The Diverse Intonations of Man: Genealogical Rhetoric in Borges's Prose

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... tú mismo eres el espejo y la réplica
De quiénes no alcanzaron tu tiempo
Y otros serán (y son) tu inmortalidad en la tierra.
-Borges, "Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro"

Roberto González Echevarría has observed that "[g]enealogy is a fundamental element in modern Latin American fiction" (158). Likewise, in her study of Spanish American autobiographical writing, Sylvia Molloy highlights the centrality of genealogy or family history:

From the Inca Garcilaso [...] to Borges, who in his inscription to his Obras completas, thanks his mother for 'your memory and, with it, the memory of our elders,' the past, in Spanish America, appears to be, very consciously, a family affair. (159)

Fifty years before the dedication cited by Molloy, Borges, in a poem from Luna de enfrente entitled "Casi un juicio final" explicitly recognized his tendency to make genealogical themes, in particular the inclusion of his own ancestors—real or imagined—a cornerstone of his poetic program: "A los antepasados de mi sangre y a los antepasados de mis sueños / he exaltado y cantado" (86).¹ Borges was born in the home of

¹ References to Borges's poems are taken from Obra poética: 1923-1977. All references to the short stories correspond to the Hurley translation printed as Collected Fictions. My citations of the essay "Kafka and His
his maternal grandparents and grew up under the tutelage of various relatives, including that of Fanny Haslam, his English-born paternal grandmother. Accordingly, many of Borges's biographers, including Borges himself, have stressed the formative importance of his immediate ancestry, often casting it as a sort of dualistic destiny forcing a choice between the more refined, English and literature-prone ancestry of his paternal line and the staunchly Argentine, militaristic heritage of his maternal ancestors. However, despite the fact that Borges regularly weaves genealogical content and themes into his poems, short stories, and essays, few critics have moved beyond the biographical dimension of this fascination with family history, and genealogy is rarely even mentioned in the many critical catalogues of Borgesian themes and motifs. In addition to Molloy's comments cited above, Seúl Yurkievich provides an exception to this critical oversight by recognizing Borges's literary treatment of genealogy. According to Yurkievich, family history constitutes a central concern of Borgesian poetry, one closely related to the poet's circular conception of time:

La concepción cíclica del tiempo hace que todo su vivir sea repetición del pasado. El presente sólo tiene valor en tanto asegura la perduración de ese pretérito personificado, sobre todo por la gente de su sangre. (141)

Yurkievich links the frequent appearance of illustrious Borges ancestors in the poetic texts to other Borgesian fixations such as his pantheistic notion of selfhood and his constant questioning of time and linear history, noting that "[t]oda vida para Borges es repetición de ideas, sentimientos, actitudes y situaciones humanas básicas. La historia no hace más que repetirlas [...]" (141). Although the purpose of this paper is to examine the role and implications of genealogical discourse in Borges's prose production, Yurkievich's conclusions provide a relevant and useful starting point, especially if we agree with him that "[a]juíza el decir más esencial de Borges, aunque no el más logrado, se dé en sus poemas" (127). Although the deployment of genealogical motifs in Borges's prose is arguably more subtle and nuanced than the direct approach that characterizes much of his poetry, it is not difficult to find references to his own ancestry and other themes relevant to a broad conceptualization of genealogy among his short stories and essays. In this article I examine the presentation of genealogical content, themes, and motifs in several prose texts by Borges and explore their corresponding ideological, aesthetic, and theoretical ramifications. These analyses lead me to conclude that Borges favors a personalized and heterogeneous approach to genealogical rhetoric that differs markedly from the premises and purposes of both conventional and mainstream poststructuralist variants.

My intention to underscore the theoretical implications of Borges's usage of genealogy in his prose texts is based on the premise that both terms—Borges and genealogy—have become highly relevant to discussions of theoretical discourse. Clearly, Borges has been an important influence on the development of literary and culture theory during the late twentieth century. Mark Frisch has observed that the identification of the Argentine writer as "a precursor or as one of the first postmoderns [...] has become fairly automatic" (15). Defining the postmodernism broadly as "a shift within the culture toward philosophical pluralism," Frisch surveys a number of authors who argue in various ways that Borges indeed played "a pivotal role in redefining this cultural shift and in providing
the metaphors and the language to describe it” (35-36). That postmodern thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida cite themes from Borges’s essays and stories to illustrate their own points is further evidence of his impact on what is now simply called “theory.”4 While this point hardly needs further elaboration, the theoretical relevance of genealogy, particularly of the traditional variant, may, at first glance, seem less obvious. However, despite its many practical applications, traditional genealogical practice rests on a number of highly ideological assumptions. The premises informing conventional forms of genealogy include faith in historical truth; confidence in the fidelity of long-term memory; the tendency to endow distant origins with meaning and purity; appeals to notions such as legitimacy and pure bloodlines to justify or maintain legal privileges and societal status; and a narrative logic and metaphoric iconography that privilege linearity and causal relationships (e.g., the “begats” that propel the Biblical timeline and narrative flow, anthropological kinship diagrams, pedigree charts, the genealogical tree, etc.).5 According to Stephen Sayers, traditional genealogy has important psychological significance in that “[t]he experience of being rooted in unchanging historical grounds can provide a bulwark against a fragmented and unpredictable social world” (162). Julia Watson agrees, noting that “[t]hrough establishing their genealogy, family members are ensured that their everyday lives have transpersonal significance and are embedded in a historical chain” (298). Just how amenable traditional genealogies are or should be to narrative redressing is the subject of some debate, however. According to Watson, “Genealogy […] is used to verify an established past. It is impermissible to add or invent. […] For the genealogist, the introduction of a personal perspective would undermine the validity of history” (300). However, Tess O’Toole writes of a natural affinity between genealogy and fiction that “ties not only in the inherently narrative structure of a family line, but in the fact that genealogies involve a certain amount of speculation, perhaps even fabrication” (5). In any case, Goldie Margalantaler has observed that “despite the seeming lack of imaginative scope permitted by long, dry lists of family names, [genealogies] actually carry a pronounced ideological punch, and as such have metaphoric uses when adapted to fiction” (28).

In opposition to the ideological premises and implications of conventional genealogy stand alternative or more overtly theoretical appropriations or reformulations of the term whose origins, ironically enough, can be traced to Nietzsche’s critique of origin-seeking in texts such as On the Genealogy of Morals. Whereas traditional genealogy is very much concerned with the recovery of origins, with identifying the founding ancestor of a particular lineage, Nietzsche promotes a painstaking investigative process that demystifies primordial origins and calls into question the essential meaning or truth-value that their remoteness supposedly puts beyond scrutiny (20-21). Similarly, in a gloss of Nietzsche’s text, Foucault rejects the metaphor of origins as loci of metaphysical or historical significance and redefines genealogy as an alternative to traditional historiography:

Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times. (130)
According to Foucault, “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origins; it is the dissection of other things. It is disparity.” (142)\(^6\)

In addition to such critiques of the essentialist approach to origins, the brand of genealogy invoked by poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists also implies a departure from the rigid hierarchical and patriarchal structural model symbolized by the binary branchings of the genealogical tree representative of Hebrew-inspired approaches to traditional genealogy. According to Giun Balsamo,

One must engage genealogy as a construct, whose contrived architecture is best exemplified in the trope of the genealogical tree: a modular assemblage of legitimate filiations, a treelike structure, whose ramifications, apparently all-inclusive, hide the intricacy of exclusion, discrimination, and abusive grafting. (17)\(^7\)

In his analysis of the story “The Circular Ruins,” Balsamo makes that case that the physiological and legal dynamics of genealogical discourse are central to an understanding of the tale and that genealogy constitutes “an absence that cries out to be thematized, a silence, on Borges’s part, that calls attention to its hidden intentionality” (35). Whereas, as Balsamo points out, “The Circular Ruins” is completely silent regarding “the emblematic agencies of patronymic, genealogical, ritual, legal, and sexual legitimacy” (35), other prose texts by Borges incorporate genealogical themes more explicitly. Accordingly, the rest of my paper seeks to provide a provisional thematization of genealogy as it appears in Borges’s prose by way of an analysis that takes into account four interrelated questions: (1) What are Borges’s beliefs regarding genealogy and family history? (2) How does Borges “do genealogy” in his prose texts? (3) What purposes or functions do genealogical motifs fulfill in these texts? and (4) What relationships exist between Borges’s use of genealogy and his other literary and philosophical obsessions?

Emir Rodríguez Monegal notes that during his childhood “Georgie was surrounded by the sacred objects of family history and the ritual repetition of the deeds of his heroic ancestors” and that “[t]hese stories [...] were a permanent part of his heritage” (6). The genealogical knowledge that Borges was able to glean from the stories of his mother and grandmother and the family relics populating his childhood home was limited to his most immediate ancestors, the Borges, Acevedo, and Sutre families. Years later he would write of his father’s line, “Nada o muy poco se de mis mayores / Portugueses, los Borges: vaga gente / Que prosigue en mi carne, escuramento [...]” (146). Borges makes no attempt to further illuminate such shadows, to identify these ancestors or any others beyond his immediate forebears; he never engages in genealogical investigation or research, per se. In response to allegations that he intentionally hid the Jewish origin implied by his surname, Borges penned an ironic response entitled “Yo, Judío” in which he claims to have searched for his Jewish ancestry without any luck: “Doscientos años y no doy con el israelita, doscientos años y el antepasado me elude.” “¿Quién no jugó a los antepasados alguna vez, a las prehistorias de su carne y su sangre?” Borges asks. But concrete answers to genealogical questions are ultimately unknowable or, at best, suspect since they belong to history and “[e]l pasado remoto es de aquellas cosas que
for Borges if men are destined to re-live one another’s
experiences throughout history.

The tendency to invoke genealogy as a means to
mythologize is readily apparent in “The South,” one of Borges’
most celebrated stories and clearly one of his most auto-
biographical, especially in terms of his family history. The
first paragraph of the tale presents the genealogy of the
protagonist Juan Dahlmann, which includes Johannes Dahlmann,
an evangelical minister (a reference to a Borges relative from
his English stock), and, on the maternal side, a certain Francisco Flores who “died on the border of Buenos Aires”
(174). This introduction only slightly alters Borges’ own
genealogy and reproduces the split between a lettered tradition
and a military heritage: “In the contrary pulls from his two
lineages, Juan Dahlmann (perhaps impelled by his Germanic
blood) chose that of his romantic ancestor, or that of a
romantic death” (174). Of course one of the ironies of this
self-conscious genealogical choice by Dahlmann is that it
ensures that he will meet a similar fate. Aside from this
intergenerational imposition of destiny, the story makes
another important contribution to our understanding of the
mythologizing function of genealogical discourse in Borges’
prose by suggesting a close relation between genealogy and
geography, which it in turn connects to the idea of temporal
regression. Upon leaving the sanatorium, Dahlmann decides
that the nostalgia of his late grandfather’s estancia would be
good for his convalescence. Here, we learn that to exit Buenos
Aires in the direction implied by the story’s title is to open a
portal to the past: “Everyone knows that the South begins on
the other side of Avenida Rivadavia. Dahlmann had often said
that that was no mere saying, that by crossing Rivadavia one
entered an older and more stable world” (176). As the train
gets closer and closer to his ancestral home, “Dahlmann
suspected that he was traveling not only into the South but into
the past” (177). When he is taunted by a band of primitive
locals, it is only after the innkeeper pronounces his last name,
that emblem of genealogy and symbol of familial integrity,
that Dahlmann realizes the ultimate consequence of his
journey.

The opening paragraph of “Deutsches Requiem” also
provides the genealogy of its protagonist, a Nazi sentenced to
execution. As is the case in “The South,” certain underlying
details of the genealogy we read are reminiscent of Borges’s
own family legends, although the names, places, and years
vary:

My name is Otto Dietrich zur Linde. One of my forebears,
Christoph zur Linde, died in the cavalry charge that decided
the victory of Zorndorf. During the last days of 1870, my
maternal great-grandfather was killed in the Marchenoir
forest by French sharpshooters... (229)

The narrator reveals a very Borgesian perspective on
genealogy when he muses, “[I]t is natural that I should think
of my elders, since I am so near their shadow—since, somehow,
I am they” (229). Otto Dietrich zur Linde’s philosophical
rationalizations of the violent tactics of Nazism reveal a vision
in which his own ancestors unwittingly occupy crucial causal
links in the inexorable continuity of history: “Christoph zur
Linde, killed by a Muscovite bullet in 1758, somehow set the
stage for the victories of 1914; Hitler thought he was fighting
for a nation, but he was fighting for all nations [...]” (233). In
this story, a parallel is drawn between family history and the
fate of mankind, but both are characterized as a series of
reprises by members of a minimal cast: “Down through the
centuries and latitudes, the names change, the dialects, the
faces, but not the eternal protagonists” (233). The mirror
image of this condemned Nazi appears in “The Secret
Miracle.” Significantly, the protagonist of this tale, Jaromir
Hladik, also has genealogy to thank for his predicament: “He
was unable to refute even one of the Gestapo’s charges: His
mother’s family’s was Jaroslavski, he came of Jewish blood
 [...]” (157).

Given Borges’s penchant for mirrored reflections, for
pantheism and eternal returns—even doppelgangers—the
reader might wonder whether these two contemporary
protagonists could in fact be the same person. The answer
could easily be affirmative if we accept the fantastic premises
behind another of Borges’s genealogical stories, “The Garden
of Forking Paths,” which also unfolds against a military
backdrop. In this story, whose title evokes the branching
geometry of the pedigree chart or family tree, Yu Tsun a man
of Chinese ancestry now employed as a spy for the Germans
in World War I, has a most unexpected encounter with his
heritage. By incredible and completely arbitrary means, Yu
Tsun, whose only intention is to communicate the location of a
strategic target in the English countryside, locates the only
person alive capable of solving the greatest mystery of his
own family history. The situation in and of itself calls into
question the value of deliberate family history research. Yu
Tsun is the great-grandson of Ts’iu Pên, who left a political
career to write a novel and to build a labyrinth. However, the
labyrinth was never found and the novel has confounded all of
Ts’iu Pên’s descendants. Yu Tsun calls the novel “a
contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts,” a judgment he
justifies by observing that “in the third chapter, the hero dies,
yet in the fourth chapter he is alive again” (124). That line is
consistent with Borges’s vision of genealogy as the eternal
return of a limited cast of ancestors, and Yu Tsun’s confusion
anticipates that of Baron Römerstadt, the protagonist of
Hladik’s verse drama, who is dismayed to notice that “actors
come back onstage who had apparently been discarded from the
plot” (159). Stephen Albert, the man Yu Tsun has come to
kill, reveals that the book and the labyrinth are one and the
same, a conclusion he has reached thanks to a cryptic note
from the author expressing his wish to leave the book to
“several futures (not to all)” (125). He explains that Ts’iu Pên
has succeeded in creating an “infinite book” by exploring all
of the several futures which open up to its characters when
faced with any choice:

[H]e believed in an infinite series of times, a growing
dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times.
That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snapped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains all possibilities. (127)

One important consequence of this fluid metaphor of space and time is that it proposes a temporal scheme that is disjunctive and completely arbitrary in opposition to the continuity and causality implied by linear and even circular time conceptions of history, a more rhizomatic model—to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology—that allows for establishing connections and influences in any direction. The implications for genealogies would be that they need not adhere to the strictly lineal models of succession, descent, and likeness implied by the biological reality of paternity.11

This idea of non-linear, even anachronistic, connections between generations is further developed in Borges’s writings on the topic of literary influence, the most famous of which is “Kafka and His Precursors.” In this well-known piece, Borges essentially argues that a writer’s works and ideas modify the past as it is perceived by readers so that, for example, we may notice the influence of Kafka on the writings of a ninth-century Chinese philosopher. Similarly, Borges’s story “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” in which the narrator remarks on how much richer and more complex Cervantes’ novel would be if it had in fact been written by an early twentieth century French author, provides a “new technique of deliberate anachronism and […] erroneous attribution” (44). What emerges in texts such as these is a theory of literary paternity

11 Paternity is an important subcomponent of genealogical discourse and references to it appear in numerous texts by Borges, not the least important of which is the pronouncement attributed to a Uqbar heresiarch who wrote that “[m]irrors and fatherhood are hateful because they multiply and proclaim” the universe (69). In the text I have already cited, Balsamo argues that the presentation of paternity as parthenogenic and celibatic in “The Circular Ruins” has significant ideological ramifications. For his part, Ahearn commenting on stories such as “The Gospel According to Saint Mark” and “Bродie’s Report,” concludes that “[t]he unawareness of paternity is for Borges evidence of cultural regression” (275).

in which traditional literary generations are seen as arbitrarily imposed sequences and readers, not writers, establish the connections of new pedigrees.

What these examples have shown is that Borges invokes genealogical themes, content, and rhetorical strategies in a number of ways in his prose, all of which influence or are influenced by his treatment of related themes, including the relationship of family histories to broader mythologies, the tension between individual and collective concepts of identity, and the nature of time. Borges’s heterogeneous approach to genealogy does not fit neatly into either of the broad categories defined above as traditional and theoretical. Borgesian genealogy recognizes, even exalts, a certain identification with his immediate ancestors and their exploits but is less interested in recovering or researching a definitive and prestigious origin that would guarantee the unification of his ever-divided sense of self. His is also not a genealogy that seeks to patiently investigate, à la Foucault, the multiple disjunctions of history to or document the local, contingent conditions behind the supposedly unquestionable origins of institutions or discourses. In the examples that we have seen, Borges articulates the parameters of a personalized theory of genealogy and family history in which the lives of a single ancestor are infinite and whose profound influence at once perpetuates and enriches the genealogical tradition in Latin American literature. Works such as Cien años de soledad, Moacyr Scliar’s A estranha nação de Rafael Mendes, and José Donoso’s Conjeturas sobre la memoria de mi tribu all reflect, in their own ways, the influence of Borges’s unique innovations in genealogical rhetoric.

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