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## STORIES ABOUT STORIES: A BORGESIAN TAKE ON PREMODERN CIRCULATION

### Abstract

Along with other goods, texts, ideas and stories traveled along the Silk Road. One famous case of East-West circulation was the *1001 Nights*. Another story, the Great Renunciation (the best-known version being the story of the Buddha) traveled across space and time, transforming, adapting and generating scores of versions. Scholars from the nineteenth century on have reflected on the global migration of stories, whether to point out the universal elements that account for the stories' transcultural adaptability, or to focus on the modular units that generate an exponential multiplicity of variants, in the wake of Goethean morphology. However, most often, premodern stories do not fold themselves neatly into the major contemporary theories of literary circulation, whether Franco Moretti's model of imported form and local content, or Pascale Casanova's Meridian model with its centripetal trajectory of texts through translations and literary prizes. David Damrosch's definition of world literature as a "mode of reading and of circulation" does apply, but only in a broad and general sense. In this way, the East-West circulation of premodern tales offer a good point of entry into the current anxieties about the "presentism" of contemporary world literature theories. In this context, Borges's writings prove to be especially rewarding, offering us, not only a powerful re-reading of premodern literature, but also pathways for conceptualizing premodern circulation. The present essay looks at the ways in which these complicate, and also build on, an iconic master trope of literary circulation which is widely recognized as foundational to our discipline: the trope of the marketplace. Several of Borges's stories and essays ("La busca de Averroes", the essays on the circulation of the Buddha legend, and the texts about the *1001 Nights*), offer both a metatextually productive illustration of current, often aporetic debates about global literary circulation, and creative strategies for a renewal of literary practice by returning to minor and/or archaic forms.

**Keywords:** Jorge Luis Borges, marketplace, premodern circulation, Silk Road, master metaphors of comparative literature.

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## HISTORIAS SOBRE HISTORIAS: UNA VISIÓN BORGESIANA DE LA CIRCULACIÓN PREMODERNA

### Resumen

Junto con otros bienes, textos, ideas e historias recorrieron la Ruta de la Seda. Un caso famoso de circulación Este-Oeste fue el de las *1001 Noches*. Otra historia, la Gran Renuncia (la versión más conocida es la historia de Buda) viajó por el espacio y el tiempo, transformándose, adaptándose y generando decenas de versiones. Los estudiosos desde el siglo XIX en adelante han reflexionado sobre la migración global de las historias, ya sea para señalar los elementos universales que explican su adaptabilidad transcultural, o para centrarse en las unidades modulares que generan una multiplicidad exponencial de variantes, según la morfología goetheana. Sin embargo, la mayoría de las veces, las historias premodernas no se integran claramente en las principales teorías contemporáneas de la circulación literaria, ya sea el modelo de forma importada y contenido local de Franco Moretti, o el modelo meridiano de Pascale Casanova con su trayectoria centrípeta de textos a través de traducciones y premios literarios. La definición de David Damrosch de literatura mundial como un «modo de lectura y circulación» sí se aplica, pero sólo en un sentido amplio y general. Así, la circulación Este-Oeste de cuentos premodernos ofrece un buen punto de entrada a las ansiedades actuales sobre el «presentismo» de las teorías de la literatura mundial contemporánea. En este contexto, los escritos de Borges resultan especialmente gratificantes, ya que nos ofrecen no sólo una poderosa relectura de la literatura premoderna, sino también caminos para conceptualizar la circulación premoderna. El presente ensayo analiza las formas en que estos complican, y también desarrollan, un tropo maestro de la circulación literaria que es ampliamente reconocido como fundamental para nuestra disciplina: el tropo del mercado. Varios de los cuentos y ensayos de Borges («La busca de Averroes», los ensayos sobre la circulación de la leyenda de Buda y los textos sobre las *1001 noches*) ofrecen una ilustración metatextualmente productiva de los debates actuales, a menudo aporéticos, sobre la circulación literaria global y estrategias creativas para una renovación de la práctica literaria volviendo a formas menores y/o arcaicas.

**Palabras clave:** Jorge Luis Borges, mercado, circulación premoderna, Ruta de la Seda, metáforas maestras de literatura comparada.

Along with other goods, texts, ideas and stories traveled along the Silk Road. One famous case of East-West circulation was the *1001 Nights*. Another story, the Great Renunciation, the story of a king who leaves his palace to become an ascetic (the best-known version of this story being the story of the Buddha) traveled across space and time, transforming, adapting and generating scores of versions. Scholars from the nineteenth century on have reflected on the global migration of stories, whether to point out the universal elements that account for the stories' transcultural adaptability, or to focus on the modular units that generate an exponential multiplicity of variants, in the wake of the folklorists' motif system and Proppian morphology. However, most often, premodern stories do not fold themselves neatly into the major contemporary theories of literary circulation, whether Franco Moretti's model of imported form and local content, or



Pascale Casanova's Meridian model with its centripetal trajectory of texts through translations and literary prizes. David Damrosch's definition of World Literature as a "mode of reading and of circulation" (Damrosch 2003: 3) does apply, but only in a broad and general sense. In this way, the East-West circulation of premodern tales and legends offer a good point of entry into the current anxieties about the "presentism" of contemporary world literature theories.

In this context, the writings of Borges prove to be especially rewarding. Both in his fiction and in his essays, Jorge Luis Borges offers us not only a "powerful re-reading of premodern literature", as the editors of the present volume, Delia Ungureanu and Ksenija Vraneš write, but also productive pathways for conceptualizing premodern circulation. Several of Borges's stories and essays (such as "La busca de Averroes", the essays on the circulation of the Buddha legend, and the texts about the *1001 Nights*), offer on the one hand, a metatextually productive illustration of current, often aporetic debates about world literature and global literary circulation, and on the other hand, creative strategies for a renewal of literary practice by returning to minor and/or archaic forms, such as tales, legends, parables or aphorisms.

The present essay looks at the ways in which Borges's stories and essays complicate, yet also build on, an iconic master trope of literary circulation which is widely recognized as foundational to world literature as a discipline: the trope of the marketplace. If one chooses as a starting point Goethe's fragments and aphorisms on *Weltliteratur*, the metaphor of commerce points mostly to current, industrial conditions defining the modern book trade: an intellectual network of readers, writers, translators, scholars, journal editors and publishers engaging in a global trade of ideas.<sup>2</sup> The Goethean creation story, rooted in a modern world and a capitalist economy, is furthered, and hardened, by Karl Marx, who, in the *Communist Manifesto*, co-written with F. Engels in 1848, posits equivalence between the circulation of material goods and that of culture:

In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. *And as in material, so also in intellectual production.* The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrowmindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (Marx and Engels 2013: 18; emphasis added)

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<sup>2</sup> On the modern context of Goethe's fragments on *Weltliteratur*, see D'Haen, Domínguez and Rosendahl Thomsen 2013: especially p. 10-15.



The systems of two influential thinkers of world literature, Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, are directly shaped by this economic paradigm: Moretti invokes the novel as a capitalistic form, while Casanova develops a view of world literature as a dynamic, unequal space where nations compete for the cultural center and books achieve global consecration through a system of prizes and translations.

The discipline of world literature is heavily invested in the marketplace metaphor, which ties the major debates and conceptualizations to a specific and recent historical moment--a time of capitalist globalization that encompasses modern trade networks for literary products, including worldwide communication channels, institutions of learning, book fairs and literary prizes, etc.

David Damrosch's criticism of the "creeping presentism" restricting comparative studies to modern works is echoed both by Bruce Robbins, who called for a "temporal cosmopolitanism" in comparative literature, and by Alexander Beecroft, whose 2015 book, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, endeavored to theorize earlier, premodern circulation networks as well as contemporary ones.<sup>3</sup>

Ben Hutchinson, in turn, acknowledges this issue in his essay "Metaphors of Reading" collected in *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Historically, comparative literature's self-understanding endeavor has been dominated by "two categories [...] Modernity and Europe" (Hutchinson 2018: 6). But a "counter-narrative" of premodern circulation deserves to be told, he argues, since "long before the Renaissance, languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, and Chinese rivalled Greek and Latin as cosmopolitan, supranational modes of expression. Multilingualism--between the vernacular and the lingua franca, for instance--was common in the Middle Ages". Since comparative literature is a uniquely self-reflective discipline, the metaphors of reading it generates are of special value. "Comparative literature (...) constructs metaphors of reading, models of how to interpret texts and cultures between languages and nations" (Hutchinson 2018: 7). Emphasizing the importance of "the search for a master metaphor" (Hutchinson 2018: 7) to understand the origins, history and future of comp lit, Hutchinson stresses that "in the case of comparative literature, the metaphors it lives by are arguably as important as the insights it makes possible" (Hutchinson 2018: 12). He squarely aligns the Goethean trade metaphor with a modern capitalistic world in the making. "Already in the 1820s, Goethe, in launching the term world literature, used the metaphor of the marketplace--partly in the Enlightenment sense of a forum for trade and commerce, partly in order to encourage the dissemination of his own works" (Hutchinson 2018: 9).

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<sup>3</sup> David Damrosch in the introduction to *Comparing the Literatures* (Damrosch 2020: 9); Bruce Robbins in "Prolegomena to a Cosmopolitanism in Deep Time" (2015), and Alexander Beecroft in *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (2015) all address in various ways the issue of chronological short-sightedness in comparative literature scholarship.



Alongside Goethe's modern marketplace metaphor, Hutchinson proposes alternative metaphors of circulation and exchange that expand the chronologically narrow range: "Perhaps the most obvious metaphor for the comparative approach to literature is that of the crossroads" (Hutchinson 2018: 8), he writes, adding the metaphor of the Silk Road. These metaphors, as I hope to show, are found in Borges's writings in varying degrees, giving fictional life to the theoretical paradigms.

Taking as starting point Hutchinson's discussion of master metaphors, this essay proposes to explore Borges's relevance to contemporary world literature debates. Borges's writings, I suggest, complicate and enrich the trade metaphors, both by illustrating and dramatizing various aspects of the mechanisms and vagaries of literary circulation, and by proposing fictional views of theoretical issues, which narrate paradoxes, aporias or ironies of the circulation paradigm. This paper will explore this argument through three case studies. First, I revisit an iconic story of intellectual trade and cultural misunderstanding, "La busca de Averroes" ("Averroës' search"), which offers "a Pandora's box of cultural differences" (Hutchinson 2018: 5), in particular an abundance of ironic twists on the East-West cultural intercourse.<sup>4</sup> Next, I focus on stories of ancient literary circulation from East to West, comparing 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist Max Müller's essay "The Migration of Fables" (1870) to Borges's own essays on the circulation of renunciation tales, "Formas de una leyenda" (1952) and "Diálogos del asceta y del rey" (1953), both originally published in *La Nación*.<sup>5</sup> A third case of premodern circulation is provided by Borges's beloved *1001 Nights*, which loom large in Borges's texts, whether his stories, his poems or his essays. I will focus mainly on the late essay "Las Mil y una noches" from the 1980 volume *Siete noches*, as well as the prose poem "Alguien", from the 1977 book of poems *Historia de la noche*.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most radical example of literary circulation, the *1001 Nights* comes close to erasing the point of departure and becoming a purely metamorphic, translational and wandering text--and offers Borges a paradoxical pathway towards innovation by turning away from the dominant form of modern literature (the novel) and reverting, instead, to archaic models and practices.

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations from Borges will refer to the Emecé critical edition of complete works, with the exception of "Diálogos del asceta y del rey" which references *Textos recobrados 1931-1955*.

<sup>5</sup> "Formas de una leyenda" was first published in *La Nación* on 8 June 1952, then included in *Otras inquisiciones*. "Diálogos del asceta y del rey" was first published in *La Nación* on 20 September 1953, and subsequently included in *Textos recobrados 1931-1955* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Both can be found in the third volume of *Obras completas* (2007): III, 199 "Alguien"; III, 272 "Las mil y una noches".

## 1. Averroes at a crossroads

The story “La busca de Averroes”, first published in *Sur* in 1947, then incorporated into the first edition of *El Aleph* in 1949, can be read as a metatextual illustration of premodern circulation on various levels. As is well known, the plot hinges on Averroës’s attempt to understand two Greek words whose meaning escapes him: tragedy and comedy. Confronted with trying to understand a genre which has no equivalent or representation in his own system, Averroës confidently misinterprets tragedy and comedy as panegyric and satire.

One way in which we can understand Hutchinson's crossroads metaphor is in terms of the reader's positioning. “Standing at the centre of any number of converging routes or spaces -the Silk Road, the Holy Roman Empire, the Republic of Letters--the comparatist, following this model, surveys and directs the passing traffic” (Hutchinson 2018: 9). In this image, the reader (or critic) stands at a crossroads, a privileged position to survey incoming and outgoing ideas, texts or books. Averroës, the character from the well-known eponymous story in *El Aleph*, “La busca de Averroes”, is at just such an economic, cultural and historical crossroads. His hometown of Cordoba in medieval Al-Andalus represents a privileged meeting point: a thriving and vibrant trade center, located on the banks of the Guadalquivir River, commanding the flow of goods from West and East. The story repeatedly hints at this privileged crossroads situation: at the beginning of the tale Averroës happily leafs through a precious dictionary received from Tangier; at dinner he meets a traveler who recently returned from China, and his harem includes a red-haired slave girl, an exotic and expensive commodity from Northern Europe (Borges 2009: 1035). All this evokes an expansive trade network across the entire known world. Averroës himself, of course, is a crossroads thinker, an exemplary cross-cultural mediator, a scholar who ensured the circulation of Greek philosophy between East and West and is rightly celebrated by both.<sup>7</sup>

An extraordinary bridge figure, Averroës (1126-1198) is known as The Commentator for his great commentary on Aristotle. In Borges’s portrayal, he is aware of and confident in his own central place at an intersection of cultural influences. And yet Borges chooses to focus not on his formidable accomplishment as a transmitter of Greek philosophy into the world of Islam, but on one singular failure. The anecdote, as is well known, comes from historian Ernest Renan (1823-1892), who recounted in his biographical study *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (1852) this notorious instance of cultural misunderstanding. The epigraph quotes Renan in the original French: “s’imaginant que

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<sup>7</sup> This is reflected iconographically as well: for example, in the fresco by fourteenth-century Florentine painter Andrea Bonaiuto where he is portrayed alongside the great Christian philosopher and fellow Aristotelian Thomas of Aquinas.



la tragédie n'est autre chose que l'art de louer" (Borges 2009: 1031). Because theater did not exist in Islamic culture at the time, Averroës had no understanding of the words "Tragedy" and "Comedy" which are obviously ubiquitous in Aristotle's *Poetics*: "Esas dos palabras arcanas pululaban en el texto de la Poética; imposible eludirlas" (Borges 2009: 1031). At the end of the story, driven by a delusional sense of epiphany, he makes his famous error:

Algo le había revelado el sentido de las dos palabras oscuras. Con firme y cuidadosa caligrafía agregó estas líneas al manuscrito: Arista (Aristóteles) denomina tragedia a los panegíricos y comedias a las sátiras y anatemas. Admirables tragedias y comedias abundan en las páginas del Corán y en las mohalacas del santuario. (Borges 2009: 1035)

Revisiting this well-studied story through the lens of the master metaphors of commerce, foundational to world literature, gives fresh insights into how Borges complicates, enriches and challenges current theoretical debates. With the words "tragedy" and "comedy", we could say that Averroës is left with a coin that cannot be exchanged in his own currency (or, to borrow from Itamar Even-Zohar, with elements that cannot fit easily into his Arabic polysystem).<sup>8</sup> Generic mismatch--translating a text into a linguistic and cultural context that does not have the equivalent genre--is a common problem in translation studies. Of course, Averroës's task is not the task of the translator, but the task of the commentator, since the book he has in hand is an Arabic version, indeed an already-translated text that is the result of multiple layers of translation, from Ancient Greek into a lost Syriac text, then into Arabic: "Averroës, ignorante del siríaco y del griego, trabajaba sobre la traducción de una traducción" (Borges 2009: 1031). Yet Borges's story remains quite ambiguous on this issue, as Abdelfattah Kilito points out in his essay "Borges et Averroës".<sup>9</sup> And while Averroës is not exactly translating these two words but rather attempting to comment on them, his false "solution" to the problem is indeed the equivalent of a domesticating translation, defined by Schleiermacher as "bringing the text closer to the reader".<sup>10</sup> By reaching for an approximation that exists in Arabic lit, by

<sup>8</sup> In this case the receiving culture is in the stronger, dominant position, which is not conducive to openness to translated literature (Even-Zohar 2009: 242-243).

<sup>9</sup> "Comment est-il tombé alors sur les mots *tragoedia* et *comoedia*? On s'attendrait plutôt à ce qu'il trouve leurs équivalents en arabe. De là une certaine incertitude dans le texte de Borges: on a l'impression qu'Averroës, qui ignore le grec, travaille sur le texte grec de la *Poétique* et qu'il lui incombe personnellement de traduire les deux mots douteux. C'est comme si la question de leur traduction s'était posée pour la première fois dans la culture arabe avec lui et qu'il avait donc la charge de les rendre en arabe." (Kilito 1999: 13-14)

<sup>10</sup> "Either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him [*this is the foreignizing method*]; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the author toward him [*this is the domesticating method*]" (Schleiermacher "On the Different Methods of Translating" (1813), quoted in Ortega y Gasset 2004: 60)



equating tragedy to “panegyric” and comedy to “satire”, he folds the foreign notions back onto familiar domestic generic categories.

He is also perpetrating a kind of textual bias because his interpretation, which substitutes “tragedy” and “comedy” with “panegyric” and “satire”, reduces the unknown genre to its textual component, radically negating and overlooking the more important feature, performance. In this respect the two missed clues of the story are particularly egregious. As we know, Averroës successively overlooks two clues to what he is searching for: the children's play-acting in the street, and the description of the Chinese theater later that day during the dinner party. Both instances, the children impersonating the muezzin and the faithful and Abulcásim's bumbling description of the Cantonese actors riding imaginary horses, fighting with pretend swords and dying make-believe deaths on the stage, insistently offer the (disregarded) hint of a genre that puts performance rather than verbal arts first. In this episode, Averroës is no different from his host, Farach, who displays smug complacency about his own culture. When Abulcásim attempts to suggest that a story might be acted out rather than narrated (“Imaginemos que alguien muestra una historia en vez de referirla” [Borges 2009: 1034]), Farach dismisses the idea of performance with self-satisfied contempt in favor of the storyteller's verbal skill: “no se requerían *veinte* personas. Un solo hablante puede referir cualquier cosa, por compleja que sea” (Borges 2009: 1034). These men feel secure in their traditions and tend to look down on everyone else; Averroës himself, despite his openness to Greek philosophy, is not immune to the kind of parochialism that comes from occupying a privileged central position.

The story illustrates the complexities and paradoxes of the local/global entanglement (one of the main conceptual paradigms structuring world literature debates) in an exemplary fashion. Borges writes that his goal was to narrate “el caso de un hombre que se propone un fin que no está vedado a los otros, pero sí a él” (Borges 2009: 1036). Averroës, “encerrado en el ámbito del Islam” (Borges 2009: 1036), is trapped in a local context that does not let him grasp the foreign art form or see beyond his own generic boundaries. Praising their own poetic tradition, their own religion and customs, these self-satisfied men return to their homes; Averroës along with them. He is blinded by prejudice twice, missing the first clue when he pays no attention to the children's game—a rudimentary form of comedy; then, missing the second clue when he ignores the description of the Cantonese theater by Abulcásim. What is obvious to the reader remains impenetrable to the story's hero. Like a tragic hero, Averroës is blind to what everyone in the audience can see. By translocalizing a typical feature of Greek tragedy (whereby the audience knows what the hero does not) the story recasts tragic irony in an Andalusian setting. But tragedy affects others besides the protagonist Averroës. Borges also hints at the tragic real-life context of Averroës's mind-blindness—its ethical consequences. Fleeting mentioned in a parenthesis is a disturbing detail: “(En el harén, las esclavas de





pelo negro habían torturado a una esclava de pelo rojo, pero él no lo sabría sino a la tarde)” (Borges 2009: 1035). In this case, the women's intolerance to physical and cultural difference has been taken to horrifying extremes. Averroës, who prides himself on being open to distant truths and foreign ways, is unaware, like Oedipus – Aristotle's prime example of a tragic hero – of the evil in his own house. Cultural prejudice is bound up with moral shortcoming. The darker side of trade, inseparable from unequal power distribution and violence, also surfaces, discreetly yet insistently, in this parenthetical detail about one nameless victim of imperial networks: it is as if Borges wanted to remind us of the human cost of the great commercial superpower that imported precious books alongside enslaved people torn from home.<sup>11</sup>

Reversibility, ironic instability of the local and global poles, is typical of the story and complicates the basic dual polarity at work in the world literature theoretical framework. For indeed--and this is another fascinating paradox of the story--despite his ultimate failure to understand the basic Aristotelian notions of tragedy and comedy, Averroës is otherwise a brilliant exponent of the local/global theory of reading, a genuine comparatist *avant la lettre*. At dinner, the guests discuss the complexities of decontextualized reading. Abdalmálik claims that locally and historically specific poetry such as the pre-Islamic poetry of nomadic Arabs, for instance the verses of sixth-century Bedouin poet Zuhair, who sang of camels and desert wells, has no appeal for modern-day Arabs of Al-Andalus (“Dijo que era absurdo que un hombre ante cuyos ojos se dilataba el Guadalquivir celebrara el agua de un pozo” [Borges 2009: 1034]). Against this, Averroës, Borges's mouthpiece in this case, argues the opposite view most powerfully. Not only does this ancient desert poetry still speaks to us, he claims, but it becomes even more meaningful when it is taken out of its local context. A twelfth-century resident of Cordoba, where there are no camels and water is not a rare commodity, can nevertheless appreciate a Bedouin ode to a well, or the image of destiny as a blind camel:

El tiempo, que despoja los alcázares, enriquece los versos. El de Zuhair, cuando éste lo compuso en Arabia, sirvió para confrontar dos imágenes, la del viejo camello y la del destino: repetido ahora, sirve para memoria de Zuhair y para confundir nuestros pesares con los de aquel árabe muerto. Dos términos tenía la figura y hoy tiene cuatro. (Borges 2009: 1035)

That reading is a decontextualizing, globalizing activity, where meaning is added through the reader's context, is a quintessentially Borgesian article of faith, most forcefully

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce Robbins's ethical reflections on premodern imperialism in his article “Prolegomena to a Cosmopolitanism in Deep Time” (2015) are especially relevant here.



expressed in his famous essay “El escritor argentino y la tradición”,<sup>12</sup> in which he claims the right and the duty for Argentines to read and write globally, rather than restricting themselves to narrowly local themes or subjects. “Creo que nuestra tradición es toda la cultura occidental, y creo también que tenemos derecho a esta tradición [...] debemos pensar que nuestro patrimonio es el universo; ensayar todos los temas” (Borges 2009: 442, 443). In the Averroës story, this same principle is repeated in the story's epilogue which adds yet another temporal and geographical layer, introducing a twentieth-century narrator from Argentina, and thereby transporting the story from Al-Andalus to the present time and the edge of the west. “El tiempo agranda el ámbito de los versos” (Borges 2009: 1035): reading the story of Averroës from a decontextualized vantage point, just as Averroës read the pre-Islamic well-and-camel poem--is a potentially infinite expansive operation that adds to its value.

However, this decontextualized view of literature--the idea that reading multiplies the terms of the equation, expands the network of the text's circulation, and increases its value--may be generous and ambitious, but it is also prone to failure. As we know, the story ends in Borges's melancholy acknowledgement that he is no more able to understand Averroës's predicament than Averroës was able to comprehend the foreign genre: “Sentí que Averroës, queriendo imaginar lo que es un drama sin haber sospechado lo que es un teatro, no era más absurdo que yo, queriendo imaginar a Averroës, sin otro material que unos adarves de Renán, de Lane y de Asín Palacios” (Borges 2009: 1036). Borges's moment of disabused admission duplicates Averroës's earlier feeling of fatigue and bewilderment at the dinner party. When confronted with the radically foreign genre of the Cantonese drama, Averroës feels overwhelmed by the sheer incommensurability of distances--time, space, language, culture. Hopelessness, despondence, a profoundly discouraging sense of alienation are the features of these reverse epiphanies: “El temor de lo crasamente infinito, del mero espacio, de la mera materia, tocó por un instante a Averroës. Miró el simétrico jardín; se supo envejecido, inútil, irreal” (Borges 2009: 1033). The dysphoric episode can be read as an ironic reversal of *Weltliteratur*'s legendary origin story: according to Eckermann, Goethe was inspired to invent the notion by the discovery of a Chinese novel (Goethe 2009: 21-23). Goethe's elation and enthusiasm when encountering the foreign opened the way to his euphorically expansive intuition of world literature as “ever-widening circles”, to quote Fritz Strich (1949: 16). In contrast to Goethe, Averroës remains unimpressed by the description of the Chinese theater and goes on to make his famous misinterpretation. Borges in the epilogue is overcome by a similar sense

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<sup>12</sup> The essay “El escritor argentino y la tradición”, initially given as a lecture at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, was published in *Sur* in 1955, then included in the 1957 edition of *Obras completas*. It features in the volume entitled *Discusión*.



of futility and gives up on understanding the radically foreign: “En el instante en que yo dejo de creer en él, ‘Averroes’ desaparece” (Borges 2009: 1036).

The narrative is strung tightly between two opposite scenes. The first part of the story, when Averroës is at home in his library, is marked by a sense of confidence, a euphoric sense of rootedness in the center of his world, with space radiating concentrically all around him in an orderly, understandable pattern: “De algún patio invisible se elevaba el rumor de una fuente; [...] Abajo estaban los jardines, la huerta; abajo, el atareado Guadalquivir y después la querida ciudad de Córdoba [...] y alrededor [...] se dilataba hacia el confín la tierra de España...” (Borges 2009: 1031) But in the second part of the story, when Averroës is at dinner with Abulcásim, the traveler who has returned from China, comfort gives way to a dysphoric feeling of disorientation, anxiety and incompetence. His confidence is severely tested, as a sense of incommensurability, both spatial and cultural, overwhelms his understanding and takes the form of the immense deserts, mentioned by Abulcásim, that separate Cordoba from Canton. As we know, for Borges the desert is another form of the labyrinth, as expressed for example in his parable “Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos”, also collected in *El aleph*. There, the king of Arabia taunts his defeated enemy before leaving him to die in the desert, which is deadlier version of the labyrinth:

¡Oh, rey del tiempo y sustancia y cifra del siglo! en Babilonia me quisiste perder en un laberinto de bronce con muchas escaleras, puertas y muros; ahora el Poderoso ha tenido a bien que te muestre el mío, donde no hay escaleras que subir, ni puertas que forzar, ni fatigosas galerías que recorrer, ni muros que te veden el paso. (Borges 2009: 1053).

Two tropes of circulation frame the story of Averroës—one euphoric, harmonious, and contained in the concentric limits of a commensurable world, the other dysphoric, uncanny, threatening, nonsensical like a labyrinth or a desert: Borges’s story pits a satisfying experience of circulation within a culturally homogenous world, against a frightening experience of circulation outside of the familiar “circle of Islam”. Acknowledging the formidable task of imagining the thoughts of another man many centuries removed—Aristotle from Averroës, Averroës from Borges—this tale of heroic failure also fictionalizes the challenges of what Bruce Robbins calls the imperative of “temporal cosmopolitanism”.

## 2. Max Müller reader of Borges

A parable about the vagaries and unpredictability of literary circulation, “La busca de Averroes” fictionalizes many of the fundamental issues and notions at the heart of



world literature. While “La busca de Averroes” told the story of a failed literary circulation, conversely, Borges’s essays on the Renunciation legend (“Formas de una leyenda” and “Diálogos del asceta y del rey”, written a few years later in the early Fifties) tell the story of a hugely successful circulation, the story of a tale that traveled around the globe from India to Iceland, and over many centuries, with astonishing adaptability and enduring power. While the best-known variant of the Renunciation legend is the story of Prince Siddharta, who left his palace and became the Buddha, the story circulated with remarkable ease through Muslim and Christian lands, transforming itself as it made its way along the Silk Road, and generating the Muslim story of Bilawar and Budasaf and the Christian story of Barlaam and Josaphat.<sup>13</sup>

Borges’s essays reflect on how stories circulate, metamorphose, and endure in time and space. These essays belong to the same critical decade of Borges’s life, the Fifties, as Borges’s famous essay “El escritor argentino y la tradición” in which he formulated key ideas on the global circulation of themes and provided the earliest vision of a Borgesian *Weltliteratur*. This was a turning point for Borges, poised to become a world writer himself: in large part for political reasons, he began to travel and lecture widely on the international scene, and he was about to receive international consecration thanks to the Formentor International prize which launched him in the wider Western world. In this sense his reflections on the circulation of stories have an autobiographical counterpart in his own becoming global. In addition, this was also the decade when he became blind, a misfortune which would have significant repercussions on his compositional methods and experience of literature, since he would henceforth come to rely on memory, dictation, and being read to by others.

Borges’s essays owe a large debt to late-nineteenth-century scholars who studied the East-West trajectory of the Renunciation story. Borges references many of them, from Max Müller (who edited the monumental *Sacred Books of the East*) to T. W. Rhys Davids (the author of several articles on Buddhism, including in the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, dear to Borges), Menéndez y Pelayo (who retraced the steps of the Buddha into Christian lore), Hermann Oldenberg (author of a well-known life of the Buddha) and many more. For my argument, it will be most productive to cross-read Borges’s essays with a famous text by a towering figure of nineteenth-century Orientalism, the Oxford scholar Max Müller (1823-1900). In “On the Migration of Fables”, a lecture first given at the Royal Institution in 1870, Müller traces the East-West voyage of two well-known stories. The first part of his lecture follows the familiar fable by Jean de La Fontaine, “La Laitière et le Pot au lait” (1678), a cautionary tale about spilled milk and spoiled dreams, all the way back to its Indian source, the third-century *Pañcatantra*, in which a Brahmin accidentally

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<sup>13</sup> For a more developed treatment of this topic, see my book, *Borges, Buddhism and World Literature: A Morphology of Renunciation Tales* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).



kicks over the contents of his rice sack while daydreaming about how it will make him a rich man. While La Fontaine acknowledges his debt to “Pilpay, sage indien” for this and other fables of the 1678 edition, Müller unravels the intricate and complex itinerary that leads from the third-century Brahmin to the seventeenth-century milkmaid, through a sixth-century Persian translation, an eighth-century Arab book of animal fables, *Kalila wa-Dimna*, two Spanish translations of that very popular book, and various French and Latin versions leading up to our French fabulist.

The second part of Müller's lecture follows the story of the Great Renunciation (the Indian prince who leaves his palace to pursue enlightenment) from East to West, from the Buddhist legend of Boddhisatva in the *Lalita Vistara* to the Christian legend of saint Josaphat as told by John of Damascus, whose account was so popular that it was translated into Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Hebrew, Latin, French, Italian, German, English, Spanish, Bohemian, Polish, Icelandic, and Tagalog. Incidentally, the Christian version transforms the ascetic (who brings about the young prince's conversion) into a merchant. To gain access to Josaphat, the hermit Barlaam claims to be a merchant with a miraculous healing stone to sell, a transparent metaphor for spiritual revelation, but also a reminder of the crucial role of merchants as vehicles for new ideas, including religious ideas: as Ros Ballaster argued, mercantile and narrative exchanges were mutually supportive (Ballaster 2005: 12).

Both master metaphors mentioned by Hutchinson are active here: the Silk Road, along which these stories traveled like other goods, and the crossroads, as a centrally located vantage point from which the reader can assess circulation. Quite explicitly, Max Müller positions himself mentally at the crossroads of east and west and at a specific point in time to survey the fortunes and meanderings of these stories: “In order to gain a commanding view of the countries traversed by these fables, let us take our position at Bagdad in the middle of the eighth century, and watch from that central point the movements of our literary caravan in its progress from the far East to the far West” (Müller 2018: 10).

Borges's essay “Forms of a Legend” is very close to Max Müller's both in structure and in spirit. It follows the Renunciation legend as it circulates from India to Iceland and everywhere in between, and concludes with the legend's reincarnation into Oscar Wilde's children's story “The Happy Prince” (whose translation into Spanish, not coincidentally, was Borges's first publication at the age of nine), thus bringing the tale to a final and unexpected South American stop, into the hands of a young Borges reading the story in Buenos Aires: “A fines del siglo XIX, Oscar Wilde propuso una variante; el príncipe feliz muere en la reclusión del palacio, sin haber descubierto el dolor, pero su efigie postuma lo divisa desde lo alto del pedestal” (Borges 2010: 108).



Very much like Borges, the nineteenth-century Orientalists interrogated the transcultural appeal of the Renunciation legend, focusing both on the thematic and compositional level. The tale travelled easily, Müller claimed, because it held universal appeal. "If he lived the life which is there described, few saints have a better claim to the title than Buddha; and no one either in the Greek or in the Roman Church need be ashamed of having paid to Buddha's memory the honor that was intended for St. Josaphat, the prince, the hermit, and the saint" (Müller 2018: 32). Max Müller's concluding remarks on the fundamental similarities between Buddhist and Christian values of asceticism paved the way for a late-twentieth-century cultural anthropological view such as Geoffrey Galt Harpham's definition of asceticism as a "primary transcultural structuring force", in his seminal 1987 study *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Harpham 1987: xiii). Müller's understanding of circulation is based on the privileging of formal features, which give the tale a kind of universal currency that enables it to travel through different cultural contexts. Highlighting the continuity between the Indian brahmin and the French milkmaid in La Fontaine's Perrette story, or between the Buddha and the Christian saint, he remarks that "in the same sense in which La Fontaine's Perrette is the Brahman of the *Panchatantra*, St. Josaphat is the Buddha of the Buddhist canon" (Müller 2018: 34). Müller's attention to plot over character anticipated the folklorists' focus on modular narrative units that allowed the story to generate an exponential multiplicity of variants, an approach systematized in the early decades of the twentieth century by Proppian morphology, itself rooted in Goethe's morphological theories.

Borges's essays suggest a similarly "morphological" model of circulation, inspired by Goethe's theory of life forms. The core episode of the Renunciation legend, the life-changing encounter between the king and the ascetic, is described as an "archetype" in the second essay, "Diálogos del asceta y del rey", which begins: "Un rey es una plenitud, un asceta es nada o quiere ser nada; a la gente le gusta imaginar el diálogo de esos dos arquetipos" (Borges 1997: 510).

After tracing several global variants of the king-and-ascetic encounter, Borges concludes with a "morphological" hypothesis:

Los textos anteriores, diseminados en el tiempo y en el espacio, sugieren la posibilidad de una morfología (para usar la palabra de Goethe) o ciencia de las formas fundamentales de la literatura. Alguna vez he conjeturado en estas columnas que todas las metáforas son variantes de un reducido número de arquetipos; acaso esta proposición también es aplicable a las fábulas (Borges 1997: 517-518).

(In a gratifying convergence, the word "fábula" points both to Müller's analysis of La Fontaine's milkmaid fable, and to the Russian Formalists' concept of *fabula*.) The model of circulation here relies on a combination of archetypes and variants, or in Borges's terms,



“accidents”: the Renunciation legend circulates easily, Borges states in “Formas de una leyenda”, because it is formed of “verdad sustancial y [...] errores accidentales” (Borges 2010: 108).

What this paradigm for literary circulation provides, I want to suggest, is twofold. First, as a template for interpretation, it affords a reading protocol which isolates the recurring “archetype” behind the multiplicity and mutability of “accidents.” Secondly, as a mode of composition, it generates a writing practice by accidental variation on an archetypal plot. To give just one example among many: the transcultural variations on the king-and-ascetic archetype generate three successive Borgesian parables written over three decades, each variously featuring a kingly character who renounces his kingdom following an encounter with an ascetic character: first the above mentioned Arab story, “Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos” (*El aleph*), then a Chinese story, “Parábola del palacio” (*El hacedor*), and lastly a Celtic story, “La máscara y el espejo” (*El libro de arena*). Not coincidentally, these texts belong to premodern genres (tales, legends, parables) and thus are especially suitable for a morphology of archetypes.

Along with this paring down of the narrative to the formulaic and the modular, I now want to focus on another striking Borgesian feature: orality. Borges’s essays prioritize a neo-archaic, preliterate model of literary circulation: “La realidad puede ser demasiado compleja para la transmisión oral; la leyenda la recrea de una manera que sólo accidentalmente es falsa y que le permite andar por el mundo, de boca en boca”, Borges notes in “Formas de una leyenda” (Borges 2009: 105). Remarkably for a legend with such a rich textual history, Borges envisions a mode of circulation that relies on a hybrid mechanism, part written, part oral storytelling.

### 3. Up and down the silk road: the *1001 Nights* as a model of circulation

Our third case study concern a cluster of Borgesian texts that deal with the circulation of the *1001 Nights*. The late essay “Las Mil y una noches”, published in the collection *Siete noches* in 1980, establishes the circulation of the tales as a foundational moment for Western literature, stating at the outset: “Un acontecimiento capital de la historia de las naciones occidentales es el descubrimiento del Oriente” (Borges 2007: 272). The tales of the *Nights*, Borges explains, offer a rich and complex history of circulation, translation and compilation even before they enter the sphere of Western culture:

Tenemos una serie de cuentos; la serie de la India, donde se forma el núcleo central, [...] pasa a Persia; en Persia los modifican, los enriquecen y los arabizan; llegan finalmente a Egipto. Esto ocurre a fines del siglo quince. A fines del siglo quince se hace la primera



compilación y esa compilación procedía de otra, persa según parece: *Hazar afsana, Los mil cuentos*. (Borges 2007: 278)

From there the book becomes an exemplary case of the meeting of East and West, beginning with Galland's translation into French in the early eighteenth century. The epitome of circulating texts, the *Nights* has no individual authors, only versions and translations, and possesses the power to generate potentially infinite numbers of variants, continuations and translations into multiple languages, and to create new literary genres, to the point where the distinction between translators and rewriters becomes moot.<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, Borges defends Galland for having (as he believes) invented the tale of Aladdin, the most famous of the stories, an "orphan story" with no known original before Galland:

Hay un cuento que es el más famoso de *Las mil y una noches* y que no se lo halla en las versiones originales. Es la historia de Aladino y la lámpara maravillosa. Aparece en la versión de Galland y Burton buscó en vano el texto árabe o persa. Hubo quien sospechó que Galland había falsificado la narración. Creo que la palabra «falsificar» es injusta y maligna. Galland tenía tanto derecho a inventar un cuento como lo tenían aquellos *confabuladores nocturni*. ¿Por qué no suponer que después de haber traducido tantos cuentos, quiso inventar uno y lo hizo? (Borges 2007: 283).

Ironically, the tale of Aladdin would go on to become the most widely traveled of all the tales in the *Nights*: in his essay, Borges retraces the "steps" of this tale across Western literature like the magician follows Aladdin's footsteps in the story.<sup>15</sup>

Borges's defense of Galland rests on two important points. It shows, first, that the Silk Road along which the *Nights* circulated has at that point become reversible, with the West responding in kind to the East and sending its own tales back to the source. The labyrinthine editorial history of the orphan tales bears this out, as well as the more recent history of the reclaiming and rewriting of the Westernized *Nights* by contemporary Eastern authors such as Naguib Mahfouz. Secondly, Borges's choice of the Latin phrase *confabuladores nocturni*, points to the importance of orality in the circulation process. Borrowed from Austrian Orientalist Joseph von Hammer Purgstall (1774-1856) who incidentally was the first European translator of Hafez's *Divan*, of Goethean fame, the

<sup>14</sup> One example of recreation is the story "El sur", which translocalizes the *Nights* to present-day Argentina. The protagonist, equipped with a talisman-like copy of the *Nights*, travels to the southern confines of the land, there to meet his appointed death in semi-mythical gaucho territory: Aladdin's footsteps, emblem of fate, the master concept in Borges's Romantic reading of the *Nights*, are recreated in the image of the train tracks, a modern metaphor of destiny.

<sup>15</sup> On the complex history of the orphan tales, see Paulo Lemos Horta's recent book *Marvellous Thieves: Secret Authors of the Arabian Nights*.





phrase *confabulatores nocturni* designates the storytellers who, as late as the nineteenth century, sometimes recited tales from the *Nights* in the market squares of Cairo, as attested by translator Edward Lane, who lived in Cairo for several years in the 1820s and 1830s and mentioned the practice in his well-known *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*.<sup>16</sup>

Borges's model of literary circulation thus centers on the storyteller, a fact which does not align with the history of the circulation of the *Nights* as we know it (where the textual, literate transmission is primary, with oral storytelling being a secondary feature at best). In the prose poem "Alguien" Borges again puts forward the same anonymous, semi-oral model, along with the use of the same phrase from Hammer Purgstall:

El hombre habla y gesticula. No sabe (otros lo sabrán) que es del linaje de los *confabulatores nocturni*, de los rapsodas de la noche, que Alejandro Bicornes congregaba para solaz de sus vigiliás. No sabe (nunca lo sabrá) que es nuestro bienhechor. Cree hablar para unos pocos y unas monedas y en un perdido ayer entreteje el Libro de las Mil y Una Noches. (Borges 2007: 199)

## Conclusion

Both master metaphors, the silk road and the marketplace, are joined in this scene. But we are far from Goethe's modern, capitalistic marketplace (although Goethe's model applies quite well to Borges's access to world author status). Instead, we find ourselves in an archaic marketplace: the topos from the *Nights*, the place where the ultimate adventure (storytelling) begins.

The humble storyteller who recites the tales for a few coins in Borges's prose poem writes back to the economic model of literary circulation derived from Goethe, and even more to the modern theoretical interpretations of Goethe's metaphor. The deliberate choice of an archaic currency (coins, some of them with Roman emperors' heads stamped on them) – epitomizes an explicitly pre-modern view on circulation. The poem "Alguien" also echoes numerous "coin stories" found elsewhere in Borges's fictions, where coins--lost and found, disappearing, fantastically proliferating, etc.--are an obsessive theme: featured in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", "La lotería en Babilonia", "El Zahir", "Tigres azules", as well as many poems. The coin motif concretizes in poetic and narrative form the basic dual meaning of the Spanish verb *contar* (to count; to tell a story) in all its rich ambiguity. The use of the word "benefactor" (*bienhechor*) also complicates the mercantile metaphor. The disproportion between what the storyteller receives in payment for his

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Borges 2009: 523.



performance (a few coins) and what his audience and future readers of the book receive (an incommensurably greater benefit) is briefly hinted at in this short prose poem. Rather than a commercial transaction, a gift, rather than exchange, beneficence: the *1001 Nights* is a gift from the East to the West, Borges claims, a treasure held for collective use by the entire community of its readers, a common heritage of all that ties back to the claim of universal patrimony expressed defiantly in the earlier essay “El escritor argentino y la tradición”.

“Es un libro tan vasto que no es necesario haberlo leído, ya que es parte previa de nuestra memoria y es parte de esta noche también” (“Las mil y una noches”, Borges 2007: 284). Borges’s essay on the *1001 Nights*, I would argue, offers a productive theoretical insight on premodern circulation, one that complicates and enriches contemporary theories, but in addition, it also offers us a sort of origin story of literary circulation, by weaving together the *1001 Nights* and the blind Homeric bard creator of the Western tradition, as well as the blind Argentine writer himself, reliant on a return to semi-oral, archaic modes of literary practice. Serendipity and vulnerability are a large part of the transmission process. Borges shared with nineteenth-century Orientalist scholars a sense of wonder that tales could travel such vast distances both in space and time. As Captain Richard Francis Burton, the flamboyant Victorian translator of the *1001 Nights*, Borges’s favorite “hombre de palabras y hazañas”<sup>17</sup> (Borges 2010: 403), put it laconically in his “Terminal Essay” on the *Nights*: “Tales have wings” (Burton 1886: 120). Borges also shared the conviction that these stories-about-stories were as enthralling in their own way, as any adventure tale: “History, here as elsewhere, is stranger than fiction”, Müller writes in the conclusion to his essay “On the Migration of Fables” (Müller 2018: 32): a proto-Borgesian statement.

Borges’s “speculations” on premodern forms of literary circulation should be understood in the context of a deliberate turning away from the modern toward the archaic. Along with other contemporaries – Franz Kafka, T. S. Eliot, Karen Blixen, Italo Calvino, among others – Borges offers a possible counterexample to Moretti’s claim about the global dominance of the nineteenth-century realist novel. “If literary modernity is forward-thinking, is it because it is backward-looking?”, Ben Hutchinson asks rhetorically, in the introduction to his 2016 book *Lateness and Modern European literature* (Hutchinson 2016: 4). Taking a cue from Ben Hutchinson’s “taxonomy of lateness”, I would propose that we read such writers as, in Nietzsche’s words, “creatures facing backwards”,<sup>18</sup> anti-modern writers whose radical reversal of tradition and turn away from the novel and toward archaic modes of composition, transmission, and circulation,

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<sup>17</sup> “Man of words and deeds” (“Translators of the *1001 Nights*”, Borges 2000: 98).

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, quoted in Hutchinson 2016: 4.



“offers a significant counter-narrative to the 'progressive' view of modernity” (Hutchinson 2016: v)<sup>19</sup> and aims to take a road less traveled to literary innovation.

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<sup>19</sup> While Hutchinson's corpus includes mostly Modernists, similar features and concerns apply to later writers such as Borges.

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