastic infatuation with Dostoevsky to complete antagonism towards all things Russian, the Argentine writer finally resumed his interest in the authors he had neglected for a large part of his life. Indeed, Borges' could not have surmised the extent of his influence on Russian literature and did not live to read (perhaps, to his own advantage) the post-Soviet texts that borrow and steal from his works in a somewhat vulgarized “Borgesian manner.” The Argentine master would have been decidedly surprised to learn that up till today Russian writers vie for the title of a “Russian Borges,” mimic his style, establish literary prizes in his name, and endeavor to demystify the perplexing absence of Russia from his works by construing obscure and absurd theories. For example, Oleg Postnov suggests that Borges does not mention Russia for the same reason that Ts'ui Pen does not pronounce the word “time” in the Garden of Forking Paths: “time” is an answer to a riddle and therefore should not be said aloud not to spoil the game (www.netslova.ru/stat/stmon.html?mon=11&year=12). Vadim Alekseev applies the idea of Borges' poem “El Golem” that a word can reveal its secret meanings if the order of letters is changed, to the name Jorge Luis Borges to retrieve the phrase “Eres rojo, eres ruso” (2009, 2). Not only these detective inquiries, but also the ostensible “Borges effect” that swept post-Soviet literature and still flourishes in Russian letters, is partially fueled by Borges' indifference to

Russian literature and hostility to Soviet regime. His conservative political views delayed the official publication of his works in the Soviet Union until the 1980s – early 1990s, but the peak of his popularity was not until the fall of the communist regime. Consequently, Borges entered the post-Soviet literary market when Russian writers and readers needed him most. In times of domestic literary crisis, when authors strove to break free from socialist realism and the Russian classical tradition, Borges' work offered them a perfect model that was as distant from Dostoevsky as it was from Gorky. Thus, Borges, who erased Russia from his map of the World Republic of Letters, unknowingly came to participate in the formation of the new post-Soviet literature.

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1. On March 11 1916, in his letter to Roberto Godel, his friend in Buenos Aires, Borges writes: “En el colegio sigo como siempre. He trabado amistad con dos muchachos: Stalkine, el primero, es ruso de Odessa, moreno, bajo y vivaracho...” (<http://www.cartas.org.ar/cartas/publicadas/pub-bor-god-11-03-16.html>).
2. In the letter, sent to Abramowicz from Buenos Aires Borges thanks his friend for introducing him to “l a musique russe, les vers de Rimbaud, la granadine, les promenades discutées a la nuit...” (1999, 150).
3. In an interview to Rosa Majián, Borges says: “I tried to learn Russian but it is a very difficult language and I failed” (66).
4. In an interview with Fernando Sorrentino, Borges says: “I wrote poems dedicated to the Russian Revolution, which of course hasn’t anything to do with present-day Soviet imperialism. We saw the Russian Revolution as a sort of beginning for peace among all men. My father was an anarchist, a Spencerian, a reader of the *The Man Versus the State*, and I recall that in one of the long summer vacations we took in Montevideo, my father told me to take a good look at many things, because those things were going to disappear and I would be able to tell my children or grandchildren – I haven’t had any children or grandchildren – that I had seen all those things. He told me to look at military barracks, flags, maps having different colors for the different countries, butcher shops, churches, priests, customs houses because all of

those things were going to disappear when the world was one and differences were forgotten. Up until now this prophecy hasn't come true, but I hope it will come true some day. But I want to reiterate that I saw the Russian Revolution as the beginning of peace among all men, as something which has nothing to do with the present-day Soviet imperialism" (6-7).

5. Since this book has never been published, it is difficult to determine the exact number of poems explicitly dedicated to the Russian Revolution that the author intended to include in the collection. Carlos Meneses infers that there were five or six so-called "Poemas en Rojo" [Poems in Red]; "Rusia," "Gesta maximalista", "Trinchera", "Último rojo sol" and "Guardia Roja" Although the rest of the pieces in "Salmos Rojos" did not overtly refer to the Revolution, they were infused with ideas related to justice, peace, and brotherhood of men (Meneses 1996).
6. – a Spanish avant-garde movement (1918-1923) that heavily relied on metaphors, aspired to purify poetry from the opulent mannerisms of modernism, employed evocative symbols and explored the poetics of the modern world and technology. . In his 1921 essay, published in *Nosotros* "Ultraísmo," which might be easily called "Ultraism Manifesto", young Borges outlines the definitions of the "novísima estética" and, consequently, articulates the scope of his own literary aspirations: Reducción de la lírica a su elemento primordial: la metáfora. Tachadura de las frases medianeras, los nexos y los adjetivos inútiles. Abolición de los trabajos ornamentales, el

- confesionalismo, la circunstanciación, las prédicas y la nebulosidad rebuscada. Síntesis de dos o más imágenes en una, que ensancha de ese modo su facultad de sugerencia (Moreno 495).
7. Pierre Pascual translated into French and published Esenin's "Tovarish" in *Clarté* magazine only in 1922
 8. "The Twelve" came out in French translation by Serge Romoff in 1920 (*Les Douze*, Paris: La Cible) ; in English translation by C.E. Bechhofer in 1920 (*The Twelve* London: Chatto & Windus,); in German translation by Reinhold von Walter in 1921 (*Die Zwölf*, Berlin: Skythen), as well as by Wolfgang E. Groeger in the same year (*Die Zwölf*, Berlin: Newa).
 9. In his letter to Godel from March 1921, Borges characterizes the Russian Revolution as one of the avatars of the modern times and longs for the creation of poetic school, inseparable from the contemporary reality: ¿Pero, crees tú que sobre una base arcaizante se puede fundar una escuela poética que rime con la realidad y la psicología de nuestro siglo, lleno de tantas y tantas cosas peculiares, de la Revolución Rusa, de los cinematógrafos, de las teorías de Einstein sobre la cuarta dimensión, de los aviones, de los carteles luminosos, de los pianos de manubrio? (Así, todo revuelto, absurdo y fabulosamente cercano).
 10. Expressionism, which Raymond Furness describes as "a movement towards abstraction, towards autonomous color and metaphor, away from plausibility and imitation; a concern for the typical and essential, rather than purely personal and individual..." (1973, 21), indisputably influenced Borges' ideas and aesthetics. In the aforementioned

letter to Godel, Borges says that he had read “large number of books” by young German writers, who would “welcome this revolution with enthusiasm” and who openly declare their antimilitarism: Johannes V. Becher, Franz Plemfert, Otto Ernst Herre, Max Pauluer, Gustav Meyrink, Franz Werfel, Harendever and many others. Throughout his literary career, Borges continued to admire expressionist poetry, despite his disagreement with the political affiliations that some of the poets would develop later: Becher became a communist and was exiled to the Soviet Union, Wilhelm Klemm would turn into an advocate of Nazism.

- II. Borges could have been introduced to Dostoevsky, and, perhaps, to other Russian writers by Rafael Cansinos-Assens (1882-1964), the theorist of *ultraismo* and a polyglot man of letters, whom Borges had always considered his master. Cansinos-Assens translated numerous Russian authors into Spanish: Turgenev, Tolstoy, Andreev, Maxim Gorky, Artzybacheff and the complete works of Dostoevsky. In the “Autobiographical Essay” Borges describes the enormous influence that the Spanish writer had on him: “What I got from him, chiefly, was the pleasure of literary conversation. Also, I was stimulated by him to far-flung reading” (1970, 152). Perhaps, during these conversations and readings Borges developed his taste for Dostoevsky.
12. Borges anxiously sought to share his discovery with his friend Jacobo Sureda (1901-1935). Before his departure to Buenos Aires, Borges sent a copy of the novel to Sureda as a farewell gift. On the third of March, Borges writes to his friend: “Mañana

temprano te certifico un ejemplar de *Crimen y expiración* de Dostoievski que compré esta mañana.. Escribeme lo que de él piensas. Para mí, es la mejor novela que se ha escrito jamás” Having arrived in Buenos Aires, Borges asks Sureda about the book in the first letter he wrote (1999, 193).

13. Evidently, Borges’ first collection of poetry, “Fervor de Buenos Aires,” which “celebrated sunsets, solitary places and unfamiliar corners,” instead of praising red banners of the revolution, came as a shock for the Spanish ultraístas, who were surprised not to find his earliest poems in the book. Evaluating this book, Guillermo de Torre, with perceptible acrimony says that Borges “a la continuacion de una “manera” habia preferido el descubrimiento de un “tono”. Al “entusiasmo” de tipo whitmaniano, ante la pluralidad del universo, sustituye el “fervor” por el espacio acotado de una ciudad’ (1984, 29).
14. In an interview with Fernando Sorrentino, Borges says: “All that was organized by Ernesto Palacio and Roberto Mariani. They thought about literary cliques in Paris and thought it might be useful as publicity if there were two inimical, hostile groups” (7).
15. In the questionnaire, published in the newspaper *Clarín* (founded in 1945), Borges says: [“Me han invitado a países socialistas. Pero no quise ir. Hubiera ido con antipatía. Si uno visita un país con antipatía, está dispuesto a encontrar todo mal. Y yo no quiero. Me invitaron dos veces. Han sido amables. Pero yo les dije: “Mi viaje podría ser incómodo para mí y podría ser incómodo para

ustedes también. Y no será un viaje provechoso”
(Mateo 1994, 116).

16. In an interview published in *Clarín* newspaper in 1970, Borges says: “Creo que no hay una frontera entre los dos. Entre la literatura fantástica y la realista no hay mayores diferencias. Incluso, se me ocurre que la primera es mas real que la segunda” (Mateo 1994, 100).