

# Borges, Cynewulf, Beowulf: Old English Poetry in Borges's Unpublished Notebooks

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Jorge Luis Borges's longstanding interest in medieval literature is well-established and a number of recent works have delved into this subject. Among the most important can be mentioned M. J. Toswell's *Borges the Unacknowledged Medievalist* (2014), Vladimir Brljak's "Borges in the North" (2011) and a recent special number of the *Old English Newsletter* bearing the title "A Pandemonium of Medieval Borges" (2021). Several articles and book chapters focus more specifically on Borges's engagement with Old English literature, among which can be mentioned Galván Reula, Hadis, Gamarro, Smith and Gomes Gargamala. Most of this research has, however, not made use of Borges's unpublished notebooks, although this is completely understandable given that many were unavailable until fairly recently.<sup>1</sup> In the following article I will present some of the materials from these

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1 On the acquisition in 2019 of the Donald Yates Collection, consisting of over twenty Borges manuscript sets, by the Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections Library at Michigan State University, see Balderston ("Editor's Note") and Esplin (127).

notebooks which take as their focus what Borges called at different times the “literatura de la Inglaterra germánica” (“literature of Germanic England”) or the “literatura de la Inglaterra sajona” (“literature of Saxon England”).<sup>2</sup> Borges’s notes give much more space to poetry from the period, thus the analysis here will do likewise. Beyond merely presenting a sample of relevant materials, it is also my aim to show how these previously unstudied materials contribute to our understanding of Borges’s interest in Old English and thus, moreover, serve as a resource for future research.

## LECTURE NOTES ON *ANTIGUAS LITERATURAS GERMÁNICAS*

In my contribution to *Variaciones Borges* 52 I discussed the contents of a red Avon notebook (MS 678-03) which forms part of the Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections Repository at Michigan State University. This notebook, written around 1950, has been described by Emron Esplin as “the largest Borges notebook in this collection and probably the largest in the world” (132). In it, the first 23 pages (of 66) cover “literatura germánica” and are connected to a series of lectures given in Buenos Aires in 1950 as well as providing the backbone of *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, a Spanish-language introduction to medieval Germanic literature, which was published a year later in 1951 in collaboration with Delia Ingenieros. The material of the first 23 pages is divided up into eight sections and my previous article focused on sections 4-8, those which deal principally with Old Norse material. Here I will look more closely at the first three sections—provided with numbered and underlined headings—which deal with Old English material. They cover:

1. Descubrimiento de los textos [Discovery of the Texts, ff. 1-3]
2. El sueño de Caedmon [Cædmon’s Dream, ff. 4-5]
3. Beda, historiador de milagros [Bede, Historian of Miracles, ff. 6-9]

The first of these sections, while starting with some general observations, could more fittingly be called “*Beowulf*,” since more than two thirds of the notes are concerned with the epic poem bearing that name. The second

<sup>2</sup> These designations are taken from, respectively, *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* and *Literaturas germánicas medievales*.

section, that on Caedmon, also covers the background of the conversion in the British Isles and discusses the poet Cynewulf and the “balada guerrera” (“warrior ballad”) generally known as “The Battle of Brunanburh.” The third section, that on Bede, also includes notes on the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the post-Norman Conquest poet Layamon. It is reasonable to conclude that the section headings were picked for the sake of the appearance of structure, but that they did not accurately reflect the content. Borges simply needed to find boxes within which to place the varied topics which he was interested in discussing, even if they were only loosely connected to the specific section headings.

In my article on the Old Norse material, I pointed out that “the notebook is [...] useful inasmuch as bibliographical references are more systematically included there as compared to the rather sparse referencing in the main text of *ALG*” (37). Likewise, Balderston has observed that “one of the most notable features of Borges’s manuscripts, particularly those of his essays and lectures, is the profusion of bibliographical references in the left margin” (*How Borges Wrote* 21). Both statements hold true in relation to the Old English material in MS 678-03, which is accompanied by over 120 clear page references to a selection of works. This profusion stands in contrast to the section on “La literatura de la Inglaterra germánica” from *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* where we find only about ten references to scholars across forty pages. Two of those ten references mention the work in question, and one provides the year of publication,<sup>3</sup> but the remaining eight simply give an author’s surname and none of them provide a page reference. The bibliography at the end of *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* does, it must be admitted, help out, mentioning four volumes from Everyman’s Library (*Anglo-Saxon Poetry* edited by R. K. Gordon, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *Layamon’s Brut*) as well as three works of secondary literature (W. P. Ker’s *English Literature, Medieval*, Stopford A. Brooke’s *English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest* and Frederick John Snell’s *The Age of Alfred, 664-1154*). Nevertheless, for anybody trying to understand how Borges’s reading informed his lecturing and writing, the thorough referencing in the notebook presents a more complete picture and thus also represents a significant aid.

3 These are references to “Lethbridge (*Merlin’s Island*, 1948)” on p. 14 and to W. P. Ker’s *Epic and Romance* on p. 22.

The references provided in the notebooks are of various kinds. Some point to scholarly sources on Old English literature and culture, including primary texts. Joshua Byron Smith's comments, made without the help of the notebooks, that amongst Borges's sources "older works outnumber more recent ones, and eccentric choices make their way into his discussions" (313) is further verified by this group of references in the notebook. To give an example, the work which Borges most often refers to (around twenty times) on these pages is John Earle's *The Deeds of Beowulf* which was first published in 1892 (i. e. 60 years before the notebook was written).<sup>4</sup> References are also made to entries from encyclopedic general reference works: unsurprisingly for anyone familiar with Borges's preferred sources, there are around ten references to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.<sup>5</sup> A third group of references draw attention to literary examples from other periods and places where Borges saw a connection with something in the Old English corpus: Livy, Dante, Robert Louis Stevenson and Shelley all pop up. And finally, there is the odd reference to Borges's own previous works—"Kenningar" and "Los Anales"—on those occasions where Borges has decided to reuse texts which he had previously published.<sup>6</sup>

At this point a more focused analysis can be enlightening, thus the section on Cynewulf from *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* will serve as a useful example for understanding how the notebooks contribute to our understanding of Borges's sources. To provide some background, Cynewulf is one of few named authors who produced poetry in Old English. We know his name thanks to runic signatures inserted into his works, which are otherwise written in the Roman alphabet, the contrast of scripts making the runes leap from the page. The runic letters appear non-consecutively

4 In joint second place with around fifteen references each are Stopford A. Brooke's *English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest* (1930) and Frederick John Snell's *The Age of Alfred, 664-1154* (1912).

5 Another two quotes are accompanied by "D. e. h.-a." in the left margin. This slightly cryptic reference is to the *Diccionario enciclopédico hispano-americano de literatura, ciencias y artes*. Borges made use of its article on "Beda" (Bede).

6 "Los Anales" is a reference to *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*, a periodical where Borges first included some vignettes which would later form part of *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (Lavender 43-46).

albeit usually in the correct order in colophons appended to the narratives.<sup>7</sup> When extracted they spell out the name of the presumed author. Each rune also stands for a word, thus when the runes are expanded sense can also be made of the passages as a whole. Cynewulf, either as an individual or a school, is nowadays usually believed to have been active in the ninth century and four long poems by him, all on Christian subject matter, are extant: *Juliana*, *Elene*, *Christ II*, and *The Fates of the Apostles*.<sup>8</sup>

Borges's section on "El poeta Cynewulf" appears on pp. 36-39 of *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*. The five paragraphs include three discussing Cynewulf's method of using a runic signature—the example provided taken from the colophon to *Juliana*—and briefly summarizing the speculation about his identity. The last two paragraphs discuss two poems, *The Dream of the Rood* ("El sueño de la cruz") and *Christ* ("Cristo"): the first shows Christ as a hero mounting the cross, the second alludes to him as a literal King of the Jews, and describes the various "leaps" which he made (e. g. from heaven to the womb of the Virgin Mary), an interpretation developed out of a line of poetry from the Song of Songs.<sup>9</sup> Three initial points are worth commenting on. Firstly, that Borges is much more interested in discussing Cynewulf's runic signature than discussing the contents of his poetry. Secondly, that part of the discussion is based on an evaluation of authorship which is no longer subscribed to: *The Dream of the Rood* does not contain Cynewulf's runic signature and modern scholars do not see it as the work of Cynewulf. Thirdly, the two texts which are commented on in slightly more detail both include a heroic appraisal of traditional Christian matter.

Another point worth making is that there is not a single reference to Borges's sources provided in this section. We may guess at them using the aforementioned bibliography at the end of *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*,

7 In *The Fates of the Apostles*, however, the runes are jumbled up, appearing as FLUWCYN, i.e. CYN(E)WULF.

8 The medieval codex known as the Exeter Book contains a lengthy body of material on Christ which used to be treated as a single work authored by Cynewulf, hence Borges mentions "el extenso poema *Cristo* de Cynewulf" (*Antiguas* 38). Nowadays it is more common to see this as three separate poems, called *Christ I*, *Christ II* and *Christ III*, with only the second one being attributed to Cynewulf.

9 The source is Song of Solomon 2:8: "The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills" (Authorized King James Version).

but under normal circumstances it would require a certain amount of leg-work to check through all the sources and identify which, if any, Borges was relying upon. The red Avon notebook (MS 678-03) makes our job, however, much easier. There, alongside the text concerning Cynewulf on f. 5r, we find a total of fifteen references. Two are to other authors who have embedded their names into their works: Dante (in *Purgatory*) and the Victorian poet Robert Browning (in “A Light Woman”). Another two references are to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: one the article on “Runes, Runic Language and Inscriptions” and the other that on “Dumfriesshire,” which is made use of because it mentions the Ruthwell Cross, a local monument which bears a runic inscription corresponding to a section of *The Dream of the Rood*.<sup>10</sup> The remaining references are to Snell (seven in total), author of *The Age of Alfred*, and Brooke (four), author of *English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest*.

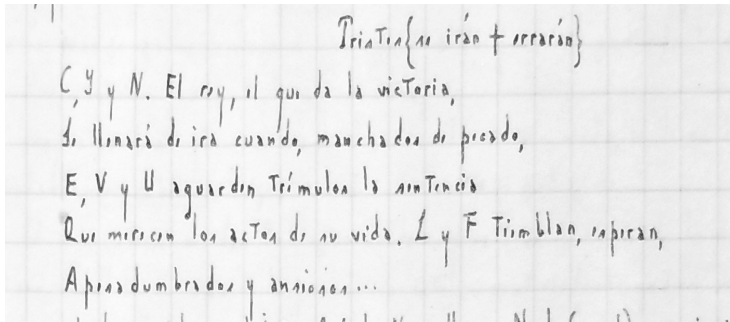


FIG. 1. Borges's translation of Cynewulf's runic signature (f. 5r of MS 678-03), based on the text found in Snell's *The Age of Alfred*.

Snell's *The Age of Alfred* is thus Borges's main source here, a reasonable choice when one considers that the second chapter of the second part (“Religious Poetry”) of that work is dedicated entirely to “Cynewulf and His School.”<sup>11</sup> Snell provides 34 pages of discussion covering a number

10 Interestingly, in the notebook Borges includes a parenthesis after the word Ruthwell to note “pr. Rivvel.” This note on pronunciation is taken from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry but does not make it into *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*. It is perhaps present in the notebook as an aid to Borges in an oral context.

11 It is worth pointing out that Borges could, however, just as easily have relied more heavily on Brooke, who has two chapters dedicated to Cynewulf (chapter XI, “The Signed

of Cynewulf's works (including several which are no longer believed to be by Cynewulf). The main points made by Borges can all be traced to this chapter: the quote from *Juliana* which provides an example of Cynewulf's runic signature appears on pp. 141-42. On p. 143 Snell comments that "it has been supposed that Cynewulf began life as a professional *scop*" while on the following page it is said that he reveals "a degree of education that could hardly have been acquired elsewhere than in a monastery," and also that his poems give "plain evidence of a spiritual metamorphosis, or what is termed conversion." These last three comments come together in Borges's statement that "se ha conjeturado que [Cynewulf] fue un cantor profesional, un *scop*, que, después de años tormentosos, ingresó en la vida monástica. En efecto, sus poemas dejan suponer una conversión" (*Literaturas* 37).

While the notebook allows us to trace the source of Borges's comments, it also permits us to see where Borges has been selective and where he has been eclectic. In terms of being selective, it is most accurate to describe Borges's approach as omitting the vast majority of information from his sources and merely selecting a few choice statements. He has nothing to say on Cynewulf's female-centered compositions, *Elene* and *Juliana*, with the exception of the wordplay of the latter's colophon. Brief notes on heroic reformulations of religious imagery are where Borges's interest lies. As regards Borges's eclecticism, the parsing of the runic signature in the colophon to *Juliana* is a case in point. As already mentioned, he clearly copied the passage from Snell—the notebook explicitly states that pp. 141-42 are his source—but the way he parses the runes afterwards deviates from Snell's analysis. Snell discusses "Ǡ or L being fully pronounced 'lagu' and ƿ or F 'feoh'" (141) and then explains that "'lagu' ('lake') means water; 'feoh' ('fee') means property" (142). Thus, we can read the final line of the colophon, "L. F. shall quake", as something like "both waters and possessions shall quake," a prediction concerning dissolution at the end of times. Borges, however, choses to parse other runes from the signature and not those which Snell focused on. He explains how N stands for "nead" ("hardship"), U stands for "ur" ("our") and C stands for "cene" ("brave"). This information is taken not from Snell but from Brooke (168), so Borges is synthesizing. It is uncertain why, but perhaps "water" and "property"

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Poems of Cynewulf," and chapter XII, "Poems attributed to Cynewulf or his School").

were too prosaic, and Borges preferred parsing the runes with a more existential import. In any case, even with Borges's parsing, the passage remains remarkably cryptic. Tom Birkett, discussing the runic signature in *Juliana* has commented that it is "the most appreciably riddlic of the four [Cynewulf] colophons, and there is still some debate as to exactly what the runes signify within the passage" (787). Perhaps this also appealed to Borges: an enigma which even his scholarly sources on Old English poetry were unable satisfactorily to penetrate.

### ADDITIONAL NOTES ON CYNEWULF

We may imagine that with Borges's brief entry on Cynewulf in *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* that he was done with the topic and the questions posed by this medieval author. Yet elsewhere in Borges's unpublished notebooks we find evidence of a continued interest. The notebook in question is a brown Mérito notebook, which, like the already discussed red Avon notebook, forms part of the Stephen O. Murray and Keelung Hong Special Collections Repository at Michigan State University, with the shelf mark MS 678-05. Of the 42 leaves of the notebook, 13 are blank while 29 contain notes of some kind or other, including texts in both Borges's hand and that of his mother, Leonor Acevedo. They seem to have been written in the period 1950-1953.<sup>12</sup>

"Cynewulf" appears as a title on f. 40r of the notebook and is confirmed as a discrete entry in the notebook due to its inclusion as the final item on a list of the contents found on the inside back cover. What appears below this title on the front and reverse of f. 40, all in Leonor Acevedo's hand, is not a draft text, but merely a series of quotes and references. We could perhaps imagine this as one of the initial stages of Borges working through an idea, gathering together various allusions from his broad reading which would allow him to start writing a publishable note or extended observation.

The first notes on the page read as follows: "It can hardly be disputed that Cynewulf's reputation with critics has gained ~~with~~<sup>by</sup> the pleasure of discovery. It is not uncommon in these days to hear him compared to William Cowper or Dante..." followed on the next line by the fragmentary

12 For more information on the notebook see Balderston, "El fin" 150-51.



“when the author concerned is so hypothetical a person.” Alongside this latter clause appear both a name, “Emile Legouis,” and a page reference in the margin, “pag. 44,” which help us with locating the source of both statements. Legouis was a French scholar and author of the first section of the bipartite *A History of English Literature*, namely the section on “The Middle Ages and the Renaissance (650-1660).”<sup>13</sup> Legouis included as part of his discussion of “Anglo-Saxon Literature” a subsection on “Cynewulf: ‘Christ’ and the Lives of Saints” (41-46). The first quote which Borges includes is actually from p. 42 with the second from p. 44. If nothing else, Borges’s inclusion of these comments shows us that he had continued to delve into a variety of sources and new perspectives on Old English poetry—moving beyond those of Snell and Brooke—after having published *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*.

Legouis would also have presented Borges with a starkly contrasting viewpoint to the assessments that he had read in the works by Snell and Brooke concerning Cynewulf’s oeuvre. Legouis lambasts the uncritical way in which scholars had pieced together a biography of Cynewulf from hints in a selection of poems and historical sources, for example the oversimplification involved in the assumption that “the accuracy of some of his battle-scenes and seascapes showed that he had fought on land and sailed the seas” (41). Legouis also critiques the poems themselves, calling out their obscurity and suggesting that this characteristic is the result of “the radical weakness of a befogged intelligence” (42). Taken in this context, the quote which Borges has chosen to have copied out is highly ironic: the comparison with Cowper and Dante is seen by Legouis as completely unjustified.<sup>14</sup> Borges seems, however, not to be concerned so much with the critique as with the questions of authorship that underlie the reception of Cynewulf’s work. We may remember that Borges himself in MS 678-03 compares Dante and Cynewulf, both having inserted their names into their own works. Judgements about authorship are more or less

13 The work was first published as *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1924), but Borges is obviously quoting from the English translation, made by Helen Douglas Irvine, and first appearing in 1926-27. The author of the second section, “Modern Times (1660-1959),” was Louis Cazamian.

14 It is also a dig at Stopford A. Brooke, who quoted a section of *Christ II* and commented that the cited text was “a passage as personal in its pathetic religion as anything in Cowper” (168).

irrelevant, argues Legouis, when the author of a work is “so hypothetical a person,” but for Borges it is the construction of an author—a fiction of who *Cynewulf* was—carried out in the spirit of “the pleasure of discovery” which has added new layers of appreciation to his works (even if such appreciation is erected upon the weakest of foundations).

All these considerations seem like a natural extension of Borges’s emphasis within the section on *Cynewulf* found within *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*. Borges’s list of authors who have written themselves into their own works—Virgil, Dante, Ronsard, Cervantes, Whitman, Browning—and the identification of *Cynewulf*’s cryptographic signatures as examples of such interpolation taken to the next degree can also lead to ruminations on the mechanisms by which such authorial-intrusion works. On a basic level one might imagine that they enable us to proceed with a biographically-oriented form of literary analysis. On a deeper level they may lead to considerations of to what extent authors themselves are fictions, created by their own works, a conceit which chimes with much of Borges’s work.

The four quotes that follow those taken from Legouis seem to confirm that Borges’s thinking was tending in this direction. The first is from Guillaume Apollinaire’s poem, “Merveille de la guerre,” from his collection of concrete poetry, “Caligrammes” (1918) (“Maravilla de la Guerra” in the Spanish translation): “Yo lego al porvenir la historia de Guillermo Apollinaire que estuvo en la guerra y supo estar en todas partes” (“I bequeath to the future the story of Guillaume Apollinaire who was in the war and knew how to be everywhere”). This is another example of a poet, like Browning in “A Light Woman,” inserting his name into his own work. This is followed by a quote from Lucan: “Stat magni nominis umbra” (“[he] stands in the shadow of a great name”). This is taken from Book I of the *Pharsalia* or *Bellum Civile* in which the statesman Pompey the Great is said to be living in the shadow of a great name after having turned from military feats to a political life. This is not an example of an author inserting his name into his work—Lucan is not referring to himself, but rather to one of the principal historical figures of his narrative—but it is an example of how a myth surrounding a name can come to supersede the reality of the person

bearing that name.<sup>15</sup> The next quote, in German, is from a work entitled *Diesseits und Jenseits II*, presumably that by Max Brod (published 1947).<sup>16</sup> It alludes to Plato's *Phaedo*, or "Fedón, o de la inmortalidad" ("Phaedo, or concerning the immortality [of the soul]") as has been written in the top margin of f. 40v. A quote within the quote translates the words of Phaedo in response to Echecrates's question about who was present at Socrates's suicide, explaining that "Platon, aber, glaube ich, war krank" ("Plato, I think, was ill"). Regarding this, Brod observes that the comment has always appealed to him because it is "die einzige [...] an der innerhalb seines ganzen Riesenwerks der Autor, unscheinbar genug, sich nennt" ("the only [place] within the entirety of the author's monumental production [in which] the author, in an inconspicuous way, names himself").<sup>17</sup> Thus once again an author inserting their own name into one of their works. The final quote is from *Don Quixote* and follows the same pattern: "Muchos años ha que es grande amigo mío ese Cervantes" ("This Cervantes has been a friend of mine for many years").<sup>18</sup> Taken together, these four quotes show that Borges was interested in aligning Cynewulf's method with that of a number of different authors who had inserted their names in their own works.

As well as the quotations already mentioned, names of individual writers appear, as if left hanging, waiting for further comment which never came. "Goethe" and "Juan Andrada" appear on the recto side and a list of three names appear on the verso: "Muhammadji, Whitman, Apollinaire." Apollinaire has already been discussed above in relation to the quote from his poem while Goethe and Whitman are greats of world literature who need no introduction in general nor as part of Borges's reading and

15 There is also a play on words here because Pompey's cognomen is "Magnus," i.e. "the Great." The name is thus "great" from a subjectively qualitative perspective and "Great" from an objectively lexical perspective.

16 A page number is given in the margin: "p. 90." The full title of the second volume of Brod's work is *Von der Unsterblichkeit der Seele, der Gerechtigkeit Gottes und einer neuen Politik*. Borges referred to the same quote in a talk entitled "La inmortalidad," later published in *Borges oral* (31).

17 Several errors in the copying of this quote seem to suggest that Leonor Acevedo struggled with the German.

18 The quote continues in the notebook for another three lines and is taken from Chapter 6 of *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*.

interests.<sup>19</sup> The remaining names, “Muhammadji” and “Juan Andrada,” are more obscure. A “Muhamadji” (with one medial “m”) is mentioned by Borges in a “biografía sintética” of a “H. R. Lenormand,” a French playwright, included in the magazine *El Hogar* in 1937 (*Textos cautivos* 190). There we are told that Lenormand’s father contributed to producing the *Anthologie de l’amour asiatique* in which one of the most desolate and urgent of love songs is to be found, “Las trenzas negras” (“The Black Tresses”) by the Afghan poet Muhamadji. If one looks up “Les tresses noires” (its original French title) in the named anthology, one finds that Muhammadji (with two medial “m”s; said to have lived c. 1850-1890) is indeed the author and, moreover, includes his name in his own poem (Thalasso 47).

Juan Andrada can also be traced down thanks to an earlier reference by Borges in a periodical. In this case it is in the “Museo” section of the May 1946 number of *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*. The “Museo” section is a miscellany of short excerpts from various international sources and there we find a copla (approx. “popular song,” “troubador’s ditty”) by one Juan Andrada:

Cuando el día se levanta,  
 Cuando relumbra la aurora,  
 Ya no es Andrada el que canta,  
 Es un infeliz que llora. (Borges and Bioy Casares 51)

[When the day takes to its wings  
 and with rays of light dawns,  
 it is not Andrada who sings  
 but a sad man who mourns.]<sup>20</sup>

Thus, once again we have a poet who speaks his own name in one of his works. I have been unable to locate more information on this Juan Andrada. Vladimir Brljak, discussing the “Museo” sections has pointed out that “some of the extracts have been tampered with, while others [...] seem to be invented altogether” (“Borges Against the Vikings”) and Fabiana

19 Borges’s ideas about Whitman’s use of his own name in his poems can be found in the transcriptions of his lecture notes (Arias and Hadis 43). There Borges also mentions the Persian poet Hafiz as having done likewise.

20 The translation here is my own and not closely literal. Rather I have attempted to retain the rhyme scheme which is so important for coplas.

Sabsay-Herrera has pointed out that they “convocan, junto a autores y libros famosos, a autores ignotos e incluso apócrifos” (“gather, alongside famous authors and works, unknown and even apocryphal authors”; 114). Juan Andrada seems to be somewhere in-between, an authentic work but misattributed. As Sabsay-Herrera also points out, the copla attributed to Juan Andrada would actually seem to be by “Benegas, payador de Bolívar (provincia de Buenos Aires)” (“Benegas, wandering minstrel from Bolívar (province of Buenos Aires)”; 114), thus ultimately Borges’s understanding of it as a work in which an author gives their own name would be undermined.

This string of examples of authors who embed their names into their works is, all things considered, fairly straightforward, but questions remain. Why, for example, did Borges pick Cynewulf to head up this list, making him stand out above the other examples? Cynewulf is not the oldest, that credit being granted to Plato. But while we have information on Plato from other sources, our knowledge of Cynewulf rests almost solely on his signatures and colophons. Cynewulf’s signatures stand out, moreover, for their being more intricate and involved than average authorial name-dropping. It is perhaps for this reason that Borges, in his lectures, made a connection between what he deemed to be Cynewulf’s cryptography and the birth of the detective novel, “a genre typical of the English language” (Arias and Hadis 43).

In the same lecture, held in 1966, Borges also hops from the subject of the runic signature to runes more generally and “a Swedish scholar who said that the Greeks had copied the runic letters from the Germanic peoples for their alphabet” (Arias and Hadis 44). The link between runes and the mysteries of cultural transmission had, however, featured elsewhere in Borges’s notebooks over a decade earlier, providing us with the identity of the Swedish scholar, as will be discussed in the final section.

### NOTES ON BEOWULF

If the “Cynewulf” entry in the brown Mérito notebook gives us a glimpse into the germ of one of Borges’s ideas which never reached fruition, yet another notebook reveals ideas which came closer to completion—although not the whole way—and which also built upon Borges’s interest in Old English poetry. The notebook in question is once again a red Avon

notebook, albeit this time one which is kept at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.<sup>21</sup> This notebook is almost entirely in Leonor Acevedo's hand and the inside back cover provides a list of contents which reveals two items of interest for the present article: "Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*" (the first item of six) and "Las runas y *Beowulf*" (the third of six). While Cynewulf is generally unknown to those who are not scholars or students of Old English, *Beowulf* has a much wider renown. Nevertheless, neither of these short pieces made it into print during Borges's lifetime. The first of these items was, however, recently edited and translated by Joe Stadolnik, while an edition and translation of the latter is currently in preparation by the present author.

The notes about Cynewulf discussed above show one example of how Borges, to use M. J. Toswell's words, takes a medieval text and "uses it profoundly for his thinking about literature and its role in society" (*The Unacknowledged Medievalist* 6), in that case the interconnectivity of literary works and the fictions about their authors embedded in them.<sup>22</sup> Carlos Gamerro, discussing "Borges y los Anglosajones," has remarked that "Borges se interesa sobre todo por las composiciones realistas de las antiguas literaturas germánicas, lo cual lo lleva a preferir el modelo de las sagas islandesas por encima de poemas como *Beowulf* o *El cantar de los Nibelungos*" ("Borges is principally interested in realist compositions from the ancient Germanic literatures, which leads him to prefer the model of the Icelandic sagas to poems like *Beowulf* or *Das Nibelungenlied*"; 30).<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the two pieces in the later red Avon notebook show that Borges was not immune to the charm and mystery of *Beowulf* and that he could likewise draw upon it as a thought object leading to wider realizations.

The first essay, "Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*," is around 1300 words long and appears on ff. 1r-11v of the notebook in question. It describes the trials

21 Catherine E. Wall (157-58) discusses the five Borges notebooks kept at the Harry Ransom Center. The notebook now under discussion is called by her "the later red Avon notebook" and dated 1955-1960. I believe that it was probably written closer to 1955.

22 The first "it" in Toswell's quote refers to Old English and Old Norse in general.

23 Toswell commented on these texts in a way which highlights their similarities, stating that Borges's "encounter with Argentina and the brutal world of its frontiers reflect the Old Norse sagas and to some extent *Beowulf* and other Old English poems" (18-19).

and tribulations of Grímur Thorkelin, the Icelander turned Dane who produced the first edition of *Beowulf*. This topic had already been mentioned in *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (18-19) and we know from the marginal notes in MS 678-03 that Borges drew principally on John Earle's *The Deeds of Beowulf* (1892, x-xii) as a source on this background story concerning how the poem was brought to light. In the notebook under the heading "Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*," however, this anecdote is permitted to stand alone as an example of "pasión literaria" ("literary passion"; 464), albeit one which is ultimately a "malhadada pasión" ("ill-fated passion"; 466). The crux of the story is simply that Thorkelin spent years working on the first edition and translation of *Beowulf*, but that shortly after publication this work was figuratively torn to shreds by critics, who rightly recognized that the scholarship was deeply flawed and riddled with errors.

Borges's essay, however, ends with some observations which had not appeared in *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* and which link literary passion with the immortality of the soul. Borges ponders what might have occurred after Thorkelin's death: did he meet the author of *Beowulf* in a Christian heaven, did he meet the Platonic ideal of the poem *Beowulf* in a pagan afterworld or was he reborn, an almost clean slate, but with enough of his former life intact to feel a vague unease when coincidentally confronted with the name of the poem once again? This final option, imagined as taking place "en una librería de Buenos Aires" ("in a bookshop in Buenos Aires"; 466), points to Borges being the one feeling the unease. He thus imagines himself as Thorkelin reborn, just as in other places he imagines himself as an Anglo-Saxon reborn: "¿Por qué no pudo haber hablado mi alma, su voz pregunta en esa grabación, 'en un cuerpo anterior al siglo décimo, aquel idioma que luego se convertirá en el inglés?'" ("Why could my soul not have spoken,' his voice asks in this recording, 'in a body predating the tenth century, that language which would later become English?'" ; Vázquez 218). We can extrapolate and suppose that the failure of an editor or a translator, of multiple editors or translators, takes on a different sheen if the editor or translator is just another reborn facet of the original author.<sup>24</sup>

24 See the poem "Composición escrita en un ejemplar de la gesta de Beowulf" and Joshua Byron Smith (306-08) for more on Borges's ideas of immortality and rebirth as related to Old English.

The second *Beowulf*-themed essay in the notebook, “Las runas y *Beowulf*,” is a little shorter, at around 1100 words, and is found on ff. 13r-15v and 21r-22v (with another text appearing on the intervening pages). It goes in a different direction from that taken by the essay on Thorkelin, albeit one which also has echoes throughout Borges’s work. It starts by introducing runes, which as we have already seen piqued Borges’s curiosity when writing about Cynewulf. Various examples of rune-inscribed items are given, before a comparison is made with *Beowulf*. Runes are said to be ultimately derived from the alphabet found on Phoenician coins brought by traders to the Baltic while *Beowulf* is said to contain Virgilian influence in the scene of Grendel’s mere (the swamp from which the monstrous antagonist of the poem hails).<sup>25</sup> Thus both parts of the comparison—examples of ancient Germanic culture—are said to reveal connections to the wider classical world and more broadly to lay bare “el vasto universo como una red inextricable y vertiginosa de efectos y causas” (“the vast universe as an inextricable and vertiginous network of effects and causes”).

A couple of additional points deserve to be made about this as-yet unpublished essay. Firstly, in his earliest discussions of Cynewulf’s runic signature, Borges had given a list of the types of objects upon which runes were inscribed: “en un cuchillo, en una corona, en un cuerno, en una pulsera” (“on a knife, on a crown, on a horn, on a bracelet”). The marginal note in the red Avon notebook (MS 678-03) allows us to see where that list was sourced, namely Edmund Gosse’s *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on “Runes, Runic Language and Inscriptions.” Each of the items in the list can be identified with a specific object mentioned in Gosse’s article. The crown is the “diadem of Straarur,” the horn is “the Golden Horn, discovered at Gellehus,” the bracelet is one “dug up at Charnoy, in Burgundy” and the knife is one “found in the Thames in 1857, and now in the British Museum.” Gosse does not give the name of this knife, but it is generally known as the

25 Borges’s interest in the Virgilian influence upon *Beowulf* is apparent in various of his writings, but seems to have become more pronounced over time. Building upon the text in *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, he added an entirely new paragraph in *Literaturas germánicas medievales* in which he explains that “el influjo de la *Eneida* es notorio en la famosa descripción de la ciénaga de Grendel” (“the influence of the *Aeneid* in the famous description of Grendel’s mere is notorious”; 25). In “El soborno” (*El libro de arena*), moreover, one of the protagonists calls *Beowulf* “pseudovirgiliano” (141).



Seax of Beagnoth,<sup>26</sup> and it takes on an almost talismanic significance for Borges. It is the first runic item mentioned in the essay and serves as the prototypical runic object in the comparison with *Beowulf*.

The Seax of Beagnoth's importance as a thought-object for Borges can be perceived in its later permutations in Borges's work. The poem "Fragmento," for example, appeared first in the collection *El otro, el mismo* (1961; here quoted from *Obra poética* 244-45), thus only a few years after the later red Avon notebook was written. In it the words "una espada" ("a sword") are repeated like an incantation and on one occasion the weapon is specified to be "una espada con runas" ("a sword with runes").<sup>27</sup> Teodosio Fernández, discussing the application of Germanic-style kennings in Borges's work, commented that: "Tampoco en los poemas es fácil detectar esa huella, salvo en los que buscan inspiración en las antiguas literaturas germánicas. Basado en la gesta de Beowulf, el rey que mata al dragón y muere emponzoñado por su veneno, 'Fragmento' resulta quizá, en este aspecto el más significativo" ("Nor is it easy to detect this trace in the poems, except for those which seek their inspiration in the ancient Germanic literatures. Based on the *Deeds of Beowulf*, the king who kills a dragon and dies poisoned by its venom, 'Fragmento' end up being, in this respect, the most significant"; 90). "Fragmento" had also been mentioned by Galván Reula who declared it that of Borges's poems which "recoge con mayor fidelidad [...] el espíritu y la forma de la poesía escrita en inglés antiguo" ("with most faithfulness distills the spirit and the form of poetry written in Old English"; 143).

"La runas y *Beowulf*" permits us to see that the inspiration for "Fragmento" is not just *Beowulf*, as Fernández seems to think, but also the actual runic short sword pulled up out of the mud of Thames. Moreover, when Galván Reula affirms that, thanks to the runes inscribed upon it, "la espada cantada por el poeta sirve así de vínculo entre el continente y la isla, entre la cultura primitiva compartida por el resto de las tribus germánicas, el desarrollo ulterior de estos pueblos en Gran Bretaña" ("the sword which the poet sings about thus serves as a link between the continent and the

26 Images of and information about this "seax" can be found at [https://www.british-museum.org/collection/object/H\\_1857-0623-1](https://www.british-museum.org/collection/object/H_1857-0623-1).

27 A "seax" is technically a type of short sword or dagger, but it is unlikely that this distinction was seen as categorical by Borges.

island, between the primitive culture shared by the rest of the Germanic tribes, the subsequent development of these peoples in Great Britain"; 146), we can now qualify this reading. While a rune-inscribed sword does perhaps speak of pan-Germanic relations across the North Sea, for Borges it also spoke of the connections between the classical civilizations of the south and the migration-age ones of northern Europe. The sword is a conduit in more than one way, and "Las runas y Borges" helps us understand new layers within "Fragmento."

As well as the runic knife, Borges mentions Odin's sacrifice for the knowledge of the runes and the epitaphs found on runestones spread around the world in the far-flung locations which the Vikings reached. These are familiar topics for Borges, turning up in other places.<sup>28</sup> One runic avenue which Borges turns down here, however, is not so familiar from his other works, and takes us to seventeenth-century Uppsala and the aforementioned Swedish scholar. Uppsala (or "Upsala") had turned up before and would turn up again in works by Borges. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the first story of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1941), contains many hints at Borges's interest in medieval Germanic literatures, albeit leaning more towards Old Norse poetry than Old English.<sup>29</sup> As Margrét Jónsdóttir pointed out "allí podemos trazar un subtexto islandés" ("we can trace an Icelandic subtext there"; 134). The subtext can be seen not only in the outer form of a number of words mentioned—"Hlaer", "Jangr" and "hrönir" which have the outer trappings of Old Norse lexical items even if they are not actual words—but also in the way in which the languages of Tlön seem to be inspired by kennings albeit with their methods of periphrasis stretched and modified to new levels. Yet one more of the minor details which gives a Scandinavian flavor to this story is the fact that while searching for "Uqbar" in the *Anglo-American Cyclopedia* nothing can be found between "Upsala" at the end of one volume and "Ural-Altai Languages" at the start of the next (that is until Bioy Casares locates his exemplar of the cyclopedia with the additional pages containing the entry on "Uqbar"). It is presumably coincidental—as much as any random

28 On the Viking epitaphs, originally sourced by Borges from Bertha Philpotts's *Edda and Saga*, and turning up in *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* before *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*, see Brljak ("Borges Against the Vikings").

29 The story had already appeared in the May 1940 issue of *Sur*.

detail in discussion of Borges's oeuvre can be considered coincidental—but Uppsala is also the supposed site of a major pagan temple in Ancient Scandinavia, as described in the eleventh-century *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (“Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg”) of Adam of Bremen. This temple came to play a significant role in another story by Borges many years later, namely “Undr” in *El libro de arena* (1975), since it is in proximity to it that the conversation between the narrator (Adán or Adam of Bremen) and Ulf Sigurdarson takes place.

Borges's mention of Uppsala in “Las runas y Beowulf,” written approximately midway between “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and “Undr,” follows on from the mention of how Jordanes, a sixth-century Gothic historian, called Scandinavia the factory of nations and how “estas palabras fueron leídas en Upsala por el enciclopédico Olof Rudbeck” (“these words were read in Uppsala by the encyclopedic Olof Rudbeck”). There follows a quoted passage on the subject taken from Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (one of Borges's favorite works which made it into his Biblioteca Personal). Gibbon, in criticizing the antiquarians of the seventeenth century, had mentioned Olof Rudbeck (1630-1702), author of the four-volume work *Atlantica*, which claimed that ancient Sweden was identical with Plato's Atlantis. Gibbon was disdainful of Rudbeck's many theories, among which were the ideas that all Greek and Roman classical culture had its roots in the north, with runes being the progenitors of the Greek and Latin alphabets. Borges repeats the description of Rudbeck's theories, although most likely not to lambast them as Gibbon did. Rather, it would seem, for Borges, who was fascinated by flawed Scandinavian scholars, from Snorri Sturluson to Grímur Thorkelin, the idea of yet another scholar, doomed to ignominy for his lifetime's work on arcane runes and shadowy interpretations of classical texts, would have been deeply appealing.

While the discussion of the runic knife and Uppsala have taken us away from Old English poetry, they serve to remind us that Borges's interest in Old English was not isolated from his interest in other medieval Germanic languages or literatures (or other languages and literatures more generally, for that matter). Nevertheless, returning to the core focus of this article in summary, the three notebooks looked at here deepen our understanding of Borges's work relating to Old English poetry and culture carried out in

the 1950s and beyond. They help us better understand the sources of his published work—in particular *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*—and thus also of his reading in general. They also include unpublished materials in different stages of completion, from the florilegium appearing under the heading “Cynewulf” to the two short essays on *Beowulf*. Finally, these unpublished materials provide further clues to the inspiration behind his literary output, including poems such as “Fragmento” and short stories such as “Undr.”

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**Appendix:** Notes on Cynewulf from MS 678-03 (p. 5)

Virgilio, Dante, Ronsard, Cervantes, Whitman, Browning, los persas, han intercalado su nombre en sus composiciones; Cynewulf, poeta sajón cuya fecha probable es el siglo VIII, empleó ese artificio literario, de un modo casi criptográfico o de ficción policial. Intercaló runas (letras escandinavas que perduran en un cuchillo, en una corona, en un cuerno, en una pulsera, en piedras sepulcrales y que se leen de derecha a izquierda, como el hebreo o el árabe) en su Leyenda de Santa Julia. El texto, así, forma una suerte de acróstico:

Triste {se irán + errarán}

C, Y y N. El rey, el que da la victoria,  
Se llenará de ira cuando, manchados de pecado,  
E, V y U aguarden trémulos la sentencia  
Que merecen los actos de su vida. L y F tiemblan, esperan,  
Apesadumbrados y ansiosos...

El nombre de cada runa es el de una idea u objeto. Así la N se llama Nyð (need) que significa necesidad, padecimiento; la U se llama Ur (our) que significa nuestra; la C, Cene (keen) que significa valiente. Cynewulf, en otros poemas, introduce runas para significar esas palabras y deletrea de ese modo su nombre.

A Cynewulf ha sido atribuido, aunque no lleva su firma, el Sueño de la Cruz (Dream of the Rood), grabado en versos rúnicos en la cruz de Ruthwell

(pr. Rivvel) en Escocia. El poeta sueña con la cruz, la ve recubierta de joyas y luego manchado de sangre y luego recubierta de ~~sangre~~<sup>joyas</sup>. Luego “el mejor de los leños” habla y cuenta su historia, como hablará la puerta del infierno en el canto tercero:

Per me si va nella città dolente...

La cruz comparte la pasión del Señor; le clavan los clavos, la injurian. Cristo, en el Sueño de la Cruz, es el [• joven Héroe]

En este poema el sentimiento es cristiano; en otros, el mecanismo *épico* (las imágenes de las armas, de los muertos, de las aves de presa) es empleado en una materia que lo rechaza, o que difícilmente lo admite. Ocurre lo que Snell llama “a strong infusion of martial metaphor”; en un poema sobre el Exodo de Israel y la destrucción de los egipcios en el Mar Rojo, los israelitas son vikingos. En el poema Crist, la inscripción irónica Rex Judaeorum es tomada literalmente: Cristo es un rey (cyning, König, King), los apóstoles, su escolta de guerreros.

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