

Borges, Buddha's Life Story, and the Transmission of Buddhism to Latin America*

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Abstract: This paper discusses the way in which one of the greatest Latin American literary figures, Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), represented the Buddha, and the choices that he made vis-à-vis the contemporary intellectual discussions on the Buddha's story and Buddhism in the 1970's, a period in which Buddhism was generally unknown to most Latin Americans. This study is part of a larger research that seeks to understand how Borges's seminal artistic and intellectual relevance intersected with the transmission and development of Buddhism, and its study in Latin America.

Keywords: Buddha's life story, J. L. Borges, Buddhist modernism, Buddhism in Latin America

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hijbs.05.01.06>

* I would like to express my deep gratitude to Clark Chilson for his very insightful suggestions, and to Katheryn Linduff, who in addition to providing very keen comments, also took the trouble of proofreading an early draft of this paper. I cannot thank either of them enough for their unfailing support. I am also extremely thankful to the expert reviewers who gave me incredibly generous and detailed comments and feedback. Their suggestions have inspired new questions and avenues of research. All the shortcomings and mistakes that remain are certainly my responsibility alone.

This paper is about a lecture and a storyteller. The setting was a theater in Buenos Aires in the 1970's—with a mesmerized audience. The story was the Buddha's life. Uncannily mirroring the manner of transmission of Buddhism along the Silk Roads at the turn of the Common Era where storytellers often retold some version of the Buddha's life, the notable writer Jorge Luis Borges also chose to narrate the Buddha's life rather than exclusively delve into doctrinal or philosophical aspects in his lecture entitled 'Buddhism' to his Argentinian audience.

It is generally accepted that Borges (1899–1986) was one of the greatest twentieth century literary figures. The seminal artistic and intellectual relevance that he continues to have in Latin America today provides us with a broad rationale for my attention to this lecture here. But to this I must add a much less common, and more specific rationale, namely, the need to further understand how his seminal artistic and intellectual relevance intersected with the transmission and development of Buddhism, and its study in Latin America. A more concrete aim of this paper is, then, to contribute to the nascent area of study of Borges's engagement with Buddhism.

The history of Buddhism in Latin America is just starting to be written,¹ and similarly, Borges's engagement with Buddhism is just beginning to be appraised.² Precisely because this paper lies at the intersection of these two nascent scholarly areas and is part of a much more encompassing research project, it has an exploratory character. Here I will delineate questions and themes that cannot be fully answered at this stage but will be further developed in later works.

¹ Cristina Rocha's 'Buddhism in Latin America' is an excellent introduction to the state of the academic field.

² The most substantial and groundbreaking contribution is doubtlessly Sonia Betancort's *Oriente no es una Pieza de Museo*. The main argument of this masterful work is the centrality of orientalism in Borges's opus, an argument that is carefully constructed throughout the two parts of the book. The first part studies Borges's orientalist background with rigorous scholarship. The second part is a thorough genetic analysis of Borges and Alicia Jurado's *Qué es el Budismo* vis-à-vis Borges's earlier handwritten notes.

The relevance of Borges's lecture on Buddhism cannot be overstated, as it was not only one of the first public talks on Buddhism anywhere in Latin America,³ but it was delivered by one of the most prominent cultural Latin American figures of the time.⁴ This is, however, to the best of my knowledge, the first full-length academic paper dedicated to an analysis of this lecture. This paper closely analyses the section that focuses on the Buddha's life, and pursues the specific question 'What kind of life of the Buddha did Borges present?' with the goal of revealing the ways in which he depicted Buddhism to this audience, and the choices that he made vis-à-vis the contemporary intellectual discussions on the Buddha's story and Buddhism, more broadly.

The accounts of the Buddha's life have been informed by doctrinal developments and disputes since the dawn of the tradition. Not surprisingly, in the nineteenth and twentieth century, in the making of what is now generally known as 'Buddhist Modernism', it also became the arena in which monastics, practitioners, artists, and scholars alike wrestled to give shape to what they thought Buddhism really was or should be. This paper approaches Borges's narrative as inscribed within this debate.

Buddhism in Latin America and 'Buddhist Modernism'

Latin America is now home to more than six hundred groups⁵ representing an array of Buddhist traditions (Theravada, Pure Land, Zen, Tibetan, and non-sectarian)⁶ despite the relatively small number

³ It is also noteworthy that this lecture delivered in 1977 has gathered more than 350,000 views in the various channels of YouTube in which it is available as of February 2022.

⁴ To add to Borges's relevance, in her recent outstanding article 'Borges and Buddhism', Evelyn Fishburn suggests that *What is Buddhism* may be the only introductory book to Buddhism written by a major literary figure (Fishburn, 'Borges and Buddhism', 212).

⁵ Usarski, *Buddhism in South America*, 527.

⁶ Rocha, *Buddhism in Latin America*, 302–03.

of people who self-identify as Buddhist in the region.⁷ In their pioneering works, both Frank Usarski (2011) and Cristina Rocha (2017) lamented the paucity of research on this issue. Fortunately, as Usarski shows in a recent entry to *Oxford Bibliographies*,⁸ there is a growing body of research, and we can be hopeful that we will soon start to have a fuller picture of Buddhism in Latin America.

The beginnings of the history of Buddhism in Latin America can be dated to the end of the nineteenth century when Japanese migrants started to arrive in Mexico and Peru. The immigration to Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia would take place slightly later, in the first decades of the twentieth century. With these first waves of Asian migration, immigrants 'sought Buddhist temples as a home away from home'⁹ and thus some form of Buddhist presence in a few Latin American countries became tangible. But this seems to have been an affair largely restricted to these migrant communities.

Meanwhile, some Latin American educated sectors took great interest in 'the Western Orientalist construction of the "East" as exotic and mysterious'.¹⁰ Rocha further notes:

Buddhism was, in a way, an easy import because it had been re-fashioned into the so-called 'modern Buddhism' (Lopez 2002) or 'Buddhist modernism' (McMahan 2008) to fit Western thought and societies.¹¹

Rocha's point that we should situate the process of intellectual

⁷ As Rocha indicates available statistics are unreliable, figures vary from 410,000 to 759,000 (Rocha, *Buddhism in Latin America*, 299). Usarski explains that, except for Brazil, there are no complete official statistical data available because national censuses often do not include a question about religion, and if they do, Buddhism is grouped under 'other religions' (Usarski, *Buddhism in South America*, 527).

⁸ Usarski, 'Buddhism in Latin America'.

⁹ Rocha, 'Buddhism in Latin America', 301.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 301–02.

transmission within the wider phenomenon of the encounter of Buddhism and modernity is crucial to understand Borges's views and role. The complexity of this encounter, however, cannot be overstated. And although this paper is clearly not the place to delve into that complexity, it is critical to underscore that this was not a singular or finished project. In fact, a review of the primary and secondary literature on 'Buddhist modernism' reveals—just like in the debates on modernity—that despite the widely shared common aims, there was an astonishing complexity and plurality of views. As David McMahan succinctly expresses it, 'Buddhist modernism is a dynamic, complex, and plural set of historical processes with loose bonds and fuzzy boundaries'.¹² These were intricate sets of processes that the Western academic world took some time to acknowledge. Mark Teeuwen reminds us that

Bechert¹³ was among the first Western scholars to use such terms as modern Buddhism, modernistic Buddhism, and Buddhist modernism. In doing so, he was finally giving some credence to Buddhist leaders in various corners of Asia who had begun to use similar terms already a century earlier.¹⁴

Indeed, as Bechert showed, the origins of Buddhist modernism were to be found in 1870s Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, and the main agents of change were Buddhist monks challenging Christian missionaries to public debates. This encounter between Buddhism and modernity continued to take many forms throughout the world, and scholars such as Donald Lopez (1995 and 2002), Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1988), and David McMahan (2008) would continue to build on Bechert's groundbreaking research.¹⁵

¹² McMahan, *The Making*, 7.

¹³ Heinz Bechert established the term as a scholarly category in his 'Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft' in 1966.

¹⁴ Teeuwen, 'Buddhist Modernities', 1.

¹⁵ Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere coined the term 'Protestant Buddhism' in their study of Sinhalese Buddhism in Sri Lanka, while Donald

Despite the diversity and historical situatedness of the cases they study, there is general agreement that modernizing Buddhism shares a number of broad features. As the purpose of this paper is not to examine 'Buddhist modernism' *per se* but to situate Borges's version of the Buddha's life within this framework, Donald Lopez's concise description of the main common traits within the multiplicity of the project of what he calls 'modern Buddhism' can serve us as a general frame of reference. One of its characteristics is that Buddhism becomes a 'system of rational and ethical philosophy, divorced from the daily practices of the vast majority of Buddhists, such as the worship of relics, which are dismissed as superstitious'.¹⁶ In this sense, the Buddha's original message was considered to be compatible with conceptions of 'reason, empiricism, science, universalism, individualism, tolerance, freedom and the rejection of religious orthodoxy'.¹⁷ 'The strong emphasis on meditation as the central form of Buddhist practice marked one of the most extreme departures of modern Buddhism from previous forms'.¹⁸ At the same time, modern Buddhism stressed the universal over the local, equality over hierarchy, and 'often exalts the individual above the community'.¹⁹

As we can gather from this description, the project of modernizing Buddhism was deeply linked to the project of modernity at large, and evidently shared its values. Nonetheless, the way these values

Lopez refers to 'modern Buddhism'. While I certainly acknowledge the nuances and differences of usage, following Bechert's (1984) and McMahan's (2008) lead, and in consonance with common usage, especially in the area of Buddhism in the West, I will use 'Buddhist modernism' throughout this paper. I wish to express my gratitude to the reviewer who made very keen comments on this section and provided a very insightful discussion on the issue of terminology.

¹⁶ Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist*, xvii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, ix. Other features of modern Buddhism, according to Lopez, comprise the more active roles it offers to women, its appeal among the educated middle classes, and having become an international form of Buddhism with its own lineage and scriptures (Cf. *ibid.*, ix–xxxix).

were articulated varied greatly, and that is why both projects were so complex and fluid. To give an example, the compatibility of Buddhism with reason and empiricism implied for rationalist, positivist scholars the need to demythologize Buddhism. Generally, this meant, ridding it of (or reinterpreting in a scientific fashion) elements that were seen as contrary to the rational spirit of Buddhism such as mythological and ritualistic elements, often with the justification that these were probably later accretions. But scholars inclined towards romanticism were likely to be staunch defenders of the value of myths. And, naturally, in between the extreme positions we find a spectrum of more nuanced views. This generated a very rich discussion that belies a simple, straightforward representation of 'Buddhist modernism' as 'demythologized' or 'rationalistic'. In fact, among those Buddhist modernists we find a whole panoply of positions regarding what 'demythologized' or 'rational' Buddhism meant. Logically, disagreements and discussions ensued. This was a conversation of which Borges was aware and did not shy from participating in. This paper intends to discuss some of the positions he took with the caveat that the aim is not to claim originality, but rather to attempt to situate Borges within this discussion and the spectrum of views encompassed under 'Buddhist modernism'.

Borges and Buddhism

This section provides a very brief introductory outline of Borges's lifelong engagement with Buddhism²⁰ and it also gives some background to the lecture that is the focus of this paper.

In a conversation with Osvaldo Ferrari,²¹ Borges reminisced about his first encounter, as a little boy, with the versified legend of the Buddha, 'The Light of Asia' by Sir Edwin Arnold. He commented that he considered the poem 'quite mediocre', that it was made of

²⁰ For a more detailed account of Borges's lifelong engagement with Buddhism and Orientalism, more broadly, see Betancort, *Oriente no es una pieza de Museo*.

²¹ Borges and Ferrari, *Libro de Diálogos*.

'pretty forgettable verses'. This long and admired poem published in 1879, that had marked a turning point in the spread of Buddhism among the British and American middle classes—as well as the Buddhist renaissance in Sri Lanka—had a poor aesthetic impact on Borges. We can assume that this was a candid assessment that shows us a Borges that did not follow blindly European intellectual fashions and had no qualms in making those outlier views public.

Nevertheless, he remembered that the last verses deeply impressed him and he recited them at the interview:

El rocío está en la hoja / levántate gran sol
La gota de rocío se pierde en el resplandeciente mar

Which is an almost literal translation of the original version: ²²

The dew is on the lotus—Rise, great Sun!
[And lift my leaf and mix me with the wave!]
The dewdrop slips into the shining sea!

Borges explains the last verse as meaning that 'the individual soul gets lost in the whole' or perhaps 'dissolves in the whole', an idea that remained powerfully inspiring for him. He recalled that reading that poem had taken some effort on his part but that those lines had stayed with him since probably 1906 when he was around seven years old. For assiduous readers of Borges, this choice of reading and this memory feat come as no surprise. He was a precocious and formidable reader²³ and he, like his father, was fascinated by the Orient.

Borges did not attribute his initial interest in Buddhism to Arnold's poem, however, but to his discovery of Schopenhauer's *Die*

²² Borges had read the poem in English and translated it into Spanish in the interview. He changed the first verse to mean, 'The dew is on the leaf' and skipped the next verse.

²³ In fact, in many interviews and conferences Borges would state that he *lived* in his father's library.

Welt als Wille und Vorstellung [The World as Will and Representation]²⁴ which he read while he and his family were living in Switzerland (1914–1919). So impressed was Borges by the philosopher that he decided to teach himself German to be able to read his work in the original, which he did.²⁵

In an interview with Jean de Milleret, Borges told him that he had been interested in Buddhism before he even considered writing about it, and that he had in his library about thirty or forty books in French, German, and English.²⁶ Among those there were volumes by scholars such as, Herman Beckh, Edward Conze, Paul Deussen, Georg Grimm, Karl F. Köppen, Herman Oldenberg, and D. T. Suzuki, just to mention a few of the scholars Borges often cited.

In 1950 he taught a course on Buddhism at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, and in that period he wrote articles and gave multiple interviews related to Buddhism.²⁷ And in 1955, Borges presented the very first conference about Zen in Argentina. It took place at the National Library of Buenos Aires.²⁸ These facts already situate Borges as a pioneer in the intellectual transmission of Buddhism to

²⁴ Paorodi and Almeida, 'Borges en Diálogo sobre el Budismo', 103.

²⁵ Borges, *Autobiografía*, 46.

²⁶ de Milleret, *Entretiens*, 142–43.

²⁷ Thanks to the generosity of Alicia Jurado (1922–2011) and Maria Kodama, and Sonia Betancort's acumen and determination, the notes that he wrote for that course are now available. Borges gifted his notebook containing the notes to Jurado. In 2001, she, in turn, gave an autographed paper copy to Betancort, who had been interviewing her for her doctoral dissertation. Betancort later published the full manuscript in her book *Oriente no es una Pieza de Museo* [The Orient is not a Piece of a Museum], published in 2018. We can only expect that her masterful study and the publication of the handwritten manuscript of Borges's notes will elicit more research on this aspect of Borges's opus that is yet to receive the attention it deserves. In 2011, Jurado gifted the original notebook to the Academia Argentina de Letras, which published the content of the notebook along with Jurado's comments and a brief introduction by Pedro Luis Barcia that same year (See Jurado, *Borges, el Budismo*).

²⁸ Carini, 'Budismo Global', 182.

Argentina and, by extension, to Latin America.

In 1976 Borges and Alicia Jurado published *What is Buddhism?*. Jurado was a scientist and an accomplished intellectual.²⁹ She was Borges's close friend and shared with him a deep interest in Buddhism and Eastern philosophies. In the preface to the volume she minimizes her own participation in the writing of the essay. Indeed, she states that the general outline of the book, the personal approach, and unique style are all to be credited to Borges. Whereas her duties, she says, consisted in investigating and selecting materials from more recent texts, suggesting some data and minor revisions, as well as reading, writing, and preparing the manuscript.³⁰ It is very difficult, nonetheless, to disentangle what each contributed to the final manuscript,³¹ except when we find evident correspondences with Borges's handwritten notes.

Beyond his literary and intellectual interest in Buddhism, Borges had a much more profound existential relationship not only with Buddhism but with other religions and philosophies. As he stated candidly, what he sought was perfection, not only in his writing but in life. He thought one of the paths to attain perfection was ethical cultivation and, in a memorable interview,³² he joked that although he tried very hard, he had not accomplished ethical perfection.

Borges's fictions have been interpreted from the most varied perspectives but to what extent his understanding of Buddhism permeates them is still an open question. In a recent article Borges scholar Evelyn Fishburn has suggested that reading some of his fictions with Buddhist concepts in mind would be more appropriate than current

²⁹ For more details on Alicia Jurado see Betancort, *Oriente*, 126, note 5.

³⁰ Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, Prologue.

³¹ Betancort notes Jurado's important contribution (Betancort, *Oriente*, 129, note 14). She also observes that Jurado made the point that it was on the final section on China and Japan that she had contributed the most. Jurado also stated that when they wrote the book Borges had not been to Japan yet, but she had, and that all the content related to Japan stemmed from her experience (Jurado, *Borges, el Budismo*, 24).

³² Interview with Sofia Imber and Carlos Rangel in 1982.

interpretations. For instance,

Many Borges stories include revelatory moments, some just before the death of the protagonist. These have mostly been understood in terms of ecstasy, but in some instances the Buddhist concept of nirvana may prove more appropriate. Funes, prostrate, immobile, unable to sleep would imagine himself ‘at the bottom of a river, rocked (and *negated*) by the current’.³³

Similarly, she suggests that ‘a Buddhist-inflected reading would add many layers to the density’ of other stories.³⁴ Indeed, both Fishburn and Betancort agree that the influence of Buddhism can be perceived in a number of his stories, such as, ‘The Circular Ruins’, ‘The Library of Babel’, ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’, ‘The Immortal’, and ‘The Writing of the God’,³⁵ just to mention but some notable ones written in the 1940s, the decade in which he created much of the fiction that would turn him into a world-renowned writer.

Borges also wrote a few essays directly related to Buddhism, ‘Personality and the Buddha’ (1950), ‘Forms of a Legend’ (1952), and ‘The Dialogues of Ascetic and King’ (1953), as well as others in which there are important references to Buddhism, notably, ‘The Nothing-

³³ Fishburn, ‘Borges’, 213–14. This revelatory moment is from Borges’s ‘Funes the Memorious’ (1954 [1942]). The emphasis on ‘negated’ is Fishburn’s.

³⁴ Fishburn, ‘Borges’, 216. I believe the flipside of this question is also compelling. That is, we may also wonder whether these stories may have had any impact on the development of Buddhism in Latin America. We may consider, for instance, the kind of theoretical questions that they raise or the profound aporias that some of them can make the readers experience. These are questions that far exceed the aims of this paper but to which I shall return in my forthcoming research.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 212–16 and Betancort, *Oriente*. The second part of Betancort’s *Oriente no es una Pieza de Museo* offers a thorough genetic analysis of Borges and Alicia Jurado’s *Qué es el Budismo* vis-à-vis Borges’s earlier handwritten notes, while at the same time opening a very rich discussion on Borges’s views on Buddhism and how these are reflected in his fiction.

ness of Personality' (1922), 'A New Refutation of Time' (1944–1947) and 'From Someone to Nobody' (1950).³⁶ In these essays Borges grapples with the notion of non-self and its implications, a topic to which he will return in the lecture to which we now turn.

The way Borges presents the Buddha's life in his 1977 lecture differ in important ways from the version of the legend in the book he and Alicia Jurado had published just the previous year. As we will see, Borges at times in his lecture takes what could even be considered a proselytizing attitude. It is also quite clear that he presents a form of Buddhism that is consonant with 'Buddhist modernism'.

The 1977 Lecture on Buddhism: Borges's Retelling of the Legend of the Buddha

This section will especially focus on the public lecture about Buddhism he gave at the Coliseo Theater in Buenos Aires in 1977 when he was seventy-eight years old. It was part of a series of seven lectures at the Coliseo Theater that would later be compiled in the volume *Siete Noches* [Seven Nights]. In chronological order, the titles of his talks were: 'The Divine Comedy', 'The Nightmare', 'One Thousand and One Nights', 'Buddhism', 'Poetry', 'Kabbalah', and 'Blindness'. The topics attest to the breadth of Borges's knowledge and interests. We find among these seven topics, two literary masterpieces that Borges greatly admired, two experiential topics that he contended with throughout his life (Nightmares and Blindness), a talk that focused on the act of creation (Poetry), and two more specifically religiously and philosophically oriented, on the Kabbalah and Buddhism.

These were some of the last public talks Borges would ever give and, ostensibly, some of the most meaningful for the author. Indeed, once the revision of the written edition of the talks had been finalized,

³⁶ Betancort, *Oriente*, 109–24 discusses them, and my forthcoming paper, 'The Buddha's Life According to J. L. Borges', is partially based on the comparison of these essays.

Borges told the editor, Roy Bartholomew, ‘I think that about the topics that have obsessed me so much, this book is my testament’.³⁷

What follows will discuss Borges’s introductory remarks and his live narration of the Buddha’s life story up to his enlightenment.³⁸ I will compare some sections of this narrative with the versions in his book of 1976 and his handwritten notes from 1950 to underscore what I consider to be relevant differences in his interpretive trajectory.

This is how Borges introduced his lecture:

Ladies, Gentlemen. The subject tonight is the essentials of Buddhism. I will not go into that long history that started two thousand five hundred years ago in Benares when a Prince in Nepal—Siddhartha Gautama—who had become the Buddha, set in motion the wheel of the law, that is, he proclaimed the four noble truths and the eightfold path. No, I will not follow that long story, but I will talk about what is essential in that religion, the most widespread in the world.³⁹

Given that he intended to ‘talk about what is essential’ in Buddhism, it is noteworthy that he ends up devoting about half of the lecture to discussing the Buddha’s life story. This can be seen as a tacit acknowledgement of the didactic potential of the Buddha’s life story, which was certainly nothing new. That is how sacred biographies have been traditionally used. But in another text that also discusses

³⁷ Borges, *Siete Noches*, 169. Bartholomew also tells us that the talks had been recorded on magnetic tapes, but they were not always clear. Despite this lack of clarity, they served as the basis for newspaper publications that consequently had multiple problems in addition to transcription errors (Ibid., 165–66).

³⁸ The live lecture is available on various channels of YouTube. The compilation *Siete Noches* corresponds very closely to the oral version but has been edited in various ways. I follow and translate the live lecture when there are significant differences. When these are minimal or they do not have any effect on the discussion, I follow the printed version. When there is no citation of an English version, translations are mine.

³⁹ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

the Buddha's life, 'Forms of a Legend', Borges provides something closer to an overt rationale: 'Reality may be too complex for oral transmission; legends recreate it in a way that is only accidentally false and which permits it to travel through the world, from mouth to mouth'.⁴⁰ Contrary to scholars who had seen myths and legends as elements that needed to be rationalized, Borges ascribed them with irreducible value in their capacity to recreate reality that greatly exceeded other narrative forms, as we will see below.

After his statement of intent, Borges proceeded to explain the longevity of Buddhism and identified two main causes: its tolerance and the fact that it demands much from our faith. The tolerance of Buddhism was greatly emphasized by Buddhist modernists. The second cause, however, must have sounded quite extravagant to those familiar with 'Buddhist modernism'.

'Buddhism requires a great deal of faith. It is natural, given that every religion is an act of faith'.⁴¹ This statement is quite remarkable considering that for many intellectuals contemporaneous with Borges the appeal of Buddhism lay precisely in its being much less a religion than a philosophy, and for having to do little or nothing with faith. Indeed, this was considered to be one of the hallmarks of 'Buddhist modernism'. As one of the pioneers of the field, Heinz Bechert, notes, when discussing the development of 'Buddhist modernism' in Asia and the West:

Buddhism was understood as a rational way of thought, and it was particularly stressed that the Buddha did not demand belief in his teachings, but invited people to find out by way of reason and to test by religious practice and meditation that it was the truth. Therefore, modernists describe Buddhism as 'the religion of reason' as opposed to the religions of blind belief in dogmas like Christianity, Islam or Judaism.⁴²

⁴⁰ Borges, 'Forms of a Legend', 149.

⁴¹ Borges, 'Buddhism', 59.

⁴² Bechert, 'Buddhist Revival', 276.

To a large extent, Borges's views were perfectly attuned to this understanding. In his lecture he stated unequivocally that: 'Of course, the religion is incrustated with mythology, it is incrustated with astronomy, strange beliefs, magic'. But this was not opposed to the point Borges was trying to make.

It is natural [that Buddhism requires a great deal of faith], since all religion is an act of faith, just as the homeland is an act of faith. What is it, I have asked myself many times, to be Argentinian? To be Argentinian is to feel that one is Argentinian. What is it to be Buddhist? To be Buddhist is feeling the four noble truths and the eightfold path.⁴³

Among his editions to this paragraph for *Siete Noches*, Borges added a brief but helpful explanation:

To be Buddhist is—not just to understand, because that can be accomplished in a few minutes—but to *feel* the four noble truths and the eightfold path.⁴⁴

Borges's choice of words here needs some clarification. He uses the word '*comprender*', which basically means to understand, and I think it would be accurate to say that he means by it to understand intellectually, or just rationally. Indeed, we can read the Four Noble Truths, and understand their meaning, in the sense that we can see how the statements are logically connected and what each of them means on the surface, even if we disagree with them, or they mean little to us. And this, as he explains, is a level of understanding that can be achieved in just a few minutes. When, on the other hand, he states that 'To be a Buddhist is to [...] *feel* the four noble truths and the eightfold path', the word '*sentir*' (feel), although rather vague, is clarified, to a certain extent, by his example that 'Being Argentinian is to feel that we are Argentinian'. The word 'feel' can be interpreted here

⁴³ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁴⁴ Borges, 'Buddhism', 59.

as signaling a direct experience or intuition but also, and without contradicting this first sense as standing for something that we have internalized, something that we have made part of our being and by which we define ourselves. In other words, something that is true and meaningful in an existential sense. This is one plausible interpretation. Yet, one of his biographers, provides a different interpretive key ascertaining that for Borges ‘the homeland was a “decision”, that one is Argentinian because one has decided to be’. ‘With this simplification’, she adds ‘he denied the flipside of the coin: the fatality of being born in a place, the fatality of conditioning’.⁴⁵ Or, in other words, we could say, he denies the doctrine of karma.

Borges himself does not elaborate any further and we are left to grapple with this pregnant ambiguity on our own. This will be the case in many other instances. If we were to categorize Borges’s study as a strictly academic work, we would probably find fault in this lack of development and explanation. But it would be a mistake to read this, or any other of Borges’s works on Buddhism—even his full-length book *What is Buddhism*—as an academic work in the modern sense. Borges took a great number of liberties that would be inadmissible in academia nowadays—such as not always citing with precision his sources; others, such as, borrowing terminology and freely elaborating on it without acknowledging the original source, and most particularly, his signature style of blurring the line between story and essay—can be taken as creative licenses that could be at once very insightful and thought-provoking, but still academically unacceptable. We will see that Borges used this same approach, that we can perhaps call an erudite-poetic approach, to recreate the life of the Buddha. This combination of erudite knowledge and poetic impulse allowed Borges to weave a variety of versions that sometimes differed in minimal but significant ways.

Returning to the previous comparison, Borges made at least three very interesting points: (1) He presented Buddhism as a religion, not just as a philosophy. (2) He reckoned that it demands much of our faith. (3) He established a parallel between being a Buddhist and

⁴⁵ Canto, *Borges*, 9.

being Argentinian as being acts of faith. Regarding the third point, this was one of the several references that Borges made throughout his talk to establish familiar yet provocative comparisons.⁴⁶

Although he leaves us wanting for more explanations on the relationship between ‘understanding’ and ‘feeling’, these three points are partially illuminated by the ensuing discussion on ‘belief’ and ‘credulity’ which develops as Borges begins to introduce the Buddha’s life story:

There is also the story of the Buddha. We may, if we like, not believe that story. I have a Japanese friend, a Zen Buddhist, with whom I’ve had long and friendly discussions. I told him I believed in the historical reality of the Buddha. I believed, and still believe, that some twenty-five hundred years ago there was a prince of Nepal named Siddhartha or Gautama who became the Buddha, the Enlightened or Awakened One—as opposed to the rest of us who are sleeping or are dreaming this great dream that is life. I remember that line of Joyce: ‘History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.’⁴⁷ Well, Siddhartha, at age thirty, woke up and became the Buddha.⁴⁸

For Borges the fact that Buddhists (or particularly, Zen Buddhists) did not demand belief in the actual existence of the Buddha was quite extraordinary:

I talked with my friend who was a Buddhist—I’m not sure I’m a Christian, but I am sure I’m not a Buddhist—and I said: ‘Why not believe in the story of Prince Siddhartha?’ He replied: ‘Because it doesn’t matter; what matters is to believe in the Teachings.’ He added, I think with more wit than truth, that to believe in the his-

⁴⁶ Borges also reiterated the question about what it meant to be Argentinian in a multiplicity of contexts.

⁴⁷ Here Borges adds yet another interpretive layer to James Joyce’s much-discussed statement ‘History is a nightmare from which I want to wake up’ implying perhaps that history is akin to saṃsāra.

⁴⁸ Borges, ‘Buddhism’, 60.

torical existence of the Buddha or to be interested in it, is something like confusing the laws of mathematics with the biographies of Pythagoras or Newton. One of the subjects of meditation for the monks in the monasteries of China and Japan is to doubt the existence of the Buddha. It is one of the doubts that must be imposed on one's self in order to arrive at the truth.⁴⁹

Borges seems to have greatly admired this disregard from the Buddhist tradition for the historical existence of the Buddha, particularly when he compared it with the other religious traditions with which he was familiar:

The other religions demand a lot from our credulity. For instance, if we are Christians, we must believe that one of the three persons of the Godhead became incarnated in a man, condescended to being a man and was crucified a thousand nine hundred and seventy something years ago. If we are Muslims we have to believe that there is no other god than God and that Muhammad is His apostle. But we can be good Buddhists and deny that the Buddha existed. Or rather, we can think, or better said, we should think that our belief in the historical is not important, as the historical belongs to what Eça de Queirós called 'the universal illusion'. That does not matter, what matters is to believe in the Doctrine.⁵⁰

This is a central doctrinal difference among these religious traditions, and Borges clearly found the demand of *credulity* from Christians and Muslims troublesome. He made a very useful distinction here between 'belief' and 'credulity'. In all likelihood, this distinction finds its source in David Hume whose philosophy Borges greatly admired. For Hume belief was one of the central problems of philosophy. Belief, according to him, 'renders realities, or what is taken for such, more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions

⁴⁹ Borges, 'Buddhism', 60.

⁵⁰ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

and imagination.⁵¹ Belief itself is neutral, it does not have positive or negative associations, rather, it is a mystery.⁵² Credulity, by contrast, always has negative associations. It is the proclivity to accept statements of fact that not only cannot be proven, but also challenge our reason.⁵³

Thus considered, this distinction would allow us to understand why Borges does not seem to have a negative view of belief or faith.⁵⁴ Although clearly in the rationalistic camp, we observe a more sophisticated position in the binary faith-reason that was one the main axes of the discussion of 'Buddhist modernism'.

Now, we return to the lecture. Having established that 'we can be good Buddhists and deny that the Buddha existed', we would logically expect Borges to move onto another topic, perhaps to expound the doctrine. But Borges was a master of the unexpected.

'Nonetheless', says Borges, 'the legend of the Buddha is so beautiful that we cannot fail to tell it'.⁵⁵

Here we can appreciate the freedom with which Borges approached his presentations. He does not need to provide an academically sound reason for introducing the legend of the Buddha; he gives a purely aesthetic reason. He just must tell the legend because it is 'so beautiful'.

It is interesting and pertinent to make a comparison here with the functions of sacred biography Juliane Schober identifies in her

⁵¹ Hume, *Enquiry*, 63.

⁵² According to Hume, belief is as difficult to define as it would be impossible to explain the feeling of cold to a creature who has never experienced it (Cf. *ibid.*, 62).

⁵³ See, for instance, *ibid.*, 142, 587.

⁵⁴ He uses both terms interchangeably in different places. For instance, in an interview from 1974: '[...] I believe that belonging to a country is an act of faith, I believe that if we feel Argentinian, we are Argentinian.' And closely resembling Hume in the note above, Borges adds: '[I]f you ask me for a definition of Argentinian, I can't give you one. Just as I can't give you a definition of the yellow color or the taste of coffee. It's something I feel' (García et al., *Borges por Borges*, 50).

⁵⁵ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

excellent edited volume on Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia. She notes their didactic value, their capacity to 'mediate the ideal and the real, the conceptual and the pragmatic', to serve simultaneously as 'models of' and 'models for' religious practice.⁵⁶ Undoubtedly, these are some of the most important reasons why sacred stories deserve our scholarly attention. And Borges, as we will see, implicitly acknowledges them, but at this point in his talk he seemed to forsake all other considerations to invite the audience to simply relish the beauty of the story (perhaps also simultaneously inviting them to suspend judgments of truth, at least for the time being?). He reinforces this effect by interjecting this comment before starting the narration of the legend:

The French have devoted special attention to the study of the legend of the Buddha. And their argument is valid. Their argument is this: the biography of the Buddha is what happened to one man in a brief period of time. It may have happened this or that way. In contrast, the legend of the Buddha has illuminated and continues to illuminate millions of souls, millions of people in the world. Thus, the legend is more important. Furthermore, the legend is what has inspired so many beautiful paintings, so many poems.⁵⁷

Thus, we have, on one hand, the historical contingency of the individual. On the other, we have the grandeur and fecundity of a legendary account. The legend thus becomes a powerhouse of artistic creation and religious inspiration in virtue of the perennial beauty and truth that it condenses and instantiates.

The question of the historical truth hidden within the legend that had been the concern of many seminal orientalist at the beginning of the twentieth century seems not to have occupied a central place for Borges, but rather what held significance for him was the power of the legend itself. It is noteworthy that here Borges is siding with a particular view partially *contra* other scholars whom he greatly

⁵⁶ Schober, *Sacred Biography*, 3.

⁵⁷ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

admired and often cited, such as the German Indologist Hermann Oldenberg (1854–1920) and the English scholar of the Pāli language, Thomas Rhys Davis (1843–1922). Both scholars had seen in the mythical and legendary aspects of the narrative irrational elements that detracted from a historically accurate account of the life of the Buddha, which was, in their view, what serious scholars should seek.

Borges had already intimated where he stood in the debate between positivistic historical truth and mythical truth in his book *What is Buddhism*. The opening paragraph reads:

Paul Deussen has observed that the legend of the Buddha is a testimony, not of what the Buddha was, but of what he became in a very short time; other researchers add that it is in the legendary, in the mythical, that the essence of Buddhism has found its deepest expression. The legend reveals to us what innumerable generations of pious men believed and what continues to endure in the mind of much of humanity.⁵⁸

Given, however, that this was the introductory paragraph to the section dedicated to the legendary Buddha, we may wonder if in the second section, the one dealing with the historical Buddha, there is a different view. But there is not. Rather, we find an acknowledgment of a general problem and the state of the debate.

In the case of the Buddha, as with the other founders of religions, the essential problem of the researcher lies in the fact that there are not two testimonies but only one: the testimony of legend. Historical facts are hidden in legend, that is not an arbitrary invention but a deformation or magnification of reality.⁵⁹

As other thinkers of the period, Borges thought that it was possible, to a certain extent, to sort the historical from the legendary elements with various degrees of certainty. But, whereas for scholars such as

⁵⁸ Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

Oldenberg and Rhys Davis, recovering historical facts was one of the most important goals, for Borges, clearly, this was not his main concern or interest.

Borges cites Edward Conze to show the contrasting approaches of the Western historian and the Buddhist practitioner:

To the Christian and agnostic historian, only the human Buddha is real, and the spiritual and the magical Buddha are to him nothing but fictions. The perspective of the believer is quite different. The Buddha-nature and the Buddha's 'glorious body' stand out most clearly, and the Buddha's human body and historical existence appear like a few rags thrown over this spiritual glory.⁶⁰

This quotation is followed by the acknowledgement that Buddhism is just a particular case of a broader problem. 'Like Schopenhauer, Hindus despise history: they lack a chronological sense'.⁶¹ Borges and Jurado then bring to bear the views of Alberuni (Al Biruni), who suggests that Hindus completely disregard the order of historical facts to then contrast the views of the eleventh century Iranian scholar with those of Oldenberg, who tries to defend them from such a representation.⁶²

In this debate Borges's sympathies seem to lay with Deussen, who observes:

Common historians (who do not forgive Plato for not having been a Demosthenes) should try to understand that Hindus are at such a height that does not allow them to become enchanted, like the Egyptians, with the compilation of lists of kings, or to put it in the language of Plato, with enumerating shadows.⁶³

Borges and Jurado then conclude that: 'The truth, no matter how

⁶⁰ Conze cited by Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 32.

⁶¹ Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 32.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶³ Deussen cited by Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 33.

scandalous it may be, is that Hindus care more about ideas than dates and proper names'.⁶⁴

This brief overview reveals that Borges was well acquainted with the broader contemporaneous scholarly debate over how to approach the source material, in this case, the legend of the Buddha. This also reveals how this debate was inscribed within two other larger problems: the etic vs. emic approaches as represented by the very apposite citation of Conze, and the nature of the Indic primary sources. All these intersected with the question of what the goal of the scholar engaging the Buddhist tradition—and more broadly, any Indic traditions—should legitimately be.

Returning to Borges's live narration, he was about to introduce the Buddha's life story and then added the caveat: 'Although one need not believe it, the legend of the Buddha is illuminating'.⁶⁵ Then he begins the narration with the alluring statement: 'The legend⁶⁶ starts in heaven'. He continues: 'In heaven there is someone who for centuries on end—we can literally say, during an infinite number of centuries—has been perfecting himself until he understands that in his next incarnation he will be the Buddha.'⁶⁷

This is the corresponding sentence in the book: 'The Bodhisattva (the one who will become the Buddha, a title that means "the Awakened") has attained—thanks to merits accumulated in infinite previous incarnations—birth in the fourth heaven of the gods'.⁶⁸ His adaptation of this sentence, as compared with its textual counterpart, seems to have a double aim: (i) to be more easily understandable in an oral presentation and (ii) to mitigate the exoticism of the story.

The first aim barely needs explanation. Borges was famous for being a superb lecturer, extraordinarily attuned to his audience. The second aim is not only interesting but potentially perplexing. Why

⁶⁴ Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 33.

⁶⁵ Borges, 'Buddhism', 61.

⁶⁶ Borges used the terms 'biography', 'legend', 'myth', etc., interchangeably. Similarly, I have made no technical distinctions among them here.

⁶⁷ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁶⁸ Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 11.

leave out elements that may sound fantastic and defy imagination? In other words, elements that may feel immensely alien and, precisely in virtue of that, greatly memorable? Borges recognized the power of exoticism and made it a central element of his fictions.⁶⁹ And not only of his fictions. In an interview with Jean de Milleret, Borges told him that when he started to write the book on Buddhism with Alicia Jurado he wanted to show the 'strange world' of Buddhism while Jurado, conversely, wanted to leave aside the 'fantastic' elements of Buddhism.⁷⁰ Why then temper the exoticism inherent in many elements of the Buddha's life story? I surmise that his effort to temper some of the exoticism of the legend was part of a larger effort that can be observed in the lecture not to present Buddhism in a way that can easily be taken more as kind of curiosity than a serious philosophical doctrine or a real path to salvation.⁷¹ Understood in this way, we could also propose that this was an effort to 'demythologize' the story. This claim is controversial in view of the aforementioned dialogue with de Milleret in which Borges stated that he and Jurado

[...] couldn't agree because she wanted to write this book in order to convert people to Buddhism. Thus, if I found any picturesque characteristics, she would say that would put people off. She wanted to discard anything that would appear fantastic to us Westerners. Basically, she sought to write a sort of Buddhist catechism. I, on the contrary, wanted to exhibit that strange world that is the world of Buddhism. So, after writing a few pages, we realized that we wanted to write two different books and we abandoned the project.⁷²

They did, however, eventually finish writing the book they had started in 1954, and published it in 1976, one year before the lec-

⁶⁹ See for instance, Vargas Llosa, 'The Fictions', 1331, where Vargas Llosa ascertains that 'exotic is an indispensable element' of Borges's fictions.

⁷⁰ de Milleret, *Entretiens*, 111.

⁷¹ This is a topic I will be developing in much more detail in a forthcoming paper in Spanish entitled 'El Buda de Borges' [Borges's Buddha].

⁷² Cited in Bossart, *Borges and Philosophy*, 179.

ture. In the section on the legendary Buddha, it was Borges who clearly prevailed as we find an abundance of exotic and mythological content there. In contrast, in the lecture, he omitted or explained away much of it. Thus, although my contention that Borges made a deliberate effort to temper some of the exoticism⁷³ may seem controversial in light of his conversation with de Milleret, it is well supported by internal evidence provided by the lecture, as I intend to show below.

The following example may serve as an illustration of one of the strategies Borges used in his talk, and it also allows me to further the case for Borges's conscious attempts to mitigate the exoticism of the story in his lecture. Having introduced his audience to the being who will become the Buddha, Borges tells them that he chooses the continent, the century, the caste and the mother from whom he will be born. Borges briefly explains that in Buddhist cosmogony the world is divided into four triangular continents in whose centre lies a gold mountain, Mount Meru. He further elaborates on the mother and the conception:

There is a queen, a queen called Maya. Maya, remarkably, means illusion. Queen Maya has a dream that risks sounding extravagant to us but, of course, as we will see, is not extravagant for Hindus. The queen, married to King Suddhodana, dreamed that a six-tusked white elephant, wandering in the mountains of gold, entered her left side without causing her pain. Then she wakes up. The king summons his astrologers and they explain that the queen will give birth to a son who may be the emperor of the world or the Buddha, the Awakened, the Enlightened, the being destined to save all. Naturally, the king chooses the first destiny, he wants his son to be the emperor of the world.⁷⁴

⁷³ Although not directly relevant to this paper, it is still interesting to note that in the lecture it may have been Jurado's views that prevailed, at least to a certain extent.

⁷⁴ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

Here, Borges interrupts the narration to introduce an explanation:

Let's go back to that detail which, without doubt, has seemed grotesque to you, as it has seemed grotesque to me, why a six-tusked white elephant? Let's think of the reasons that Hermann Oldenberg gives in his book *Die Lehre des Buddha*, *The Buddha's Doctrine*. Hermann Oldenberg notes that in India the elephant is not a monster locked in a zoo but a domestic animal, an animal that one sees daily, as we can see a horse, a dog, a cat. It is not a grotesque animal. And then the color white is always a symbol of innocence. Why six tusks? Here we have to remember (we will have to resort to some history) that the number six, which for us is arbitrary and somewhat uncomfortable (since we prefer three or seven), is neither in India, where it is believed that there are six dimensions in space [...]. That means that the idea of a six-tusked elephant is just not monstrous as it would not be for us to think, for instance, of a pigeon, two wings, that'd have nothing particular about it, or number three or seven [...].⁷⁵

In *What is Buddhism?* the conception episode is included but the explanation is much shorter and is several pages removed from the episode itself.⁷⁶ Conversely the book's version abounds in details that were omitted in the talk, for instance:

The gods create a palace in her body. In that enclosure the Bodhisattva waits for his time to arrive, praying. In the second month of the Spring, the queen walks across the garden. A tree, whose leaves glow like a peacock's plumage, offers her a branch. The queen accepts it with naturalness.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁷⁶ The conception episode is on page 12, the explanation is on page 24. Interestingly enough, in his 1950 class notes we find already a similar explanation (See footnote 27).

⁷⁷ Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 12.

It could perhaps be argued that Borges omitted a number of details in his talk due to the restrictions of time. But just as there is much that he excluded, there is also much that he added in comparison to the book. For that reason, it is plausible to argue that these omissions and additions were not just caused by time pressure but rather followed certain criteria. I am arguing that one of these was to temper the exoticism. One of the ways in which he did this was by interjecting diverse kinds of explanations, cosmological, historical, or doctrinal.

Borges continues with the traditional general outline of the Buddha's life story. The queen gives birth painlessly. The young boy excels at everything and gets married at sixteen. As his father knows that 'his son runs the risk of becoming the Buddha'⁷⁸ he confines him to the palace and gives him a harem of eighty-four thousand. He has briefly summarized Siddhartha's birth and youth and now will elaborate on the four sights.

We hear Borges's soft voice:

The prince lives a happy life; he ignores there is suffering in the world, as the three essential facts have all been hidden from him: old age, sickness and death. But a day comes, a predestined day, that day the prince goes out in his chariot through one of the four doors of the rectangular palace. Let us say, through the North door. He goes a stretch and sees a very strange being, a being that is different from all he has seen. He sees a being that is bent, wrinkled, has no hair. He can barely walk leaning on a cane. He asks, what, who that man is, if that is indeed a man. Then the charioteer answers that he is an old man and that we will all be that man if we continue to live.

The prince returns to the palace, he returns disturbed, very restless. But after six days (number six continues to rule the story) he goes out in the same coach but through the South door. In a ditch he sees an even stranger man, with the whiteness of leprosy and the face emaciated. He asks who that being is, who that man is, if that is indeed a man. He is sick, the charioteer answers; we will all be that man if we live long enough.

⁷⁸ Borges, 'Buddhism', 62.

The prince, already very restless, returns to the palace. For the third time he goes out again and sees a man who seems to be asleep, but whose color is not that of this life. That man is carried by others. He asks who that man is. The coachman tells him that he is a dead man and that we will all be that dead man if we live enough.⁷⁹

These are the famous three sights, very well known to most in the Buddhist world, that will impel Siddhartha to abandon his life of comfort and pleasure to seek liberation. The version that Borges offers his audience, however, though faithful to the spirit of traditional sources, has also been greatly transformed. In this iteration you can hear the frail but powerful voice of Borges as he describes those others who are also partly himself: the old man, the sick man who walks aided by a cane, and the man who knows full well how close death is, and 'feels' the suffering that those aspects of the human condition entail.

There can be little doubt that Borges had made the conscious choice to put the spotlight on this part of the story, especially if we compare it with the textual version of the book:

Siddhartha goes out one morning in his chariot and sees in amazement a stooped man 'whose hair is not like that of others, whose body is not like that of others,' who leans on a walking stick and whose flesh trembles. He asks what kind of man that is: the coachman explains that he is an old man and that all men on earth will be like him. In another exit he sees a man who has been devoured by leprosy. The charioteer explains that he is sick and that no one is exempt from this danger. In another outing he sees a man carried in a coffin. That immobile man is dead, the charioteer explains, and dying is the law for everyone who is born.⁸⁰

Although still compelling by the very nature of the content, we can see that the narrative is much more detached, much less personal than the

⁷⁹ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁸⁰ Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 14.

oral version delivered at the Coliseo theater. The structure is the same, as Borges and Jurado are following the traditional sources.⁸¹ Since these texts are very long and the descriptions are quite abundant and ornate, it is common practice to summarize the main points of the story. In the lecture Borges followed this practice but underscored the growing psychological anguish of Siddhartha, and its resolution:

The prince is devastated. Three terrible truths have been revealed to him: the truth of old age, the truth of illness and the truth of death. But he comes out a fourth time through the eastern door, let's say. When he goes out the eastern door he sees a man who is almost naked but whose face is full of serenity. He asks who that man is. He's told that he's an ascetic, a man who has renounced everything and who's achieved bliss. The prince resolves to abandon everything [...].⁸²

Here Borges briefly pauses to explain, without calling it by its name, the Buddha's doctrine of the Middle Way:

The prince resolves to abandon everything. He, who has led such a rich life. Because Buddhism believes that asceticism may be good, but only after having tasted life. It is not believed that one should start by denying oneself anything. One has to seize life and then we may regret it, but not without first knowing it.⁸³

Earlier I had argued that Borges's effort to temper the exoticism of the legend was part of a larger effort to prevent Buddhism from becoming an intellectual curiosity. In his version of the four views, he underscores the drama of the human condition, the commonality of that drama, or, in other words, its universal value. In Borges's inspired and skilful narration, this is not any more the story of an

⁸¹ In his class notes and in *Qué es Budismo*, 24 Borges listed the *Buddhacarita* and the *Lalitavistara*.

⁸² Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Indian prince who may or may not have existed, it is the story of each of us. I would suggest that this psychological reading was yet another strategy that Borges used to present Buddhism in a way that was moving, memorable and, above all, in a way that underscored the perennial significance of the story.⁸⁴ He dwells on another dramatic element:

The prince then resolves to become the Buddha. At that moment they bring him news: his wife, Yasodhara, has given birth to a son. Then he exclaims: 'A bond has been forged'. Because it is something that ties him to life. That is why they give the son the name of Fetter [Rahula]. And he is in his harem, looks at those women who are young and beautiful and he sees them as if they were old, horrible, leprous, with cancer, with horrendous illnesses. And later he goes to his wife's room. She is sleeping. She is holding the child in her arms. He is about to kiss her, but he understands that if he kisses her, he will not be able to let go of her, and then he goes away, without kissing her.⁸⁵

Borges's narrative once again makes Siddhartha's choice even more dramatic and heartbreaking. He also quite surprisingly lists cancer as one of the 'horrendous illnesses' in the live lecture but deletes it in the printed version of the lecture in *Siete Noches*. Again, perhaps another strategy to present side by side an illness that was common in the past with one that was prevalent and significant to the audience.

He then glosses over Siddhartha's year of yogic practices and strictures, and takes us to the episode in which he faces Mara. 'There

⁸⁴ McMahan identifies 'psychologization' as one of the processes that served to demythologize and detraditionalize Buddhism. However, he understands it as the reconceptualization of Buddhism as psychology, in the sense that Buddhism starts to be seen as a 'science of mind' (McMahan, *The Making*, 52–57). What I describe may somehow be related to this development but does not correspond to this strategy since I am simply trying to make the point that Borges here shifts the emphasis to Siddhartha's state of mind.

⁸⁵ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

follows a magical intermission, which has its correspondence with the Gospels: it is the struggle with the demon. The demon is called Mara'.⁸⁶ Once more, we see here another strategy to de-exoticize some symbols, i.e. establishing comparisons to a familiar religious tradition, as the audience must have been largely Catholic. Borges elaborates this episode in some detail, possibly because of how appealing and colourful the scene is.

The demon feels that he dominates the world but that now he's in danger and leaves his palace. The strings of his musical instruments have been broken, the water has dried up in the cisterns. He prepares his armies, and here we have a description of his armies. He rides on the elephant that is, I don't know how many miles high, he multiplies his arms, he multiplies his weapons and attacks the prince. The prince is sitting at the sunset under the tree of knowledge, that tree that was born at the same time as he was. The demon and his hosts, his hosts of tigers, lions, camels, elephants, and monstrous warriors attack him and shoot arrows at him. But when the arrows come to him, they become flowers. They throw mountains of fire at him that end up forming a canopy above his head. The prince continues to fight, he continues to fight motionless. He may not know that he is being attacked. He is thinking about life. He is about to attain nirvana, salvation. And before sundown, the demon has been defeated. And a long night of meditation follows. At the end of that night, Siddhartha is no longer Siddhartha, or Gautama is no longer Gautama. He is the Buddha: he has reached nirvana.⁸⁷

The contrast between Mara's agitation and desperation and the Buddha's calmness are vividly depicted. Once again, Borges's masterful storytelling makes us experience that moment of deliverance as an epic battle in which the hero has no weapons but his own inner peace and concentration.

Borges omitted another detail that is quite colourful and tied in

⁸⁶ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

very well with his conclusions about the Middle Way—the detail of Mara's daughters' failed attempt to seduce Siddhartha. This, however, was included in the book. May we infer that Borges's focus on this epic battle may have been a veiled reference to the military coup d'état in Argentina the previous year?⁸⁸

He resolves to preach the law. He gets up, he has already been saved, he wants to save others. He preaches his first sermon in the Deer Park in Benares. And then another sermon, the Fire Sermon, in which he says that everything is burning: that souls are on fire, that things are on fire, that bodies are on fire [...].⁸⁹

It is quite remarkable that Borges omitted the Buddha's period of hesitation before deciding to teach. In his live lecture, as we see, after the attainment of enlightenment the Buddha immediately resolved to preach the law because he wants to save others. In the book, however, Borges followed the traditional narratives more closely and elaborated on this episode. He tells us that the Buddha stayed for seven more days under the tree. The gods feed, clothe, and adore him. He gains his first converts and then Brahma came down from heaven with a large following to beg the Buddha to start the teaching that will save humankind, and the Buddha accepts.⁹⁰

Did Borges leave out this episode simply because it was not relevant or interesting? I suspect that it was perhaps because this episode, without an explanation, could be perceived as contradicting the ethical character of the Buddha, and by extension, Buddhism. Such an impression would have detracted from the kind of teacher and the kind of doctrine Borges seems to have been trying to portray.

Borges then explains, what he had just briefly mentioned earlier, that the law of the Buddha is not that of asceticism:

⁸⁸ This is a complicated topic that would deserve further discussion. I believe this is a plausible reference as we have seen that Borges made an effort to suggest connections with the story that were relevant to the audience.

⁸⁹ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁹⁰ Borges and Jurado, *Qué es el Budismo*, 18–19.

For the Buddha, asceticism is an error. What he preaches is a Middle Way, and those are the Four Noble Truths. That is, that man should not abandon himself to carnal life because carnal life is lowly, ignoble, shameful and, therefore, painful. And neither to asceticism that is also ignoble and also painful. The Buddha preaches a Middle Way—to use the theological terminology. And he dies years later. He already has many disciples. He could've been immortal, but he chooses the moment of his death. He dies in the house of a blacksmith.⁹¹

Borges will once again emphasize the centrality of the Middle Way towards the end of his lecture, as we will see below. It is noteworthy that he contrasts the Buddha's decision to die with the alternative of remaining immortal instead. In his version of the Buddha's life, Borges kept elements that other Buddhist modernists deliberately excluded in their effort to 'demythologize' it, such as this notion that the Buddha could have chosen to be immortal. Borges could have just equally omitted this detail but instead he uses it to underscore one of the philosophical principles of Buddhism that was central to Borges's own opus, the principle of *anātman* (non-self). Borges follows the traditional narrative and adds that the Buddha dies surrounded by his disciples who are in despair wondering what they will do without him.

He tells them that he does not exist, that he is a man like them, as unreal and as mortal as they, but that he leaves them his Law.⁹²

Once more, Borges compares the Buddha's attitude to that of Jesus to establish an important difference. While Jesus had told his disciples that if two of them were gathered, he would be the third. The Buddha, in contrast, told his disciples: 'I leave you my Law'.⁹³ Borges thus emphasizes that it is the Dharma (the Law) that matters, not the individual who preaches it—thus contrasting the universal to the

⁹¹ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

particular, and showing the absolute value of the universal. The death of the Buddha signals the beginning of the history of Buddhism.

Later will come the history of Buddhism. We will have so many events: we will have Lamaism, magical Buddhism, Mahayana or the Greater Vehicle that follows the Hinayana or the Lesser Vehicle, the Zen Buddhism of Japan. To my mind, if there are two forms of Buddhism that are almost identical, that are similar, one is what the Buddha taught—if he existed historically (and I'm convinced that he did exist because, why would one invent a character, even if legends are false). We have then what the Buddha preached, and what is now taught in China, in Japan, Zen Buddhism. And they are essentially the same. The others are mythological encrustations, they are fables. And some of those fables are interesting.⁹⁴

That Zen Buddhism and what the Buddha taught are essentially the same is a contentious issue, and here Borges is taking a very particular position vis-à-vis Buddhist modernists. He is clearly following the line of D. T. Suzuki and disregarding the great number of scholars who disparaged any form of Mahāyana Buddhism and claimed that only 'original Buddhism' was true. As Donald Lopez observes: '[...] modern Buddhism does not see itself as the culmination of a long process of evolution, but rather as a return to the origin, to Buddhism of the Buddha himself'.⁹⁵

Although Borges had just stated that the other forms of Buddhism are mythological encrustations and fables, still after the caveat he will narrate two fables that have to do with miracles.

It is known that the Buddha could perform miracles but, just like Jesus Christ, he did not like to perform them. They seemed to him a vulgar ostentation. And there is a story that I can tell, the story of the sandalwood bowl.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁹⁵ Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist*, ix.

⁹⁶ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

In this story one of the Buddha's minor disciples performs a miracle which consists in rising through the air and flying around a sandalwood bowl to get it and, ostensibly demonstrate his superior magical power. The Buddha expels him from the community of monastics 'for doing something so vulgar'.⁹⁷

But we know that the Buddha also performed miracles. For instance, this one that is rather amusing. I don't know if it was thought of with some humor. I don't think so. I think it was rather a miracle of courtesy. There is a moment when the Buddha had to cross a sand desert, and it is noon. Then the gods, from their thirty-three heavens, each send him down a parasol for him to protect from the sun. And the Buddha does not want to slight any of the gods, so he multiplies himself into thirty-three Buddhas. And each one of the gods sees a Buddha covered by the parasol, that he has accepted the gift. Well, the Buddha performed that miracle out of courtesy. And there are other miracles and other sayings of the Buddha.⁹⁸

Borges's choice of miracles is very significant. He first made the caveat that these are to be considered as 'mythological encrustations' but then he uses one of them to make the point that the Buddha generally rejected miracles. In contrast, he narrates a second story where the Buddha performs a miracle out of 'courtesy', not out of necessity or 'vulgar ostentation'. And, it seems to me, that this lovely story has the effect not only of amusing but also of endearing the Buddha to the audience.

A third story that Borges chooses is the famous 'parable of the arrow', according to which a man who has been wounded in battle with an arrow does not allow his friends and family to remove it without first knowing the name of the archer, the material of the arrow, and several other details. While asking these questions the man dies. Borges explains:

⁹⁷ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

'I, conversely, says the Buddha, teach to pull out the arrow'. [...] The arrow is the universe. The arrow is the idea of 'I'. [...] That is, the Buddha says, we shouldn't waste time on useless questions: Is the universe finite or infinite? Will the Buddha live after nirvana or not? All this is useless. What matters is that we pull out the arrow. That is, this is a law of salvation. And the Buddha says—these sentences are very beautiful, I think—'As the vast ocean has only one flavor, the flavor of salt, the flavor of the Law has the flavor of salvation'. That means that the Law that he teaches is vast as the sea, but it has one single flavor, the flavor of salvation'.⁹⁹

Here Borges unequivocally establishes one of the pivotal points of his lecture, that what the Buddha taught was above all, a soteriology, a path of salvation, not just a philosophy or even a religion. Indeed, he criticizes the followers of the Buddha who

have lost themselves or have perhaps found too much in metaphysical disquisitions. But that is not the goal of Buddhism. That is why a Buddhist can profess any religion as long as he follows that Law.¹⁰⁰

He once again underscores the tolerance of Buddhism in comparison to monotheistic traditions that do not allow their followers to simultaneously profess other religions. This is followed by a brief mention of the Four Noble Truths. Borges then elaborates on the notion of transmigration with multiple comparisons to Western philosophy and literature. He connects this notion to the Hindu view of time and the history of the universe to then explain the doctrine of karma.

In Buddhism there is no god, or there may be a god, but that's not what's essential. The essential is that we believe that our destiny has been preordained by our karma. That is, if I happen to have been born in Buenos Aires in 1899, if I happen to be blind, if I happen to be giving this lecture before you tonight, all of this is the result of my previous life. There is not a single fact of my life that has not

⁹⁹ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

been preordained by my previous life. And that is what is called karma. [...] Karma is a mental structure, an extremely delicate mental structure that we are weaving and interweaving at each moment of our life.¹⁰¹

Borges explains that it is not only through volition and action but also through our thoughts, our dreams, our sleep, etc., that we are all the time weaving our karma. He presents a view of an implacable law of karma, and, following Deussen and Schopenhauer, ‘a cruel law’, thus projecting a world that is inescapably and perfectly ethical.

Borges had no claims at having achieved a thorough understanding of Buddhism or being a representative of the tradition. In fact, towards the end of the lecture he states:

It is very difficult to explicate a religion, especially a religion that one does not profess. But I have tried. I could have narrated so many fables, so many legends but I think that what matters is not to see Buddhism as a game of legends, or a topic for the arts but as a discipline, a discipline that is within our reach [...].¹⁰²

This statement is at first sight quite tantalizing as it seems to be a criticism of his own presentation or perhaps his own previous views.¹⁰³ As if the same word, legend, that had such an exalted meaning at the beginning and throughout the lecture, had now been demoted to a lesser status, especially as now it is flanked by the word ‘game’. But this, I would argue, is meant as a caveat to the audience precisely not to demean Buddhism by understanding it as a sheer ‘game of legends’ but to become aware that praxis is fundamental. He explains that what matters is to live Buddhism as ‘a discipline’.

And here he wittingly or unwittingly seems to be inviting his audience to go a step beyond and practice Buddhist discipline, which

¹⁰¹ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ The views he had expressed in his conversations with de Milleret quoted above.

conjures up the image of proselytizing storytellers. The explanation of how he understands Buddhist discipline strengthens this view; for Borges, this is:

a discipline that is within our reach and does not demand asceticism from us, since asceticism was condemned by the Buddha. Nor does it allow us to abandon ourselves to the licenses of carnal life, that was condemned, too. What he asks of us is meditation, and that meditation does not have to be a meditation on our faults, on our past life.¹⁰⁴

This is a remarkable point. He was not referring to the current widespread emphasis on *śamatha* (calm-abiding) or *vipaśyana* (insight) meditation. Borges refers to the meditation on anātman (non-self):

One of the subjects of Buddhist meditation is to think that our past life was illusory. For example, if I were a Buddhist monk, I would think at this moment that I have begun to live now, that all of Borges's previous life was a dream, that all of universal history was a dream. That is to say, it asks from us exercises of an intellectual order and in this way we will release ourselves from the thirst.¹⁰⁵ Once we understand that the self does not exist, we will not think that the self can be happy or that it is our duty to make it happy. We will reach a

¹⁰⁴ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

¹⁰⁵ In all likelihood, there is a transcription error in *Siete Noches* that is, in turn, reproduced in the English translation *Seven Nights*. This sentence reads: 'Mediante ejercicios de orden intelectual nos iremos liberando de la zen.' The word 'sed' (thirst) has been transcribed as 'zen' turning the phrase into the virtually incomprehensible statement: 'Through exercises of an intellectual kind we will become free of zen' (Borges, *Seven Nights*, 74). There can be little doubt that the actual word here is 'sed' (thirst) as Borges must have been referring to the release from *Tṛṣṇā* (literally this Sanskrit word means thirst but is often rather inadequately translated as desire, sometimes better rendered as craving), the proximate cause of suffering according to the traditional formulation we find in the Four Noble Truths.

state of calm. That does not mean that nirvana is equivalent to the cessation of thought, and proof of this is to be found in the legend of the Buddha. The Buddha, under the sacred fig tree, reaches nirvana, and yet he continues to live, he continues to live and preach the law.¹⁰⁶

He returns once again to the Buddha's legend as a source of clarification and legitimation. Thus connecting what seemed to be a digression, to the life story. Once again, he emphasizes the difference between the purely conceptual or ludic approach to the tradition and the experiential one. He does this yet again in his concluding remarks:

What I've said today is fragmentary but it would have been absurd for me to present a doctrine to which I have dedicated so many years—and of which I have understood little, really—with the intention of showing a piece of a museum. For me Buddhism is not a piece of a museum: it is a way of salvation. Not for me, but for millions of men. It is the most widespread religion in the world and I think I have treated it with all due respect in my presentation tonight.¹⁰⁷

These last statements, which serve as an epilogue to his talk, give us a fundamental key to understand his approach to Buddhism, and, by extension, to the Buddha's story. Let us imagine what it means to be a piece in a museum. It is something that is lifeless, something that is on display to be observed, a thing of the past, that no matter how valuable it may be or curious we may be about, it must remain separated from us by a window shelf. Contrarily, for Borges, the storyteller, the legend of the Buddha was very much alive, a perennial source of beauty and inspiration, and for Borges, the lecturer, his role was to point in the direction of the legend.

¹⁰⁶ Borges, *Recorded Lecture*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

Conclusions

Borges is known to many as a master of short fiction, but he also played a role in the transmission of Buddhism to Latin America that is yet to be properly assessed. He lived in a period in which what we now call 'Buddhist modernism' was in the making, and that was the kind of Buddhism that the Latin American intellectual elites 'imported' from Europe and the United States. There was, however, not one single form of 'Buddhist modernism', and it was not even necessarily a conscious movement. This paper has suggested that Borges was an active participant in the making of modern Latin American Buddhism who engaged in intellectual debates and took well-considered positions. His positions, however, as we have seen, were fluid and evolved in time but also varied depending on how Borges saw his own role, on the audience, and his motivation. As suggested earlier, it would be a mistake to categorize Borges's work on Buddhism as academic. Rather, recognizing that his approach freely oscillated between the erudite and the poetic allows us to have glimpses of his interpretive richness.

In order to make specific comparisons with Buddhist modernist thinkers, a much longer monograph would be needed, but I hope to have shown through the close reading and analysis of selected sections of Borges's lecture on Buddhism how he articulated his own positions within the larger debate. I have noted especially three points: (i) That he presented Buddhism as a religion (not just a philosophy) and a soteriology in which faith and praxis had central roles. (ii) That he gave preeminence to legends over history. A view that, to a certain extent, seems to go against the demythologizing efforts that were so characteristic of 'Buddhist modernism', but, on the other hand, served the purpose of strengthening the universal message and value hidden within them. (iii) That he articulated his universalism by tempering exoticism. As we have seen, at times, he did this counter-intuitively, by explaining how a symbol was culturally specific.

There are other topics that I have only briefly mentioned, such as the way in which Borges read the legend in a psychological key, which differed from the tendency towards psychologization of 'Buddhist

modernism' in important aspects or the emphasis on meditation on anātman, that merits more research.

To answer briefly the specific question this paper set out to investigate, he presented the Buddha as a human being that he believed had existed but whose existence was irrelevant for those who followed him. As a legendary figure whose story was too beautiful not to tell, and depicted both the tragedy and promise of the human condition.

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