

La crítica del mito: Borges y la literatura como sueño de vida

Daniel Nahson

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One of Borges's fascinations is how he erases personality, only to reassert it. He berates our poor individualism then tells us that all scribbling traces our own face. He refutes time but says time is the matter we're made of. He obliterates history yet historicizes, decries politics yet politicizes, berates biography yet "biographizes." No wonder generations of critics have struggled with the conundrum of (what used to be called) "life and letters," *genio y figura*.

Daniel Nahson's book, the result of some thirty years of thinking about Borges, takes on the challenge, "sin soslayar las dificultades que las tensiones entre el biografismo y el textualismo presentan para el intérprete" (29). The critic wants to avoid the extremes painting Borges as a paper creature or of delineating a fact-inflated biography. How he achieves this makes for captivating reading, with some chapters particularly convincing.

Nahson argues that the author's texts are "aspectos del mito del 'yo' de Borges, es decir, un mito autobiográfico por la cual la vida y la creatividad literaria pasan a estar íntimamente enlazadas" (24). He positions himself aggressively against the reading of Borges as a post-structuralist *avant la lettre* shuffling disemboweled texts, by insisting that if Borges's writings are a directed dream, they are a *sueño de vida* that stages life in/as literature. We can't ignore Borges's times and experiences, as generations of critics have, so Nahson has no problem using Edwin Williamson's biography as a source. But "nothing but the facts" tells us little about the strategies of encryption that transform a life into an "autobiographical myth." That is the task Nahson sets for himself.

He begins by discussing the modes of the autobiographic impulse in Borges, surveying the theoretical literature on autobiography, and focusing on the fragmentation and fictionalization of the "I" in various Borges texts, including the canonical, "Borges y yo," and "Autobiographical Essay." This isn't uncharted territory in Borges criticism, but Nahson reminds us with elegance that in favoring doubling (*desdoblamiento*) as his "autobiographical" manner, and an essayistic treatment of the self, Borges overflows generic boundaries; his texts are neither confessions nor testimonial letters, but a tension-filled, dreamed autobiographic palimpsest.

In the next chapter, Nahson enters into his element, analyzing the emotion and eroticism of Borges's verse, specifically the poem, "Paréntesis pasional," published in Seville in 1920. Reproducing the free-verse and prose text in its entirety, he shows how the paean to the Beloved ("Amada") with its carnality—"Ahora tu cuerpo, deliciosamente, como una estrella, tiembla en mis brazos"—dialogues with poetic traditions ranging from the Song of Songs to *modernismo* and *vanguardia*, and how it reveals both the imminence of a sexual consummation and consummation itself. The point isn't whether Borges bedded the redhead of the poem exactly as described, but how events are turned into poetic objects which aren't necessarily "detached" or "uncommitted"—adjectives typically applied to Borges and to his "love situations" in particular.

Nahson explores another aspect of Borges's "detachment" in the ensuing two chapters—his (mis)use of religious writings. Here conventional wisdom tended to be that their employment was merely *lúdico*, fueled by Borges' interest in the fantastic, or in the symbol-making capacity of spiritual traditions—the Aleph, for one. Any suggestion that mystical motifs might actually signal attraction to the mystical experience, or that the writings about Jesus might actually concern themselves with personal suffering was considered out of order. But Nahson defends *both* registers in Borges's re-inscription of the religious, a concrete search for plenitude, however skeptical and heterodox, and an equally concrete dialogue with Scripture *qua* scripture, with its oral and written models of narration and poetry. Meaning, Nahson says, isn't always detachedly deferred, so Derrida's deconstructive *différance* and dissemination aren't entirely applicable: Borges "hace cosas muy concretas y brillantes con las tradiciones religiosas... Borges parece estar haciendo algo muy específico

(no siempre irresuelto desde el punto de vista de la significación) a partir de 'mitos' establecidos e igualmente concretos..." (184).

To show this concreteness, Nahson devotes one chapter to "Mateo XXV:30: trascendencia y vocación poética," and another to "Dios, Cristo, Borges y el canon de los Evangelios." The latter comprehensively surveys Borges's engagement with the figure of Christ and the Gospels, especially the Beatitudes. Nahson demonstrates how the erudite de-centering of holy texts relates less to their canonical intent and more to Borges's own concerns, anxieties, joys and sorrows (173). As Borges writes in "Cristo en la cruz": "¿De qué puede servirme que aquel hombre / haya sufrido, si yo sufro ahora?" (186). The oral origins of many of the sacred writings only adds to their human dimension. In the Gospels, Borges writes, ideas dead on paper are brought to life by those who heard and conserved them, because there was a human being behind and around them; this gives them a virtue lost to moderns (200-01). A wistfulness for the immediate and the "real" marks Borges's endeavors, Nahson says, "una visión personal y humana no extenta de religiosidad" (202).

The book's final chapter, an eighty-page critical quasi-novella, focuses on "El Congreso," the sum and summary of Borges's staging of his life. Noting the many critics who have engaged the story, and melding their insights, Nahson weaves an interpretative condensation of Borges's *mito autobiográfico* that mirrors the fiction itself: "El Congreso' congrega como en una Visión-Aleph un compendio de personajes y temas que recurren en la obra del autor" (259). Love, salvation, degradation, pain, and frustration, along with history, literary and religious traditions, poetry, irony, and the incommensurability of the word are all "packaged" into the tale, projecting an interiority that looks beyond itself, *figura y genio*.

La crítica del mito is the labor of a critic who has thought about Borges for many decades and has engaged him from a perspective that hasn't always been popular. The life/letters divide isn't as acute as it once was, so in that sense the polemics can appear overwrought. There's also unevenness in the originality and length of the chapters, with some ground already covered by others. But in its encyclopedic scope and interpretative solidness Nahson's book is a worthy addition to contemporary Borges studies.

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