

the same title but which perhaps belong to different genres, or between variations in the title of the same text.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Borges and His Critics

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To appreciate the voluminous body of critical works dealing with Borges, it is useful to consider briefly his career and development as an author. A cursory examination of several related matters—his status as a Hispanic American writer, his generational position, and the diffusion of his work outside Argentina—is also in order.

Born in 1899, Borges made his literary debut in the decade of the 1920s with the publication of several slender volumes of poetry and essays. These works—*Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929), *Inquisiciones* (1925), *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1923), *El idioma de los Argentinos* (1928)—along with his activities in connection with a number of ephemeral reviews, assured him a solid reputation among his fellow Argentines. By the early 1930s, Borges's poetry had appeared in international anthologies; one Argentine journal, *Megáfono*, had dedicated an entire issue to him; and even a French critic, V. Larbaud, had noted his work in a general article on Spanish American writers. At this point in his career, he was, so far as Spanish American critics were concerned, one of many youngish, emerging, promising *rioplatense* writers of a generation that included the novelist Eduardo Mallea, the poets Leopoldo Marechal and González Lanuza, and the essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, among others. Only a few critics outside Argentina were aware of his work, and for those who did not read Spanish he was virtually unknown. In a word, he was simply another competent but not especially unique writer of a

peripheral continent: "un mero argentino" as he himself is wont to say.

It is difficult to appreciate the importance of the early international interest in Borges in the light of recent events—the award of Nobel prizes to Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez; the tremendous notoriety of other Spanish American writers, such as Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa, underscored by the broad recognition of the continent's literary importance as evidenced by the impressive volume of translations. By contrast, during most of its history Latin American literature has been viewed by the few sophisticated Europeans and North Americans who were aware of its existence as an interesting manifestation of a picturesque culture: a corpus of writing that either palely reflected Parisian literary fashion or the raw violence of a seething continent. Significant, skillful writers whose work was on the cutting edge of literary innovation, authors who were to shape trends and movements, were not to be found in Mexico, Peru, or Argentina. More often than not, foreigners read the Latin Americans simply for the documentary value of their work rather than for their excellence as creative artists. This same attitude, with certain modifications, was shared by many Latin Americans themselves. Sophisticates of "cosmopolite" leanings—and this would perhaps mean the majority of the intellectuals—voraciously consumed foreign literature while they treated homegrown letters with a curious attitude of respect and boredom: a kind of paying one's dues to cultural nationalism. To further complicate matters, the continued emphasis in Latin America upon a literature of political commitment or upon works directed toward the definition of national identity served to alienate Borges from a great many writers and critics, especially the younger generation. In short, when he emerged as a truly international literary figure shortly after World War II, neither foreign nor Argentine critics were quite prepared to deal with his work.

The events that mark the transition from his status as "un mero argentino" to that of perhaps the first Latin American writer of international stature are noteworthy. In 1938, following the death of his father, Borges took a minor post as a municipal librarian. This position helped bring out the bibliophile that

seems to have always been latent in his nature and probably helped accelerate his growing blindness. At about this time, Borges shifted his literary interest from the poem and the essay to prose fiction. Earlier, in his *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935), he had taken the first hesitant steps in this direction; but the highly imaginative, typically Borgesian fantasies for which he became famous did not begin to appear until 1939.

Alicia Jurado, a student of Borges's work and one of his personal friends, notes that Borges suffered a severe fall during Christmas of 1938. He struck his head in the accident and was subsequently hospitalized for several weeks; she points out that it was only after this traumatic event that he began to write such celebrated fantasies as "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Although Jurado hesitates to affirm a link between these events, she does consider them important enough to be mentioned. At any rate, during the following decade Borges did produce the bulk of his *ficciones*. Although he continued to write essays and poetry, it was the appearance of such startling collections as *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1942), *Ficciones* (1944), and *El aleph* (1949) that attracted worldwide attention to him. Translations of his work began to appear in the United States, and, with the return of a group of French exiles who had been in Buenos Aires during the war, Borges's fame spread across the Atlantic.

At home, Borges did not fare so well. His *Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* was nominated for the National Literary Prize in 1941, but to the chagrin of his supporters a much inferior writer won the award. Borges's friends reacted sharply: the influential literary magazine *Sur* devoted almost an entire issue to a "Vindication of Borges" (see item J22), while the following year Argentina's leading literary club, the S.A.D.E. (Sociedad Argentina de Escritores), established its own literary prize, which was awarded to Borges in 1944.

This prolific period in Borges's life coincides with a steady deterioration in Argentine morale. The economic depression of the early 1930s, followed by the specious boom of the 1940s, an ambivalent attitude toward World War II, and a steady drift away from political democracy mark the decade and a half that culminated in the dictatorship of Juan Perón. The political position of the intellectuals, especially of writers during this period of the

erosion of Argentine democracy, has not been fully studied. It is true that some of the leading literary people spoke out against the drift toward totalitarianism; others participated in a kind of mute protest, while a few were outright supporters of Perón and his program.<sup>1</sup>

Though essentially an apolitical person, Borges did take an unequivocal stand against the dictatorship. Early in 1946—just before the election of Perón—he signed a petition criticizing the military regime then in power. As a result, Perón relieved him of his post of municipal librarian and offered him a job as “Poultry Inspector for Fairs and Exhibitions.” His refusal of this insulting offer was celebrated at a dinner held in his honor at which he publicly delivered a stinging attack on the cruelties and stupidities of dictatorship. There is no doubt, then, that Borges opposed the tyranny; yet he remained in the country and continued to write. Perhaps the highly imaginative fantasies of these years were produced in response to the unpleasant realities of the times. Yet Borges seldom, if ever, injects overt political criticism into his work. Those who feel that writers are obliged to take an unequivocal stand on specific political, social, or economic issues and that they are then obliged to propagandize these views are usually disappointed with Borges. They do not realize that for Borges the times in which we live, troubled as they may be, are not unique. A similar problem is posed by Borges’s attitude toward Argentina—her destiny, her essence, her uniqueness. Many contemporary Argentine writers, as well as Latin Americans in general, have addressed themselves directly to this search for “essence,” be it *mexicanidad*, *peruanidad*, or *argentinidad*. Borges, by contrast, has not participated actively in this quest. There are good reasons for this apparent aloofness, just as there are valid reasons—at least in terms of Borges’s own philosophy and temperament—for his apolitical stance. These matters lead directly to some of the critical problems surrounding Borges and will be treated later.

With the fall of Perón in 1955, Borges’s fortunes rose. Official recognition of his merit came in the form of his being named director of the National Library and, in the following year, of his appointment as professor of English literature at the University of Buenos Aires. The literary production of the preceding five

years, highlighted by the publication in 1952 of the essay collection *Otras inquisiciones*, was crowned by his being awarded the National Prize for Literature for the year 1956. Though his prose of the 1940s and early 1950s has become, and will probably remain, the definitive corpus of work about which most of the significant criticism revolves, despite age and blindness Borges has continued to produce a steady stream of poetry, expository prose, and short narratives. Among the book-length collections of recent decades several merit special attention. *El hacedor* (1960) consists of poetry along with short emblematic parables in prose, such as the frequently anthologized piece “Borges y yo.” *El informe de Brodie* (1970) marks Borges’s return to narrative fiction, a genre that he seemed to have abandoned after his dazzling collections of the late 1940s. *El informe* is especially important, since its stories differ markedly from the highly libresque and often playfully brilliant pieces in *Ficciones* or *El aleph*: rather, these newer narratives are deceptively simple and unadorned, though a feeling of the uncanny still persists. *El libro de arena* (1975) is the most recent collection of prose fiction and one that continues the mood of *El informe de Brodie*. Borges’s latest poetry is represented by *El oro de los tigres* (1972) and *La rosa profunda* (1975); in addition, he frequently published individual poems in leading newspapers and magazines.

This brief summary of Borges’s major writings should give the reader some idea of his literary production, though only the highlights of his work have been noted here. No mention has been made of several early titles, of the works done in collaboration with his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares, nor of the many prefaces, introductions, and uncollected pieces that he has written. Another caveat concerns the many volumes of his work in Spanish as well as in translation that are not actually books but rather reprintings, collections, or anthologies of previously published material—the deceptively titled *Obras completas* of the Emecé house is a case in point.

Since the diffusion of Borges’s writings beyond the Hispanic world bears directly on the course of critical trends, some additional information on translations is in order. The first renderings into French and English were individual stories: Néstor Ibarra’s translations of “El acercamiento a Almotásim” (1939),

"La lotería en Babilonia," and "La biblioteca de Babel" in the Buenos Aires-based journal of French exiles *Lettres françaises* (1944); P. Verdevoye's translation of "Las ruinas circulares" in the Parisian journal *Confluences* (1946); and an English version of "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* (1948). A bit earlier, in 1947, Dudley Fitts had rendered a few poems into English for his *Anthology of Latin American Poetry*. These translations, however, were sporadic and elicited little critical work. By contrast, two important book-length collections appeared in France in the early 1950s: *Fictions* (1951) and *Labyrinthes* (1953). Borges was clearly launched on the continent: an Italian translation of *El aleph* appeared in 1954, while K.A. Horst's *Labyrinthe* gave Germans a chance to read *El aleph* and *Ficciones* in their own language. The early 1960s saw an impressive number of important English translations, notably Yates and Irby's *Labyrinths* (1962), Kerrigan's *Ficciones* (1962), Boyer and Moreland's *Dreamtigers* (1964), and Simm's *Other Inquisitions* (1965). Not surprisingly, these publications were accompanied by an ever-increasing volume of critical comment. They also paved the way for Borges to receive a number of honors and distinctions: such prestigious literary awards as the *Prix Formentor* (shared with Samuel Beckett, 1961); an invitation to speak at the University of Texas (1961–62); honorary degrees and lecture-ships from a host of other important institutions; special conferences, symposia, and issues of journals in his honor—in short, all of the trappings that literary fame can bring. By the late 1960s and 1970s, foreign translations of his work were appearing only a few years after the Spanish originals were published—another clear sign of international recognition.

### Early Criticism (1923–54)

As might be expected, the earliest comments on Borges deal with him primarily as a poet and are almost entirely Argentine in origin. Chiefly minor pieces—reviews of his poetry collections or brief notes—they praise him but seldom attempt any real analysis. However, by the early 1930s Borges was becoming important enough to receive more serious criticism; and in 1933 the magazine *Megáfono*, recognizing his growing stature, conducted a poll

of opinions on the rising young author (J23). Some fifteen contributors participated, including several men who are now counted among the most distinguished writers and critics of the Hispanic world: Amado Alonso, Eduardo Mallea, Ulises Petit de Murat, and Enrique Anderson Imbert. By this time Borges's essays had attracted almost as much attention as his poetry; and as a result the *Megáfono* writers begin to differentiate Borges the poet from Borges the prose writer. Anderson Imbert, for example, attacks Borges as a critic and essayist, though he admits that his verse is probably more praiseworthy. Leon Ostrov notes that the two activities—that of poet and critical essayist—are mutually self-destructive.

Borges's early reservations about writing fiction seem to have had some foundation. At least so it seemed when the jury charged with the task of selecting the winner of the National Literary Prize for the year 1941 rejected his first collection of stories, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*. A host of writers and critics, especially those of his own generation, rallied round their defeated comrade in the aforementioned remarkable show of solidarity. Their outrage found expression in the pages of *Sur*, at the time only a decade old but well on its way to becoming one of the Hispanic world's truly great literary magazines. Borges's close friend and collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares was as cutting as anyone in his assessment of the situation: "The commission . . . awarded the two first prizes to persons whom no one could confuse with writers." Eduardo Mallea, the rising novelist of the generation, was especially eloquent in his praise, comparing Borges's prose to that of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. Luis E. Soto emphasized Borges's essential *criollismo*, while the highly respected Dominican critic Pedro Henríquez Ureña underscored Borges's originality in what has become a famous statement: "There may be those who think that Borges is original because he proposes to be. I think quite the contrary: Borges would be original even when he might propose not to be." And Amado Alonso, in describing Borges's literary language, coined a phrase as memorable as it is virtually untranslatable: "un estilo tan estilo" ("a style so style"). Though all the contributors seem to agree that the award should have gone to him, several indicate that their support of Borges was not unqualified.

The reservations of several vociferous compatriots surfaced even more dramatically a few years later. When Borges published his second collection of prose pieces, his celebrated *Ficciones* (1944), Ernesto Sábato, a "committed" writer of Sartrean leanings and an author of some prestige, wrote a sharply critical review of the book in *Sur* (G98). The ideas expressed in this piece have since become classical statements of the anti-Borges position. Sábato first attacks Borges's overt use of literary sources for his fiction: he dismisses these as "underlying fossils." He then points out Borges's tendency to reshuffle the same limited number of ideas—a literary trait that was apparent even as early as 1945: "The influence that Borges has kept on having on Borges seems insuperable. Will he be condemned from now on to plagiarize himself?" Borges's lack of seriousness also irritates Sábato. Two points that he makes in this regard are probably true: that Borges's fantasies do not have the nightmarish involvement found in Kafka and that Borges's interest in theological matters is merely "a game of a nonbeliever." Sábato also attacks Borges's overall views on fiction: his fondness for the "geometrization" of narrative and his critique of the psychological novel. Yet, like a number of others who have reservations about Borges's prose, Sábato expresses considerable respect for his poetry, and thus he concludes his article with a rich statement that sums up the ambivalence in his attitude: "I see you, Borges, above all as a Great Poet. And afterward, thus: arbitrary, brilliant, tender, a watchmaker, great, triumphant, daring, timid, a failure, magnificent, unhappy, limited, infantile, and immortal."<sup>2</sup>

Though Sábato's views represent a position that has persisted till today, they could not prevail against the general acclaim that grew steadily from the mid-1940s through the mid-1950s. In addition to an ever-increasing stream of laudatory and penetrating critical pieces—for example, those of the Mexican X. Villaurrutia (1945: J59), R. Lida (1951: G16), R. Lida de Malkiel (1952: C63)—Borges, as noted earlier, could find consolation in having his *Ficciones* awarded the national "Prize of Honor" of the S.A.D.E. and in finally winning the National Prize for Literature for his collection of essays *Otras inquisiciones* (1952).

It is thus ironic that the first book-length study devoted to him should have been essentially negative. Adolfo Prieto, a

young Argentine critic, in his *Borges y la nueva generación* (1954: K14) spoke for a different generation with a radically different concept of the relationship between writers and the world. "Borges is a writer for the writers of his generation" is the *leitmotiv* running through Prieto's study. The younger men of letters, he claims, can't even "react against" Borges. One of the clearest statements of his opinion appears early in his book: "Detective fiction and fantasy suffer from the same defects . . . as the novel of chivalry and the pastoral novel. These defects spring basically from the complete gratuity of these genres, from their absolute forgetting of man, from their schematization of reality. . . ." Even as a writer of fantasy, Borges is found lacking. Prieto concentrates his attack on the story "El aleph," a tale well spiced with Borgean humor though one that might seem rather inept if taken with complete seriousness. As might be expected, Prieto does exactly this. He objects most of all to what he calls "the direct presentation" of the fantastic. He feels that Borges fails in not preparing the reader for the series of "ineffable" events that follow once the author descends into Carlos Argentino's basement. "Everything is possible in the world of fantasy, provided we are captured by it. . . . If our feet remain on the ground, the attempt fails. . . . The most difficult task . . . for the acutely imaginative artist is to transform the earthbound spectator into a fantastic spectator, to stamp his passport to a world different from our[s]. . . . The realm of the fantastic, viewed from the outside . . . is simply absurd." Prieto's objections, taken in the general sense, are justified. Their application to this story, however, is not—unless we, like the critic, assume a dead seriousness that the tale lacks. In reviewing the titles of the stories that Prieto chooses for praise or condemnation, one is struck by his omissions. His criteria for good fantasy might well have been applied, for example, to "Las ruinas circulares." Yet he does not discuss this magnificent story at all.

### Critical Acclaim (1955–69)

The mid-1950s was a crucial period for Borges and for the course of Borges criticism. With the fall of the Perón regime, mainstream literary activity could resume in the nation: one of

the indicators of the change was the appointment of Borges as Director of the National Library, a clear sign of national recognition. Several more balanced, more appreciative books on his work also appeared. Ríos Patrón's *Jorge Luis Borges* (1955; B24), Tamayo and Ruíz Díaz's *Borges, enigma y clave* (1955; E89), and Fernández Moreno's *Esquema de Borges* (1957; B12) are all works that explicate rather than propagandize.

In 1957, perhaps the first really scholarly exegesis of Borges's main themes appeared. Ana María Barrenechea's *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (B3) is the culmination of several years' work. The author, Argentine by nationality but educated in the United States, published the book in Mexico. The study, as its title suggests, is limited to the notion of "irreality," especially in Borges's prose fiction. The author states clearly in her conclusion that this is only one of many aspects of his writings, and to interpret him solely on the basis of his cultivation of "irreality" might lead to "a purely negative and false idea" of Borges's work. Barrenechea's fundamental attitude toward Borges is one of great admiration, though she does not attempt to write literary propaganda in his behalf. While this book gets close to some of the most basic concerns of Borges, it may err on the side of seriousness: for example, one finds in Barrenechea's work little appreciation for Borgesian irony and high humor. Note, for example, the following: "To undermine the reader's belief in the concreteness of life, Borges attacks those fundamental concepts on which the security of living itself is founded: the universe, personality, and time. The universe is converted into a meaningless chaos abandoned to chance or ruled by inhuman gods . . ." (p.16). Or, from Barrenechea's concluding statements, "Borges is an admirable writer pledged to destroy reality and convert Man into a shadow. The process of dissolution of concepts on which Man's belief in the concreteness of his life is founded . . . has been analyzed. Also viewed here have been the anguishing presence of the Infinite and the disintegration of the substantial . . ." (p.144). In historical perspective, however, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* is clearly one of the most significant studies to have appeared: doubly so, since Robert Lima's excellent translation of her book, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker* (1965), was instrumental in making Borges better known to readers of English.

It was in France, however, that Borges's literary stock had its earliest and most dramatic rise. Some mention has already been made of his contacts with the group of French exiles residing in Buenos Aires during the closing years of World War II. Through the efforts of this group, the French produced the first book-length translations of his work and these by a major publishing firm, Gallimard. Thus, by the late 1950s, a substantial portion of Borges's writings was available to French readers. The critical response that accompanied this activity was impressive. One study (I11) records some fifty items of French criticism dealing with Borges during the decade. Though it was not strictly speaking a French prize, the fact that the international Prix Formentor was awarded to him in 1961 certainly did much to establish his reputation among French readers.

The interest that French critics have shown in Borges, however, goes deeper than simple matters of recognition and applause. If one keeps in mind that the major critical trend of structuralism had come into flower in Paris of the 1950s, and that several leading figures of that movement were fascinated by Borges, one can appreciate the significance of the comments upon Borgesian texts by Genette, Sollers, Foucault, Ricardou, Todorov, and others. A number of these critical observations appeared in 1964 in a special number of the review *L'Herne* (O5), dedicated entirely to Borges; others in various essays published slightly earlier or later. It is not possible here to analyze the relationships among structuralism, post-structuralism, the French new novel, the Spanish American *nueva narrativa*, and the works of Borges; however, it seems safe to say that such links exist. Some investigators, E. Rodríguez Monegal (I12) and David W. Foster (E32), for example, have taken some preliminary steps in this direction, but much remains to be done. Indeed, one is tempted to propose that in the case of Borges—and perhaps even as a general phenomenon—a symbiotic relationship between creative writing and critical theory obtains. Stated more concretely, it may be that the creative work of Borges and many of the new novelists have influenced the structuralist movement as much as theoreticians of structuralism have shaped contemporary writing. Clearly, many basic features of Borgesian prose—the privileged status that he, perhaps inadvertently, assigns to *escritura*, his penchant for intertextual linkages, his use of the

embedded plot, the self-consciousness of his texts, and his skill in manipulating authorial voice fascinated and delighted the new French critics. Of special significance is the fact that Borges's work had now become associated with a very recent, highly sophisticated literary trend. The contrast between this view of him and that of some of the younger Argentine critics is noteworthy. It will be remembered that a few years earlier men like Sábato, Prieto, and the "parricides" considered him to be a kind of anachronism, completely out of touch with their own literary and political concerns.

Interest in Borges within the English-speaking world began early among specialists in Spanish American literature, but with the appearance of translations in the early 1960s a growing appreciation of him became evident beyond academia. For example, John Updike's essay in the *New Yorker* of October 30, 1965 (J58), is a milestone in the American understanding of the Argentine writer. Updike's long article is candid, sophisticated, and full of relevancy for the North American reader. He is especially sensitive to the problems posed by the "arrival" of a previously unknown foreign writer on the international, or in this case American, literary scene. What is most interesting is that Updike sees a real possibility that such a writer may have an important effect on our literature. "The question is, I think, whether or not Borges's lifework . . . can serve, in its gravely considered oddity, as any kind of clue to the way out of the dead-end narcissism and downright trashiness of present American fiction." Perhaps what appeals most to the reviewer is the fact that "Borges's narrative innovations spring from a clear sense of technical crisis. For all his modesty . . . he proposes some sort of essential revision in literature itself." Yet Updike concludes his introductory observations by remarking that Borges "seems to be the man for whom literature has no future," a casual statement that may well be an important clue to Borges's current vogue. Throughout his article, Updike hits the mark. He sees the essential differences between Borges and Kafka with great clarity; his interpretations of the Borgesian attitudes toward eroticism and "femaleness" are well taken; finally, his summation of Borges's thoughts on the novel is especially penetrating: "Certainly the traditional novel as a transparent imitation of human circumstances has 'a distracted or tired

air.' Ironic and blasphemous as Borges's hidden message may seem, the texture and method of his creations . . . answer to a deep need in contemporary literary art—the need to confess the fact of artifice."

A number of other articles, reviews, interviews, and reprints of Borges's work attest to his growing stature in North American literary circles during this period. John Ashbery's enthusiastic review of Borges's *Personal Anthology* in the *New York Times Book Review* (April 1967) is a case in point, while *Time* magazine's book editor joined the chorus of praise with a review that will, no doubt, further endear the publication to Latin American readers: "Argentina has no national literature, but it has produced a literary mind that is as mysterious and elusive as the fretted shadows on the moonlit grass" (March 24, 1967).

During the 1960s Borges's influence on other creative writers became especially evident. For example, Vladimir Nabokov's fondness for Borges's work may be exactly documented. Readers who are familiar with the Russian-American writer's *Pale Fire*—a novel built around the detailed literary discussion of a cyclical and imagined poem—may recognize in it an echo of Borgesian art. The North American novelist John Barth is another writer who has expressed a great attraction for Borges's fiction. Barth, however, has discussed this attraction in considerable detail. In a provocative article, "The Literature of Exhaustion," published in the summer of 1967, Barth sees the state of the arts clearly and is disturbed by what he sees (J8). Like Updike, he views contemporary art as having reached a dead end, or a point of no return. Pop art, "happenings," the "intermedia" arts, and the like have at their roots a "tendency to eliminate not only the traditional audience . . . but also the most traditional notion of the artist: the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect; in other words, one endowed with uncommon talent, who has moreover developed and disciplined that endowment into virtuosity." Barth's ideas on contemporaneity in art form the next basic step in his argument. It is essential, he feels, for a good literary work to be "technically up-to-date": "A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes

them considerably less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary: Joyce and Kafka, for instance, in their time, and in ours, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges." One of the hallmarks of our times, Barth goes on to say, is the fact that a sense of "ultimacies" pervades everything from theology to weaponry. Borges, he notes, is not only *aware* of esthetic ultimacies, but *uses* them in his literature. This notion is further underscored in Barth's discussion of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and again in his analysis of Borges's fascination for the *regressus in infinitum*—"an image of the exhaustion, or attempted exhaustion, of possibilities. . . ." For the "exhaustion of possibilities," like the "felt ultimacies" in contemporary life, leads toward an "intellectual dead-end." Barth relates Borges's ideas on the impossibility (or at least the difficulty) of "originality in literature" to the same theme, that is, to the "used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities."<sup>3</sup>

The late 1960s also witnessed the publication of several major books on Borges in the United States: Zunilda Gertel, writing in Spanish, analyzed Borges's poetry in her *Borges y su retorno a la poesía* (1967; D33); Ronald Christ, concentrating on the prose, published his *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Illusion* (1969; E19), while in the same year the University of Texas—the first North American University to host Borges—brought forth Carter Wheelock's provocative study of Borgesian symbolism, *The Myth-maker: A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges* (E93). Richard Burgin's *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (1969; L14), though not really a critical study, is significant in that it appeared under the imprint of a major publisher and that it illustrates the popularity of the interview format for dealing with Borges. Though perhaps not as interesting as the French with regard to critical theory, the North American work on Borges of the 1960s is substantial and runs the gamut of popularized reviews in the mass magazines to highly technical studies coming out of the universities.

In Argentina and other parts of the Spanish-speaking world during the period under examination—1955 to 1969—similar recognition is in evidence, although, as will be noted below, negative views of Borges's work and person persist. Several essentially sympathetic studies appearing in Argentina in the mid-1950s

have already been mentioned; these were followed by a number of other works, including Isaac Wolberg's *Jorge Luis Borges* (1961; M22) and Alicia Jurado's *Genio y figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (1964; B16). The first of these is little more than an essay in which the author takes great pains to demonstrate Borges's deep-rooted Argentinity. His enthusiasm is indicated by the fact that he predicts that Borges will eventually receive a Nobel Prize. Alicia Jurado's contribution is an unpretentious but extremely informative book on Borges the man as well as Borges the author: Jurado is a good friend who approaches his work with warmth and enthusiasm, but not with awe. As a result, her book, though certainly not a definitive study, is rich in insights. Jurado is well aware of Borges's sense of humor, she is sensitive to his essentially retiring personality, and, most important, she accepts him for what he is.

Considering the importance of Mexico as a literary center, the critical reception of Borges's work there merits special attention. It will be recalled that Barrenechea's book was first published in Mexico City. The same year (1959) Emma Susana Speratti Piñero's *Jorge Luis Borges* (D69) appeared under the imprint of the prestigious government agency the Instituto de Bellas Artes. A decade earlier—well before the period of international acclaim—Borges was discussed by Alfonso Reyes in his study of genre, *El deslinde* (entered in this bibliography in J50); by Ali Chumacero, who analyzed his poetry in the journal *Letras mexicanas* (J20); and by Xavier Villaurrutia, who wrote a favorable review of *Ficciones* in the important literary magazine *El hijo pródigo* (J59). In the 1960s, two substantial books on Borges came out in Mexico City: M. Blanco-González's *Jorge Luis Borges, anotaciones sobre el tiempo en su obra* (1963; H54) and G. Sucre's *Borges el poeta* (1967; D71).

### Recent Criticism (1970– )

The sheer volume of major critical studies, specialized scholarly essays, dissertations, special volumes, reviews, and informal observations on Borges's works that have appeared in the last ten to fifteen years makes it difficult to generalize regarding the present status of criticism. Further complications arise from the fact



that this stream of analysis and comment issues from widespread sources: Buenos Aires, New York, Paris, London, Madrid, not to mention more exotic places, such as Bucharest or Oslo, where Borges is not unknown. A few patterns seem to emerge from an examination of this material. For one, a kind of critical canon regarding his work has become established: stated simply, scholars and even many sophisticated general readers now have a fairly good idea of what the adjective "Borgean" means. His themes, his technical devices, his sources, his influences, and the unique texture of his writing have at least been identified and sorted out, though much remains to be said in most of these areas. Another generalization that seems valid concerns the overall assessment of his worth as a writer: while the bulk of critical opinion suggests that he is indeed one of the great figures of the century, some observers refrain from going quite this far—they find certain things missing in his work, which inhibits their unqualified praise. A strongly negative critical position also persists, as shall be noted in the final section of this study.

In the early years of the 1970s, several broad-scoped studies were published by authors intent upon making Borges better known among general readers. Often, these volumes were part of a university or commercial press "author" series: examples are Stabb (1970, Twayne World Authors; B26); Alazraki (1971, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers; E3); and Cohen (1974, Barnes and Noble "Modern Writers" series; B8). Another facet of the interest in Borges was the continued appearance of numerous interviews, dialogues, and "conversations" with him. While not really opening new critical perspectives, these have on occasion offered the student of Borges interesting personal tidbits or insights into his literary art. Typical of these publications are Burgin (1969, noted earlier), Sorrentino (1937; L67), Vázquez (1977; L74), and Gilbert's extensive chapter on Borges in her widely read volume *Seven Voices* (1973; L37).

In addition to these popular works, a number of provocative comparative studies have made important contributions to Borges scholarship of recent years. Questions of influences, affinities, and parallels are discussed in such studies as Stark's *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov and Barth* (1974; E86), Sosnowski's *Borges y la cabala* (1976; H103), Covizzi's *O insólito em*

*Guimarães Rosa e Borges* (1978; H100), as well as in a large number of doctoral dissertations dealing with possible relationships between Borges and a host of other writers (Beckett, Hawthorne, Poe, Cortázar, Sarduy, Pynchon, etc.).

Perhaps the most fascinating study of this type is J.D. Crossan's *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (1976; E25), since it illustrates just how far the matter of affinities and literary analogies may be pushed. A critical *tour de force*, Crossan's essay is based on the notion that there is a kind of parallelism in the iconoclasm of both Jesus and Borges. For the Argentine writer, the essence of this iconoclasm lies in his "comic subversion on one giant and central aspect of our literary heritage, the tradition of the Book. And especially on its most fascinating example, the Realistic Novel . . ." (p.77). For Jesus, a similar relationship exists with reference to the legalistic Judaic tradition, or what Crossan calls the Nazarene's deliberate comic subversion of "the wise and prudent necessity of . . . law." The ends toward which the two direct their iconoclasm or "comic subversion" are very different, being literary in one case and religious in the other. Crossan supports his argument by abundant examples from scripture and from Borges's writings; he captivates his reader by a free-wheeling, flamboyant, yet intellectual style and by rich citations from a host of other writers, among whom the voguish French structuralists figure prominently. In addition, he is obviously on familiar terms with Biblical scholarship (he is a professor of theology at DePauw) as well as with current works on Borges.

Yet, despite the well-wrought argument, the impressive scholarship, and the appropriately turned phrase, there is something strangely gratuitous about Crossan's essay. That both Jesus and Borges are iconoclasts and employ "comic subversion" may be true, but it is debatable that this formal relationship justifies their being considered in a single study. Although Crossan does not suggest that we view Borges as a great religious teacher or that we think of Jesus as a brilliant innovative *littérateur*, the juxtaposition of the names in the book's title could easily lead the casual observer to assume that such substantive similarities do exist. The true devotee of Borges will nonetheless find Crossan's volume fascinating and will not be deterred by the mere fact that

it may be gratuitous. After all, Borgean gamesmanship is infectious: and wasn't it Menard himself who wrote a technical study "proposing, discussing, and finally rejecting" the notion that the game of chess might be enriched by the elimination of the rook's pawn?

Another interesting facet of recent criticism is the increasing application of semiotic and structuralist perspectives to the study of Borges. In addition to many shorter technical pieces that derive from this tradition, two volumes merit individual attention: the British critic J. Sturrock's *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges* (1977; E88) and Sylvia Molloy's *Las letras de Borges* (1979; B19). The first of these focuses chiefly on the stories of *Ficciones* and *El aleph*—texts that in the author's view "set the student of Borges the most, and the right, questions." He also holds that a careful analysis of this corpus of work leads not only to an explication of a particular author but also to "larger questions in the so-called theory of Fiction." Sturrock's interest, throughout his well-wrought study, is extremely textual, extremely internal: while he is not an orthodox follower of a narrowly defined school, his debt to contemporary criticism, especially to Barthes et al., is clear. His remarks in the book's final chapter, "The Uses of Uselessness," touch upon a point that lies at the center of the continuing discussion of Borges's ultimate worth as a writer. Quoting Pierre Menard, Sturrock observes, "There is no intellectual exercise that is not, in the end, useless," (p.203). He then goes on to state that "there may be something very old-fashioned, and Art-for-Art's-Sake-ish, about a defense of literature which claims that literature is valuable precisely because it is useless . . ." (p.203). He also perceptively notes that a justification of literary activity on these grounds will probably seem "more challenging" to Argentine readers.

Like her British colleague, Molloy approaches Borges well provided with the instruments of contemporary criticism. And also like Sturrock, Molloy has her structuralism and semiotics well digested: her method indicates that she can use traditional criticism as well as the insights of a Barth, a Genette, or a Todorov—writers with whom she obviously has had a long-standing familiarity. It is difficult to generalize about a work so laden with penetrating observations as *Las letras de Borges*. How-

ever, one idea appears to dominate the study: Molloy holds that the formal aspects of Borges's texts—his syntax, his erasures and his *dissecta membra*, his enumerations and often bizarre taxonomies, in short, the total textual morphology—has a message, a significance that is more important than his more obvious "themes" or "content." Among the finest pages of her study are those in which she analyzes the way that Borges emphasizes and personalizes *el gesto*, her section on "the pleasures of interpolation" and the perspective discussion on intra- and intertextual references.

No survey of critical work on Borges would be complete without noting those studies that emphasize the biographical determinants and elements in his writings. In Borges's case, this matter is especially problematic, since on the one hand his life has been—at least outwardly—notoriously uneventful, and, on the other, contemporary critical fashion has in general tended to derogate this approach. Nonetheless, biography, kept in proper perspective, can be an important complement to more technical, intrinsic criticism: it was perhaps with this in mind that E. Rodríguez Monegal produced his lengthy, detailed, and often surprising volume, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (1978; M19). Several more modest attempts of this sort have already been noted—for example, Jurado (1964) and Vázquez (1977)—but these essays must be considered minor pieces when compared with the five hundred pages of Monegal's book.

Opinions vary as to how well the author has met the challenge of producing a "literary biography" of Borges. For John Sturrock writing in the *New York Times*, the book "has the virtues of a workmanlike chronicle, but none of the charms of mature biography." The same commentator accuses Monegal of doing a "terrible thing" in his "grubbing around" for the roots of Borges's fiction in the dull details of the writer's prosaic life. By contrast, V.S. Pritchett in the *New Yorker* considers Monegal's book to be "an absorbing, even exciting work of discreet detection, written with verve, often very moving."

These seemingly disparate assessments, however, do give a fair idea of what *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* is all about. Moreover, they underscore a basic problem inherent in the genre itself. Granted there is value in knowing that the rambling

old hotel at Adrogué and the dreary municipal library provided the physical settings for certain stories; that Borges's by-now-famous 1938 accident and hospitalization inspired "El Sur"; or that the "Maurice Abramowicz" who appears as an erudite commentator in a footnote to "Tres versiones de Judas" was in fact an old schoolmate from Geneva. Yet some may wonder why all this merits such painstaking attention. Don't all authors rely upon bits and pieces of their personal experiences, places they've been and people they've known to supply raw material for their fictional creations? However, it may be well to remind those who intone the credo of contemporary textual criticism that there is in fact some very real "reality" behind the printed pages of Borges's texts. Leaving aside literary biography's values or limitations, what can be said of this specific example of the genre? On balance, the work is a useful, intelligently presented compendium of what Monegal—and a number of other critics, friends, and interviewers—have been able to piece together of Borges's life and of how that life has entered into his works. Much of the material is already familiar to students of Argentina's most celebrated writer, but the author does add new information, clarifies details of what had been sketchy areas, and, when hard biographical data are lacking, offers some intriguing speculations.

### Against Borges

It is perhaps unfortunate to conclude the present study by examining the substantial body of criticism that is strongly negative toward Borges's work. Yet intelligently formulated criticism of this kind can often illuminate basic questions regarding a writer's literary tenets as well as issues dealing with the place of art in the broader context of society or politics. Of course, much of this negative criticism has not been intelligently formulated or objective: one suspects that a good deal of it derives either from gross misunderstanding of Borges or simply from envy.

The earliest manifestations of the negative view have already been noted. At first—as for example in the *Megáfono* discussion of his work—it consisted of polite critical assessments expressing preferences or rejection of various aspects of his work. However, by the mid-1940s and early 1950s, after Borges had published many of his major prose fictions, the tone of his detractors had

changed. Sábato was one of the earliest to lead this attack. A highly politicized younger generation of writers, demanding "commitment" of themselves and of their mentors, soon followed. The two works that best illustrate this phase of the negative criticism are Prieto's aforementioned *Borges y la nueva generación* and the chapter on Borges in E. Rodríguez Monegal's study of the period, *El juicio de los parricidas* (1956: K18).

What seems to underlie the views of those who took issue with Borges is in essence the familiar polemic between the defender of art-for-art's-sake and those who hold to the idea that writers must, in some manner, express political or at least philosophical commitment in their literary creations. Thus, even when he is attacked for his "geometrical" narratives, his "mathematical plots," or his stylistic quirks, it is often this issue that illicit the criticism. Sábato's comments—of 1963 in this case (J54), though they had changed little since his previously cited review of *Ficciones*—illustrate the problem well: "The so-called theology of Borges is the game of a nonbeliever and the subject matter of his effete literature. There is, in the depths of his being, a horror of flesh and blood life. . . . He takes refuge in his tower and there like a pure mathematician . . . he devotes himself to his Leibnitzian games. (With a clear conscience, without nostalgia, without sadness, without any sense of guilt or of frustration?)"<sup>4</sup> In short, Sábato, like many others, demands of Borges or any writer, dedication, faith, passion, or commitment to something beyond his literary creation. Other Argentine writers of the 1950s are a good deal less thoughtful in their deprecation of Borges. Attacking from various quarters—Peronism, traditional nationalism, or heterodox Marxism—critics like Jorge Abelardo Ramos in his *Crisis y resurrección de la literatura argentina* (1954; K15-K16) or J.J. Hernández Arregui in his *Imperialismo y cultura* (1957; entered in this bibliography in K7) hardly discuss literary matters but simply consider Borges an outcast because in their view he had not contributed to a "national" literature or because he symbolized the cosmopolite taste of a small circle of Buenos Aires intellectuals.

The bulk of the negative criticism of Borges has been and still is Argentine in origin. However, on relatively rare occasions, non-Argentine writers have expressed strong reservations regarding his work. Often their reactions stem from their rejection

of his moderate—some would say conservative—political views, or from the fact that his critics hold to an essentially different concept of the relationship between literature and reality. Or, as noted earlier, simply envy or misunderstanding may account for their attitude. One wonders, for example, which of these factors prompted the celebrated Spanish novelist Camilo José Cela to write the following in a 1953 magazine article (K3): "Jorge Luis Borges is a phantom, he is the great *bluff* of Argentine literature. At times an unsophisticated young lady may perhaps find his stories acceptable. Jorge Luis Borges is a hybrid product without any great interest" (p.2). Latin American politics of recent decades are unquestionably closely related to the trajectory of the negative criticism of Borges. For one thing, Havana, which by the early 1960s had become a literary center for the continent's Marxist intellectuals, provided a new locus from which Borges could be attacked. Not that the Cubans wrote a great deal about him; indeed, their tendency to ignore him while lauding other important Latin American writers seems to have been quite deliberate. Of this limited Cuban comment, the observations of Roberto Fernández Retamar, one of the top intellectuals in the Castro government, should be noted. Writing in his essay *Calibán: apuntes sobre la cultura de nuestra América* (1973), he echoes much Argentine criticism by attacking Borges for his European orientation and lack of sympathy for the lower classes. Such publications as the Castrista journal *Casa de las Américas* on occasion gave Borges's detractors a prestigious forum, of broad circulation, in which they could criticize him. Some of Sábato's comment on Borges appeared in the journal, as well as an especially perceptive critique by another Argentine writer, Noé Jitrik. His essay "Estructura y significado en *Ficciones* de Jorge Luis Borges" (G96) merits special attention since it represents one of the most intelligently conceived critiques to have been written. For one thing, Jitrik proceeds analytically from Borges's texts. Early in his essay, after discussing several key *ficciones*, he pinpoints a remark by the writer-protagonist of "El milagro secreto": "Hladik favored verse, because it prevents the audience from forgetting unreality, which is essential to art." Jitrik goes on to deduce that this indicates that Borges is affirming "a certain theory of art whose parameters might be unreality, fictional in-

vention and above all the distinction between what is explicit (the anecdote) and what is hidden within the structure of that which is explicit . . ." (p.141). Moreover, Jitrik holds, such hints as these in Borges's texts indicate a critical approach that most commentators have not really followed.

It would be impossible to trace the full development of Jitrik's argument in the present study. It is sufficient to note that toward the end of his essay he establishes a kind of dialectic between "action" and "thought" that he feels characterizes mainstream Argentine letters. Yet Borges and his ilk do not really conceive of "thought" as a stimulus to "action." Jitrik thus concludes his essay with the following observation:

Clearly this conflict should be explained throughout the course of Argentine literature in order to relate Borges to it. It is sufficient to say at this point that Borges demonstrates it in all its splendor and in its true form: he is, above all else, an Argentine intellectual for whom the frozen universality of thought can perfectly stifle the transforming function of thought. (p.162)

As noted earlier, not all of the negative criticism of Borges is as intelligent as the example just cited. Indeed, some of it consists of sheer personal vituperation or simply questionable, idiosyncratic comment. A relatively obscure pamphlet like Alfredo Arfini's *Borges: pobre ciego balbuciente* (1968; K2) is an example of the former, while Blas Matomoro's heavy-handed Freudian put-down, *Jorge Luis Borges o el juego trascendente* (1971; K11), might typify the latter. Finally, various aspects of the anti-Borges position have been studied and organized in a helpful anthology of negative criticism, Juan Fló's *Contra Borges* (1978; O4). Although this volume could hardly include everything written on the subject, Professor Fló's balanced assessment of the negative position more than compensates for any omissions: in short, the book is to be recommended as a most convenient source of material on Borges's detractors.

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Any essay on the critical reception of an author who has inspired as many comments, articles, dissertations, essays, and books as has Borges will necessarily be incomplete. Moreover, the fact that Borges is still alive and writing, that his work circu-

lates in half a dozen major languages, that he is widely studied in universities, and that he continues to be discussed at symposia and colloquia means that the last word on him has yet to be uttered. The decade of the 1980s has clearly not seen any diminution of interest in him. New books, such as G. Bell-Villada's unpretentious, balanced study, *Borges and His Fiction: A Guide to His Mind and Art* (1981; E11), or Thorpe Running's essay on Borges's relationship to the Ultraists, *Borges' Ultraist Movement and Its Poets* (1981; D64) have appeared; even as the present study goes to press, new articles and probably new books are surely being produced. While there is a danger that—as in the past—some of this new material will simply rework areas that have already been thoroughly investigated, the fact remains that Borges's writings are capable of generating a fresh and vigorous stream of comment. Certainly this is a measure of his texts' richness, if not of their author's greatness.

### Notes

1. See my "Argentine Letters and Peronato: An Overview," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* 13, 3-4 (1971), 434-455.
2. My translation.
3. A substantial portion of the foregoing material appeared in slightly different form in my *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), 21-23, 137-146.
4. My translation.
5. My translation.

## JOURNAL ABBREVIATIONS

Cities in Argentina are listed as places of publication without designation "Argentina," with the exception of San Juan, in order to distinguish it from San Juan, Puerto Rico.

- ABC* American book collector. Arlington Heights, Ill., 1950- .  
*Abside* México, D.F., 1937- .  
*ACF* Annali della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere di Ca' Foscari, Venezia, 1961?- .  
*Actual* Mérida, Venezuela, 1968- .  
*AF* Anuario de filología. Maracaibo, 1962- .  
*Affinités* Buenos Aires, 1951- .  
*AION-SR* Annali, Istituto Universitario, Napoli. Sezione Romana. Napoli, 1959- .  
*Akzente* Köln, 1954- .  
*Alcor* Asunción, 1955- .  
*ALHisp* Anales de literatura hispanoamericana. Madrid, 1972- .  
*ALitC* Acta literaria. Concepción, Chile, 1975-? .  
*Amaru* Lima, 1967-71.  
*Américas* Washington, D.C., 1949- .  
*Antigr* Antigonish review. Antigonish, N.S., Canada, 1970- .  
*AR* Antioch review. Yellow Springs, O., 1941- .  
*Arbor* Madrid, 1941- .  
*Asomante* San Juan, P.R., 1945-72.  
*Atenea* Santiago de Chile, 1924-? .  
*Atlantic* Atlantic monthly. Boston, 1857- .  
*AUC* Anales de la Universidad de Chile. Santiago de Chile, 1843- .  
*Ausonia* Siena, 1946- .  
*AyL* Armas y letras. Monterrey, México, 1944- .  
*BA* Books abroad. Norman, Okla., 1927-76. Continued as *WLT*, q.v.  
*BAAL* Boletín de la Academia Argentina de Letras. Buenos Aires, 1933- .  
*BADAL* Bibliografía argentina de artes y letras. Buenos Aires, 1959-? .