The Other Borges: A Precursor from the Future

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I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good no longer belongs to anyone, not even to the other [Borges], but rather to the language and to tradition. Otherwise, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in the other.

Jorge Luis Borges [from "Borges and I," in El Hacedor].

THE WORK OF Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, a perennial Nobel Prize candidate for the past two decades, has been acclaimed by many scholars and critics as classic 20th-century world literature. A master of the fantastic tale, a critical theorist ahead of his time, Borges discarded old genres in order to create his own, which challenge and enrich our literary traditions. Borges's intertextuality is baffling to some, but a treat to hedonic readers and lovers of literariness. In one slim volume, he rewrites old Greek myths; depicts ancient gaucho fights; parodies Poe and Chesterton; presents a Judas-redeemer who made the death of Christ possible for us sinners; creates an Irish patriot who is really a traitor, theologians transformed into heretics, Dante before death, Shakespeare before God. Borges writes with T. S. Eliot's historical sense, "which compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that... literature... has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."

Every writer necessarily feeds on his predecessors. As Paul Valéry would put it: "Nothing more original, nothing more unique than to feed off others. But they must be digested—the lion achieves his form by assimilating sheep." Like Eliot and Valéry, Borges would, to a degree, negate individual identity, but would aim simultaneously to rescue every literary work's originality through the creative act of reading. The time spent writing a work is insignificant compared with the infinite amount of time devoted to its reading and recollection.

The last time I spoke with Jorge Luis Borges, I felt like a doubting Thomas. Lancaster, Pennsylvania—Amish country—in 1983 seemed an appropriate place for a revelation. The first time I had met him, seven years earlier in Orono, Maine, he had remained at a distance, seeming to speak only paragraph after paragraph versions from his standard text. Surrounded by up-and-coming critics wearing a variety of bright yellow ties (it was rumored that Borges, blind for over 20 years, could still see patches of yellow), he clutched and caressed a favorite cane, offering few insights into himself, the man of flesh and blood.

I had read much of Borges's work, including many relatively unknown essays and reviews, as I prepared to write a dissertation on his "Libros y autores extranjeros" ("Foreign Books and Authors"), a biweekly column he published from 1936-39 in the Buenos Aires magazine El Hogar.

Throughout this New England symposium in his honor, Borges responded to questions with pat answers. His words sounded so much like they came from a book that they did not engage anyone desiring to weave along with the writer, rather than nodding and thinking "that's from 'Partial Magic in the Quijote,' last paragraph." To hear authors read aloud can be enjoyable, but during an informal encounter their quoting a partial text can get in

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the way of conversation. Borges was truly in persona that evening. I visualized what he said in perfect paragraphs, with footnotes, dazzling all listeners. I had two specific questions to ask him; to my surprise his answer to both was "I don't know." He did not know who Ann Keen was, the writer who preceded him in "Libros y autores extranjeros." nor did he know who had taken over his column in El Hogar when he was hospitalized after a Christmas 1938 accident. He added, "Don’t bother reading my contributions to El Hogar. I was strictly a hack writer in those pages."

That remark in itself was certainly enough to get rolling a dissertation that was only beginning to take shape. I could not believe that a three-year period of Borges reviewing such figures as T. S. Eliot, Paul Valéry, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, H. G. Wells and Virginia Woolf—not to mention Ellery Queen, C. S. Lewis, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce and Shikibu Murasaki—was not worthy of attention. After finishing a study of his short story "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quijote," in which I utilized the materials from El Hogar, I spent several years (with the aid of my adviser Emir Rodríguez Monegal) trying to convince Borges to allow me to prepare an anthology of that most important "hack" from Argentina.

Borges, who was born in Buenos Aires in 1899 and died in Geneva in 1986, had a bilingual upbringing (in English and Spanish), reflective of his Argentine and British ancestry. Fanny Haslam, his paternal grandmother, was born in Staffordshire. She came to America to join her elder sister, who had settled in Argentina with her husband. Fanny, an avid reader, initiated the tradition of reading as an activity to be performed primarily in English at the Borges household. On his mother's side prevailed the image of a great-grandfather, Coronel Isidoro Suárez, who fought in the battle of Junin in Peru with Simón Bolívar in 1824. The readings of the family created a vast library of English books, from which Borges read at a very early age. He was fond of telling that he first read Don Quijote in English, and that when he finally got around to the original Spanish it seemed a poor translation from the English. Borges's father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, was an attorney and a teacher of psychology at a local English school. Leonor Acevedo de Borges, his mother, translated into Spanish several of Hawthorne's stories, and, according to Borges, produced some translations of Virginia Woolf, Melville and Faulkner which have been attributed to him.

Borges became very popular with different groups of avant-garde poets, who were impressed with his knowledge of Expressionism. He published several of his poems, and translations of German Expressionist poets, in Spanish literary journals. He wrote two books in Spain and destroyed them both: one (a collection of poems in praise of the Russian Revolution) when he left Spain, the other one (a book of essays) upon his return to Buenos Aires.

It was not until 1921 that Borges saw Argentina again, and he sang to his newly discovered Buenos Aires in his first published book, Fervor de Buenos Aires (1923). During the rest of the decade, he published several volumes of poems and essays, and helped found and direct three literary journals. The next ten years were crucial for Borges, the creator of critical fictions, who was to become world-famous. The 1938 accident brought him close to death and, in his view, changed him into a different person.

In 1970 he published a version of that event in the New Yorker:

It was on Christmas Eve of 1938—the same year my father died—that I had a severe accident. I was running up a stairway and suddenly felt something brush my scalp. I had grazed a freshly painted open casement window. In spite of first-aid treatment, the wound became poisoned, and for a period of a week or so I lay sleepless every night and had hallucinations and high fever. One evening, I lost the power of speech and had to be rushed to the hospital for an immediate operation. Septicemia had set in, and for a month I hovered, all unknowingly, between life and death. . . . When I began to recover, I feared for my mental integrity. I remember that my mother wanted to read to me from a book I had just ordered, C. S. Lewis’s Out of the Silent Planet, but for two or three nights I kept putting her off. At last, she prevailed, and after hearing a page or two I fell into crying. My mother asked me why the tears. "I’m crying because I understand," I said. A bit later, I wondered whether I could ever write again. I had previously written quite a few poems and dozens of short reviews. I thought that if I tried to write a review now and failed, I’d be all through intellectually but that if I tried something I had never really done before and failed at that it wouldn’t be so bad and might even prepare me for the final revelation. I decided I would try to write a story. The result was "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quijote." "Pierre Menard," like its forerunner, "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim," was still a halfway house between the essay and the true tale ("Autobiographical Notes," New Yorker, September 11, 1970, p. 84).

This hybrid form that draws from and combines elements of both the essay and the short story is generally considered one of the identifying characteristics of Borges's fiction. Understandably, critics who study his "halfway house" tend to focus on "The Approach" (1936) and "Pierre Menard" (1939). No one questions that the period between 1936 and 1939 was crucial for an understanding of Borges's development as a writer; however, little attention has been paid to Borges's other literary activities during these years—especially the various essays, reviews, biographical sketches and literary gossip that appeared in El Hogar.

Borges's work as a reviewer is at the heart of his poetics of reading. After all, he states in the prologue of his first anthology of short stories (1941): "It is an arduous and impoverishing whim to compose vast books, to extend for five hundred long-winded pages an idea whose perfect oral exposition lasts a few minutes. A better method is to pretend those books already exist and to offer a sum-
mary, a commentary.” This anthology, which was expanded to the famous Ficciones (1944), included one of his earliest hoaxes, “The Approach to al-Mu’tasim” (1936): a short story in the form of an essay, a review of a book that did not exist.

It is not surprising that the man who wrote a pseudo-review about a nonexistent book, a man who spent three years writing a biweekly on foreign books and authors, should write “Pierre Menard,” a story (composed in the form of an obituary) whose narrator is the reviewer of a nonexistent author’s life works. No wonder Borges’s intertextually rich fictions are based rhetorically on the art of book reviewing. The review represents a beginning of writing which immediately leads to another text, toward one reading and one’s readings. Thus, Borges prefers to feign that a book already exists and to offer his readers a summary, a review. His literature represents a critical assessment of those vast literary projects he did not execute, and the readings that inspired those projects appear in an endless chain of allusions.

In 1955, after the overthrow on Juan Perón, a totally blind Borges became the director of the National Library of Argentina. In 1961 he shared the prestigious Formentor Prize with Samuel Beckett, which brought him renown throughout the Western world. Although his fame is based on his work as a storyteller (Ficciones and El Aleph), any future international assessment of Borges must consider his poetry and essays. But the extent of his reputation will depend on the forms literature takes in the future. As Borges tells us in an essay on George Bernard Shaw: “If I were granted the possibility of reading any present-day page—this one, for example—as it will be read in the year 2000, I would know what the literature of the year 2000 will be like.” Will Borges, who believes that “every writer creates his precursors,” become a mere precursor in a Bloomian battlefield?

Borges’s poetics of reading does not obviously examine literary history from a chronological point of view, a linear mode according to which precursors invariably connect themselves from one life to another—and on toward the present. As Borges concludes in “Pierre Menard,” who is Valéry disguised as Don Quijote disguised as Unamuno and Poe, the reading of a work may affect the subsequent reading of an earlier work. By reading the Aeneid and later the Odyssey, we stage our own history of that creative spirit of literature. We may, if we are so inclined, think of the Odyssey as having been written after the Aeneid. Or, as Borges states in “Kafka and His Precursors,” we may read Kafka and then authors who wrote before him, and find in the latter certain Kafkaesque traits. Those authors resemble Kafka even though they might not resemble each other: Kafka is the precursor. What future doppelgangers await Borges and Kafka?

MY ADVENTURES with Borges and El Hogar lasted many years. Every time Borges and I met, I persevered in my attempt to change his opinion about those writings. Initially, my last meeting with him in Lancaster was another encounter with Borges the man of letters, but it later led to my initiation into the group of those who have touched his scar.

During yet another of Borges’s tours of American universities, I attended a reception and dinner with him at Franklin and Marshall College. Talking with him, I soon realized I was meeting a different Borges, one who spoke about his works like a common reader. For some reason, he would not let anyone interrupt our conversation. This time, he brought up El Hogar. We also covered the usual ground: the etymology of the word gaucho; Edgar Allan Poe; time and death. But he also asked me the etymologies of a few words of obvious Caribbean origin, and he listened patiently to my intertextual analysis of his story “The Two Who Dreamed” (which he translated from Burton’s translation of the Arabian Nights). As dinner was announced and he was guided toward another room, he called out my name “Enrique, Enrique,” insisting I help him along, expecting me to sit next to him, messing up the arrangements with nonstop, clutching conversation in Spanish, in the company of many who did not speak it. This was a private Borges who did not want to be in public, a man who needed a break from performance.

I sat on his left at supper and María Kodama, his constant companion, was on his right. She would load the fork for him with a bit of rice, some chicken and a few peas. Still talking and without taking his blind gaze off me, Borges would pick up his fork and eat from it. The fork was always ready for him, at the right spot, always providing the same combination of tastes, meeting his every expectation—until the middle of the meal when, after a mouthful, he missed something. He looked ahead with half-closed eyes and said with loud disappointment: “NO PEAS,” in English. Taste is in the mind.

After all had settled back to their own plates, and the two of us returned to our conversation about El Hogar,
I mentioned the need for an anthology of those works. I even dared to say that "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quijote" had its truest roots in the *El Hogar* writings and not in his experience of recuperation from the 1938 accident. What an insensitive blunder that was! Here was Borges next to me, the jovial man of flesh and blood I had searched for, and I was talking text instead of man. Borges the critic would agree that the time spent writing a work is insignificant compared to the infinite amount of time devoted to its reading and recollection. But here was the other Borges—the person—with me in time.

Returning me to reality and setting me straight, Borges recounted the story of the accident, the sleepless nights, the fear of losing his faculties, his writing of "Pierre Menard" as a safe experiment. Then he lifted my right hand and placed it upon the deep scar on his head. That's when I felt like a doubting Thomas. Autobiographical fallacies aside, I can now only repeat something Borges said, a paraphrase of Mark Twain he cited in reviewing Kipling's autobiography (*Something of Myself*) in *El Hogar*: "It is not possible for a man to tell the truth about himself, or to keep from conveying to the reader the truth about himself." We parted as a shared, lived text.

A year later, a friend wrote me about Borges's latest visit to Brazil, saying that the author had decided to include some of his articles from *El Hogar* in a Pléiade anthology planned for that year. Enclosed was a list of 32 pieces María Kodama was requesting urgently that I send to Borges. After so many years, I was rescuing these texts from oblivion, thanks to Yale's Sterling Memorial Library, and returning them to their writer—for a French translation of his works!

In October 1984, Borges authorized a complete anthology of *El Hogar*—this one in the original Spanish. I was to be editor, and Emir Rodríguez Monegal was to write a prologue. Both Emir and Borges passed away before this project was published in Barcelona in September 1986.

As the leaves fall in Pennsylvania, I recall Borges the etymologist alluding to the meaning of Bryn Mawr in Welsh: "So, you are teaching at Bryn Mawr. That's on high ground, isn't it?"