

RETASKING BORGES: TECHNOLOGY AND THE DESIRE FOR A BORGESIAN PRESENT

J. Andrew Brown

The books that are the focus of this review have the curious distinction of being mentioned in a *New York Times* article published in January of 2008. Noam Cohen, a staff writer for the *Times* who specializes in issues of technology and digital culture argues that many of Borges's stories anticipate developments in digital culture. He introduces his argument invoking recent developments in certain areas of Borges criticism with the bold: "Yet a growing number of contemporary commentators — whether literature professors or cultural critics like Umberto Eco — have concluded that Borges uniquely, bizarrely, prefigured the World Wide Web" (Cohen). He proceeds through a series of examples that includes a comparison between Tlön's project and Wikipedia, Funes and the ways in which blogs and YouTube act as unimaginably complete archives of reality, and Babel's *biblioteca* and the internet itself. Cohen uses *Borges 2.0: From Text to Virtual Worlds* by Perla Sassón-Henry and the at that time anticipated publication of *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges* as the two examples of "literature professors" that serve as support for his attempt to construct Borges as a kind of digital seer, one whose writings and speculations clearly anticipated internet life in the 21st century. In this essay, I will begin with reviews of each book and then turn to a discussion of the interest and project that unites them.

Borges 2.0 is a short book, 124 pages including index and bibliography consisting of a prologue and nine chapters (the ninth is an epilogue of a single page). In these brief chapters, Sassón-Henry focuses her analysis on

“La biblioteca de Babel” and “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” looping back in various chapters to cover different aspects of the relationships she sees between the two stories and hyperfiction, hypertextual environments and the World Wide Web. She interlaces this analysis with discussions of Deleuze and Guattari’s work on the rhizome, Umberto Eco’s writing on digital culture and the theoretical and critical work of Katherine Hayles and Stuart Moulthrop among various other critics.

232

J. Andrew Brown

The book makes for an intriguing introduction to much of the current thinking on the Argentine writer’s relationship to hypertext and gives a serviceable review of hypertext theory. Its extreme brevity, with chapters seldom longer than 15 pages, results in an unfortunate lack of development in some cases. In many of the arguments, the apparent kinship between Tsui Pen’s garden and hypertext, with the forking paths of narrative that hyperlinks promise seems all the argument needed to claim: “These stylistic similarities with hypertext as well as the innovative thematic of his work make Borges a forerunner of the new technologies and invite his readership to interact with texts from an ever-evolving perspective that takes in to account historically relevant scientific and technological developments” (20). This creates an intriguing vision of the role of the Borges critic, to be sure, but one that promises at the very least an inexhaustible series of textual engagements as each new technology will suggest new ways to read Borges’s work.

By focusing on these similarities between Borges’s texts and new technologies, Sassón-Henry participates in a tradition of writing on Borges and his relationship with science and technology in which connections are “discovered” repeatedly, especially when it concerns “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” and I think a similar phenomenon occurs when one reads the story with hypertext as a lens. In fact, *Borges 2.0* participates in a tradition of writing about Borges that extends at least as far back as 1991 in an article written by Ned Davison in *Hispania*. A number of critics have worked on this subject, notably Ema Lapidot in a series of articles written during the 1990s. One of the oddities of *Borges 2.0* is its rather patchy bibliography concerning work already undertaken on Borges and hypertext especially. None of the several articles from the 1990s are mentioned, with most of the Borges criticism included being limited either to more general

work on the Argentine author or work done by critics who are hypertext theorists first and foremost and not Borges experts.

One of the strengths of the book is the inclusion of chapters that study how artists working in hypermedia have interpreted Borges, a kind of reading Borges over the shoulders of others who are reading Borges. Sassón-Henry's discussion of Stuart Moulthrop's "Reagan Library" and Natalie Bookchin's *The Intruder* suggests fertile ground for the study of Borges in contemporary art and culture. In both cases, though, Sassón-Henry sketches out formal and thematic similarities and then moves to the next chapter, leaving the reader desiring more development and a deeper understanding of the cultural and artistic dynamics in operation behind the similarities.

Ultimately, the book is more of a affirmation of the sense that hypermedia is Borgesian than a compelling argument for why we should read it as such. A more intriguing question for this reviewer is why the perceived need exists to identify something as "Borgesian" in the first place. What is it about our readings of Borges and our readings of contemporary digital culture that compels so many to remake Borges as a hypertextual fore-runner? How does this help our readings of contemporary culture and to what extent do we live in a world that Borges made (to paraphrase an essay written by Jonathan Lethem)? Much larger questions, certainly, and beyond the scope of this review. Let us turn now to the intriguingly-titled *Cy-Borges*.

Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges is a collection of essays edited by Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus published by Bucknell University Press in 2009. Herbrechter and Callus gather a group of distinguished critics who, in general, specialize in issues of literature, technology and culture especially as it relates to the posthuman. Herbrechter and Callus have collaborated earlier on anthologies devoted to literary theory and continue to work on posthuman theory in a broad cultural context. In addition to the introduction, there are essays by Floyd Merrell, Neil Badmington, David Ciccioricco, Gordon Calleja, Ruben Borg, Jonathan Boulter, Martin S. Watson, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Paula Rabinowitz and Ivan Callus. The essay topics range from several that explore proposed relationships between Borges's work and technology to Borges and memory, to issues of the posthuman and even Borges and Joyce.

The preface suggests the book almost as a title in search of a text. It begins with: “Cy-Borges: This compound word seems almost destined. Perhaps it was waiting to be coined” (7). The concept is persuasive and hangs a lantern on the paradoxical nature of the book’s theme: why we should study the paradoxical idea that Borges helps us remember the posthuman, an idea that does not emerge until well after Borges wrote. The crux of the argument, that extends from the preface to the introduction, is that Borges himself requires such a reading. That is, due to the writers and theorists who have followed Borges and have read him, we are well-served by studying the process by which Borges served as precursor, not only to writers like Philip K. Dick and William Gibson or theorists like Katherine Hayles, but also to ideas of the posthuman that are (and were) so important to them. Herbrecther and Callus are quite right to invoke “Kafka y sus precursores” in their development of this idea, following Borges by suggesting that many of the qualities latent in a writer’s work only begin to be once others have written. In that very Borgesian sense, Borges was not posthuman until the posthuman arrived, but now that it has, Borges is now clearly a precursor to the posthuman condition.

It is an attractive argument and the essays that follow contribute, mostly, to an even stronger argument by virtue of their consistently high quality. I would single out for praise David Ciccioricco’s article, one of the best on technoscience and Borges that I have encountered. In it, Ciccioricco lucidly assesses the tendency in hypertext criticism to frame Borges as prophet of hypertext, a sort of history of ideas genealogy that locates an origin point on Borges. While Ciccioricco correctly identifies Borges as having been an important inspiration to these critics and artists, he also problematizes the relationship showing how Borges’s work challenged many of the assumptions of hypertext and digital media as often as it prefigured those assumptions. Sadly, he does not engage Sassón-Henry’s book, though one assumes that *Cy-Borges* was already in press when *Borges 2.0* appeared. What Ciccioricco does is provide an excellent way for assessing the contribution of *Cy-Borges* in general as he helps articulate a critical position by which we can explore exactly the relationship between Borges and the posthuman.

The other articles are also successful to varying extents and make the book essential reading for those interested in Borges and technosci-

ence as well as those interested generally in posthuman theory. The main criticism of the book would be its incomplete engagement with Borges criticism, especially Borges criticism that comes from the field of Hispanic Studies. Most of the articles do take into consideration many of the more visible English language works, and I commend them generally for the attempt to situate the work within those traditions. Still, the paucity of references to Spanish language criticism of Borges is troubling, a lack perhaps due to the fact that only one of the contributors is a professor of Spanish (and whose article does not suffer from this issue). While I would never argue that only critics who read Spanish have something important to say about Borges (or any other Latin American writer), I am concerned that these language barriers create works that can only ever offer incomplete interpretations of Borges and his work. In the case of a book like *Cy-Borges*, where the subject depends necessarily on the readings that subsequent theorists and critics have made of Borges, this lack is unfortunate.

This lack brings me to a less important criticism, though one that could again be leveled at various texts of recent Borges criticism. In an “Editors’ note” the editors indicate that they have not tried to harmonize references to primary texts, that each essay uses different translation and editions of Borges’s works and that many times the “Spanish original is not always invoked” (11). The justification given is that the variations between editions are not always superficial and that Borges, with his own suspicion of original texts, “would have approved” (11). In a book like this, the main justification would seem to be more practical than anything, as tracking down all of the references would have an editorial task somewhat beyond the pale. At the same time, it underlines the fact that the editors of the book have collected a group of critics the majority of whom do not seem to have a consistently clear sense of the broader field of Borges criticism. It also suggests a diffused Borges that extends and is transformed as he travels through the various editions and translations of his work. This diffusion only underscores the reconstruction of a Borges who is much more focused on the critic doing the construction than on some kind of objective Borges. And perhaps that is all anyone can do in literary criticism, certainly this method of literary criticism has served as the focus of thousands of pages of literary theory in its own right. Still, in a book devoted to the figure of Borges, it creates a conundrum that is never fully resolved.

As I consider these two projects, I am struck by the way they evoke Borgesian concepts that they do not always recognize. Sassón-Henry appears to miss the way in which “Kafka y sus precursores” very clearly describes her project, the ways in which much of the work on hypertext has made it possible to see the hypertext in Borges that did not exist until that subsequent work came into being. Herbrechter and Callus call on that essay quite productively in suggesting a playfully serious way to engage Borges and the Borgesian and I applaud them for that. At the same time, neither Sassón-Henry, nor any of the authors in *Cy-Borges*, note the other concept that could be used to engage their critical projects. In this, I refer to the *hröñir* that appear in Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” In the case of Borges and technology criticism, I think we can find literal and figurative *hröñir* everywhere. To review, the *hröñir* are those duplicate objects that show up in the idealist Tlön when people go looking for them.

Siglos y siglos de idealismo no han dejado de influir en la realidad. No es infrecuente, en las regiones más antiguas de Tlön, la duplicación de objetos perdidos. Dos personas buscan un lápiz; la primera lo encuentra y no dice nada; la segunda encuentra un segundo lápiz no menos real, pero más ajustado a su expectativa. Esos objetos secundarios se llaman *hröñir* y son, aunque de forma desairada, un poco más largos. (1: 439)

I recommend Evelyn Fishburn’s recent article on “Tlön” and *hröñir* for an excellent discussion of the role of these objects in the story and in our criticism of the story.¹ Borges’s description of the generative powers of the act of looking seems to gain traction if we think of some Borges projects along the lines of a desire (well-intentioned and serious) to discover a Borges that did indeed act as precursor to developments in science and technology.

If we continue with Borges’s depiction of the *hröñir*, we find further developments that assist in this particular characterization of aspects of Borges criticism. The narrator continues:

¹ This idea for thinking about Borges and technology criticism as *hröñir* comes from hearing a version of this paper at the Borges Conference at the University of Iowa, April 11, 2007.

Así se descubrió la improcedencia de testigos que conocieran la naturaleza experimental de la busca... Las investigaciones en masa producen objetos contradictorios; ahora se prefiere los trabajos individuales y casi improvisados. La metódica elaboración de *hrönir* (dice el Onceno Tomo) ha prestado servicios prodigiosos a los arqueólogos. Ha permitido interrogar y hasta modificar el pasado, que ahora no es menos plástico y menos dócil que el porvenir. Hecho curioso: los *hrönir* de segundo y de tercer grado –los *hrönir* derivados de otro *hrön*, los *hrönir* derivados del *hrön* de un *hrön*– exageran las aberraciones del inicial; los de quinto son casi uniformes; los de noveno se confunden con los de segundo; en los de undécimo hay una pureza de líneas que los originales no tienen. El proceso es periódico: el *hrön* de duodécimo grado ya empieza a decaer. Más extraño y más puro que todo *hrön* es a veces el *ur*: la cosa producida por sugestión, el objeto educido por la esperanza. (1: 439-40)

In the case of the hypertext versions of Borges or works inspired by Borges that Sassón-Henry analyzes, we appear to have literal *hrönir*, duplicates of an original Borges that conform themselves more closely to the vision that the artist or critic holds of Borges as a pioneer of hypertext. Following that line of reasoning (if we can use that word), we can end up with two *hrönir*, the hypertext copy and the new Borges story that is now a clear precursor of digital literature. What I see happening, most clearly in Cohen's *New York Times* article and to a lesser extent in *Borges 2.0*, is precisely that process: readers of Borges go looking for this newly updated Borges and find him, the finding serving as an act of critical creation. I do not necessarily argue that this *hrönir* of Borges is not "authentic," but I do think we need to aware of the process and take the generative role of the act of criticism into account. In the case of *Cy-Borges*, we see a more complex process of *hrönir* creation. We do, of course, have a series of critics who explicitly or implicitly begin their critical project searching for this *Cy-Borges*, remember that this book is a title in search of a book, or better, a concept in search of an author. This search is productive in a variety of ways. Many of the articles "produce" useful criticism that we can use in deepening our understanding of the Argentine author. At the same time, many of these articles produce *hrönir* of Borges, adding to previous critical (and auto-) constructions of the author that populate the landscape of Borges criticism. This process makes the editor's note at the beginning even more important. The attempt to deflect criticism for not standardizing the Borges references sets up a situation in which our *hrönir*-producing critics are beginning

the production process with hröñir-like texts, the various translations and editions functioning as proliferating objects created by a public search for an accessible Borges.

I do not feel it necessary to decide whether this is “good” or “bad” criticism, the argument certainly holds that all literary criticism makes *hröñir*, it just seems that the criticism under discussion here makes the process a little more explicit. However, what I do feel it necessary to raise is a closer analysis of veins of Borges criticism, a study of the dynamics at work in the way Borges is used, re-used and “re-tasked” as we plumb new areas of the possibilities of his texts. This focus on Borges as precursor has come to the fore in a number of areas related to science and technology studies and brings us to a situation that also needs more attention and this time, attention that passes a qualitative judgment.

I noted that, in general, the articles in *Cy-Borges* could engage more fully the richness of Borges criticism, especially Borges criticism written in Spanish. In the case of *Borges 2.0*, we also see a very short bibliography and one that leaves out much of the work done even on Borges and technoscience as well as other criticism that could be brought to bear. This is unfortunate, clearly, as many of the ideas that appear in these two books have been anticipated and elucidated in other works. Understanding the relationships between these “new” readings of Borges and other foundational readings promises a much clearer vision of Borges’s work. Indeed, I believe it would be particularly valuable to understand how more traditional literary criticism of Borges functions synergistically with the work coming from scholars interested in literature, technology and science. Incidentally, we see a similar situation in Borges criticism in the field of Borges and science, especially chaos theory and quantum mechanics. As I have noted elsewhere, there are nearly a dozen articles that “discover” the fact that “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” bears more than a passing resemblance to Hugh Everett’s subsequent Many Worlds Theory in quantum mechanics (Brown 152–59). I am struck by another similarity to Tlön’s *hröñir* in these situations in which we have duplicating criticism that appear, all independent copies of an original in which searcher find that for which they were looking. In the quotation included above, Tlön’s narrator notes that “investigaciones en masa producen objetos contradictorios” and that individual hröñir-producing projects were preferred. What we

see in much of Borges criticism, sadly, is an embrace of this mindset. Ironically, as technology has made it much easier to access a majority of Borges criticism, we also see an avalanche of criticism on Borges and technology that has apparently not availed itself of said technology.

This is a pet peeve, clearly, and one that should only be applied unevenly in the case of the two books under consideration. They are both valuable in their ways and I applaud their attempt to identify, establish and create new pathways in Borges criticism. As Cohen's article shows, there is a strong interest in reading Borges as a strangely prescient intellectual, and both books provide strong critical apparatuses for exploring that characterization. I also applaud their ability to provoke rethinkings of how we do Borges criticism and to suggest opportunities for the study, not only of Borges, but also of how Borges is re-purposed and re-tasked in the digital world.

J. Andrew Brown
Washington University in St. Louis

WORKS CITED

- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas*. 4 vols. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1996.
- Brown, J. Andrew. *Test Tube Envy: Science and Power in Argentine Narrative*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2005.
- Cohen, Noam. "Borges and the Foreseeable Future." 6 January 2008. *New York Times*. 4 August 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/books/06cohenintro.html>>.
- Fishburn, Evelyn. "Digging for hrönikr: a second reading of 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.'" *Variaciones Borges* 25 (2008): 53-67.
- Herbrechter, Stefan and Ivan Callus, eds. *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009.
- Sassón-Henry, Perla. *Borges 2.0: From Text to Virtual Worlds*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007.