

1997

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Mark, "A New Version of Borges' Three" (1997). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 30.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/eml_fac_pubs/30

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A New Version of Borges's Three

By Mark Harris

Contra Mundum, No. 15 Final Print Issue

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There exists a tendency among secular literary critics today to uncover and reveal a humanistic vision behind even the most apparently Judeo-Christian literary works and their authors. In criticism of early American literature, witness the majority opinion that Puritan Anne Bradstreet grew beyond the allegedly narrow-minded religious focus that characterizes her early poetry, advancing in her later poems (published posthumously) to more earthly, personal concerns; the latter poems, of course, are viewed as by far Bradstreet's best poems, according to most purveyors of this assessment). In more recent literature of the Americas, writers such as Emily Dickinson, or the twentieth-century Argentinian short-story writer Jorge Luis Borges, display throughout their bodies of work an ostensible interest in and search for spiritual truth; however, to describe what such writers do, with such terminology, seems to make the average secular critic uncomfortable, as it also might his or her secular audience. So instead, Dickinson, Borges, and other writers display a fascination with eternity, or some similarly safe, de-Christianized euphemism for what the writer really displays. Secular literary critics of twentieth-century literature seem consciously reluctant to admit that a modern writer such as Borges is searching for Christ, much less making anything as certain as a statement, much less a statement of truth.

Even when a secular critic does venture to discuss a writer's view of God today, the inevitable conclusion is that a writer like Borges (since he's intelligent and innovative and thus, not religiously narrow-minded) is exposing the silliness, pettiness, and ultimate futility of all theological searches for and arguments about absolute truth. Such has been the typical conclusion regarding a Borges story which centers around Judas and Christ.

When Jorge Luis Borges, in the story "Three Versions of Judas", suggests the superfluity of Judas's role as betrayer, is he questioning Christ's divine independence of humanity? Of course, it's actually theologian Nils Runeberg—at least as important a character as Judas in terms of understanding the story—who makes that suggestion about Judas's role. But remarkably, many who comment on "Three Versions of Judas" don't recognize a distinction between Borges and Runeberg, but rather assume that the latter, when making suggestions such as the above, expresses Borges's view. Quite the contrary; an important goal of Borges in "Three Versions" is to criticize Runeberg. By seeing Runeberg as

Borges's spokesperson, secular criticism can present Borges's view of Scripture as postmodernly fragmented and universally skeptical. But the writer himself demonstrates, in "Three Versions" and elsewhere, his belief in one truth.

A few critics have attempted a close look at Runeberg, but very few have examined more than one aspect in-depth. One needs to see all the ways by which Borges undermines Runeberg's credibility and exposes his motives to understand the purpose of "Three Versions". Start with Runeberg's name, part of which Wheelock examines: "Nils Runeberg...is himself a kind of nothing, a nil remembered now only by heresiologists. He died of a ruptured aneurism, like Herbert Ashe, who also is barely remembered."¹ "Rune" can be a character in need of deciphering, and in that sense it can stand for both Christ and Judas as mysteries. "Berg" is a variant of "burg", or town; "Runeberg", then, can be a repository for mysterious symbols, and "Nils", rather than Borges, negates or ciphers both the symbol and its repository.

Runeberg's three versions of Judas are undercut by Borges's narrator even before they're presented. In the story's introduction, the narrator asserts that Runeberg neither "believe [d] in" nor "care[d] about" his conclusions regarding Judas (p. 152). Runeberg cares about receiving publication and attention. After the narrator describes Runeberg's first version and the panning it received from theologians, we're told that Runeberg not only "rewrote the disapproved book" but actually "modified his doctrines" (p. 153). As McMurray suggests, Borges's story "presents a scathing parody of theological renaming";² Runeberg is willing to rename and rewrite history and theology in order to make his mark. Roughly two years after publishing his first treatise on Judas, Runeberg completed the second, "modified" version; but perhaps fearing a reception similar to that of his first version, he let another two years pass before publishing it. The narrator suggests the moral implication of Runeberg's fraudulence by noting that "Dante would have destined [Runeberg], perhaps, for a fiery sepulcher; his name might have augmented the catalogues of heresiarchs" (p. 151). This proposed fate stems from not only the blasphemous substance of Runeberg's statements but, probably more so, from the lack of sincerity behind this. When Runeberg's third version meets with no reaction, good or bad, at all, Runeberg takes the attention he craves by force, "intuit[ing] from [the] universal indifference an almost miraculous 'monstrous' conclusion (p. 155). He is willing to say anything about Judas in order to be heard. God had commanded this indifference; God did not wish His terrible secret propagated in the world" (p. 156).

From that point, Runeberg becomes increasingly like the Judas in his first and third versions (or like Hawthorne's Ethan Brand), rejecting his rejecters and welcoming, as his third Judas does, the glorious uniqueness of being an eternal victim of "the fire which cannot be extinguished" (p. 153):

He sensed ancient and divine curses converging upon him [for] pronounc[ing]

1 Carter Wheelock, *The Mythmaker: A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1969).

2 George R. McMurray, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980).

the secret name of God. Wasn't he, perchance, guilty of this dark crime? Might not this be the blasphemy against the Spirit, the sin which will not be pardoned (Matthew 12:3)? Nils Runeberg wandered through the streets, praying aloud that he be given the grace to share Hell with the Redeemer. (p. 156)

Borges makes clear that Runeberg's need for uniqueness, rather than sincere convictions, is what motivates him to write about Judas. The narrator tells us that Runeberg "was deeply religious" (p. 151); that Borges enjoys using language literally and didactically suggests Runeberg religiosity is merely literal. He is bound in and by labyrinthine theological and moral sophisms. In all three versions, Runeberg's premises and conclusions are not based in a solemn search after truth, as one can see by examining them.

Runeberg's Three Versions

In the first version (pp. 152-153), Borges criticizes Runeberg's attempt "to decipher a central mystery of theology" (pp. 151-2), namely, why Judas did what he did. This first version appears as a thinly-woven patchwork of assumed premises and unsupportable conclusions; the thread that unravels Runeberg's twofold premise, that Judas's motive is a mystery and that that mystery can be solved, lies (with Borgesian irony) in one of Runeberg's conclusions: "the treachery of Judas was not accidental; it was a predestined deed which has its mysterious place in the economy of Redemption" (p. 152). The truth of this conclusion retroactively negates Runeberg's premise and the need for it. As McMurray notes, Runeberg's "absurd, labyrinthine logic ridicules the 'inventions' of theological reasoning",³ the inventions being "mysteries" that theologians create in order to solve them. Rather than suggesting, as secular criticism does, that Judas (and, by association, all Scripture) is open to and enlivened by simultaneously conflicting interpretations, Borges suggests that certain simple truths should be left unmystified and don't need "solving."

Runeberg's first version starts with the assumption that Judas's act of betrayal has been seen as indispensable to Christ's arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection (p. 151). Without explaining this assumption, Runeberg then points out that Judas's primary act of betrayal, "identify[ing]" Jesus, was an act not really needed, due to Jesus' being constantly in the public eye. But of course, a more logically "needed" function of Judas was identifying a place and time at which Christ could be found alone. Runeberg, who would know this, ignores it.

In all three of his versions, Runeberg projects his own need for uniqueness onto Judas. In the first version, he claims that "Judas, alone among the apostles, intuited the secret divinity and terrible purpose of Jesus" (p. 153), an obvious theological error. In the Synoptic Gospels, Peter acknowledges Jesus as "the Christ" in front of the other disciples

3 George R. McMurray, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980).

(Matthew 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20).

Describing Christ's descending to earth and taking on human form, Runeberg finds that “in order to correspond to such a sacrifice it was necessary that a man, as representative of all men, make a suitable sacrifice. Judas Iscariot was that man” (p. 152). Obviously, this conclusion begs the question that someone needed to “correspond to such a sacrifice” as Christ's, but Runeberg conspicuously withholds a reason for his assumption.

A similarly non-sequitural assumption follows, that “the lower order is a mirror of the superior order, the forms of the earth correspond to the forms of the heavens; the stains on the skin are a map of the incorruptible constellations” (p. 153). The three analogies contradict Runeberg's above assertion that Christ entered an altogether different dimension in moving from “the superior order” to “the lower order”. From this premise, the first two parts of which have some Biblical base which Runeberg does not bring out, he concludes that, necessarily, “Judas in some way reflects Jesus”, e.g. in “deliberate self-destruction in order to deserve damnation all the more” (p. 153). Again, no elucidation of this “similarity” appears, a lack characteristic of the first version and which leads the narrator to sum up weakly, “in this manner did Nils Runeberg elucidate the enigma of Judas” (p. 153).

After his first version's unanimous pan by theologians, Runeberg tries a new audience, “abandon[ing] the terrain of theology to his adversaries and postulat[ing] oblique arguments of a moral order” (p. 153). It is that man-made “moral order” that Borges now criticizes.

Runeberg's second version of Judas (pp. 153-154) reacts against any negative view of Judas, based on the premise that the betrayer has gotten bad press. As “one of the apostles”, Judas “deserves from us the best interpretations of his deeds” (p. 153). Again, Runeberg ignores a well-known episode of “the most precious drama” (p. 152), Judas' posthumous dismissal and replacement as an apostle, consequent of his betraying Christ.

The second version gives the betrayer the unique position of being the most altruistic person to have lived, Christ notwithstanding. Runeberg puts forth as Judas' motive “an extravagant and even limitless asceticism” (p. 154). Rejection of “the spirit” (p. 154) and all its attendant pleasures certainly defines “asceticism” in a new way, which novelty the narrator's sardonic oxymoron perhaps reflects. Dubious corroboration for Runeberg's conclusion consists of a “footnote” from “Three Versions” “editor”: “Euclides da Cunha, in a book ignored by Runeberg, notes that for the heresiarch of Canudos, Antonio, Conselheiro, virtue was 'a kind of impiety almost’” (p. 154).

Runeberg's closing thought in version two, that Judas “thought himself unworthy to be good” and so chose to abstain from goodness in order to “glorify God” (p. 154), contradicts well-known passages such as Romans 6 which make vehemently clear that purposely sinning does not magnify God's goodness. Judas “thought himself unworthy to be good” because “happiness, like good, is a divine attribute and not to be usurped by

men” (p. 154). This picture of the self-sacrificing Judas resembles that of Runeberg near the story's end, false humility, martyr complex, and all. Runeberg seems as loath “to impute [Judas]’s crime to cupidity” (because greed is “the most torpid motive force”) (p. 153) as he is, perhaps, to admit that the motive behind his own conclusions about Judas is a desire for publication and recognition. Version two indeed “abandon[s] the terrain of theology”, but though its “oblique arguments” contain statements about morality, their “order” is suspect (p. 153).

Runeberg turns to Gnosticism for the primary source of his third version of Judas (pp. 155-156) owes a great debt to Gnosticism, as Aizenberg notes:

The Cainites, a Gnostic school..., gave a particular twist to the system of antitheses...typical to Gnosticism. Of the possible oppositions available to them, the Cainites chose to focus on the one which pitted Cain against Abel, proposing a value reversal that made Cain the superior brother and Abel the inferior. (The same transposition was applied to the Judas/Jesus pair.) 'Tres Versiones de Judas' is based on this Cainite Jesus/Judas inversion.⁴

Runeberg's conclusion here, which the narrator deems “monstrous”, is that Judas, not Jesus, was (and is) God-become-man, the savior of the world (p. 155). To support this, Runeberg suggests that limiting “all that happened to the agony of one afternoon on the cross is blasphemous” (p. 155), a view elsewhere refuted by Borges himself: “it is not unjust that a disobedience in a garden should contaminate all humanity and that the crucifixion of a single Jew should be sufficient to save it”.⁵ Runeberg's suggestion is upheld by “Erfjord” in a “footnote” directly contradicted by Hebrews 10:1-18: the crucifying of God has not ceased, for anything which has happened once in time is repeated ceaselessly through all eternity. Judas, now, continues to receive the pieces of silver; he continues to hurl the pieces of silver in the temple; he continues to knot the hangman's noose on the field of blood. (Erfjord, to justify this affirmation, invokes the last chapter of the first volume of the *Vindication of Eternity*, by Jaromir Hladik). (p. 155)

One sees in “Erfjord”'s quote a curiously Borgesian idea, the labyrinthine nature that makes time appear to repeat itself. Erfjord's ostensible justification is taken from a fictitious book written by the protagonist of “The Secret Miracle”, the story directly preceding “Three Versions” in *Ficciones*. Its “truth” in the Borgesian universe of fictions does not necessitate its truth when applied to Scripture.

To support his conclusion that God became Judas, not Jesus, Runeberg must show that God was capable of becoming a sinner. Thus, Runeberg points out that “to affirm that he (Jesus) was a man and that he was incapable of sin contains a contradiction” (p. 155). He's right, but of course the Bible does not say that Jesus was incapable of sin. It says that

4 Edna Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic and Judaic Elements in Borges* (Potomac, MD: Scripts Humanistica, 1984).

5 Jaime Alazraki, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

He didn't sin, which made Him uniquely qualified to save humanity. Runeberg ignores this common knowledge since he's trying to establish the uniqueness of Judas, not Jesus. As in his first two versions, Runeberg betrays the truth he knows in an attempt to glorify himself.

Runeberg's third version ends with the observation that "in order to save us, [God] could have chosen any of the destinies which together weave the uncertain web of history; He could have been Alexander, or Pythagoras, or Rurik, or Jesus; He chose an infamous destiny: He was Judas" (p. 156). God's being Judas raises the interesting question of who Jesus was, but Runeberg doesn't pursue his third version that far. Such an omission may help explain why Runeberg's final treatise meets with no hostility, but simply blank neglect.

Borges's Purpose

What is Borges's purpose in presenting Runeberg's series of unsupported conclusions? Secular criticism, as has been shown, tends to view Runeberg as Borges's mouthpiece, so that Borges can be seen as attacking all theology. For example, McMurray writes that "Borges's skepticism toward theology is expressed ironically by his protagonist's assumption that there can be no errors in 'the most precious drama in the history of the world'".⁶ McMurray's conclusion works this way: Borges's narrator states Runeberg's belief that "to suppose an error in Scripture is intolerable; no less intolerable is to admit that there was a single haphazard act in the most precious drama in the history of the world" (p. 152); McMurray then takes the "error" from the first belief and lumps it with the "drama" from the second, concluding a priori (like Runeberg), that Borges is skeptical not only of Runeberg but of theology in general.

For Aizenberg, Runeberg's use of Gnostic thought also somehow translates into Borges's Gnostic skepticism of absolute, Scriptural truth:

Scripture ... is not a congealed text with a single, authentic meaning. Rather, it is a system of variants, with as many readings as readers, each of them true. In line with this audacious freedom of interpretation, the ancestral voices embodied in the canonical book can even be turned into their own opposites. But radical as it may be, the rethinking of the sacred stories and the venerable mythologies is, in the final analysis, a strategy to rescue them from ossification, to make them generate new meanings in a continuous process of deconstruction and reconstruction.⁷

Aizenberg's view, the various "versions" of a Biblical text are "parasites that vivify the host by questioning the proof-text, releasing its lurking revelations, and actualizing its

6 George R. McMurray, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980).

7 Edna Aizenberg, *The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic and Judaic Elements in 'Borges* (Potomac, MD: Scripts Humanistica, 1984).

superimposed lights”.⁸ Aizenberg makes the mistake of Runeberg, whom Borges shows to be unnecessarily trying to “actualize” the “concept of the Son” (p. 157). Borges's theologians, the Bible itself, and Christian readers and critics reject such enlivening as unnecessary and unilluminating.

Borges has said that Job 41 shows God to be “inscrutable”⁹ Aizenberg turns Borges's explication of that chapter into a general “conviction” and changes God's “inscrutability” to that of all “absolute truths”, claiming that Borges hold the “conviction that a fragmentary metatextuality is the only state possible, with absolute truths enclosed in absolute texts beyond our understanding or grasp.”¹⁰ A similarly erroneous conclusion is found in Alazraki: “Borges, skeptical of the veracity of . . . metaphysical hypotheses. . . and of the revelations of the . . . theological systems . . . of several religions, strips them of their claims of absolute truth and pretended divinity and makes them instead raw material for his inventions. In this way, he returns to them the character of aesthetic creation and wonder for which they are valued and justified.” In reality, Borges defends Scripture by exposing the fallacy and fraudulence of Runeberg's failed attempts to “strip” Scripture of its “absolute truth”.

“Three Versions” narrator suggests the absolute power of God, in an early sentence where he acknowledges God's existence and role as creator of definite, absolute destinies. Many destinies might have been Runeberg's, but they weren't; “instead, God assigned him to the twentieth century, and to the university city of Lund” (p. 151). Notwithstanding all the possible lives Runeberg might have lived, the one God designated his one actual life, just as the one God designates all actual truth. Like Runeberg, in Borges's poem “Baruch Spinoza” “someone is creating God in the half-light”,¹¹ yet Runeberg's myopic, failed attempts to recreate God as Judas do not necessitate God's word being out of date or uninspired.

Elsewhere, Aizenberg shows that Borges believes there can be one true interpretation of a passage of scripture: “as [Borges] artfully recalls the tale of [Job,] he examines (only to reject) various interpretations and leads his audience to what he thinks is the true explanation.”¹²

Borges examines three versions of Job 41, finally rejecting two and finding the last to be

8 Edna Aizenberg, “Borges and the Hebraism of Contemporary Literary Theory”, *Borges and His Successors: The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 249-262.

9 Edna Aizenberg, “Introduction to Two Lectures by Borges”, *Borges and His Successors: The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 263-266.

10 Edna Aizenberg, “Borges and the Hebraism of Contemporary Literary Theory”, *Borges and His Successors: The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 249-262.

11 See Robert Mezey, “Borges and Spinoza”, *Tikkun* 7 (Sept. 1992), p. 56.

12 Edna Aizenberg, “Introduction to Two Lectures by Borges”, *Borges and His Successors: The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), pp. 263-266.

true: "According to this third interpretation, which I believe to be the true one, God declares by means of [His] descriptions [of Behemoth and Leviathan] that He is inscrutable, that His nature does not have to be understood by man."¹³The writer of "Three Versions of Judas" then spells out his purpose in examining three versions of the Scripture: "If this lecture serves as a stimulus for you to reread that infinite book in the original or in translation, then I have not spoken in vain today."

Conclusion

"Three Versions of Judas" certainly shows that Scripture's perspective on Judas coexists with others. However, it does not follow that the Scriptural perspective is not the true one. Both Aizenberg and Alazraki contend that Borges argues against the existence of absolute truth, particularly in regard to Scripture. Certainly we can see Borges criticizing Runeberg's three different, vacillating, incompatible versions of Judas, but such criticism argues for Borges's believing in the unassailable truth of the original Scripture rather than against such, and Borges himself supports the idea of Scriptural truth in "The Book of Job." Secular criticism of the various versions, the Biblical version must somehow be equally mistaken, or biased, or silly. The idea is suggested that because Runeberg, representing humanity, fails to hit a true mark with any of his that since, in regard to Judas (and as Borges says in regard to the story of Job), God's ways are "inscrutable", then no absolute truth exists in regard to them. In other words, if I, a human being, can't understand it, then it's not true (for me). This is a perfectly common secular idea, but it's wrongly applied to Borges and to "Three Versions of Judas".

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¹³ Borges, Jorge Luis, "The Book of Job", *Borges and His Successors: The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), pp. 267-275.

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