

Dissenting mildly: A teacher as a popular journalist

LUZ RODRÍGUEZ CARRANZA

Of Borges during the 1930s, we know that he is the author of *Historia universal de la infamia*, and a man who, looking back twenty years later, described himself as 'bashful, undecided as to whether to write short stories, someone who amused himself (sometimes without aesthetic justification) by faking and twisting other people's tales' (Borges 1989/96: 1). We know from John King that he collaborated on *Sur* and translated intensively (King 1986: 92). However, of Borges the journalist, who wrote for the magazine *El Hogar (Ilustración semanal argentina)* every two weeks, we know rather little. The aim of this article is to analyze the texts recovered by Enrique Sacerio Gari and Emir Rodríguez Monegal (Borges 1986), and to attempt to understand how the author of *El Otro, el Mismo* adapted his style and concerns to the requirements of a mass-market family magazine, to the predetermined structure of the section concerned, and, above all, to the deadlines that left him no time to reflect, to rewrite, to consult the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The hypothesis that I wish to develop here is that Borges used popular genres known to the magazine's readership without altering his ground rules, which he applied strictly in order to achieve the most challenging transformation — that of his readers' way of thinking.

The 1930s began with a world economic crisis and a military coup in Argentina. At that time, King informs us, *Sur* was above all a magazine of ideas, not yet the 'forum for literary experimentation' that it would later become.¹ The ideas were politically pan-Americanism, and philosophically the pacifism of Huxley and the personalism of Mounier and Maritain. The pacifism soon changed into a political position that opposed fascism.² The Spanish Civil War forced intellectuals at the PEN Club congress held in Buenos Aires in August 1936 to take an uncompromising stand.³

Sur attacked fascism in all its guises and denounced its 'doctrine of hatred' (King 1986: 68). As of 1936 it openly espoused the Republican

cause. This position, says King, was unpopular

with a government and Catholic Church that subscribed to a romantic doctrine of 'Hispanidad' and looked to the triumph of the Church and the sword in Spain. The main newspapers, *La Nación*, *La Razón* and *La Prensa*, were all hostile to the Republic, if not totally committed to the pro-insurgent forces. (King 1986: 66)

At the outbreak of World War II, *Sur* declared its unconditional support for the Allies and denounced Nazi persecution of the Jews. These intellectuals were swimming against the tide of public opinion, which was emotionally roused by pro-Franco propaganda and by the burgeoning presence of Nazi elements in the Argentinian military and government. Yet *Sur* was read solely by an elite and posed no immediate subversive threat.

In October 1936, Jorge Luis Borges took over the 'Foreign books and authors' section of *El Hogar* — to make a living, as he confessed in 1970.⁴ For over three years this section coexisted uneventfully alongside articles for housewives, fashion columns, children's stories, and the sports pages. Borges was responsible for providing a Reader's Guide (the original rubric, and one much used in other sections of the magazine) indicating 'what one should know' of the literature of other countries and languages. The first question that these texts raised in my mind was whether Borges set out his own ideas — and those of *Sur*, if he shared them — or if he wrote what was expected of him, eluding burning issues. The answer soon became clear: it was enough to note the authors and texts reviewed and cited — Masters, Woolf, Joyce, Faulkner, Valéry, O'Neill, T. S. Eliot, Döblin, Kafka, Poe, Chesterton, Zenón de Elea, Schopenhauer — to ascertain that Borges was writing about what interested him, and that he commented in detail on the pacifist and antifascist thinkers of the period — Huxley, Barbusse, Benda, Rolland. An answer was not so readily forthcoming to the second pressing question: How did Borges adapt to a readership more familiar with radio soap operas and cinema than literature, that is, with a population more familiar with popular genres than with philosophy, and especially with the nationalistic myths extolled by the public education of the time?

The genres

In fiction and essays, Borgesian reasoning draws upon and develops a dialogue with classical and modern literature, or with philosophy.

Borges discusses the works of his favorite authors, creates a pastiche of what interests him, and, above all, experiments briefly with the genres he is discussing. He employs the same strategy in *El Hogar*, although here the genres chosen are popular — those that were familiar to the people of Buenos Aires during the thirties: epideictic or didactic articles, biographies, anthologies, crime stories, and science fiction. This task was by no means simpler than that of using 'cultured' genres. At the time Borges reflected deeply on the classical genres. The more classical the genre the more rigid are its conventions, and the harder it is to use its mold to convey something different. Achieving greater freedom within rigorously applied bounds was the task Borges set for himself throughout his opus, and his section in *El Hogar* constituted, in my view, one of his most ambitious challenges. Popular genres are the most classical and least malleable: their norms are fixed and readers do not readily accept changes. Borges employed and discussed them every two weeks, apparently drawing comparisons without generating any hostile response.

I restrict myself here to an analysis of Borges's practice in just two of these genres — the epideictic and biographical — as these are the most rigorous and referentially controlled. The epideictic or didactic genre is the basis of all *El Hogar* texts. It blends with other genres, gradually altering an argument's structure, using, for instance, the conjecture of crime novels and the juxtaposition of anthologies. As for biography, it had its own place in the 'thumbnail biographies' of the writers. Its analysis turns out to be simpler to delineate, although the techniques of the four other genres imperceptibly alter its rules.

The epideictic genre

The various sections of *El Hogar* were didactic. They corresponded to the genre defined in the *Traité de l'argumentation* by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1992) as an epideictic discourse — one that 'intends to enhance the degree of adherence to certain values ... recognized by the audience' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1992: 67). Borges used the epideictic genre as the principle vehicle in his section of *El Hogar*, and this could once again be seen as confirming his conservative ideology, since, according to the *Traité*, it is the choice of those who 'within society, defend traditional values, accepted values, educational rather than revolutionary values, new values that spark debate and controversy' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1992: 67). Borges, however, used all his energy and talent to attack the opinions

that were prevalent in the Buenos Aires of his time. His strategy was subtle: use the epideictic genre to weaken — not strengthen — his readers' adherence to hegemonic values.

The first requirement was to find common ground for discussion with the readers — that which Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call 'an intellectual contact': the consensus regarding the *value* of discussing a given subject (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1992: 18). Points of contact between writer and reader can be readily established when they share the same set of values, which just needs to be reinforced didactically. Other strategies are needed when the aim is to challenge assumptions: propaganda, which attacks head on, or fiction, which establishes a tacit agreement to suspend beliefs for the duration of the game.⁵ Borges discarded the first genre: his texts contain no apostrophes, comminations, exclamations, or hyperbole. Propaganda is unhelpful in *El Hogar*, because the risk of irritating the editors or of losing readers is too great. The second strategy — which Borges used in the forties, when his epistemological proposals were called *Ficciones* — is also unproductive. Borges's task at the magazine was to explain literary texts and authors didactically, and the first intellectual contact had to be established within this framework.

At first glance there is nothing startling in Borges's *El Hogar* column. The structure was determined in advance, which, as I indicated above included a thumbnail biography and two reviews of foreign works and authors. The layout and typography are the same as in the rest of the magazine, and the illustrations are conventional portraits of the writers. Borges respected this setup for three years, the only change being the inclusion every month and a half of an essay on a subject, a few exceptions aside, that touched upon Argentinian national culture. Each text begins reassuringly, with the enunciation of a norm that prefigures the deductive reasoning and didactic demonstration characteristic of the epideictic genre. Nonetheless, during the first year there was an almost imperceptible shift from one issue to the next. The norms are not presented as unquestionable truths but rather as somewhat unfounded and vague opinions with which it would be possible to take issue. In the early months, Borges used innumerable formulas of rhetorical humility to confront these assertions with certain strictly personal reservations that compromise no one, such as 'Frankly, we do not believe' or 'I dare, however, to suggest to the reader'.⁶ At the outset, a humorous incident or a personal experience entertains and surprises, thus favorably disposing the reader to stop trusting the norm — already reduced to a belief or simple opinion — and to look forward with interest to the reasoning, as in the following example:

1. Countless times I hear it said: 'Nobody can abide *María* by Jorge Isaacs any more; nobody is that romantic, that naive'. This vague opinion (or series of vague opinions) can be divided into two parts: the first declares that this novel is unreadable nowadays; the second — audaciously speculative — puts forwards a reason, an explanation. First the fact, then the probable reason. Nothing more convincing, more honest. I can make but two objections to this weighty charge: a) *María* is not unreadable; b) Jorge Isaacs was no more romantic than we are. I hope to demonstrate the second. As for the first, I can merely give my word that yesterday I effortlessly read the book's three hundred and seventy pages, alleviated by 'zinc plates'. Yesterday, the twenty-fourth of April 1937, from two fifteen in the afternoon to ten to nine at night, *María* was highly readable. (Borges 1986: 127)

Here two objections are raised, but the first — the readability of *María* — only serves the purpose of humorously suspending credulity. What interests Borges is to discuss the second opinion, by comparing several known interpretations that are at odds with those of romanticism, or by referring to everyday experiences that he shares with his readers, and shifting from the first person singular to the first person plural:

2. I have asserted that Isaacs was no more romantic than we are. It is no coincidence that we know him to be Creole and Jewish, the son of two skeptical blood lines. ... The Hispano-American pages of a certain encyclopedia say that he was 'an industrious servant of his country'. That is to say, a politician; that is to say, disillusioned. ... The plot of *María* is romantic. This means that Jorge Isaacs was capable of deploring that the love of two beautiful, impassioned beings should remain unsatisfied. It is enough to go to the cinema to confirm that we all share this capacity, boundlessly (Shakespeare shared it too). (Borges 1986: 127-128)

It is utterly impossible to deny these arguments after the norm has been ridiculed, because the first-person plural has drawn us in, as discerning, and then intelligent, interlocutors. The very fact of arguing implies 'that one values the adherence of the interlocutor, achieved with the help of reasoned persuasion, that one does not treat him as an object, but rather appeals to his freedom of judgment' (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1992: 73). Never — not even when thoroughly analyzing the rhetoric of these texts — does a reader feel that he is being manipulated, because Borges shares with him his own strategy, and by the end of 1937 he was already showing his hand:

3. Schopenhauer reduces all ludicrous situations to the paradoxical and unexpected inclusion of an object in a category that is alien to it, and to our

sudden perception of this incongruity between the conceptual and the real. (Borges 1986: 188)

The sudden perception of the inapplicability of the norm replaces the fictional and emotional techniques of propaganda, and enhances the intellectual contact. Reasoning then uncovers what must be borne in mind when elaborating a new interpretive hypothesis of the case in question. During the weeks that follow, the cases multiply and the argument becomes inductive: but the rule or norm used to explain them is the imaginative hypothesis of the first case, which is repeated each time less playfully and more forcefully. Repetition — a technique characteristic of the epideictic genre — thus converts the conjecture into a new norm that no longer surprises anyone.

Borges's aim though is not to replace one norm with another, but rather to transform the public into readers who think for themselves and cease to be a soft touch for propagandists. The repetitions are never identical, but adopt the rhetorical form of amplification: concessions, gradations, enumerations, corrections, and anaphoras.⁷ The new norm, which has already become questionable, is confronted with a surprising new case, and the edifice rapidly collapses: all that remains is the rejection of reductive definitions and the incitement to critical and creative reading.

The thumbnail biographies

The laws of the genre of biography, as pointed out by Group μ (1994: 160–161), demand a hero and a theme that guides the selection of the features of the narrated life — or biographemes — through deletion, addition, substitution or permutation. The classical features of the popular biography are as follows:

1. The hero: exceptional being.
2. Origins: place and date of birth, family.
3. Path through life (up to the main action that transforms him into a hero): education, first acts, early life events.
4. Stimulus (meeting) or Revelation (decisive event).
5. Main action.
6. Summary of his life between 5 (main action) and 1 (exceptional being).

Borges was perfectly aware that his readers were familiar with this genre, through their schooling and everyday life — all Argentinian

textbooks used it, as did popular magazines — and through what was offered by publishers. In the first year of the section, a third of its reviews dealt with biographies. Exasperated, Borges announced in September 1937 that:

Biographies continue to abound. With people in short supply, authors are turning to rivers and symbols. Emil Ludwig published a torrential biography of the Nile. And, to celebrate the first centenary of the death of Claude Rouget de Lisle, Hermann Wendel has published *La Marsellesa. Biografia de un himno*. (Borges 1986: 153)

In his thumbnail biographies, Borges strictly included the conventional biographical facts, but refused to link them causally. So, from the first issue the heroes are presented through their names and nationalities, in application of Schopenhauer's rule, as can be seen in examples 4, 5 and 6, which humorously invalidate the relation between the first two facts. The critique is already perfectly clear in example 7:

4. October 16, 1936: Carl Sandburg — perhaps the leading poet of North America and certainly the most North American — was born in Galesburg, in the state of Illinois, on January 6, 1878. His father was a Swedish blacksmith, August Jonsson, an employee of the workshops of the Chicago railroad company. As there were many Jonssons, Johnsons, Jensens, Johnstons, Johnstones, Jasons, Janssens and Jansens in the workshops, his father changed his name for an unmistakable one and opted for Sandburg. (Borges 1986: 33)

5. October 30, 1936: Virginia Woolf has been considered 'the leading novelist of England'. (Borges 1986: 38)

6. December 11, 1936: Edgar Lee Masters has been in America for many generations. (Borges 1986: 56)

7. April 2, 1937: Eden Phillpotts, 'the most English of English writers' is of obvious Jewish stock and was born in India. (Borges 1986: 112)

In these examples there is a subtle dismantling of the patriotism that presents writers as incarnations of their country. So, in the first thumbnail biography, that of Sandburg, the conventional norm is stated and then ridiculed with the change in name. Example 5 places the name of the female writer just before the cliché enunciated in the masculine form (*el novelista*) and in quotation marks. In example 6, the detail is in the use of *estar*, 'to be' (somewhere — America), instead of *ser*, 'to be' (somebody — an American). Lastly, in example 7 — by now it is already April 1937 — Borges finally moves away from the absurd norm by presenting it directly in quotation marks and comparing it paradoxically with something alien to it: a Jewish writer who was

born in India. Example 8 is particularly interesting as an illustration of the conjectural pirouettes of Borges:

8. November 13, 1936: The phrase 'a German novelist' is almost a contradiction in terms, since Germany, so rich in organizers of metaphysics, in lyric poets, scholars, prophets and translators, is notoriously lacking in novels. The work of Lion Feuchtwanger is a violation of this norm. (Borges 1986: 42)

Here the commonplace 'a German novelist', which must have presented the writer, is refuted, and we then discover that Feuchtwanger, *because he is a German novelist*, is *therefore* an exception. The readers encounter even fuller and more demanding reasoning in example 9, but by then they have already had a year of practice:

9. September 17, 1937: Of all the nations that fought in 1914, none has produced such a diverse and essential antiwar literature as was seen in Germany. Of the many German poets who execrated the war ... none was more psychologically interesting than Fritz von Unruh. Other loathers of war — here I am also thinking of Barbusse, of Remarque ... were civilians suddenly flung into the bewildering hell of the trenches; Fritz von Unruh was a soldier of heroic vocation. ...

Son, grandson and great-grandson of military men, Unruh was born in Silesia, in 1885. (Borges 1986: 166)

The argument tends to demonstrate that there may be a cause-and-effect relation between two apparently opposing concepts, war and pacifism, in other words, not all pacifists are civilians who know nothing of war. Moreover, those who know war well are those who become pacifists. Hence Germany fought, but produced the most essential antiwar literature: there were German poets who loathed war. Unruh was the most interesting pacifist, because he was from a military family, was educated for war, and had become a soldier with a heroic calling. This line of reasoning is later taken up again more unequivocally in a review, where the most sacred values of nationalism are demolished through the ferocious words of a British army general (Borges 1986: 207–208).

The writers who interested Borges were those who distanced themselves from patriotism, such as Feuchtwanger in example 10:

10. November 13, 1936: Feuchtwanger was born in Munich, in early 1884. It cannot be said that he loved his birthplace. (Borges 1986: 42)

In this first appearance of the topic, the litotes tempers the declaration. In his reviews, Borges persists with the theme,⁸ and after two and a half years of habituating his readers, a first biographeme devoid of understatement is then possible:

11. May 27, 1938: Van Wijk Brooks is one of those American writers whose customary and advantageous exercise is the denigration of America. (Borges 1986: 238)

Patriotism and nationalism permeated the climate of opinion in the Buenos Aires of those years, but Borges did not limit himself to the undermining of abstract concepts. The biographeme of the writer's origins also allowed him to allude directly to the real and burning ideological controversies of the moment. The exceptional character of Benedetto Croce called for a harsher irony:

12. November 27, 1936: Benedetto Croce, one of the few important writers of contemporary Italy — the other is Luigi Pirandello — was born in the hamlet of Pescasseroli, in the province of Aquila, on the 25 February 1866. (Borges 1986: 50)

The fact that Borges suggested there were only two important writers in the Italy at the time may seem to us now to be a literary and innocent joke, but in the Buenos Aires of November 1936 this was far from the case. It provocatively excluded Ungaretti, whose fascist stance at the PEN Club congress was unambiguous (King 1986: 65).

The third biographeme — the path through life — follows naturally from the first two, and should be the nexus between these and the writer's Great Work. But it is precisely here that causality suffers the greatest blow. The bald facts about the lives of the writers are meaningless; they do not enable us to know them, or to foresee that they will become writers, as can be seen in the gradation of examples 13 to 16, leading to the extreme case of Ernest Bramah in example 17:

13. January 22, 1937: To enumerate the facts of Valéry's life is to ignore Valéry, is not even to allude to Paul Valéry. (Borges 1986: 75)

14. September 3, 1937: The statistical facts of the life of poet Edward Estlin Cummings run to just a few lines. (Borges 1986: 162)

15. October 1, 1937: The facts of the life of Countée Cullen require few lines (the facts, the mere statistical facts). (Borges 1986: 171)

16. October 29, 1937: The facts of the life of this author suggest no mystery other than that of their unelucidated relation to the extraordinary work. (Borges 1986: 182)

17. This biography runs the risk of being no less pointless and encyclopedic than a history of the world according to Adam. We know nothing of Ernest Bramah, except that his name is not Ernest Bramah. (Borges 1986: 206)

In many cases, education must also have hindered the writer's work. Hauptmann 'at school ... was assiduously the most idle pupil'

(Borges 1986: 158), Will James was raised on horseback (Borges 1986: 195), and Virginia Woolf was never sent to school, although 'one of her domestic disciplines was the study of Greek' (Borges 1986: 38). The greatest paradox is that of the unfortunate David Garnett, born into a family of intellectuals:

18. March 5, 1937: In 1892, David Garnett, renovator of the imaginative tale, was born in a place in England whose name the biographical dictionary does not wish to remember. His mother, Constance, has impressively translated the entire works of Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and Tolstoy into English. On his father's side, he is the son, grandson and great-grandson of men of letters. Richard Garnett, his grandfather, was a librarian at the British Museum and author of a famous *History of Italian Literature*. The age-old handling of books by so many generations had wearied the Garnetts: one of the first things that they forbade David was the practice of prose and verse. (Borges 1986: 101)

The significant events in the life of Garnett in no way presage the title of 'renovator of the imaginative tale' that the biography bestowed upon him:

19. Garnett's first studies were of botany. He devoted five years to this peaceful and roving passion, and was the discoverer of an extremely rare subclass of toadstool: the immortalized and poisonous *Fungus garnetticus*. This happened around 1914. In 1919, he opened a bookshop on Gerrard Street, in the Hispano-Italian neighborhood of Soho. His friend Francis Birrell taught him how to make packages: an art whose principles he mastered around 1924, the year in which they closed the bookshop. (Borges 1986: 101)

Clumsy David took five years to learn how to wrap books, and the man who taught him was the only one who could act as his Stimulator. Borges's fourth biographeme does not abound in Stimulators, but the Revelation is still the same: war. The effects of this revelation, though, never seem clear. In the case of Unruh — the antiwar soldier in example 9 — we know that he wrote the dramatic poem *Vor der Entscheidung*. But all expectations remain frustrated, because at no time are we told that the work speaks of war (even though it denigrates it), but just that it is unreal. Of *Opfergang*, composed before the fortress of Verdun, we are told:

20. This grave and short tale — perhaps the most intense of those motivated by war — does not seek in any line to be a transcription of reality. What is singular is that an experience is immediately transformed into a symbol. (Borges 1986: 167)

The fifth biographeme is by far the most important: the appearance of the Great Work that justifies the inclusion of the writer in this

anthology of heroes constituted by the thumbnail biographies. Thus, Masters 'is by antonomasia the author of *Anthology of Spoon River*' (Borges 1986: 57). Borges employs various means to frustrate our expectations, but the result is always the same: the Work in no way identifies the writer.⁹ Equally, the various books by a given author do not allow any cumulative interpretation of his identity:

21. The work of Döblin is curious ... it consists of exactly five novels. Each one of them corresponds to a distinct, isolated world. 'The personality is nothing but a conceited limitation' declared Alfred Döblin in 1928. 'If my novels survive, I hope that the future attributes them to four different people.' (When he formulated this modest or ambitious wish, he had not yet published *Berlin Alexanderplatz*.) (Borges 1986: 179)

Garnett was dispatching poorly wrapped books in his Soho bookshop when he published his first story, which is 'a total renovation of the fantastic genre', although we do not understand why. Borges limits himself to explaining to us what this story is *not*:

22. March 5, 1937: Unlike Voltaire and Swift, Garnett avoids all satirical intentions. He also eludes Edger Allan Poe's promotion of horror; H. G. Wells's rational justifications and hypotheses; Franz Kafka's and May Sinclair's contact with the peculiar climate of nightmares; the surrealists' disorder. Success followed almost immediately: Garnett dispatched countless copies on the counter. In 1924 he published: *A Man in the Zoo*. In 1925, *The Sailor's Return*. (His books are magical, but absolutely peaceful and, sometimes, cruel) (Borges 1986: 101-102)

It is absolutely impossible to find any causal logic linking the facts in Garnett's biography: family, education, clumsiness, book sales, commercial success and simultaneously the oddness and the poison of the toadstools, magic, the tranquility and cruelty of books that are like nothing we know. But the essence of the reflection on the genre lies in this very impossibility. As a good pedagogue, Borges never leaves his reader helpless. In one of the first thumbnail biographies, he clearly defined what their canonical value is. Virginia Woolf,

23. is the daughter of Mr. Leslie Stephen, compiler of biographies, books whose value resides in the quality of the prose and in the accuracy of the information, and which rarely attempt analysis and never invention. (Borges 1986: 38)

On the same page of the October 30, 1936 issue, a review asserts however that 'the selection of facts is in itself an art. "The biographer's art", Maurois has said, "is, above all, to forget"'. These two brief meta-textual reflections are the key to the Borgesian method. André Maurois's

book, *Aspects de la biographie* — cited by Group μ in 1994 — dates from 1930, and in 1936 it was the most recently published work on the subject. Borges is in perfect command of the poetics and rhetoric of the genre he employs. By impeding the causal narrative between the biographemes, Borges is denouncing the fallacy seemingly subscribed to by literary biographies that 'invent' a causality pointing to the Great Work as an explanation of the writer's identity. The Borgesian method, then, applies the norm much more strictly.

Once more, however, what Borges is suggesting goes further, and aims to question this rule by applying it to actual texts. Maurois does not analyze what the biographies should be, but what they are, and emphasizes that the very selection of the facts is an art: something intentional. Borges's insistence on the lack of direct causal importance of the selected facts points to a causality of another order, since he has *chosen* these, and not other, events. The facts can be selected not just in accordance with *one* causality, which stereotypes the genre. By selecting other events, it is possible to compile countless different biographies of the same person; the same writer can be interpreted differently according to each of his books, as in the case of Döblin. The same events can also be interrelated multiply and randomly, like the concepts of the thinking machine put forward by Raimundo Lulio in an essay of October 1937:¹⁰ Magic, Borges had said a few years before, 'is the crowning or nightmare of what is causal, not its contradiction' (Borges 1989/96: 1.231).

If we return now to the style and figures, we will discover with astonishment that the rhetorical veneer mysteriously forms part of the tactical reasoning. These texts contain not a single synecdoche, and we now understand why: nothing is more impossible for this reasoning than the figures that seek to reduce the whole to any one of its component parts. Once again, the writers and their works are described with enumerations (see above). There are also semantic figures that weaken the contradiction of the oxymoron: litotes, a great Borgesian specialty, irony, hypallage and, above all, antithesis.

For Borges there were no minor genres — he employed them all with the same rigor and interest — and he took his job as journalist-educator very seriously. It was no coincidence that he wrote in his own biographical note, which he prepared for publication in the *Enciclopedia Sudamericana* in Santiago, Chile in the year 2074, that periodicals were the *literary* genre of the period (Borges 1989/96: 3.505, my italics). Like Sarmiento and many Latin American thinkers, Borges was perfectly aware of the

importance of the press. By using the familiar — popular genres in the press — and in the space at his disposal, Borges sought to change his readers' way of thinking. Implicitly addressing the reader with *tú*, the familiar form, the strategy was to distance his readers from generalized irrationality, from the impersonal 'it is said', which Borges transmutes into 'they say', they, that is, who simply parrot opinions without troubling to scrutinize them in the harsh glare of reality. For this he developed a highly flexible combination of argumentation techniques for the five genres that he employed in his magazine section. Through deduction (didactic), Borges discovers the inapplicability of a norm to a particular case that requires a conjectural interpretation (detective-like hypothesis or abduction). As the cases multiply (the amplifying juxtaposition of anthology), he proceeds by induction, but the rule applied to elucidate these cases is now the first interpretive hypothesis. Each one of these cases is unique and unclassifiable and demands new hypotheses, which in turn gradually invalidate the first. Like science fiction novels, each text is a mystery that obeys its own laws. In brief, it is a question of demonstrating the absurdity and impracticability of generalizations.

Borges's thumbnail biographies without a doubt afforded the most direct attack upon the hegemonic values of the period, because they thwarted any attempt at univocal and definitive interpretation of the personality of a human being. In other terms, the aim was to stymie all attempts at reductive identification, the preferred mechanism of nationalist and fascist discourse. Using the popular aesthetic, Borges subverted the reader's way of thinking, and pointed to the unreliability of established norms and the need for critical reading. I suspect though, that Borges subtly convinces us of something much more valuable, which is that racial and national determinisms do not exist, that the passions they arouse are delusional, and, above all, that identity is something so ineffable and kaleidoscopic that it can never be used as a concept without running the risk of fundamentalism: it can only bear enumeration ... or metaphor.

Translation (including the quotations from Borges) by David Marsh

Notes

1. "The emphasis on imaginative literature came only at the end of the period, mainly as a result of Borges's development from poet and prolific essayist into the writer of short stories ("Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" was published in *Sur* 56, May 1939), and also as a result of the different emphasis that gradually appeared in the magazine with the arrival of José Bianco as jefe de redacción in August 1939' (King 1986: 58).

2. 'Pacifism was one form of intellectual and, by extension, social commitment. However anxiously writers tried to maintain the independence and purity of their position, they were being forced by the times into facing up to serious questions' (King 1986: 60).
3. The Argentine delegation was headed by Carlos Ibarguren, an eminent right-wing nationalist historian and fascist sympathizer, and by Victoria Ocampo. 'The PEN Club meeting was explosive. It included leading fascists like the former Futurist Filippo Marinetti and the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti; victims of German racist policies, like the Austrian Stefan Zweig and the German Emil Ludwig (who would later be published in *Sur*) and liberal French writers such as Maritain, Jules Romains and Benjamin Crémieux, who was of Jewish origin. Marinetti publicly attacked Ocampo and there were many confused and heated debates' (King 1986: 65).
4. In Borges's own words, 'small paying job' (Borges and di Giovanni 1970: 82).
5. Pragmatics is used to analyze the fictional strategy, thus allowing safe presentation of possible worlds that do not tally with the readers' ideas. The 'belief-building game' suspends disbelief during the game, and establishes agreement regarding a 'possible world' in which not only the rules of verification of the 'real world' apply (Adams 1985; Pavel 1996).
6. 'Frankly, we do not believe ... I dare to dissent mildly' (13 November 1936) (Borges 1986: 45); 'Perhaps ... perhaps ... perhaps — and this is the last solution that I offer the reader (25 December 1936) (Borges 1986: 64–65); 'I dare, however, to suggest ... I don't know if' (8 January 1937) (Borges 1986: 70–71); 'I suspect' (29 January 1937) (Borges 1986: 79); 'I dare suspect' (12 February 1937) (Borges 1986: 88); 'I suspect, however' (19 February 1937) (Borges 1986: 96); 'I usually ask and ask myself ... I don't think so' (19 March 1937) (Borges 1986: 106).
7. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca show that repetition is important in argumentation, but contributes nothing to demonstration and scientific reasoning: 'But most figures that rhetoricians classify under the names of figures of repetition ... appear to have a much more complex argumentative effect than that of heightening presence. In the form of repetition they aim above all at suggesting distinctions ... through repetition, the second wording of the term seems to change value' (1992: 236–237).
8. February 19, 1937: 'Is an H. L. Mencken conceivable in this country, an acclaimed specialist in the art of calumniating and vituperating the country? I think not. Patriotism, Argentinian pseudopatriotism, is a poor, terrified thing' (Borges 1986: 106–107).
9. A much more subversive affirmation is found in an essay on Unamuno: 'It is said that we should seek an author in his best works. One could reply (in a paradox that Unamuno would not have dismissed) that if we truly wish to know him, we would be best advised to consult the less felicitous ones, since the author is more present in them — in the unjustifiable, in the unpardonable — than in those other works that no one would hesitate to sign' (Borges 1986: 79–80).
10. 'It is a scheme or diagram of the attributes of God ... each of these nine letters is equidistant from the center and is joined to all the others by cords or by diagonals. The first means that all the attributes are inherent; the second, that they are joined to each other ... such that it is not heterodox to assert that glory is eternal, that eternity is glorious, that power is truthful, glorious, good, great, eternal ... etcetera. I want my readers to grasp fully the magnitude of this etcetera. It comprises, for the present, a number of combinations far beyond what this page can contain ... This motionless diagram ... is already a thought machine. It is natural that its inventor — a thirteenth-century man, let us not forget — fed it subject matter which now seems to us unrewarding. ... We (at heart no less ingenuous than Lulio) would load it differently' (Borges 1986: 175–176).

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Luz Rodríguez Carranza (b. 1951) is Chair of Latin-American Literature and Chairman of the Department of Latin-American Studies at the University of Leiden, the Netherlands <lrodriguez@let.leidenuniv.nl>. Her principal research interests include rhetoric and Latin-American literature and journals of the twentieth century. Her major publications include 'A comparative analysis of Caribbean magazines 1960–1980' (with Nadia Lie 1997), 'Postoccidentalismo, binarismos y análisis literario' (1999), 'Populism and cultural studies. The great narrative of the Latin-American difference' (2000), and 'Revistas literarias de los '60: propuestas de re-lectura' (in press).

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Editor-in-Chief/Rédacteur en Chef JEAN UMIKER-SEBEOK
<umikerse@indiana.edu>

Associate Editor/Rédactrice Adjointe BERNADINE DAWES
<semiot@indiana.edu>

Assisted by/Assisté de RACHEL KURTZ
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Address/Adresse Semiotics Publications
Indiana University
P.O. Box 10, Bloomington, IN 47402-0010
USA
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Special Issue

Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs

Guest Editor:

LISA BLOCK DE BEHAR

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