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BOOK REVIEW

A Review of David E. Johnson's *Kant's Dog: On Borges, Philosophy, and the Time of Translation* (SUNY University Press, 2012, 274pp.)

STEPHEN D. GINGERICH

“EL PERRO DE KANT”: TIME, BORGES, KANT’S DOG

Humor is not usually counted among the traits of good literary criticism. *Kant's Dog* announces itself with an apparent joke, and in the third chapter, which shares the book's name minus the subtitle, we are told that Borges takes Kant's dog out for a walk in the park. Johnson explains that, by way of this canine constitutional, Borges offers a critique of transcendental philosophy's grounding of concepts of knowledge. Though the level of wit is never as high as in “Kant's Dog,” Johnson carries out a similar critical operation in each chapter of his book. He confronts Borges's texts with philosophical figures and texts to which Borges alludes in *Ficciones* and elsewhere, and sometimes with things to which Borges does not, in fact, allude. Indeed, some of Johnson's points of reference would have to be *avant la lettre*; discussions of Derrida and Derrida scholars Rodolphe Gasché and Martin Hägglund set the philosophical bar high. Other references—to Kant's dog, Schopenhauer's cat, the idiot god, and an in-born, mechanical human heart—clearly exist neither in reality nor in Borges's texts. Not only does Borges walk Kant's dog. He also refutes, time and again, Aristotle's, then Augustine's, then Heidegger's understanding of time. He tries Hume's faith in the external world. He shakes Aristotle's confidence in the possibility of a stable, unequivocal basis for ethical decision. Invoking the texts of all three major Abrahamic religions, he calls God to the stand in order to spell out an ethics of immortality. On the one hand, Johnson is one kind of reader that Borges engenders: a scholar willing to chase down allusions and work out intricate interplay of text and intertext. But also,

as we shall see, his dazzling display of expertise gives priority to thinking through, again, and beyond (if thinking through is not always also *beyond*) the problems that occupied Borges.

Chapter 3, “Kant’s Dog,” can give us a good sense of the book as a whole. Those who know anything about Kant the man probably know of his daily walks. What we didn’t picture was the dog that accompanied him, restrained in accordance with a “philosophical leash law” meant to keep him from running amok and causing his owner unexpected trouble. Johnson frames his third chapter with this story, suggested by a “key moment” in “Funes the Memorious” (91). We are reminded that in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant “trots out” a dog at the precise point at which he sets out to establish the objective validity of concepts drawn from sense experience. In other words, when Kant wants to explain how the understanding manages to turn the manifold of sensation into comprehensible units, he chooses as an example our recognition of a dog as a dog. How can we say that what we see is a dog? This is the work of imagination, which often appears to be Johnson’s main concern. Neither passive nor active, neither sense nor understanding, interior nor exterior, it “inscribes the transcendental” (93). That is to say, it makes the universality of knowledge possible. But its inscription also “singularizes the universal,” ruining the purity of traditional categories of reality or materiality and of subjectivity or conceptuality. The imagination “makes it possible to see and name, to know or to recognize, a dog as a dog,” yet it does so at the price of “(making) it impossible that the dog will ever be one” (93).

Johnson notes that Borges’s narrator in “Funes” also evokes a dog as an illustration of Funes’s discomfort that what is called a dog one minute should retain the same name the next minute. This is Kant’s dog, says Johnson, and this chapter shows how Borges’s text, by virtue of Funes’s rejection of Kant’s dog, poses an “implicit challenge to Kant” (92). Kant’s analysis of imagination acknowledges the temporal character of thought, but when Borges takes the dog out, testing the temporal synthesis of the imagination, he finds that it puts Funes in the position of being so absolutely present as to be dead, so alive as to be deceased (118–19). Borges does not improve on Kant but, rather, follows up on Kantian imagination by inscribing again the aporetic nature of the universal, of objective knowledge: we can see and know and name the dog only at the price of killing it.

But Johnson’s intention is not to identify a philosophical position belonging to Borges, Kant, or even Funes. We ought to be careful not to translate “Kant’s dog” into a simple dismissal of a philosopher or of philosophy, in general. Though the challenge to Kant consists in discerning

“the necessary inscription of the empirical as the impossible condition of possibility for the transcendental determination of thought and experience” (92), such an insight can hardly be ascribed to Borges, at least not rigorously, for the “condition of possibility of thought” is, in Johnson’s telling, an impossible one. Indeed, both Kant and Borges offer an approach to this aporia, while both, at the same time, demonstrate a failure to appreciate the radicality and the necessity of the aporia. In his first chapter, Johnson concludes that Borges “retreats” from the implications of his own utterances about the indeterminacy of the future by claiming a liberating effect for the concept of eternity (39) rather than a “logic of survival” whereby we *live on* (42). In spite of himself, Borges’s effort to save us from time estranges us from life.

Johnson returns time and again to the problem of inscription, the necessity of an empirical marker that would at once ground and undermine, affirm and negate the transcendental operations that philosophy traditionally looks to as the foundation for truth, certainty, and objectivity. Inscription, Johnson argues in his introduction, is another name for *imagination*, and it is perhaps as a meditation on imagination that we can most easily grasp the discussions that make up the other four chapters and the Afterword of *Kant’s Dog*, all of which weave readings of Borges with interpretations of texts that Borges evokes. Chapter 1, “Time: For Borges,” examines Borges’s essays on time, along with canonical texts by Aristotle, Augustine, Heidegger, and Derrida, concluding that the author of “A New Refutation of Time” “retreats” from the implications of his own utterances about the indeterminacy of the future, and hence about time. Chapter 2, “Belief, in Translation,” combines exegeses of “Pierre Menard” and essays on translation of classics and film with a reflection on the theme of the “secret operation” of belief in Hume. For Johnson, following Borges, translation must be seen as a kind of repetition of an original that is always already a translation. In spite of a kind of structural belief to the contrary, the condition of possibility of being repeatable, and hence of being legible or comprehensible at all, is being repetitive (repeating a perfectly good original). Chapter 4, “Decisions of Hospitality,” takes up Borges’s essays on metaphor to explore the possibility of an unequivocal meaning that could ground decision-making. Reading Borges’s “Garden of Forking Paths” and other fictions, the decision becomes the site of ethical thinking. Echoing Derrida’s work on hospitality, which Johnson reads alongside Aristotle, Heidegger, and Augustine, he concludes that ethical decisions are always made in the face of the uncertainty that results from “irreducible metaphoricity” (146). In chapter 5, “Idiocy, the Name of God,” Johnson elaborates the interplay in “The Aleph” between

pantheism and a number of source texts: the Bible, the Koran, Kabbala, and other theological commentaries. The ethics of immortality is no ethics at all; to be ethical, God must be mortal and if immortal, he is not only *not* an ethical being but impossible.

Borges scholars will be interested in Johnson's book for his contributions to ongoing scholarly debates about the interpretation of specific texts and his perceptive analyses of what he refers to in the introduction as "accidental" details (9). However, any reader is bound to learn as much about Kant, Heidegger, Derrida, Maimonides, Locke, and so forth as about Borges, *per se*. *Kant's Dog* is thus also for the non-Borges specialist, a reader who is interested in what interested Borges, but not only or necessarily *because* it interested Borges. That a fantastical tale or a detective story can be interpreted as an intervention in philosophical discussions of life and death, the concept and the example, time and causation, freedom and choice, and so on, the awareness of this we owe more to Borges than to any other writer in the Western canon. Recalling Borges's equation of the imagination with Greek *phantasia*, Johnson asserts that "the fantastic . . . is the only possible genre, not only of literature, but also of thought and life" (17). *Kant's Dog* contributes to an appreciation of how seriously we should take Borges as a creative writer and thinker (*Dichter und Denker*, in the inimitable German idiom), but also, if I may put it this way, as a liver.

As enigmatic as the title's evocation of Kant's dog is the designation in the subtitle of "the time of translation" as one of the book's primary themes. It would be tempting to correct this, in fact, and insist that the concept that most orients Johnson's readings of Borges and the myriad philosophers and literary thinkers is the imagination. Imagination temporalizes the universal, inserts it into history and into mortal life. Without the imagination, the universal (and hence conceptuality and all projects of knowing) cannot be, but imagination also links the universal irrevocably and irreparably to the singular. Translation's time is another way of talking about imagination's temporalizing function. This substitution may be advisable because of Borges's investment in translation over imagination, which he seems to have viewed, rather than as the faculty that synthesizes universal and particular (Kant's *Einbildungskraft*), in more conventional terms as the ability to produce fictions. It might be news to practicing translators that translation *has* a time. Certainly, the act of translation—embodied, archived in any particular translation—manifests a temporal relation, the past text, rendered contemporary and made available for a certain posterity. But we should not mistake this reflection on translation for the reflections of a translator

in a conventional sense, meant, as it were, for other practicing translators. Indeed, it should not surprise us that the time of translation is the time of time, translation serving as one of several means of articulating the nature of temporality.

For Johnson, as he says in the introductory chapter, “Philosophy, Literature and the Accidents of Translation,” the effort to think time requires engaging the relationship between literature and philosophy, which itself requires not only speaking of that relation but entering into it as he reads literary and philosophical texts together, where both encounter each other and themselves as/at the limits of sense and understanding. For some, philosophy is born with the effort to deny poetry its transcendental significance, but it is undeniable that in this day and age philosophy and literature both enjoy a privileged discursive status in the project of plumbing the depths of human experience. The same could not be said for translation. It is often assumed to be a technical exercise of transference of meaning, celebrated for allowing wider access to thought, poetic sensibility and reflection, knowledge, and cultural manifestations. Rarely are we reminded that it, too, touches on the very emergence of sense, consciousness, and inventions. *Kant’s Dog* lends translation a prestige reserved for other humanistic discourses. This task appears to coincide with Borges, whose statement about translation bears repeating: “No problem (is) as consubstantial to literature and its modest mystery as the one posed by translation” (cited 48). When this statement was published (in two separate essays) in 1932, it may have been a mere joke on the part of a young writer who had devoted himself to poems and essays. Humor aside, *Kant’s Dog* demonstrates, with imagination, how Borges’s life and work bear it out.

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