

Betancourt, Sonia. *Oriente no es una pieza de museo: Jorge Luis Borges, la clave orientalista y el manuscrito de Qué es el budismo*. Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2018. 312 pp.

EVELYN FISHBURN
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Borges's life-long interest in Eastern thought and belief systems has not received the critical attention that it merits. It is largely absent from all major critical studies of his work and religion, which are centered overwhelmingly on Judaeo-Christian beliefs. However, recent scholarship's move away from a traditional Europocentric position towards a more global attitude is seeing a shift in the direction of Borges Studies. Sonia Betancourt's magnificent work *Oriente no es una pieza de museo* is a noteworthy example of this trend. The title alludes to the concluding words of Borges's conference on Buddhism (1977) published in the collection *Siete Noches* (1980). The full sentence reads: "Para mí, el budismo no es una pieza de museo: es un camino de salvación. No para mí, pero para millones de hombres." This brief quotation establishes the prevailing importance of Eastern thought in Borges's thought without ignoring his fundamental outsider's stance.

This book comprises two major sections: the first, "La clave orientalista," focuses on key elements in Borges's engagement with Buddhism, while the second is an extended examination of *¿Qué es el budismo?*, a short introductory work written in collaboration by Borges and Jurado. There are two appendices, one a facsimile of the recently found manuscript of *Qué es el budismo*, signed and gifted to Betancourt by Alicia Jurado, and the other, also to Betancourt, a letter of appreciation and praise by Borges's widow María Kodama. These sections are followed by a substantial bibliography.

Betancourt's erudition and meticulous scholarship is evident from the outset. In "La clave orientalista" she reviews Borges's family influence, and in particular that of his father, his ideas and, crucially, his library. This is where Borges acquired his early fascination with the life of the Buddha and with descriptions of the jungles of India and Africa. Arabist narratives such as Sir Richard Burton's translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* and the *Kama Sutra*, were avidly, and secretly, read by Borges. These works, which deal mainly with the Orient as a place of adventure, excitement and exoticism, remained a life-long inspiration, and were the first step towards a more serious approach.

Betancourt contextualizes her autobiographical account with an informed and detailed appraisal of the socio-cultural situation in Argentina in the 1930s and 1940s, observing that it reflected

Parisian attitudes toward the Orient as “exotic.” An indication of her wide lens, and the thoroughness of her investigation, is the inclusion of Arlt’s anti-theosophic stance, Güiraldes’s captivation with India and Lugones’s occultism presented as relevant background information. Similarly, the visit of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore is mentioned as a major event in the cultural scene in Argentina. Its impact is recalled by Borges in “Benares,” a poem of 1923 establishing a dialogue between the two cultures. The point being made here is that this cosmopolitanism would lead, eventually, to a literary style in which “las culturas orientales son asumidas como propias” (66).

Borges’s affinity with Buddhist thought has, as is well-known, much to do with his reading of Schopenhauer whom he often labelled his “favorite” philosopher. Betancourt elaborates on this issue from two unusual angles: one, Borges’s discussions of Schopenhauer with his mentor, the idiosyncratic poet-philosopher Macedonio Fernández, and the other, his friendship with the absurdist painter Xul Solar. Betancourt comments that Macedonio read in Schopenhauer’s interpretation of Hindu and Buddhist theories “un matiz trágico’ (a tragic tone)” (93), presented as something to be “endured” or “suffered,” perceptively observing that this misleading nihilism is absent from Indian philosophy. On the other hand, Betancourt argues that the playful overtones in the paintings of Xul Solar helped Borges to view Buddhist notions of reality as a ludic illusion.

Time, place, and individual existence are but some the main Buddhist themes which Borges discusses in his oral pronouncements and in his essays. For example, in his meditative text “A New Refutation of Time,” accepted as Borges’s major disquisition on this subject, allusions to the Milinda Pañha and the Visuddhimagga (symbolic allegories in which time and place are depicted as illusory) are given a prominent role. From the paradoxical title to the self-cancelling sentiments expressed in the argument, shared elements with Buddhism are highlighted. Temporality is both denied and established through the subtle use of repetition. The same obtains with regards to other writings in which a belief in individual existence is severely undermined.

The second part of Betancourt’s book is an in-depth discussion of the already mentioned *Qué es el budismo*. This short text gained much recognition as one of the very few discussions of the topic by a literary figure. Betancourt highlights some of the special insights contained in the work’s masterful summary of the main ideas and trends in Buddhism as part of a discussion of the complexity of their presence in Western thought. This section is divided into seven subheadings, each introduced by an epigraph encapsulating its content. The author’s greatest contribution to Borges scholarship is the first publication of the manuscript to *Qué es el budismo* in her doctoral thesis (2010). It was subsequently displayed in the Biblioteca Nacional (30). Following the line of Daniel Balderston’s pioneering work

of genetic criticism in *How Borges Wrote*, Betancourt embarks on a comparatist analysis of the manuscript and the finished product. To illustrate the extent of her microscopic attention to detail, I refer to observations regarding nuances of meaning in Borges's handwriting in the passages relating to the historic and to the legendary Buddha (139). There is a considerable amount of confessional revelation which is here brought to light, with documented information about what has been excluded from the published version. A case in point is an attempt to grapple with Hindu cosmologies as related to Buddhist metaphysics which is a topic discussed in the manuscript yet not made explicit in the 1976 publication.

The author interviewed Jurado several times in 2001 and she is the only critic to address Jurado's personal contribution to *Qué es el budismo*, which she notes is strongest in the final sections on China and Japan, countries only she had visited while Borges did not do so until much later. As an aside I would add something on the difference in attitude between the two collaborators: Jurado, with her usual modesty, ascribes her inclusion as named author as completely due to Borges's generosity while he (in conversation with Jean de Milleret, 1967) reveals that the project was about to flounder because of Jurado's religious involvement with Buddhism. Though this is not made explicit in Betancourt's account, it can be sensed from it. The final section examines Buddhist traces in Borges's short stories. Its aim is principally to identify their presence in the fiction without expanding on new interpretation from this perspective but providing a valuable solid basis for research.

It is impossible to do justice to the wealth of material explored in this searching investigative tome. Apart from the very few topics I discuss with regard to Borges's concern with Buddhism many more, on legends, suffering, reincarnation and so on are considered. Most pages of this very densely packed volume base their argument on a wide selection of supporting works, supplemented by further suggestion in footnotes that at time rival and often exceed the information of the main text. This makes for somewhat arduous reading which, however, is compensated by the depth of the scholarship. To this must be added the carefully categorized twenty seven pages of the Bibliography, which offer a new perspective on Borges's wide knowledge which, in Betancourt's perceptive conclusion, is about immersing oneself in erudition in order to distance oneself from it (239, "se trata de un acercarse a la erudición para alejarse de ella").

Borges apprehends this cosmovision of Orientalist ideas as a fantasy that seduces the West but which, to return once more to the title, enlightens by contrast as much as analogy. He does not seek to paper over the differences but to show them as a sign of complexity and richness. *Oriente no es una pieza de museo: Jorge Luis Borges, la clave orientalista y el manuscrito de Qué es el budismo* is destined to be

considered a pivotal work in Borges studies, re-shaping their content, scope and direction. Its publication is a cause for celebration not only for Borges scholars but also all interested in the interplay between cultures and new ways of assessing this. The author is to be warmly congratulated on this substantive research project.