

BORGES CENTER INAUGURATION
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A day I will never forget: in 1997, in Cuba, I went on the Internet for the first time. I don't know what the state of the Internet was here, in the United States, but in Cuba, in 1997, it was just a conversation about something remote that supposedly was going to change the world. I worked in a good place, Casa de las Américas, the second institution founded by the revolutionary government that took power in 1959. It is not surprising, then, that it was one of the first places in the country to have Internet access. There I was, in front of a computer, with no idea of how to start—what was that new verb?—navigating. But I had a journal in my hand and a web address. The journal was *Variaciones Borges* and the address, the home page of the then Jorge Luis Borges Center for Studies and Documentation at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Of course, you have to be a total geek when, having the opportunity of accessing for the first time this wonder, the Internet, you decide to visit a remote and very specialized study center. I don't remember what was the second site I visited, maybe a museum, believing, like many people back then, that soon it would no longer be necessary to see art collections in person. So Iván and Cristina, now you know, if you were tracking visitors back then, the hit from Cuba was me.

And now, more than ten years later, I'm here as one of the editors of this journal. When I realized this coincidence, not long ago, I thought of a phrase: "Reality is partial to symmetries and slight anachronisms" ("A la realidad le gustan las simetrías y los leves anacronismos"), as the narrator of "El Sur" says. It's a good phrase, one that lends itself to repe-

tion, and, as Borges would say, more appropriate to close a conversation than to stimulate it. But, to be honest, I'm not sure if this phrase actually captures my experience. I'm here, talking about Borges, and I thought the phrase would give a more Borgesian feeling to a conversation about him. The content has generated its own form, and this form is paraphrasing the object it intends to analyze. But a paraphrase, whether elementary or sophisticated, is not enough these days.

I wonder if this is not the way many studies about Borges have proceeded. He appears very accessible, very quotable. Everybody seems to know him well enough to write about his work, and sometimes the specificity of what can be said is lost in generalizations that could be applied to any great writer. Something similar has happened with the uses and abuses of his work. There are always a few aspects of it that can be easily misunderstood and imposed upon analysis that have little to do with what he actually wrote. Yes, fame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst form.

We build ideas around writers, and, despite the evidence to the contrary, those ideas persist. Borges noted this with Don Quixote. The image of Sancho Panza that has remained is that of a short and fat man, but the text says that he had long legs and a prominent belly. Doré might be partially responsible, but the notion of the odd couple may have played a bigger role. Iván Almeida has proved how a poem like "Instantes" is still attributed to Borges. Maybe, as he suggests, we should study why this happens, instead of spending more time trying to disprove the fallacy. If we do this, we realize that the work has an existence beyond its textual nature. It exists also as an echo, a rumor, a casual conversation. Borges had a clear awareness of this phenomenon.

It is paradoxical to see that an author who so valued the exact use of words, punctuation, and correction was, at the same time, a textual relativist. Borges seemed to pay too much attention to those non-textual elements that influence, or sometimes determine, way we read a text. Literary personality, the publishing market, literary history, all seem to create a network of relationships that affect the product itself. As the narrator of "El Aleph" would put it, "I realized that the poet's work had lain not in the poetry." The poet's work had lain not in the poetry? It had lain, continues the narrator, "in the invention of reasons for accounting the poetry admirable." We have here the non-textual element, the one that will impact

greatly on the reception of a work. And what better non-textual element that Borges's relationship with the press? One of the reasons his personality became so controversial was his constant exposure to the press. An exposure that he himself stimulated and that seems to contradict his early positions on the reductive nature of the mass media.

For those of us who didn't live in Argentina in the decades of Borges's fame, it is amazing to see how he was constantly present in the press, particularly in the popular press. There were, apparently, several reasons for this: an old blind man walking the streets of Buenos Aires must have attracted people's attention. He would talk to anybody, particularly to reporters, and would make quick comments that became instant quotes. The press loved him for that, because each conversation provided the title of the story and the controversy. The Borges who criticized, through his character, the lowbrow media, was, to a certain extent, their willing accomplice. It's the Borges of the magazine covers shared with Maradona or Lady Di. The Borges covered by the press reach him in the intimacy of his house, eating a plate of soup or talking on the phone while Fanny tied his shoes. Or the Borges who, at the end of his life, very sick and unable to give a personal interview, takes time to answer a quick questionnaire about his marriage to María Kodama.

Opinions differ on the reasons for this attitude. For some, he was using the media as a way of reaching beyond the boundaries of the books, as a way of intervening in the world of superficiality and, maybe, contributing to change it. For others, his fame came to substitute the vacuum left by a creative work that didn't offer anything essentially new since the great fiction books and essays of the 1940s. The contradictions are evident. Borges's opinions seemed to change according to the audience and the time of the day, but they would usually surprise, they would always be heard.

But all this non-literary world that surrounded Borges would not have been possible without a work, a work that consists not only of the finished product but also of the process that led to it. There is in him a work ethic that has a certain authenticity, since he believed in the impartiality of the intention even if the result was partial. In a way, even the mass media thought that Borges had something to say and wanted to know more about it.

The media construction of an author, the study of the books he didn't write, the challenge to the notion of authorship that represent the works written in collaboration, unexpected connections to other authors: these are possible routes that show that, despite the vast amount of writing about Borges, there is always something more there. May the Borges Center, and its journal, help us discern what may be useful, and even pleasant, to read.

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