

## Coetzee and Borges: the Southern Connections

ENRIQUE GALVAN-ÁLVAREZ  
Universidad Internacional de la Rioja  
[enrique.galvan-alvarez@unir.net](mailto:enrique.galvan-alvarez@unir.net)

FERNANDO GALVÁN  
Universidad de Alcalá  
[fernando.galvan@uah.es](mailto:fernando.galvan@uah.es)

This essay addresses some of the relations that can be traced between, on the one hand, J. M. Coetzee and Jorge Luis Borges and, on the other, the concept of the Global South and Coetzee's recent approach to Latin America. The development of his ideas about the notion of the South or "real South," as opposed to the "mythic South," is discussed and illustrated through a brief analysis of Borges's tale "El Sur" ["The South"] and Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*. These two texts help us in focusing Coetzee's rejection of the so-called "Northern Gaze," a Westernised world-view dominated by the English language, and his preference for Spanish as the language for the initial publication of his latest books.

Keywords: Global South; intertextuality; Latin America; "El Sur"; *Disgrace*; Northern gaze

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## Coetzee y Borges: las conexiones del Sur

Este ensayo aborda algunas de las relaciones que pueden trazarse entre J. M. Coetzee y Jorge Luis Borges, por un lado, y el concepto de Sur Global, por otro, ocupándose del reciente acercamiento de Coetzee a Latinoamérica. Se analiza el desarrollo de sus ideas sobre el concepto del Sur o "Sur real", en oposición al "Sur mítico", ilustrándose a través de un breve análisis del relato de Borges "El Sur" y la novela de Coetzee *Disgrace*. Estos dos textos nos ayudan a centrar el rechazo de Coetzee a la llamada "mirada del norte", una visión

occidentalizada del mundo dominada por la lengua inglesa, y su preferencia por el español como lengua en la que ha publicado inicialmente sus últimos libros.

Palabras clave: Sur Global; intertextualidad; Latinoamérica; “El Sur”; *Disgrace*; mirada del norte

## I. INTRODUCTION: COETZEE AND BORGES

Borges's presence in Coetzee's *oeuvre* seems particularly evident in his production over the last twenty years, in the fictions now labelled as "late Coetzee," or the "Australian phase," i.e., from *Elizabeth Costello*, in 2003, to his recent novel *The Death of Jesus* (2020). Although rather unusual in Coetzee criticism, our contention is that Borges has been an influential author in the making and development of J. M. Coetzee as a writer ever since the Argentine writer became known to him during his stay in the U.S. in the period 1965-1971. This was also the time Borges was discovered and widely praised in the U.S. Coetzee was then in his late twenties and already planning to become a writer, so reading Borges (and John Barth's articles on him) made an impact on Coetzee's writing. Works such as "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*" and "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," which have left their trace in literary history, were fundamental to the writing of Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands* (1974) (Galván 2021). Borges's shadow was also present in other works of Coetzee's "South African phase," like *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron* (1990) (Galvan-Alvarez and Galván 2021).

Even though reviewers and critics talked very early on about Borges's influence on *Dusklands* (Kosew 1998, 3; 15; Morphet 2004, 14-15), and there are a few mentions scattered in the critical literature—including one from Nadine Gordimer, who equalled him to the "incomparable Borges" apropos of *Age of Iron* (qtd. in Huggan and Watson 1996, xi)—, as Lynda Ng and Paul Sheehan have said, "the presence of Borges in Coetzee's writing has been remarked upon, over the years, but never fully explored" (2017, 91). Recent partial exceptions to this assertion, in addition to those already cited, are Galván (2016; 2020), Rose (2017) and Brits (2018).

However, one question that remains to be explored is the significance of the parallels between Coetzee and Borges—beyond the obvious recognition of a literary debt. This article discusses a particular connection between both writers which joins them more closely than their shared views on metafictional writing. The connection lies in their condition as writers from the South, who clearly belong to their own national literary traditions but who are simultaneously cosmopolitan authors with a strong European background. Furthermore, they are indisputably international writers insofar as they have been globally recognised. A combination of both conditions, "southern" and "international" (or "global"), leads to the label of the Global South, even though calling Borges and Coetzee Global South writers is certainly controversial. Coetzee himself is not very happy with the term, and some authors have also expressed their doubts about the label(ing). Arthur Rose, for instance, considers that the cosmopolitanism of the two writers does not suit the Global South category: "The South-South relationship between Coetzee and Borges is obscured by their transportation via Europe [...]. There are other, more suitable writers to that task than Borges and Coetzee, with less overt allegiance to North-South cultural hegemony" (2017, 5). However, a consideration of both writers in terms of this notion

might help in widening the theoretical conception and the textual applications of Global South, since it should not be regarded simply as another denomination for Postcolonial Studies or Third World Studies (Dirlik 2007, 12-15).

## 2. SOUTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH IN COETZEE

Caroline Levander and Walter Mignolo pointed out some years ago that the notion of Global South implied breaking with the disciplinary boundaries and institutional mappings which set “methods of analysis and knowledge production onto stable territorial frameworks” (2011, 1-2). They put the emphasis on the Global South being “the place of struggles between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of modernity and modernization together with the logic of coloniality and domination, and, on the other, the struggle for independent thought and decolonial freedom” (4). Indisputably, Borges and Coetzee have long been seen as epitomes of modernity and coloniality, but they have also advocated, from the start of their writing careers, their right to speak freely of (and for) their national cultures and traditions. It is noteworthy to mention that despite their condition as cosmopolitan and global writers, Borges and Coetzee have been deeply imbued with the history and literary traditions of Argentina and South Africa respectively. Borges’s interest in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Argentine history can be found in many of his writings. Early in his career, for instance, he wrote on the *gaucho* tradition in *Martín Fierro* and on many other Argentine works and authors; even in the last phase of his writing many of his tales are profoundly Argentine, including most stories in *El informe de Brodie* (1970) and some of those in *El libro de arena* (1975) (Sarlo 1988 and 1993, and Fiddian 2017 have emphasised this aspect of Borges’s *oeuvre*).

Analogously, Coetzee has drawn on the history and literature of South Africa in most of his works, particularly those published while he lived in the country. Penner (1989), Gallagher (1991), Attwell (1993), Attridge (2004) and Crewe (2016) are among those who have elaborated at length on these connections. As Crewe states, the presence of the provincial life in Coetzee’s autobiographical books and many of his novels “attest[s] to the impossibility of getting the provinces out of his system, or of attaining any fictionalized self-understanding that does not begin with them” (2016, 3). However, and paradoxically, both authors have always rejected being classified as merely “national” writers. Borges saw himself, and wanted others to regard him, not just as an “Argentine writer,” as “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” shows (Borges [1951] 2001). Similarly, Coetzee has fought against being treated as a “South African writer” in strict nationalistic terms. For Coetzee, nationalism is equivalent to “regression”: “nationalism (tribalism) is a regressive state; and if groups (group thought, group behaviour) are a concern of mine, it is because, over the course of a lifetime, at some cost, I have, reactively, withheld myself from regression to the group” (Coetzee and Kurtz 2016, 110-11). Elsewhere, he has said: “I sometimes

wonder whether it isn't simply that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a 'South African novelist'" (Morphet 1987, 460), and has also complained about finding "*Traduit de l'anglais (Sud-Africaine [sic])*" in the French translations of his works: "I'd like someone to point to the moments when my *anglais* becomes *sud-africaine [sic]*. To me it reads like *anglais* purged of markers of national origin, and a little bloodless for that reason" (Auster and Coetzee 2013, 72). This is connected to Coetzee's feeling that English is not his "mother tongue" even though he was brought up in this language. Attwell has discussed that peculiar position in connection with Coetzee's Afrikaner origins (2015, 35-48).

Russell West-Pavlov has offered some insightful remarks on the need to move beyond the north-south binary perspective (predominant in Postcolonial Studies) and to refocus social and literary analyses from a southern perspective. As a relevant example, he mentions Coetzee's 1987 acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize (Coetzee 1992, 96-99), in which the writer "reproached the literature of that period for being 'unnaturally preoccupied with the power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and subjugation to the vast and complex world that lies beyond them'" (West-Pavlov 2018, 9). Coetzee was alluding to his rejection of the traditional concept of *littérature engagée* and of writing only committed to the political concerns of a specific country or society. One of the valuable consequences of refocusing literary history and the analysis of literary texts from a southern perspective is precisely the opening up of "spaces in which hitherto vibrant but elided traditions and ongoing routes of cultural transactions become visible in new ways" (West-Pavlov 2018, 19). Some Latin American authors have discussed this too, such as García Canclini (2013), whose translator into English, George Yúdice, has emphasised the circulation of cultural content in order to avoid the constant colonisation from the North, because otherwise what people "get to hear and see is a very skewed and narrow selection of the full spectrum of cultural offerings from around the world" (qtd. in West-Pavlov, 19). West-Pavlov recalls ideas expressed many decades ago by other Latin American critics and theorists, such as José Martí, José Vasconcelos, Fernando Ortiz and José Enrique Rodó. They are well known in Latin America for focusing the cultural and literary history of the subcontinent on its specificity and intersectionality, avoiding Western-centric notions of universalism. Such notions of the South and the Global South—through dialogue between different areas of the cultural (not necessarily geographical) South—can become a fertile field of literary and cultural analysis.

Keeping this framework in mind, it is worth addressing Coetzee's involvement with Latin America, and especially with Argentina and Borges. A reading of Borges and Coetzee in this light not only opens up the opportunity for the application of the notion of Global South to cosmopolitan and Euro-modernist writers, like them, who are also committed to their own South and its cultural and historical *Weltanschauung*. It contributes as well to enriching our appraisal of Borges and Coetzee from a new

perspective, thus recognising the peculiar combination of Southern and Eurocentric views in their works.

In his Jesus novels Coetzee seems to have more openly and deeply approached Latin America, as this trilogy is set in an unidentified Spanish-speaking Latin American utopia/dystopia, where many refugees have arrived fleeing an unknown threat or catastrophe. The country looks like an old socialist state, with basic welfare (education, health, jobs, food). Characters speak Spanish, a language they have learnt upon arrival. Consequently, as some critics have remarked, their words sometimes sound in English as if they were a translation from Spanish, or as if they were “born translated” (Seshagiri 2013, 650-51; Walkowitz 2015, 4-5; 249-50). The atmosphere and some particular episodes in these late novels have been compared to Plato’s philosophy of the state, as well as to some tales by Borges, namely his fantastic “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the creative “Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*,” and “Funes el memorioso” (Galván 2016, 187-89; Ng and Sheehan 2017, 86-101; Rose 2017, 68-72). In addition to Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*—the book David, the boy protagonist in the trilogy, uses to learn to read—,<sup>1</sup> some critics have even pointed to the educational model implemented in Argentina by President Sarmiento in the 1860s: a “free, compulsory and non-religious primary school and military service [...] designed to foster a sense of national unity among its diverse immigrant population” (Ng and Sheehan 2017, 93). This model is present in the trilogy as “a form of cultural and linguistic homogenization by proxy” (Ng and Sheehan 2017, 93) and a doctrinaire attitude that turns David into a misfit.

However, Coetzee’s connections to Latin America are not reduced to these three novels. In fact, since 2011 Coetzee has travelled frequently to South America, including regular attendance at Book Fairs in Bogotá and at the Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga in Colombia, and annual visits to Chile. In 2015 he agreed to the establishment of a short-story competition for secondary school students called “Concurso John Maxwell Coetzee,” organised by the School of Architecture of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC). He has usually been present at the awards ceremony, and in the fourth “Concurso” (September 2018) gave a fifteen-minute speech in Spanish to congratulate the winners, in which he mentioned his experience as a young writer and also talked about Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda, the two Chilean Nobel laureates (García 2018).

His involvement with Argentina has been even more important, where he has also participated several times at the Book Fair of Buenos Aires. In 2011, at the third FILBA (Festival Internacional de Literatura de Buenos Aires), the Argentine editor Soledad Costantini invited Coetzee to publish a collection of books called “Biblioteca Personal Coetzee.” He accepted, selected twelve titles, and wrote a long preface for each book. The volumes appeared in Buenos Aires between 2013 and 2015, published

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<sup>1</sup> For Cervantes’s influence on Coetzee, see also López (2013), who discusses his presence in some of the novels, such as *Age of Iron* (1990), *Disgrace* (1999), *Slow Man* (2005) and *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), as well as in some of Coetzee’s critical pieces.

by El Hilo de Ariadna. Furthermore, in 2014 Coetzee accepted the invitation of the Argentine National University of San Martín (UNSAM), in Buenos Aires, to chair a seminar series on Literatures of the South, which started in 2015. His role entailed visiting the University and participating twice a year (in April and September) in these seminars. As a result of this involvement, the series, also known as “Cátedra Coetzee: Literaturas del Sur,” held seven sessions between 2015 and 2018, with the participation of South African writers Zoë Wicomb, Ivan Vladislavić and Antjie Krog; the Mozambican Mia Couto; Australian writers Nicholas Jose, Gail Jones and Delia Falconer, some of whose books have been translated into Spanish; and the Argentine writers Mariana Dimópulos and Marcelo Cohen, whose works have been translated into English in Australia. Other Argentine writers who have contributed to the seminars and who are being translated or have had residencies in Australia in recent years are Pedro Mairal and Fabián Martínez Siccardi (Etherington 2020, 180-81).

It should be noted, however, in connection with his *Cátedra*, that Coetzee is not very happy with the adjective in the term Global South. He prefers simply “Literatures of the South,” which stresses what brings together literatures and writers from different Southern countries and cultures, and avoids the mediation of the European and North American publishing houses, which have usually decided which works from the South are to be published or translated. One of his most notable gestures in this direction is the publication in Argentina in Spanish of his latest books, namely a collection of short stories entitled *Siete cuentos morales* (Coetzee 2018a) and the novels *La muerte de Jesús* (Coetzee 2019) and *El polaco* (Coetzee 2022), which appeared in Buenos Aires preceding their publication in English. Coetzee’s explanation is that although he is generally considered today as an “international author,” he doesn’t believe in giving his North American publishers the control and prerogative over translations into other languages. In fact, he had already started publishing some of his books in Dutch before the English editions appeared (Walkowitz 2015, 3-5; 22), but now he prefers to do so in a southern language and country. He says he feels “alienated” from what English represents in the world because of the North American way of life and U.S. imperialism in the world (Costantini 2018), and he does not want Southern writers to have to reach their local readers through publishing houses based in Europe, having “to follow norms and conform to standards set in the North” (Halford 2016). Breaking free from cultural dependency on the North requires getting rid of the sense of inferiority which the “Northern Gaze” (to use Coetzee’s phrase) has imposed.<sup>2</sup>

For him, the use of the phrase Global South risks imposing a “mythic South” on the “real South.” The “mythic South” that emanates from the Northern Gaze of theorists and writers (spanning from More’s *Utopia* to *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels* and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*) is an imaginary construction, much like the

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<sup>2</sup> Halford (2017) reviews Coetzee’s involvement with related Global South theorists—despite his disinclination to theorise—including Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2011) from Latin America; Jean and John Comaroff (2012) from South Africa; and particularly Connell (2007) from Australia.

Orientalism exposed by Said (1978). In opposition to fantasy, he defines the “real South” in very simple terms, distancing himself from theoretical constructions which might lead to mystification. Coetzee’s inaugural lecture at UNSAM in 2016 contrasts the “real South” to the “South” and defines it, perhaps in a “romanticized” tone (Rose 2017, 192, n. 18), as follows:

In my view “South” will in due course suffer the fate of “periphery,” of “Third-World,” and of other specialist terms of the social sciences... What is left is the real South, the South of this real world, where most of those present in this room were born and most of us will die. It is a unique world—there is only one South—with its unique skies and its unique heavenly constellations. In this South the winds blow in a certain way and the leaves fall in a certain way and the sun beats down in a certain way that is instantly recognisable from one part of the South to another. In the South, as in the North, there are cities, but the cities of the South all have a somewhat phantasmatic quality. The peoples of the South are all, in one way or another, rough and a bit lazy. We have troubled histories behind us, which sometimes haunt us. It is nothing like this in the North. I can go on endlessly with my list. And the literatures of the South do indeed go on endlessly as they try to pin down in words their intuitions of what a life in the South consists in (Halford 2017).

These words, coloured somewhat by romanticism and most likely ironic (“people of the South are all, in one way or another, rough and a bit lazy”), recall Borges’s early picture of Buenos Aires,<sup>3</sup> as well as one of his most popular and significant tales, “El Sur” [“The South”], which Borges added in 1956 to his book *Artificios* (1944).

### 3. BORGES’S SOUTH: “EL SUR”

“El Sur” begins by stating the undeniable Argentine condition of the protagonist, Juan Dahlmann, secretary of a municipal library in Buenos Aires. His surname is not Spanish; like many other Argentines, Juan Dahlmann was a descendant of non-Spanish immigrants though he “considered himself profoundly Argentine” (Borges 1998, 174). This is a central issue in Borges’s production and is discussed at length in his essay “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” (Borges [1951] 2001). In a 1998 review of Borges’s English edition *Collected Fictions*, Coetzee ([2001] 2002, 147-48) draws attention to Borges’s rejection of localistic tendencies in that essay, in which Borges writes as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> See his first three books of poems, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (*Fervour of Buenos Aires*, 1923), *La luna de enfrente* (*Moon Across the Way*, 1925) and *Cuaderno San Martín* (*San Martín Copybook*, 1929); or some of his essays on Buenos Aires: the two versions of “Buenos Aires,” one published in 1921 in the magazine *Cosmópolis* (now in Borges 2011b, 106-108), and the other in *Inquisiciones* (1925) (now in Borges 2011a, vol. I, 106-108); “El advenimiento de Buenos Aires” (1956; now in Borges 2003, 29-31); and “El mapa secreto” (1956; now in Borges 2003, 26-28).



The idea that Argentine poetry must abound in Argentine differential traits and in Argentine local color seems to me to be a mistake [...]. I think Shakespeare would have been astonished if anyone had tried to limit him to English subjects, and if anyone had told him that, as an Englishman, he had no right to write *Hamlet*, with its Scandinavian subject matter, or *Macbeth*, on a Scottish theme [...]. Everything we Argentine writers do felicitously will belong to Argentine tradition, in the same way that the use of Italian subjects belongs to the tradition of England through the work of Chaucer and Shakespeare [...] we cannot confine ourselves to what is Argentine in order to be Argentine (Borges [1951] 2001, 422; 423; 426; 427).

Juan Dahlmann's grandfather (on his father's side) was Johannes Dahlmann, a minister of the Evangelical Church who had arrived in Buenos Aires in 1871. However, through his maternal grandfather—who had died fighting against the “Indians” on the border of the province of Buenos Aires—Juan Dahlmann was an example of “Argentinization,” in the words of the narrator (Borges 1998, 174). As Jaime Alazraki puts it, “Juan Dahlmann is a symbol of his country's fate: the conflict between his two lineages is an expression of Sarmiento's formula ‘civilization and barbarism’,” as well as one of Borges's masks (1988, 67). The picture we get of this character is that of an educated man, a librarian slightly obsessed with reading, who one day, when absent-mindedly examining a copy of Weil's version of *Arabian Nights*, hit his head against a door, which gave him a concussion. He was taken to a sanatorium for a variety of tests and then was recommended by the surgeon to retire to the countryside for his convalescence. Dahlmann decided to recuperate in a large country house he owned in the south of Argentina. From that point onwards Borges systematically explores what the South stands for in opposition to the North (i.e., Buenos Aires), which reproduces the typical confrontation between urban and rural spaces. The countryside and its nature become a sort of fantasy land for Dahlmann, who had only lived in the North before, i.e., in town, in Buenos Aires. He contemplates the landscape of the South from his train window and feels as if he is visiting the past:

he saw horsemen on the clod-strewn roads; he saw ditches and lakes and pastures; he saw long glowing clouds that seemed made of marble, and all these things were fortuitous, like some dream of the flat prairies. He also thought he recognized trees and crops that he couldn't have told one the name of—his direct knowledge of the country was considerably inferior to his nostalgic literary knowledge. [...] All was vast, but at the same time intimate and somehow secret. [...] The solitude was perfect, if perhaps hostile, and Dahlmann almost suspected that he was traveling not only into the South but into the past (Borges 1998, 177).

Alazraki has also written that this connection with the past can be linked to Borges's poem “Junín,” which evokes Borges's grandfather epically fighting at the battle of Junín in 1824 (1988, 70). When Dahlmann arrived at his destination he walked into

the station, but as there was no vehicle to take him to his house, he left the station and went into a country store where he could rest, eat and drink. The depiction of the store corresponds very much to what Coetzee describes as “real South,” whatever that may really be: “the smells and sounds of the plains still floated in through the thick iron grate at the window. The storekeeper brought him sardines and then roast meat; Dahlmann washed them down with more than one glass of red wine. Idly, he savored the harsh bouquet of the wine and let his gaze wander over the store, which by now had turned a little sleepy” (Borges 1988, 178). The idle and sleepy atmosphere Dahlmann perceives here recalls Coetzee’s description in *White Writing* (Coetzee 1988) of how early European travellers and colonisers construed the people of Southern Africa: “Idleness, indolence, sloth, laziness, torpor—these terms are meant both to define a Hottentot vice and to distance the writer from it” (1988, 18). As shown in these words, Coetzee is obviously fully aware of the ideological nature of this European construction of Africanness, which pervades all the essays in the book. That is why his depiction of the people of the South in his inaugural UNSAM lecture as “in one way or another, rough and a bit lazy” must necessarily be interpreted as ironic, a sort of echo of the topical Eurocentric view, as stated above. A literal reading of those words is evidently untenable within the context of Coetzee’s writing.

Dahlmann also noticed the presence of some *gauchos*, rough and aggressive, who started bullying him, and one of them, a young man with an “Indian-looking face” (179), challenged him to fight. At this moment the narrator turns to symbolism: “the motionless old gaucho in whom Dahlmann had seen a symbol of the South (the South that belonged to him) tossed him a naked dagger—it came to rest at Dahlmann’s feet. It was as though the South itself had decided that Dahlmann should accept the challenge” (179). It is not difficult to imagine the story’s bitter and fateful ending. Borges, when questioned about its meaning, presents it as a dream or hallucination, happening only in Dahlmann’s mind while he is in the sanatorium. That would make it an oneiric event, if not a fully metaphorical or symbolic episode, but certainly one which is far beyond the nature of reality. Not all critics, however, agree with Borges’s interpretation (Alazraki 1983, 127-28, n. 5), something which is not our present concern, but the appeal of the South over the North is nonetheless undeniable. As both men leave the store to fight outside, Dahlmann evokes his first night at the sanatorium and his wish or dream to die as a sort of hero, because “dying in a knife fight under the open sky, grappling with his adversary, would have been a liberation, a joy, and a fiesta. He sensed that had he been able to choose or dream his death that night, this is the death he would have dreamed or chosen” (179).

This is Borges’s view of the South, an equally “romanticized” view and very close to that picture of the “real South” Coetzee talked about, even if it cannot be termed “realistic.” It is perhaps paradoxical that this South—primitive, rough, violent, wild—is so appealing to these two writers who are usually considered examples of some of the most sophisticated and cosmopolitan metafictional writing produced in the Western

world. The stereotypical international portrait of Borges is not exactly that of an author dealing with *gauchos*, *compadritos* and knife-fights. But, as stated above, Sarlo (1993, 9-49; 95-137) and Fiddian (2017, 175-91), among others, have convincingly argued that Borges was not only the intellectual, cosmopolitan and sophisticated writer, regarded by many as alien to the reality of his nation and the dilemmas of nationalism and postcoloniality. He was also a writer concerned with issues of personal and national identity, with the (re)building of an Argentine cultural tradition, as well as with the ideological and cultural constructions of Orientalism, Occidentalism and postcolonialism.

#### 4. COETZEE'S SOUTH: *DISGRACE*

Analogously, some critics have described Coetzee as “a deeply European writer”; and “from one angle,” as Derek Attridge says (in Coetzee [2007] 2008, xiii), that is true, for Coetzee remains fascinated by European literature. The proof lies in the many essays he has written about European writers like Dostoevsky, Beckett, Kafka, Musil, Rilke, Celan and Grass (Coetzee [2001] 2002, 60-103; 114-26; Coetzee [2007] 2008, 30-39; 114-44; 169-73; and Coetzee 2018b, 169-217). Nonetheless, it is also unquestionable that Coetzee, like Borges, deals with the South in most of (if not all) his works, as mentioned above. Furthermore, Ben Etherington has also recently asserted that even though “Coetzee’s worlds are not confined to a nation,” their habitat is not “the world at large,” remarking that this concept of “South” “has given the later Coetzee a way of pointing to affinities that have long been latent in his work” (2020, 181). This leads this critic, borrowing a term from Paul Celan, to suggest that the notion of “South,” as used by Coetzee, “is not so much a latitudinal alignment, as a *literary meridian*” (181, italics in the original). *Meridian* refers here to the realm “which speaks ‘on behalf of the *strange . . . on behalf of the other*’”. To get to this region one needs to undertake ‘topological research’, suggesting, Celan hints in a series of puns, the study of tropes and of topography as well as topology” (182, italics in the original). Etherington’s examples include: a) the reference to “POEMAS CREPUSCULARIAS” [*sic*] in Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), which evokes Neruda’s collection *Crepusculario*; b) the unconventional system of counting discussed by Señor C. in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), recalling Borges’s “Funes el memorioso”; and c) the re-emergence of the same idiosyncratic counting method in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016). All three are related to Coetzee’s lifelong concern with the internationally dominant position of English as an international language, which Etherington does not mention, but which, in our view, lies behind these points of Coetzee’s “literary meridian.”

Baylee Brits has developed this concern in more depth, exploring Borges, Beckett and Coetzee from the perspective of mathematics and narrative, taking Georg Cantor’s theories as a starting point. After discussing Coetzee’s views on numbers and language in *In the Heart of the Country*, *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of*

*Jesus*, she links Coetzee's position with Borges's, which she also analyses (2018, 49-87). Though she does not allude to Coetzee's notion of "South," she does make reference to his "geoliterary spirit" and "geomodernism," which link to Etherington's "literary meridian" and t(r)opological approaches. For her, "Coetzee's preoccupation with the space or split between centre and province, and the intermingling between these two spheres of artistic possibility" are "[m]uch like the young Borges" (2018, 178).

Both writers share many features of the South, to which their different countries and national traditions belong. A salient feature is violence and cruelty. The knife-fight with *gauchos* and *compadritos* in "El Sur" is a good example. Only by way of illustration, some pages of *Disgrace*, for instance, can be read as a partial parallel to Borges's narrative, further expanding the treatment of violence and roughness in the South. Here librarian Dahlmann's counterpart is David Lurie, a white, middle-aged English literature professor from Cape Town interested in Romantic poetry. He is asked to leave his job after an inquiry committee for alleged sexual misconduct. So, Lurie decides to leave Cape Town (here the equivalent to Buenos Aires, both being the epitomes of great urban spaces in the two countries) for a remote rural farm in the underprivileged and underdeveloped Eastern Cape province, where his daughter Lucy lives. Not unlike Dahlmann's impressions when travelling to the south of Buenos Aires, when David reaches the poor and neglected countryside of Eastern Cape, what he sees also reminds him of the past: "His daughter's smallholding is at the end of a winding dirt track some miles outside the town: five hectares of land, most of it arable, a wind-pump, stables and outbuildings, and a low, sprawling farmhouse painted yellow [...]. The house, which is large, dark, and, even at midday, chilly, dates from the time of large families, of guests by the wagonful" (Coetzee 1999, 59-60). The daughter lives very close to Salem, a town founded south of Grahamstown by some Christian families in the 1820s, where some houses in the Georgian style were erected and are still preserved.

Further details characterise the poverty and uncertainty of a deprived land, and several rough African characters evoke Borges's *gauchos* as well. Petrus is one of them and can be seen as the counterpart of the old *gaucho* in "El Sur," because although he is Lucy's "new assistant" and "co-proprietor" (62), he eventually sides with a delinquent youth (137-39)—equivalent to Borges's "young thug with the Indian-looking face" who challenged Dahlmann to fight (Borges 1998, 179). This young man (called Pollux) has two other companions, who attack David and rape Lucy, cruelly kill the dogs that Lucy keeps on her farm and steal his car and other valuables. These three men, like the *gauchos* in Borges's story, are extremely aggressive, the young man—merely a boy—being described as cold and animal-like, challenging and threatening the dogs in the farm: "He has a flat, expressionless face and piggy eyes" (92). The contrast between David Lurie—a symbol of cultural isolation—and these men is a further illustration of that picture of the two opposing worlds—urban and rural—where the confrontation between the alleged European efforts at civilisation and African barbarism is crudely but also ironically and mockingly presented. If Borges depicted his librarian as somewhat

out of place when still reading his copy of *Arabian Nights* on the train to the south, Coetzee is openly sarcastic in his picture of Lurie: “He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see” (95).

However, parallelisms cannot be extended much further because, in *Disgrace*, the dichotomy of civilisation *vs.* barbarism does not have the same implications as in Sarmiento’s classic, or in Borges’s development in “El Sur,” even if violence is always in the background:<sup>4</sup> Coetzee’s novel is set in a cruel, racialised post-apartheid South Africa, under very specific historical circumstances, and the author—despite his use of irony—definitely does not seem complacent about any romantic view of violence. It would be a mistake to link Borges’s *gauchos* to Coetzee’s young and violent Africans. Attwell (2015, 211-32) has studied the process of the writing of this novel, examining Coetzee’s notebooks and tracing the development of the project from its inception. The strong political presence of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and other historical events in the post-apartheid period are clearly influential in how the story of David Lurie was finally written. Coetzee initially thought about David committing suicide (which would have brought him closer to Dahlmann), although eventually he settled on the death of the unhealthy or unwanted animals of Bev Shaw’s clinic (Coetzee 1999, 218-20) and the final scene when David takes one of those maimed dogs to its sacrifice (Attwell 2015, 231). There is indeed nothing romantic about Lucy’s rape and her later adaptation to the new reality, or the brutal cruelty displayed by the Africans towards the dogs, in contrast with Dahlmann’s final exultation at death.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our contention throughout this essay is that a new approach to reading Borges’s and Coetzee’s literary works in direct dialogue with each other is not only possible but necessary. This cannot be done by ignoring their Western affiliations,

<sup>4</sup> In relation to Borges’s views on Sarmiento’s *Facundo. O civilización y barbarie* (1845), as Sandra Contreras points out, “it is always in the immediacy of specific historical junctures, which Borges construes each time as contexts of violence, that he writes about Sarmiento’s texts” (2020, 67).

<sup>5</sup> As said above, it would be wrong to claim a close parallelism between these two texts in connection with violence. We cannot do justice in this essay to the treatment of violence in *Disgrace*, a novel which, as Simone Drichel has written, is “not just the most-discussed in Coetzee’s *oeuvre*; it is also one of the most widely discussed novels of the late twentieth century” (2011, 148). This scholar provides a detailed and well-informed account of the novel; but for a fuller discussion of violence in *Disgrace*, see especially Attridge (2004, 162-91) and Crewe (2016, 89-103). For a better understanding of Coetzee’s presentation of violence in his other South African novels, prior to *Disgrace*, see Jolly (1996, 110-57). This provides the right context to read violence in *Disgrace*, which is not Borges’s world of *gauchos* and *compadritos*.

affinities and aesthetics; to do so would mean distorting what those works are and what both writers have done in their long careers. Arguably Borges and Coetzee have decisively contributed to the Western genre of the “fiction of ideas,” since both have dealt throughout their careers with questions concerning ethics, knowledge, or key metaphysical issues: reality, fiction, identity, the self, time, language, infinity, eternity, death and a long etcetera. This field is certainly one of common feelings and positions shared by Borges and Coetzee, as the latter implicitly recognised in his 1998 review of Borges’s *Collected Fictions* when he praised Borges’s dealings with identity and the self, and with the limits of language and reality.<sup>6</sup>

When discussing “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*”—one of the finest pieces of Borges’s *oeuvre* for him—Coetzee delved into some of the ideas that he would be applying later to his own writing, such as his autobiographical trilogy, especially *Summertime* (2009), and novels like *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007): “the excitement, even creative triumph, however somber its shading, with which the narrator records the stages by which an ideal universe takes over a real one, the takeover being capped, in a turn of the screw of paradox characteristic of Borges, by the realization that the universe of which we are part is more than likely already a simulacrum, perhaps a simulacrum of simulacra going on to infinity” (Coetzee [2001] 2002, 143-44). These words on Borges cannot be ignored when dealing with Coetzee’s discussion of reality and fiction (in his autobiographies and elsewhere in his novels and essays), or his peculiar and ambiguous depiction of “real South,” because that South—allegedly “real” in opposition to “mythic South”—could also be defined, as he did in the case of Borges, as “more than likely already a simulacrum, perhaps a simulacrum of simulacra going on to infinity.”

Many philosophers have indeed felt attracted to Borges and Coetzee because both use as their writing model “the anatomy or critical essay, rather than the tale,” as Coetzee terms Borges’s technical innovations (Coetzee [2001] 2002, 143). We cannot forget however that, although some of Borges’s more metaphysical and philosophical tales and essays are undeniably set in unreal and invented worlds, others are profoundly Argentine, in the same way as Coetzee’s fictions are closely connected to South African

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<sup>6</sup> The issues reviewed here have been dealt with recently, in the case of Borges, in books by Frisch (2004), Riberi (2004) and Dapía (2016). A useful overview of his main philosophical tenets is also the essay by Martín (2020). Relevant contributions on Coetzee’s ideas in the last decade include books which discuss ethical and intellectual issues, and human relations with animals: collections edited by Leist and Singer (2010); by Danta, Kossew and Murphet (2011) on Coetzee’s “Australian phase”; and by Mehigan and Moser (2018), which includes an essay by Attwell on “J. M. Coetzee’s South African Intellectual Landscapes” (274-93). These were preceded by the collection edited by Jane Poyner (2006) and by her own book on the paradox of post-colonial authorship (2009). Equally interesting are the books by Hallemeier (2013) on cosmopolitanism; by Chesney (2016) on aesthetic issues connected with late modernism and philosophy in the development of the notion of “serious fiction”; and by Clarkson (2009) on language. Finally, there are others on more abstract and philosophical subjects, such as those by Wilm (2016) and Rose (2017), as well as the collections edited by Bradshaw and Neill (2010), by Wilm and Hayes (2017) and by Uhlmann (2018). A recent overview of many of those contributions can be found in Uhlmann (2020).

or to Australian environments. Despite their metaphysical concerns, Borges's stories allude to places and people who belong, or pretend to belong, to his "South," in suburban or rural spaces: "Hombre de la esquina rosada," "Funes el memorioso," "El muerto," "La otra muerte," "El Zahir" and "El Aleph" among them.

We cannot therefore persist in ignoring the condition of Borges and Coetzee as Southern writers who have written, and very eloquently, about the South. Whether this South is in their works a "real South"—whatever that might be—, as Coetzee apparently claims, or another kind of "mythic" construction of the South, is certainly a debatable issue, and not an easy one to resolve. Some of their writings could undoubtedly be read as metaphorical or symbolic pictures of the South, particularly when they controversially engage with views of the South as intrinsically rough, violent, wild, lazy or "phantasmatic,"<sup>7</sup> which brings us back to the old question about their ideological and political convictions. However, we also find it significant that, in writing that complex South, they have tried hard to, or have at least allegedly purported to, avoid mythologising or oversimplifying it. In that process they have given voice to a region, their shared South Atlantic (and more recently, the South Pacific as well), moving the focus away from the European and North American cosmopolitan centres of cultural influence. This is precisely what Coetzee has been strongly calling for in his most recent works of fiction and public statements. Perhaps it is now high time that we open our ears and listen to their voices and connections. We think that such an endeavour is worth trying.

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<sup>7</sup> "Phantasmatic," Coetzee's term in his inaugural lecture for his *Cátedra* at UNSAM, was likewise a condition to which Borges also alluded early in his career. As Beatriz Sarlo has written: "Borges stated this sense of loss (or absence) in one of his first essays: what Buenos Aires needed badly, he wrote, was ghosts. Although it could be read ironically, his assertion also implies a 'cultural politics': where the myths of a traditional society recede into an irretrievable past, the traces of those myths in literature construct an analogon not of a previous reality, but of an ideal model in terms of which a society can view itself. 'Ghosts' imply a common ground and a sense of harmony with the past. In a society where modern institutions founded on written law had eroded traditional beliefs and 'natural' bonds, the fact of sharing the same 'ghosts' opened up, symbolically, the possibility of retrieving the sort of deep cultural awareness threatened by a modern republic itself riven by conflict" (Sarlo 1993, 83-84). For further discussion on Borges's views on Buenos Aires and Argentina in his early works, see also Sarlo (1988, 44-50).

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Enrique Galvan-Alvarez is Senior Lecturer at the all-online Universidad Internacional de la Rioja (UNIR) and Research Affiliate at Oxford Brookes University (UK). His work is concerned with postcolonial and diaspora identity-making in a number of different literary and non-literary contexts.

Fernando Galván is Professor of English at the University of Alcalá. He has written extensively on contemporary fiction and recently authored other essays on Coetzee and Borges.