

UCLA

Mester

Title

Borges, Buddhism, and World Literature, a review

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3t0754zb>

Journal

Mester, 49(1)

Author

Araujo, Jason

Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/M3491046810

Copyright Information

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

DOMINIQUE JULLIEN. *Borges, Buddhism and World Literature: A Morphology of Renunciation Tales*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 126pp.

“A king, venturing beyond the palace walls, meets an ascetic, and decides to leave his palace, forsaking his life of power and luxury for one of asceticism and eventual enlightenment.”¹ The opening sentence of Dominique Jullien’s wide-ranging study entitled *Borges, Buddhism and World Literature* can be read as a provocation, a call to both remember and push forward. The efficient paraphrasing of the classic Renunciation tale that comes to us from Buddhism strikes deep when we think, here in the Anglo-Saxon world at least, to the future of 2020 and beyond. Is an *uvaktoro* (a non-palace) along with an acceptance of a simpler-while-richer way of life possible? Dr. Jullien, professor of Comparative Literature and French Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has been tracing French literary production (from Chateaubriand to Balzac, Flaubert to Proust, and much more) over the last thirty years. This most current work, her “following an idea in movement,” is a homecoming of sorts: Dr. Jullien’s first published article was “L’erudition imaginaire de Jorge-Luis Borges” in *Romanic Review* (1987.)

The book is comprised of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion, unfolding over the course of a modest 126 pages. The introduction sets the stage as the reader is invited to explore Borges’s relationship to the Renunciation story and its impact on his *oeuvre*. The reader is also urged to consider and complicate the various ways scholars have studied literature and the different debates that have taken place in the wake of Edward Said’s totemic 1978 *Orientalism*. Dr. Jullien writes of her project: “What seems clear is that Borges’s dialogue with Eastern philosophy and Renunciation narratives, undertaken ‘from the edge of the West’ and from a culture entangled in its own postcolonial negotiations, hardly fits the Orientalist model originally described by Said and critically established in the wake of his ground-breaking book.”

What follows is a series of chapters that, on their own, may stand independently or in conversation with one another, in my opinion a very helpful way of organizing the complexity of the book. The first chapter unpacks the morphology of the Renunciation tale as read and understood by Borges within the larger context of literary history over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly referencing

the histories and possibilities of morphology and ‘world literature,’ as well as the potential for Borges’s political withdrawal. Following this discussion, the second chapter addresses the paradox of the power dynamic as represented in the Renunciation myth and how the king-ascetic foil can move politics. This chapter seeks to think about Borges within the context of various other thinkers and stories, including the *1001 Nights* and the work of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. The third chapter traces the shift in Borges’s poet stories, where the foil to the king morphs from the ascetic to the poet, suggesting a fundamental relationship between asceticism and art. The fourth chapter is a meditation on the relationship between the Renunciation tale and the power of the parable in the twentieth century. Despite Borges’s insistence that he be read not as a didactic writer but as a writer concerned with aesthetics and the varied emotional responses from his readers, Dr. Jullien seeks to unpack his resistance to being associated with what she sees as some of the basic qualities of the genre of the parable: short, enigmatic, and perplexing. The conclusion returns to why Borges’s fascination with the Renunciation story illuminates some of our contemporary literary and cultural debates in new and perhaps productive ways. She ends by stating, “[r]ather, [the Borgesian model] resonates with contemporary strategies of globalized reading, concurrently cross-reading texts from various times, places and traditions. Neither interested in drawing up a list of canonical works, nor in consigning them to the dustbins of literary history, the Borgesian strategy makes comparison ‘prevail over the codification of the canonical.’”²

Borges, Buddhism and World Literature is proof of an intellectual fidelity as well as a moving testament to the power of comparison in the face of a changing academy. The ambition and fearlessness of juxtaposing drastically different temporal and geographic traditions is something old and new *à la fois*. It should inspire both established academicians as well as up-and-coming scholars who celebrate the contours and possibilities of a changing and dynamic discipline; a Janus face looking both forward and back.

Jason Araújo
University of California, Los Angeles

Notes

1. p. xxii
2. p. 106