

SHLOMY MUALEM, *Borges and Plato: A Game with Shifting Mirrors*. Madrid: Iberoamericana/Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert. 2012. 206 pp.

It might be said that one of the defining marks of a truly great writer is the way their works invite us to imagine them in dialogue with any other great writer. Given that the number of perennially interesting philosophical and artistic themes is limited, it stands to reason that we could imagine a rich dialogue between any two such authors, given a sufficiently prolific literary output and the tendency for ambitious writers to cycle through most, or at least many, such themes at some point in their career.

It is therefore unsurprising that library bookshelves now groan under the weight of studies comparing Borges to other major writers and thinkers, from Cervantes to Schopenhauer. But if the formula 'Borges and X' has proven a reliable means of generating scholarship, the end result has too often been only a serviceable contribution to Borges studies without necessarily transforming our understanding of either Borges or 'X'. Every now and then, however, a work finds its way into print that far outstrips the workman-like results that such a formula would suggest. Shlomy Mualem's *Borges and Plato* may well prove to be such a work. Not only will readers of Borges find it a lucid and engaging treatment of many themes central to his thought, but Mualem's book also represents a marvellous exposition of Plato's views on a range of topics central to the philosophy of art and literary theory. Indeed, many Borges scholars would be well served to begin their study of Plato here, as Mualem's work is an extraordinarily clear and straightforward exposition of Platonism, as well as a first-rate contribution to Borges studies.

*Borges and Plato* is organized into two sections, the first dealing primarily with purely philosophical themes and the second with aesthetic and literary ones. The first chapter offers a welcome disquisition on the ancient interplay between literature and philosophy in the guise of *mythos* and *logos*. The second chapter explores Plato's methodological scepticism in relation to Borges' 'intellectual instinct', arguing that 'Borges is the most Socratic writer of our times' (83), precisely due to his relentless pursuit of truth in a way that recalls the Socratic elenchus. Chapter 3 offers a nuanced discussion of Plato's complex notions of *idea* and *eidos*, as well as Borges' intimate engagement with the themes of blindness and knowledge. Mualem argues that Borges' persistent use of the theme of the archetype sheds light on his 'intellectual tendency toward idealism'—in particular, Platonic idealism (86). Chapter 4 synthesizes Plato's often conflicting views on mimesis and examines Borges' insistence that there is no link between literature (aesthetics) and morality (ethics). It must be said that, as interesting as this discussion is, a more in-depth examination of Borges' recurring interest in the theme of deceiving with the truth would have enhanced this segment.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide an illuminating comparison of Plato's mistrust of poetry and Borges' notions of artistic inspiration and the process of writing. Mualem provides here a particularly helpful discussion of Borges' own working methodology as a literary craftsman. Especially insightful is his re-interpretation of some of Borges' classic fictions as allegories of the process of literary creation. The final chapter offers some welcome reflections on an important point of divergence between Plato and Borges, namely, the former's tendency to undervalue the written word and latter's cultish devotion to the book.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of *Borges and Plato* lies in its perspicuous organization of Borges' views, which are scattered across short stories, poems and essays, into clear and coherent philosophical positions. Particularly welcome is Mualem's willingness to make use of Borges' abundant interviews in articulating these positions, even if one would have wished to see some sort of explanatory discussion of the complexities of Borges' use of this important, but often neglected or unacknowledged, literary medium. Likewise, one might note that, with the exception of the allegories of literary creation that Mualem discusses (for example, in Chapter 5), his own particular readings of Borges' specific texts are not generally original or

1228 BSS, XC (2013)

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

groundbreaking *per se*; their value resides precisely in his lucid presentation of the significance and depth of their philosophical content.

It is increasingly difficult for new scholarship on Borges to rise above the din of clattering presses and chattering interpreters. *Borges and Plato: A Game with Shifting Mirrors* is a first-rate work, a book that deserves the sustained attention of every Borges scholar.

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