
Reading Borges in Edinburgh

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My poem titled "Reading Borges in Edinburgh" narrates my visit to Holyrood Abbey in Edinburgh. Theoretically, it is based on my dissertation project of comparative literature, which I am currently undertaking at the University of Kent. My project seeks to explore the cultural encounters such as translations and adaptations between Latin American and Japanese literatures, focusing on a writer's disposition to foster a transnational relationship with a literary tradition in the "periphery," enabling a critique of uneven and unequal literary systems whilst exploring the world literature potential of Japanese-Latin American literary relations. In turn, in "Reading Borges in Edinburgh," I intend to forge this type of literary affiliation with the Argentine poet Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) against the historically charged context of Edinburgh. On the one hand, this poem sheds a light on the fictitious aspect of nation and problematizes the crucial role that literary works play in that process. On the other hand, by interspersing Borges's verses in mine, it bridges Japanese and Latin American literary traditions, constituting an intertextual solidarity of world literature.

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In association with

Reading Borges in Edinburgh

Eiji Yasuhara

To gaze at a river made of time and water
and remember time is another river.
To know we become lost like a river
and the faces float like water. (*"Ars Poetica"*)

To prove yourself needs words by others,
I wonder, walking down the Canongate Street towards the Scottish Parliament.
The names and the verses engraved on the wall,
Stevenson, Burnes, Gerard Manley Hopkins,
these verses were coveted to found a nation.
This fact feels like a danger to myself,
but why?

Although respectable is the act of naming,
a name itself feels unnerving to me.
People and words I love, a well-crafted story called my life,
would escape the questioning once I'm comfortable with those names.
Even though I've been enticed by the interactions between us,
changing second by second.

Nobody saw the beauty of the streets
Until when, frightening in clamour,
The verdant sky collapsed
In the fall of water and shadow (*"Regained Quarter"*)

The street led me to the Holyrood Abbey
built in the edge of the history.
The Abbey, which believed in different kingdoms and religions,
now has been destroyed in arrows, fires, and oblivion,
remaining unfinished forever.
The story of my life has been, is, and will be
no more than this ruined church.
The credo and the politics of the present "me"
will be an inexistent projection
just like this Abbey's roof open to the sky.

Critical Commentary

This poem, titled “Reading Borges in Edinburgh”, is based on my dissertation project of comparative literature, which I am currently undertaking at the University of Kent. My project *Affiliative Desires: Latin American and Japanese Encounters in Transnational Literary Circulation* seeks to explore the cultural encounters between Latin American and Japanese literatures, focusing on a writer’s disposition to foster a transnational relationship with a literary tradition in the “periphery.” I argue that this transnational literary dialogue enables a critique of uneven and unequal literary systems, whilst exploring the world literature potential of Japanese-Latin American literary relations.

In “Reading Borges in Edinburgh,” I intend to forge this type of literary affiliation with Latin American poetry, but from a different point of view. Here, in an attempt to dive into the relationship of nationalism and literature, I render this poem as an intertextual dialogue with Borges against the historically charged context of Edinburgh. Firstly, this poem highlights the fictitious aspect of the nation state, which Benedict Anderson famously called the “imagined community” in his book of the same name, and problematises the crucial role that literary works play in this process. This type of literary nationalism has not exclusively taken place in Scotland, but also all over the world; Argentina and Japan being no exception. In 1920s Argentina, the young Borges wrote poems such as “Fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires” (“The Mythic Foundation of Buenos Aires,” 1929) to support the left-wing populist president Hipólito Yrigoyen, who held office from 1916 to 1922, and again from 1928 to 1930. Simultaneously in Japan, as a gesture of nostalgia and escape from the increasing Westernisation of the country, the future Nobel Laureate 川端康成 (Kawabata Yasunari) envisioned the northern Niigata prefecture as the embodiment of the essentialist (and again fictitious) image of the premodern Japan in his seminal novel 『雪国』 (Snow Country, 1st edition, 1937).

Secondly, by contrast, interspersing Borges’s verses within my verses, this poem seeks to bridge Japanese and Latin American literary traditions, constituting an intertextual solidarity of world literature. Although a literary work can be used to implement an affective community, to bring people together, artificially transforming them to “citizens,” it is always open to a new reading. As Walter Benjamin claims in his essay “The Task of the Translator” regarding literary translation, every translation is a version of the work, and piecing together multiple versions is the way to pursue “pure language,” its true expression. Holyrood Abbey, which appears in the last stanza, is a symbol of the potential of literature in this sense. Just as this roofless Abbey is never complete, no literary work is ever finished, and remains to be a site for multiple interpretations to come. Reading

Borges against the Scottish context, reworking on Borges in Scotland from the Japanese perspective, are a gesture to relish this potential of literature.

Now I wonder who you are, reader, who is kindly taking time to read my poem, and how you read it. All readings are precious, constituting the voyage of world literary tradition, which includes Stevenson, Burns, Borges, me, and maybe you.