

# POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN BORGES: FALLIBILITY, LIBERAL ANARCHISM AND CIVIC ETHICS\*

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Abstract: The political philosophy latent in Borges' works rests on the belief in a self-sufficient individual, the pre-eminence of liberty, a distrust of government and nostalgia for anarchy understood as a self-organized order. Yet he also emphasizes the fallibility of individuals and warns against civic indifference brought about by an isolated individualism. A paradox seems to emerge from these simultaneous convictions: would anarchy work if individuals are unable to do much in and by themselves? Can an individualistic disposition be conducive to a rich and orderly civic life? I find that Borges' notion of fallibility is consistent with his defence of liberal anarchism because in the latter fallibility carries less pernicious effects than under alternative political arrangements. I also argue that his notion of liberal anarchism is compatible with his concern for civic order if we look at the ethics of self-restraint that sustains Borges' simultaneous advocacy of a self-organized order and a stable civic life.

## Introduction

Many of the works of Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup> (1899-1986) show the writer's life-long inspiration in the field of ideas, institutions, and activities related to the political. In his fiction we find considerations of political topics like Nazism, strikes, conquests, political assassinations, civil strife, Latin American political history, law enforcement and legislative institutions, among others. His non-fiction also deals with the topics of civil strife,

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<sup>1</sup> I rely here mainly on his pieces edited in English under the titles *Collected Fictions*, transl. by Andrew Hurley (Penguin Books, 1998); *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, transl. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and E. Weinberger (Penguin Books, 1998), and *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman (bilingual edition, Penguin Books, 1999). Quotations from these books appear hereafter as CF, SNF and SP, respectively. I have also translated and included references to different editions and interviews in Spanish when necessary to better illustrate the arguments. For Borges' biographical information in English see James Woodall, *The Man in The Mirror of the Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Hodder Headline, 1996) and Norman T. Di Giovanni, *The Lesson of the Master: On Borges and His Work* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003); in Spanish, see Alicia Jurado, *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1997 [1964]) and Borges and Di Giovanni, *Autobiografía 1899-1970* (Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 1999. First published in the *New Yorker* on 9/19/1970 as "Autobiographical Notes" and later on included in Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, New York, 1970).

colonization, nationalism and political behaviour, especially during the Second World War. Among his poems, “The Dagger”, “General Quiroga Rides to his Death in a Carriage”, “The Cyclical Night”, and “Oda Written in 1966”, also provide examples of the importance of politics as reflected in his life and writings.<sup>2</sup>

In the texts and opinions here under analysis, Borges conveys a political philosophy that rests on the belief in a self-sufficient individual, the pre-eminence of individual liberty and responsibility, a distrust of government, and nostalgia for anarchy understood as a self-organized order. Borges’ intention was not to persuade on political philosophical issues but to take them as inspiration for his writings, inspiration that reflects –but does not intend to do so- his political opinions. So although his intention was not to philosophize, he did use philosophical ideas as topics for his writings. As stated in several interviews and writings, many of these political ideas converge in his adherence to liberal anarchism.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in spite of his staunch defence of individualism and liberty, his writings emphasize the essential fallibility of individuals, understood in Popper’s terms as “the realization that all of us may and often do err, singly and collectively.”<sup>4</sup> Borges also lamented the pernicious political effects of civic isolationism caused by individualism, which induces people to be indifferent to the ends of political association.<sup>5</sup>

A double paradox seems to emerge from Borges’ simultaneous belief in the ideas of a politically self-sufficient but radically fallible individual, on the one hand, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the references for these topics are the following: Nazism (CF:81,157,229,391), strikes (CF:216), conquests (CF:208), political assassinations (CF:143,326), civil strife (CF:336, SNF:186), Latin American political history (CF:390,472) law enforcement (CF:212), legislative institutions (CF:407;422), colonization (SNF:250), nationalism (SNF:420), political behaviour (SNF:197-212), “The Dagger” (SP:17), “General Quiroga ...” (SP:41), “The Cyclical Night” (SP:151), “Oda Written in 1966” (SP:237).

<sup>3</sup> In Borges’ words: “I am a modest spencerian anarchist” (J. Soler Serrano, “Entrevista a Borges” (1980), uploaded May 2007, accessed from <http://es.youtube.com/watch?v=7ER919AtOgA>); “I believe that in time we will have reached the point where we will deserve to be free of government” (CF: 345); “In all political regimes... the State is annulling the individual” (Carlos Mongé, “Conversaciones con Jorge Luis Borges”, Chile: *Revista de Estudios Públicos* 75, 1999), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (USA & Canada: Routledge, 2000 [1963]), 16.

<sup>5</sup> J.L.Borges and Osvaldo Ferrari, *Reencuentros. Diálogos inéditos* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999 [1985]), 111-112. I thought of Tocqueville when writing this sentence. Borges’ fears closely resemble the French author’s since for both authors an indifferent individualism is a cognitive rather than a sentimental error, and its isolationism works against the strength of the political community, facilitating the emergence of despotism. See A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1969), 506-509.

concomitant ideal of a strong individual and the yearning for an orderly civic life, on the other. How could self-sufficient individuals live in an anarchistic regime if they are unable to do much in and by themselves? Isn't human fallibility better cushioned or corrected with the help of political institutions? Can anarchism be compatible with his call for an orderly civic life?

As a response to these questions and as a tentative resolution of the paradox I will posit two hypotheses. First, in Borges' texts fallibility appears to be less problematic in anarchism than in alternative regimes, because in the former the consequences of error or deceit are less threatening to the individual than in the latter. In an anarchic condition individuals are self-sufficient and live without coercing others; under non-anarchistic regimes governments tend to engage in arrogant and oppressive courses of action that foster conflicts and wars. Admittedly, Borges' political man is strong or self-sufficient in a primitive way, since he forgoes social cooperation, material prosperity or great achievements.<sup>6</sup> But this primitive self-sufficiency seems to him preferable to the exposure to coercion in other political settings, because it is envisioned as a free and peaceful order. At the end of the day, he thinks that fallibility is not corrected, but enhanced by existing political practices and institutions, as opposed to a liberal anarchist order where the individual is less fallible, because she is less pretentious and/or less deceived about the oppressive tendency of political activities. If for Borges natural man is unable to understand or do much, he is at least capable of grasping the dangers of political coercion and of preventing it by living in a self-organized albeit primitive order.

Second, with regard to the tension between Borges' case for a strong individual and his simultaneous yearning for an orderly civic life, I will argue that the two elements may be reconciled by looking at Borges' advocacy of an ethics of self-restraint, which would allow for a self-enforcing and orderly political life. Borges' is a minimal notion of ethics applied to relations among individuals in society and tied to the values of duty and law-

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<sup>6</sup> In this sense Borges' notion of self-sufficiency is not Aristotelian, on account of its isolationism. For Aristotle self-sufficiency is not "that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Chapter 7). Borges' stance is closer to Emerson's concept of "Self-Reliance", in which the individual isolates himself to keep the "independence of solitude" that allows for self-trust in accepting his place on earth and in working accordingly. See Ralph W. Emerson, *Essays and Poems* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 260,263. I thank Doug Den Uyl for calling my attention to this comparison.

compliance.<sup>7</sup> For him, an ethical conduct thus understood is indispensable to the well functioning of a self-organized society since, absent the government, ethics replaces coercion as a means of assuring order. Conceptually, in this view ethics works both as a foundation and as the result of such order: self-restraint makes a self-organized society possible, and in the absence of coercive structures, ethics constitutes the reference and guide for individual actions. For Borges, liberal anarchism without an ethics of self-restraint - that is, an isolated individualism in conjunction with lawlessness –generates violence and political interference unfailingly.

The development of these arguments is structured as follows: in section one I look at the place of the individual in Borges' writings, by contrasting his philosophical notion of a fallible individual with his case for a strong, self-sufficient political man. In section two I analyze his anarchistic vision and the critique of political interference latent in his stories "The Congress" and "Avelino Arredondo." In section three I address his call for an ethics of self-restraint as a presupposition for his normative defence of anarchism, by looking at "The Bribe" and his essay "Our Poor Individualism." I conclude with a summary of these insights and a comment on Borges' contribution to the relation between literature and politics.

## I. The Individual in Philosophy, Art and Politics

Borges' texts repeatedly remind the reader of the limits and the insignificance of the individual and the complexity of the universe, where the individual dissipates in a "universal mythology",<sup>8</sup> a situation that is paralleled in his fiction to the "dissolution of

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<sup>7</sup> I speak of a minimal notion of ethics in the texts under analysis since, strictly speaking, ethical norms encompass more than dealing with others; they also concern how we should live. In turn, political norms define the setting within which people carry on their ethical actions. For an elaboration of this idea see Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Ethics for a Non- Perfectionist Politics* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2005), 91. For Borges' broader treatment of ethics see his poems "The Just" (SP:455) and "De la salvación por las obras" ("On Salvation by Deeds") in J.L.Borges, *Obras Completas III, 1975-1985* (Barcelona: Emecé, 1989), 450. An account of ethical issues in Borges can be found in Zulma Mateos, *La filosofía en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 1998), 113-122.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Act of Illusion*, (New York: Lumen Books, 1995), 76.

characters” incidental to the plot.<sup>9</sup> The dissolution of characters is present in the Borgesian insistence that individuals dissolve in “archetypes”, for example in his description of the Lombard warrior as a “generic type”, in his view of Argentine *gauchos* and knife-fighters as embodying the archetypical courageous man, and in his idea of the archetypical hero as he who embarks in restoring justice to a corrupt world.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in many of his poems individuals do not play an important or independent role, but rather follow a design or a plot (usually in the form of a labyrinth), where they find themselves facing a destiny that most often they do not and can not understand.<sup>11</sup>

Borges’ notion of a mysterious cosmos, unknowable and consequently confusing or deceiving to the human eye<sup>12</sup> is the foundation of his epistemology of fallibility. However, the fact that our cognitive limitations prevent us from knowing or describing reality with certainty or exactitude does not imply that reality itself is disordered or chaotic. In his story “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” we read that reality may be ordered “in accordance with divine laws” that we can never “manage to penetrate”, and in “The Library of Babel” we are informed that reality is presented to us under “the same disorder” which, when repeated, “becomes Order”, an Order that is Borges’ “elegant hope.”<sup>13</sup>

The *appearance* of a cosmological chaos paves the way to the *hope* that there is an order and to the resignation that we can only make conjectures about what that order might be. Because of their radical fallibility, human beings should attempt to classify things and enumerate their attributes as long as they remain aware that those mental products are in essence arbitrary and subject to deconstruction. Far from decrying the uselessness of such

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<sup>9</sup> Sylvia Molloy, *Signs of Borges*, transl. Oscar Montero (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 40-47.

<sup>10</sup> See CF: 208; SNF:137;SNF: 401-404 and Borges, “Discurso de Aceptación del Premio Cervantes”, 1979, accessed from <http://www.terra.es/cultura/premiocervantes/ceremonia/ceremonia79-2.htm>). There is also a classification of politically-situated archetypes: the recurrence of war as the “cyclical battle of Waterloo” (SNF:213); a Western Culture associated with the fight against oppression (SNF:201; Borges, 1979), and an archetype of civil strife detectable in South American history (CP:159-161).

<sup>11</sup> For the idea of an unknown destiny in Borges see, among others, his poems “Poem of the Gifts” (SP: 95), “The Labyrinth” (SP: 275), “Chess” (SP: 103), “For a Version of *I Ching* (SP:383), “You Are Not The Others” (SP: 385). For his idea of a violent destiny see “The South”, “The Interloper” (1970, CF: 348-350) and “Conjectural Poem” (CP:159-161). On a nation’s destiny see as example his observations on Scandinavian countries (SNF:377-381).

<sup>12</sup> Alicia Jurado, *Genio y figura*, 120-121; Biagio D’Angelo, *Borges en el centro del infinito* (Lima: U. San Marcos/U. Católica, 2005), 105.

<sup>13</sup> CF:68-81 and CF:112-118, respectively.

tasks or of preaching despair, for Borges the cognitive enterprise is justified and merits the effort, in spite of its provisional results. Such is the concluding thought in “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”<sup>14</sup> an ironic piece where Borges deals with the topics of knowledge and language and with the problems of the representation, classification and expression of reality. He concludes that: “The impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe can not dissuade us from planning human schemes, even though it is clear they are provisional”.

The idea of a limited individual is central to Borges’ opinions on the role of the individual in art, and to his belief in the lack of individual artistic originality. Borges insisted that most artists just make a comment on the literary tradition, and that they grow out of, and within, the tradition of generations. In the introduction to *The Garden of Forking Paths* he remarks, “It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books - setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Borges’ portrayal of the literary world allows us to infer that literature is not an individualist, “privatized experience, a game of solitaire”<sup>16</sup> but rather a cooperative enterprise gradually unfolding in time, where each individual is able to provide a small personal contribution.

The limits of the individual in the world of art come through also in Borges’ opinions on the extent to which the artist knows what she is doing. Art, as the cosmos, is a mystery that cannot be explained: “The Rose has no Why” or “Art Happens.”<sup>17</sup> By the same token, artistic ends should be apolitical; the artist’s intentions need not be committed to a moral, social or political cause. “To talk of social art is like talking of vegetarian geometry”, Borges wrote in 1933.<sup>18</sup> He later criticized those who sustained what for him were two incompatible premises: “all license in art” and “art should prepare the revolution.”<sup>19</sup> Beyond the logical incompatibility between the notions of art for art’s sake and art in the service of political ends, Borges’ implication is that the political use of art would be

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<sup>14</sup> SNF:229-232.

<sup>15</sup> CF: 67.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Franco, “The Utopia of a Tired Man: Jorge Luis Borges”, *Social Text*, 1981, Vol. II:1, 78.

<sup>17</sup> SNF: 513,240.

<sup>18</sup> J. L. Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1931-1955*, (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2001), 343.

<sup>19</sup> SNF:192.

arrogant from an epistemic view: “The notion of art as compromise is a simplification, for no one knows entirely what he is doing.”<sup>20</sup>

For Borges a politically-engaged art is not only oxymoronic and arrogant but may also be misleading and dangerous. For one, it replaces the artistic standard with a political criterion: “Politics is ubiquitous, a writer is judged on the basis of his political opinions and not of his art.”<sup>21</sup> Secondly, politics might look for the imposition of a cultural model, thus threatening the liberty essential to the creative process. Borges’ case against nationalistic pretensions is proof of his opposition to artificially-imposed cultural models. For him, writers should not be coerced into the substance or the form of their works, but should address any topic “without reverence.”<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding the need to preserve artistic independence from the claws of politics, Borges acknowledged that the political might still have a function with regard to art: “the ends of art have to be distinguished from the excitations that produce it [that can be political].”<sup>23</sup> In this sense, the writer operates as a detached spectator who uses human actions and historical events to “entertain and fascinate.”<sup>24</sup> Borges himself is a testimony of the political *excitations*, since his tales, poems and essays abound in references to battles, tyrants, nostalgia for peace and individual freedom, and imaginary socio-political organizations. Strong as these excitations were, he declared he had tried to remain uncontaminated by political *intentions* in his works, as he asserts in 1970: “I have never hidden my opinions, even through the difficult years, but I have never allowed them to intrude upon my literary production, either, save that one time when I praised the Six-Day War.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> CF, 343. Likewise, the artist’s intentions and plans do not matter much, and they may even be ironically reversed, as was the case with Swift, who, according to Borges, wrote *Gulliver’s Travels* “to raise an indictment against mankind and instead left behind a children’s book” (SNF:327). Borges mentions at least one exception to the fact that artists’ intentions are not usually fulfilled, and that exception is the *Aeneid*: “Virgil set out to write a masterpiece; curiously, he succeeded” (SNF: 519).

<sup>21</sup> Borges and Ferrari, *Reencuentros*, 155.

<sup>22</sup> See his piece “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” (SNF: 420-427).

<sup>23</sup> Borges, *Textos recobrados*, 2001:343.

<sup>24</sup> SNF: 444.

<sup>25</sup> CF:346. The reference is to the poems “To Israel”, “Israel”, “Israel, 1969”, where Borges is inspired by Israel’s “courage”, as illustrated in the combative tone of the poems transmitted by the use of the words persecution, victory, rigor, battle and soldiers. The poems are included in J. L.

One politically inspired theme that animates many of Borges' works is his concern with governmental interference with individuals: "I believe, like the calm anarchist Spencer, that one of our maximum evils, perhaps the maximum, is the preponderance of the State over the individual.... The individual is real, the States are abstractions abused by politicians, with or without uniform."<sup>26</sup> This statement expresses the strength of individualism in Borges' vision of the political realm, in contrast to the philosophical condition of individual dissipation and the inter-generational nature of the literary enterprise. Moreover, unlike his philosophical pieces and poems where individuals submit themselves to a destiny, it has been pointed out that in his politically-situated stories individuals choose the regime in which they want to live.<sup>27</sup> In politics, individuals are strong enough to create their own destiny and, equally important, to take responsibility for that decision.

The character of a strong individual who chooses a political situation of his liking and takes responsibility for it is present, among other Borges stories, in "*Deutsches Requiem*", "Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden", "Pedro Salvadores", "A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz 1829-1874", and "The Etnographer."<sup>28</sup> An analysis of the plots of all these stories is impossible in a single article, but they feature characters who have to justify or make a choice of a political identity that will define who they are, or perhaps more tellingly, who they do not want to be. The best example of such a story may be "A Weary Man's Utopia", which the author characterized as the most honest and most melancholic piece, a sentiment perhaps reflected in the choice of the word "weary" for the title of the story.<sup>29</sup>

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Borges, *Obras Completas II, 1952-1972* (Barcelona: Emecé, 1996), 374,375,384. See below, note 58, for the appeal of courage to Borges.

<sup>26</sup> Borges, *Textos recobrados (1956-1986)*, (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2003), 305-306.

<sup>27</sup> D. Balderston, *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 95.

<sup>28</sup> CF: 229-234, CF: 208-211, CF: 336-33, CF:212-214, CF: 334-335, respectively. For an analysis of his stories along the same lines see "*Deutsches Requiem*" in A. Salinas, "Political Liberty and Individuality in Jorge Luis Borges' Fictions" (Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2002), and for "Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden", "The Etnographer" and "A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz 1829-1874", see A. Salinas, "Inequalities in Fiction: Frontier Encounters and Transformations in Jorge Luis Borges" (Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> The story was published in *The Book of Sand*, 1975, and included in CF:460-465. See also the afterword to the book (CF:484-485). Part of the analysis of the story is taken and revised from Salinas, "Political Liberty and Individuality".

“A Weary Man’s Utopia” is a time-traveling story in which Eduardo Acevedo - an ordinary, contemporary man- visits the future. There he encounters a man with whom he is only able to talk in Latin – all other languages have spontaneously disappeared - and who informs him of the changes that humanity had gone through. In the future world there are no public recollections of data, no history or literature, there are no books or museums and no more memories. We infer that the absence of linguistic, historical, and artistic differences (which would be registered in books, museums and memories, had they not disappear) has erased all motivations for interpersonal conflicts arising from clashing visions, thus turning the world into a peaceful place. As a result, people have no use for government. There is no inheritance either, and each person builds a house and makes the household goods he uses. Life may last at least four hundred years; in this scenario of lonely and self-sufficient individuals who can do without love and friendship, the latter eventually disappear, and individuals even decide when they want to die by walking into a death chamber.

Acevedo listens to his interlocutor, and –given that the man has no memories- informs him of the world where he comes from, one still haunted by “spectral collectives” and populated with “crippled” politicians, the triviality of mass media news, the importance of appearances (“to be is to be portrayed”) and the “frequent occurrence of robbery”. Both the old man and Acevedo express no feelings or surprise for their respective accounts, and they split at the door of the death chamber into which the old man walks. Acevedo returns to his office, where he hangs a blank canvas yet to be painted.

Two comments are in order: First, it is intriguing that an author who had previously emphasized the cooperative nature of literary, cultural and social pursuits wrote a story devoid of any social interaction, literary, emotional or political. If we take into account Borges’ insistence on human fallibility, however, the characterization of such setting as utopian makes sense. Only in such a setting are individuals relieved of the burdens of their fallibility and are able to engage in the performance of all functions - reading and writing, producing and consuming, living or dying- solely by themselves. The picture of an all-encompassing, infallible human being thus constitutes the boldest and greatest utopia of all. Furthermore, the people in the story do not possess any feelings of loneliness or grief or joy and hence do not offer laudatory or derogatory comments with regard to their situation.

Borges' utopian portrait of humanity removes important traits of a non-utopian condition, namely, fallibility and emotional frailty -and consequently erases their effects, from anxiety to literary dependency to political oppression.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, the plot speaks straightforwardly to the type of individualism that serves as the basis of Borges' political utopia, the self-sufficient individual.<sup>31</sup> Whereas in the world of Acevedo, individual identity depends on being perceived by others and individuals are haunted by countries and common markets, in the world of the future, individuals live separately and are in complete control of their lives and deaths. There are no governments, and wars have ceased. The story celebrates the absence of government and conveys Borges' impression that the individual had been historically threatened by the State, an organization he thought persistently interfered with individual liberty.

"A Weary Man's Utopia" was published in 1975, and hence can be seen as a summary of Borges' philosophical preoccupations and political sympathies. Long before that date, he had criticized political interference, which had for him specific victims: culture, literature, and, more broadly, the realm of thought and expression. Borges was actively engaged in the denunciation of this interference. In 1939 he lamented the effects of war among certain groups in Buenos Aires, conducive to "the extinction or abolishment of all intellectual processes",<sup>32</sup> and in 1946 he asserted that "Dictatorships foster oppression, dictatorships foster servitude, dictatorships foster cruelty; more abominable is the fact that they foster idiocy."<sup>33</sup> By 1950, in the context of China's Cultural Revolution, he is definitively convinced that "burning books and erecting fortifications are the usual occupations of princes."<sup>34</sup> The "usual occupations" of governments included, of course, the perpetration of wars, a tendency essentially inimical to the unity provided by culture. In

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<sup>30</sup> It is of course debatable whether the absence of feelings and desires can constitute an ideal; perhaps it is one in the stoic sense that it contributes to the tranquillity of mind. The pursuit of tranquillity would make sense in the case of Borges, who delighted in conversation and in exploring metaphysics but shunned the appeal of love and romance in most of his stories.

<sup>31</sup> I mentioned before that Borges shares Emerson's advocacy of a self-sufficient individual. They also agree on the idea that every form of government is corrupt. However, in "Utopia" their sympathies part away: Emerson's call for a "nation of friends" (Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 559-571) finds no place in Borges' solipsistic world of the future.

<sup>32</sup> SNF: 202.

<sup>33</sup> In Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Borges and Politics" (*Diacritics*, Vol. 8, 1978:55-69), 65.

<sup>34</sup> SNF: 344-346.

“Juan López and John Ward”<sup>35</sup> written shortly after the Falklands War, an English soldier reads the Quixote, an Argentine soldier reads Conrad, and their common literary interests are menaced by war. Borges’ resistance to political interference and to the dismantling of cultural unity triggered his adscription to liberal anarchism, to which I now turn my analysis.

## II. Politics as Interference vs. Liberal Anarchism: “The Congress” and “Avelino Arredondo”

Borges’ opinions on politics and on his own political affiliation have not been the object of much systematic analysis. This may be due to the fact that most works on Borges are literary, or to a suspicion that his opinions were perhaps quite controversial. Even critics like Vargas Llosa, who shares Borges’ concern for individual liberty and contempt for any form of collectivism, dismisses Borges’ political stance as “something that does not mean much.”<sup>36</sup>

It is precisely the scholars’ treatment of Borges’ liberal anarchism that captured my attention. Among those who first dealt extensively with the topic of politics in Borges are Rodríguez Monegal, who explains Borges’ political preferences as the result of a gradual withdrawal from reality because of his progressive blindness, and Balderston, who argues for a historical or contextual reading of his stories.<sup>37</sup> Yet in Balderston’s index there is no reference to liberalism or anarchy, and he labels the magazine *Sur*, where Borges published frequently, as anti-fascist and pacifist without specifying if it was conservative, communist, anarchist (or any other). Rodríguez Monegal mentions Borges’ joining the Conservative Party as a result of the influence of family and friends, and not as an affiliation chosen, to use Borges’ words, as an “act of scepticism”<sup>38</sup> and as a reaction against political “barbarism”, which he associated with populist and fascist regimes.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Borges, *Obras Completas III*, 500.

<sup>36</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, “Borges, político” (*Letras Libres*, November 1999, at [www.letraslibres.com](http://www.letraslibres.com)).

<sup>37</sup> Rodríguez Monegal, “Borges and Politics”, 67; Balderston, *Out of Context*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> CF: 345. In any case Borges’ “act of scepticism” in time applied to the Conservative Party itself, from which he later disaffiliated, so that by 1980 he explicitly declares that he “belongs to no

Among those who acknowledge Borges' liberal anarchism there is somehow a partial or incorrect reading of it. Franco assimilates Borges' political philosophy to a libertarianism that "privileges the freedom of the powerful and is not concerned with liberation from economic oppression"; for González, Borges' anarchism is a theme that appears late in his works after he had abandoned the hope of a liberal government; according to Bell-Villada, Borges' "urbane liberalism" is an "idealist intellectual's interpretation; it sees political turmoil being brought about not by economic dislocations but by the mass appeal of a few seductive ideas"; and Rodríguez Luis aligns Borges with "European bourgeois liberalism."<sup>40</sup>

To a certain extent these authors capture the spirit of Borges' stance, since he was indeed uninterested in economic analysis (and in economic issues at large), and he intensified his anarchism as the years increased as well as his suspicion that government interferes with individuals. Yet to think that his anarchism appears only late in his works, or to relate it to the freedom of a privileged few, or only to Europe, is to overlook several facts. For one, we know from his autobiography that he acquired his liberal anarchistic opinions early on from his father.<sup>41</sup> Second, Borges did not identify with the "privileged few"; on the contrary, when writing an autobiographical note he declared that he "rejoiced in belonging to the bourgeoisie... the plebs and the aristocracy, devoted to money, gaming,

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party". See Daniel Bourne, "A Conversation with Jorge Luis Borges", *Artful Dodge* (April 25, 1980, accessed from <http://www.wooster.edu/artfuldodge/interviews/borges.htm>).

<sup>39</sup> See his articles compiled under the title "Notes on Germany and the War" where we read that Hitler's "only possible lesson is barbarism" (SNF: 203). Fascist ideas had spread rapidly among many Argentines, who Borges described as deriving pleasure in evil and atrocity (SNF:205). His criticism of Nazism gained him recognition by an anti-fascist editorial community that awarded him the *Prix Formentor* in 1961, which brought him his international fame and resulted in the translation of his works to several languages (Woodall, *The Man in The Mirror ...*, 193).

<sup>40</sup> Franco, "The Utopia...", 58; Gene Bell-Villada, *Borges and his Fiction: A Guide to his Mind and Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999 [1971]), 273-274; Julio Rodríguez Luis, "La intención política en la obra de Borges: hacia una visión de conjunto", *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 1980:170-199, 179; José L. González, *Borges and the Politics of the Form* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 198.

<sup>41</sup> Borges and Di Giovanni, *Autobiografía*, 30. Other authors also trace Borges' anarchist inclination to the influence of Macedonio Fernández, a writer and a close friend of his father who Borges met regularly (see Diego Tatián, "Borges y la política", n/d, p.13-14, accessed from <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/etext/llilas/vrp/tatian.pdf>, and Bell-Villada, *Borges and his Fiction*, 18-19. Whether Fernández introduced these ideas to Borges' father, or viceversa, is irrelevant to the fact that they both transmitted their anarchistic sympathies to the writer.

sports, nationalism, success and publicity, seemed to him identical.”<sup>42</sup> Third, his thought should not be traced back to European influences only, since as it has been convincingly argued Borges is better understood at the crossroads of European and local, *criollo* influences.<sup>43</sup> Finally, except for González<sup>44</sup> the issue of Borges’ liberal anarchism has remained under-analyzed, despite Borges’ own insistence on it.

So what was Borges’ liberal anarchism? According to Sylvan the term anarchy means “without head” and implies a decision-making process dispersed among all members of a polity, as opposed to governmental coercion and closed ideas of authority.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, anarchy is not the Hobbesian depiction of the war of all against all, nor does it carry a connotation of disorder, but is rather a political stance that sees the State as corrupt, intrusive and aggressive. However, as with many political concepts, anarchy is a noun that needs to be accompanied by adjectives to avoid confusions. Conceptually, anarchy can be compatible with a communist organization that is inimical to liberalism insofar the latter defends a notion of private property absent in the former. From this angle, Borges considered himself a liberal anarchist, since he made it clear that “(...) no one has ever called me a Communist, a nationalist, an anti-semita (...).”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, his anarchistic dislike for the State translated into a distrust of the political *per se*, indistinctively understood as partisan activities, the activity of governing or as the establishment of national boundaries and identities. He was indeed reluctant to admit that countries should be a valid or at least a primordial category of political organization: “As I think of the many myths, there is one that is very harmful, and that is the myth of countries (...) All of those

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<sup>42</sup> Borges, *Obras Completas III*, 505.

<sup>43</sup> Rodríguez Luis, “La intención política...”, 193; Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London: Viterbo, 1993), 14, accessed in 2002 from *Borges Studies on Line*, [www.hum.au.dk/romansk/borges](http://www.hum.au.dk/romansk/borges)

<sup>44</sup> Even González (*Borges and the Politics...*, 180-186), who dedicates six pages to the analysis of Borges’ anti-fascist stance, leaves only one page to the analysis of his anarchism, which he reluctantly sees as the last stage of Borges’ individualism.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Sylvan, “Anarchism”, in Goodin, R. and Pettit, P., *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 232.

<sup>46</sup> CF:345. From Gaus, G. and Kukathas, Ch., *Handbook of Political Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 129, I gather that a synonym for liberal anarchism could be market anarchism or anarcho-capitalism. However, given Borges’ indifference to economic issues in his case I prefer to use the adjective liberal in its broader connotation.

myths that we impose on ourselves- and they make for hatred, for war, for enmity- are very harmful.”<sup>47</sup>

Borges’ political stance had an historical as well as an intellectual source, and these sources converged in his critique of politics for interfering with individual endeavours by means of conflict, death, and humiliation. Civil strife and war were obviously the most extreme forms of state interference with individuals, generally, and particularly with Borges’ own ancestors and family. His relative Francisco Laprida was killed in the Argentine civil wars of the 1820’s, an event he depicts in the famous “Conjectural Poem.”<sup>48</sup> His great-grand father Isidoro Suárez fought in the wars of independence and was later exiled from Argentina due to civil strife, as he evokes in the poem “A Page to Commemorate Coronel Suárez, Victor at Junín.”<sup>49</sup> His grandfather, coronel Francisco Borges, served in a frontier post and died in a battle; his other grandfather, Isidoro Acevedo, took part in the wars of unification in 1860’s.<sup>50</sup> Although he died old and peacefully, his grandson envisioned him “killed by an army of shadows ... in a dream for his motherland.”<sup>51</sup>

There were other contemporary forms of political interference that attracted the writer’s attention. The growth of fascism forced him to speak against the domestic and foreign policies implemented since the early 1930’s in his country and intensified during General Perón’s administration.<sup>52</sup> As a consequence of his political opinions, Borges was

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<sup>47</sup> Bourne, “A Conversation...”.

<sup>48</sup> Written during Perón’s administration, “Conjectural Poem” (CP:159-161) had, according to the author, a double meaning: to narrate Laprida’s death to the hands of the barbarians, and to associate barbarism with the *peronist* regime (Mongé, “Conversaciones con...”, 11). For Borges barbarian was anyone devoted to the use of violence and war. In Argentina, he associated barbarism with the *caudillos* (populist leaders who resorted to violence as a means of governing) such as Rosas and Perón (Borges, *Obras Completas III*, 505-507).

<sup>49</sup> SP:169.

<sup>50</sup> Di Giovanni, *The Lesson...*, 68.

<sup>51</sup> Borges, *Obras Completas I-II*, 87. For further details of nineteenth-century Argentine military history and its effect on Borges’ family see John Irwin, *The Mystery to A Solution: Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story*, (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 166, and Balderston, *Out of Context*, 87-88.

<sup>52</sup> The “Manifiesto de escritores y artistas”, [“A Manifest of Writers and Artists”] published in the magazine *Antinazi* on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1945 (reprinted in Borges, *Textos recobrados (1931-1955)*, 355) illustrates this criticism. Directed against the military government with Nazi inclinations, the manifest - signed among others by Borges- condemns Argentina’s international isolation imposed by a “succession of governments divorced from popular will” and calls for elections and democracy. President Perón was later elected by the popular will, but he continued the policy of

dismissed from his position as Director of the National Library and was mockingly appointed Inspector of Poultry and Rabbits, an office he declined. In 1948, also under Perón's presidency, his only sister Norah spent a month in jail, and his mother was placed under house arrest for having "disturbed the public order" when singing the national anthem in the street.<sup>53</sup> Besides Argentina's political problems, world history also gave him sufficient cause to protest. He and his family had to rush back home from Europe at the beginning of World War I, and at the outbreak of World War II he found himself surrounded by fascist sympathizers in Buenos Aires.

Intellectually, Borges adhered to Herbert Spencer's staunch defence of individualism and his distrust of government intervention in individual and social life. Spencer develops these ideas especially in his work *The Man vs. The State*, where he writes that "the great political superstition of the present is the divine right of parliaments."<sup>54</sup> But Borges goes even farther than Spencer (who had ideas about how a *proper* parliament would act) and contests the very idea of representation in "The Congress", a story that calls into question the possibility of successfully representing and averaging the multiplicity of individualities in a single representative body. It is worth examining the plot more closely to bring out Borges' critique of the way political institutions function.

"The Congress"<sup>55</sup> - which bears a "kafkian" title to his author<sup>56</sup> - was inspired by the case of Anacharsis Cloots, an eighteenth-century French baron who dreamt of a universal family of nations, about whom Borges probably read in the Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition.<sup>57</sup> Anacharsis Cloots is replaced by Alexander Glencoe in an ironic tale

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isolation by pledging neutrality during rest of the War. Borges' adersion to Perón's regime became more pronounced, as did his critique of populism, which he associated with democratic politics until the early 1980's (see González, *Borges and the Politics*, 196, n.31).

<sup>53</sup> Woodall, *The Man in The Mirror*, 159.

<sup>54</sup> H. Spencer, *The Man versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society and Freedom*, ed. Eric Mack (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics 1981 [1884]),123. Scott Gordon in *The History and Philosophy of Social Science* (Londond: Routledge, 1991, 412-438) offers an extensive analysis of Spencer's ideas on social evolution, minimal government, social ethics and individualist methodology and his widespread influence among nineteenth-century academics and intellectuals.

<sup>55</sup> CF: 422-436.

<sup>56</sup> Borges, *Autobiografía*, 151.

<sup>57</sup> In 1790 in the company of thirty-six foreigners and in the name of this embassy of the human race, Cloots declared that the world adhered to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. He took his pseudonym from Anacharsis, a philosopher of Scythia who lived in Athens in early VI BC. Source: Wikipedia, based in the Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition. Young

about the attempt, and eventual failure, of a small group to form a body that could represent “all people of all nations”. In the story, set in the 1970’s, the narrator Alexander Ferri is a poor man who as a young student had arrived in Buenos Aires to make a living. Nothing extraordinary occurs to him until decades later, when he is invited to attend the meetings of a small group that assembles weekly for the purpose of doing something “more important and more secret” than the activities carried at the “pompous, dome-capped building” (an allusion to the real legislative body). The members of this Congress do not know what their exact role or purpose is. Ferri infers that they are “to discover gradually and without haste the goals that the Congress sought.” The chairman is Glencoe, a rancher from Uruguay, who had failed to become a Congressman and had decided to found another Congress of greater scope.

Eventually the number of delegates to the Congress starts to grow. Inspired by the love of their job, some of them renounce their honoraria, and those who are not willing to do so leave, so that “only the faithful remained.” As the debates unfold, someone warns that the problem with the Congress is that “designing a body of men and women which would represent all humanity was akin to fixing the exact number of Platonic archetypes, an enigma that has engaged the perplexity of philosophers for centuries.” How many and what types of classes were to be represented? The ghost of John Wilkins appears at this point in the form of the humorous categories of representation that Borges suggests presents: “ranchers, Uruguayans, founding fathers, red-bearded men and men sitting in armchairs.” Which should be represented? And “was one engineer sufficient to represent all engineers, even engineers from New Zealand?” In the task of finding a category for each delegate, Ferri is scornfully made the representative of wops by another delegate, Fermín Eguren. Chairman Glencoe immediately corrects Eguren and instructs Ferri to be the representative of immigrants, “whose labors are even now helping to build the nation”.

Besides the “Platonic” difficulty of matching the diversity of reality with the idea of representation, the Congress also experiences the concrete problems Borges thinks characterize political organizations generally: overexpansion, rivalry, flattery, and the

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Borges read the latter edition every night (Christ, *The Narrow Act*, 280), and he picked it as one of the five books that he would take to an island, together with two volumes of Gibbons’ *Decline and Fall*, Russell’s *Introduction to Math* (or a book by Henri Poincaré) and the Bible (see the 1963 interview with Mario Vargas Llosa, “Entrevista a Jorge Luis Borges”, accessed from <http://www.clubcultura.com/clubliteratura>).

burning of books. The overexpansion of Congressional activities is depicted in the accumulation of printed material. Members of the Congress first realize it can “not do without a library of reference books”; later they decide that the library should include “classics of every land and every language,” and the list is eventually expanded to contain newspapers and “random collections of university dissertations, short stories, bulletins and theater programs.” As the library grows, the packages begin piling up, without being catalogued and in improper places such as a wine cellar. The overexpansion of the Congress is also reflected in spurious expenditures. Since the delegates have to agree to the use of a common language to be used during their meetings, Ferri and Eguren are sent to London and Paris, respectively, to “do research.” Both stay longer than initially instructed, squandering money for unofficial purposes. Ferri has a romantic affair (that he later discloses with remorse), and Eguren delays his return for the mere pleasure of being in Paris, where he spends “vast sums” of money.

Flattery and rivalry also characterized the meetings, where, according to the narrator, almost all the delegates speak to seek the approval of the chairman. Since only some delegates had remained after renouncing the payment of honoraria, their flattery of the chairman reveals the non-pecuniary aspects of the love of power, strong enough to find expression even among the “faithful.” The rivalry between Ferri and Eguren present in their attempts to attract the leader’s attention also points to the need for courage, a recurrent theme in Borges’ work.<sup>58</sup> Eguren is terrified one night when faced by an armed man, and is humiliated by Ferri’s quick and effective reaction that challenges the aggressor to a duel and forces him into retreat. The humiliation that Eguren feels is ironic, since he had thought of Ferris as the “representative of wops,” and not as helping to “build the nation.” In his eyes, wops are useless, but in protecting him from an illegal violent death, Ferri had shown that he was indeed of great use. By protecting Eguren, can Ferri been seen to be contributing to the construction of a peaceful nation? On the one hand, the protection of the

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<sup>58</sup> To Borges’ eyes, “the religion of courage” had provided unity to the Argentines. In a 1955 piece Borges imagines the mission of tango “to give Argentines the belief in a brave past, in having met the demands of honor and bravery” (“A History of Tango”, SNF:397-399). Courage stands out in this essay as a condition proper of some argentines, like gauchos and knife-fighters, but is not limited to them, for it is an “old cult” traceable to the Icelandic Sagas. Moreover, it is a faith based on “an awareness that God may be found in any man” (SNF:403-404). For a connection between courage and politics in Borges’ stories, and for an elaboration on his late repentance of his “cult” of courage see Salinas, “Inequalities in Fiction”.

right to live is a necessary implementation of the rule of law, which is, in turn, a major building block of a peaceful nation. On the other hand, by attempting to engage in a duel rather than calling the police, Ferri was bypassing and possibly undermining the institution of law and order, in effect, by taking the enforcement of the law into his own hands. It is not possible to see from this single story whether Borges thinks that the police are irremediably ineffective or corrupt and that Ferri was, therefore, justified.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the chairman orders the group to burn all the books in the Library: “Every few centuries the Library of Alexandria must be burned,” he says, and so confirms Borges’ opinion about the prince’s “usual occupations.” In deciding to burn the books without consulting with the deliberative body, Chairman Glencoe acts according to another of Borges’ views concerning the tendencies of politicians: the disposition to abuse power. Strangely enough, nobody in the story reacts negatively to his decision, perhaps they already knew what was about to happen, or perhaps they always felt the Chairman would have the final word. In any case, when he hears from Glencoe that the Congress is not a specially defined group of people but that it “embraces the entire world,” Ferri promptly agrees and thinks that “The Congress truly and secretly exists, it is the universe and ourselves,” a statement that points directly to the inadequacy of any form of representation, and consequently to the inadequacy of modern representative governments as we know them. At the end of the day the efforts to create the Congress fail, not because of Glencoe’s authoritarian will or the group’s internal disputes, but due to their fallibility, that is, their failure to grasp the truth of the complexity of “universe”.

Just as “The Congress” addresses the problems of representation, so “Avelino Arredondo” is set in the context of a dysfunctional regime that provokes a political assassination. Both stories reflect the recurrent problems of politics as Borges sees them; in a way the first story presents the causes of those problems and the second story depicts their

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<sup>59</sup> Borges suggests a reason that Argentines generally did not obey the laws when he observes that Argentines do not identify with the State because “governments in this country tend to be awful” (SNF:309). For an account of the Argentine disrespect of the State as causing an endemic legal anomie and socioeconomic underdevelopment see Carlos Nino, *Un país al margen de la ley* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2005), who proposes civic education and institutional reform as remedies. But Nino begs the problem that Borges detects: among the public officials, who and why and how are they supposed to implement civic education programs and institutional reform, if most of the officials “tend to be awful”?

most extreme effect. “Avelino Arredondo”<sup>60</sup> is based in a real event that took place in Uruguay in 1897, when President Juan Idiarte Borda was killed by a young man of his own Colorado Party, which was ruling the country amidst civil conflicts and war.<sup>61</sup> The killer was Arredondo, a young clerk and student of law disenchanted with the cronyism and factionalism of political bosses and party machineries. He resorted to political assassination in what, he later declared, was the only way of achieving justice and restoring political stability to his country.<sup>62</sup>

Borges’ story focuses on Arredondo’s careful preparations for the crime. Months before the selected date, he tells his friends and his fiancée that he is going to the country for a while and bids them goodbye. He then spends months inside his house, with the Bible, his servant and the rain as his only companions. During his long seclusion, he plays chess and awaits the moment of his “joy and liberation.” Occasionally, he thinks of his fiancée but instantly drives the thought away and reminds himself that he should not long for what is unavailable. One night he goes out to a bar and runs into a group of soldiers who shout that it is “outlawed to give news about battles” and insist that he say *Viva el Presidente!* [Long live the President!]. Arredondo complies with their order despite his hatred of the President, but he tells himself he is not a coward, as he proves on August 25<sup>th</sup> when he shoots President Idiarte Borda in a public parade and turns himself in. He then declares that he had broken with his friends and his fiancée so as not to implicate them, and that he had not looked at newspapers so that nobody could say they had incited him into the crime. Claiming to have acted alone, he is convicted of the crime and imprisoned.

“Avelino Arredondo” is the application of the Borgesian notion of politics as interference in a concrete historical event.<sup>63</sup> The plot transpires in the context of enduring instability, the use of force and clientelism to sustain power, and the consequent civil conflict leading to war and murder. There is a vivid contrast between these violent

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<sup>60</sup> CF: 472-476.

<sup>61</sup> A. Hurley, “Notes to the Fictions”, in CF:563-564.

<sup>62</sup> D. Alvarez Ferretjens, *Crónica del Periodismo en el Uruguay*, (Montevideo: Fundación Hanns Seidel/Ingenio S.A.,1986), 285, in Belén Riguetti, “Periódicos: museos de minucias efímeras”, 2006:9, accessed from [http://www.analisis.edu.uy/monografias/riguetti\\_periodicos.pdf](http://www.analisis.edu.uy/monografias/riguetti_periodicos.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> Although “Avelino Arredondo” is situated in South America, the theme of political assassination is not uniquely identified with that region. Borges also deals with an individual who commits a politically-inspired murder in his one-page “In Memoriam, J.F.K” (CF: 326), where he observes that the killer of Kennedy acted alone, as did the killers of Cain, Lincoln and Idiarte Borda.

conditions and Arredondo, who acts to secure peace and assumes the responsibility for that action with serenity. There is no explicit evaluation of Arredondo's actions in the story; the reader witnesses an account of the facts and of his feelings in the same way that he would read them in a newspaper chronicle. The text must not be read as an apology for violence or of political assassination, but rather as an expression of Borges' interest in taking political events as inspiration for his stories. Given that political factions and their devastating effects have been rampant in Latin American history, it seems only natural that Borges would deal with these topics in his fiction.

The issue of factions in the story brings to mind Madison's fear that, in seeking to eliminate factions, the cure would be worse than their effects. Borges replicates Madison's fear, but he does not share the hope that an extended republic would mitigate the evil effects of faction, because of his doubts about any representative regime succeeding in such task. So, where Madison talks of the necessity of government due to the non-angelical nature of men,<sup>64</sup> Borges defends liberal anarchy due to the non-angelical nature of politicians. Read together with "The Congress," "Avelino Arredondo" highlights the shortcomings and impediments -conceptual and factual- in the working of all political institutions.

However, Arredondo's crime is also an example of fallible human nature on account of his mistaken belief that an assassination is an acceptable and effective means of solving a country's instability. To see why Borges might think the fallibility of self-sufficient individuals might be less problematic in anarchy than in alternative regimes, we should ask: would Avelino's crime have taken place in an anarchistic setting devoid of the struggles for political representation? I venture to say that probably not. Since the crime took place, and civil strife was rampant, the question is which of the two - anarchism or the established regime- is worse in its effects. Leaving aside utilitarian calculations about the number of victims in each scenario, Avelino's intention is to fight against the uniformity imposed by Idiarte's faction, whilst from the soldiers and Avelino we gather that Idiarte aims at erasing opposite factions altogether. Again, as Madison observed, "The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man" (...) "that the *causes* of faction cannot be removed; and

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<sup>64</sup> Publius, "Federalist No.51", in Madison, Hamilton and Jay, *The Federalist*, ed. G. Carey and J. McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001 [1787-1788]), 269.

that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its *effects*.”<sup>65</sup> Arredondo fights authoritarianism because he understands the need to combat the effects of factions. The soldiers are deceived into supporting an authoritarian regime that promises order by suppressing opposition, but that succeeds only in fostering widespread violence. At the end of the day, and when compared to Arredondo’s motivations, the existing political regime seems to be a more egregious example of human fallibility.

Borges’ story was inspired by a pamphlet written by Luis Melián Lafinur (*Causa política de Avelino Arredondo*, 1898), the counsellor for Arredondo’s defence and Borges’ second uncle.<sup>66</sup> In an afterword to the book, Borges informs us that his uncle had asked that Arredondo be pardoned, but that the judges sentenced him to five years in prison. According to Bolón, the perspective of Melián Lafinur’s pamphlet is diametrically opposed to Borges’ inasmuch as it defends the *collective* nature of the crime.<sup>67</sup> When justifying his stance, the counsellor argued that governments inspired fratricide and murder, and that civil wars foster insanities like Avelino’s. He concluded that Avelino should be pardoned, therefore, because he acted out of “patriotic and noble motives.” In reversing Melián Lafinur’s argument by pointing to the *individualistic* nature of the crime, Borges insists on the pre-eminence of individual choice and individual responsibility.

Borges not only highlights Arredondo’s stature but assigns him a place in the nation’s political memory by (mis)informing in the afterword that a street in Montevideo bears Arredondo’s name. This information is inexact and also ironical, because it is supposed to be based on microfilms of the newspaper, *El Día*, dated August 20<sup>th</sup> -31<sup>st</sup>, 1897, which contained the news and comments on the crime, and *La Razón*, dated August 26<sup>th</sup>, that had long disappeared from the National Library in Montevideo.<sup>68</sup> The disappearance is not surprising, because *El Día* had been the voice of the Colorado Party in opposition to Idiarte and *La Razón* had published a long article accusing Idiarte of being solely responsible for

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<sup>65</sup> Publius, “Federalist No. 10”, in Madison, Hamilton and Jay, *Ibid.*, 43-45. Italics in the original.

<sup>66</sup> Paulo Rocca, “El Uruguay de Borges”, (*Fragmento* 28/29, Florianópolis, 2005), 215, accessed from <http://www.periodicos.ufsc.br/index.php/fragmentos/article/viewFile/8142/7560>

<sup>67</sup> Alma Bolón, “Avelino Arredondo. Diversas ficcionalizaciones de un acontecimiento histórico”, in *Variaciones Borges*, July 2005, accessed from [http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi\\_0199-5042003/Avelino-Arredondo-diversas-ficcionalizaciones-de.html](http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-5042003/Avelino-Arredondo-diversas-ficcionalizaciones-de.html)

<sup>68</sup> Bolón, “Avelino Arredondo”, 2005.

the failure of the pacification attempts.<sup>69</sup> Borges was aware of this historical lacuna and rescued Arredondo from oblivion by making him part -at least in fiction- of the construction of the national memory.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to taking personal responsibility for his own actions, Borges' Arredondo is exemplary in knowing that he is able to carry out the task he has set for himself, and adhering to his understanding of his civic duty to help restore order to his country. Avelino complies with the soldiers' command at the bar not because he is a coward; he is not. He obeys in order to remain unnoticed and perhaps to remind himself that he had a higher aim. In detaching himself from the affection of his friends and his fiancée, he exercises a sort of emotional self-restraint for the sake of a political cause. He often thinks tenderly of those he loves, but he knows that they cannot be involved in the execution of his plan. In these regards, Avelino embodies not only the self-sufficient and responsible political man, but equally importantly, the self-aware and self-restrained embodiment of the demands of civic ethics. The fact that Avelino is misguided about how to achieve stability does not invalidate the priority these demands had for him. I will further analyze the issue of civic ethics and its political implications in the next section.

### **III. Institutional Order and Civic Ethics. “The Bribe” and “Our Poor Individualism”**

Borges' case for liberal anarchism (constructed on the idea of a strong individual) and his simultaneous yearning for an orderly civil life may be reconciled by looking at the role of civic ethics in his stories and opinions, in which self-restraint is seen as the condition for an orderly institutional setting. For him, ethical conduct understood as compliance with the

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<sup>69</sup> Riguetti, “Periódicos”, 15.

<sup>70</sup> Borges thus puts into practice Appiah's notion that “the metaphor of a national memory has to be cashed out in terms of the stories that citizens tell one another about the nation, the tales they tell their children. These are produced from oral and literary traditions whose shape is the product of choices and decisions of exercises of power and acts of judgment and resistance—in short, of politics” (Kwame Appiah, “Global Citizenship”, *Fordham Law Review*, Vol. 77, N° 5, 2005:2375-2392, accessed from <http://law.fordham.edu/ihtml/page3.ihtml?imac=1137&pubID=500&articleid=2311>), 2386. It does not pertain to governments alone to decide who will belong to the national memory; it also belongs to the literary tradition, which may even be a stronger force.

expected social rules is indispensable to the good functioning of any human institution. Non-compliance as an attitude emerging from a self-interested individualism unconcerned with the rules of social order tends to generate conflict. In other words, individualism in conjunction with lawlessness - that is, liberal anarchism without an ethics of self-restraint is prone to generate political interference meant to resolve it resulting in violence.

The ethics of self-restraint envisioned by Borges mandates taking actions contrary to one's self-interest. This is shown in "The Bribe",<sup>71</sup> a tale about two professors working at the same university in the southern United States, Dr. Winthrop, a native of Boston, and young Professor Eric Einarsson, originally from Iceland. Winthrop is a scholar of Puritan origins who has "found it hard to adapt to the customs and prejudices of the South". At one point Winthrop has to advise the head of his department whether Einarsson or his friend, American Professor Locke, should chair a conference. Both possess sufficient academic credentials. Einarsson's "sharpness and impertinence had won him general dislike," but would make for a better moderator at the conference than Locke with his shy and taciturn disposition. An article is then published that indirectly calls into question Dr. Winthrop's pedagogical method; the article is signed by E.E. followed by the institutional affiliation of the author. A few days later, Einarsson is selected to chair the conference and comes to Winthrop's office to thank him. He then confesses that by publishing the article he had intended to use Winthrop's fair-mindedness to favour his own interest in chairing the conference, since the latter would feel ethically obliged to appoint someone who had criticized his work. Thus, Einarsson induces Winthrop to follow his "sense of right and wrong" with that "curious American passion for impartiality." In doing so, Winthrop consciously acts against his own self-interest in seeing his critic deprived of the position and ends up recommending him for the conference.

Borges wrote that "The Bribe" "could not have happened anywhere else," since it reflects what he admired about the American Protestant ethos: a commitment to "doing what is right" and to impartiality.<sup>72</sup> Borges' first visit to the U.S. was in 1961, which

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<sup>71</sup> CF: 466-471.

<sup>72</sup> See Borges and Di Giovanni, *Autobiografía*, 143. Could Winthrop's renunciation to self-interest have happened elsewhere? Borges' story "Guayaquil" (CF:390-396) also deals with an academic encounter between two professors working in Argentina, and parallels a historical meeting between two military heroes of the Latin American wars of independence, Bolívar and San Martín. After the meeting San Martín withdrew from the battlefield for reasons never made public. Contrary to the

possibly explains the growing presence of ethics in his late works. In the prologue to *In Praise of Darkness* (1969) he writes that “one of the virtues that make me prefer Protestant nations to Catholic ones is their concern for ethics.”<sup>73</sup> In the beginning of the story, the author contrasts the protestant ethos with the “prejudices of southern U.S.”; elsewhere, he contrasts it with South Americans, who “tend to think in terms of convenience” while “people in the United States have an ethical attitude.”<sup>74</sup>

The opposite of the American ethos is specially reflected in the Argentine case, which Borges lucidly analyzes in several essays. In the early piece “Our inabilities” (1931), Borges complains about the average Argentine person who “insists on irreconcilable differences with outsiders” and who refuses to “admit them as responsible members of this world.”<sup>75</sup> Winthrop’s decision to favour a foreigner with the Conference chair would have never occurred in the southern country, trapped in a “megalomaniac will” that predisposes people to “hate” each other. The concern for impartiality is replaced by a “poverty of imagination and resentment” that Borges criticizes “with no joy.”

Borges elaborated his comparison of the cultural ethos in North and South America in his 1933 article “A Sentence by Quixote” where he compares and distinguishes the Argentine/Spanish attitude towards law and order – which we may describe as suspicious and distant- with other western nations that possess “a passion for legality,” and in particular, with the American attitude pulled simultaneously by a passion for both “adventure and order.”<sup>76</sup> In his eyes, the American natural hero is the policeman, vigilante, or any person that collaborates with him in enforcing the law. No Argentine would praise this collaboration, and their natural hero may also be an assassin. If the Argentines feel “that law infringement is not a virtue,” they are also open to the idea that it may not be a sin.

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idea that in “Guayaquil” one of the professors stoically renounces to self-interest (Franco, “The Utopia of a Tired Man”,77), the plot is more about defeat inflicted by the winner’s strength of will, as is made clear by the fact that Schopenhauer is mentioned three times in the story. Winthrop’s decision thus remains unique, reflecting Borges’ opinion that it could not have happened elsewhere. For a historical background supporting the interpretation that Bolívar’s “victory” was mostly conferred by facts and not by San Martín’s stoic choice see E. Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 227-228.

<sup>73</sup> CF: 332.

<sup>74</sup> Borges and Di Giovanni, *Autobiografía*,144.

<sup>75</sup> SNF:56-58.

<sup>76</sup> “Una sentencia del Quijote”, in Borges, *Textos recobrados (1931-1955)*,62-65.

The Argentine ethos and its political implications are examined in the essay “Our Poor Individualism”,<sup>77</sup> where Borges looks at its origins and justification. He traces the indifference to legality back to the Spanish heritage, as illustrated by Don Quixote’s dictum: “Let each answer for his own sins. (...) It is not fitting that honest men should be the instruments of punishments inflicted on others, when they are in no way involved.”<sup>78</sup> When the concrete individual is not harmed, he should not take part in enforcing law or duty. Eventually, the individual finds his place living “at the margins or in spite of the government,” contributing to the creation of a culture of individualism unconcerned about the political community. Curiously, in this essay Borges finds this individualistic feature very promising, because in a time in which both fascism and communism had a growing appeal, he hoped that Argentine individualism would make a contribution to the world by “protecting the individual from the State.” In “A History of Tango” Borges repeats the idea that Argentines, unlike North Americans and most Europeans, do not identify with the State. For him, the State and by implication, its laws and regulations, are seen by his countrymen as constraining freedom.<sup>79</sup>

Decades later, his hope of an “Argentine contribution to the world” evaporated, when the writer realized that Argentina did not profit from the practice of isolated individualism, precisely because “politics is the contrary”; it is about “engaging with the whole.” The Argentine author argued that thinking in terms of concrete persons undermines the sense of community and crowds out thinking in terms of ethics, which is by definition the field of abstract and general rules.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the late Borges deplored the type of individualism indifferent to the community, one that breeds a lack of social ethics and causes civic disorder. Borges’ arguments here come full circle: given that only self-restrained

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<sup>77</sup> SNF: 309-310. The essay was first published in magazine *Sur* (1946) and included in his book *Otras Inquisiciones* (1952).

<sup>78</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, ed. Joseph Jones and K. Douglas (New York and London: Norton & Co., 1981), I:XXII, 157.

<sup>79</sup> SNF:397-399. For a similar view see the analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* by Catherine Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form* (Maryland: Rowman & LittleField, 1990), 146-151, who argues that in Twain’s American South the reluctance to obey the law and its situation of unprotected rights would maximize the role of force. Borges found a “physical closeness” between the American South and South America in their “blood relation” with history (SNF: 186). See also Irwin (*The Mystery...*, 169-171) for a comparison of Borges and another southern writer, Faulkner.

<sup>80</sup> Borges and Ferrari, *Reencuentros*, 109-112.

individuals can assure social order, in the political realm only a law-abiding ethos and the respect for impartiality can prevent the need or occasion for undue political interference and can make a liberal anarchistic setting plausible.

So what was to be done in those cases like Argentina where an unrestrained individualism had paved the way for political abuses? Borges' double reaction was to strengthen the discourse on ethics and to denounce those abuses with the arms of letters.<sup>81</sup> The literary constituted for him the most suitable realm to decry political fallibilities and to channel our imagination to more utopian – and for him not more insensible- political goals.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

In this work I looked at the place of the individual in some of Borges' writings, by contrasting his philosophical notion of a fallible individual with his case for a strong, self-sufficient political man. I analyzed his liberal anarchism and the critique of political interference latent in his stories "The Congress" and "Avelino Arredondo", and I addressed his call for an ethics of self-restraint as a presupposition for his normative defence of anarchism, by looking at "The Bribe" and his essay "Our Poor Individualism."

I suggested that in the writings and declarations here under analysis, Borges' simultaneous belief in a potentially self-sufficient but radically fallible individual and his yearning for a rich and orderly civic life seemed to be paradoxical. If paradoxes are "the juxtaposition of incongruous ideas,"<sup>83</sup> their resolution needs to bring to light those hidden presuppositions that, because of their invisibility or disarticulation, make us take as incongruity what is only apparently so. Resolving a paradox thus requires reconciling what appear to be mutually exclusive premises.

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<sup>81</sup> The contentious tone of the metaphor of arms follows Borges' in his invitation to "combat the monotonies of dictatorships" (Rodríguez Monegal, "Borges and Politics", 66).

<sup>82</sup> In this sense I agree with González (*Borges and the Politics...*, 188-189) in that Borges' defence of an autonomous art –one with no political role- carries a political meaning without becoming the type of social or committed art that he had previously criticized.

<sup>83</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range and Resolution*, (Chicago and Lasalle: Open Court, 2001), 4.

As a tentative resolution of the paradox I first argued that it may not be paradoxical to posit both a liberal anarchist person *and* a fallible natural person, if we think that the former is aware of the pre-eminence of conflict in politics and the undesired oppressive outcomes of political action - and hence is less fallible than the non-anarchist. Borges' liberal anarchism reminds the reader that it is in the nature of the State to coerce individuals; that it tends to over-expand, and that wars and cultural walls are politically constructed. For Borges, the idea of liberal anarchism was more attractive than that of an interventionist government, because the effects of human fallibility are more dangerous in the latter. His idea that individuals are unable to do much in and by themselves may ultimately be reduced to the belief that individuals cannot do as much bad as governments can.

Does Borges' conception of liberal anarchism represent a feasible alternative for the contemporary world? Can individuals be protected without any governmental enforcement mechanism? Borges does not respond to this question, and his writings exclude any specific steps toward institutional reform. This lack of recommendations probably follows from his fallibilism. His stories constitute exercises in rational criticism to detect errors more than experiments in living politically. His liberal anarchism serves more as a red flag in the political agenda, as a cautionary observation about things going wrong rather than a recipe instructing us how to get where we want to go. By ironically depicting the world of common markets and the working of political bodies such as the Congress, and by highlighting philosophical problems such as those involved in determining what can and should be represented, Borges indirectly indicates the direction in which institutional reforms should move, namely, one where the individual recovers the power to make decisions as well as the trust that she is capable of responsibly doing so. This idea is not limited to any place in particular, but is applicable to all individuals. Thus, the final logical step in Borges' belief in individuality is cosmopolitanism: "I suppose in the long run, governments and countries will die out and we'll be just, well, cosmopolitans."<sup>84</sup>

I have also argued that it may not be paradoxical to defend an isolated natural man *and* a committed civic man, if we take account of Borges' notion of a civic ethics that mandates respect for others and law-abidingness. The kind of isolation presented in his

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<sup>84</sup> Bourne, "A Conversation...". Borges' cosmopolitanism is one that "does not endorse a single world government" but "tries to give people as much control over their own lives as is consistent with ensuring that they do not derail the lives of others" (Appiah, "Global Citizenship", 2390).

stories is anything but ethical: characters such as Ferri, Acevedo's interlocutor, and Arredondo can go without goods or art, they can live away from family or friends and they are definitively unconcerned about fame, money or sports; but their thoughts and actions certainly mandate an ethical stand, one of assuming the responsibility for their decisions and/or doing what they think is right and lawful. In all three cases the civic mandate of behaving ethically with regard to the polis leaves ample room for individual isolation. It forgoes direct political enterprises in favour of the construction of a peaceful social order indirectly resulting from their civic actions.

Besides ethical behaviour, the construction of the desired social order for Borges also demands from the individual a task more literary in nature: the use of imagination to attractively convey the idea of a more cooperative, just and peaceful world, as well as to denounce political interferences that work against the emergence of such an order. Political concerns thus inspired many of his writings and speeches. Unlike Virgil, who succeeded in his attempt to write a masterpiece, Borges did not aim at such a grand task.<sup>85</sup> Ironically, and confirming his suspicion that no one knows entirely what she is doing, Borges' works achieved world-wide success in articulating a distinctive literary style, one that makes the reflection on political philosophy more entertaining –perhaps even more persuasive- but not less rigorous or profound.

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<sup>85</sup> Or at least he did not declare so: "A mere handful of arguments have haunted me all these years; I am decidedly monotonous" (SNF:346); "I hope that the reader finds in my pages something that merits being remembered" (SNF:333).