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Abstract

Review of Daniel Balderston. *How Borges Wrote*. U of Virginia P, 2018.

Keywords

Borges, Balderston, Latin American Literature, Genetic Criticism

Daniel Balderston. *How Borges Wrote*. U of Virginia P, 2018. vii + 375 pp.

Speaking to a packed auditorium at Harvard University's Sanders Theatre in 1968, Jorge Luis Borges told aspiring writers they should "tamper as little as they can with their own work" (*This Craft of Verse*, Editorial Biblos, 2000). Then at the height of his literary influence, Argentina's most famous writer offered his "Poet's Creed": "The moment comes," he said, "when one has found out what one can do—when one has found one's natural voice, one's rhythm. Then I do not think that slight emendations should prove useful." And yet Daniel Balderston's newest contribution to the study of Borges reveals this bit of wisdom to be yet another "*ficción*" 'fiction' from one of the twentieth century's greatest conjurers of artifice. *How Borges Wrote* is a revelation—quite literally: it reveals, through hand-written manuscripts, typescripts, notebooks, and marginalia, the extensive tampering-with that was central to Borges's creative practice.

The fact that "the marginal and peripheral is essential to Borges's work" is an irony not lost on Balderston, who notes in his introduction that there is no central archive of Borges's manuscripts: "since his papers are dispersed[,] the archive must be constructed" (3, 5). Balderston—author of ten previous books on Borges and Latin American literature, and co-author or editor of many more—compiles and examines over 180 documents, many from private collections, to construct such an archive, including more than eighty high-quality, full-page facsimiles that comprise a third of the book. *How Borges Wrote* is divided into eight chapters, "organized around the materiality of the manuscripts themselves" (19): Reading, Jottings, Notebooks, Possibilities, Copies, Typescripts, Revisions, Fragments. The sheer amount of material presented would be overwhelming without Balderston's lucid organization, patient transcription, and insightful analysis of Borges's idiosyncratic process.

While Balderston's early work focused on intertextual studies, he later pivoted to questions of history, politics, and ideologies in *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (Duke UP, 1993). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, his essays explored mythology, homosexuality, canonicity, and reader-oriented questions. From the beginning, however, textual issues have been a common thread for Balderston as he guided readers through Borges's labyrinth. He has compiled useful indexes, bibliographies, and encyclopedic databases worthy of the creator of Uqbar and Tlön. In 1986 he published an index that later morphed into the comprehensive "Finder's Guide" now housed at the University of Pittsburgh's Borges Center (www.borges.pitt.edu), for which Balderston, the university's Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Modern Languages, serves as director. Given this long trajectory, perhaps it was inevitable that Balderston's scholarship would lead him toward the realm of genetic criticism, which places the writing process on equal footing with

the final product. Geneticists usually discuss the “avant-texte” as the sum of the texts leading up to publication of a finished version, what Balderston in *How Borges Wrote* calls “texts that come before the actual drafting of a first version of the text” (50). Borges, however, also tended to tinker with his texts even after publication, which means multiple “final” versions exist for some writings. For example, Balderston notes that Borges’s first book of poetry “was rewritten several times after its 1923 publication, so that by the time the 1969 introduction is written (in which Borges claims that the book has not been rewritten), the text is very different from the original” (193).

One need not be steeped in the history or methodology of genetic criticism, however, to appreciate the sense of order Balderston’s latest book brings to the chaos of so many drafts and revisions. Borges’s handwriting is often inscrutable, and the countless marginal symbols he used to indicate a wide variety of potential choices or alternate readings sometimes change from manuscript to manuscript. “The reason for the plethora of symbols for what is fundamentally the same operation,” Balderston writes, “is that Borges is a writer who entertains not just doubts but doubts within doubts within doubts, so that he needs a system of annotation for possibilities that lead to other possibilities” (18). In the chapter devoted to “Jottings,” Balderston painstakingly transcribes the scrawled lines Borges scribbled onto frontispieces, cover pages, and back matter of books he was reading. He argues that, far from mere marginalia (the writing sometimes has little to do with the subject of the book in which they appear), these jottings represent “a point of departure” where “the text he initially imagined could have become a poem or a prose poem” (52). Such a “garden of forking paths” is everywhere apparent in *How Borges Wrote*. In fact, Balderston points to two drafts of “*El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*” (“The Garden of Forking Paths”) as being of particular interest, the first for its “dizzying series of possibilities, more numerous than the published version” (170), and the second for the way it “expands through vacillation, doubt, forking, evoking or making present the very bifurcation and multiplication of which it speaks” (172). In a brilliant discussion of a single sentence and all its variants from “El Aleph” (“The Aleph”), Balderston devotes seventeen pages to elucidating the ways in which Borges “goes off madly in all directions [while] at the same time working from a still center” (154).

How Borges Wrote makes it clear that, despite his denials, “Borges revised extensively” (193). Perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates that our reading of Borges has itself been “bound up with an aesthetic of the fragment” because it too is always “unfinished, messy, [a] self-contradictory draft, with its plethora of variants . . . a fractious and fractured whole” (210). With its bilingual transcriptions and detailed scholarly apparatus, this complex and challenging text might initially seem to appeal only to Borges scholars and genetic critics; on closer inspection, though, Balderston’s lively and engaging prose is refreshingly light on jargon and

deserves a broad audience. Even those who have read the entirety of Borges's work will discover in Balderston's new book something unexpected, a "ravishing richness" (214) just at the margins of what they thought was familiar.

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