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Jorge Luis Borges' Métier
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Hipertexto

... vi a Borges en una nueva fase de su
éxito creciente: era ya director de la
Biblioteca Nacional, profesor de la
Universidad, miembro de la Academia...
Pero lo que más me sorprendió fue
verlo transformado en conferencista.
Enrique Anderson-Imbert. "El Éxito de
Borges" 7

In all modesty, as researchers, writers, literary critics, we, whether we like it or not, belong to a select group. I don't want to say brotherhood, because that would have serious implications. As members, we gather, at times, to share our thoughts, personal interests, and concerns, and it is for this reason I am here today to address the professorial inclinations of a well-known writer whose calling card exhibits similar descriptions as ours, but raised to a much higher degree of quality and interpretation, as the quote, by Anderson-Imbert, above implies.

Furthermore, in the introduction to *Seven Nights*, Alastair Reid (in 1984) reminds us that: "Among his many literary selves, Borges has had a separate existence as a lecturer for almost the past forty years, and, like every separate dimension of Borges, the lectures shed a different kind of light on the whole, and make clear more of Borges's webbed connections."¹

The last time I saw Borges in Pennsylvania, in spite of his frailty, he was still going strong delivering lectures, and instructing us, on diverse literary themes. My early contacts with Jorge Luis Borges were those in which I, as novice graduate student, sat in awe of this man when he delivered his profound lectures at the University of California, San Diego and, later at Michigan State University. (See my interview with Borges: "Borges sobre cine" published in *The Bilingual Review (La Revista Bilingüe)* Volume V (January-August 1978) Nos. 1 and 2. I recall that in more than one occasion Borges and I talked about Mexican literature and culture. Every time, he would ask "¿De

1 From the Introduction to Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights* (1).

dónde es usted? My reply was “de México” and Borges face would light up to begin speaking of his dear friend Alfonso Reyes.²

Aside from this personal anecdote, I am ready to begin this approach to Borges by mentioning the lectures that Borges delivered at separate times and places. I am thinking of his lectures at the Teatro Coliseo in Buenos Aires, readings that he delivered at intervals between June and August, 1977 (those lectures were later published in Mexico in 1980); and also the series of lectures Borges gave (a couple years later) at the Universidad de Belgrano (which were published by Emecé / Editorial Belgrano (in 1979) under the rubric of *Borges Oral*.³

Inevitably, when we come to Borges' literary production, we move from fact to fiction, from reading and research, and from research to fictional accounts to find that satisfying journey. As with most authors of Borges' caliber, every reading reveals new discoveries. Often, those findings occur during subsequent readings. Thus, on and about Borges many special readings and interpretations can be had. On some of his most memorable readings or perceptions one finds, at least, three major trends of literary design, some salient personal characteristics, fictional patterns formed from other writers, and an overall philosophical summary of the first two characteristics. Such is the case of the “Oriental” tales narrated by Scheherazade (the charming female character who narrates the Arabian Nights). We all know that “Her delightful storytelling wins the favor and mercy of her husband, a Persian king.”⁴ We reproduce the use of the present tense verb “wins” because the tale(s) are everlasting.

A quick glance at Borges' *lecture*, of not too long ago, on *The One-Thousand and One Nights*, serves to identify it as an important source for Borges, the lecturer, the professor. During the course of his discussion of a couple of these tales (“Aladdin and his Magic Lamp,” and the tale of “The two dreamers”), Borges weaves important digressions into his commentary so that we perceive his *modus operandi* and to leads us through his discourse into the realm of literary history. In his discussion of *The Arabian Nights* (Borges speaks of the *One Thousand and One Nights* to highlight its infinite possibilities), we see that in the long list of the common names of the translators of this Magical Book (translated into French, English, German, and Spanish (The names of Galland, Madrus, Burton, Lane, Paine, Henning, Littmann, Weil, and Cansinos-Asséns, Borges is revealing the impact of the Book in various languages, and the same time, his name-dropping, as often is the case, serves to divulge other sources in his thoughts. G. K. Chesterton and Robert Louis Stevenson are the obvious sources (“Stevenson's admirable New Arabian Nights” depicting the Baghdad of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Borges insists). This lecture re-appears expanded elsewhere within his works as “Los traductores de las 1001 noches” in *Historia de la Eternidad*, published in

2 See Joseph Tyler “Jorge Luis Borges and Alfonso Reyes: The ‘unpublished’ letters.” In *For Borges: A Collection of Critical Essays and Fiction on The Centennial of His Birth (1899-1999)*. Carrolton, GA. *Occasional Papers of the Circle of Borges Scholars*, 1999.

3 *Borges Oral* contains lectures (Conferencias) on immortality, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Detective Fiction, and Time among other subjects.

4 From the *Webster's Dictionary* on-line.

Buenos Aires by Emecé, in 1966 (99-134). Adding a bit of local color, Borges cites from the Arabic language, the translation there is from a book entitled "*Quitab alif laila ua laila*" book that the rummies also call the 1001 Nights." (99)

Clearly, the narrative pleasure of Scheherazade delighted, and impacted Borges (and other writers, I am thinking of John Barth [Barth was willing acolyte to Borges who was attending the lecture Borges gave at Michigan State in 1978) in his early readings. In fact, Borges, declares "The subject of dreams is a favorite of *The Thousand and One Nights*. An example, offered by Borges, is the story of the two dreamers (53), about the search for a treasure and its finding, in the mind of the two dreamers. Related to *The Thousand and One Nights* we recognize without much effort Borges' tale "The Approach to Al-Mutasim", a novel whose apocryphal edition lands its readers into the realm of the make-belief. Nonetheless, "The Search for Al-Mutasim is a journey for its protagonist, but it is also a forum for discuss, particularly the idea of Pantheism, advanced in the ideas of Baruch Spinoza, and the telling of the fantastic tale of Simurg."⁵

On another lecture, dealing with "Poetry," Borges stops to remind his readers and listeners about his teaching credentials adding: "I have been a professor of English literature in the College of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires, and I have tried to disregard as much as possible the history of literature" (81).

Within the Semitic design we find his discussion of the Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism intriguing and mystifying for its sense of perplexity leaves us at the doorsteps of incredulity. Again, the lesson dictated by Borges includes his favorite readings, one of them being Spangler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (from which he realizes that "the prototype of the magical book is the Koran," 97). Within this text, we also find the names of Edgar Allan Poe ("The Gold Bug") and Baruch Spinoza. Kabbalah, besides being what it represents, it also signifies reception and tradition. The Cabalists believed that the letters came first (99). "...But the idea, as you see, refers to an essential problem, that of the existence of evil, which the Gnostics and the Kabbalists resolved in the same way. They resolved it by declaring that the universe is the work of a deficient Divinity, one whose fraction of Divinity approaches zero, of a god who is no *the* God." (103). Within the searching process they use the *boustrophedon* method reading the text for meaning from right to left and left to right and again from right to left. According to the major source of Jewish Mysticism, and Borges, the cryptography of the Cabalists is worth to be deciphered and the results are worthy of consideration when we are looking for the presence or absence of God.

Adhered with this thought (The Kabbalah and the laws of creation), Borges lectures and cites a metamorphosis: El golem, The Golem, Der Golem. From the teachings of the Kabbalah, through Meyrink, to Borges. As in the novel by Meyrink, the film, and the poem by Borges, it tells the story of a Rabbi in Prague who, imitating God,

⁵ In connection with the Simurg symbolizing the 30 birds that go in its search, one can only think that in spite of his occasional complaints about Borges towards the end of his life, Julio Cortázar learned the lesson well. I am thinking of "Continuidad de los parques" and "Todos los fuegos, el fuego."

with magic creates a Golem (Adam meaning “red clay”) to help him sweep the synagogue. But in the long run, the incidental facts turn accidental, and, in the final analysis, the Golem turns to dust. From the Kabbalah, and from his lectures, derives “A Defense of Basilides The False,”⁶ included in Borges’ *Selected Non-Fiction*. It is obvious, then, that the Argentine writer worked on different strata (genre, if you will) to become informative and pedagogic.

Another major trend in his literature that develops from his readings (which includes Borges writing reviews and research) is his personal interest in the Medieval Germanic Literatures, including the study and teaching of Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon. As we said, elsewhere,⁷ Borges’ initial interest for these literatures began at home with the English origins of his father: “My father’s English came from the fact that his mother, Frances Haslam, was born in Staffordshire of Northumbrian stock” (“An Autobiographical Essay” 136).⁸ In his autobiographical essay, the Argentine poet talks about his attraction to the medieval Germanic literatures and to their poetic forms:

I had always been attracted to the metaphor, and this leaning led me to the study of the simple Saxon kennings and overelaborates Norse ones. As far back as 1932, I had even written an essay about them.⁹ The quaint notion of using, as far as it could be done, metaphors instead of straightforward nouns, and of this metaphor’s being at once traditional and arbitrary, puzzled and appealed to me. I was later to surmise that the purpose of these figures lay not only in the pleasure given by the pomp and circumstance of compounding words but also in the demands of alliteration. Taken by themselves the kennings are not especially witty, and calling a ship “a sea stallion” and the open sea “the Whale’s-road” is no great feat. The Norse skalds went a step further, calling the sea “the sea-stallion’s road,” so what originally was an image became a laborious equation. In turn, my investigation of kenningars led me to the study of Old English and Old Norse. (*The Aleph and Other Stories* 178)

Borges’ experience with these medieval Germanic literatures led to his lecturing and teaching the subject in and out of the university. His research efforts in this field culminated in the publication of *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (Old Germanic Literatures), an earlier version of *Literaturas Germánicas Medievales* (Medieval Germanic Literatures). The earlier text appeared in México in 1951. And it is in “Mateo, XXV, 30” (Matthew, XXV, 30) a poem published as part of his *El Otro, el mismo* (The Self and the Other) in 1953, where we find the first traces or elements of these medieval

6 See “In Defense of Basilides the False” included in *Selected Non-Fictions Jorge Luis Borges*, edited by Eliot Weinberger. New York: Viking Penguin, 1999.

7 Joseph Tyler. “Medieval Germanic Elements in the Poetry of Jorge Luis Borges.” In *Borges’ Craft of Fiction: Selected Essays on his Writing*. Carrollton, GA: University of West Georgia: Occasional Papers published by the International Circle of Borges Scholars, 1992. See also: *Jorge Luis Borges. Medieval Germanic Literatures*. Trans. Joseph Tyler (unpublished Ms.)

8 For more information on this subject, see Martín Hadis, *Literatos y Excéntricos. Los ancestros ingleses de Jorge Luis Borges*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2006.

9 See “Las Kenningar” in *Historia de la Eternidad*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1953 (Pp. 43-68)

Germanic literatures. The single reference of “La Saga de Grettir” (“Grettir’s Saga”) is the bridge that connects a simple title with a full composition: a poem entitled “A Saxon” (A.D. 449). This poem, with its indefinite and anonymous title, is symbolic for its generic value, for it transmits diachronically the metamorphosis of rudimentary individuals into men of letters as the last two strophes of the poem clearly testify. This poem ends with a long, chaotic enumeration of words that together compose one single sentence. The persona of the poet says,

He brought with him the elemental words
Of language that in time would flower
In Shakespeare’s harmonies: night, day,
Water, fire, words for metals and colors,

Hunger, thirst, bitterness, sleep, fighting
Death, and other grave concerns of men;
On broad meadows, and in tangled woodland
The sons he bore brought England into being. (*Selected Poems 1923-1967*, 107)

A few poems later, Borges joins the many bards who sing of the moon with lines (or verses) loaded with meaning:

There’s an iron forest where a huge wolf
Lives whose strange fate is
To knock the moon down and murder it
When the last dawn reddens the sea.

Parenthetically and as part of the poem, Borges adds:

(This is well known in the prophetic North;
Also, that on that day the ship made out
Of all the fingernails of the dead will spread
A poison on the world’s wide-open seas.) (*A Personal Anthology* 197)

These parenthetical lines derive from Scandinavian literature (*The Poetic Edda*) where one reads of Ragnarökr (“The Twilight of the Gods”), a poetic title for a short piece found in *Dream Tigers* (26). The original source for these referential lines appears within the text of the *Medieval Germanic Literatures* where Borges writes:

This is the Twilight of the Gods (Ragnarökr). Fenrir, a wolf muzzled by a sword, breaks its millennial prison and devours Odin. The ship Naglfar sets sail, constructed with the fingernails of the dead. (In the *Snorra Edda* we read: “one must not allow someone to die with uncut fingernails, because he who forgets it hastens the construction of the ship Naglfar, feared by the gods and men.” (102)

Engrossed by this phenomenon of growing nails beyond death, Borges writes yet another piece simply entitled “Toenails.” What is mythical in the earlier example becomes in the later work simply another curiosity: the extraordinary growth of beard

and nails on a corpse; although the poem as a whole certainly carries a profound existential message, the details about the beard and nails are merely a curiosity.

Gradually we move away from these peripheral elements and we approach a concentration of poems directly related to the central subjects of the medieval Germanic literatures. A poem functioning as an inaugural part of these cardinal themes is appropriately entitled “Embarking on the Study of Anglo-Saxon Grammar.” Here again we find autobiographical data supporting a now commonly held hypothesis about the poet’s kinship to early skalds. In selecting the term *embarking* for the poem’s title, the translator chose his words wisely, for it is a sort of voyage in time that the poet (anchored in his native Buenos Aires) has chosen to undertake. “I come back to the far shore of a vast river / Never reached by the Norsemen’s long ships (los *dragones* del Viking reads the original) / To the harsh and work-wrought words / Which, with a tongue now dust, / I used in the days of Northumbria and Mercia / Before becoming Haslam or Borges” (SP 139). Serious studies of these words, symbols of other symbols, will keep the poet busily researching, learning, and writing about his findings. Proceeding along the same path, we come to Borges’ sonnet “Poem Written in a Copy of Beowulf.” Here Borges trades the internal rhyme of the former composition for the external rhyming scheme of the sonnet in its original version (abba abba cdd cdd). What may seem at first, if you pardon the oxymoron, a silent clamor for weaving and unweaving words – (At various times I have asked myself what reason / Moved me to study . . . / The language of the blunt-tongued Anglo-Saxons.) – ends up being a philosophical commentary comparing the bard’s lexical toil with his weary existence: “I tell myself: it must be that the soul / Has some secret sufficient way of knowing / That it is immortal.../ Beyond anxiety and beyond this writing / The Universe waits, --he concludes— inexhaustible, inviting” (SP 155).

The third in this series of poems dealing with the medieval Germanic literatures, “Hengest Cyning,” has a Nordic flavor. Both poem and title contain a binary value; the composition starts with the King’s epitaph: Beneath this stone lies the body of Hengist [sic] / Who founded in these islands the first kingdom / Of the royal house of Odin / And glutted the screaming eagle’s greed. (SP 157) and continues with the neo-fantastic element of the King’s speech, supposedly after death, in defense of his own deeds. Composed of alternating long and short verses, the protracted text contrasts with the briefer portion of the composition in both size and content. Its tempo, nevertheless, is kept with internal rhyme and an occasional alliteration (“no sé que runas habrá marcado el hierro en la piedra” / Hay ríos para el remo y para la red”) (*Obra poética* 234-235). The poem is not only interesting because of its contrastive elements, but also because of its narrative components. Especially appealing are those parts mentioning the geography, the toil of the Briton farmers, and the fateful decay of their cities. As a matter of fact, in “The Elegies,” Borges mentions something to this effect at the same time that he quotes another scholar; thus, in “The Ruin,” he comments, “Stopford Brooke, in a dignified tone, says that the Saxons disdained city life, allowing the existing towns in England to fall into ruin and later composing elegies to deplore those ruins” (MGL 24).

After giving these examples of Borges' poetic output, I come to the conclusion that Borges' interest in the Medieval Germanic Literatures is due to numerous reasons, but one in particular seems to lie slightly hidden within his autobiographical strata. Living in a world of created doubles –ein Doppelgänger, in German—Borges has conceived the character Juan Dahlmann and sets him in conflict very much like Borges' own in "Borges and I." In the poem, too, Borges / poet / persona undergoes a kind of personality split while yearning to become one with his predecessors. Borges' earlier books of poetry (*Fervor de Buenos Aires*...) speak of his native Buenos Aires, *The Self and the Other* talks about his other Fatherland, that of Northumbria and Mercia.

Taking in consideration Borges' literary out-put from *The Book of Sand*, we can identify a few stories in which the theme of the Sagas and the Old Norse appear and re-appear to significantly add to our postulation. Borges goes from the classroom to other venues of literary entertainment to display his intense liking for these themes used to promote his teachings. To begin with, there are two clear examples of professorial interpolations in the short stories: "Ulrica" and "The Bribe."

"Ulrike" is a piece of fiction based on a love affair. There are some critics who might think this piece to be autobiographical, but it is hard to prove the extent of that personal authenticity. The fact is that the male protagonist, Javier Ojalora, is a professor from the Universidad de los Andes, specializing in Old Norse, who meets a mysterious Nordic young woman whose looks, and historical knowledge of the Sagas is indispensable to the over-all development of the allegorical plot. "The Bribe," on the other hand, develops within the American campuses, especially that of the University of Texas in Austin. The autobiographical details are stronger in this story than in "Ulrica" since we know that Borges taught in Texas during 1961 ". . . in 1961 he [Borges] was invited by the Edward Larocque Tinker Foundation to spend a semester as a visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin, where he would give readings and teach a course on Argentine literature" (Williamson 347). If in "Ulrica" there are mentions of common places and historical events elsewhere I have dealt with the stories in *The Book of Sand*, so let it suffice a quick summary of its composition and final teachings of that collection. In "The Bribe" de fictional events blend with historical facts (Borges' presence at UT in Austin).¹⁰ Except for the tale on "Avelino Arredondo," the complete set of fictional accounts in *The Book of Sand* are either directly or indirectly related to the Medieval Germanic Literatures.¹¹

In the end, *Magister dixit* and we have no other choice, but to learn the lesson well. As we know, Borges died in Geneva in 1986, and these pages are offered here to pay homage, and in his memory.

10 See Joseph Tyler, "Jorge Luis Borges and Alfonso Reyes: The Unpublished Letters" in *For Borges: A Collection of Critical Essays and Fiction on The Centennial of His Birth (1899-1999)*. Carrollton, GA: Occasional Papers of the International Circle of Borges Scholars, 1999. Pp. 54-55.

11 See Joseph Tyler, "Borges y las literaturas germánicas medievales en el Libro de Arena." *Hispanic Journal* 2.1 (1980): 80-85. Also useful to anyone interested in these relationships, see: Evelio Echeverría, "Neologismos españoles de origen escandinavo y esquimal" included in the same collection *Hispanic Journal* 87-90.

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