

Introduction

Space is for us an existential and cultural dominant, a thematized and foregrounded feature or structural principle.

— FREDRIC JAMESON¹

Space is all around us, and even within us; we take it for granted. Yet, the statement quoted above from Fredric Jameson points to the key importance that the idea of space holds for those of us who live in the contemporary world, and the crucial role that it plays in terms of articulating an understanding of what it now means to be human. In the current era, it suggests, we are more spatially aware than heretofore; we explain our existence in spatial terms more than we used to, and, while remaining aware that we are temporally-bound beings, we have a new and stronger appreciation of the values and meanings associated with locations, places and the general concept of human spatiality.

The fact is that our identity, our sense of self, our links with other people, our ambitions, all the ways in which we relate to the world, are intimately connected to our ability to understand, manipulate and talk about spatiality. From identifying our origins when we meet someone new, to explaining our behaviour to friends or strangers, to knowing where 'home' is, to changing the way we live and the people we interact with, not to mention reflecting on our life's trajectory and our place in the universe, all of these very human activities and processes entail a relationship with space and a sophisticated understanding of its meanings. As Henri Lefebvre (1991: 59) put it: 'Change life! Change Society! These precepts mean nothing without the production of an appropriate space.' This is how fundamental the phenomenon of space is to our lives, as basic a part of us and our existence as time, even if the latter is more readily accepted as a topic of discussion, both in everyday life and in the realm of literature. In relation to the topic

discussed in this book, as we shall see in due course, the 'spatial turn' taken by the study of culture has meant that spatiality is increasingly seen as an area worthy of reflection and discussion in the context of literary studies. And in the particular case of Jorge Luis Borges, spatiality takes on a profound importance, relating, as it does, to issues of identity, of metaphysical speculation about the place of human beings in the universe, of power and powerlessness, and to a wide range of other important human questions.

This book explores the relevance of space and place to the writings of Borges, showing how spatial concepts are crucial to many of his most important works. It demonstrates some of the ways in which Borges capitalises on the special facility which we as human beings have for conceptualising spatial knowledge and for giving expression to that knowledge, and concludes that Borges exploits this basic human ability to conceptualise and articulate spatial knowledge in order to address fundamental questions about what it means to be human. The theme is pervasive in his work, and could be addressed through the study of any one of numerous essays, stories and poems. The main focus here is on a number of the key stories in the two core anthologies, *Ficciones*, first published in 1944, and *El Aleph*, the first edition of which appeared in 1949. Other material is examined also, including some of Borges's poetry (especially that from the 1920s), and one of the stories from the collection *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935). The Epilogue makes reference to additional stories not analysed in depth in the core chapters, as well as reprising some of the arguments set out in those chapters.

Although there is a vast bibliography on Borges, discussions of space and place in his work are far less numerous than examinations of the theme of time. This tendency to concentrate on time is at least partly due to the fact that the study of literature in general has been dominated by the temporal dimension. Discussion of literature has often become discussion of literary history, and, despite the increased emphasis on spatial themes in discussions of culture, it is still the case that historical and biographical concerns loom large in literary criticism.

It is also true, however, that other concerns have entered the literary arena, and a myriad of diverse theoretical approaches compete with each other to achieve fresh insights into the work of major canonical writers such

as Borges, as well as offering new takes on cultural production generally, whether that be classical writing or the many manifestations of popular culture that are grist to the mill of academic critics. At times, commentators have shown some impatience with authors such as Borges in particular, either because his work may appear to lack an appreciation of the significance of various forms and contexts of cultural production – there is no discussion of soap operas in Borges, and scant acknowledgement of the significance of subaltern culture – or because certain of his pronouncements on the political situation in his country at specific points in the course of the twentieth century, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, had a reactionary, undemocratic flavour that alienated him from progressive thinking at the time. Those who have read accounts of Borges's life such as the biography by Edwin Williamson (2004) are inclined to see such distasteful political statements in context, however, and to appreciate, on the one hand, how apolitical Borges was generally, and, on the other, how anarchic and anti-establishment many of his ideas actually were.

The aim here is not to enter a defence of Borges in relation to such issues. Rather, it is to show that, however obliquely, and at times only implicitly, his stories demonstrate an awareness of the importance of human spatiality and the realities associated with it. This manifests itself in the many ways in which space and spatial concepts function in our lives, from the dichotomy between the lived experience of space and human conceptualisations of space, on the one hand, to the intersection between spatiality and issues of power, and even politics, on the other.

Thus, Borges's various approaches to space and place, and the hints that he offers in his work about the ways in which human beings experience spaces and places, are a central concern of this book. The most fundamental notion about space that is of relevance here is the fact that, along with time, it can be taken as forming the 'stuff' of the universe; it is what Doreen Massey (1992: 67) calls a 'dimension', that is, 'one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualize the world'. Curiously, however, it is difficult to treat the two concepts of time and space in an equivalent manner, since the term 'space' itself seems always to require clarification. Hence, offering definitions of time can appear superfluous when discussing temporal concepts in an author's work, while any discussion of space

seems to require us to make some attempt at defining what we mean by the concept before we can begin that discussion.

The two notions – time and space – are inseparable, of course, a fact that Borges himself drew attention to in his discussion of these concepts in his 1928 essay ‘La penúltima versión de la realidad’: ‘Creo delusoria la oposición entre los dos conceptos incontrastables de espacio y de tiempo ... El espacio es un incidente en el tiempo y no una forma universal de intuición’ (OC1: 200) [*I think the supposed opposition between the two uncontrastable concepts of space and time is a delusion ... Space is an incident in time and not a universal form of intuition*].² It is not possible, then, to conceive of one of these dimensions as existing without the other. As Massey (1992: 80) puts it, ‘Space is not static, nor time spaceless’, since, although they are different from each other, neither spatiality nor temporality can be conceptualised as the absence of the other. Rather, we need to think of the two dimensions as functioning always together, so that any discussion of the one will take account of the other. This can be a real challenge, since it is relatively easy to take account of time in our discussions of *spatial* realities – from the histories of places to historicist or biographical commentaries on literary works – but it is easy to overlook the importance of the spatial when giving an historical or chronological account of matters.

Thus, well-wrought discussions of Borges’s stories, such as Williamson’s study of ‘El fin’ [‘The End’] (Williamson 2007), Fiddian’s work on ‘Tema del traidor y del héroe’ [‘The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero’] (2010) or Balderston’s classic account of the contextual features of those and other stories (Balderston 1993) offer invaluable insights into the meanings of the works discussed, and elucidate relevant historical and biographical detail that helps us to interpret the work. Furthermore, explicit discussions of the theme of time such as Earle (2003), Johnson (2009) and Colás (2009) have also helped to show how important this topic in particular is to Borges’s work. Indeed, the author’s own pronouncements have seemed to support the view that time is a central concern of his writings, and have tended to ensure that the issue of temporality is kept to the forefront in analyses of them. For instance, towards the end of his 1947 essay ‘Nueva refutación del tiempo’ [‘A new refutation of time’], Borges asserted unequivocally that ‘[e]l tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho’ (OC2: 148) [*Time is the*

substance of which I am made]. And the following is the account he gives of the terror that the idea of time induced in him throughout his life:

[H]ay algo que siempre me interesó y aún me aterrorizó desde que yo era niño. Ese algo es, como ya lo sabe quien haya hojeado mis libros, el problema del tiempo, la perplejidad del tiempo, el infinito remolino del tiempo. (quoted in Ferrer 1971: 39)

[*There is one thing that has always interested me and has even terrified me since my childhood. That one thing, as those who have leafed through my books will have gathered, is the problem of time, the perplexity of time, the infinite whirlpool that is time.*]

That statement is reinforced by similar ones made at other times, including Borges's bald assertion, in an interview with Norman Thomas di Giovanni, to the effect that '... I have always been obsessed by time' (Borges 1974: 57). Meanwhile, in his 1936 essay 'Historia de la eternidad' ['A History of Eternity'], he had asserted that:

El tiempo es un problema para nosotros, un tembloroso y exigente problema, acaso el más vital de la metafísica; la eternidad, un juego o una fatigada esperanza. (OC1: 353)

[*Time is a problem for us, a tremulous, insistent problem, and perhaps the most important of all metaphysical issues; eternity is a game, a worn-out hope.*]

Hence, Juan Nuño (1986: 60), in his discussion of philosophical themes in Borges, can declare that 'siempre en Borges el gran tema, escondido o manifiesto, es el tiempo ...' [*In Borges, the great theme, either hidden or explicit, is always time*]. In a similar vein, but perhaps closer to the mark, Jean Franco (1981: 64) makes the claim that Borges '... is ... obsessed by eternity'.

In fact, Borges's apparent obsession with time and eternity turns out to be as much about spatiality as it is about temporality. For a start, as Sieber (2004: 202) has suggested, Borges rejects the idea of space as being merely 'a kind of dramatic scenery or backdrop for the star attraction, the unfolding of time'. She goes so far as to assert that Borges 'privileges space' and suggests that 'time is subservient to space in Borges' work', to the extent that 'existence could be defined by the quality of taking up space as opposed to an unfolding of events in time'. While it is difficult to state with any