

THE MAKING OF JORGE LUIS BORGES
AS AN
ARGENTINE CULTURAL ICON

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List of Abbreviations

The complete works of Jorge Luis Borges have been abbreviated throughout the thesis as follows:

<i>OCI</i>	<i>Obras completas</i> , 3rd edn, vol. 1 (Barcelona: Emecé, 1996)
<i>OCII</i>	<i>Obras completas</i> , 2nd edn, vol. 2 (Barcelona: Emecé, 1999)
<i>OCIII</i>	<i>Obras completas</i> , vol. 3 (Barcelona: Emecé, 1997)
<i>OCIV</i>	<i>Obras completas</i> , vol. 4 (Barcelona: Emecé, 1996)
<i>OCEC</i>	<i>Obras completas en colaboración</i> , 5th edn (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997)

Abstract

Jorge Luis Borges, a literary figure intimately linked to Argentina's sense of cultural identity, has evoked both veneration and vilification among the country's intellectuals and the general public. Despite the vast amount of work written about his life and work in Argentina and abroad, no comprehensive examination of the construction of the author as an Argentine cultural icon has been produced so far. This thesis focuses on Borges as cultural signifier and it examines the often conflicting facets of the construction of Borges as icon. It argues that the ideas, hopes, fears and demands that Argentine people have placed upon the author – thus constructing the icon – are also those that allow them to define their cultural identity. Thus, the study sheds light on the mechanisms of the ongoing construction of Argentine identity and exposes the complexity of the process by drawing from critical, political and media discourses.

The main images and conceptions of Borges examined and contested in the present work include his perceived social, political and intellectual elitism; his perceived positioning as a writer detached from Argentina's socio-political reality; the interpretation of his admiration for English literature as a way of disregarding Argentine culture; and finally the image of the author as a perpetual old blind sage with no links to popular culture. The study of these images and conceptions is elaborated through the analysis of biographies, photographs, comic strips and the promotion of so-called 'Borgesian' spaces in the city of Buenos Aires. These are studied in relation to the socio-political, historical and cultural contexts in which they were produced.

This study is based on the view that the intertwined processes of the construction of the icon and of identity formation are fluid and in constant development. In this way, the thesis does not seek to reveal an essence of Borges; it aims to uncover the complexity of the operations that constitute the definition of Argentine cultural identity through Borges, focusing on the process rather than on an end result.

Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Signed:

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Acknowledgements

In 1985, during a talk which took place in my hometown of San Fernando, only a few hundred metres away from the house where, at the time, I was busy being a teenager, Borges said: ‘A mí se me hace cuento que empezó Buenos Aires, la considero tan eterna como el agua y el aire, y mis versos, unos logrados y otros no tanto, no hubiesen sido posibles sin ese aire y esa agua.’¹ This thesis would not have been possible without the air, the river or the people of San Fernando, my family and friends. It celebrates the memory of the Maestro, Borges, whom I have never venerated personally, but whose immense generosity I have enjoyed in the inexhaustible experience that is reading, and infinitely re-writing his work. This thesis presented me with the risk of tiring of the Borgesian oeuvre: in this sense, I have failed. Blissfully.

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¹Darío L. Luciano, *Borges en San Fernando: Jorge Luis Borges en el Ateneo Popular Esteban Echeverría* (Victoria, Pcia. Bs. As: Ediciones Ocruxaves, 1996), p. 86.

offering academic advice, but also, by devoting plenty of time to listening to me. Fernanda Peñaloza particularly encouraged me to develop an academic profile which could extend beyond the production of the thesis. She encouraged me to share my work with others by speaking at conferences and other such events, and also, to establish a network of colleagues within the field of Latin American Studies. As a fellow Argentine, working with her allowed me to maintain an awareness of the Argentine context of my research and contributed to stimulate my own personal quest for cultural identity. Karl Posso supervised the last stage of the thesis, ruthlessly reading through my work without leaving any words unturned. His passion for language tested the limits of my own knowledge, particularly of the English language. He looked after the arguments of this thesis with a keen eye for detail and insistence on clarity. Chris Perriam believed in the project and supported it from the start in all its aspects.

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Dedication

Dejo a los varios porvenires (no a todos) mi jardín de senderos que se bifurcan.

J.L. Borges, 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan'

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Don Tito Anselmi, my grandfather, who didn't read books but told me the stories that have largely made me who I am. And also to the memory of Dr Michael O'Ryan, who was proud of my 'pursuit of wisdom'.

I experienced the uncertainties, anxieties and unimaginable pains and joys of labour, birth and parenting whilst working on an exploration of the discourses that construct my country's – my own – cultural identity. This would not have been possible otherwise: the richness and uniqueness of this thesis is due to – and not in spite of – the fact that I am a woman, an Argentine émigré and a mother. It is for my son, Santiago and for my daughter, Fianna, to whom the future belongs, a future that I hope will be filled with infinite possible paths and hours of pleasurable reading.

Introduction

Buscar en Jorge Luis Borges el *factor Borges*, esa propiedad, ese elemento singular, esa molécula que hace que Borges sea Borges y que [...] desde hace más o menos cuarenta años vienen encarnizándose con Borges y con su obra, hace también que el mundo sea cada día un poco más borgeano. [...] No hay, por supuesto, *un* elemento Borges sino muchos, y todos son históricos, acotados como están por la ceguera fatal del horizonte mismo que los establece.²

Alan Pauls, *El factor Borges* (2000)

As Alan Pauls suggests, the search of the ‘Borges factor’ has been intense: vast amounts of critical work and biographical accounts have been written as part of it. Surprisingly little, however, has been written about the mechanisms of this ongoing quest itself. This thesis focuses on that ‘fatal blindness of the horizons’ which constructs the variety of historical ‘Borges elements’ that Pauls mentions. It seeks to demonstrate the fluid quality of the process and the illusory nature of its aim. Crucially, the thesis intends to uncover the intimate links between the processes of construction of Borges and of formation of an Argentine cultural identity.³ The latter comprises a culture’s history but also its mythology, a sense of the present and anxieties and expectations about the future. Following María Cristina Pons, the thesis investigates the role of the figure of Borges in the mythical universe which encompasses the collective dreams of

²Alan Pauls, ‘Prólogo’, *El factor Borges: Nueve ensayos ilustrados* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de cultura económica, 2000), pp. 7-8, italics in the original.

³Interestingly, in a discussion on Argentina’s quest for a definition of its national ‘essence’, Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo note that ‘in his essays and fictional works, the writer Jorge Luis Borges contended that Argentine identity was an elusive and mobile frontier between conflicting cultural worlds,’ in Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo (eds.), *The Argentina Reader. History, Culture, Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 9.

Argentines. There are many other figures, notably Carlos Gardel, Diego Maradona and Eva Perón, who also play a part in this complex reality which penetrates the various aspects of what constitutes the culture, memory and identity of Argentina: ranging from the quotidian to the sacred, they include politics, economics, religion, art and literature. Thus, the role of Borges within the Argentine mythical universe, which, as Pons points out, ‘se re-mitifica todos los días,’⁴ is regarded as the locus where some of the voids and lacks of its culture are articulated.

Borges was born in 1899 in Buenos Aires, where he spent most of his life and wrote most of his work. His greatest ambition was to be a poet: he wrote various collections of poems and essays, but he is best known for his short ‘fictions’, which are considered to have been crucial in the later development of what is commonly known as the Latin American literary ‘boom’. It was also for his short stories that Borges became well-known abroad. He gained international fame in the 60s, after his work had been translated into French, Italian and English. For much of the last twenty years of his life, he travelled extensively, giving lectures and receiving awards, particularly from highly regarded foreign universities. He received, amongst many other honours and awards, the International Publishers’ Prize in 1961; honorary doctorates from Oxford and Columbia Universities in 1971, a gold medal from the Académie Française in 1979, and the Premio Cervantes in 1980, to name but a few. Consequent media exposure, which placed him in the spotlight for the rest of his life, made Borges a very public figure, whose presence in Argentine cultural life was strongly felt, and whose every word was closely scrutinized. He died in Switzerland in 1986.

‘Vende patria’ and ‘Maestro’ are among the most common names used in Argentina to refer to Borges. These terms represent two extreme but crucial

⁴María Cristina Pons and Claudia Soria (eds.), *Delirios de grandeza. Los mitos argentinos: memoria, identidad, cultura* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2005), p. 11.

constructions of the writer by fellow Argentines over the last six decades. How do they compare? What do they say about Borges? What does their use say about Argentina's conceptions of the writer? And how does this shed light on Argentina's relationship with its own sense of cultural identity? It is the aim of this thesis to respond to these questions.

'Vende patria' is a phrase loaded with impassioned denunciation typical of the 60s and 70s, when it was most widely used. It is an accusation of treason and has strong links with two other facets of the figure of Borges: that of a writer in an ivory tower detached from the socio-political reality of his country; and his perceived preference for foreign cultures, particularly British culture. In turn, the assumption that Borges was an elite writer and therefore concerned exclusively with the production and consumption of high culture is based on the combination of these two factors. As early as 1957, Juan José Hernández Arregui wrote: 'El rasgo definitorio de la obra de este escritor es su desdén por lo argentino.'⁵ Reactions such as this would gain increasing strength throughout the 60s and 70s. In 1969, for example, Blas Matamoro complained, referring to Borges: 'mal puede representar a la cultura nacional un cipayo incorregible como él.'⁶ These reactions constitute a demand for the writer to engage in national culture and their strength of feeling responds to a seemingly inevitable need to define cultural identity in terms of Borges, whose central position as cultural role model cannot be escaped, as this thesis will demonstrate.

Borges is nowadays often referred to – and indeed, addressed, apostrophically – as 'maestro'. 'Ya entendimos, maestro,' wrote Juan Sasturain in 2006, to conclude a

⁵Juan José Hernández Arregui, 'La imagen colonizada de la Argentina: Borges y el *Martín Fierro*', *Imperialismo y cultura (La política de la inteligencia argentina)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Amerindia, 1957), in *Antiborges*, ed. by Martín Lafforgue (Buenos Aires: Vergara, 1999), pp. 147-66 (p. 147).

⁶Blas Matamoro, 'Detrás de la penumbra está Inglaterra', *Borges o el juego trascendente* (Buenos Aires: Peña Lillo, 1971), in *Antiborges*, pp. 193-250 (p. 249). 'Cipayo' is another word for traitor.

reflection on Borges's 1933 article 'Modos de G.K. Chesterton'.⁷ Here, Borges said about his greatly admired Chesterton, who had recently died: 'Quedan las caras de su fama, quedan sus proyecciones inmortales,' a phrase which later applied to Borges himself.⁸ Arguably, the more positive trend represented by the use of 'maestro' is characteristic of recent years, although it has by no means replaced the old 'vende patria': both have existed side by side, together with other more nuanced perceptions of the writer. The constructions of Borges as cultural role model and as a writer in an ivory tower are related. The image of a Borges in old age is a case in point: the construction of the writer as a perpetually old man – an image reinforced by his blindness – is, at the same time, a way of accentuating his conservatism and a depiction of a venerable tribal elder. These constructions of the writer tend to intersect, as this thesis will demonstrate. The figure of the labyrinth is used, for example, to associate Borges with an almost mythological, higher intellectual plane, where he is detached from the world of mere mortals. If used in conjunction with political accusations of elitism or Euro-centrism, this yields a writer in an ivory tower whose work can only appeal to the learned elite. It has, however, been used positively, to refer to Borges as a godlike figure whose eternal old age is a sign of wisdom.

What these constructions of the writer have in common is that they are based on Borges's perceived position as Argentine cultural signifier: a central figure that has been instrumental in the quest for a definition of the country's cultural identity. The thesis seeks to prove that this position, reinforced by the emergence of the 'Parricida' generation of intellectuals of the 60s (whose aim was to kill the 'father' Borges), is still

⁷Juan Sasturain, 'Los modos de J.L.B.', *Página/12*, 14 June 2006, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/subnotas/2826-1021-2006-06-14.html [accessed 19 March 2010].

⁸Jorge Luis Borges, 'Modos de G.K. Chsterton', *Sur*, 22 (1933), in *Borges en Sur. 1931-1980*, ed. by Sara Luisa del Carril and Mercedes Rubio de Socchi (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999), pp. 18-23 (p. 18). Most recently, Alan Pauls also refers to Borges as 'maestro' in an article that assesses the impact of the Borgesian tradition on contemporary Argentine writers in 'La herencia Borges', *Variaciones Borges*, 29 (2010), 177-88 (p. 177).

strong today.⁹ This is evidenced in the words of Josefina Ludmer who, in 1999, wondered: ‘¿Cómo salir de Borges?’¹⁰ and came to the conclusion that the starting points for ‘otra posición de lectura que me permita salir de Borges están en Borges’ (p. 297). This was in the context of an attempt to think of Argentine literature from a different perspective, one in which Borges is not necessarily the pivotal point. Seven years later, Noé Jitrik referred to the writer as a national success story and reflected that Borges ‘sigue estando en todas partes [...] su figura se extiende como un manto.’¹¹ The evolution of this relationship of Argentine thinkers with the figure of Borges was traced and analysed by Martín Lafforgue in *Antiborges* (1999), a collection of critical texts dating from as early as 1926 to 1997. This thesis goes beyond this by incorporating the general public’s construction of the Borges image.

When the reflections on Borges’s canonical status within the Argentine literary tradition are considered alongside the reception of his life and work outside of intellectual circles, it becomes evident that, to borrow Ludmer’s words, Argentina is not ready to define itself culturally without reference to Borges. This responds to the points of contact between the iconicity of Borges and the formation of Argentine cultural identity, which this thesis explores. The intersections between the milieus of intellectual activity, the media and politics where the construction of the writer emerges are here explored through an in-depth analysis of cultural products such as biographies, photographs and comic strips; and of the promotion of what I call ‘Borgesian’ urban spaces. This is the first substantial piece of research to analyse the figure of Borges by bringing together this variety of discourses.

⁹See Hernández Arregui and Matamoro in *Antiborges*. See also Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *El juicio de los parricidas: la nueva generación argentina y sus maestros* (Buenos Aires: Deucalión, 1956).

¹⁰Josefina Ludmer, ‘¿Cómo salir de Borges?’, in *Jorge Luis Borges. Intervenciones sobre pensamiento y literatura*, ed. by William Rowe, Claudio Canaparo and Annick Louis (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2000), pp. 289-300 (p. 297).

¹¹Noé Jitrik, ‘Apuntes sobre el manto borgeano’, *Página/12*, 14 June 2006, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/subnotas/2826-1022-2006-06-14.html [accessed 30 May 2010].

A Textual Approach to Cultural Analysis

Although the thesis provides brief analyses of some Borgesian texts, it does not pivot around literary analysis per se. Even though a large number of critical texts are used, this research considers cultural practices other than written text as forms of text. Thus, my analysis mainly inscribes itself within the conceptual and methodological discourse of cultural studies. The largely poststructuralist approach underlying this study is reflected in my reading of a variety of cultural products as text, which is based on Derrida's famous words: '*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte.*'¹² Thus, Derrida warns us against attempting to look behind texts in the hope of finding an ultimate truth which exists independently of '*other* texts, other horizons, other socio-historico-linguistico-political presuppositions.'¹³

In this context, the thesis echoes the Barthesian demystification of cultural practices by showing that they are based on historical constructions, teasing out the conventions that underlie them.¹⁴ Following Umberto Eco, these '*discursos cotidianos*' are approached with permanent suspicion, as '*no se trata de que haya que descubrir las cosas bajo los discursos, a lo sumo, discursos bajo las cosas.*'¹⁵ The thesis thus proceeds by deconstructing certain oppositions surrounding the figure of Borges in order to expose the ways in which dichotomous notions such as popular/high culture; centre/periphery (or nationalism/Euro-centrism) are played out in the construction of certain images of the author. In this context, it would be unrealistic to claim that I am able to position myself completely outside of the discourses that underlie the construction of Borges, as doing so would go against my claim that studies like this one

¹²Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.

¹³Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 80

¹⁴Consider, for example, Roland Barthes's analysis of everyday activities in *Mythologies* (1957).

¹⁵Umberto Eco, *La estrategia de la ilusión*, trans. by Edgardo Oviedo (Buenos Aires: Lumen, 1992), pp. 9-10.

contribute to such construction. It would also presuppose a de-contextualization that would contradict the basic tenets of the thesis, that is, it would imply the existence of absolute truths or essentialisms. Thus, this thesis itself constitutes yet another construct, that is another chapter in the transformation of Borges into a cultural icon.

This thesis particularly considers the notion of authorial decentring and the pre-eminence of the reader (a reader constructed in the text) in its analysis of five biographies of Borges in Chapter 1. How do biographers relate to the premise, advanced by poststructuralist thought, that the author is not a guarantor of absolute truth, but, rather, that, separate from the historical person, it is a function of the text which is ‘historically and structurally variable according to the cultural assumptions of specific systems of discursive arrangement’?¹⁶ Here, bearing in mind the complex and eclectic nature of biographical activity, the objective is to expose the possible other discourses that have gone into the biographers’ own construction of the author. The use of the term ‘discourses’ is based on the basic foucauldian notion that categories that we take for granted are not based on inalterable truths, but, rather, they have been constructed historically and are imbued with power and knowledge, as Umberto Eco explains in a discussion of Foucault: ‘el poder no solo es represión e interdicción, sino también incitación al discurso y producción de saber.’¹⁷ My approach focuses on the concept of projection taken in its widest sense. One of the main premises of psychoanalysis, the notion of projection is picked up by Foucault as the main mechanism for the textual construction of the author-function mentioned above. The foucauldian view claims that the projections that are involved in this process are based on certain motivations and anxieties which a reader brings to texts. This thesis extends this notion to a variety of

¹⁶Seán Burke, ‘Ideologies and Authorship’, in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern. A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 215-21 (p. 217).

¹⁷Umberto Eco, ‘La lengua, el poder, la fuerza’, in *La estrategia de la ilusión*, tr. Edgardo Oviedo (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 1992), first published in 1979, pp. 336-54 (p. 339).

media, including the photographic and the audiovisual in order to disentangle a particular set of discourses that contribute to the construction of the author and the definition of a cultural identity.

Most of the ideas that can be identified in this study as poststructuralist are drawn primarily from Borgesian thought. Thus, it follows Uruguayan critic and Borges biographer Emir Rodríguez Monegal, who had difficulty understanding why Derrida had taken so long ‘en llegar a las luminosas perspectivas que Borges había abierto hacía ya tantos años.’¹⁸ Deconstruction, he claims ‘la había practicado en Borges *avant la lettre*’ (para. 1). Among the most relevant of these concepts, Borges had shifted the focus of the aesthetic experience away from the attainment of an end result and emphasized the richness of the process itself in his article ‘La muralla y los libros’ in 1950.¹⁹ A year later he explored notions of decentring in ‘La esfera de Pascal’, where he also wrote: ‘Quizá la historia universal es la historia de la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas,’²⁰ a sentence which Derrida later quoted in his famous *L’écriture et la différence*, as Monegal points out.²¹ In an article which considers the influence of Borgesian thought on thinkers like Derrida and Foucault, among others, Alfonso de Toro summarizes these tenets:

Borges aclara que no hay mimesis, y con esto no hay origen, sino una infinidad de trazas. Cada libro, cada texto [...] se disuelve en otro [...] socava la autoría y la autoridad de la palabra y de su productor, socava *la verdad*, para construir una

¹⁸Emir Rodríguez Monegal, ‘Borges y Derrida: Boticarios’, *Maldoror. Revista de la ciudad de Montevideo*, 21 (1985), 125-32, online at www.archivodeprensa.edu.uy/r_monegal/bibliografia/criticas/crit_06.htm [accessed 4 April 2010], para. 1, I.

¹⁹Jorge Luis Borges, ‘La muralla y los libros’, *La Nación*, 22 October 1950, later published in *Otras Inquisiciones, OCII*, p. 13.

²⁰Jorge Luis Borges, ‘La esfera de Pascal’, in *Otras Inquisiciones, OCII*, p. 16.

²¹Rodríguez Monegal, ‘Borges y Derrida’, para 1, III.

escritura [...] diseminante, para establecer la *búsqueda* como último y único sentido.²²

Reference is made throughout the thesis to these basic concepts in the work of Borges, which are either examined in his essays or illustrated by his ‘ficciones’ or poems.

The next section explains how the thesis approaches the question of the cultural icon. In this way, his importance within the context of contemporary Argentina, and the delineation of the methodology of the study – which follow – can be seen in the light of how the icon is defined here, particularly in terms of its complexity.

Constructing the Icon

The ways in which Borges’s positioning in relation to the intellectual and political arenas was perceived and judged by fellow Argentines throughout his life (and indeed posthumously) has determined the ways in which this salient figure was constructed as an Argentine cultural icon. In this sense, I understand a cultural icon to be an empty vessel into which a culture pours its anxieties and questions about identity. As an image which in its quasi-religious dimension invokes the presence of what we may call a ‘cultural divinity’, the icon is revered, as Chapter 2 explores focusing particularly on the photographic image of Borges. However, our relationship with the icon is more complex than one of worship as it becomes, at the same time, object of our demands. The icon must fulfil our expectations because we think that it is given to it to do so. Failure to deliver results in our disappointment and sometimes, condemnation, as Chapter 3 demonstrates. In this sense, this thesis departs from studies like Nicola

²²Alfonso de Toro, ‘Borges/Derrida/Foucault: *Pharmakeus*, heterotopia o más allá de la literatura (‘hors-littérature’): escritura, fantasmas, simulacros, máscaras, carnaval y... Atlön/Tlön, Ykva/Uqbar, Hlaer/Jangr, Hrön (N) / Hrönir, Ur y otras cifras’, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Pensamiento y saber en el siglo XX*, ed. by Fernando de Toro and Alfonso de Toro (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1999), online at www.uni-leipzig.de/~detoro/sonstiges/Pharmakeus_spanisch.pdf [accessed 4 April 2010], p. 149, italics in the original.

Miller's 'Contesting the Cleric: The Intellectual as Icon in Modern Spanish America' (2003), which examines the making of six Latin American intellectuals, including José Martí and Gabriela Mistral, as cultural icons.²³ Miller's analysis works by linking positive traits present in each of these personalities which are consistent with certain utopias related to the various struggles that are generally perceived as being characteristic of the region. Each figure is identified with a religious phrase which in turn further elevates their consecrated position. Miller's analysis is straight-forwardly positive and touches on the idealistic construction of icons as god-like figures worthy of reverence. She recognizes that this is simplifying the issue:

There are, of course, problems that arise from making icons out of intellectuals, not least that their ideas tend to be reduced to one-dimensional form. Icons are touchstones to what Erwin Panofsky called 'intrinsic meaning': they are telling about the cultural concerns of any particular moment of history, but they do not allow for tension, conflict or debate about these concerns. (Miller, p. 75)

The evolution of the iconization of Borges examined in this thesis proves that Miller's simplification does not necessarily follow, as the notion of worship is only one of the many, often contradictory, facets of the construction of Borges's iconicity.

The next section introduces the role of the figure of Borges in the branding of Argentina as a global product for export, in order to emphasize the importance of the icon within the delineation of an Argentine identity outside of the field of intellectual activity and into the arena of cultural consumption by the general public.

²³Nicola Miller, 'Contesting the Cleric: The Intellectual as Icon in Modern Spanish America', in *Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies*, ed. by Stephen Hart and Richard Young (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 62-75 (p. 74).

Branding Argentina, Branding Borges

En estos tiempos Borges se compra más “para tener” que con fines de lectura.²⁴

Marcelo Abadi, 1999.

The central role of the image of Borges in the construction of the image of Argentina can be clearly seen in ‘Estrategia de Marca País’ (EMP), a set of plans and targets aimed at the creation of a brand profile for the country. The project, launched in 2004, led by the national government’s ‘Secretaría de Medios de Comunicación’, aims to publicize Argentina abroad with a view to its insertion in foreign markets, thus benefiting from revenue generated from, among others, the tourist, cultural and educational industries. The strategy pivots on the desired qualities of inalterability and perpetuity of a cohesive image for Argentina, and is expected to stand above the ideology and political agendas of successive governments. The result, in the shape of a concrete ‘brand’ for Argentina, is expected to be presented officially to coincide with the bicentennial celebrations of the revolution that opened the way to Argentina’s independence in May 2010.

As part of the plans to identify the basic components of an Argentine identity which could be marketed abroad, the public opinion consultancy firm ‘CEOP’ (Centro de Estudios de Opinión Pública) carried out a survey in early 2005 in which 1,211 members of the public and 1,144 ‘líderes de opinión’ took part.²⁵ The survey identified the figure of Jorge Luis Borges as one of the ‘personajes históricos más representativos de la Argentina.’ Interestingly, opinion leaders also identified Borges as Argentina’s

²⁴Marcelo Abadi, ‘Siete noches y un error’ *Variaciones Borges*, 8 (1999), p. 134-7 (p. 134).

²⁵‘Líderes de opinión’ refers to leading personalities who have the power to influence public opinion because of their position as business directors, politicians or media personalities.

fifth most representative *current* personality.²⁶ This speaks of the writer as a figure who threads through high, dominant, popular or mass and emerging sectors of Argentine culture.

However, a similar study which was carried out in 2006 to assess the general reading habits of Argentines, found that ‘desde el punto de vista cuantitativo, y según lo manifiestan los entrevistados, no aparecen títulos ni autores emblemáticos. Desde lo cualitativo, solo se puede mencionar [...] la recuperación de algunos pocos títulos de autor nacional’.²⁷ Borges does not appear among the very few Argentine authors mentioned in this study. So what makes this internationally acclaimed and influential writer whose books are not widely read by the ‘average’ 21st-Century Argentine so emblematic of ‘Argentineness’? What does the choice of the writer as representative figure shown in the first survey say about the ‘average’ Argentine’s own perception of our own cultural identity?

This study does not, of course, assume the existence of an ‘average’ Argentine. However, it does identify certain more or less consistent historical and cultural trends which inform a notion of Argentine identity, which, in turn, can be recognized as motivations for the construction of Borges as a cultural icon. Among these, the development of Argentina’s relationship with Europe, particularly France and Britain, throughout the 20th Century is perhaps the most relevant. The tensions within this complex relationship lie at the core of the Argentine anxiety regarding cultural identity: Europe as cultural model oscillated between veneration and rejection, where the

²⁶Carlos Galván, ‘San Martín y Maradona, los que mejor representan al país’, *Clarín*, 31 March 2005, online at www.clarin.com/diario/2005/03/31/sociedad/s-03015.htm [accessed 10 March 2010].

²⁷The study was carried out by a specialized research team of ‘Sistema de Consumos Culturales (Secretaría de Medios de Comunicación, Presidencia de la Nación)’, led by the Secretary of Media, Enrique R. Albistur. Renowned sociologist Roberto Bacman was among the chief investigators. 3,051 people between the ages of 12 and 70 were consulted. All social strata are represented in the study. ‘Consumos culturales 2006’, online at [www.consumosculturales.gov.ar/index.php?option=com_ccs&cid\[0\]=3&task=investigación&Itemid=3](http://www.consumosculturales.gov.ar/index.php?option=com_ccs&cid[0]=3&task=investigación&Itemid=3) and at [www.consumosculturales.gov.ar/index.php?option=com_ccs&task=grupocultural&cid\[\]=2](http://www.consumosculturales.gov.ar/index.php?option=com_ccs&task=grupocultural&cid[]=2) [accessed 10 March 2010].

definition of an Argentine culture was supposed to lie in the measure of the distance between the two. Thus, for the elite, the success of the definition lay in how well foreign models were imitated; and for the nationalist populists, in how effectively these models were repudiated. This dominates most of the 20th Century and it can be clearly seen as an important contributing factor in the construction of Borges's love of all things British, for example, as cultural elitism and disdain of Argentine culture. The politicisation of these binaries fuelled, particularly throughout the 60s and 70s, the construction of Borges as 'enemy' in the eyes of the more politically engaged intellectuals of the left, who believed that writers should focus on the national and have a commitment to the struggle for a better, fairer world. An analysis of this politicisation – which occurred at a crucial time of great political and social unrest – shows the important role played by the discursive practices dominant at different historical moments of the 20th Century in Argentina in this particular construction of Borges.

A Historical Approach

This year, 2010, as Argentina celebrates its bicentenary, it is a suitable time to reflect on what it means to be Argentine. As the national government took the opportunity to exploit this occasion, not only by organizing a variety of celebratory events, but also by creating 'Argentina' as a brand, the choice of Borges as one of the figures which best represent a sense of 'Argentineness' is highly significant. This thesis examines a variety of examples of Borges's use as a national cultural referent, arguing that such uses respond to the fact that the figure of the writer has been made to condense certain anxieties and expectations regarding Argentine cultural identity.

The thesis will show that these anxieties rest largely on Argentina's complex relationship with 'foreignness', which has been perceived either as something valuable

or as a threat. It will also show that the accompanying expectations are related to a perceived need for national cultural cohesion. This need for cohesion – as chapter 2 will argue in relation to the construction of Borges as national cultural treasure – can be traced back to a homogenizing approach to nation-wide, state education in response to the perceived threat of lawlessness (‘barbarism’) in the shape of, among others, mass immigration, particularly during the first half of the 20th Century. In this period, ‘foreignness’ meant two separate things for Argentina’s developing sense of identity. One referred to powerful nations from where refinement and high culture were imported: the Argentine elite were traditionally educated following French or British models. A different – undesirable – notion of ‘foreignness’ was that associated with the immigrants that arrived from impoverished nations, particularly Italy and Spain.

In an analysis of the context in which the Radical Party developed in Argentina during the first three decades of the 20th Century, Torcuato S. di Tella refers to the impact of mass immigration on the country in the context of this two-fold approach to foreignness: ‘Local elites, even if they certainly distrusted the massive waves of new entrants [...] had no qualms about the incorporation of the more successful immigrants, who had made it into the bourgeoisie.’²⁸ As far as the immigrants themselves were concerned, di Tella points out that, instead of the situation in other countries, of the ‘native discriminating against the foreigner [...] it was the foreigners who discriminated against the natives’ (p. 34). This attitude made a lasting impact on the way future Argentine-born generations would relate to their own native land, as, in effect, their immigrant parents and grandparents ‘discriminated what in time became the country of their own children, and their children inherited those attitudes’ (p. 34). This binding of foreignness and class (where poor Spaniards or Italians were seen as undesirable, whilst

²⁸Torcuato S. di Tella, *History of Political Parties in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2004), p. 34.

the British and the French were admired and emulated, for example), and a consequent perception of Argentina as inferior, is crucial to the quest for a national identity throughout the 20th Century. Di Tella reflects that, ‘most probably, this is the source of [Argentina’s] large literature of uprootedness and lack of identity which has been dominant for decades’ (p. 34), and he describes the situation as a ‘Borges nightmare’ (p. 34). This indicates that these important issues are as inherent to the writer as they are to the nation.

Di Tella’s so-called ‘Borges nightmare’ consists in the repetition of the trope that lies at the core of a national literature built upon what Ricardo Piglia identified as ‘el intento de representar el mundo del enemigo, del distinto, del otro (se llame bárbaro, gaucho, indio o inmigrante).’²⁹ Thus, the perceived need for national cohesion which motivated much of the nationalistic agendas of the 20th Century can be traced back to the 19th-Century discourse of ‘civilization and barbarism’, which, as Di Tella rightly points out, lies at the core of Argentina’s earliest and most influential literary manifestations. As Edwin Williamson observed in relation to Spanish American societies towards the mid-19th Century:

There was a general awareness among educated creoles that lawlessness threatened to become endemic and might frustrate the creation of the free and prosperous nations envisaged by the Liberators. It was fear of this ‘barbarism’, this appalling breakdown of social and political order, that informed much of the literature that would be produced in the nineteenth century and beyond.³⁰

²⁹ Ricardo Piglia, ‘Echeverría y el lugar de la ficción’, in *La Argentina en pedazos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Urraca, 1993), pp. 8-10 (p. 9)

³⁰ Edwin Williamson, ‘Civilization and Barbarism’: Literary and Cultural Developments I’, in *The Penguin History of Latin America* (Revised Edition) (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 285-310 (p. 285).

In Argentina it was the case, notably, of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo o la civilización y la barbarie* (1845), Esteban Echeverría's *El matadero* (written in 1840 and published posthumously in 1871), and José Hernández's *El gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872). Piglia traces the origin of the repeated narration of a basic violent scene which is told twice, to the first two, and claims that this confrontation 'ha sido narrada de distinto modo a lo largo de nuestra literatura por lo menos hasta Borges' (p. 8). The thesis explores this fundamental 19th Century narrative which persisted in the 20th Century and its role in the definition of a national identity, as it unravels its articulation with the construction of Borges as national cultural icon.

The relevance of a historical approach to the study of the construction of Borges the icon responds to a need to disentangle 'the ways in which narratives of the past [...] have been iconized as images of identity that have been incorporated into notions of nationality and statehood.'³¹ Several historical moments in 20th-Century Argentina are particularly relevant to this thesis, as the political and ideological discourses prevalent determined the reception of the author and his work and thus were crucial to the construction of the icon. It was the singular intertwining of Borges's personal history and the historical development of the country, that made this author amongst all others, a cultural icon.

Argentine public opinion has traditionally seen politics in terms of opposition and rivalry, as Noé Jitrik points out as he exhorts Argentines to move beyond such antagonistic views: 'conservar esos 'sí' y esos 'no' como si no pudieran disolverse en un 'acaso' supone la aniquilación de unos y la esclavitud de los otros.'³² This way of approaching politics, which is still prevalent, implies a simplification of the terms of the

³¹Stephen Hart and Richard Young (eds.), *Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies* (London: Arnold, 2003), p. 8.

³²Noé Jitrik, 'Exquisitos y justos', *Página/12*, 3 April 2007, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/imprimir/diario/contratapa/13-82698-2007-04-03.html [accessed 19 February 2010].

political equation, as Ernesto Laclau explains, ‘replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise.’³³ I would like to move away from such dichotomies by treating relevant historical moments as transitions, focusing on the tensions that characterize them in order to expose the complexity of discourses prevalent at the time and which contributed to the various constructions of Borges. The analysis of these issues is, of necessity, general, as the in-depth exploration of their complexity exceeds the scope of the present study.

The first historical moment of the 20th Century that this thesis particularly refers to is the struggle of the middle classes (largely represented by Yrigoyenist Radicalism with which a young Borges identified) to maintain power in the transition between the end of exclusive rule by the oligarchy in 1912 and the rise of nationalist populist Peronism in the 40s. During this period, as David Rock explains, the prevalent political situation ‘is best pictured as an exercise in informal power sharing between the traditional elites and the urban middle classes,’ a relationship that was ‘subjected to a multitude of strains and had the appearance of perennial conflict rather than compromise.’³⁴ At the same time, this transition was mirrored in the change in the demographic configuration of Argentina, and particularly of its capital city, as the dominance of the ‘criollo’ elite was gradually replaced by a more multicultural population given the mass immigration between the 1870s and the 1930s.³⁵

The influence of the oligarchic governments and their close ties with Britain and France is particularly relevant to the definition of the city of Buenos Aires being essentially European, as Chapter 4 explores. After World War II, Argentina failed to replace its declining connection with Europe with an alignment with the United States,

³³ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 18.

³⁴ David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1982* (London: Tauris, 1986), p. 215.

³⁵ See, for example John Lynch, Roberto Cortés Conde, Juan Carlos Torre and Liliana de Riz, *Historia de la Argentina* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2001), pp. 68-69.

which ‘underlay the collapse of the conservatives in 1940-1943’ and ‘left the way open for the nationalists, from among whose ranks Perón rose.’³⁶ Peronism brought with it an unprecedented political protagonism for the working class, forcing another change in the configuration of the political arena which would determine the history of the rest of the century.³⁷

Another fundamental aspect of recent Argentine history is the intermittent succession of de facto governments, both civil and military, culminating in the brutally repressive, extreme-right military dictatorship of 1976-1983.³⁸ Borges’s mature years and his rise to international fame coincide with this period of intermittence, particularly after Perón was toppled by the *Revolución Libertadora* of 1955. His public reactions to de facto governments in general largely determined popular perceptions of him as a supporter of oppressive regimes, which, coupled with his construction as a writer in an ivory tower on the part of ‘progresista’ intellectuals, fuelled his vilification in the 60s and 70s. The transition to democracy after 1983 is the period in which this construction is re-evaluated. Borges’s death occurred in this crucial period of political transition.

Critical Perspective

The thesis is generally informed by some of the most relevant debates in Latin American cultural criticism, particularly Argentine writer and academic Beatriz Sarlo’s position in relation to them. Sarlo’s singular position, both as protagonist and cultural critic of the turbulent 70s, allows for a valuable ‘Argentine’ perspective on these debates. Thus, the figure of Borges is examined in terms of the tension between popular

³⁶Rock, *Argentina*, p. 261.

³⁷Di Tella briefly discusses the early configuration of the Peronist party in *History of Political Parties in Twentieth-Century Latin America*, where he underlines the fact that ‘what started as an attempt at class harmony, ended up arousing the most intense experience of class confrontation in Argentina’s history.’ p. 73.

³⁸David Rock provides an account of the impact of authoritarian factions in Argentina in *Authoritarian Argentina. The Nationalist Movement, its History and its Impact* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995).

culture and high culture and the place of the intellectual in his/her Latin American and national context. These debates, in particular as regards the figure of the intellectual, started in earnest in the late 50s, when the Southern Cone saw the rise of a generation of left-wing intellectuals like those grouped around *Contorno* magazine in Buenos Aires and *Marcha* in Montevideo. Strongly guided by dependency theory and national populist views which largely characterized the seminal work of Ángel Rama, these debates subsequently developed throughout the 60s and 70s.³⁹ These developments coincide, chronologically, with Borges's mature years and international renown. Their impact is evident, firstly, in the particular constructions of the author as elitist and foreign-loving during the period; and secondly, in the subsequent analyses of his work up until the 90s.

In 1985, Beatriz Sarlo manifested her impatience with the state of affairs of Argentine left-wing intelligentsia, whose attitude could be summarized by the idea, 'proclaimed in the name of the Revolution, that it is futile, if not a covert treason, to change the political positions maintained during the last two decades; as a result, ideological and theoretical immobility is thus vindicated as merit.'⁴⁰ Her position, especially in relation to Rama's pioneering critical stance, was that the reductionist approach to Latin American criticism predominant in the 60s and 70s represented a methodological flaw that prevented the field from moving forward.⁴¹ Most importantly, Sarlo's re-evaluation of the term 'periphery' interrogates the dichotomy between Argentina as peripheral and Europe as central, and proposes an acknowledgement that its peripheral position enables an intertextual relationship which does not occur 'en un

³⁹Patricia D'Allemand, 'Hacia una crítica literaria latinoamericana: Nacionalismo y cultura en el discurso de Beatriz Sarlo', in *Mapas culturales para América Latina: culturas híbridas, no simultaneidad, modernidad periférica*, ed. by Sarah de Mojica (Bogotá: CEJA, 2001), pp. 189-200 (p. 190).

⁴⁰Beatriz Sarlo, 'Intellectuals: Scission or Mimesis?', in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. by Ana del Sarto, Alicia Ríos and Abril Trigo (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 250-61 (p. 250). First published in Spanish in *Punto de Vista*, 25 (1985).

⁴¹D'Allemand, 'Hacia una crítica literaria latinoamericana', p. 193.

vacío sociocultural' (p. 197). Sarlo proposes a break from the close ties between politics and cultural criticism in order to achieve a wider view of the complexity of cultural production and critical activity.

This thesis follows Sarlo's style of criticism, which is less restricted by outmoded political views, and her problematization of the notion of national identity as a homogenizing project: 'Me resisto a pensar la cultura argentina como una empresa de homogeneización realizada en nombre de la identidad nacional.'⁴² Instead of focusing on a logic of binaries, which inevitably leads to a sense of exclusion, Sarlo 'desjerarquiza los procesos culturales, en primer lugar entre metrópolis y periferia, pero también entre producción 'culta' y producción popular.'⁴³ I have focused on what I consider to be a new wave of Borgesian criticism whose emergence is closely linked to the publication of Sarlo's influential *Borges, a Writer on the Edge* (1993), which was later translated and revised as *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* (1995). This new way of conceiving the works of Borges entails a repositioning of his work 'on the edge', both in terms of his narrative technique and of the context of their production, leaving behind the notions of universality which saw him as the creator of cosmogonies, stripped of all regionalisms.⁴⁴ Instead, it looks at Borges's 'Argentineness', but only by situating the writer 'en los límites (entre géneros literarios, entre lenguas, entre culturas) [...] un marginal en el centro, un cosmopolita en los márgenes.'⁴⁵ From this perspective, this thesis goes beyond Sarlo's singular take on the 'peripheral' nature of Borges's

⁴²Beatriz Sarlo, 'La izquierda ante la cultura: del dogmatismo al populismo', *Punto de vista*, 20 (1984), 22-5 (pp. 24-5), quoted in D'Allemand, 'Hacia una crítica literaria latinoamericana', p. 195, emphasis in the original.

⁴³D'Allemand, 'Hacia una crítica literaria latinoamericana', p. 197.

⁴⁴In 1996, a conference was held in London where this new positioning was evidenced in the contributions of various academics writing about Borges at the time. These were collected in *Borges and Europe Revisited* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1998).

⁴⁵Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2007), p. 9

positioning and, following Sylvia Molloy,⁴⁶ re-positions the writer ‘in-between’ rather than ‘on the edge’. Sarlo’s idea of ‘filo de dos orillas’⁴⁷ is thus replaced by a kind of liminality, an ‘irresolvable, ever fruitful in-between,’⁴⁸ where the boundary is blurred and the two edges merge into one.

In this sense, the study also differs from the approach chosen by Borges’s latest biographer, Edwin Williamson, who sees the writer’s life in terms of a struggle between opposing forces. Williamson considers that this is mirrored in the trope of the duel in Borges’s ‘ficciones’:⁴⁹ the writer’s life, he suggests, was punctuated by a ‘yearning to assert identity by eliminating a rival,’ even when ‘Borges often liked to show how the victor might in the end be no more than a mirror image of his victim’ (p. ix). I prefer to use the tactic of seeing Borges the man as a complexity, taking care to note and embrace the contradictory nature and the tensions that go into the construction of an identity, and the fact that it is a process rather than an end result. The Borgesian oeuvre does not reveal core truths and, by the same token, Borges the man did not try to delineate a personal or a national identity that might be in any way simplified. Instead, I believe that it is his complexity and embracing of contradictions which pervade his work. It is the crossing of boundaries that positions Borges in the in-between, rather than in the centre or the periphery, as has been claimed.

⁴⁶Sylvia Molloy, ‘Lost in Translation: Borges, the Western Tradition and Fictions of Latin America’, in *Borges and Europe Revisited*, ed. by Evelyn Fishburn (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1998), pp. 8-20.

⁴⁷Sarlo, *Borges*, p. 6.

⁴⁸Molloy, ‘Lost in translation’, p. 20.

⁴⁹Edwin Williamson cites many instances of this trope throughout his biography, such as ‘El puñal’ (1953), ‘El desafío’ (1952), ‘El duelo’ (1970), ‘El sur’ (1952) and ‘Guayaquil’ (1970) amongst others in Edwin Williamson, *Borges: A Life* (London: Viking, 2004).

Borges en todas partes: Narrowing down the Scope.

Como objeto, se lo consagra y consume: se suceden homenajes y conferencias, se ‘reedita’ su ‘arqueología literaria’, se redescubren ‘nuevos inéditos’, pululan biografías y aparecen con llamativa frecuencia otras tantas recopilaciones de entrevistas, diálogos y anécdotas ingeniosas. Se anuncian películas. Hay remeras, llaveros, posters y almanaques con su efigie; muestras fotográficas y concursos literarios se escudan tras su nombre. Las agencias gubernamentales se lo disputan. La opinión pública lo reverencia. La Legislatura porteña avanza un poco más y consagra, con el peso de la ley, el año borgeano. Borges, en fin, está en todas partes.

Martín Lafforgue, ‘Introducción’, *Antiborges*

Martín Lafforgue’s words are a fitting way of justifying my choice of angle, as it reflects that the most distinct characteristic of Jorge Luis Borges as object of study is that both his life and his work have been the subject of a wealth of critical work and media coverage. The beginnings of this vast production can be traced back to the publication of the first book entirely devoted to Borgesian criticism, Adolfo Prieto’s *Borges y la nueva generación* (1954),⁵⁰ and later, the first biography, Alicia Jurado’s *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (1964), which has been followed by more than a dozen others written in Spanish and in English.⁵¹ Therefore, this thesis does not inscribe itself within this long tradition as it does not aim to reveal any previously unknown facts

⁵⁰María Luisa Bastos examines the earliest critiques of Borges dating back to 1923 and she points out the significance of the publication of Prieto’s book in *Borges ante la crítica argentina 1923-1960* (Buenos Aires: Hispamérica, 1974), p. 75.

⁵¹Williamson cites ten other than his own and Jurado’s in *Borges*, pp. 544-5, but these do not include, for example, Alejandro Vaccaro’s two later publications: *El señor Borges* (2004, with Epifanía Robledo de Uveda) and *Borges: Vida y literatura* (2006); or Jason Wilson’s *Jorge Luis Borges* (2006).

about Borges or his work. Instead, it is efforts like these publications which are the object of study, examining the relationship between Borges and his work as the subject of criticism and consumption, and the production of portrayals of the man and analysis of his work. This is where the originality of this thesis lies. It may appear a Herculean task, and it would be, were it not that this thesis focuses on a limited number of areas of appropriation of Borges and does not expect to provide an absolute or ultimate definition of the author nor of his work. Therefore, the wide range of easily available material is reflected in the variety of sources that are referred to and cited throughout. Instead of attempting a more or less comprehensive survey of a vast field, I have narrowed the scope of my sources by carefully selecting the material that appeared most representative of it, in order to provide a well-documented assessment of both the consumption and study of Borges. As far as possible, wherever a book or article or image is referred to, acknowledgement of the existence of further evidence is provided, generally in footnotes, as the availability of a variety of such products lies at the core of the circulation of a certain image of the writer.

The names of certain experts in the field stand out and this is also reflected in the thesis. Most are academics whose work has been published immediately before or during the period of research leading up to the completion of this study. Thus, I refer to the work of contemporaries of Beatriz Sarlo, many of whom publish regularly in the journal *Variaciones Borges*. *Variaciones Borges* has been published biannually since 1996 in Spanish, English and French by the Borges Centre at the University of Pittsburgh, its editor is writer and academic Daniel Balderston.

Apart from specialized books and articles in literary journals, I have also looked at press coverage in the three main national newspapers: *La Nación*, *Clarín* and *Página/12*. I have normally accessed these online. I have aimed for a balanced use of

these publications as a means of reflecting the main ideological views and political positions prevalent in Argentina, given that, in very general terms, *Clarín* is positioned in the centre of the political spectrum, with a generally liberal tendency; *Página/12*'s position is towards the left with a clearly 'progresista' outlook, and *La Nación* is generally perceived to be a conservative newspaper with close ties to the Catholic Church, even though it publishes material from a variety of ideologies. Of the three, *Clarín* 'es por lejos el diario con más lectores y con mayor tirada,'⁵² and it is read across all socio-economic levels. *La Nación* also has wide circulation. Although its readership is smaller than that of the other two, *Página/12*'s relevance lies in that it represents the views of important sectors of the intelligentsia. A selection of articles about Borges's appearance in the media between 1971 and 1980 was obtained from the archive of *Clarín* newspaper, which includes tabloid newspapers such as *La Razón*, *La Prensa* and *Diario Popular*.

Audiovisual material referred to in the thesis was accessed through a variety of archives: material broadcast on Argentine national television and in cinemas was viewed at Buenos Aires-based television channel *Canal 13*, the *Archivo General de la Nación* and the *Audiovideoteca de Escritores*, run by the government of the City of Buenos Aires. These include documentaries, interviews and news reports. Commercially available documentaries on VHS or DVD, as well as those available online, were also consulted.

There are still numerous cultural products on Borges whose analysis exceeds the scope of this thesis. It is worth mentioning, in this context, the attribution of Borges's authorship to the poem best known as 'Instantes' and the phenomenon it has given rise to, that is, its reproduction in several media, such as book marks and as accompaniment

⁵²Hernán Fernández, '¿Quién lee cuál?', *Infobrand Digital*, 6 February 2007, online at www.infobrand.com.ar/notas/8556-%BFQui%E9n-lee-cu%E1%3F [Accessed 9 March 2010].

to images in video montages circulated widely, particularly on the Internet. This, which Iván Almeida approaches as a mystery worthy of detective fiction,⁵³ could also be interpreted as a projection of the lacks and voids in the sense of Argentina's cultural identity that such appropriation fills, as Almeida hints: 'Tal vez el fenómeno resida en una íntima voluntad de ser engañados cuando el mundo no llega a acomodarse a los propios sueños' (p. 246). The attribution of this poem to Borges is perhaps linked to a need for a widely accessible style of writing, one which 'ordinary' Argentines can read and enjoy, and which will bring them closer to the icon. Among the manifestations of a wish to recuperate Borges as a cultural role model for the younger generations which are not studied here, are those expressed through the musical milieu and the Internet. As an example of the first of these, we have the case of the Argentine band *Cuentos Borgeanos*, whose songs revolve around Borgesian tropes like the labyrinth and infinite time.⁵⁴ A study of the context of the band's emergence, as well as a comparative analysis of some of their lyrics and videos in relation both to Borgesian images and elements of Argentine identity, would yield very interesting conclusions which would complement and reinforce those arrived at in this thesis. With regards to the Internet, the popular broadcasting website *YouTube* contains a variety of video postings ranging from televised interviews with the writer, computer-generated animations of Borges's stories, to personal accounts of favourite Borges poems set to music from all over the world.⁵⁵ Reference is made in this thesis to the various Borges fan groups on the social network *Facebook*. However, an in-depth study of the contexts of the creation of these

⁵³Iván Almeida, 'Jorge Luis Borges, autor del poema 'Instantes'', *Variaciones Borges*, 10 (2000), 227-46.

⁵⁴See, for example, Guillermo Zaccagnini, 'Cuentos borgeanos: Nada de "rock literario"', *Clarín*, 3 January 2008, online at www.clarin.com/diario/2008/01/03/espectaculos/c-1576361.htm [accessed 8 February 2010]. Their videos can be seen at www.cuentosborgeanos.com.ar.

⁵⁵See, for example, www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBVpq60oLLw; www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnYUULJD0B0&feature=related; www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0c3Wtqn6I8 or www.youtube.com/watch?v=jV515nEaJUc&feature=related [all accessed 4 April 2010] amongst many others.

web phenomena and the wide range of discourses associated with them exceeds the scope of this research.

The specific sources analysed at each stage of the thesis are discussed in the following section, which provides a summary of each of its chapters.

Outline of the Chapters

The thesis comprises four chapters, each of which centres on the analysis of the construction of Borges, either through the use of urban space (Chapter 4) or in one type of cultural product: biographies (Chapter 1), portrait photography (Chapter 2), and comic strips (Chapter 3). Each chapter starts with an appraisal of the fundamental characteristics and specific issues relating to the medium, which are laid out in order to provide a general framework against which each of the products is analysed. An overview of the historical context of production and consumption has been provided in every case, taking into account the socio-political configuration of Argentina during each of the periods considered.

A brief examination of a small selection from Borges's work follows, in order to establish how Borges's view of the genre or medium or space may have influenced the way in which the figure of the author has been appropriated in each medium. Reference is made to the poetry, essays and stories collected in the 1996 version of *Obras Completas* published by Emecé; and to a variety of articles published in popular magazines which are not included in it. I have tried to refer to work written at different stages of Borges's life, although a linear chronology is neither my concern nor recuperable from the multiple and retroactive readings that will be analysed here.

Wherever available, the production of Argentine thinkers, scholars, journalists and artists has been either analysed as primary sources, or generally brought to bear on the

analysis of the construction of the figure of the writer. However, international constructions of the writer are also taken into account in order to emphasize, sometimes by contrast, the modes of construction that are considered Argentine. Irreverent portraits of Borges taken by American photographers, for example, are in strong opposition to those produced by their Argentine counterparts, whose work was inscribed in a discourse that constructed the author as a revered figure. Some instances of foreign reception and critical analysis of the Borgesian oeuvre, as well as the construction of the figure of the author abroad, are themselves examined. This is done in relation to the value of this international exposure in Argentine public opinion and its evaluation as confirmation of greatness. The international milieus taken into consideration are mainly the English- and Spanish-language United States and European markets.

The core of each chapter is devoted to an in-depth analysis of representations and appropriations of Borges: Chapter 1 deals with the ‘genre’ of literary biography, which is arguably closest, both formally and critically, to the author’s literary works. The origins and influence of the construction of differing images of Borges are examined through an analysis of five literary biographies considered in order of publication. These are: Alicia Jurado’s, which was the only one available for many years;⁵⁶ Emir Rodríguez Monegal’s *Borges: Una biografía literaria* (1987), arguably, the most widely cited; María Esther Vázquez’s *Borges: Esplendor y derrota* (1996) and Estela Cantos’s *Borges a contraluz* (1989), which offer invaluable insiders’ views; and Edwin Williamson’s *Borges: A Life* (2004), which is the most recent work of length written in English and it provides valuable contrast to the other four.

The ways in which these biographies respond to the expectations, agendas and contexts in which they have been written are brought to bear on their construction of the

⁵⁶Rodríguez Monegal’s *Borges: a Literary Biography* was published fourteen years later, in 1978, and it was not translated into Spanish until 1987.

author. Here, Gerard Genette's concept of the paratext as an interstitial space where meaning is produced is applied to the biographies. Thus, they are seen as fundamental mediators of the consumption of the Borgesian oeuvre.⁵⁷ The peripheral elements of the biographical texts, such as titles, chapter headings, illustrations and cover design, are analysed, highlighting their significance as providing a unique in-between space where meaning is created. A link is also established between these and the significance of interstitial spaces in Borges's narratives: footnotes, epigraphs and general marginalia. This, together with the writer's preference for a marginal positioning in terms of literary theory, general politics and philosophy, is highlighted throughout the thesis, which thus aligns itself with the latest general trend within Borgesian literary analysis.

The biographical information present throughout the thesis should be approached in the light of the conclusions arrived at in the first chapter, which demonstrates that even when rigorously documented, historical facts are constructs in so far as they are subjective narrations of details of the author's life. (This is partly the reason why my analysis of the role of biography in the construction of the figure of the author is developed in the first chapter.) In the next three chapters, the thesis then proceeds to an examination of the images of Borges first considered in relation to these biographies but as presented through other discursive and visual practices.

In chapter 2, the recurrent image of the author as elderly is examined in portraits that have circulated in a variety of settings, including magazine and newspaper articles, but particularly on book covers. This chapter argues that the construction of Borges as an old blind sage is partly achieved through the wide circulation of portraits which accentuate the features of old age and blindness. The visual dimension of the writer's iconic status is emphasized by examining the construction of the writer as a figure of

⁵⁷Gerard Genette, *Paratext: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) was first published under the title *Seuils* in French in 1987.

veneration, a ‘national treasure’ whose most salient characteristic is the wisdom of his old age. The chapter focuses on the impact of Borges’s rise to international fame in the 60s and Argentina’s reaction to it. It is in this chapter that representations of the writer in the media are looked at in detail, through an analysis of the images that accompany newspaper articles particularly in the 70s and early 80s. International reception of Borges is brought to bear on this analysis of local press coverage, and images taken by Argentine photographers are compared to those by American photographers. Reference is also made to Borges’s appearance in televised interviews. The appropriation of the image of the writer as a legitimising figure on the part of the last military dictatorship is examined through reference to the censorship of a popular television programme of the time, ‘Operación Ja Ja’.

Portraits of the writer which appeared on a variety of book covers are also examined and compared in Chapter 2 in order to demonstrate the consistency of the depiction of the writer as elderly. Among the publications which appeal to the general public, pictorial collections such as Argentine photographer Sara Facio’s *Jorge Luis Borges en Buenos Aires* (2005) contain some of the most circulated portraits of the writer. Other image-based books referred to here are Miguel de Torre Borges’s *Borges: Fotografías y manuscritos* (1987), Alan Pauls’s *El factor Borges* (2000) and *Borges: 1001 imágenes* (2003), where portraits of Borges and his family are accompanied by images of book covers, manuscripts and other documents. As an example of the circulation of the Borges image in the Argentine popular press of the 70s, I have referred to Editorial Atlántida’s *Todo Borges* (1977). This special issue magazine contains portraits of the writer, copies of press clippings and other items of memorabilia that contributed to the image of the writer in that particular historical context.

The exploration of the all important visual component of the construction of Borges as icon continues in the following chapter, as the analysis moves from the photographic image to cartoon depictions of the writer. Chapter 3 focuses on the changing relationship of the ‘progre’ generation with Borges as a cultural role model, which is traced through an analysis of depictions of the author in comic strips of the mid-80s. Cartoons of Borges produced in the 70s, particularly Hermenegildo Sábat’s, are also analysed. In relation to these comics I trace an ideological arc from rejection to celebration which takes place due to critics’ strong historical and political motivations from the 60s to the dictatorship and the post-dictatorship years. This arc is best represented through the changes in depictions of Borges in comics. In particular I examine the case of *Fierro* magazine.

By linking the comic strips with Borges’s early work for popular magazines, the chapter achieves an interrogation of Borges’s perceived position in the debate between high and popular culture. For this purpose, two comic strip adaptations of stories by Borges are analysed: Alfredo Flores and Norberto Buscaglia’s ‘Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva’ and Alberto Breccia and Juan Sasturain’s ‘El fin’. The figure of Borges drawn as a subversive character is studied in relation to Breccia and Sasturain’s comic strip series *Perramus*. Both the latter and Flores and Buscaglia’s strip appeared in the mid-80s in *Fierro*. In the aftermath of the tragic defeat of Argentina’s left in the 70s and early 80s,⁵⁸ the appropriation of the figure of Borges as a revolutionary in comic strips signals, not only a change in the way the intelligentsia related to him, but also the hope for a future reconstruction of an Argentine cultural identity.

Chapter 4 evaluates the impact of the main traits of the construction of Borges as perpetuated in the creation of what I call ‘Borgesian’ spaces in the city of Buenos Aires in recent years. It demonstrates that these traits serve the purposes of urban politics in

⁵⁸D’Allemand, ‘Hacia una crítica literaria latinoamericana’, p. 194.

the delineation of a particular image for the city as a cultural product for export, which is consistent with the objectives of the ‘Estrategia Marca País’ mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction. Some of these Borgesian spaces are included in a walking tour promoted by the city’s department of tourism; these spaces are analysed alongside other private ‘Borgesian spaces’ within the city. The fact that the city’s current administration does not belong to the same political party as the national government leads to a greater need for Argentina’s international legitimisation; it also points to the city’s tension with populist nationalist ideals. In this context, the relevance of the role of the city in the construction of a national identity lies, as David William Foster explains, in that ‘it is virtually impossible to speak of Argentine culture without reference to Buenos Aires.’⁵⁹

Borges’s friend Ulyses Petit de Murat wrote in 1980 that ‘Georgie era un desaforado caminador. Batía todos los rumbos de la ciudad.’⁶⁰ Many of his friends would later corroborate this as they narrated the seemingly endless wanderings on which the author liked to take them. Importantly, however, this love of roaming the city was always felt by his friends and companions to relate to an individual, intimate experience of the city.⁶¹ In all likelihood, and given his renowned love of etymology, Borges would have approved of Petit de Murat’s use of the adjective ‘desaforado’. A word describing a breaking away from the centre, literally, and also, figuratively, straying away from the norm; a ‘desaforado’ Borges is one who strays away from the centre of the city and ventures into the marginal areas of the ‘arrabal’, zigzagging his way across the boundaries of an urbanized Buenos Aires, inhabiting a topological, but also, a literary in-between. ‘Desaforado’ also talks of an ardent lack of restraint,

⁵⁹David William Foster, *Buenos Aires: Perspectives on the City and Cultural Production* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 6.

⁶⁰Ulyses Petit de Murat, *Borges – Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, 1980), cited in *El Buenos Aires de Borges*, by Carlos Alberto Zito (Buenos Aires: Aguilar, 1999), p. 32. ‘Georgie’ was the nickname that Borges’s family and closest friends liked to use to refer to the writer.

⁶¹Cf. María Esther Vázquez, *Borges: esplendor y derrota* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1996), pp. 73-4.

describing a young and passionate Borges experiencing the city on his own terms, regardless of tradition and etiquette. The role of the polemic surrounding Borges's final resting place, which is played out in the context of the city, results in the ultimate objectification of the writer and brings the chapter to a close.

The analysis of urban spaces in the last chapter is arguably the furthest detached from the medium of the book and the one that covers events in very recent history. However, in Chapter 4 I do examine how urban spaces are read as texts that are constantly being written and rewritten – I do this in relation to Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Andreas Huyssen. It is hoped that this final analysis will refer the reader back to the beginning, as it brings together elements of the writer discussed in Borges's biographies and those which have been perpetuated through the circulation of his visual image, providing a coherent sense of the evolution of the construction of the icon. By organizing the chapters in this way, it is hoped that the thesis will allow the reader to see clearly how the historico-political discourses have contributed to the constructions of Borges as a signifier of Argentine identity.

Chapter One

Weaving through the threshold: Literary Biographies of Borges

Introduction

Hay muchos Borges. Somos muchos [...] Decir que uno es muchos es un modo jactancioso de decir que no se es nadie, que uno es nadie.

J.L. Borges, 1982.⁶²

This chapter explores the construction of a multiplicity of Borgeses in a selection of literary biographies written between 1964 and 2004 in Argentina and abroad. These are Alicia Jurado's *Genio y figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (1964); Emir Rodríguez Monegal's *Borges: Una biografía literaria* (1987, first published in 1978); Estela Canto's *Borges a contraluz* (1989); María Esther Vázquez's *Borges: Esplendor y derrota* (1996); and Edwin Williamson's *Borges: A Life* (2004). Many other biographical accounts of the author have been written in Spanish and English.⁶³ The most recent of these to be published is Adolfo Bioy Casares's *Borges* (2006), which provides valuable insight into both Borges and Bioy; crucially, it sheds light on four decades of Argentine literature as seen through their fruitful friendship. However, it is not examined here due to its nature: it is a selection of extracts from Bioy's diary, which means that it is not directly comparable to the biographies studied here. Moreover, its relatively recent publication date does not allow for a comparable analysis of its reception.

⁶²From a radio interview, in Antonio Carrizo, *Borges el memorioso: Conversaciones de Jorge Luis Borges con Antonio Carrizo* (Mexico and Buenos Aires: fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982), cited in *Borges Verbal*, by Pilar Bravo Mario Paoletti (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999), p. 50.

⁶³Consider, for example, Argentines Roberto Alifano's *Borges: biografía verbal* (1988) and Horacio Salas's *Borges: una biografía* (1994), British James Woodall's *The Man in the Mirror of the Book* (1996) or Chilean Voldia Titelboim's *Los dos Borges: vida, sueños, enigmas* (1996).

I argue, following Foucault, that it is not possible to have one sole construction of an identity or one unique idea of author because constructions are the product of a combination of individual projections.⁶⁴ By identifying certain recurrent projections within a culture and by perpetuating the old idea of the power and authority of the writer, a series of more or less consistent fantasy-images of Borges have been historically circulated and commercialised, thus turning the author into a commodity. The shift from author to reader that Barthes discussed in the 70s led him to explain that ‘a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination,’ and that ‘the reader is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field’ the ‘traces by which the written text is constituted.’⁶⁵ The reader as a consumer satisfies a need to create an origin by constructing an author for the work.

The publishing market, which taps into the anxieties and expectations that make up the readers’ projections, has been successful in constructing an author-commodity. As Borges himself suggested on many occasions (consider, for example, ‘Borges y yo’ or ‘El otro’), there are multiple Borgeses and Borges the commodity is a construction who is neither the author, nor the fictional character, nor the historical man who lived between 1899 and 1986. He is, rather, an amalgam of all those, inasmuch as they each constitute a discourse, whose mode of ‘circulation, valorisation, attribution, and appropriation’ varies ‘with each culture’ and is ‘modified within each.’⁶⁶ So there is the separation between Borges the man and the creator of fictions described by a third one who wrote this in ‘Borges y yo’ (*OCII*, p. 186) in 1957, plus the other one on the covers of books, whose image seems endlessly reproduced on the promotional posters and carrier bags of bookshops and book fairs. But as Borges also pointed out, to say that

⁶⁴Michel Foucault, ‘What is an author?’, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, by David Lodge and Nigel Wood, 2nd edition (New York: Pearson Education, 2000), pp. 174-87 (p. 180).

⁶⁵Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-48 (p. 148), italics in the original.

⁶⁶Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, p. 185.

there is a multiplicity of Borgeses is to say that there is no Borges. This may be interpreted as Borges's response to the quest for a fundamental, unique Borges who may lurk behind the texts, holding the key to their mysteries. So, this chapter takes up Foucault's invitation to 'locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers' (p. 177); and, consistent with Borges's own positioning and narrative technique, it shifts the focus away from the quest for any real, core, original, Borges.

Consistent with the traditionally-held belief that the author can provide the basis for explaining the characteristics of his work, and therefore reinforcing the idea of the author as a sacred, originating force which precedes the text, literary biography attempts a reconstruction of the man through analysis and interpretation of his life and his work. By looking at biographical texts from a poststructuralist perspective, considering that 'every text is eternally written *here and now*,'⁶⁷ I will argue that the construction of the author emerges from depictions created through narrative technique, that the revelation of the truths generally promised by biographers can only be a set of constructs and that the information or interpretations that are put forward as revelations are not sacred or unalterable. I shall discuss how each of the images of Borges constructed in the biographies selected responds to the expectations, agendas and contexts in which they were written.

Literary biographies are powerful mediations of our approach to, perception and understanding of literary texts. I will therefore refer to this 'genre' using Gerard Genette's concept of the paratext: 'a threshold, a zone between text and off-text, not

⁶⁷Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p.145, italics in the original.

only of transition but also of transaction,⁶⁸ a space that allows for the production of further meaning which the reader will then take to his/her experience of the fictional text. I shall begin by providing a brief theoretical review of the ‘genre’ of literary biography and its role as paratext.⁶⁹ I will then give an overview of Borges’s narrative technique and his position as a forerunner of post-structuralism in order to emphasise how these problematize some of the claims of literary biography. In this context, it becomes necessary to clarify that ‘Borgesian’ here refers to the qualities of the text, even though these qualities are anchored through a reference to the name of the person who wrote them. The paradox remains, with the inevitable references to Borges as a historical subject-creator resulting in the creation, in this thesis, of a fictive version of my own.

Finally, I shall explore the images of Jorge Luis Borges constructed in the five biographies mentioned above and how these have impacted on the public imaginary in order to create and perpetuate certain myths and prejudices that make up Borges as a cultural icon. I shall offer a brief survey of their reception by general readers, academics and intellectuals and I will also look at their dissemination in the mass media as a means of secondary projection to a general public. An assessment of their reception in Argentina and, where relevant, in the English-speaking world, will be undertaken.

⁶⁸Gerard Genette, *Paratext: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.2.

⁶⁹The word ‘paratext’ is used throughout the chapter in a wider sense to refer to biographies as paratextual to the works of Borges. The word is also used, more specifically, to refer to paratextual elements such as titles, covers, indexes within the biographies themselves.

Literary Biography: ‘Something Betwixt and Between’⁷⁰

The practice of biography can be traced back to ancient civilizations, as Nigel Hamilton suggests in his *Biography: A Brief History* (2007).⁷¹ Hamilton refers, particularly, to the Scandinavian sagas: ancient oral accounts of the lives of heroes. Throughout the centuries, biographies continued to serve a pedagogical purpose, as the lives of the great and the good constituted noble examples for ordinary people to follow. Perhaps the best known early biographer is the Roman essayist Plutarch in the first century AD, who wrote, amongst others, the *lives of Alexandre the Great and Julius Caesar*. This writing of exemplary lives continued throughout the Middle Ages with the practice of hagiography.⁷² Dr Samuel Johnson is considered to have inaugurated modern literary biography with the publication of *Lives of the English Poets* in 1781. Johnson’s innovation lay in his ‘depictions that included elements both “beautiful and base”, embracing “vice and virtue”, rather than relying on the “sober sages of the schools”.’⁷³ His own biographer, James Boswell, author of perhaps the most famous biography in history, *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), was only one of the many contemporaries upon whom Johnson’s ‘valuation of biography would have a powerful impact’ (p. 91). Indeed, according to Hamilton, Johnson’s ‘opinions would provide a vision of the modern *purpose* of biography that has lasted to this day’ (p. 85).

Literary biography differs from biography in general in that the biographer is at the same time historian and literary critic, and his or her fundamental challenge lies in keeping the delicate balance between ‘reading the life in the works or reading the works through the life’ of his or her biographee.⁷⁴ David Ellis warns: anyone embarking on a

⁷⁰Virginia Woolf, ‘The Art of Biography’, in *Collected Essays*, vol.4 (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), p. 227, cited in ‘Literary Biography: The Cinderella of Literary Studies’, by Michael Benton, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 39.3 (2005), 44-57 (p. 55).

⁷¹Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007)

⁷²For a discussion of the writing of the lives of saints, see Hamilton, *Biography*, pp. 33-59

⁷³Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 87-8.

⁷⁴Michael Benton, *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. xv.

systematic study which would cover the entire field of literary biography ‘would go mad, or die before their task was done.’⁷⁵ The difficulty of this task lies, primarily, in the resistance of literary biography to classification, as it is, by nature, a bewilderingly diverse and heterogeneous form (Ellis). Instead, as Michael Benton suggests, ‘the diversity is best served by viewing literary biography from a range of perspectives – historical, comparative, referential auto/biographical and so on.’⁷⁶ Suffice to say, then, that the examination of biographies of Borges in this chapter is based on Michael Benton’s treatment of this particular form of life-writing as hybrid, and assessed from a historical and comparative perspective. Indeed, the different biographies considered here are testimony to the diversity of the form, even though they all contain an element of chronology and, as Benton explains, the principles that underpin each representation are sufficiently similar to be recognizably biographical.⁷⁷

The ‘genre’ of literary biography is based on the assumption that there is an author, that this author exists prior to his work, that this author has a certain intention and motive in the production of his work, and also that there is a meaning in the author’s work which constitutes the key to a certain truth about a real person responsible for the production of the work. This seems to suggest a hermeneutic model of literary biography as a series of layers, which the biographer can penetrate in order to reveal certain truths about the author and his/her works. Literary biography’s piecing together of the life of a writer from his/her literary yield creates the illusion that the reader may get to know him/her by reading his/her work. A phenomenon that arises as a consequence of this is the possibility that the public, although not necessarily the reading public, appropriate the writer’s life through literary biography, completely

⁷⁵David Ellis, *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. viii.

⁷⁶Michael Benton, *Literary Biography*, p. xv.

⁷⁷Michael Benton, ‘Literary Biography: The Cinderella of Literary Studies’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 39.3 (2005), pp. 44-57, p. 46.

bypassing the writer's work, as the biographer has done the reading for them. This is part of the reason why this activity has been treated with suspicion by literary theorists in recent decades.⁷⁸

Michael Benton refers to literary biography as 'Cinderella' because of its renowned shunning by British academia, who have considered it, throughout the 20th Century, incapable of establishing 'any theoretical foundation upon which to build.'⁷⁹ This is a particular consequence of the dominance of post-structuralist thought and literary biography's clear resistance to its modes of enquiry, nor even to engage 'with the practical questions of selection, organization or presentation.' (p. 45). Yet, as Benton highlights, literary biography enjoys immense popularity, which is only partly due to commercial success. The fact that a considerable number of biographies of one same author have been written, and new ones continue to appear – Borges is a case in point – speaks, according to Benton, of the uniqueness of an activity with infinite possible variations.⁸⁰

The main generic element of literary biography that Benton identifies is 'its concern to document facts' and he approaches its study 'in the light of its narrative impulse.'⁸¹ Thus, Benton highlights the hybridity of this form, which constitutes a nexus where history and fiction cross. A further aspect of the task of the literary biographer consists in allowing his or her work to 'tell its story through the dynamic biographer/biographee relationship unique to every biography' (p. 46). In this way, the allure of the intertwined activities of writing and consuming literary biography lies in its

⁷⁸ Ellis considers biography one of the few remaining points of interaction between the academic world and the rest of society, as he investigates the reasons for the notorious lack of theorization surrounding the subject, in 'Lives Without Theory', *Literary Lives*, pp. 1-19.

⁷⁹ Benton, 'Literary Biography', p. 45.

⁸⁰ I use the word 'activity' advisedly, to draw attention to the unease with which literary biography sits next to literary genres. I shall therefore use the word 'genre' to refer to literary biography – for want of a better one – between inverted commas, in order to indicate the resistance of this activity to classification, as a form which lies in between history and fiction.

⁸¹ Benton, 'Literary Biography', p. 46.

power to enable us to study ourselves by writing/reading about the lives of others. This is particularly relevant to the study of the construction of Borges, as by their very nature, his biographies construct, not only the author, but also the biographer and the various historical, political and literary discourses underlying their work.

It is the great number of possible combinations of this kind that allows for the production of a potentially endless number of biographies of the same author which in essence should tell the same story, but which use a unique combination of narrative approaches and devices. Under the guise of pure fact, information about the life of the historical figure is mixed with interpretations of his work, to narrate the author-man. Selection of facts, style and rhetoric, the choice to follow or ignore a teleological approach to events and chronology, are all narrative techniques which serve the purpose of holding a text together cohesively, providing the unity required for the life of a writer to make sense, and resulting 'in a provisional construct created from that mixture of elements' (p. 49).

Even though the biographer may intend to hide behind them, his/her choice of narrative devices and the way in which they are combined represent a projection of his/her own particular expectations and desires upon the text, which result in a fictional construction of their subject. In the words of Paul de Man, 'in the end there is only writing.'⁸² a biography's efforts to 'conceal its own fictionalisation' (p. 13), paradoxically results in naming it. Thus, when reading a biography, the reader is confronted by the construction, in turn, of the biographer in all its cultural complexity. Precisely because biographies are modes of narrative, the voice of the narrator is unavoidable, and in literary biography in particular, in interpreting the work of an author and making choices concerning the narration of their life, literary biographers

⁸²Anderson refers to de Man's 'Autobiography as De-Facement' (1979) in *Autobiography*, by Linda Anderson (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), p13.

end up achieving a double construction: that of themselves and of their subject. This poses the question of the biographer as an author: his or her claims to legitimacy in the shape of, for example, a personal relationship with the subject would suggest that the truth of the text lies with its author. In this sense, this same text may not necessarily have been true had it not been written by a figure of such authority. Both the author-biographer and the author-biographed are vehemently put forward as legitimizing forces of origin. In this sense, it could be argued that the hegemonic model of certain illuminated minds embarking in the conveyance of certain truths is thus perpetuated by literary biography, its historical development and, most relevantly, its consumption. Although, as Benton cautions, of course ‘the idea that there is some essential personality to be revealed is an illusion [...] Instead there is a representation to be created in all its complexities and contradictions.’⁸³

Images created by the narration of an author’s life in literary biography have the power of influencing the way we read the author’s work. Gerard Genette defines this type of space of production of meaning as ‘paratext’: ‘a *threshold*, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a ‘vestibule’ that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back.’⁸⁴ Genette uses the word paratext in a general sense to refer to the space surrounding the text, but which is in interaction with it and mediates our experience of the text itself. He also uses it in a particular sense, to identify elements within it such as prologues, title headings, dedications and acknowledgments, which appear in print in the book itself. The titles of sections or chapters within a book are a specific example of paratext, which Genette admits ‘is a relay’ which may ‘– if the author is too heavy-handed – impede and ultimately block the text’s reception’ (p. 94). We shall see how the choice of chapter headings and other paratextual elements can

⁸³ Benton, ‘Literary Biography’, p. 52.

⁸⁴ Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 2, italics in the original.

betray the over eagerness of a biographer to push a point too far, revealing their fictionalizing intentions and motivations.

Within the category of the paratextual, Genette identifies something he calls the public epitext, that is, something which is not materially attached to the text but circulates in the social sphere and is directed at the general public. The public epitext is constituted by a variety of media, as is the case of published conversations with Borges which Genette mentions as an example.⁸⁵ In general terms, the publicity apparatus put in motion by any given publishing house is a key element of the public epitext of an author's work. Together with general iconography, information that appears in the various media, and academic discourses (as this thesis will subsequently explore), literary biography is epitextual to the Borgesian oeuvre, its influence over the reading of the literary works, virtually unavoidable.⁸⁶ Similarly, epitextual elements represent a liminal space for the production of meanings associated with the persona of the author.

The Imminence of a Revelation: Borges Off-centre

Sacamos los pesados revólveres (de pronto hubo revólveres en el sueño) y alegremente dimos muerte a los Dioses.

J.L. Borges, 'Ragnarök' (1959)

The last line of Borges's 'Ragnarök', which constitutes its last paragraph, thus reinforcing its importance, is a fitting metaphor for the death of the author occurring within discourse: the author-god is killed by guns which are themselves generated

⁸⁵Genette, *Paratexts*, pp. 358-9.

⁸⁶Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 344.

within the narrative that the dream represents.⁸⁷ A brief overview of Borges's off-centre narrative stance suffices to illustrate its direct opposition to the idea of the author as origin and genesis underlying literary biography. In his introduction to his reading of 'Fundación Mítica de Buenos Aires', in the recording *Jorge Luis Borges por él mismo. Sus poemas y su voz* (1967), Borges's famous voice can be heard saying: 'Es un poema escrito hace tanto tiempo que lo veo como ajeno [...] Lo releo y me parece escrito por otra persona. Por una persona que no me es antipática, pero que ciertamente no es el Borges que está hablando ahora.'⁸⁸ This dissociation between Borges the writer and the Borges whose voice is recognisable in the recording, constitutes a warning against any kind of epiphany occurring as a consequence of hearing what might be generally perceived as the man himself reading his own work. The particular intention behind these statements does not concern us directly, but it might be argued that, perhaps aware of the theoretical discussions going on at the time, they are based on Borges's own developing notion of authorship, as someone who exists solely for the creation of a certain work: 'yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir, para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura,' says the narrative voice of 'Borges y yo' (*OCII*, p. 86), and then evaporates forever, irretrievably: 'yo estoy destinado a perderme, definitivamente [...] mi vida es una fuga' (p. 86). This particular parable, in which 'the mysterious commerce between the proper name and its bearer'⁸⁹ is enacted but not resolved, as Seán Burke points out, is perhaps the most faithful expression of Borges's in-betweenness. That is, a certain reluctance to

⁸⁷ Williamson provides a very convincing political interpretation of the anger and violence in 'Ragnarök' in *Borges: A Life*, pp. 339-40.

⁸⁸ Héctor Yánover (dir.), 'Fundación Mítica de Buenos Aires', *Jorge Luis Borges por él mismo: Sus poemas y su voz* (Buenos Aires: AMB Discográfica, 1967). This vinyl record, containing recordings of Borges reading and sometimes commenting on some of his poems, is held in *The Borges Collection* at the University of Notre Dame, U.S.A. Available online at www.library.nd.edu/rarebooks/collections/rarebooks/hispanic/southern_cone/borges/album_1.shtml [accessed 28 April 2006]. It was also digitalized on CD and published together with the poems in book format by Visor in 1999. The original recording was then re-released on CD in 2002.

⁸⁹ Seán Burke, 'Writing the Self', in Seán Burke (ed.), *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern. A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 301-39 (308).

define unequivocally a definite place for the author, who is neither at the centre nor outside of the text.

Further metaliterary evidence of Borges's conception of the author can be found in a conversation recorded by his partner in writing and good friend, Adolfo Bioy Casares, as early as 1949, who remembers Borges reflecting that in *Martín Fierro* there is 'una nobleza estoica' which has created the character, and that 'las circunstancias de su biografía – o las intenciones del autor – se dejan de lado o se olvidan.'⁹⁰ The writer's assertion that characters are a product of style of speech, rather than of stable pre-existent notions, points to a conviction that characters do not represent underlying persons, but that they emerge from discourse. This view of literature goes against the notion that literary biography can uncover the writer underneath the characters in his/her books.

These ideas pervade the Borgesian oeuvre: the refutation of the author as origin; musings on the notion of a higher force – perhaps a muse, god or spirit – as source of inspiration, as described in his poem 'El otro' (*OCII*, p. 268); the breaches opened up in the articulation of what has traditionally been perceived as Borges, the name as signifier, and Borges, the man as signified. Of these, the best known, and perhaps most analyzed instance, is the story 'Borges y yo' (*OCII*, p.186), which provides a succinct parable of the dissociation of Borges the fictional character from Borges the writer, as mentioned above.⁹¹ Or, in a further dissociation, the image created in the story of a Borges writing the story by a Borges whose image we consume as readers. Other stories such as 'Funes el memorioso', 'El Sur' and 'El Aleph' also explore this issue in their

⁹⁰Adolfo Bioy Casares, '1949', *Borges*, ed. by Daniel Martino (Barcelona: Destino, 2006), p.37. The conversation concerned their work on the Bustos Domecq detective stories.

⁹¹See Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 258 for a discussion of this dissociation.

self-referentiality.⁹² In the intersection between fiction and criticism, ‘Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain’ and ‘Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote’ also embark on the fictional problematization of traditional categories for the study of literature, in particular the notion of authorship, through the creation of a fictional author.⁹³ Thus, the fact that it is possible to create a new author for an already existing work of literature illustrates the point that the author function emanates from discourse.

This off-centre positioning that Borges assumes is explored in Beatriz Sarlo’s *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*.⁹⁴ First published in 1993, it is the fruit of a significant shift in Borgesian criticism in the 90s: from the focus on the universalizing notion of Borges and of Borgesian cosmogonies as self-contained totalities, to a more ‘angular and splintered mode of truth.’⁹⁵ Sarlo rethinks the author’s stance in relation to Argentine cultural identity and contemporary views of the literary canon, repositioning him ‘on the edge’: Borges, she claims, ‘hace del margen una estética. [...] La máquina literaria borgeana ficcionaliza estas cuestiones, y produce una puesta en forma de problemas teóricos y filosóficos.’⁹⁶ Sarlo locates Borges’s writing on the periphery, giving prominence to the space of the scission: ‘un juego en el filo de dos orillas’ (p. 2), moving away from the notion of a central truth which defines the ‘genre’ of literary biography.

Sylvia Molloy has a more productive view of this space, which is reminiscent of the space where Foucault locates the operation of the author-function: ‘a space into

⁹²Lorena Amaro Castro explores the opposition between referentialism and textualism and reflects on autobiography as fiction, invention and construction of the self in writing in *Autobiografía y nombre propio en los textos de Jorge Luis Borges* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2003) and in her article ‘La imposible autobiografía de Jorge Luis Borges’, *Variaciones Borges*, 17 (2004), 229-52.

⁹³María del Carmen Marengo, ‘El autor ficticio en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges: Crítica y renovación de la literatura argentina’, *Variaciones Borges*, 10 (2000), 167-83.

⁹⁴Later translated and published as *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* in 1995. Subsequent citations throughout the thesis are from Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2007).

⁹⁵As early as 1930, Borges quotes Thomas De Quincey in his epigraph to *Evaristo Carriego*: ‘A mode of truth, not of truth coherent and central, but angular and splintered.’ *OCI*.

⁹⁶Sarlo, *Borges*, p. 8.

which the writing space constantly disappears,⁹⁷ which she prefers to see as an ‘ever fruitful in-between.’⁹⁸ Borges, she claims, prefers the ‘dispersion and not the moment of resolution’ (p. 13). Similarly, in a much quoted passage from the 1950 essay ‘La muralla y los libros’, Borges defines aesthetic experience as the imminence of a revelation that never occurs:

La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético.⁹⁹

Borges’s narrative technique is perhaps where this shifting of the focus away from the centre is most noticeable. By associating the quest for absolute reason, knowledge and perception with madness and horror (consider Funes’s plight in ‘Funes el memorioso’, for example), Borges’s fictions tend to focus on the approximation to, rather than the reaching of, any kind of core truth (impeccably explored in Arnett’s nephew’s road to discovery in ‘There Are More Things’, for example). The narrative is usually approached from the periphery, rather than a centre that the characters do not – and are not able to – know, hinting at the idea of a core truth as an illusory and elusive myth.¹⁰⁰ Futile quests for totalities, of knowledge in ‘La Biblioteca de Babel’, of

⁹⁷Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, p.175.

⁹⁸Sylvia Molloy, ‘Lost in Translation: Borges, the Western Tradition and Fictions of Latin America’, in Evelyn Fishburn (ed.), *Borges and Europe Revisited* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1998), pp. 8-20 (p. 20). See also S. Molloy, ‘Placer y desconcierto: la desarticulación del hiato’, *Las letras de Borges y otros ensayos* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 1999), pp. 141-64.

⁹⁹J.L. Borges, 1950. ‘La muralla y los libros’, in *Otras Inquisiciones, OCII*, p. 13. (First published in *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, 22 October 1950).

¹⁰⁰Consider, for example, ‘El fin’, where the events are narrated from the point of view of an outsider, Recabarren, who is physically unable to stand centre stage. The main event of the story is approached peripherally, at an angle. This is particularly apparent if considered in contrast with its precursor, José Hernandez’s *Martin Fierro*, where the story is not only centrally narrated but acted out by its protagonists.

perception in ‘El Aleph’, of memory in ‘La memoria de Shakespeare’, to give a few of the best-known examples, appear to lead to a certain centre or resolution, end or revelation, whereas in fact, they are generally an exploration of the quest itself, a lingering on the road, rather than an arrival anywhere. The prevalent image in Borges is the paradox, and the juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory concepts and settings, which opens an in-between space which is neither and both at the same time. ‘El Sur’ is perhaps the classic example: Dahlmann’s train journey could be said to represent a liminal space, which is, in turn, a metaphor for a state of consciousness which is not possible to define as wakefulness, dream or delirium. At the same time, this story makes the roaming across the geographical and cultural boundaries of the city of Buenos Aires, whilst in a non-defined state of consciousness, a wandering across the boundaries of personal identity, which promises to find its resolution as the story seems to approach the limits of a narrative which, by virtue of its lack of an ending, gives value to the journey over its destination. This is reinforced in Spanish by the fact that destiny and destination are one and the same word: ‘destino’.

Borges’s famous prologues are also a good example of the aesthetic of the in-between, but it is in his own experiments in biography (*Historia Universal de la Infamia*, ‘Biografías sintéticas’, and *Evaristo Carriego*) where his views regarding authorship and his aesthetics of the in-between coalesce with his views on the impossibility of the ‘genre’. Annick Louis points out that Borges’s life has motivated writings which are based on devices that he himself had condemned in his incursions into the ‘genre’: the narrative strategies used in life writing as an exercise in fiction writing; the logical falsity of any claim to factuality; and the inevitable autobiographical inscription of the biographer,¹⁰¹ as we shall see next.

¹⁰¹Annick Louis, ‘La biografía o las formas del yo’, *Variaciones Borges*, 3, (1997), 207-13 (p.1).

Evaristo Carriego begins by incorporating elements of authenticity and factuality through very detailed references to documents: ‘La vindicación de la antigüedad de Palermo [...] la registran los *Anales de la Biblioteca*, en una nota de la página 360 del tomo cuarto; las pruebas [...] fueron publicadas mucho después en el número 242 de *Nosotros*’ (*OCI*, p. 105). Only to turn, a few lines further on, to the realm of fiction: ‘el entreverado estilo de la realidad, con su puntuación de ironías, de sorpresas, de previsiones extrañas como las sorpresas, sólo es recuperable por la novela’ (p. 105). Borges does not hesitate to point out that biographers are writers of fiction, boldly uncovering the characteristics of the ‘genre’, which is what might have led some critics to treat *Evaristo Carriego* as an unorthodox or failed biography.¹⁰² Sylvia Molloy calls it an ‘edgy text,’¹⁰³ and Beatriz Sarlo prefers to see it as the simulation of a biography which is, in fact, both a mythology of Buenos Aires and a literary manifesto.¹⁰⁴ Borges reflects that it is not possible to stay within the boundaries of factuality; and that his omissions would only include what he knows, and not, as many biographers promise on the covers of their books, the whole unadulterated universal truth (*OCI*, p. 107). By deconstructing the ‘genre’, he exposes what he considers the obvious fact that it is just not possible to engender in others memories that do not belong to them (p. 113), in other words, this amounts to writing fiction. He justifies the attempt, though, claiming that a certain naivety is involved in the process: ‘Ejecutar esa paradoja, es la inocente voluntad de toda biografía’ (p. 113), where the rather clever use of ‘ejecutar’ brings to mind both ‘to realize’ and ‘to sacrifice, or destroy in the name of justice’. Perhaps Borges feels that biographers rather arrogantly expect to be able to ignore such evident

¹⁰²See for example Daniel Balderston, ‘Beatriz Viterbo *c’est moi*. Visión angular en *Borges a contraluz* de Estela Canto’, in *Borges: realidades y simulacros* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2000), pp. 109-15 (p.110).

¹⁰³Sylvia Molloy, *Signs of Borges*, translated and adapted by Oscar Montero (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 11.

¹⁰⁴Sarlo, *Borges*, p. 44.

characteristics of the process. In this context, ‘inocente’ becomes ironic, as factuality dissolves into fiction as the narrative progresses.

Weaving Through the Threshold: Embroidering Images of Borges

The five biographies of Jorge Luis Borges considered here (out of the great deal of material of biographical interest such as memoirs, testimonies and interviews that have been published) have been chosen for the extent of their impact, as measured in references to them in other biographies and academic publications, and their reception in the media. The influence of these biographies on the consumption of Borges as a cultural icon will be demonstrated by comparing and contrasting the images of the writer that each of them constructs.¹⁰⁵ This will be approached in terms of the perceived position of each of the biographers in terms of an author’s creative work as evidence for his/her own life narrative; their constructions of the notion of authorship, and the biographers’ autobiographical inscriptions. As stated in the introduction I will proceed in order of date of publication.

(i) Alicia Jurado’s Genio y figura de Jorge Luis Borges (1964)

Argentine writer, biographer, and translator Alicia Jurado was around twenty years younger than Borges and a good friend of his, a position that she hastens to define in the introduction to her biography (Fig. 1), where she points out the challenge of ‘aventurarme al retrato de un amigo querido, cuyas debilidades sin duda atenuaré por lealtad.’¹⁰⁶ Subsequent biographers refer to her as intelligent, loyal and generous. Edwin Williamson, for example, includes her in the category of female friends of Borges

¹⁰⁵Cf. Rodrigo Fresán, ‘Una guía de las biografías de Borges escritas en la Argentina’, *Página/12*, 16 January 2005, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-1953-2005-01-16.html [accessed on 11 May 2009].

¹⁰⁶Alicia Jurado, *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1964), p. 5

‘whom he respected for their literary or intellectual work.’¹⁰⁷ Highly educated and a member of the traditional ‘criollo’ elite, Jurado’s obvious affection for the writer coexists in her biography with a strong personal conservatism which is not only evident in her literary analyses but which she also projects on to her subject. In her defence of Borges against the critics of the time, who appeared to perceive him as cold, unfeeling and removed from the political realities of 60s Argentina, she is careful to separate the sphere of the private man from that of his works:

Si pasamos al campo de sus opiniones políticas, que apenas figuran en sus libros pero de las que no falta constancia en diarios y revistas y son tema permanente de su conversación, es difícil imaginar hombre más apasionado que Borges [...] No le pidamos pasión a los cuentos de Borges, porque no la tienen y porque es posible que si la tuviesen [...] fueran menos admirables.¹⁰⁸

She does, however, admit that the poems of his youth contain his ‘emociones más intensas,’ although she clearly prefers a more mature Borges, as she repeatedly points out throughout (p. 118). Jurado complains that Borges is admired for an esoteric quality that his work does not actually possess, and she claims that ‘Borges confirmó mi sospecha de que sus cuentos no son alegóricos ni encierran significados ocultos’ (pp. 59-60) so she refrains from making explicit political or psychological analyses of Borges’s work.

On a personal level, the Borges depicted by Jurado is friendly, warm-hearted and fun-loving. Used as we are now to an image of Borges as an old man lost in thought, it is a pleasant surprise to discover that most of the photographs reproduced in Jurado’s

¹⁰⁷Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, p. 301

¹⁰⁸Jurado, *Genio y figura*, pp.66-8.

book show a smiling Borges, usually enjoying a conversation with friends. However, this image has been overshadowed by that of a conservative Borges, in terms of his views of both literature and politics, which the biographer puts forward: ‘Intelectualmente, es demasiado argentino para ser nacionalista y no ha hecho sino heredar la vieja tradición criolla de mirar hacia Europa; reprocharle esta preferencia es ignorar el pensamiento de las generaciones ilustradas que nos precedieron’ (p. 115). Jurado’s notion of ‘Argentineness’ seems rather narrow, and her reference to past enlightened generations points to a cultural elitism that must have infuriated contemporary left-wing critics. The Europe that the old ‘criollos’ looked to is of course not to be mistaken with that other Europe where poor Italian and Eastern European immigrants came from to reconfigure the new Argentina that she so despairs of:

Cabe preguntarse por qué hay personas que niegan carácter nacional a la obra de Borges, y afirman que su literatura no refleja el país. [...] Borges escribe [...] sobre la Argentina de su añoranza. Si lo hiciera sobre la realidad nacional que hoy vivimos tendría que limitarse a temas, casas, hablares y psicologías de italianos, que constituyen la esencia de la argentinidad del siglo XX. Es natural que a los nacionalistas, casi todos recién llegados al país le ofenda la nostalgia de Borges por una patria que no les perteneció y que ellos han contribuido a borrar. (p. 126)

With these sweeping comments about the impoverished quality of Argentine culture as a result of Italian immigration and a certain consequent nationalism Jurado asserts her own views regarding immigration and Italian-style fascist politics (pp. 115-7). In so doing, she achieves the perpetuation of the image of Borges as an elitist writer, which was clearly already in circulation at the time, as Jurado says. As we shall see, with the

help of Emir Rodríguez Monegal, this view of Borges will dominate the following thirty years, tapping into anxieties of the Argentine left-wing intelligentsia during the 70s and fitting in with the agendas of the military Juntas. The nationalism that Jurado attacks in her book seems to be Peronism, a social and political phenomenon which she perceives as being largely constituted by elements from an immigrant working class, with no regard for what she perceives as a high culture cultivated by the criollo founders of the 'patria'. The tension arising from the emerging dichotomy of the so-called original Argentines, also called 'criollos', and a modern Argentina, newly defined by its melting-pot reconfiguration, is taken up by Williamson and explored in great depth by him. Williamson writes from a completely different position from Jurado, ideologically, chronologically, culturally and geographically, but the conflict between old criollo values and new Argentine ones, is of similar, if not greater strength in his work.¹⁰⁹

Although Alicia Jurado's biography is no longer as widely circulated as it once was, its importance cannot be denied, both as an early critical work and as a sign of its time. Considering that hers was the only biography of Borges available for the following twenty years in Argentina (the Spanish translation of Rodríguez Monegal's biography was published in 1987), it could be assumed that it was consulted exclusively and widely.¹¹⁰ In a review of its third edition (1996), Cristina Parodi calls it 'el clásico libro de Alicia Jurado,' which is underlined by the fact that the new edition 'reproduce las anteriores [...] sin alterar el texto original.'¹¹¹ Moreover, as the pioneer of the Borges biography, *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* has been consulted and cited

¹⁰⁹Williamson uses the metaphor of the sword and dagger, which he makes a motif throughout his biography *Borges: A Life*, to refer to this conflict.

¹¹⁰There are three editions of Jurado's book and various print runs: the second edition followed the first only two years later, in 1966, with a further print run the following year and in 1980. The third edition dates from 1996, of which there has been at least one more print run in 1997.

¹¹¹Cristina Parodi, 'Alicia Jurado, *Genio y figura de Jorge Luis Borges*', *Variaciones Borges*, 4 (1997), 239-40 (p. 239).

and Alicia Jurado's analyses, opinions and memories sought by many subsequent biographers.¹¹²

The fact that Jurado's biography was being read by contemporary critics is evidenced by references in a variety of publications: as early as 1965, writer and influential Peronist intellectual Arturo Jauretche refers to Jurado as Borges's biographer in 'Moraleja de Borges: su "guerrero y su cautiva"'.¹¹³ Two years later, Ana María Barrenechea also cites Jurado in her influential *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (1967).¹¹⁴ Most relevantly, Emir Rodríguez Monegal picks up her thread of Borges's love for all things British and, as we shall see next, manages to perpetuate the myth of Borges as an incurable Anglophile in his *Borges. A Literary Biography* (1978). There are a dozen references to Jurado's biography in María Esther Vázquez's *Borges. Esplendor y Derrota* (1996), where she is referred to as 'su [Borges's] amiga de toda la vida.'¹¹⁵ Here, for example, Jurado's version of Borges's infamous 'promotion' out of the Miguel Cané Library to inspector of poultry by the Peronist government in 1946 is mentioned. More recently, Edwin Williamson mentions Jurado in his acknowledgements as one of the people who were kind enough to share their memories of Borges with him, some of which appear in his book.

Jurado's opinions have traditionally appeared in newspapers like *La Nación* and *La Prensa*,¹¹⁶ and she is an active member of the Academia Argentina de Letras. Apart from the publication of its third edition in 1996, the fact that 'porteño' libraries contain copies of *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* shows that the book is still in

¹¹²Alejandro Vaccaro, for example, cites both *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* and Rodríguez Monegal's *Borges: Una biografía literaria* as 'soporte para mi trabajo' in *Borges. Vida y literatura* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2006), p. 11.

¹¹³Arturo Jauretche, 'Moraleja de Borges: su "guerrero y su cautiva"', *Marcha* 1259 (1965), in *Antiborges*, ed. by Martín Lafforgue (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara, 1999), pp. 169-78 (p. 176).

¹¹⁴Ana María Barrenechea, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1967), p. 10.

¹¹⁵María Esther Vázquez, *Borges: Esplendor y derrota* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1996), p. 296.

¹¹⁶See for example Maximiliano Seitz, 'Por qué Borges nunca obtuvo el premio Nobel', *La Nación*, 21 August 1999, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=150373 [accessed 1 July 2009].

circulation: the website of the ‘Red de Contenidos Digitales del Patrimonio Cultural’ of the Ministry of Culture of the City of Buenos Aires shows that all the municipal libraries of the city hold copies of *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges*. Among these, Biblioteca Miguel Cané (a small neighbourhood library where Borges worked in the late 30s, which has become something of a tourist attraction) holds three copies.¹¹⁷ It is no wonder, then, that the view of Borges as an elitist, foreign-loving writer, has been so strong for so long in the Argentine imaginary.

(ii) Emir Rodríguez Monegal’s *Borges: Una biografía literaria* (1987)

Uruguayan literary critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal knew Borges and his oeuvre well and he has been himself constructed as an authority: his biography (Fig. 2) has been extensively referred to by most subsequent biographers and by Borges scholars who have taken on the complex job of trying to approach the ultimate Borges truth through the added layer of Rodríguez Monegal’s biography. Monegal’s book was first published in English as *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* in 1978. The edition considered here is a 1993 reprint of Homero Alsina Thavenet’s 1987 Spanish translation. This remarkable gap between the English publication and the translation meant that subsequent biographers would have had to go to the English original for information. It was they who, by extensively quoting it made this book a seminal work and of Monegal the most recognized authority in the field. Knowledge of the English language as a prerequisite for consulting the literary biography of Argentina’s most iconic writer clearly perpetuates the myth of the elite, foreign loving, Anglophile writer, first

¹¹⁷Online at www.acceder.gov.ar/es/buscador/td:Libros.1/title:genio%20y%20figura%20de%20jorge%20luis%20borges [accessed 1 July 2009]. The Biblioteca Nacional contains nine copies of the book (and only one of Rodríguez Monegal’s biography of Borges). The central catalogue of the libraries of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, contains seven copies of various editions of this biography (all other copies of various biographies of the author put together amount to a similar number), online at <http://opac.filo.uba.ar/>.

introduced by Alicia Jurado, who had pointed out that Borges ‘piensa como un latino, pero expone como un sajón.’¹¹⁸ She continues:

Es preciso señalar como rasgo muy notable la patente influencia del idioma inglés y de sus escritores, perceptible en ciertos anglicismos [...] sobre todo en la construcción típicamente inglesa de los párrafos [...] ha eliminado la verborragia, las digresiones y la multiplicidad de cláusulas secundarias que suelen resultar tan fatigosas en el idioma español escrito. (p. 136)

After clearly stating her personal preference for the English language over the tiresome quality of written Spanish, Jurado drives home the point with her analysis of Borges’s humour, which is apparently only available to those able to grasp and enjoy the British variety, underlining ‘los procedimientos que emplea en su sobrio humorismo [...] principalmente [...] el *humour* británico, basado casi siempre en el *understatement*’ (p. 136). Borges’s particular interest in Anglo-Saxon, English and American literatures is evident from his published work and also from his use of English words in some of his poems and stories.¹¹⁹ However, Jurado and Rodríguez Monegal’s construction of Borges as an Anglophile rests on the assumption that Borges considered British culture, for example, to be superior to Argentine culture. Judging by the assertions of these two early biographers, one would expect Borges to have actually written a significant proportion of his oeuvre in English, which is clearly not the case.

¹¹⁸Jurado, *Genio y figura*, p. 136.

¹¹⁹It is a well-known fact that Borges taught himself Anglo-Saxon, although this is more a sign of his interest in the Scandinavian sagas than in British culture itself. Between 1965 and 1967, he wrote *Introducción a la literatura inglesa* and *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (which includes ‘Literatura de la Inglaterra Sajona’) with María Esther Vázquez and *Introducción a la literatura norteamericana* with Esther Zemborain de Torres Duggan. In 1978 he wrote *Breve antología anglosajona* with María Kodama. These are all collected in *Obras Completas en Colaboración* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1998). His admiration for writers like Whitman, Shakespeare, Chesterton and Stevenson (to name just a few English language writers) is also well-known.

In a style different to Jurado's, and through less formalist literary analyses, Rodríguez Monegal chooses to develop and perpetuate the myth of the Anglophile by creating a text which incorporates elements from both Borges's personal history and his work. In exploring the links between his story 'Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva' and the writer's own family mythology, for example, Rodríguez Monegal describes the journey of the archetypal civilization versus barbarism narrative of the white woman kidnapped by savages and assimilated into their culture, entwining it with tales attributed to Borges's English grandmother, Fanny. Rodríguez Monegal ventures further even, interpreting the symbolic value of the story as a metaphor for Fanny's own sense of isolation and entrapment. At this point, the theme of England as the epitome of civilization is taken up. Rodríguez Monegal presents Fanny Haslam as a civilized lady trapped in a world of violence, chaos and barbarism:

Hasta cierto punto, el cuento revela su sentido secreto: también Fanny Haslam era una cautiva. Aunque se había casado con un caballero argentino, aunque había podido conservar su idioma y hasta transmitirlo a sus hijos y nietos, era todavía cautiva en una tierra primitiva y violenta, aprisionada para siempre en un mundo que era dominado por una lengua extranjera.¹²⁰

This appraisal shows that the narrative is constructed from arguably prevailing prejudices and preconceptions, even though the tone is one of revealed truth ('el cuento revela su sentido secreto'). In this context, the biographer offers a certain interpretation which can be contrasted, for example, with subsequent interviews in which Borges often referred to his grandmother as a very brave, no-nonsense woman, who does not

¹²⁰Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges. Una biografía literaria*, trans. by Homero Alsina Thevenet (México: Fondo de cultura económica, 1993), p. 14.

come across as the helpless Victorian lady who needs rescuing from foreign lands, thus reinforcing the idea that such images are constructed in the narrative, rather than uncovered or revealed as irrefutable fact. The way the figure of Fanny Haslam and her relationship with Borges are constructed in this biography contributes to the perception of Borges as an Anglophile, who, in Rodríguez Monegal's view, 'habría de permanecer siempre [...] bajo la influencia británica'(p. 14).

The tone of these pages taps into a wider South American prejudice of English (together with French) as the language of culture, erudition and refinement, which finds expression in comments such as: 'la abuela inglesa que tenía la llave para el mundo de lo inglés y de los libros ingleses: el mundo de la cultura'(p. 19); or 'no es extraño, entonces, que para Georgie el español quedase asociado a una forma más primitiva o elemental de la vida, mientras el inglés daba acceso a un nivel superior' (p. 23). The impact of Borges's mixed heritage on the shaping of his cultural identity comes across as problematic in *Borges: Una biografía literaria*.¹²¹ This results from the construction of a certain psychological configuration for Borges in which Spanish and English heritages are allegedly experienced as unreconcilable: in his analysis of Borges's 'La biblioteca de Babel', for example, Monegal suggests that the story 'contiene rasgos del trauma causado por el doble código lingüístico' (p. 29). It is one way of interpreting multiculturalism that may seem rather surprising bearing in mind that in the Buenos Aires of the first half of the 20th Century, cultural mix was the norm for a great number of families, as the result of mass immigration. Evidence of the creative possibilities opened by this experience appear very frequently in the Borgesian oeuvre and it is equally possible to offer positive interpretations of 'la discordia de sus dos linajes.'¹²² Once again, this thread will be picked up in a more balanced analysis by Williamson.

¹²¹'Georgie se veía confrontado por el abismo cultural que separaba en su familia al lado paterno del materno [...] los dos bandos de su familia.' Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges*, p.16.

¹²²Borges, 'El sur', *OCI*, p.524.

Considering the weight of Rodríguez Monegal's influence, especially on subsequent biographers, as we shall see below, it is fair to argue the critical importance of these pages in the construction of Borges as an incurable Anglophile.

Borges's bilingualism is related to another myth that Rodríguez Monegal's biography is instrumental in perpetuating: that of a bookish writer removed from the world. Monegal writes that 'desde el comienzo, el idioma inglés quedó inseparablemente vinculado al placer de leer. Para Georgie, ése fue el código que le dio acceso al mundo de los libros.'¹²³ To depict the isolation that resulted from this bookishness, Monegal replaces the widely used metaphor of the ivory tower with the more Borgesian labyrinth. He does this, for example, in the section 'El habitante del laberinto', where he comes to the conclusion that 'al identificarse a sí mismo con el Minotauro, Georgie estaba allanando el camino a la futura mitología de Borges. En la época probablemente sintió [...] que él era un poco como Asterión' (p. 47). This image of Borges living in the world of books is built in this case through Rodríguez Monegal's technique: he has taken the basic historical details of Borges's family, such as dates of birth, places of residence and he has put them together with the 'Autobiographical Essay' (published in *The New Yorker* in 1970).¹²⁴ To this basic recipe, he has added what he interprets to be the writer's references to his family in his creative work, and he has filled in the gaps with material taken from interviews and conversations. Crucially, however, it is the particular way in which these pieces are put together and combined with the biographer's analysis of the finished picture which achieves the construction of Borges as a writer in an ivory tower. This is illustrated by comments such as: 'la biblioteca se convirtió en su mundo' (p. 67) or, referring to Borges's prologue to *Evaristo Carriego*: 'allí contrasta el mundo de los libros con el mundo real que tenía

¹²³Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges*, p.19.

¹²⁴Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges*, pp. 464-71. Notably, the 'Autobiographical Essay' was published in English and edited and translated by Borges's American friend Norman Thomas Di Giovanni.

tanta dificultad en dominar' (p. 67). The final paragraph of the biography leaves the reader with this particular image of Borges:

Poco a poco Borges pasó a vivir dentro de un espacio mágico, totalmente vacío y gris, donde el tiempo no cuenta [...] Protegido y aislado por la ceguera, en un laberinto construido sólidamente por Madre, Borges se queda inmóvil [...] Todo en su derredor está quieto, excepto su imaginación [...] Anciano, ciego, frágil, Borges alcanza el centro solitario del laberinto. (pp. 436-7)

Beyond the text of the biography itself, this construction is reinforced by paratextual elements like the cover design, where the sadness and solitude predominant in Borges's life is illustrated by an effective juxtaposition of images (Fig.2). On the front cover of the edition studied here, a black and white close-up photograph of Borges with an expression of sorrow has been reshaped in order to fit the convex surface of a fountain pen nib, with its tip dipped in what appears as red ink, although the brightness of the colour suggests it is blood. The signing of the name of Jorge Luis Borges on a surface that resembles the Argentine flag appears interrupted. The impression thus created is one of a suffering writer imprisoned inside a pen, bleeding through its tip as it inscribes his identity on to a symbol of 'Argentineness'. This conveys a sense of Borges's superiority with respect to his country (as he appears to have the authority to 'spell out' Argentine identity), and it gives the impression that his relationship with Argentina was forced and painful. Both the tight-fit of the photograph within the nib and the deep, solid line of the frame, suggest a self-contained universe from which there is no easy escape. Thus, Rodríguez Monegal's agenda, namely to construct a mythical figure who inhabits a fictional world detached from the realities of his country and

whose life can only be understood through the interpretation of his work, makes its first impact in the space of the paratext.

This is carried through to a further paratextual element: immediately after crossing the threshold of the cover, the reader is confronted by Rodríguez Monegal's dedication to Borges's fictional women: 'a todas las hermanas de Teodolina Villar y Beatriz Viterbo' (p. 7), accentuating the flavour of 'fictional factuality' of his narration of Borges's life, as it intersects with that of his characters. The body of the text itself consists of a great number of – in many cases extensive – quotations from Borges's vast oeuvre. The chronology of his life is linked to these quotations and it expands into a critical analysis, following the more or less regular pattern of fact-quotation-analysis-biographer's conjecture or conclusion. In terms of narrative technique, lexical choices such as 'museo', 'panteón', and 'mito', which abound in the first two sections of the biography, suggest the veneration of a past that has been constructed out of a selection of objects of memorabilia and oral accounts. Similarly, many of the section headings are akin to fiction, with an abundance of metaphors in some cases, such as 'Un espejo deformado ante la realidad', 'La pluma y la espada', for example. Indeed in many cases, they are more or less direct references to Borgesian tropes, as is the case of 'El habitante del laberinto', mentioned above, or 'La biblioteca infinita'.

The first chapter opens with a quote from *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), about the supposed origins of Borges's bookishness, and the well-known story of a young Georgie growing up in the library whilst the exciting life of the 'compadritos' went on on the other side of the spear-headed fence. It is interesting that Rodríguez Monegal chooses to start his literary biography by putting forward a fictional quote as evidence of what is generally perceived to be one of the writer's best-known traits. The words 'imaginario/a' and 'real' occur in the first paragraphs of the first chapter in equal

measure, as if Rodríguez Monegal wanted to announce a certain awareness of the coexistence of both realms in Borges's perception of his own life: 'Borges [...] fue el habitante de un mundo imaginario creado por libros escritos en inglés, y también el de un mundo real, un barrio de Buenos Aires' (p. 9). As he turns his attention to Borges's ancestry, the poem 'Isidoro Acevedo' not only provides information about the warrior Acevedo, but also reminds the reader that the memory of Borges himself, which in any case is fictional, relies on 'fraudes de la palabra' (p. 9), that is, they are made up, narrated. That Acevedo 'died as a hero' comes not from historical documents, but from the poem. The most striking detail, the point at which fact and fiction blend, is the phrase 'El poema documenta' (p. 10): to what extent can poems document, one wonders. It is perhaps amusingly ironic in this context that among the verses that Rodríguez Monegal chooses to illustrate the hero's death, are: 'y la inventiva fiebre le falseó la cara del día, / congregó los ardientes documentos de su memoria / para fraguar su sueño' (p. 10).

The Spanish version of the biography concludes with the ultimate praise for Rodríguez Monegal himself: this comes in the shape of a postscript dated 1985, which reproduces a statement by Borges on occasion of *Jorge Luis Borges. A Literary Biography* being awarded the 1983 'Premio Comisso de Biografía Literaria':

No conozco la biografía de Rodríguez Monegal. Sé que es un buen amigo y un excelente escritor. Sé que sus biografías no condescienden a trivialidades ni a conjeturas psicológicas. No he leído su libro porque el tema no me interesa o, quizá, porque me interesa demasiado.

No me ha sometido nunca a interrogatorios. Tampoco a mis amigos. Ha ejecutado su obra a su modo. Éste es su mérito. (p. 443)

Although Borges claims not to have read the book, such a statement is invaluable as it lends the biography immense kudos. Rodríguez Monegal's inscription in his own work corroborates the idea posed by the 'genre' of literary biography itself: both the author-biographer and the author-biographed are vehemently put forward as legitimising forces of origin. Borges's words serve as a link to other biographies, in which the habit of making psychological conjectures has since been taken up by his former girlfriend Estela Canto, his good friend María Esther Vázquez, and more recently, Williamson, whose biography contains some strong elements of it. By juxtaposing words related to fact-finding ('no me ha sometido nunca a interrogatorios') and to artistic performance ('ejecutar'), Borges reinforces the idea that Rodríguez Monegal's account of his life is far from factual: like the word 'ejecutar' itself, it moves from the connotation of an act of extermination to that of an act of unique creation. Thus, Borges points out, instead of gathering documentary evidence or quoting from witness statements – as biographers would normally do, Rodríguez Monegal has constructed his own fiction of Borges in his own style. Rodríguez Monegal makes no apology, then, for 'writing, or inventing, a literary biography of Borges,'¹²⁵ and Borges's approval justifies his choice.

By virtue of having been introduced in the English and in the Spanish-speaking markets separately and at different times, Rodríguez Monegal's influence on other Borges biographers and scholars is vast, a comprehensive assessment of which exceeds the scope of this chapter. I will provide a few examples. In 1990, Borges expert Evelyn Fishburne includes Emir Rodríguez Monegal as an entry in her *Dictionary of Borges*

¹²⁵Emir Rodríguez Monegal, 'Borges and Derrida Apothecaries', originally published as 'Borges y Derrida boticarios' in *Maldoror*, 21 (1985), translated and reproduced in *Borges and his Successors: the Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts*, by Edna Aizenberg (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), pp. 128-38 (p. 128).

(1990), where his *Literary Biography* is referred to as ‘the best biography to date.’¹²⁶ In accordance to the Borgesian trope of a story within a story, Borges scholar Daniel Balderston cites a reference to Estela Canto in Rodríguez Monegal’s *Literary Biography* in an article about Canto’s *Borges a contraluz*, which, in turn, makes reference to Rodríguez Monegal, in 1996.¹²⁷ Subsequently, six other articles cite or refer to Rodríguez Monegal’s biography in *Variaciones Borges* between 1997 and 2000.¹²⁸ In *Georgie* (1996), Argentine biographer and collector of Borgesiana, Alejandro Vaccaro comments on Rodríguez Monegal’s excess of interpretation: ‘Las conjeturas que lleva a cabo Emir Rodríguez Monegal en su biografía [...] no son otra cosa que una demostración más de lo excesivamente interpretativo que resulta su trabajo.’¹²⁹ However, the fact that he has studied the work closely shows in his careful refutations and corrections based on intensive documentary research.

María Esther Vázquez does the opposite: she chooses to concentrate on Rodríguez Monegal’s interpretations and conjectures in order to justify or legitimize her own. She refers to, rather than cites, Rodríguez Monegal, thus giving the impression that his solid influence and authority in the field are to be taken for granted. She also reproduces some of the rather loaded nicknames that Rodríguez Monegal created for Borges, such as ‘El Gran Desconstructor’ and ‘anciano gurú’, as well as some carefully selected anecdotes which are reproduced in some detail. One of these is the rather amusing story that tells of how Rodríguez Monegal fell for one of Borges’s playful

¹²⁶Evelyn Fishburn and Psiche Hughes, *A Dictionary of Borges* (London: Duckworth, 1990), p. 206. Rodríguez Monegal’s is the only biography of Borges mentioned in this book.

¹²⁷Daniel Balderston, ‘Beatriz Viterbo c’est moi’: Angular Vision in Estela Canto’s *Borges a Contraluz*’, *Variaciones Borges*, 1 (1996), 133-9 (pp.137-8).

¹²⁸Sergio Pastormelo, ‘Borges crítico’, *Variaciones Borges*, 3 (1997), 6-16; Umberto Eco, ‘Between La Mancha and Babel’, *VB*, 4 (1997), 51-62; Fabiana Sabsay-Herrera, ‘Para la prehistoria de H. Bustos Domecq’, *VB*, 5 (1998), 106-22; Jorge Hernández Martín, ‘Textual Polyphony and Skaz in *Seis problemas* by Bustos Domecq’, *VB*, 6 (1998), 13-32; Juan Arana, ‘Las primeras inquietudes filosóficas de Borges’, *VB*, 7 (1999), 6-27 and Alfonso García Morales, ‘Jorge Luis Borges, autor del *Martín Fierro*’, *VB*, 10 (2000), 29-64.

¹²⁹Alejandro Vaccaro, *Georgie, 1899-1930: Una vida de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa/Alberto Casares, 1996), pp. 109-10.

artifices: ‘Borges juega con el lector, ya que ofrece bajo la engañosa apariencia de una crítica bibliográfica a una novela, [...] una pieza de ficción.’¹³⁰ Vázquez refers to the fictional *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim*,¹³¹ which Rodríguez Monegal ‘pidió a una librería de Londres.’¹³² This anecdote illustrates Rodríguez Monegal’s general conception of the blurred boundary between fact and fiction which characterizes his belief that Borges the man can be reached through his work. Vázquez devotes a whole section of her ninth chapter to herself, which opens with a rather severe complaint about the inaccuracy of Rodríguez Monegal’s work concerning her personally, and the nature of her relationship with Borges. She takes Rodríguez Monegal as an almost absolute authority on Borges, but sets the limit where the exposure extends to her: ‘Emir Rodríguez Monegal [...] comete varias inexactitudes que lamentablemente han sido repetidas por algunos biógrafos posteriores’ (p. 255). More recently, Williamson lists Rodríguez Monegal’s *Literary Biography* in his bibliography and cites a couple of anecdotes that appear in it, in his own *Borges: A Life* (2004).¹³³

In his review of *Borges. A Literary Biography*, John King writes that Rodríguez Monegal’s work ‘could be subtitled, without much exaggeration, ‘Borges y yo.’¹³⁴ King remarks on how Rodríguez Monegal’s own personal trajectory could be charted in his account of Borges’s life: ‘Just as the two histories run parallel and begin to overlap, so fiction and reality begin to blend’(p. 246). This review constitutes a very accurate description of the position Rodríguez Monegal assumes within his work: his autobiographical inscription and blending of fact and fiction, as this section demonstrated. The reception and extensive circulation of Rodríguez Monegal’s work – which, as we have seen, is evident in a number of references in biographical and critical

¹³⁰Vázquez, *Borges*, pp. 154-5.

¹³¹Jorge Luis Borges, ‘El Acercamiento a Almotásim’, *Historia de la Eternidad, OCI*, pp. 414-8.

¹³²Vázquez, *Borges*, p 155.

¹³³See Williamson, *Borges*, pp. 342 and 371.

¹³⁴John King, ‘Review: Literary Biography in Argentina’, *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1983), 246-53 (p. 246).

work – have contributed to the perpetuation of the construction of an Anglophile Borges who could only be ‘recognized and appreciated by only a few initiates’(p. 246), delineated by Jurado and renarrated by Rodríguez Monegal. Other biographers have also entwined their own life stories in their accounts of the life of Borges, constructing other, more intimate, Borgeses. As we shall see next, it is also the case of Estela Canto’s *Borges a contraluz* (1989) and María Esther Vázquez’s *Borges. Esplendor y derrota* (1996).

(iii)Estela Canto’s *Borges a contraluz* (1989)

When Argentine writer, translator and committed communist Estela Canto met a middle-aged Borges, she maintains that he immediately fell in love with her. Their unusual, on and off, relationship spanned the decade between 1944 and 1955. This was also the first period of Peronist rule, a time of great emotional turmoil in the writer’s life, according to Canto.¹³⁵ This is where Canto draws her legitimization as biographer: putting herself forward as the ultimate Beatrice and thus taking the position of revealer of Borges-the-sexual-being, even though, as other biographers claim, Borges was infatuated with and loved many women. However, the uniqueness of Estela Canto’s work, which is half-way between a biography and a memoir, lies in the open discussion of Borges’s sexuality, of which Borges emerges as an impotent lover, so desperate and prone to suicide that he seeks the help of a psychoanalyst.

The cover of *Borges a contraluz* (Fig. 3) shows a classic black and white posed close-up of the writer deep in thought. He is an old, blind man and the photograph somehow makes the viewer very aware of his unseeing eyes. As the next chapter explores, it is interesting that this particular image of the elderly writer was chosen to illustrate an account which pivots around a relationship that took place when he was

¹³⁵Williamson explores this psychological turmoil in *Borges*, p. 286.

middle-aged.¹³⁶ The shadow that falls on a portion of the profile evokes the title: ‘a contraluz’, which has been translated into English as ‘in silhouette’, bringing to mind the image of a lover standing by a window at night, giving a sense of intimacy, consistent with Canto’s approach to her account. The blurb on the back cover presents it as ‘el testimonio de los años más intensos de la relación entre ellos, las cartas de amor que él le escribiera, así como los comentarios sobre el texto que Borges estaba gestando en ese tiempo y que luego le dedicaría [‘El Aleph’].’¹³⁷ The fact that this is a book as much about Estela Canto as it is about Borges is corroborated by her own assertion: ‘Hablo aquí del Borges vivo, del hombre que conocí’ (back cover).

The book presents important documentary evidence in the form of photographs and letters. The choice and use of these documents is creative and effective, and it serves a dual function: to inspire a certain aura of sacredness, and at the same time, to weave the author herself into the story she is telling. The letters are addressed to her in Borges’s neat, regular handwriting and they all bear his signature. Treasured by Canto, these are testimonies of their love affair, which is ultimately the main subject of this book. The author is also generous with photographs from her personal collection, especially those which include her, for example, those in which she is taking leisurely walks with Borges in Buenos Aires, the backdrop to their affair. This is significant, as it reinforces the role of the writer’s mother as censor, which Canto stresses a significant element in relation to Borges as a sexual being. Estela Canto describes Leonor Acevedo’s unavoidable presence in their relationship as unbearable, as the writer seemed incapable of standing up to her prejudices and traditional values. For example, Borges is alleged to have telephoned his mother every time he and Estela were out, as

¹³⁶This choice of cover photograph contrasts with the Brazilian edition *Borges à Contraluz* (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 1991) (Fig. 4), which bears the photograph of the couple which appears on page 214 of the edition considered here. This contrast between other images of Borges circulated in Argentina and abroad is examined in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

¹³⁷Estela Canto, *Borges a contraluz* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1989), back cover.

his mother did not allow them to be alone in his apartment and would sit with them if she came to visit. Williamson later explores the relationship between Borges and his mother in his biography and links it to the conflict that he identifies as that of the sword and the dagger, or tradition versus desire.

Narrated mainly in the first person, *Borges a contraluz* is an obvious example of autobiographical inscription, where Borges is the other main character in the narration of Canto's own story. The book has no bibliography, no sources are cited – other than letters which are reproduced – and the only two or three footnotes are explanatory notes rather than references. There are a few quotations mainly from Borges's poetry, where Canto enjoys finding what she considers to be references to herself. The narration of the main events in the writer's life constitute the narration of a narration, as Canto relays mostly what she has heard, interspersed with passages written in a rather florid and grandiloquent style: 'Una cárcel infinita y cambiante como las olas, las formas que creemos idénticas repeticiones de otras formas, la extensión limitada por una geometría impuesta. Tenía que querer a su ciudad: no tenía nada más. Era el mandato' (p. 65).

In Canto's work the interweaving of the life of Borges the man and Borges the author with his work, together with his relationship with her, is bold and unapologetic: the reader is expected to believe the relationship narrated. Her literary analyses of various pieces by Borges reveal her position regarding authorship and her mimetic conception of literature. Among the stories that Canto analyzes are 'Funes el memorioso', 'El zahir', 'El Aleph', 'La escritura del dios' and 'La intrusa', which are also chapter headings in the biography. In her introduction, she announces that she will be revealing the various truths which only she appears to hold the key to about Borges's character in his work:

Borges ha dado las claves para penetrar en el laberinto que era su carácter. Una es *El Aleph*; otra, *El Zahir*; otra, *La escritura del dios*, que inventó una mañana que estábamos en el Jardín Zoológico, junto a una jaula [...] Hay otras claves [...] La clave de estas claves son dos o tres de las cartas que me escribió. (p. 13)

In attempting to place herself so close to the heart and mind of the author, Canto seems to be claiming her share in part of the creative process, thus merging her own autobiographical impulse with the writing of Borges's work itself, as she appears to imply that some of the most renowned texts would not have been written had it not been for her inspiring (omni)presence.¹³⁸ She not only considers the emotional being called Borges whom she knew the very core from which his work emanates, she also emphasises her position right next to that core. Following in Rodríguez Monegal's steps, her belief in the power of the texts to reveal the essence of the author dominates her interpretations:

He elegido el cuento *Funes el Memorioso*, escrito por Borges antes de conocerme [...] Funes es una confesión, una imagen de la forma en que se veía a sí mismo [...] Hay aquí una especie de compasión que, sin querer, se le escapa al autor. En toda su literatura Borges cuida meticulosa, casi obsesivamente, que la compasión no asome.¹³⁹

¹³⁸This is explored by Daniel Balderston in "*Beatriz Viterbo c'est moi*": Angular Vision in Estela Canto's *Borges a contraluz*', later published in Spanish in *Borges: Realidades y simulacro*. Subsequent references in this thesis are to the Spanish version.

¹³⁹Canto, *Borges*, pp.161-2.

This analysis also perpetuates Alicia Jurado's claim that there is no passion in Borges's stories. The strength of this image can be surmised by the presence of the comment itself in a book which is all about passion.

Following Canto's death in 1994, an article in *La Nación* referred to her unashamed account of intimate details such as the lack of physicality of her relationship with Borges: 'Canto se atreve a emitir las opiniones más audaces, más sinceras y originales que se hayan publicado sobre su amigo.'¹⁴⁰ If Canto expected to come across as bold in her interrogation of the figure of a national 'monument' by bringing to the fore Borges as a sexual being, her book achieved its objective.¹⁴¹ Daniel Balderston underlines the importance of this biography as he explores the question of Estela Canto's autobiographical impulse in 'Beatriz Viterbo *c'est moi*: Visión angular en *Borges a contraluz* de Estela Canto', and comes to the conclusion that 'su propio libro sin duda será visto en el futuro como una contribución mucho más significativa para la comprensión de Borges que el de Monegal.'¹⁴² Later, Balderston again took up Canto's thread on Borges's sexuality in his article 'La "dialéctica fecal": pánico homosexual y el origen de la escritura en Borges', where he mentions that 'En su libro (1989) Canto ofrece un análisis fascinante de los enigmas de la sexualidad en Borges.'¹⁴³ The conclusions that Balderston comes to in this article are very different from Canto's. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Balderston's reference to her book indicates that she inaugurated a new era in the assessment of Borges's life story, as her psychological

¹⁴⁰*La Nación*, 3 June 1994. Cited in León Tenenbaum, *Buenos Aires, tiempo de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones turísticas, 2001), pp. 81-82.

¹⁴¹María Rosa Lojo, for example, refers to *Borges a contraluz* as 'libro polémico que se propuso, entre otros objetivos, develar penosas intimidades de su biografiado (como sus problemas afectivos y sexuales)' in 'Una mujer con vocación de rebeldía', *La Nación*, 11 August 1999, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=214648 [accessed 1 June 2010].

¹⁴²Daniel Balderston, 'Beatriz Viterbo *c'est moi*', p. 115.

¹⁴³Daniel Balderston, *El deseo, enorme cicatriz luminosa: ensayos sobre homosexualidades latinoamericanas* (Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2004), note to p. 62, p.75.

approach was later taken up, albeit in a different style, by Williamson more than a decade later.

The value of Canto's contribution lies in her challenging of the myth of Borges as detached from the world of experience, which accompanies the revision and revalorization, in the 90s, of Borges's youth. The extent of the impact of her work can be seen in Argentine director Javier Torre's decision to base his film *Estela Canto, un amor de Borges* (2000) on her book. The release of the film motivated various articles in the Argentine press about Canto and her 'interpretaciones desprejuiciadas sobre el autor de *Ficciones*.'¹⁴⁴ In *Borges: A Life* Williamson relies on *Borges a Contraluz* for his account of the relationship with Canto, which he considers pivotal at this stage of Borges's development both as a man and as a writer.¹⁴⁵ The fact that Borges dedicated 'El Aleph' to Canto, even though Williamson claims that it is a story about Norah Lange, places her in the role of Beatrice. Williamson bases his theory of Borges's quest for a muse that will allow him to write that page that will justify him as a writer around this allegory, which comes across very strongly in his biography.¹⁴⁶ Here, the figure of Beatrice condenses Borges's source of inspiration and his object of desire. In fact, Williamson chooses the title 'The New Beatrice' for the chapter in which he describes the writer's relationship with Canto. The fact that it studies closely *Borges a contraluz* speaks of the impact of her account in respect of Borges's sexuality.

Another significant aspect of Borges's life which Canto refers to in her biography is the importance of Buenos Aires, both as a backdrop to their relationship and as central to Borges's own life and oeuvre. In *Buenos Aires, tiempo de Borges* (2001), León Tenenbaum welcomes 'toda la información urbana que Estela Canto ofrece de sus

¹⁴⁴Hugo Beccacece, 'Un personaje de película', *La Nación*, 5 September 2000, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=31672. See also Julia Montesoro, 'Jean Pierre Noher es Borges enamorado', *La Nación*, 5 September 2000, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=31673 [both accessed 11 June 2009].

¹⁴⁵Williamson, *Borges*, p.519.

¹⁴⁶See Williamson's chapter 'The New Beatrice', as above, pp.275-90.

paseos y encuentros con Borges y de las inclinaciones y preferencias de éste que registraría luego en sus obras' and devotes a section of his book to her biography.¹⁴⁷ This focus on the writer's intimate experience of the city contributes to a change in the Borges image which gradually becomes less detached from his environment, both natural and emotional. Estela Canto's *Borges a Contraluz* plays an important part in this construction, of Borges as both a national monument and an 'ordinary' man. The next section examines how it falls to another female biographer to continue this transition in the construction of Borges.

(iv) María Esther Vázquez's *Borges. Esplendor y derrota* (1996)

A regular contributor in the national daily *La Nación*, Argentine writer María Esther Vázquez met Borges at the Biblioteca Nacional, when he was in his fifties, already an established and well respected writer. She worked and travelled with him and they had many friends in common. Rodrigo Fresán has pointed out that her book 'se inscribe en la serie de obras escritas por 'las-mujeres-que-supieron-frecuentar-a-Borges.'¹⁴⁸ In 1984 she wrote *Borges, sus días y su tiempo*, a biographical collection of interviews entwined with comments by Vázquez and prefaced by Borges himself, and which is referred to quite often in *Borges: Esplendor y derrota* (Fig. 5), not only as a source of factual information, but also for the anecdotal contribution of the experience of writing itself.

The cover of *Borges: Esplendor y derrota* shows a smiling middle-aged Borges, a portrait which picks up the image of Alicia Jurado's Borges as warm-hearted and friendly (the photograph also appears in Alicia Jurado's biography). It is quite an uncommon image, compared with the more widely circulated and therefore more

¹⁴⁷León Tenenbaum, *Buenos Aires, tiempo de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones turísticas, 2001), p. 81.

¹⁴⁸Rodrigo Fresán, 'Una guía de las biografías de Borges escritas en la Argentina', *Página/12*, 16 January 2005, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-1953-2005-01-16.html [accessed 17 April 2010]

familiar, image of a serious, gloomy Borges who is deep in thought. Unlike those, this photograph has no shadows: all brightness and liveliness, it suggests a gregarious, fun-loving Borges who appears to be enjoying a social occasion. This image, which is consistent with the description of Borges's personality that Vázquez offers in her biography, emphasises the contrast between the early, 'happy' Borges and the elderly 'defeated' Borges whose sad demise Vázquez mourns at the end of the book. In her review of *Borges. Esplendor y derrota*, Annick Louis refers to Borges in this photograph as 'erigido por la revolución libertadora en 'escritor nacional' y nombrado director de la biblioteca, es feliz, y hasta ha embellecido.'¹⁴⁹ This emphasizes an implicit alignment of Vázquez with Borges's, and Jurado's anti-Peronism. In terms of the layout of the biography itself, Vázquez's can be considered a precursor of the pictorialization of the Borges biography, a commercial decision that will be imitated in other items of biographical interest.¹⁵⁰ Apart from a great number of photographs from her personal collection, which attest to her friendship with the writer at the time of his greatest public exposure, her chapters are headed with images, as she approaches her story of Borges's life through a combination of image and text.

A degree of autobiographical inscription, as we have seen with the previous three biographies, is immediately apparent on the back cover of Vázquez's book: 'Este es el relato minucioso, matizado con novedosas y a veces polémicas anécdotas, sustentado a la vez por una sólida investigación, de una dilatada y privilegiada amistad: la que unió hasta el final a Vázquez con Borges.'¹⁵¹ The friendship between biographer and subject legitimises the book, but it also links it, in the minds of Argentine readers, with Vázquez's continuing production as a writer and her presence in the press. This, in turn,

¹⁴⁹ Annick Louis, 'Nota bibliográfica: María Esther Vázquez, *Borges. Esplendor y derrota*', *Variaciones Borges*, 2 (1996), 223-8 (p. 227).

¹⁵⁰ Consider, for example, *El factor Borges: Nueve ensayos ilustrados*, by Alan Pauls (Buenos Aires: Fondo de cultura económica, 2000); or *Borges: Una biografía en imágenes*, by Alejandro Vaccaro (Buenos Aires: Ediciones B, 2005).

¹⁵¹ Vázquez, *Borges*, back cover.

reinforces her position as enemy of Borges's widow, María Kodama: consider, for example, articles such as 'Reeditarán una obra de Borges con Vázquez: El texto es de 1966 y será publicado por Emecé, luego de una disputa judicial entre Vázquez y Kodama.'¹⁵² This antagonism is also later explored by Juan Gasparini in *La posesión póstuma* (2000), and perpetuated by Kodama's virulent reaction to Gasparini's book, which resulted in her taking legal action against him.¹⁵³ It is also clearly delineated in *Borges: Esplendor y derrota*, as we shall see next.¹⁵⁴ The Borges put forward by Vázquez is a victim of circumstances which lead him to a life that ends in defeat. Her book is summarized in its last lines:

Borges triunfó y se vio envuelto en el esplendor de la fama, de los halagos, de los premios. Eso lo hizo feliz. Y, sin embargo, fue incapaz de lograr un amor entero en el momento adecuado.

Más allá del esplendor, encontró la derrota.¹⁵⁵

Vázquez's agenda is clearly to denounce what she perceives as the appropriation of Borges by the wrong people: her attack is on the figure of Borges's widow and heir María Kodama and her entourage, which she threads through the narration of Borges's life in terms of decline and fall, lamenting the loss of the great man. Shortly before his death in 1986, María Kodama and Borges were married in a ceremony in Paraguay in which the writer was not present due to ill health. The ceremony made Kodama

¹⁵²Juan Manuel Bordón, *Clarín*, 10 September 2008, online at www.clarin.com/diario/2008/09/10/sociedad/s-01756834.htm [accessed 2 July 2009].

¹⁵³The result of the trial, after which Gasparini was found innocent of libel, and other instances of legal actions initiated by Kodama against other writers and journalists, were reported by the main newspapers, for example: Mariano Blejman, 'Un testamento que deja dudas', *Página/12*, 9 October 2004, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/cultura/index-2004-10-09.html; or Ana Prieto, 'La viuda, la elegida, la guardiana', *Clarín*, 7 October 2006, online at www.clarin.com/suplementos/cultura/2006/10/07/u-01285316.htm [both accessed 20 May 2010].

¹⁵⁴Juan Gasparini, 'La otra María Kodama', *La posesión póstuma* (Madrid: Foca, 2000), pp. 14-32.

¹⁵⁵Vázquez, *Borges*, p.337.

Borges's most immediate relative. The wedding was perceived as Kodama's opportunism, even though Borges had already named her as his sole heir in his revised will in 1985. Vázquez's account of the wedding, for which she chooses the title 'Casamiento y muerte', shows how highly suspicious she was of Kodama and her motives. Here, Vázquez uses words such as 'sorpresivamente', 'insólitos' and 'rareza' to refer to the circumstances surrounding the marriage; and she ends the section by citing the opinion of Borges's sister, Norah, published in a French newspaper: 'La famille accepte ce malefice en silence, ce mariage a quelque chose de diabolique' (pp. 326-7). In *Borges: A Life*, Williamson refers to Vázquez's biography as he narrates her relationship with Borges, although her name does not appear in his acknowledgements. In a more nuanced analysis, Williamson considers that Borges's latter years were greatly enriched by the love of Kodama, thus reversing Vázquez's 'decline and fall' storyline.

As a measure of Vázquez's reception and impact, I have mentioned her presence in the press, which I shall go back to later on, with regard to her comments on Williamson's *Borges: A Life*. Annick Louis believes that the contribution of Vázquez's biography lies in that it is 'una excelente exposición de los saberes que circulan actualmente en el círculo de adeptos a la obra del escritor.'¹⁵⁶ However, she regrets the image of a defeated, emotionally impoverished writer, which emerges in Vázquez's work and which Louis claims 'responde también a una concepción cultural y a una moda, ya que se inscribe en una tendencia actual del género biográfico: la de intentar descalificar a los grandes escritores a partir de su vida privada' (p. 228). In this sense, following in Canto's footsteps, the Borges constructed by Vázquez comes across as an 'ordinary' human being who is susceptible to emotional turmoil. At the same time, however, her theme of 'apogee and defeat' suggests a sense of historical significance, in

¹⁵⁶Louis, 'Nota bibliográfica', p. 226.

the same way as ancient civilizations or movements are described in historical accounts. Thus, in these two biographies, Borges appears to be in transition from a national monument which stands above and beyond the realities of the nation, to a mere mortal who is vulnerable to emotional defeat. It is perhaps the interpretation of this transition, which, as Louis points out above, appears to some to be an attempt to lessen Borges's greatness that has earned Williamson some negative reviews, as we shall see in the next section.

(v) Edwin Williamson's *Borges: A Life* (2004)

Other biographies of Borges had already been written in English by foreigners, but none as controversial as Williamson's (Fig. 6).¹⁵⁷ Its analysis of the Borgesian oeuvre pivots around the affective upheaval allegedly suffered by the writer in his relationships both familial and amorous. The biography revolves around two main metaphors: the sword of honour and the dagger of desire. Thus, Borges's quest for a definition of his identity and, consequently, of his position in terms of an object of desire, is referred to as the conflict between the sword and the dagger. Everything to do with the writer's mother, criollo values, civilization, tradition, control is represented by the sword; the rest is represented by the dagger: the father, barbarism, anarchism, the avant-garde, desire: 'he was creating a parallel between his inner conflict of sword and dagger and the quintessential Argentine conflict of 'civilization' and 'barbarism'.¹⁵⁸ In terms of his poetic voice, Williamson sees Borges's life as a quest for a unifying principle in the person of a woman who would love him. The Borgesian oeuvre is seen through this Dantean pattern, which takes Borges from failed relationship to failed relationship until he finally finds his true Beatrice in Kodama: 'The particular terms of this Dantean myth

¹⁵⁷James Woodall's *The Man in the Mirror of the Book* (1996) and Donald Yates's *Jorge Luis Borges: Life, Work and Criticism* (1985).

¹⁵⁸Williamson, *Borges*, p.211.

can be reconstructed from an array of allusions and symbols in Borges's writing' (p. 243). The Borges that emerges is a tortured soul whose life appears greatly influenced by family values. As a consequence, he struggles to form meaningful relationships, which, in Williamson's view, enhances the interest of his work. The undermining of a great mind by reference to these alleged inabilities has received more attention than the real strength of this biography, which is Williamson's analysis of the historico-political context of Borges's life and the author's engagement with it.

Following the Rodríguez Monegal tradition of literary biography, Williamson delves into the depths of Borges's oeuvre in search of clues about Borges the man, as announced in the blurb: 'By correlating this new biographical information with Borges's literary texts, Edwin Williamson reconstructs the dynamics of his inner world – the conflicts, desires and obsessions that drove the man and shaped his work' (front-cover flap). Consistent with his purpose of interpreting Borges's life story through the prism of his emotional life, the intertitles in Williamson's biography contain words denoting feelings, such as 'isolation' or 'false hopes'. Each of the five parts of the biography is headed by a title with a lyrical quality, with rather loaded references to the famous poetry of Rimbaud: 'A Season in Hell', for example. There is the plainly factual: 'Geneva (1914-1919)', as well as the more dramatic: 'The rule of Mother'. This has the effect of emphasizing the blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction while, at the same time, helping to carry the narrative forward.

The whole front cover of Williamson's book is a photo of Borges as an old blind man, with a faintly melancholic expression on his face. It is a posed picture, in which parts of his face and body are shadowed. He appears surrounded by solid, dark furniture, giving an impression of rigidity and seriousness. This image does not relate directly to the content of the biography: the reader finds a solitary old man surrounded

by shadows where he or she would expect to see the image of a young man, possibly in love. The blurb contains carefully written, extended, generous praise, by highly respected and renowned writers and literary critics from various countries like John Updike, Mario Vargas Llosa and Harold Bloom. Williamson finds himself in the uncomfortable position of a university critic tackling a ‘lesser genre’, as the academic community seem to be a bit dismissive about biography-writing. In an interview published in *Clarín* in 2006, Williamson explains the mistrust by the academic world of the ‘genre’ of literary biography as based on the notion of ‘biographical fallacy’ expounded by American New Criticism in the 40s and 50s.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, the fact that Williamson’s work received praise from fiction writers and literary critics indicates the kind of erudite audience the biography did appeal to.

In contrast with the other four biographers studied here, Williamson is arguably an ‘outsider’ in relation to Borges insofar as he is neither a compatriot or a colleague or friend, and he did not know the writer personally. Thus, he enjoys a certain cultural distance from Borges’s context. Approaching Borges as object of study, rather than writing about a personal relationship, as is the case with the other biographies studied here, also affords Williamson the advantage of critical distance. It could be argued, of course, that in comparison to the biographies mentioned above, he lacks the possibility of legitimising his work by positioning himself within the story. Furthermore, Williamson’s long academic trajectory in the field of Spanish and Latin American Studies may have somewhat played against him in terms of the reception of his work particularly in Argentina. Crucially, Argentine reviews of his biography, which, at points, were rather unfavourable, have made *Borges: A Life* famously controversial.

¹⁵⁹‘Todavía hay una desconfianza en el género de la biografía literaria entre muchos críticos universitarios, algo que los críticos norteamericanos de los años 40 y 50 llamaron la *falacia biográfica*.’ Matías Repar, ‘A Borges le incomodaba su reputación de escritor frígido’, *Clarín*, 13 May 2006, online at www.Clarín.com/diario/2006/05/13/sociedad/s-06201.htm [accessed 11 May 2009].

Alejandro Vaccaro dismisses Williamson's biography as written by 'este hombre de Escocia' who comes to 'decirnos cómo interpretar la vida de Borges.'¹⁶⁰ Writing in *Página/12*, Rodrigo Fresán flagrantly misspells the author's name and calls the biography a travel guide which he considers unnecessary for Argentines.¹⁶¹ These comments, I argue, constitute a valuable indicator of a certain Argentine possessiveness of Borges as a 'national treasure', rather than of the quality of Williamson's work.

Reviews in the Argentine media refer to Williamson as 'catedrático de Oxford', or, simply, as 'académico inglés' or 'catedrático escocés', which makes him sound even more alien and less entitled to an opinion of the local writer. This goes against a certain Argentine snobbish preference for all things British, and dismisses the (perhaps unrealistic) expectation of an erudite work capable of revealing a truth that is only reserved to the very few. This may be the reason for the disappointment expressed in the negative reviews, which found the biography to be lacking in insight of the deepest nuances of Borges's work in the Argentine context.¹⁶² This is rather surprising, given that Williamson's can be considered one of the most comprehensive studies of the historico-political context of Borges's life. At the same time, however, Williamson's work seems to have touched a nationalistic nerve and triggered a certain national pride and protectiveness of Borges as an Argentine icon, that is, the success story that makes all Argentines winners.¹⁶³

In a letter to the editor of the same newspaper, María Esther Vázquez complains of Williamson's contrivance of a fantasy love life for Borges, offers corrections – some

¹⁶⁰Alejandro Vaccaro, 'Un trabajo bochornoso', *Clarín*, 13 May 2006, online at www.clarin.com/diario/2006/05/13/sociedad/s-06201.htm, [accessed 11 May 2009].

¹⁶¹'Un libro correcto y funcional y pertinente para el lector en inglés, pero por completo innecesario para nosotros... está más cerca de la guía de turismo que del mapa del tesoro.' Rodrigo Fresán, 'No-Ficciones', *Página/12*, 16 January 2005, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-1953-2005-01-16.html [accessed 11 Mayo 2009].

¹⁶²Edgardo Krebs, 'Borges en inglés: problema de traducción', *La Nación*, 14 November 2004, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=653713 [accessed 11 June 2009].

¹⁶³This particular construction of Borges as internationally recognized success-story is examined in further detail in Chapter 2.

of which are based on her own take on the author's life – and closes with: 'Lo que natura no da, Oxford no presta,'¹⁶⁴ which is a very clear stab at the marketing of Williamson as a prestigious academic. Three days later, another letter appeared, by Edgardo Krebs, who points out what he considers to be errors of interpretation, fact and custom, referring to Williamson as a foreigner and condemning his Freudian analysis.¹⁶⁵ Williamson defends himself addressing his reply to both critics and duly justifying his choice of facts by his intensive and thorough research, and urging readers to read his book in order to make up their own minds. He explicitly rejects that his was a 'Freudian analysis' and explains that what he has tried to do is 'situar ciertos símbolos poéticos [...] en un contexto de experiencia personal para así poder llegar a un sentido de la dinámica del mundo interior del escritor,' which he claims, is 'tarea propia de un biógrafo literario.'¹⁶⁶

Other reviews remark on what I believe is the most valuable contribution of Williamson's work to the field of Borges studies, which is the appropriately clear and concise analysis of the historical and political context of Borges's life and work. The paramount importance of this careful study of the various relevant moments in Argentine history is that it seriously undermines the existing myths of Borges as a writer in an ivory tower, and places him, quite clearly, in the position of a relatively more *engagé* writer. This image of an impassioned Borges, both as a writer and as a politicised young man, comes across in one of Williamson's public discussions of the author in a BBC radio programme in January 2007, in which he said that Borges 'has a reputation of being a political conservative. In fact, nothing could be further from the

¹⁶⁴María Esther Vázquez, 'Los amores de Borges', Cartas de lectores, *La Nación*, 16 October 2004, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=645355 [accessed 11 June 2009].

¹⁶⁵Edgardo Krebs, 'Borges', Cartas de lectores, *La Nación*, 19 October 2004, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=646152 [accessed 11 June 2009].

¹⁶⁶Edwin Williamson, 'Los amores de Borges', 'Cartas de lectores', *La Nación*, 31 October 2004, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=649821 [accessed 5 April 2010].

truth.’¹⁶⁷ As presenter Melvyn Bragg pressed him on Borges’s support of military regimes in Argentina, Chile and Spain, Williamson insisted that ‘you have to see that in the context of his whole political development, in fact, Borges [...] saw himself as a public intellectual’ who, in ‘every major juncture in Argentine history [...] took a public position.’¹⁶⁸ These comments aptly summarize his depiction of the writer in *Borges: A Life*, which includes, for example, the detailed portrayal of a politicised young Borges who espoused what Williamson terms ‘democratic *criollismo*’ and who played an important role in Hipólito Irigoyen’s reelection campaign in 1928.¹⁶⁹ The possibility of this reappraisal of Borges is due to Williamson’s cultural distance, which allows him to achieve a certain objectivity that may not have been available to Argentine biographers, thus reinforcing the significant influence of the historical and political context in which those biographies were written.

Williamson’s much publicized and greatly controversial *Borges: A Life* has been widely cited in many of the articles that appear in *Variaciones Borges*, and it has been in the international public eye, probably more than any other work on Borges of its type. In the case of Argentina, crucially, the reception of *Borges: A Life* is a valuable tool for the evaluation of the central role of the figure of Borges as cultural signifier: the protectiveness expressed by the various Borges specialists mentioned above speaks of the strength of the writer as a national treasure.

¹⁶⁷Williamson takes part in a discussion of Borges with presenter Melvyn Bragg, Evelyn Fishburn and Efraín Kristal, in ‘Jorge Luis Borges’, *In Our Time with Melvyn Bragg*, BBC Radio 4, 04 January 2007, online at www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/programmes/people/VGVmL25hbWUvYm9yZ2VzLCBqb3JnZSBsdWlziChhdXRob3Ip [accessed 20 May 2010], 36’26’’-36’32’’.

¹⁶⁸Williamson, *In Our Time*, 36’35’’-37’01’’.

¹⁶⁹Consider, for example, Williamson’s ‘Revenge and Defeat’ and ‘A New Dawn in Iceland’, in *Borges*, pp. 160-74 and pp. 416-27, respectively.

Conclusion

It was the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate that what are generally perceived to be truths revealed in biographies are actually a set of constructs. The comparative analysis of the five biographies considered, and the different cultural and historical contexts of their production, shows that each of these biographies constructs a Borges that responds to a set of discourses prevalent at that time.

The journey from the two pioneering works, Alicia Jurado's *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* and Emir Rodríguez Monegal's *Borges. Una Biografía Literaria*, through Estela Canto's *Borges a Contraluz*, María Esther Vázquez's *Borges. Esplendor y Derrota* to Edwin Williamson's *Borges: A Life*, allows us to trace the changing face of Jorge Luis Borges. But, perhaps most tellingly, this survey of the agendas and motivations behind the construction of different images of the writer, allows us to form a picture of the context behind them. Jurado's conservative Borges responds to the political debates going on in the 60s. It reveals the emerging reconfiguration of Argentina and the insertion, after the last large wave of immigration of the early 20th Century, of first generation Argentines in the institutional, cultural and political life of the country. It was also written as a reaction to the rise of Peronism. Rodríguez Monegal's depiction of the old wise man inhabiting his own fictional labyrinth perpetuates Jurado's image of the elitist writer and extends his reputation as an Anglophile. Perhaps this is a result of Rodríguez Monegal's own positioning within North American academia and the debates surrounding the idea of popular culture as opposed to high culture. Estela Canto introduces the idea of a sexual Borges, which Williamson then explores in greater depth. María Esther Vázquez is a good example of appropriation of the 'national writer' and it epitomizes Argentine reaction to his death in Geneva, finding someone to blame in the figure of María Kodama. I believe that after

Vázquez, a less antagonistic image of Borges emerges, one that it is possible to reappropriate differently, as the last two chapters of this thesis demonstrate. With its in-depth analysis of a more politicized Borges, Williamson's biography is a sign of its times: the old myths can now be set aside to approach Borges in a more moderate way.

An appraisal of the reception of these five biographies provides a sense of the extent of the circulation of the constructions of Borges within Argentina and in academic circles internationally, through coverage in the Argentine media and citations in relevant academic publications. It also corroborates Genette's notion of the power of the paratext as mediator of our experience of both Borges's oeuvre and the biographies themselves.

The next chapter continues the examination of Borges's construction as an icon considering its visual aspect. There follows a more detailed exploration of the particular cultural and historical contexts and the commercial, political and media discourses that constructed the author throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s, as this is needed to look more closely at the motivations for the parallel processes of construction of an Argentine cultural identity through that of the literary icon.

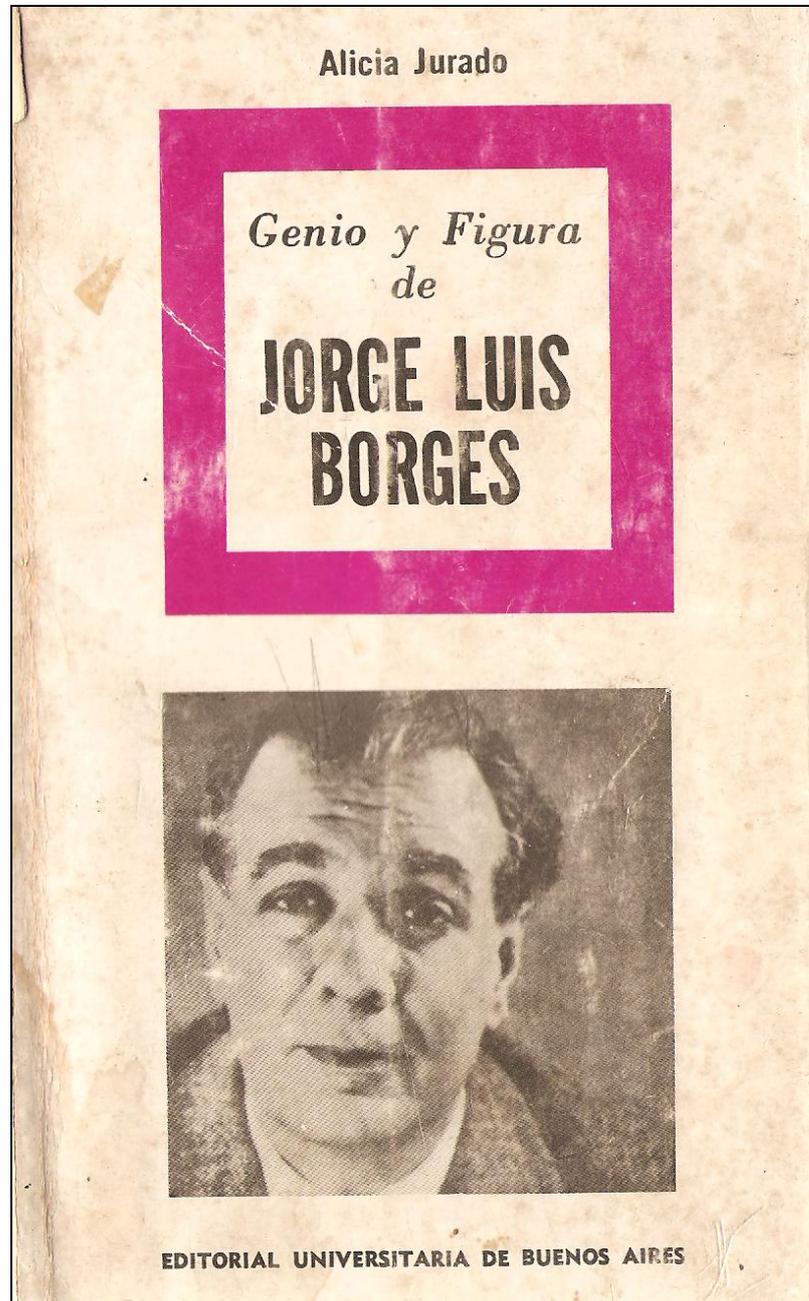


Figure 1. Alicia Jurado, *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1964).

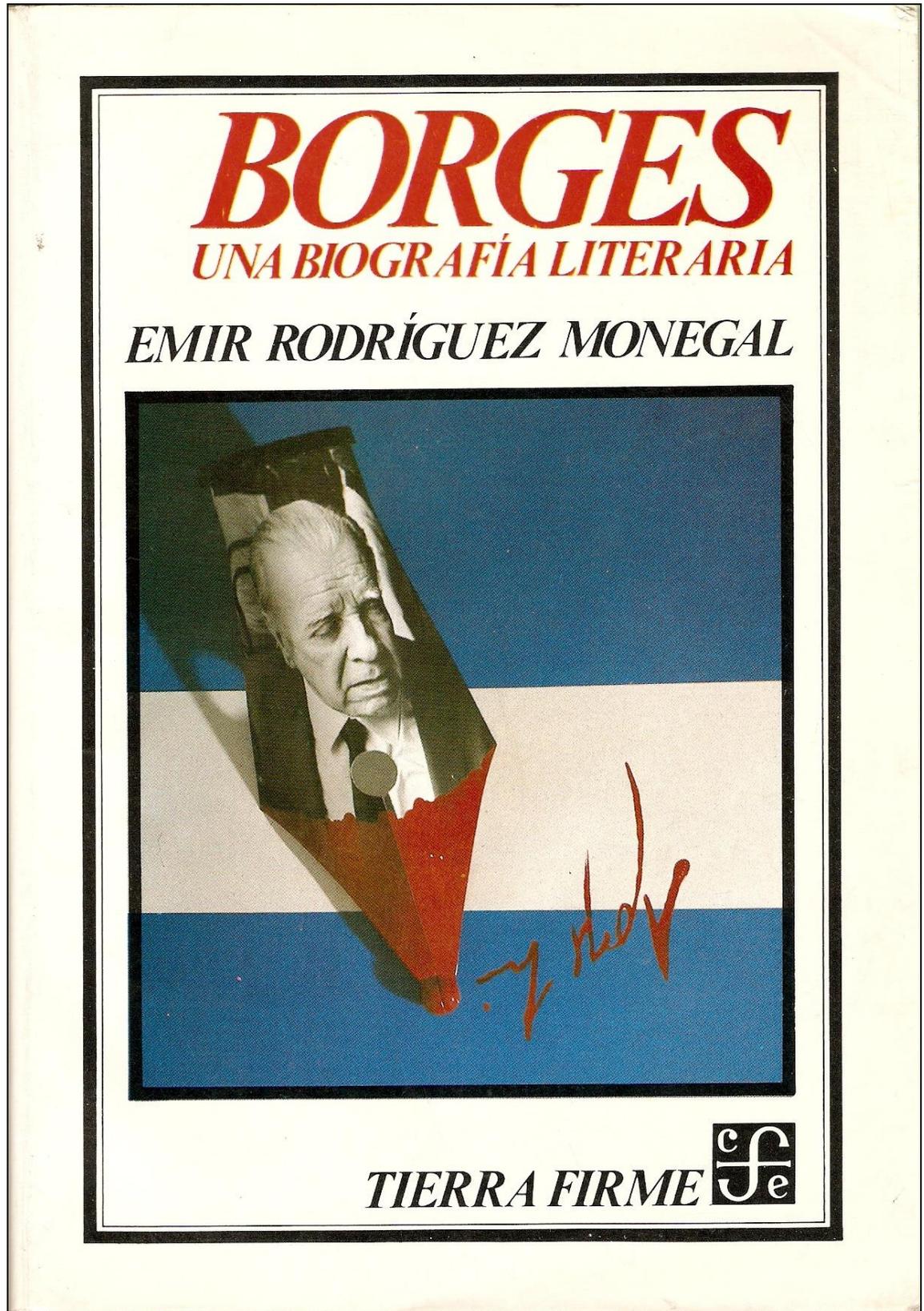


Figure 2. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges: Una biografía literaria*, trans. by Homero Alsina Thevenet (México: Fondo de cultura económica, 1993)

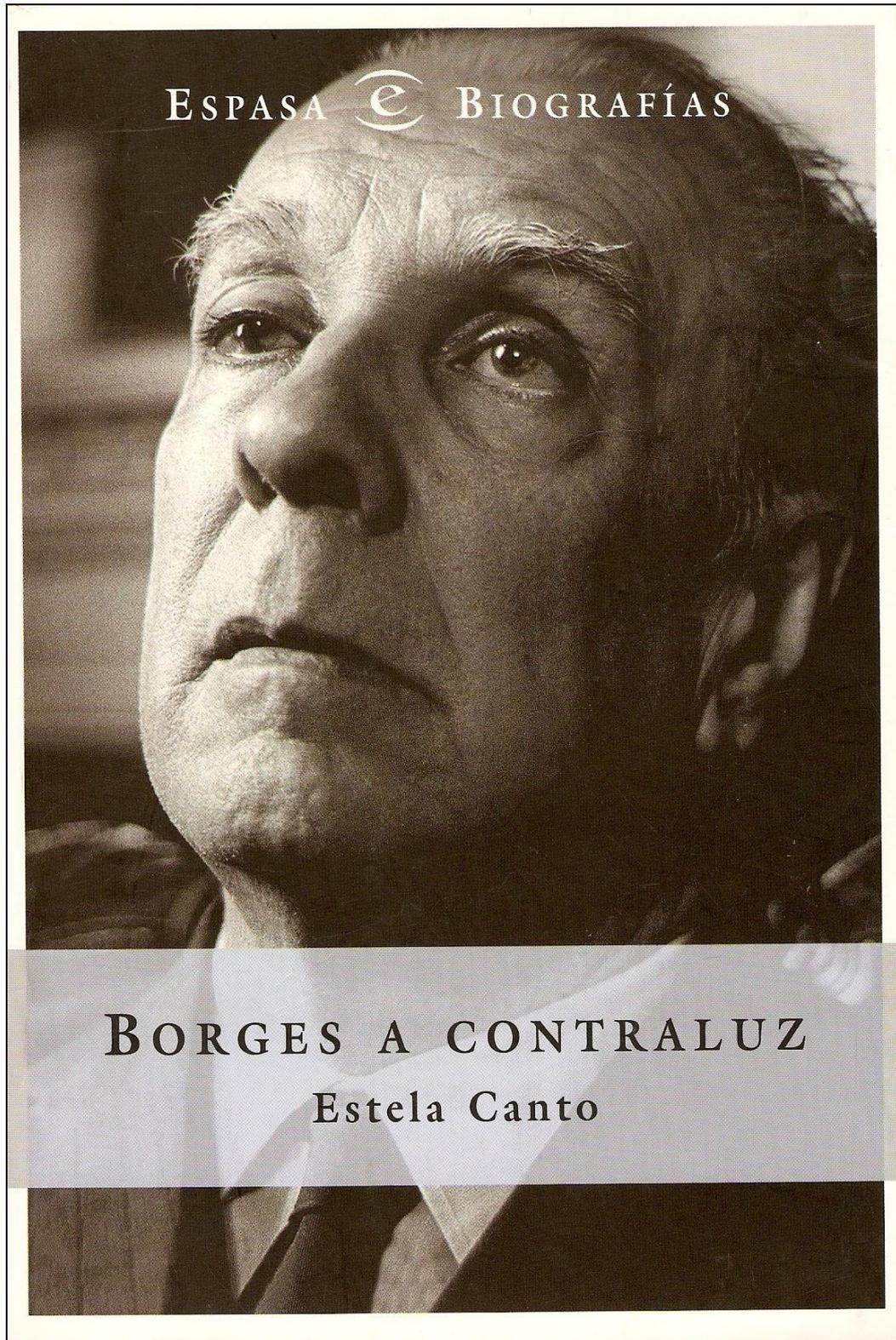


Figure 3. Estela Canto, *Borges a contraluz* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1989).



Figure 4. Estela Canto, *Borges à contraluz* (São Paulo, Iluminuras, 1991).

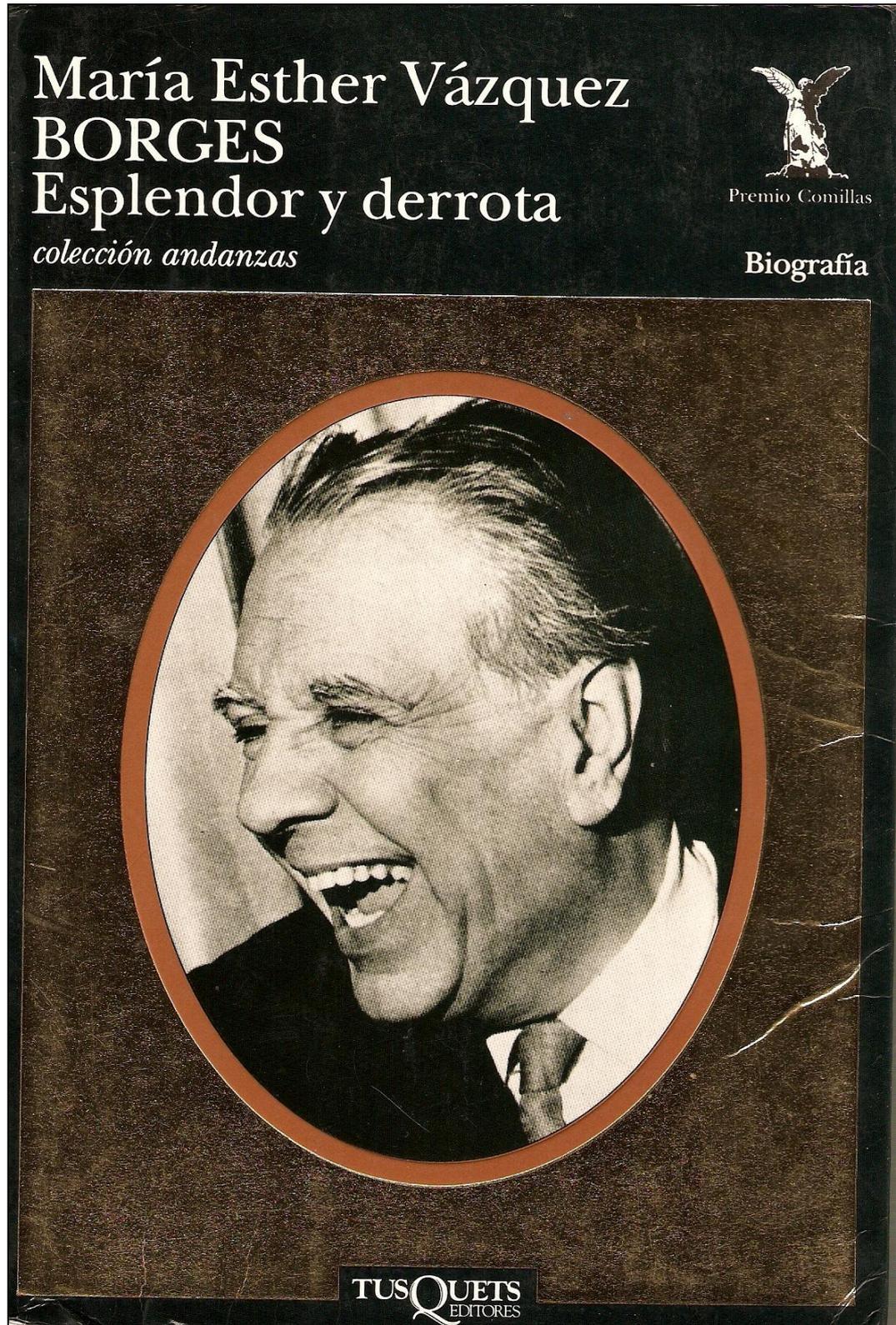


Figure 5. María Esther Vázquez, *Borges: Esplendor y derrota* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1996).

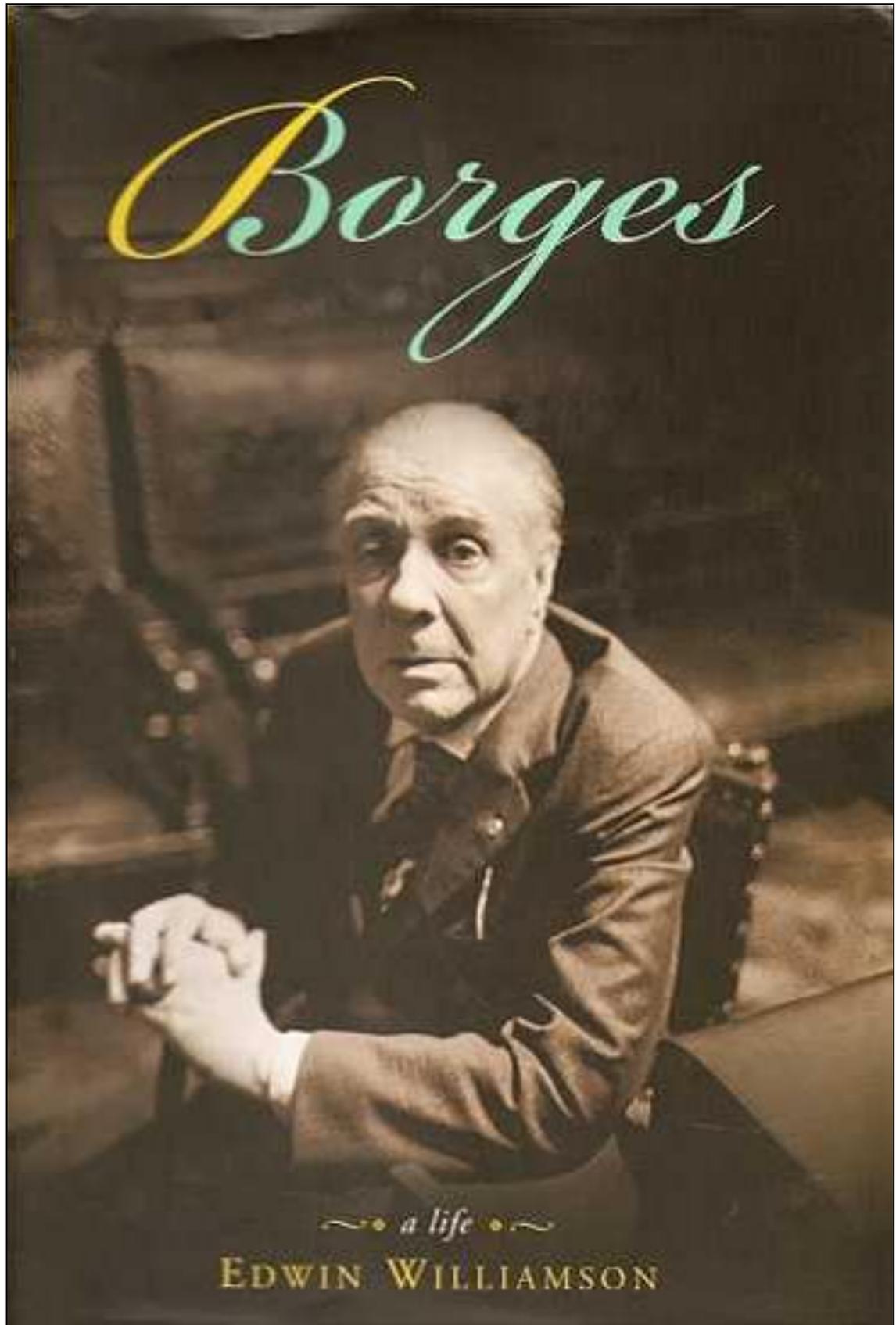


Figure 6. Edwin Williamson, *Borges: A Life* (London: Viking Penguin, 2004)

Chapter Two

Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man: Images of Borges

Introduction

detrás del rostro que
nos mira no hay nadie.
Anverso sin reverso

Jorge Luis Borges, 'Cambridge'

'Si ... lo dice' is a formula that is often completed by '...es palabra santa,' although it is mostly used on its own to suggest that the words of whoever has spoken are to be taken as gospel. 'Si Borges lo dice' was the phrase chosen as a title for an article published in *Somos* magazine in 1982 (Fig. 7) about the recent publication of *Borges el memorioso*, a book containing a selection of conversations between the writer and the famous radio presenter Antonio Carrizo which had been broadcast in 1979.¹⁷⁰ This is only one of several books of this type in existence, which is testimony to the great number of radio interviews that Borges gave in his later life.¹⁷¹ The photograph that precedes the article in *Somos* takes up three-quarters of the page and shows Borges surrounded by books. The elderly writer appears dignified, impeccably dressed in a suit and tie, with his hands resting on his now iconic walking-stick. The juxtaposition of the image of the elderly

¹⁷⁰*Borges el memorioso: Conversaciones de Jorge Luis Borges con Antonio Carrizo* (Mexico and Buenos Aires: fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982). The original interviews were broadcast as part of the programme 'La vida y el canto' which for many decades aired in Buenos Aires's commercial Radio Rivadavia between 12 and 3.30 pm.

¹⁷¹Consider, for example, Jorge Luis Borges and Osvaldo Ferrari, *Borges en diálogo* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1985), which contains interviews broadcast by state radio Radio Municipal de Buenos Aires.

writer, the old books and the title creates the semblance of a figure of authority whose words are to be taken as sacred. Furthermore, the angle from which the photograph is taken, which places the viewer slightly beneath the subject, together with the fact that Borges's unseeing gaze seems lost outside the frame of the image, contribute to producing a sense that one is in the presence of a figure worthy of veneration. This type of image seems to be the one that instantly comes to mind now whenever the name of Borges is mentioned: it is the purpose of this chapter to examine what has made it so iconic.

The image of the writer is constructed with a set of expectations and motivations which, I will argue, are related with Argentina's quest for a national identity. It is possible to trace the way in which this image was constructed in Argentina in the last decades of the 20th Century. However, this is not fixed, it fluctuates and changes, as will be explored and demonstrated in Chapter 3. The image of Borges in old age (Fig. 8 for example), which circulated in the 60s, 70s and early 80s, perpetuated the notion of the writer as an old man, with an emphasis on his blindness to create the figure of a venerable sage who inhabits a realm that is detached from that of the nation's reality. This made this image into an object of 'cultural worship', a national cultural treasure which could potentially remain the same over the generations, offering solidity to the ideal of a traditional Argentine culture. This process runs parallel to the development of the Borges image in biographical accounts analysed in the previous chapter.

This chapter explores the motivations behind the construction of the author as a national 'cultural treasure' by exploring the mechanisms whereby the image of the writer has been detached from its merely representational nature in order to become a mirror, a repository for desires and expectations associated with the quest for Argentina's cultural identity. It could be argued, in this sense, that Argentine culture

takes up the space previously occupied by the 'original', historical man in order to become the general referent of the cultural icon. I will begin with a delineation of the concept of icon and its relationship with some of the main issues related with portraiture and photography. I will then proceed with a brief examination of the role of images in the construction of identity in Borges's work. A summary of the ideas underlying my analysis of photographic images of Borges between the 60s and the early 80s in Argentina will follow. I will then examine a selection of portraits of the author on the covers of books in order to plot the development and perpetuation of the image of Borges as an old man, which seems to dominate the imaginary of Argentine consumers. I will also examine the efforts to challenge the predominance of the image of Borges as an old blind sage around the time of his centenary in 1999, and comment on what such efforts actually achieved. The points discussed will provide a framework for the assessment of the writer's relationship with the Argentine media and the latter's role in the construction and, most relevantly, the perpetuation of his image during the last twenty-five years of his life. I shall then refer to portraits taken by two photographers from the U.S.A. in order to show, by contrast, that the main motivations behind the construction of the author as an old blind sage by Argentine photographers appear to be culturally specific to Argentina.

The focus of this chapter is on photographic portraits of Borges: it studies the impact and effect of the circulation, primarily, of posed photographs where the writer's upper body and particularly his face constitute the focal point. This type of image, rather than others, such as family snapshots, has been the publishers' preferred choice for book covers – again, a connection to the study of the biographies.¹⁷² The appearance of a

¹⁷²It is pertinent to underline, at this point, that, as David Ellis points out, even though 'the initial assumption of biographers is that photographs will illustrate their text,' the 'relationship between words and images is seldom that simple,' as the decision actually lies with the publisher and is largely based on

writer's portrait on a book cover – be it a book written by him or about him – symbolizes a direct connection between the man and his work.¹⁷³ Also, as we shall see, the impact of the iconic face of Borges can be compared to that of Hollywood stars, and this is further corroborated by the distortions of the writer's physiognomy achieved by the particularly powerful expressiveness of a series of caricatures that have been based on his portraits. These cartoons have appeared in a variety of memorabilia and merchandise, such as stamps and bookshop carrier bags. Most significantly, and consistent with Robert Hariman and John Lucaites's analysis of iconic photographs,¹⁷⁴ they have constituted a form of appropriation of the image of Borges that particularly links politics and popular culture in Argentine comic strips produced in the 80s, which the next chapter analyses.

The concept of 'icon' that this thesis and particularly this chapter are based upon draws from a variety of sources: portraiture in general and portrait photography in particular, and film studies. Also, related to these practices are issues of subjectivity and cultural processes of signification which have been the concern of contemporary philosophy, sociology and cultural theory. Thus, my definition of 'icon' incorporates Barthes's early considerations of cultural products as 'myths', that is, the process of mythification understood as the construction of a powerful narrative which condenses a variety of socially significant meanings.¹⁷⁵ However, even though 'icon' and 'myth' have been used as synonymous, I do not consider them to be so.¹⁷⁶ Instead, I argue that

economic factors. David Ellis, 'Images of D.H. Lawrence: On the Use of Photographs in Biography', in Graham Clarke (ed.), *The Portrait in Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), p. 155.

¹⁷³I refer here to the book as an object to which symbolic value and meaning are attributed: as part of its paratext, the image of the writer affects the reader's preconceptions about the content, in this case, the immediate association with the idea of the old blind sage that appears on the cover.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 5-6. Hariman and Lucaites concentrate on iconic images as a form of public art in the U.S.

¹⁷⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, sel. and trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993).

¹⁷⁶ Juan José Sebreli, for example, uses 'mito' and 'ícono' (as well as 'ídolo') as synonyms in *Comediantes y Mártires: Ensayo contra los mitos* (Buenos Aires: Debate, 2008).

the icon condenses (literally makes ‘portable’ and easily repeatable) the meanings that the myth narrates. The next two sections consider the main issues related to portraiture which are relevant to this chapter and provide a more detailed definition of the concept of icon.

Portraiture: Representation, ‘Realism’ and Subjectivity

Portraiture, understood as the ‘delineation of a person, especially of the face, made from life, by drawing, painting, photography, engraving’¹⁷⁷ or the ‘deliberate replication of a singular image for wide public distribution,’¹⁷⁸ is a practice that extends as far back as the ancient world.¹⁷⁹ This linking of pictorial representation of a subject with the intention of wide circulation has come to constitute, as Shearer West suggests, a ‘vast art category that offers a rich range of engagements with social, psychological, and artistic practices and expectations.’¹⁸⁰ Catherine Sousloff also points out that ‘issues of identity in art adhere preeminently to portraiture and pertain to processes of recognition, which occur between viewers of the portrait, the artist, and the subject because of resemblance and desire.’¹⁸¹ With the advent of photography in the 19th Century, soon followed by its industrialization, the issues surrounding artistic representation in portraiture were further complicated by mechanization and mass reproduction.¹⁸² The photographic portrait in particular, as Graham Clark underlines, ‘for all its literal

¹⁷⁷ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2004), p. 11.

¹⁷⁸ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991) p. 47.

¹⁷⁹ Brilliant mentions instances in Ancient Egypt and Imperial Rome in *Portraiture*, p. 47, and West refers to ancient Peru in *Portraiture*, p. 13.

¹⁸⁰ West, *Portraiture*, p. 11.

¹⁸¹ Catherine M. Sousloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 83.

¹⁸² For an early exploration of these issues see Walter Benjamin’s ‘Kleine Geschichte der Fotografie’ (1931), where the discussions surrounding the ‘aura’ and reproducibility of a work of art, later developed in his seminal *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), were first introduced. Walter Benjamin, ‘A Small History of Photography’, in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, tr. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsly Shorter (London: Verso, 1978). For an exploration of the intersections of writing, the ‘aura’ and photography in Benjamin, see Carolin Duttlinger, ‘Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography’ in *Poetics Today*, 29:1 (Spring 2008), 79-101.

realism [...] denotes, above all, the problematics of identity, and exists within a series of cultural codes.¹⁸³

The notion of ‘literal realism’ that photographs seem to offer is due to what has been termed ‘indexicality’.¹⁸⁴ This refers to the presence of the subject photographed in the image. As a practice which is predominantly a form of documentation, photography has motivated debates surrounding the question of mimetic ‘truth’ or ‘likeness’ that are still ongoing today. Semioticians like Umberto Eco have discussed iconicity and indexicality to refer to the different types of relationship between the image and the thing or person it depicts.¹⁸⁵ The discussions of the varying degrees of ‘reality’ or ‘veracity’ in photography in Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* (1980) and Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* (1977) are well-known.¹⁸⁶ In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), Jean Baudrillard talked of ‘hyperreality’ in relation to the floundering of ‘reality’ as a consequence of endless repetition by media such as photography.¹⁸⁷ It is also worth highlighting Pierre Bourdieu’s exploration of photography as an eminently social practice which is structured and systematic in *Photography: A Middle Brow Art* (1965). In it, Bourdieu argued that it is naïve to believe that photographs are a direct representation of the real as this ‘is only ever conveyed through socially conditioned forms of perception’ and it owes its objective appearance to ‘conformity with rules which define its syntax within its social use.’¹⁸⁸ Bearing in mind the complexity and ramifications of the various debates surrounding portrait photography, I would like to concentrate on the relationship between the image and the viewer, that is, on the transaction that takes

¹⁸³ Clarke, *The Portrait in Photography*, p. 4.

¹⁸⁴ Indexicality is a notion first developed as part of the triadic conception of the sign and the sign-function by semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce in the first half of the 20th Century. It refers to a material relationship between a sign and what it represents.

¹⁸⁵ See, for example, Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

¹⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979).

¹⁸⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, tr. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), p. 71.

¹⁸⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Social Definition of Photography’, in *Photography: A Middle Brow Art*, tr. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 77

place as the photographic image of Borges is consumed by Argentines and how this transaction constructs the writer as an icon.

From Image to Icon: Borges as *chora*

In 'The Face of Garbo' (1955), Barthes wrote about the impact of the close-up image of the famous Hollywood star, describing Garbo's face as a mask.¹⁸⁹ Later, in 1986, cultural critic Kobena Mercer enhanced this analysis by defining the face of a star 'not as the manifestation of personality traits but as a surface of [...] social inscription,' an 'aesthetic surface where society writes large its own preoccupations.'¹⁹⁰ Following on from Richard Dyer's work on stardom in the late 70s,¹⁹¹ Christine Gledhill later explained that a star is a 'product of mass culture, [...] an industrial marketing device, [...] a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification' and 'an emblem of national celebrity.'¹⁹² I argue that, in this sense, the process whereby Borges's image has become iconic is akin to that of stardom. In this context, perhaps the most significant trait that iconic figures from other cultural fields share with film stars is the role of their physiognomy as a 'screen face.' In other words, as Brian Gallagher explains, the face 'is rather like a screen within a screen, a second screen in which viewers can project their own impressions and fantasies.'¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Roland Barthes, 'The Face of Garbo', in Susan Sontag (ed.), *A Roland Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 82-4.

¹⁹⁰ Kobena Mercer, 'Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's *Thriller*', in Julia Thomas (ed.), *Reading Images* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 31.

¹⁹¹ See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979)

¹⁹² Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom, Industry of Desire*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), p. xiii.

¹⁹³ Brian Gallagher, 'Greta Garbo is Sad: Some Historical Reflections on the Paradoxes of Stardom in the American Film Industry, 1910-1960,' *Images: A Journal of Film and Popular Culture*, 3 (Spring 1997), online at www.imagesjournal.com/issue03/infocus/stars5.htm. It is important to bear in mind that, as Richard Dyer argues, 'star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual' and they are 'produced by the media industries.' Richard Dyer, *Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 3-4.

This concept of a famous face as a surface onto which certain ideas and feelings are ‘reinscribed’ has its origin in early Christian icons.¹⁹⁴ As Catherine Sousloff explains, ‘icon’ is ‘the term for a foundational mimetic image,’ but one which does not ‘merely portray or narrate,’ but which is itself ‘in the deepest theological sense holy’ (p. 10). This aspect of religiosity is one of the core components of the iconic image of Borges. For centuries (since the early Byzantine icons), the icon has been conceived not as the representation of a physical God, but that of immanence itself. Sousloff cites as an example a medieval icon in a church in Istanbul, which bears an inscription describing it as *chora*. This significant word, meaning ‘land, space or container’ (p. 11), has also been interpreted as ‘receptacle’ and ‘imprint-bearer’ in contemporary studies of space by French thinkers.¹⁹⁵ The notion of icon that I apply to Borges brings together the ancient religiosity (and its accompanying veneration) associated with early Christian icons and the highly socially symbolic nature of stardom which is so current. These two seemingly irreconcilable concepts have in common a sense of ‘chora’. That is, both film stars and religious images constitute receptacles for the projection of their viewers’ (worshippers’) projections. This is consistent with Sousloff’s conclusion that ‘the icon demonstrates most clearly how the history of portraiture necessarily entails a viewer who projects his otherwise invisible God, onto or into the portrait, yet [...] the believer also inevitable projects himself onto the image’ (p. 11).

The notion of projection is further developed by Sousloff as she traces the genealogy of the modern subject in visual representation to the so-called Vienna school of artists and historians in the first years of the 20th Century. This, as she argues, ‘serves as the foundation for a later, more complex theory of the modern subject that began

¹⁹⁴ Sousloff argues that ‘the portrait more clearly than any other genre of representation elicits the question of who it reinscribes, more emphatically than any other kind of image’, in *The Subject in Art*, p. 3.

¹⁹⁵ For a discussion of the use of ‘*chora*’ in contemporary French philosophy, particularly its definition as ‘receptacle’ and ‘imprint-bearer’, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

between the world wars in Continental philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis' (p. 12). It was the Viennese art historians, she argues, who delivered the 'apparently simple alternative to naming the subject in the portrait [...]: when I see another represented in the portrait I see my social context and myself, including my history.'¹⁹⁶ This is in contrast with the 'indexical, or factual, resemblance,' as 'the portrait is not only about adherence to an exterior reality' (p. 8). Sousloff refers to this 'excess to resemblance' which 'resides in the projection of interiority onto the depicted person' as iconic, and she explains that 'projection comes from within the viewer(s), although it has often been said to be inherent to portraiture itself' (p. 8).

This is a function of the gaze, which is considered as one of psychoanalytic theory's main contributions to photography criticism and lies behind the 'particularly powerful discursive force' of photographic images in 'constructing and reaffirming our sense of identity.'¹⁹⁷ Psychoanalysis 'suggests that, through offering points of identification, images offer fantasy resolutions for subjective angst,' a process which consists of the assimilation of 'an aspect, property or attribute of that which is seen' in order to be 'transformed, wholly or partially, after the model which the other – in this instance the image – provides.' Thus, the Argentine gaze (as constituted by a collective of more or less consistent trends which is in constant resignification) seeks in the image of Borges traits which can offer a delineation of a cultural identity.¹⁹⁸ It can be argued that these 'model' elements that his image offers to effect this identification are knowledge and stability.

Consistent with Bourdieu's analysis, as Derrick Price and Liz Wells explain, images are 'embedded in particular cultural circumstances and therefore reflect specific

¹⁹⁶Sousloff, *The Subject in Art*, p. 3

¹⁹⁷Derrick Price and Liz Wells, 'Thinking about Photography', in Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 9-63 (p. 36).

¹⁹⁸Liz Wells, 'On and Beyond the White Walls: Photography as Art', *Photography*, pp. 245-94 (pp. 282-3).

assumptions and expectations.’¹⁹⁹ In this sense, Hariman and Lucaites defined iconic images, as those ‘*appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, [...] activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics.*’²⁰⁰ Their study, which focuses on photojournalistic images, binds their iconicity with a strong sense of historical significance, which is another major component of the definition of Borges as icon. Thus, in the context of what María Cristina Pons describes as ‘un país con una genealogía no muy clara, fragmentada, resultado de la discontinuidad de los proyectos nacionales propuestos por cada uno de los que ha asumido el poder a lo largo de nuestra historia,’²⁰¹ the author is constructed as historically and culturally coherent and stable.

Thus, I argue that the iconic image of Borges constitutes the locus for the condensation of a variety of meanings related to national identity: partly a mythical, sacred narrative, which exists outside time and partly a surface for the projection of cultural anxieties in constant evolution. The analysis of ‘visual methods of communication’²⁰² in a wide sense that this chapter pivots around is based on the aspects of visual discourse discussed above and the way in which these relate to one another. Most relevantly, however, the development of the image of Borges into an icon cannot be considered independently from the context of the historical development of Argentina, particularly in the 60s, 70s and early 80s, as the construction of Borges as a venerable old man responds to the discursive practices prevalent at the time. This period is marked by a dislocated sense of identity and disorientation caused by constant change and uncertainty. In this sense, as Hariman and Lucaites explain, ‘the iconic photograph acquires public appeal and normative power as it provides embodied depictions of

¹⁹⁹Price and Wells, ‘Thinking’, p. 35.

²⁰⁰Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, p. 27, italics in the original.

²⁰¹Pons, ‘El mito’, pp. 20-1.

²⁰²Derrick Price and Liz Wells, ‘Thinking about photography’, in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, by Liz Wells (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 9-63 (p. 35).

important abstractions operative within the public discourse of a historical period.²⁰³

The following analysis of a selection of Borgesian texts demonstrates the importance of these issues, where history and iconicity converge, throughout his oeuvre.

'Vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo:' Image and Identity in Borges.²⁰⁴

I will refer to five texts written by Borges at various stages of his literary career in order to illustrate his strong conception of visual images as fundamental to the construction of a narrative when defining individual and national identity. These are 'El Aleph' (1945), 'L'Illusion Comique' (1955), 'El simulacro' (1960), 'Cambridge' (1969) and 'Utopía de un hombre que está cansado' (1975). I will subsequently connect these ideas with the construction of the image of the writer himself in photographs.

One of Borges's best-known stories, 'El Aleph' explores the visual quality of the construction of identity and the ineffability of seeing – and therefore knowing – everything. Even before considering the fantastic visions conjured up by the magical object called the 'Aleph' in a darkroom/cellar, Borges manages to evoke very vivid pictures of characters and places which leave an unforgettable trace in the reader's mind. The story opens with the poignancy of an absence, which is first manifest in the changing of a billboard, as the world moves on without Beatriz Viterbo, recently deceased. As part of his grieving process, the protagonist – named Borges – feels the need to seek out his beloved in the materiality of her photographs and he decides to continue with his customary visits to her house. This, to him, now represents the pantheon of her memories, where he can almost touch her and possess her with his gaze (the only way that is now available to him). Borges is shown into an anteroom, where

²⁰³ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, pp. 198-9.

²⁰⁴ *OCI*, p. 624.

he waits to see Beatriz's cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri. Here, he can appropriate Beatriz's image, the narrative of her life strung together in a capricious photographic montage:

De nuevo estudiaría las circunstancias de sus muchos retratos. Beatriz Viterbo, de perfil, en colores; Beatriz, con antifaz, en los carnavales de 1921; la primera comunión de Beatriz; Beatriz, el día de su boda con Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz, poco después del divorcio, en un almuerzo del Club Hípico; Beatriz, en Quilmes, con Delia San Marco Porcel y Carlos Argentino; Beatriz con el pekinés que le regaló Villegas Haedo; Beatriz, de frente y de tres cuartos, sonriendo, con la mano en el mentón. (p. 617)

A story reminiscent of the Dantean descent into hell, 'El Aleph' also reminds us of the Sartrean idea that hell is other people. In it, Daneri, who is also a writer, invites Borges to descend to the cellar of the house where Beatriz used to live, in order to be able to have the terrifying experience of seeing the whole universe through a tiny crystal object called the Aleph. Amongst the spectacles this fantastical object has in store for him, perhaps the most disturbing is that of infinite eyes looking at him, and in doing so, seeing themselves, as in a mirror: 'vi interminables ojos inmediatos escrutándose en mí como en un espejo' (p. 624). A short while later, as he descends into an underground station, the horror really dawns on him: the idea that all humanity has now become familiar and that the Aleph may have condemned him to the curse of the gaze. This extreme perceptual experience, together with the power of the materiality of printed photographs ironically illustrates the writer's own fate, as his image, repeatedly reproduced and published, became a mirror in which the Argentine people expected to

see their own identity. In the story, the illusion of immediacy created by the tangibility of the photograph is explored through the juxtaposition of the empty lifelessness of the vase and the piano, and the ever so alive image of Beatriz:

El niño estaba, como siempre, en el sótano, revelando fotografías. Junto al jarrón sin una flor, en el piano inútil, sonreía (más intemporal que anacrónico) el gran retrato de Beatriz, en torpes colores. No podía vernos nadie; en una desesperación de ternura me aproximé al retrato y le dije:

–Beatriz, Beatriz Elena, Beatriz Elena Viterbo, Beatriz querida, Beatriz perdida para siempre, soy yo, soy Borges. (p. 623)

As he addresses the photograph of his beloved, invoking Beatriz in the intimacy of the little room, Borges utters his own name: it is by looking at her that he can identify himself. Similarly, I argue, it is by looking at the image of Borges and ascribing to it the imagined values of a national cultural identity that Argentine society as a collective seeks to identify itself. In this sense, following the Freudian idea of the myth as a collective dream, it can be said that the mythical quality of Borges's iconic image lies in that it 'encarna una idea (o ideal) y la gente hace lo posible para que la realidad se le parezca.'²⁰⁵ In other words, Borges becomes a screen onto which Argentina inscribes the conflicts that characterise its quest for cultural identity. In this sense, the strong presence of the medium of photography in 'El Aleph' appears prophetic.

The importance of the visual in the definition of a culture is reinforced in 'El Aleph' by the exploration of the nature of national literary tradition in the context of the story. This is made explicit in the choice of the middle name of the pompous poet

²⁰⁵María Cristina Pons, 'El mito: un sueño colectivo', in *Delirios de grandeza. Los mitos argentinos: memoria, identidad, cultura*, ed. by María Cristina Pons and Claudia Soria (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2005), pp. 11-37 (p. 19).

Daneri: ‘Argentino’. Daneri was awarded the polemic ‘Premio Nacional de Literatura’²⁰⁶ for a selection of ‘trozos argentinos’ (p. 626) from his vast poem ‘La Tierra’, which he was only able to write by looking at the Aleph. Thus, as a parable of the impossibility of expressing simultaneity with language, ‘El Aleph’ underlines the fundamental role of visual perception in the delineation of a sense of ‘Argentineness’. The controversy surrounding the ‘Premio Nacional’ constitutes the first public manifestation of Borges’s long and complex relationship with Argentine critics and fellow writers in terms of the definition of a ‘national’ literature.²⁰⁷ It is interesting that the chosen fictional environment for this polemic is a study of the construction of identity in the interaction of linguistic and visual discourses as ‘El Aleph’.

The role of images in the fictionalisation of national history in the context of national politics is more explicit in ‘L’Illusion Comique’. This unusually aggressive piece which welcomed the fall of Perón following a coup d’état that became known as ‘Revolución Libertadora’, was published in *Sur* in December 1955. Here, historical events are described as fiction, in particular, those of 17th October 1945, when president Perón was arrested and subsequently freed thanks to the people’s demand: ‘El 17 de octubre de 1945 se simuló que un coronel había sido arrestado y secuestrado y que el pueblo de Buenos Aires lo rescataba.’²⁰⁸ Language related to advertising and propaganda is chosen to define the methods used by the dictator to control the masses: Perón is referred to as a name or an effigy, and images related to representation, simulation and performance abound: ‘todos [...] sabían o sentían que se trataba de una ficción escénica’ (p. 10). All these fictions, says the narrator, ‘no podían ser creídas y eran creídas’ (p. 10), highlighting the remarkable power of the manipulation of images

²⁰⁶Borges’s *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* was entered for the actual contest of the same name in 1942, but it did not win, which generated very public reactions both on the part of his supporters and his detractors.

²⁰⁷This polemic is explored in the first chapter of Lafforgue’s *Antiborges*.

²⁰⁸Jorge Luis Borges, ‘L’Illusion Comique’, *Sur*, 23 (1955), 9-10 (p. 9).

which tap into the expectations of a people who needed something to believe in. The piece underlines the efficacy of the method of propaganda used by the regime which consisted in using – already iconic – portraits of the charismatic leaders: ‘bandas de partidarios apoyados por la policía empapelaron la ciudad de retratos del dictador y de su mujer’ (p. 9) – as in Fig. 9. Eva, the president’s wife, who had died three years earlier, would become one of the most iconic figures in Argentine history (Fig. 10). Referred to as ‘abanderada de los pobres,’ synonymous with the Argentine working class, her portrait was worshipped – and still is today – as the effigy of a saint.²⁰⁹ Borges’s examination of the power of iconic figures in the process of formation of national identity appears to pre-empt the writer’s own iconization as a national cultural referent.

The quasi-religious fervour provoked by the image of Eva Perón is picked up in Borges’s 1960 prose piece ‘El simulacro’, which describes the spectacle of a re-enactment of her wake. According to Margaret Schwartz, the story invites a postmodern reading as a ‘meditation on the copy’s usurpation of the original, on the emptiness behind the mask.’²¹⁰ Its last sentence, which Schwartz sees as a ‘metaphysical punch-line’, reflects on the iconic nature of the figures of the Perones. Borges’s text presents these figures as simulacra which served as aesthetic surfaces where the working classes projected their expectations in order to construct their mythology:

El enlutado no era Perón, y la muñeca rubia no era la mujer Eva Duarte, pero tampoco Perón era Perón ni Eva era Eva sino desconocidos o anónimos (cuyo

²⁰⁹Tomás Eloy Martínez captures this deification in his novel *Santa Evita* (1995). I have personally attended more than one wake in Buenos Aires where the portrait of Eva Perón was hung above the coffin, along with that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

²¹⁰Margaret Schwartz, ‘Dissimulations: Negation, the Proper Name, and the Corpse in Borges’s “El simulacro”’, *Variaciones Borges*, 24 (2007), 93-111 (p. 98).

nombre secreto y cuyo rostro verdadero ignoramos) que figuraron, para el crédulo amor de los arrabales, una crasa mitología.²¹¹

During the actual historical time that ‘El simulacro’ refers to, the images of Juan Domingo and Eva Perón were attributed with the characteristics of the people, even though the reality of the historical figures was completely different from their daily-life experiences: Perón was called ‘El primer trabajador’, for example, even though he had a career in the military and had no real working-class experience. Eva was famous for her sumptuous gowns and hair-dos which the ‘average’ working woman could only dream of (Fig. 10). The working class was badly in need of being represented by government and these figures were able to lend it a sense of identity. The last words of the story refer to the representation of a representation (‘figurar una mitología’), where the word ‘figurar’, which suggests simulation, appears to hold the key to the piece: something which signifies another, or the exterior of a body which makes it different from others, an image which echoes the word ‘muñeca’ above.

Written by a mature Borges and published in *Elogio de la sombra* (1969), whose prologue announces the addition of the theme of old age to his usual tropes,²¹² Borges’s poem ‘Cambridge’ speaks of a world of depthless images.²¹³ Words usually associated to the discovery of the meaning behind things (‘puertas’; ‘rostro’; ‘moneda’) are juxtaposed with images of surface (‘anverso sin reverso’) and fragmentation (‘Formas inconstantes’; ‘espejos rotos’). The sense of depthlessness is reinforced by the image of doors leading nowhere, not even the void (pp. 358-9), and also that of a disembodied face looking at us, like the head on a coin that cannot be flipped (p. 359). This face,

²¹¹ *OCII*, p. 167.

²¹² ‘A los espejos, laberintos y espadas que ya prevé mi resignado lector se han agregado dos temas nuevos: la vejez y la ética.’ *OCII*, p. 353.

²¹³ *OCII*, pp. 358-9.

together with the broken mirrors, does not lead us to the discovery of a hidden essence: instead, it reflects our own anxieties, desires and quest for identity. It is the face of an icon. The last two lines echo the repetition of ‘como en los sueños’ above (pp. 358-9), and reinforce the fluid and fragmentary nature of dreams, where identity is something in constant construction: ‘Somos ese quimérico museo de formas inconstantes, / ese montón de espejos rotos’ (p. 359). The saturation of pictorial information caused by the circulation of the photographic image of Jorge Luis Borges as an old blind sage results in a similar loss of depth, where a simulacrum has come to fill the space left by the gradual disappearance of the ‘original’ Borges: ‘Detrás del rostro que nos mira no hay nadie. / Anverso sin reverso’ (p. 359).

The strength of fictionalisations of national history and their perpetuation through reproduced images is once again taken up in ‘Utopía de un hombre que está cansado’ (1975). Here, Borges flagrantly chooses to mistranslate the Latin phrase central to the philosophy of George Berkeley,²¹⁴ as the nameless protagonist remembers the world that he has come from:

Las imágenes y la letra impresa eran más reales que las cosas. Sólo lo publicado era verdadero. *Esse est percipi* (ser es ser retratado) era el principio, el medio y el fin de nuestro singular concepto del mundo.²¹⁵

Taking Berkeley’s idea that to be is ‘to perceive’, not just one step further, to ‘to be perceived’, but beyond, to ‘to be portrayed’, Borges draws attention to the centrality of representations by media discourse in contemporary history. It is an example of what

²¹⁴This philosophy is referred to implicitly or explicitly throughout Borges’s work, starting from his early essays. He re-evaluates the concept of idealism in ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’, for example, as analysed in Marina Martín, ‘Borges, perplejo defensor del idealismo’, in ‘Dossier: Borges: Perplejidades filosóficas’, *Variaciones Borges*, 13 (2002), 7-21. Amongst others, Zulma Mateos also explores this philosophy in the works of Borges in *La filosofía en la obra de J.L. Borges* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 1998).

²¹⁵*OCIII*, p.54.

Richard Brilliant has referred to as the imprinting of ‘the consolidated image’ of public figures and celebrities ‘on the minds of their people’ by means of the ‘effective combination of mechanical or electronic reproduction and tendentious redundancy.’²¹⁶ It is also a fitting reflection of Borges’s own protagonism in the Argentine media and his construction by media discourses at the time this story was written, as we shall see later on.

These five pieces, written over a period of thirty years, illustrate Borges’s approach to the way in which images construct identity and create the illusion that they are perceived as ‘more real’ than what they represent. The very vivid depictions of performance and fictionalisation considered above are all described in the context of 20th-Century Argentina in relation to the particular way in which certain ‘national’ traits are perceived and projected. In particular, the need for people to construct effigies upon which their demands for a just society could be inscribed, as was the case with the Perones; or, in the case of Borges, the quest for an Argentine cultural tradition which could lend the nation cultural cohesion. It seems impossible to imagine what Borges and the Perones might have had in common, especially given Borges’s visceral dislike of these figures and everything related to their politics, as is evident in ‘L’Illusion Comique’. However, it could be argued that the process whereby the image of Borges is constructed as iconic has points of contact with the way in which the images of Perón and Evita were constructed.

María Cristina Pons argues that a myth can be understood as ‘la exteriorización, o la “conciencia colectiva” (según Jung) de las frustraciones, los miedos y las esperanzas,’ or as ‘espacio donde los vacíos y las carencias son articulados.’²¹⁷ It is this fundamental characteristic of the myth as a locus for the articulation of a lack that

²¹⁶ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), pp. 47-8.

²¹⁷ Pons, ‘El mito’, p. 17.

constitutes one of the main components of the icon: when collective anxieties, hopes and needs are condensed in a single visual representation, the myth becomes constituent of the icon. Eva Perón, for example, is seen as the embodiment of all things working class, while at the same time, she is eternal and saintly; but, most importantly, she has a voice to express the needs and expectations of the working class. In ‘El simulacro’ Borges understood that in order to be that voice, Eva had to be an empty vessel which could convey the hopes and fears that the working class had poured into it. But where the image of Eva Perón’s iconic status is founded on the idea of transgression and change, Borges’s relies on its power to provide Argentina with a sense of traditional ‘national’ cohesion. This illustrates Pons’s observation that ‘es notoria la contradicción entre los mitos encarnados en transgresores/as que se veneran y la condena a la “transgresión” desde un principio de autoridad y verticalismo (machista) que se percibe como sinónimo de estabilidad, de orden, de nación’ (p. 28). The construction and circulation of the image of Borges as a perpetual old blind sage speaks of an attitude of veneration of the figure within Argentine culture. The social and political turmoil experienced in Argentina in the 20th Century, which brought about a redefinition of its identity, required a referent outside of these historical changes which could provide a sense of stability and solidity. This echoes the nationalistic agendas of successive military and democratic regimes which contributed to the emergence of an imagined need for unity and definition which ran contrary to the multicultural and plurilingual nature of Argentine society: instead of embracing diversity, they attempted to quash it.²¹⁸ The next section examines the historical context in which the photographic image

²¹⁸The prohibition of foreign names is an example of this attempt to erase diversity: Article 3 of the ‘Ley 18.248 del nombre de las personas naturales’ (promulgated on 10th June, 1969) states that ‘no podrán inscribirse [...] los nombres extranjeros, salvo los castellanizados por el uso.’ This law still applies in Argentina today. Online at www.gob.gba.gov.ar/portal/documentos/ley18248.pdf [accessed 9 September 2009].

of Borges developed into an icon, tracing a trajectory which has proven to be similar to those of iconic images earlier described in Borges's own work.

Constructing Borges in the Post-Perón Years

The social and political struggles that marked most of the 20th Century motivated the delineation of a new profile of Argentine society which had started with the rapid increase of the country's population as a consequence of mass immigration, particularly in the last two decades of the 19th Century.²¹⁹ By the middle of the 20th Century, foreign immigration was combined with internal migration to Buenos Aires, as David Rock explains: 'Migrants arrived from the pampas, from the interior, and from neighbouring Latin American states, and a half million new European immigrants were admitted between 1947 and 1951.'²²⁰ The influx of these two main waves of immigration, particularly in Buenos Aires, resulted in most of the university students being from immigrant backgrounds around the middle of the century, for example. Migrants also 'swelled the numbers of new urban workers in industry, transportation, and services, becoming the backbone of the swift upward surge in union membership during Perón's first years as president' (p. 283). This gives an indication of the multiculturalism that characterized the newly reconfigured Argentina. In this context, Juan José Sebreli ascribes the receptivity of the imagination of Argentines to the 'culto a los héroes', to a 19th-Century cultural tradition of construction of symbols of nationhood realized through the system of state education:

²¹⁹As David Rock points out: 'The nation's population increased from an estimated 1.1 million in 1857 to approximately 3.3 million by 1890 [...] the population of the city and province of Buenos Aires almost sextupled,' in *Argentina 1516-1982* (London: Tauris, 1986), p. 132.

²²⁰Rock, *Argentina*, p. 283.

La necesidad de inventarse una historia heroica que diera fundamento y estabilidad al incipiente Estado nacional y, a la vez, frenara el peligro de disgregarse, temido por las clases dirigentes frente a las oleadas inmigratorias, llevó a organizar una escuela pública donde se inculcaba una verdadera ‘religión cívica’, con sus símbolos, ritos y ceremonias.²²¹

Rock uses words like ‘deadlock’ and ‘stalemate’ to describe Argentina between 1955 and 1982 – the period which this chapter focuses on.²²² He refers to the perceived lack of solutions for the country’s many problems, which resulted in a situation of instability and turmoil, of change without progress. The main issues that contributed to a prevailing sense of unrest during this period are summarized by Rock as ‘chronic inflation and recurrent cycles of recession and recovery’; ‘social and political divisions’ which ‘grew increasingly tense and violent’ and ‘progressive institutional decay’ (p. 320). He refers to the country’s social problems as ‘extreme’ and seemingly ‘ineradicable’ and links ‘the behaviour of the economy’ to a ‘cyclical flow of politics,’ as a result of which, ‘as the economy waxed and waned, regimes came and went’ (pp. 320-1).²²³

Another significant aspect of this period that Rock points out is Argentina’s impoverished sense of international standing, coming to terms with its new situation as a ‘second-rank nation in Latin America [...] unable to find a stable international position and [...] largely isolated in the world community’ (p. 320). Rock places

²²¹ Sebrelí, *Comediantes y Mártires*, p. 29.

²²²In *Argentina 1516-1982*, Rock broadly identifies the period between the depression of the 1930s and the Malvinas War in 1982 as one of ‘progressive’ and ‘unchecked’ decline. The choice of Rock’s study is due to the fact that this chapter concentrates on the sense of uncertainty and turmoil predominant in the post-Perón years. Borges is not considered in relation to the 1982 war in this thesis. The 1976-1983 dictatorship and the transition to democracy in the mid-80s are considered in Chapter 3.

²²³Torcuato S. Di Tella provides an outline of the socio-political instability which was particularly predominant in Argentina and its consequent violent atmosphere in ‘The sixties and Seventies’, *History of Political Parties in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2004), pp. 99-120 (pp. 108-11).

particular emphasis on the fact that ‘the high living standards that had once distinguished Argentina from the rest of Latin America slowly eroded’ (p. 320). Bearing in mind that one of Argentina’s most characteristic collective fantasies relates to Europe as the locus of legitimisation for cultural accomplishment, this period is characterized by a tension between a definition of an identity in ‘local’ terms and the need for international recognition. In this context, a ‘sense of self-location acquired through the contemplation of the photographic image’²²⁴ points to the construction of Borges as a figure of international recognition and success. Thus, the circulation of the images of the writer may be explained by the fact that they may have been in a position to provide a sense of cultural reassurance.

As ‘one of the factors propelling us to keep on looking’ (p.283) at the image of Borges, the desire for self-assurance in the acquisition of a sense of identity was marked by the projection of some of the more or less consistent elements of what it means to be Argentine. Cristina Pons refers to these elements as the ‘grand narratives’ that constitute the country’s ‘foundational myths’,²²⁵ which guide the process of construction of an Argentine identity. Among these is a sense of superiority with respect to the rest of Latin America, which is related to the idea that Argentina was destined for greatness. These foundational myths compensate for the absence of a clearly defined origin. Thus, the delineation of an Argentine identity is a search for a cultural father-figure which oscillates between local and foreign models.

The attribution of these symbolic meanings to the figure of Borges over an extended period of time and in a variety of contexts has resulted in the image becoming an icon. American cultural theorist Paula Rabinowitz considers that an image becomes an icon when it has been ‘composed, revised, circulated, and reissued in various venues

²²⁴Wells, ‘On and Beyond the White Wall’, p. 283.

²²⁵Pons, ‘El mito’, pp.18-19.

until whatever reality its subject first possessed has been drained away.’²²⁶ According to this approach, it could be argued that the image of Borges has been reproduced and circulated so widely that it has become an icon. However, I would stress that even though the ‘reality’ of Borges the subject at the time of exposure has been drained out of his photographs, it has not been completely exhausted: it remains as a trace. This trace, called ‘indexicality’, is where the authority of the image lies. As mentioned above, this, combined with ‘the symbolic value invested in it’ makes the photographic image of Borges iconic.²²⁷ ‘Indexicality’ refers to photography’s ‘ultimate dependence upon, and therefore reference to, a physical person or object present at the moment of making the original exposure’ (p. 35). This explains why the visual is such a pivotal aspect of the construction of the icon: the image of Borges conveys a certain presence, a trace of the actual, historical man, which produces the illusion that by contemplating his image, the viewer is, in fact, in the presence of the man.

When associated with a certain aura of sacredness afforded to it by the conjunction of other constructions of the author, the indexicality of Borges’s portrait becomes a powerful conveyor of meanings associated with identity construction, as the images analysed here demonstrate. As we have seen, Borges explores this in ‘El Aleph’, where the protagonist considers the photographs of his recently deceased friend Beatriz Viterbo. Similarly, in the case of Borges himself, his image appears to be the locus for a projected desire to possess certain attributes of the writer, as Alan Pauls points out in his discussion of Borges’s perceived erudition:

El saber [...] se lo asocia con la gravedad, con el tedio, con la disciplina [...] La única cara del saber que irradia algún *glamour* es la cara ‘capitalista’: la fase de

²²⁶Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 86, cited in *Photography*, by Liz Wells (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 47.

²²⁷Price and Wells, ‘Thinking’, p. 47.

adquisición, de acumulación de información y conocimiento. Pero es inaccesible. El resto – el *ejercicio* del saber, esa momificación en vida – mejor perderlo que encontrarlo [...] Pero lo que espera del otro lado del saber [...] es un poco de ‘autoridad’.²²⁸

Thus, the consumption of the image of Borges as a means of appropriating the authority associated with his knowledge reinforces the consumption of his work when this image is printed on book covers, which can be acquired and possessed. The next section explores how the appropriation of Borges’s visual image, commercialised together with his oeuvre and criticism on the covers of books, perpetuates the construction of Borges as an authority and unifying cultural force throughout the last decades of the 20th Century.

Photographs of Borges on the Covers of Books

Umberto Eco considers iconic photographs as condensers of discourse which, going beyond the individual circumstances of their production, refer us to other images which have preceded them or imitated them subsequently.²²⁹ Such is the case of a certain type of portrait of Borges where the writer appears as an old blind sage worthy of veneration, which was constructed during the latter part of his life and was perpetuated by its continuing circulation in the media and on the covers of books. The covers of the biographies considered in Chapter 1 are examples of this. It is difficult to distinguish between different portraits of a mature, post-60s Borges: there have been so many circulated that, somehow, it feels as though they have all become one. Images of the

²²⁸ Alan Pauls, ‘Loca erudición’, in *El factor Borges: Nueve ensayos ilustrados* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000), pp. 141-56 (p. 142).

²²⁹ Umberto Eco, ‘Una fotografía’, *La estrategia de la ilusión*, trans. by Edgardo Oviedo (Buenos Aires: Lumen, 1992), pp. 293-8 (p. 296).

type printed on reams of newspaper and magazine paper during the 70s and 80s have continued to appear on the covers of books written by him and about him (Fig. 11). These usually show an elderly writer with a serious expression and posing formally against a dark background which very often includes books. Those pictures taken indoors tend to contain an internal source of light and black and white versions of these portraits generally seem to have been preferred to colour, even to sepia. This could be understood as a publisher's decision to maintain costs to a minimum. However, even the few instances of use of colour photographs favour hues of brown and grey. The fact that as long as we are able to recognize these elements it makes little or no difference whether we are looking at one or a variety of different photographs, shows that this type of photograph has become iconic. The image of an old Borges appears to be a single one, a montage made up of the vestiges of an original, fragmented Borges which 'persist here and there.'²³⁰ We are confronted by a variety of images, but we only perceive one which contains elements of the historical Borges, such as his recognizable facial features; but, most relevantly, as has been discussed so far, we recognize those values that have been attributed to it.

When portraits of a mature Borges appear on the covers of books, the image grows stronger, both because books are more likely than newspapers or magazines to remain in a library, and because the presence of a photograph on a book's cover establishes an immediate link between the work and a particular image of the man. However, because it is the photographic image of an elderly Borges that has circulated the most, we tend to think of Borges as if the whole corpus of his literary production had begun in his seventies. This is likely to be due to the launch of Borges into the international limelight in the 60s, which is marked by the fact that he won his first

²³⁰Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

international prize for *Ficciones* in 1961. This collection of short stories, as well as much of his best-known work, of course, was written in the 40s, and it is work from this period that was first chosen for translation into other European languages, and eventually, into English. Claudio Canaparo has traced the history of the publication of *Ficciones* which launched Borges to a wider readership: ‘A partir de 1956 [...] los libros de Borges comienzan a ser distribuidos, al menos en el mercado hispanohablante, fuera del círculo reducido de los lectores de *Sur* y de las otras pequeñas editoriales.’²³¹ Thus, a book originally published in 1944 is launched to a wider market more than a decade later, and reached international acclaim almost twenty years after the stories were written. Next, we will see how this image which ties the elderly writer with his early work was perpetuated, as age became one of the most distinctive traits of the construction of Borges as a figure of reverence.

Argentine Surrealist Grete Stern photographed the writer in 1951 and this image is reproduced on the cover and inside the 1964 edition of Alicia Jurado’s *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (Figs. 1 and 12). Stern’s portrait, showing an amiable, relaxed and gregarious Borges sitting on a café chair, as if the photograph had been taken during a chat with friends, has, however, circulated significantly less than later portraits depicting him as an elderly man. After Stern, just about every photographer worth his or her salt produced images of Borges. Sara Facio, for example, is one of the best known Argentines to have photographed the writer in the 70s and early 80s.²³²

²³¹Claudio Canaparo, ‘De Bibliographica Ratio. Un comentario acerca de ‘lo Borgiano’ como narración historiográfica. Las *Ficciones* de Josefina Ludmer’, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Intervenciones sobre pensamiento y literatura*, ed. by William Rowe, Claudio Canaparo and Annick Louis (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2000), pp. 199-247 (p. 242).

²³²It is worth mentioning here Eduardo Comesaña, a principally journalistic photographer who worked for a few of Buenos Aires’s popular weekly magazines such as *Siete Días*. Comesaña is not as prestigious as Facio or Raota (famous for his photographs of working-class life, his photograph of Borges in his seventies has been used for the covers of books like Evelyn Fishburne’s *Borges and Europe Revisited*). However, he has taken many well-known photographs of Borges, amongst which is the one used for the cover of Estela Canto’s *Borges a contraluz*. He currently runs a photographic agency and archive which makes these photographs available for sale for publication, online at www.comesana.com [accessed 10 September 2009].

Sara Facio's *Jorge Luis Borges en Buenos Aires* (2005) is a good example of the perpetuation of the image of the writer as an old wise man. Here, the photographer, writer and curator skilfully juxtaposes her portraits of the author with quotations from his poetry and images of Buenos Aires. This creates a phototextual image of a profoundly porteño Borges (Fig. 13) whilst, at the same time, it reinforces the idea of wisdom associated with the writer. This aura of wisdom is also evoked by the setting of some of the photographs (taken in the Biblioteca Nacional), in which Borges appears surrounded by books. The fact that most of the photographs are taken at an angle, so that Borges's unseeing eyes appear to be directed beyond the camera, achieves the effect of an intellectual lost in thought. Thus, this particular way of photographing blindness achieves a certain 'Borgesian' link to other, perhaps inner or perhaps distant, realms, particularly, the world of ideas. Thus, Borges's blindness – which was, and continues to be, a fact well known by the Argentine public – is portrayed not as a way of exposing a disability which may elicit pity or condescension but, instead, as a link to a world of sapiency not normally accessible to the 'ordinary' Argentine. This technique has allowed most Argentine photographers to give their portraits of Borges a certain air of dreaminess and introspection that turns his blindness into an essential component of his sagelike image.

In Facio's book, the conventionally paratextual spaces of the prologue and the back cover show that her approach does not vary hugely from that of most literary biographers. In the prologue, which is structured as a selection of reminiscences and anecdotes involving herself and Borges, Facio fulfils her autobiographical impulse as she concludes with the legitimising phrase 'Éste es el Borges que conocí,'²³³ which is almost identical to Estela Canto's 'Hablo aquí del Borges vivo, del hombre que

²³³Sara Facio, *Jorge Luis Borges en Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: La Azotea, 2005), p. 12.

conoció.²³⁴ The blurb on the back cover repeats the biographical mantra of the revelation of the real man, as seen in the examples of literary biographies in the previous chapter, claiming that its aim is to ‘lograr una aproximación al mundo real del personaje a través de la representación gráfica más testimonial, espontánea e íntima que se conoce: la fotografía’.²³⁵ Borges’s work is quoted in an attempt to provide factual evidence of that real context that is promised in this book: ‘Los textos, siempre del autor [...] tratan de situar las imágenes en el tiempo y sus circunstancias’ (back cover).

However, it is in the juxtaposition of the portraits with photographs of urban landscapes and close-ups of certain objects, including the obligatory books, a painting and photographs of photographs, that the photographer is able to narrate this image of a Borges intimately linked to Buenos Aires (Figs. 14 and 15). This composition shows an august Borges, who, surrounded by objects of great traditional value, such as the portraits of his illustrious ancestors, appears as a greatly respectable figure. The fact that the photographs are printed in black and white also suggests an aura of history and tradition, as if Borges were also one of the objects of cultural worth.

The photographs reproduced in this book, which date from between 1963 and 1980, have also been exhibited in Buenos Aires and abroad and some have been used to illustrate many other books, as is the case of Pilar Bravo and Mario Paoletti’s *Borges Verbal* (1999), Alejandro Vaccaro’s *Borges: Una biografía en imágenes* (2005) amongst others (Fig.16). Facio’s iconic portrait of Argentine writer Julio Cortázar (Fig. 17, left) is amongst the best known images of this author. This photograph, where he appears with a cigarette in his mouth, captures his renowned playfulness and contributes to the generalized impression of the author as eternally young. Cortázar was fifty-three when this photograph was taken, in 1967. Considered side by side with a photograph of

²³⁴ Canto, *Borges a contraluz*, p. 9.

²³⁵ Facio, *Jorge Luis Borges*, back cover.

Borges (Fig. 17, right), also taken by Facio when the writer was sixty-three (in 1963), the ten-year age difference between the two seems considerably greater. Cortázar's youthful, relaxed pose against a bright white background contrasts with Borges's, who appears formal and more serious sitting up against the old fashioned dark seat.

The case of Borges's *Autobiografía* (Fig. 18) is a further example of the portrayal of the author as an old sightless sage: published in 1999 by El Ateneo, this was the first time the complete text of Borges's *Autobiographical Essay* was published in Spanish in Buenos Aires, as it had originally been published in instalments in English in American magazine *The New Yorker* in 1970. The image on the dust-cover is from 1967 and shows an elderly Borges with a hand on a desktop globe which, due to the way the photograph is lit, gives the impression of being on fire. Borges's face is brightly lit by the glow emanating from above. In contrast, his back is in darkness. The side of the face that can be seen shows an eye whose socket appears empty, like that of a statue. All these elements of the sepia image, whose colour evokes photographs from old times, suggest a god-like sage. This semblance is echoed in Martín Lafforgue's introduction to *Antiborges* (1999),

Jorge Luis Borges ha ingresado [...] al exclusivo panteón de los mitos nacionales. Es el nuevo ídolo de un Olimpo en el que se codea con muchas de las figuras que en vida supo abominar [...] Así, como objeto, se lo consagra y consume [...] Las agencias gubernamentales se lo disputan. La opinion pública lo reverencia.²³⁶

Lafforgue's book contains a valuable selection of texts whose range illustrates the critical but also political and ideological debate surrounding Borges which spans most

²³⁶Lafforgue, *Antiborges*, p. 11.

of the 20th Century (1926-1996).²³⁷ It boasts an inverted black and white photograph of Borges in his seventies on its cover (Fig. 19), against a red background. This audacious subversion of the image of Borges in the manner of the ‘Anti-Christ’ has a comic effect, which is consistent with the intentions of the book: to explore ‘nuevos mapas de lectura [...] en un sentido si no necesariamente contrario, por lo menos diferente del de esta sofocante hagiografía’ (pp. 11-12). The image chosen to illustrate this departure would not have been as effective if Borges had not been generally perceived as worthy of reverence. The fact that both publishing houses – El Ateneo and Javier Vergara – chose this portrayal of the author corroborates the weight of the image of the author as old and revered. Almost a decade later, the words of Rodrigo Fresán illustrate how current that preference for the image of an old Borges is in the 21st Century: in a review of Adolfo Bioy Casares’s *Borges* (2006), which shows a photograph of a young Bioy and a Borges in his thirties on its cover (Fig. 20),²³⁸ Fresán wishes it had had ‘una foto de portada ‘más de madurez’ que la demasiado ‘juvenil’ por la que se ha optado.’²³⁹ The section that follows evaluates the consequences of efforts to renovate the Borges image by choosing cover photographs of the writer in his youth, as the image on Bioy’s *Borges* illustrates.

‘El nuevo Borges’: Borges’s Centenary and Retrograde Innovation

In the late 90s, there were significant efforts to revive the image of a young Borges, with a proliferation of new editions of his early work and publication of previously unpublished material from his youth. This marketing strategy was motivated by the

²³⁷The earliest text dates from 1926 and the latest, from 1996.

²³⁸There is a very similar photo which appears to be part of the same series, in Alicia Jurado’s *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (p. 119) captioned ‘Mar del Plata, 1943’. According to Emir Rodríguez Monegal, the photograph may have been taken in the garden of Victoria Ocampo’s San Isidro house in 1932, when Borges and Bioy first met (it is reproduced in *Borges: Una biografía literaria*, page unnumbered).

²³⁹Rodrigo Fresán, ‘Caro Diario. Adivina quién viene a comer’, *Página/12*, 13 May 2007, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/9-3806-2007-05-13.html [accessed 20 April 2010].

celebration of the centenary of the writer's birth in 1999, a year during which, as Josefina Ludmer describes it, Borges was 'en la calle, la televisión, las exposiciones, los suplementos de los domingos, las encuestas de opinión.'²⁴⁰ The attempted renovation of the Borges image is considered by Graciela Montaldo as contributing to the creation of 'un nuevo escritor y una nueva demanda,' as Borges became a trademark and constituted 'una nueva forma de circulación de la cultura "alta" en el mercado globalizado.'²⁴¹ However, I would argue that the elements of 'the new' which appear to have gone into the design of the Borges 'trademark', do not actually create a new writer but, rather, consolidate the image of the traditional, monument-like sage that had circulated during the previous decades.

The new editions of some of Borges's earlier work, especially some new compilations, which contain photographs of a younger Borges, are examples of a commercial decision to re-launch the Borges image. Portraits from the 20s and 30s made a comeback and the publishing house Emecé in particular used photographs of a younger Borges in collections as diverse – in terms of content – as *Cartas del Fervor*, *Textos recobrados* and *Borges en Sur*, for example, which were all published between 1997 and 1999 (Fig. 21). These efforts accompany a re-valuation of Borges's earlier work, with a shift of focus from Borges as the highly intellectual creator of cosmogonies to that of the *flanêur* porteño, with a strong attachment to the Buenos Aires of the first decades of the 20th Century and its socio-political configurations. In spite of the significant change of perspective that is noticeable in criticism, the choice of images of a young Borges constitutes a visual reinforcement of the notion of age and tradition, as they are themselves perceived as 'old', that is the photos are themselves

²⁴⁰Josefina Ludmer, '¿Cómo salir de Borges?', in *Jorge Luis Borges: Intervenciones*, ed. by Rowe, Canaparo and Louis, p. 289.

²⁴¹Graciela Montaldo, 'Borges, Aira y la literatura para multitudes', in *Boletín* 6 (1998), p. 12. Cited in Jeffrey Ceñedo, 'Un nuevo Borges: Literatura y globalización en América Latina', *Iberoamericana. América Latina-España-Portugal*, VI (2006), 43-61 (p. 44).

now old documents. In *Hyperreality and Global Culture*, Nick Perry calls this strategy ‘retrograde innovation.’²⁴² Perry argues that advertising discourse has shifted ‘towards the cultural codes through which meanings are generated’ and that meaning is now to be attached to the name, rather than the particular product itself. Therefore, as Perry explains, the ‘advertiser’s problem thus becomes one of identifying and securing a privileged position for the name [in this case, also the face of Borges] on the assumption that the resulting sign value in the culture will translate into exchange value on the market’ (p. 38).

Cover designers in the advertising departments of publishing houses are thus faced with the task of tapping into the traditional name of Borges, the timeless Argentine bard, whilst appearing to offer a ‘new’ product. The choice of portraits of a young Borges establishes a connection with the original date of production of the texts to be sold and, at the same time, reminds consumers of the Borges that they are accustomed to. The photographs are old documents: they are either or both grainy and sepia or black and white. In the case of *Borges en Sur* (Fig. 21, centre), the portrait has had its background removed, leaving a Borges detached from a specific time and a place so that his face and attire show him in his early forties, but the setting – or lack thereof – makes him appear timeless: old and present at the same time. But where Perry talks about relocating ‘otherwise traditional representations within another discursive context’, we may think of the ‘new’ Borges image within the traditional context of the book cover, triggering associations to tradition and age. This is because, by being displayed in the same spaces as the traditional images of an elderly Borges, these young images themselves have inherited, retrospectively, the same set of meanings. It is the juxtaposition of the original discursive context of the photograph with that of the book

²⁴²This is in the context of Perry’s discussion of Benetton advertising in ‘Post-Pictures and Ec(h)o effects’ in *Hyperreality and Global Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 38-9.

cover that taps into the cultural codes that generate the meanings of reverence, tradition and prestige.

The fact that post-centenary biographies and other studies of Borges have subsequently returned to cover designs with the traditional depiction of the elderly writer, with a predominance of black and white, or sepia, portraits, attests to the strength of this image. It is the case of books like the mainly anecdotal *El Señor Borges* (2004), written by Borges's maid, Fanny Uveda de Robledo, and Vaccaro's predominantly pictorial *Borges. Una biografía en imágenes* (2005). Even a biography like Williamson's, where the earlier part of Borges's youth in Buenos Aires is explored in depth and brought to bear on his engagement with the socio-political reality of Argentina, has on its cover a portrait in sepia – as seen in the previous chapter – in which Borges is old, blind and sitting in a library (Fig. 6).

The appropriation of the meanings condensed in the photographic image of Borges in old age for his construction as a monument to national culture and as figure of international prestige on the part of the Argentine media are considered next.

'El anciano gurú': Borges in the Argentine Press.

As mentioned before, given the fact that Borges was an elderly man at the time when his work gained international recognition and he acquired greatest exposure as a public figure, it may not be surprising that the image that appears to have circulated most widely is that of the writer as an old man. However, this generalized impression of the blind sage is caused by a more complex combination of the cultural, historical and editorial contexts in which this particular type of image of Borges has appeared and circulated. Alan Pauls begins his essay dedicated to the revision of the perception of

Borges's bookishness by lamenting the narrow definition that dominated much of the criticism of the previous decades:

Años, décadas enteras dedicadas a pensar en la erudición de Borges, o no a pensarla sino a darla por sentada, a confundirla con los valores con que la asocia el sentido común – ‘cultura’, ‘elitismo’, ‘hermetismo’, ‘academicismo.’²⁴³

As Pauls suggests, it is worth reflecting on the connotations that common sense has associated with this erudition, mainly constructed by Argentine media discourses. Thus, Borges was constructed as a figure far removed from the experience of the ‘average’ Argentine, a writer who inhabited a separate sphere. This sphere was in turn considered a space for the production of a type of literature to which only a chosen few had access.

In *Autobiografía*, Borges claims that: ‘Hasta que fui publicado en francés yo era casi invisible, no sólo en el exterior sino también en Buenos Aires.’²⁴⁴ The construction of Borges in the Argentine press as internationally prestigious taps into one of the most widespread Argentine myths regarding its standing within Latin America due to its perceived ‘Europeanness’, as María Cristina Pons explains: ‘Desde nuestros orígenes prosperó la idea o el inconfesable deseo de que éramos lo más europeo de América Latina, y así quisimos creerlo y hacerlo creer.’²⁴⁵ This, in turn, relates, continues Pons, to ‘el drama también de haber querido ser y no haber sido, en el que nuestros mitos aparecen como símbolos y síntomas de un país que muestra una imperiosa necesidad de figurar en el mundo’ (p. 34). As we shall see later on, this will become evident in the

²⁴³Pauls, ‘Loca erudición’, p. 141.

²⁴⁴Jorge Luis Borges and Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, *Autobiografía* (Buenos Aires, El ateneo, 1999), pp. 141-2. Translations into French appeared as early as 1939, but the first complete selection of stories was published by Gallimard in 1951. See Jaime Alazraki, ‘Recepción de Borges en los EE.UU.’ in *El siglo de Borges: Vol. I: Retrospectiva-Presente-Futuro*, ed. by Alfonso de Toro y Fernando de Toro (Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 1999), pp. 337-8.

²⁴⁵Pons, ‘El mito’, p. 34.

reporting of Borges's public exposure abroad in the Argentine press, thus reinforcing the construction of the 'cultural success story' that forms a fundamental part of his image.

The International Publishers' Prize instantly extended Borges's international recognition, as it prompted the translation of his work into English, thus opening up the North American market.²⁴⁶ In Borges's own words, 'a consecuencia de ese premio, de la noche a la mañana mis libros brotaron como hongos por todo el mundo occidental.'²⁴⁷ As a consequence, 1961 saw the beginning of Borges as a public figure, as the last twenty-five years of his life were documented in a vast number of photographs, as well as audiovisual material such as interviews and documentaries. His increased public exposure was also due to his position as director of Argentina's National Library and his many public lectures in Buenos Aires, the interior and abroad. Emir Rodríguez Monegal described the phenomenon of the international wise man of letters, which the most circulated images encapsulate, in *Borges. Una biografía literaria*, under the apt title 'El anciano gurú':

En Parma o en Jerusalén, en Dublín o en Madrid, Borges fue entrevistado hasta el aturdimiento, fue agasajado y aclamado, fue rodeado y hasta abrumado por la adulación. En todos lados se prestó pasivamente a ese culto público [...] Delgado, frágil, tan blanco que a la distancia se hacía difícil saber si estaba de pie o si realmente flotaba, Borges parecía hecho de acero [...] Lo aceptaba todo. Su imagen pública ya no le pertenecía, y él se dejaba hacer como si las cosas le ocurriesen al otro, a 'Borges'.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶Alazraki provides an overview of the reception of the Borgesian oeuvre in the United States in 'Recepción de Borges en los EE.UU.'

²⁴⁷Borges, *Autobiografía*, p. 142.

²⁴⁸Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges: Una biografía literaria*, p. 411.

Borges appears at once vulnerable and made of steel, a worshipped figure who seems above his admirers and at the same time interacts with the young generation: ‘Aquel hombre tímido [...] se había convertido en el decano de las letras hispanoamericanas, el gurú para una nueva generación’ (p. 409). This portrayal is consistent with the ambivalent relationship to a religious icon: Borges needs to be constructed as outside of history but also accessible, super-human and human at the same time. As Juan José Sebreli explains in his study of popular icons: ‘superiores y a la vez iguales a los simples mortales, esos dioses del Olimpo se parecían bastante a los héroes populares del mundo contemporáneo.’²⁴⁹ It can be stated, then, that the construction of the image of a revered Borges, which translates into the portrait of the writer as an elderly man, is consistent with the development of the figure of a traditional, conservative writer in an ivory tower which started in Argentina in the late 60s and was reaffirmed during the 70s and 80s.

Between 1962 and 1986, Borges was closely scrutinized and much of what he did or said publicly was captured on camera: as Williamson points out, the Argentine press, which he refers to as ‘ravenous’, had a ‘seemingly insatiable desire to record his every word and movement.’²⁵⁰ Williamson describes Borges’s constant presence in the media as his ‘monstrous fame’, and by the mid-70s, he comments that Borges possessed ‘a magical aura that drew total strangers to him’ as he was ‘regularly stopped in the street by admirers who wanted to shake his hand or ask for his autograph’ (p. 423). Many journalists have said that Borges was a pleasure to interview and that he seemed eager to receive those who were prepared to accompany him and play the role of both amanuenses and fellow *flanêurs*. American academic Ted Lyons, for example, writes that ‘for nearly sixty years, Jorge Luis Borges freely and congenially granted hundreds

²⁴⁹Sebreli, *Comediantes y Mártires*, p. 22.

²⁵⁰Williamson, *Borges*, pp. 418-24.

of interviews,' and that the writer 'willingly shared his time and words.'²⁵¹ Interviews generally took place in his apartment on Maipú street or during a stroll around the surrounding 'barrio', or at the Biblioteca Nacional when Borges worked there. There are also interviews that took place in television studios both in Argentina and abroad.²⁵² Photographs of interviews of Borges by students, academics, professional photographers and young journalists abound on the Internet, as can be seen on the writer's fan page on the social network Facebook.²⁵³ American photographer Richard Avedon describes how he saw his own visit to the writer mirrored in writer Paul Theroux's own account four years later:

I read an account by Paul Theroux of his visit to Borges. It was my visit: the dim light, the trip to the bookcase, Kipling, the Anglo-Saxon recital. In some way, it seemed Borges had no visitors. People who came from the outside could exist for him only if they were made part of his familiar inner world, the world of poets and ancients who were already his true companions.²⁵⁴

Avedon experienced his visit to the writer as an invitation into a different, self-contained world, although, interestingly, as we shall see, the photographs he took of him the following year do not necessarily convey such sense of isolation. There are also

²⁵¹Ted Lyon, 'Jorge Luis Borges and the Interview as Literary Genre', *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 22, No. 44 (1994), pp. 74-89 (p.1).

²⁵²Consider, for example, 'A fondo', Joaquín Soler Serrano's interview for *Televisión Española* in 1980, online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sYkW3TmT6E&feature=Playlist&p=219795CD64423371&index=0 [accessed 20 November 2009] or 'Tiempo de Borges', Borges interviewed by Raúl Hracio Burzaco for *ATC*, 28 June 1985. *Audiovideoteca de Buenos Aires*, Centro Cultural Recoleta, Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, AEVR2038C, 31'23".

²⁵³The photographs can be seen on: www.facebook.com/search/?q=jorge+luis+borges&init=quick#/photo.php?pid=1993856&op=1&o=global&view=global&subj=10514836123&id=666408159; www.facebook.com/search/?q=jorge+luis+borges&init=quick#/photo.php?pid=30072389&op=1&o=global&view=global&subj=10514836123&id=1601724400 and www.facebook.com/search/?q=jorge+luis+borges&init=quick#/photo.php?pid=870719&op=1&o=global&view=global&subj=10514836123&id=770333196 [all accessed 20 August 2009].

²⁵⁴Richard Avedon, 'Borrowed Dogs', *Richard Avedon Portraits, 2002*, online at www.richardavedon.com/data/web/richard_avedon_borrowed_dogs.pdf [accessed 23 November 2009], p. 4.

many photographs and video recordings of interviews which have been broadcast or published in various formats, some of which are collages of photographs from a variety of sources. Many of these have been gathered in a variety of documentaries that are easily accessible online.²⁵⁵ This wealth of material attests to a Borges who obviously felt comfortable in his role of interviewee.

Borges appeared in Argentina's audiovisual media over three decades. First, he was shown in news programmes as part of the cultural scene of Buenos Aires, and, progressively, interviews were broadcast on radio and television which seemed to want to dissect every inch of the writer. Newsreel footage from 1969 of 'Argentina al Día' and 'EPA' (shown in Argentine cinemas in the 60s and 70s) contain images of Borges in an advertisement for a literary contest for Argentine writers organized by Editorial Planeta. These images in particular are shown together with publicity for private and state-run ventures, all of which are portrayed as supporting 'el respeto por la tradición' and 'la custodia del patrimonio cultural', by people who work 'para la gran familia argentina', a 'sociedad dinámica y creadora en constante evolución.'²⁵⁶ The style in which this is presented, which is similar to other news footage of the time, suggests that Borges is a valuable part of the grand plan for Argentina to become a powerful modern nation. As mentioned before, this 'manifest destiny' for greatness is, according to María Cristina Pons, one of Argentina's 'foundation myths', a grand narrative which gives the nation a sense of belonging and identity and, she maintains, 'en la mentalidad colectiva del país [...] ese destino de grandeza es una posición que se mantiene muy presente.'²⁵⁷ Borges would play a fundamental role in the perpetuation of this foundational myth throughout the following fifteen years, as the next section explores.

²⁵⁵See, for example www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0c3Wtqn6I8 [accessed 20 August 2009].

²⁵⁶*Argentina al día* 697 and *EPA* 467, Audiovisual section of the state archive 'Archivo General de la Nación', Ministerio del Interior, República Argentina, 1969. This archive does not follow a coherent system for the classification of audiovisual material.

²⁵⁷Pons, *Delirios de grandeza*, pp. 18-19.

The 70s and Early 80s and Venerable Borges

The 70s and early 80s were very troubled times for Argentina, as the political situation seemed to worsen day by day. Political turmoil, marked by the violent clashes between guerrillas and the state, was felt both nationally and internationally. During the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, the killing and disappearance of public figures both Argentine and foreign and general human rights abuses caused international reactions.²⁵⁸ 1977 saw the first marches of the ‘Madres de Plaza de Mayo’, which brought the conflict into the public eye, especially internationally. As mentioned before, this was also a time of great popularity for Borges, and the Argentine press regularly reported interviews which were broadcast both at home and in the foreign media.²⁵⁹

These articles were often accompanied by either a small portrait or a photograph of Borges in conversation, as shown in Figs. 22, 23 and 24. The basic elements of these now arch-known photographs are the white hair, trade-mark suit and tie, and, although not always used, the equally iconic walking-stick, all against a backdrop of books and/or solid, dark furniture. Another crucial feature is the emphasis on his blindness, which is made ‘visible’ through the choice of angle: most portraits of Borges as an old man clearly show that his eyes are not able to focus even though they are either directed at or at an angle to the camera. The use of these images complements the depiction in the articles they accompany, of a Borges who has become an object of cultural worship. On 25th August 1979, for example, Hellén Ferro writes in *Clarín*:

²⁵⁸The Foreign Secretary, César Guzzetti was seriously wounded in a guerrilla attack; the leader of the guerrilla group Montoneros, Julio Roque, was killed in a clash with police forces; among the ‘public’ disappeared during 1977 were the union leader Oscar Smith, the Venezuelan Ambassador, Héctor Hidalgo Solá and two French nuns. The director of newspaper *La Opinión* was also detained and tortured.

²⁵⁹Consider, amongst many others: ‘Difundiose una entrevista a J.L. Borges en Italia’, *La Nación*, 21 September 1971; ‘Borges en la TV Italiana’, *La Razón*, 22 September 1971; ‘Borges, en la TV Francesa’, *La Razón*, 28 March 1979; ‘Programa de la BBC sobre Borges’, *La Nación*, 29 April 1979); and ‘Si Borges lo dice’, *Somos*, 10 September 1982. I am indebted to Agustín Maurín for access to the archives of *Clarín* in Buenos Aires.

En toda la literatura argentina solamente hay un escritor que en su vejez haya conocido la veneración nacional que su genio, pero también los medios de difusión, han conseguido para Jorge Luis Borges. [...] La fama de Borges es internacional [...] y transmisiones como las de Canal 11 tienen la virtud de llevar a la conciencia del pueblo que hombres como Borges [...] son algo importante para la argentinidad.²⁶⁰

The article (Fig. 25), which itself contributes to perpetuate the veneration that it refers to, is about an interview broadcast by Argentine TV's Canal 11 on occasion of the writer's 80th birthday. It is testimony to the importance ascribed to the figure of Borges in the construction of a sense of 'Argentineness' by the media of the time. The regular appearance of Borges in the press – both popular and high-brow – in interviews at home and abroad shows his position as a legitimating cultural force, as Ferro points out in the same article, where the presence of Borges in the television programme is deemed to add 'alta jerarquía' (p. 11). Borges is thus portrayed as an 80-year-old 'monumento' which stands for the greatness of Argentine culture (p. 11). A monument is an empty effigy set in stone, unlikely to change or evolve and worthy of veneration, which becomes metaphorical when a certain set of meanings is projected onto it. As Chapter 3 of the present work argues, the solidity of this construction of Borges as a father figure who is representative of a strong sense of tradition is proven by the strength of the rebellion of the intellectuals of the New Generation. Thus, the early image of Borges constructed in Alicia Jurado's biography is perpetuated, solidifying the image of the old blind sage, enclosed in the labyrinth of his fictional cosmos.

The sense of Borges as a national 'monument' is reinforced by publications such as *Todo Borges* (Fig. 26), a special issue of popular magazine *Gente* published in

²⁶⁰Hellén Ferro, 'Una antología de frases borgeanas', 'Espectáculo', *Clarín*, 25 August 1979.

January 1977 which was dedicated entirely to Borges.²⁶¹ It is full of images of a variety of Borges-related documents, including newspaper articles, manuscripts, portraits, book covers and airport baggage claim tickets (Fig. 27). The fact that not all of these are dated clearly adds a sense of timelessness, giving them a certain simultaneity which reinforces the figure of Borges as eternal and unchanging. Also, the inclusion of a great deal of foreign newspaper clippings and book covers in foreign languages contributes to the impression that Borges triumphs abroad, thus legitimating his acclaim at home.

On page 150 of *Todo Borges* a photograph shows the writer posing for a portrait by Argentine artist Elbio Fernández (Fig. 28). It is a scene in the fashion of the 70s, as clearly seen in the artist's clothes and in the decoration of the room. The only elements that appear to be oblivious to the trends of the decade are the presence of books and Borges himself: his clothes and his walking-stick. The image of a 70-something Borges is captured in a fittingly Borgesian game of mirrors and reproduction, first in the artist's sketch and then in the photograph. The significance of this multi-layered image goes beyond the photograph itself, thus illustrating the mechanisms at work in the construction of a wider, more influential, image of the writer. A series of elements that lie outside the image include the publication where it appeared and its own contextual significations, especially the year of publication, which, in turn, has significance within Borges's historical life span, as discussed before. The caption, which includes a comment by the artist on the situation depicted in the photograph: 'Había luz a su alrededor,' lends the image an aura of saintliness, reinforcing the sense of Borges as a superior being.²⁶² This interesting collage of miscellaneous memorabilia, which, under the title 'Todo Borges', seems to promise access to the conveniently packaged and consumable writer, suggests that printed photographs of the writer have become

²⁶¹'Todo Borges', *Gente* (Buenos Aires: Atlántida, 1977).

²⁶²Elbio Fernández in 'Todo Borges', p. 150.

‘fetishes’, occupying the space of something unattainable but desired.²⁶³ This is how the staff of the magazine, who put this special issue together, announce it on the dustcover, paraphrasing Whitman: ‘Este libro es un hombre. Y el que toca este libro toca a un hombre.’²⁶⁴

During the 70s and early 80s Borges travelled extensively around Europe and the United States, and he often gave interviews which were promptly reported in Argentine newspapers (e.g. Fig. 23); this contributed to the construction of the image of Borges as cultural success story. As mentioned before, the reporting of Borges’s international recognition amounts to the ostensive appropriation of the image of the writer as a triumph on behalf of the nation at large. Further proof of this is an article published in *Clarín* in 1980 (Fig. 29), where Borges is referred to as the epitome of the ‘ordinary’ Argentine. Here, the trait that defines Borges’s ‘Argentineness’ is a paradoxical desire to be someone else in order to be able to know himself: ‘Un chisporroteo suave, más cerca del circunspecto humor inglés que del ingenio español, mostró la deliciosa inteligencia de quien dio una de las más profundas definiciones del argentino medio: ‘Yo, que soñé ser otro.’²⁶⁵

Televised interviews of Borges also contributed to the construction of his image as a sapient guru. Amongst the many that were originally broadcast during the 70s and early 80s, some can be found in the video archive of Buenos Aires’s television station Canal 13, which contains clips of a variety of interviews broadcast between 1980 and

²⁶³Martin Lister explains that this occurs as a result of ‘putting photographic indexicality and materiality together,’ when ‘we see the photograph as something which it is as important to hold, touch, feel and check for as it is to see, and which we sense has literally touched something that [...] has existed but is no more,’ in ‘Photography in the Age of Electronic Imaging’, in *Photography*, by Liz Wells, pp. 297-336 (p. 332).

²⁶⁴‘Todo Borges’, dustcover. Cf. Walt Whitman, ‘So Long’, *Leaves of Grass* (1860), ll. 55-8.

²⁶⁵Hellén Ferro, ‘La televisión y un Borges para todos’, *Clarín*, 27 August 1980.

1986.²⁶⁶ These generally show the writer wearing a suit and sitting in his green armchair, in his own sitting room, accompanied by his white cat, Beppo. The fact that the setting is always the same (as described by Avedon above) reinforces the idea of a holy man in his shrine, which interviewers visit in search of truth. He is an elderly man surrounded by books, and the room generally appears in darkness, which reinforces the idea of his blindness. Interviewers generally treat him with great respect, as is the case, on 23rd August 1980, of ‘Pinky’ (Lidia Satragno), a very well-known TV presenter who epitomized the middle class housewife of the time.²⁶⁷ In the interview, she speaks slowly and carefully and smiles sweetly at Borges as if she was addressing her grandfather. The questions she asks are very similar to those asked by other reporters in the many other interviews, about death, old age, blindness and books. The answers that Borges provides are also repeated in various interviews, particularly the recitation of ‘Poema de los dones’, which he normally accompanies with a reflection on the other two blind directors of the Biblioteca Nacional (José Mármol and Paul Groussac).

‘Tiempo de Borges’ is another example of the elderly writer being interviewed at length on Argentine television. The programme, in which Borges is interviewed by Raúl Burzaco for the state-run television station ATC, was broadcast between 11.00 pm and 12.30 am on 27th June 1985.²⁶⁸ Even though Burzaco has a different – slightly less reverential although always respectful – attitude to Borges, the fact that interviewer and interviewee are sitting at a plain table against a background of complete darkness gives the encounter an air of detachment from time and place. The viewer can see a table, two chairs, books, a glass of water, Burzaco and the reassuring image of an elderly, besuited Borges leaning on his walking stick (Fig. 24). Here Borges and Burzaco discuss a

²⁶⁶In 1979, a devastating fire destroyed earlier material. I am indebted to Mario Mattarucco, Head of Archive of *Canal 13*, for access to these sources in April 2008, as there is no ordinary provision for consultation of this archive by researchers.

²⁶⁷Archivo *Canal 13*, A-6641, TCS-00-46-12.

²⁶⁸Video footage found in the *Audiovideoteca de Buenos Aires*, Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, AEVR2038C 31’23”.

variety of subjects which are highly intellectual. The following day, a few extracts of this interview were published in the newspaper *Tiempo Argentino*, which Burzaco himself introduces by saying: ‘Dialogar con Jorge Luis Borges supone una suerte de forzosa autosuperación, para ponerse ‘a la altura de...’.’²⁶⁹ thus reinforcing the image of a sage. The sense of Borges’s protagonism in the construction of an Argentine culture is reinforced by the presence of the name of the country in the television channel (ATC stands for ‘Argentina Televisora Color’) and in the newspaper in which the article appeared.

The strength of the construction of Borges as a figure worthy of reverence, a national treasure whose greatness is confirmed and legitimized by his success abroad, is emphasized when it is considered as an Argentine phenomenon. This becomes evident when it is compared to the image of the writer that foreign photographers constructed. The next section examines this contrast.

Borges’s Reception in the U.S.A. and the Irreverence of American Photographers

In 1962, the publication of *Ficciones* and *Labyrinths* in the United States by Grove Press and New Directions respectively, inaugurated a period in the American reception of Borges which Argentine academic and Borges expert Jaime Alazraki identifies as ‘apogeo’, and which spans the 60s and 70s.²⁷⁰ Apart from what he refers to as ‘celebración frenética de la obra de Borges en los medios universitarios’ (p. 344), Alazraki measures the extent of Borges as ‘una presencia dominante en el escenario de la vida literaria norteamericana’ by the constant appearance of translations of, or comments on, Borges’s texts in important publications such as ‘*Time*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *New American*

²⁶⁹Raúl Burzaco, ‘Tiempo de Borges’, *Tiempo Argentino/Cultura*, 28 June 1985.

²⁷⁰Alazraki, ‘Recepción de Borges en los EE.UU.’, p 343.

Review, Mundus Artium, The New York Review of Books, Salmagundi, The Antioch Review, Esquire, TriQuarterly,’ as well as on public radio and television (p. 343). And even though he underlines Borges’s influence on contemporary American fiction and criticism, Alazraki hastens to point out that ‘lo excepcional del éxito de Borges en los Estados Unidos es que atrajo por igual al lector académico como al lector medio y al escritor profesional’ (p. 345). He continues:

Sus lectores en los EE.UU. encontraron en su obra un lenguaje en el cual reconocían su propia tradición pero modificada, absorbida por una inteligencia que conocía esa tradición pero la asimilaba irreverentemente, con una libertad, una imaginación y un desenfado que no tenía el escritor europeo. (p. 347)

In the 60s, in the United States, *Time Magazine* portrayed Borges as ‘the greatest living writer in the Spanish language,’²⁷¹ and gave *Ficciones* fourth place in a list of ‘The Decade’s Most Notable Books’.²⁷² In 1975, he was referred to as ‘the most eminent living Argentine’ by Hedley Donovan in ‘South America: Notes on a New Continent’.²⁷³ In an article published in 1977 in *The Boston Review*, Katherine Singer Kovacs highlights Borges’s position as Argentina’s main legitimating cultural force, both locally and abroad:

It is in the direct interest of the government to continue serving up Borges as a distraction, an icon, the ultimate Argentine success story. At home, his

²⁷¹‘Books: Greatest in Spanish’, *Time Magazine*, 22 June 1962, online at www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,870003,00.html [accessed 19 November 2009] (author unknown).

²⁷²‘Fiction: The Decade’s Most Notable Books’, *Time Magazine*, 26 December 1969 www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,941837,00.html [accessed 19 November 2009] (author unknown).

²⁷³Hedley Donovan, ‘Time Essay: South America: Notes on a New Continent’, *Time Magazine*, 1 December 1975, online at www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,913779,00.html [accessed 19 November 2009].

countrymen not only bask in the reflected glory of his international reputation, but they also receive assurances from their greatest writer that all is well in Argentina. Abroad, potential critics of the regime may be disarmed – after all, a government which has the support of Jorge Luis Borges can't be all that bad.²⁷⁴

Kovacs's article stresses the strength of Borges as an Argentine success story by suggesting that the appropriation of his figure on the part of the military dictatorship which governed Argentina between 1976 and 1983 was equivalent to Borges's condoning of their actions. This controversial perception of Borges as cultural father-figure who lent his support to a brutally repressive regime is contested in Chapter 3. Apart from the obvious recognition of Borges's greatness as a literary figure, the construction of his image in the United States lacked the component of the projections regarding the definition of a national cultural identity present in Argentina, which was replaced, in America, by an exploration of difference.

The portrayal of Borges abroad, in particular in portraits taken by American photographers, shows some variance in relation to those images produced and circulated in Argentina. These variations in the discourses condensed in them are achieved through an interrogation of certain elements of the figure of Borges, in particular the meanings associated with his blindness and his air of traditional respectability. I will refer to two photographs of Borges taken in New York by celebrated American photographers Diane Arbus in 1969 (Fig. 30) and Richard Avedon in 1976 (Fig. 31), to underline, by contrast, the uniformity of the image of the writer constructed in Argentina. Where Argentine photographers show Borges as a homogenizing force which lends coherence to an Argentine identity, the Borges of Arbus and Avedon tells a different story.

²⁷⁴Katherine Singer Kovacs, 'Borges on the Right', *Boston Review*, Fall 1977, online at bostonreview.net/BR03/kovacs.html [accessed 9 September 2009]. This point is more fully discussed in the following chapter.

Avedon and Arbus were the same age, both based in New York and employed at some point by magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* (which published Arbus's famous photograph of Borges in Central Park, as we shall see). They each chose to shoot Borges not because he was a literary monument, but in spite of it. Borges was considered 'lectura obligada de lectores intelectualmente informados y de alta curiosidad literaria,' as Jaime Alazraki points out.²⁷⁵ Arbus's biographer Patricia Bosworth points out that the photographer was known to be a voracious reader, especially of Kafka, Rilke and Borges.²⁷⁶ The 'great blind Argentine writer,' she claims, was Arbus's 'idol' (p. 287). However, apart from the fact that both photographers knew his work, they felt, at a personal level, that photographing the blind writer allowed them to explore difference. Susan Sontag argues that Arbus's subjects 'are to remain exotic' and that 'her view is always from the outside.'²⁷⁷ In Avedon's case, his decision to photograph the writer responded to the simple fact that 'I photograph what I'm most afraid of, and Borges was blind.'²⁷⁸ In the eyes of these American artists, Borges appeared as an interesting 'other', whose exoticism lay mainly in his blindness and in the fact that he was a cultural outsider.

Diane Arbus was very active during the 60s until her suicide in 1971. She is famous for her photographs of 'assorted monsters and borderline cases [...] people who are pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive,' as Sontag observes.²⁷⁹ Her work never comes across as 'comfortable' or 'reassuring', but is, instead, 'reactive [...] against what is approved,' advancing 'life as a failure against life as a success' (p. 44). To anyone who knew her work, Arbus's decision to photograph Borges may appear puzzling: it is this photographer's exploration of difference rather than a wish to

²⁷⁵ Alazraki, 'Recepción', p. 344.

²⁷⁶ Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1984), pp. 196-7.

²⁷⁷ Susan Sontag, 'America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly', *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 27-47 (p. 42).

²⁷⁸ Avedon, 'Borrowed Dogs', p. 4.

²⁷⁹ Sontag, 'America', pp. 32-3.

perpetuate Borges as homogenizing cultural force which differentiates her portrayal from that of her Argentine counterparts. Tomás Eloy Martínez comments that even when one of the important magazines ‘le encomendaba un tema, lo importante para ella era el sujeto que le pondrían por delante: la extrañeza, la diferencia, el ínfimo temblor de realidad que apartaba a ese personaje de todos los otros.’²⁸⁰

Diane Arbus was asked to photograph Borges by *Harpers Bazaar* and his portrait (Fig. 30) was published in March 1969 to illustrate three of his poems. Tomás Eloy Martínez points out that the challenge in photographing Borges lay in that everyone knew his image, a challenge that Arbus overcame by producing an image that is like no other image of the writer: ‘La iconografía de Borges es infinita: Diane Arbus, sin embargo, lo ve como nadie más, con los ojos muy abiertos, rebosantes de inteligencia, y los labios apagados por la amargura’ (para. 13) (a sorrow that may have been related to his unhappy marriage to Elsa Astete: in fact, this is one of the few images in which Borges appears wearing a wedding band). In Argentine photographs Borges seldom looks directly at the camera, and when he does, part of his face normally appears in shadows. This gives the impression of a traditional pose, where the subject does not appear to engage with the photographer but is, rather, sitting as if for a portrait. Conversely, Arbus’s photograph shows Borges staring at the camera. Sontag points out that in Arbus’s work this makes her subjects ‘look even odder, even deranged,’²⁸¹ accentuating not a sense of authority but one of quirkiness.

In *The Ongoing Moment* (2005), Geoff Dyer examines Arbus’s portrait of Borges in Central Park in relation to the issue of blindness. With the ‘stark frontality and frankness’ he argues are characteristic of her method, the photographer acted in defiance of criticisms that photographing the blind amounted to exploitation. In his

²⁸⁰Tomás Eloy Martínez, ‘Viaje a las tinieblas de Diane Arbus’, *La Nación*, 28 May 2005, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=707933 [accessed 24 April 2010].

²⁸¹Sontag, ‘America’, p. 37.

description of the portrait, Dyer makes reference to the relationship between the subject and the camera, a key point in portraiture which blindness problematizes:

Borges is placed in the exact center of the frame and stares directly at the camera, fully conscious of the process of which he is a part. His wrinkled hands rest on a walking stick [...] While the writer is in sharp focus, the trees behind him are blurred, isolating him from the visible world that frames – and defines our view of – him.²⁸²

Frontality explores the ethical dilemma of photographing the blind as a way of exploring difference, which had been a trope in the work of American photographers of the first part of the 20th Century. Dyer points out that Arbus's choice was due to the fact that the blind 'can't fake their expressions. They don't know what their expressions are, so there is no mask' (p. 44). Arguably, however, even when a subject is sighted, the 'mask' that they may imagine they put on may be perceived differently by the viewer. Borges's blindness appears obvious in images taken by Argentine photographers. In the case of Diane Arbus, it was not only shown but also interrogated and problematized.

Richard Avedon was a very prolific fashion photographer, whose work span more than five decades. Patricia Bosworth reminisces that 'everybody who entered Avedon's studio was some kind of star. And there was a sense of excitement, of titillation in that huge, white, lighted space.'²⁸³ This was not the case when Avedon flew to Buenos Aires to meet Borges in 1975, only to find that the writer's mother had just died. The

²⁸²Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), p. 42.

²⁸³Bosworth, *Diane Arbus*, p. 285.

photographer later said that he had felt so overcome with emotion that he had found the resulting photographs ‘empty’.²⁸⁴

The following year, Avedon photographed Borges again in New York. This portrait (Fig. 31) departs most distinctly from other images of Borges in terms of his posture: it is very rare to see Borges leaning forward, as he does in this unusual photograph against Avedon’s signature stark, white background. His clothes crease quite naturally, and although it appears posed, there is a certain sense of movement in the picture, as if he was about to stand up, or as if he had been caught in the middle of a lively conversation. Borges’s expression is also unusual, quizzical, perhaps due to the crease on the bridge of his nose, and the particularly prominent pair of nostrils. From underneath noticeably protruding white eyebrows, he appears to be peering into a camera that looks at him slightly from above. Even though the writer appears serious and elderly, the brightness of the background, the absence of props or scenery, the angle of the shot show Borges as an old man who appears ‘not sage but vaguely comical in his complacent blindness.’²⁸⁵

Avedon’s portrait of Borges does not convey a sense of reverence: instead, it seems to situate the photographer and his subject at an equal level, one at which two creative minds can interact, or indeed, it may even suggest that Borges is slightly subjected to Avedon’s camera and his creativity, rather than the other way round. This is in marked contrast with the sense of respect and reverence that characterizes Argentine portrayals of the ‘national’ author. As such, it serves to underline the fact that the construction of Borges as an old sage responds to a specifically Argentine need to see him as a figure of veneration and an icon of national culture, whose image

²⁸⁴ Avedon, ‘Borrowed Dogs’, p. 4.

²⁸⁵ Dyer quotes American writer Adam Gopnik’s comments on this photograph in *The Ongoing Moment*, p. 43.

condenses expectations regarding the cohesion of national identity, as this chapter has shown.

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate how the construction of the subject that is Borges is achieved in photographic images through the interaction between the physiognomy of the writer and the anxieties and expectations that consumers pour onto his image. Argentines scrutinize themselves in Borges as they do in a mirror. As a result, the image of Borges as a wise elder condenses the need of Argentine society to construct a figure of veneration that could provide a sense of cultural history and solidity against the background of socio-political fragmentation with which most of the 20th Century confronted them. This is a cultural father-figure representative of cultural success and legitimated by international public exposure. As Jaime Alazraki put it: Borges has taken his place ‘en el Olimpo de los clásicos donde ningún dardo lo puede alcanzar, donde infinitos lectores seguirán leyéndolo en bibliotecas, escuelas o espacios privados, en buenas o malas traducciones y donde sus textos están ya de una manera eterna [...] en el plano de lo imperecedero’.²⁸⁶

As Hariman and Lucaites point out, the iconic photograph ‘doesn’t just draw on social knowledge enthymematically but refashions social forms to structure understanding [...] and organize collective memory.’²⁸⁷ The next chapter demonstrates how ‘these modes of imitation become particularly visible, yet also destabilized, as the photograph acquires a history of subsequent appropriation and commentary’ (p. 33) in the shape of the drawing of Borges in comic strips. Here, the evolution of the construction of Borges as a writer detached from the world of ‘ordinary’ Argentines and

²⁸⁶ Alazraki, ‘Recepción’, p. 355.

²⁸⁷ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, p. 33.

his troubled relationship with politics in the 60s and 70s will be analysed. This will be followed by a study of the reassessment of the figure of Borges through the appropriation of his image in comic strips of the mid-80s, during Argentina's transition to democracy.

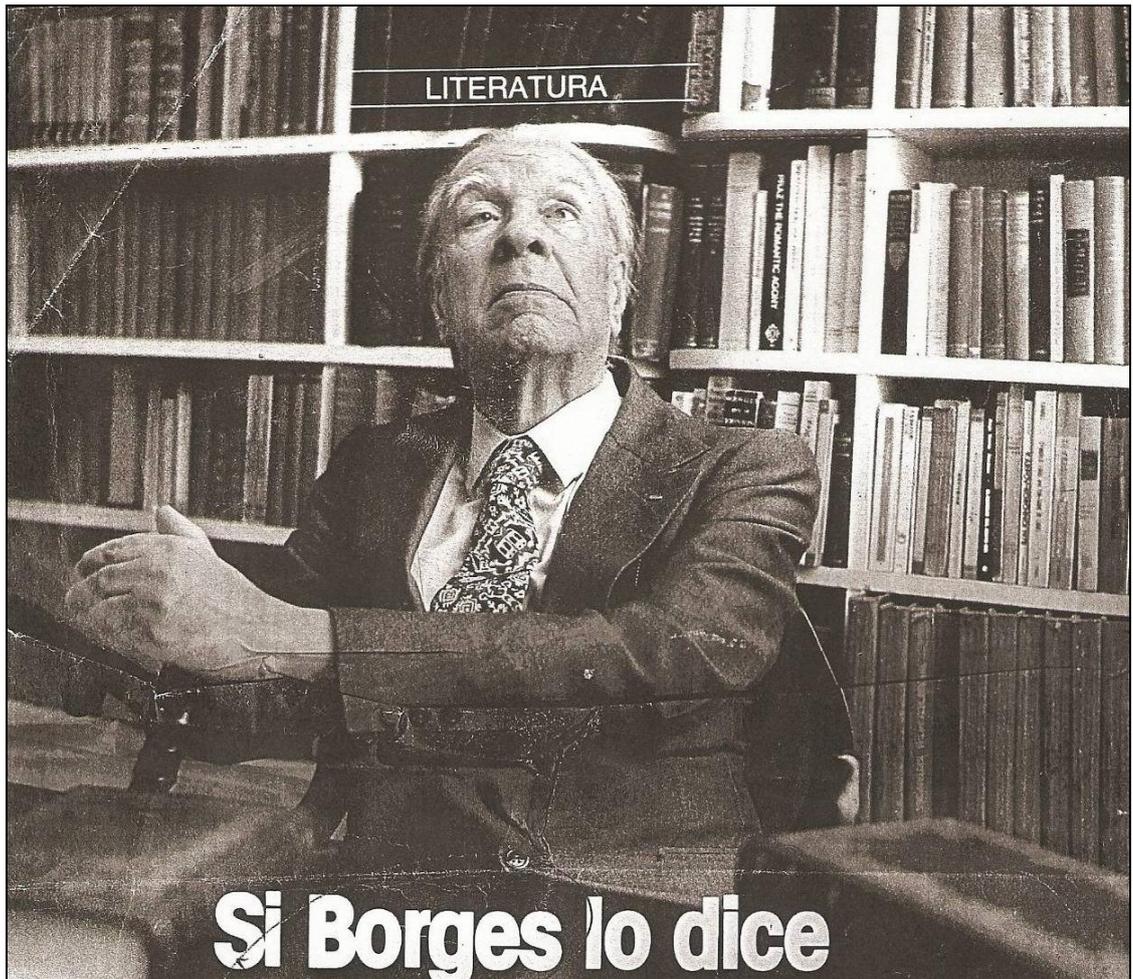


Figure 7. 'Si Borges lo dice', *Revista Somos*, 10 September 1982, p. 2



Figure 8. Borges by Eduardo Comesaña, available online at www.comesana.com/hyt_imgstock_showroom.php?hytPG=a:2:{i:0;d:8;i:1;i:8}&category=0&find=borges& [accessed 11 September 2009].



Figure 9. ‘Acto por la candidatura Perón-Perón. 31 August 1951’, available online at <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Cabildoabierto.jpg#file> [accessed 22 May 2010].



Figure 10. Eva Perón on the cover of her book *La razón de mi vida* (Buenos Aires: Peuser, 1951), available online at <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Razon.jpg> [accessed 22 May 2010].

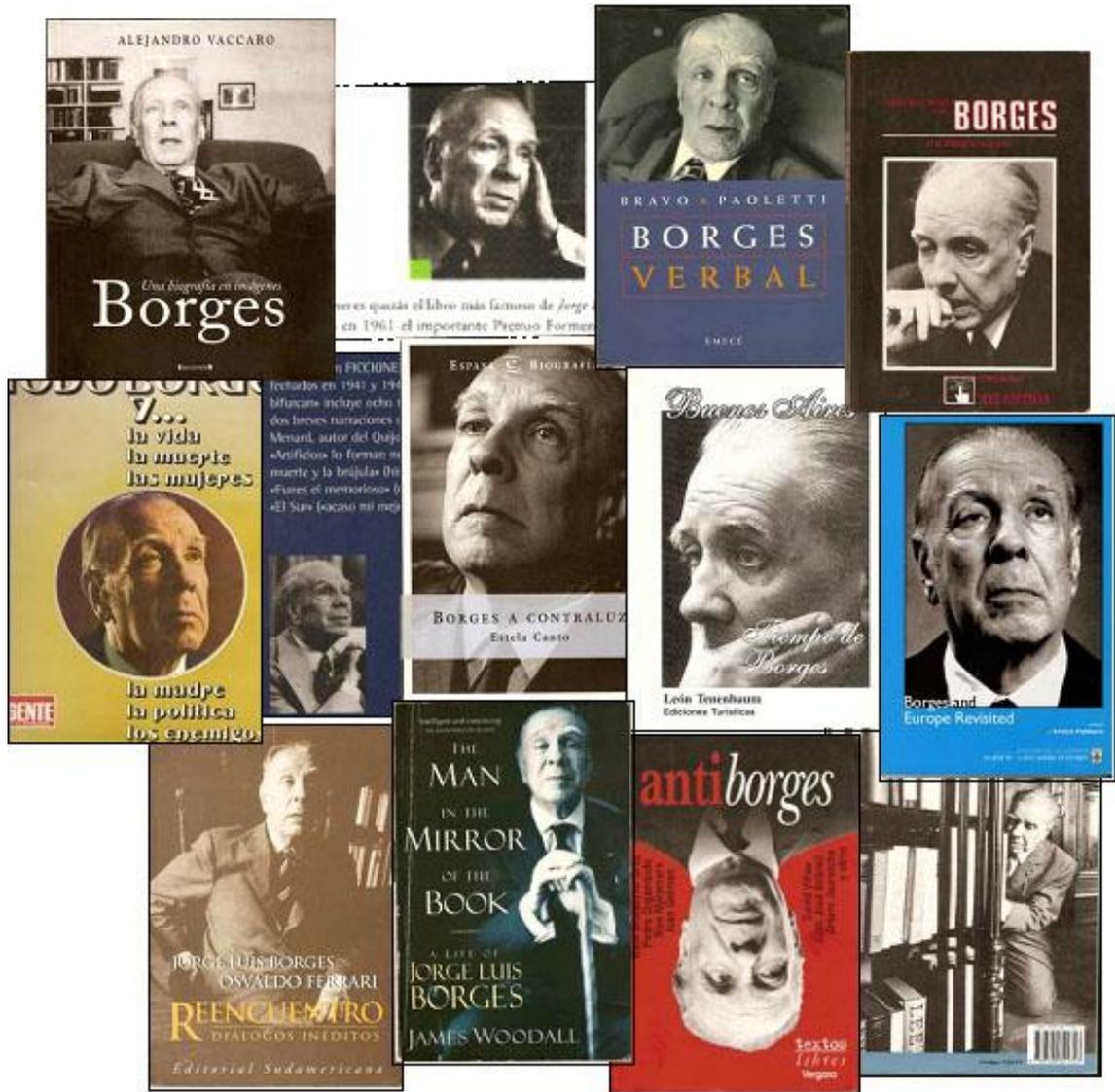


Figure 11. A selection of front and back covers of books by and about Borges.

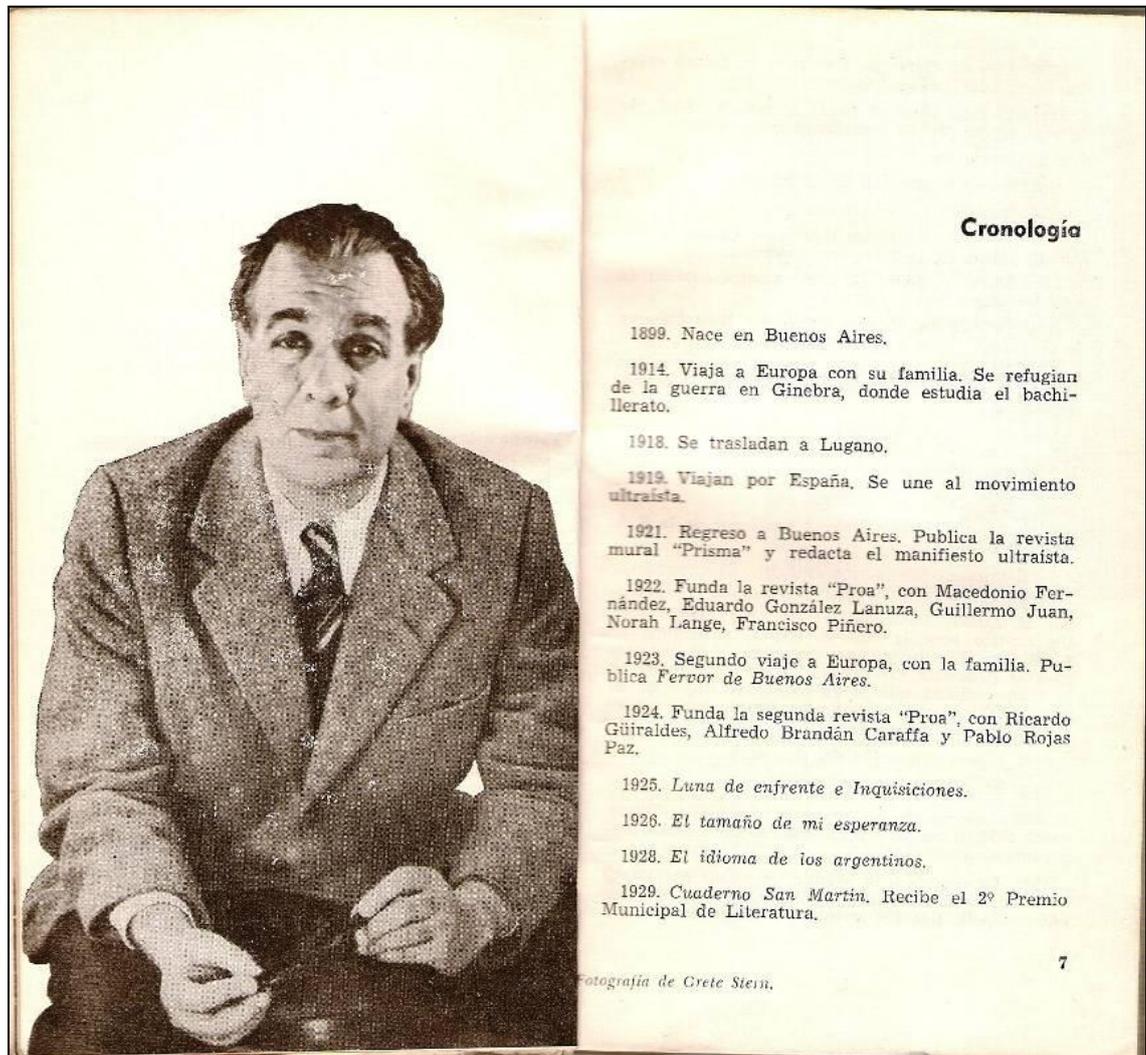


Figure 12. Borges by Grete Stern (1951) on pages 6-7 of Alicia Jurado's *Genio y Figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1964).

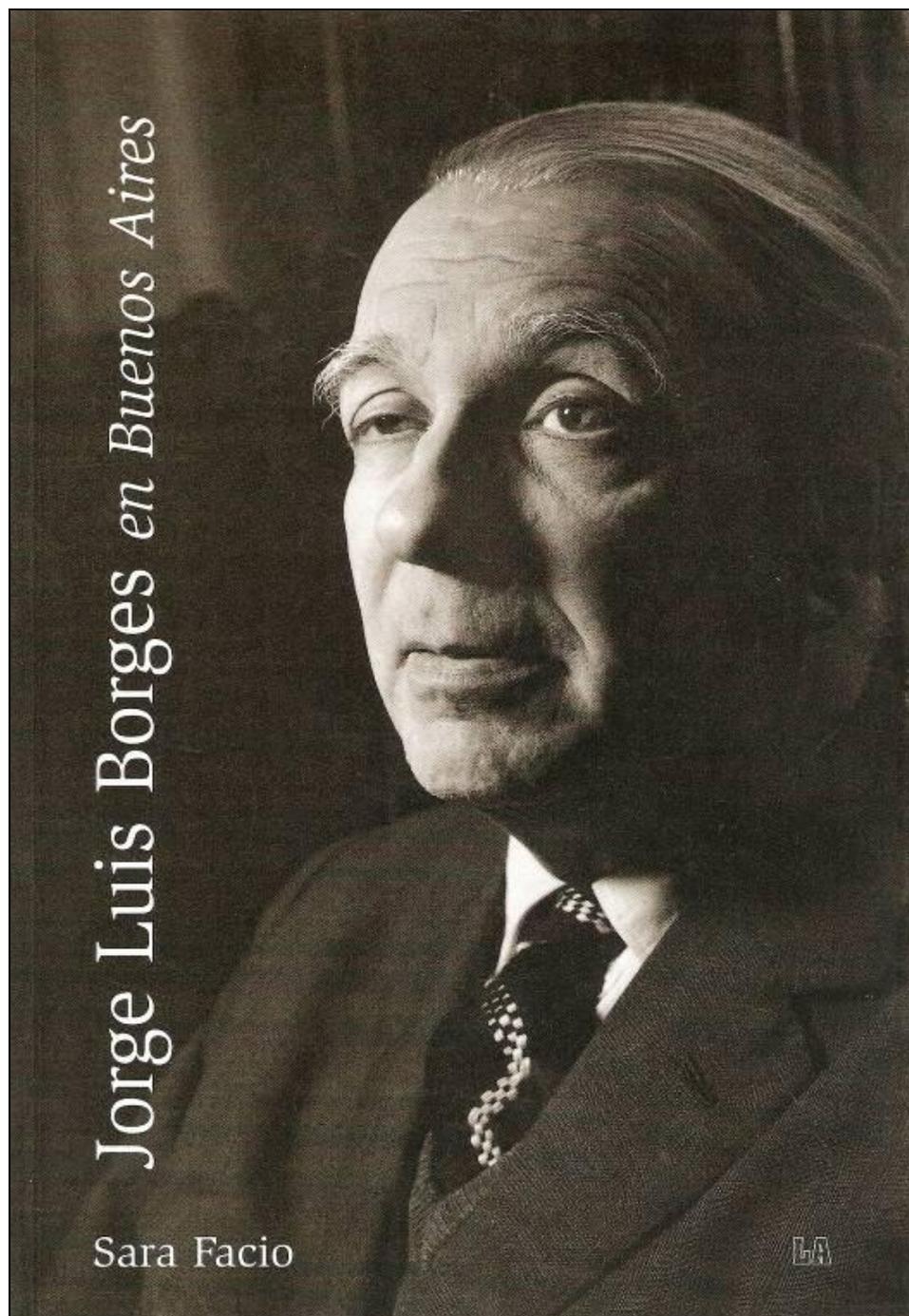


Figure 13. Front cover of Sara Facio, *Jorge Luis Borges en Buenos Aires* (2005).

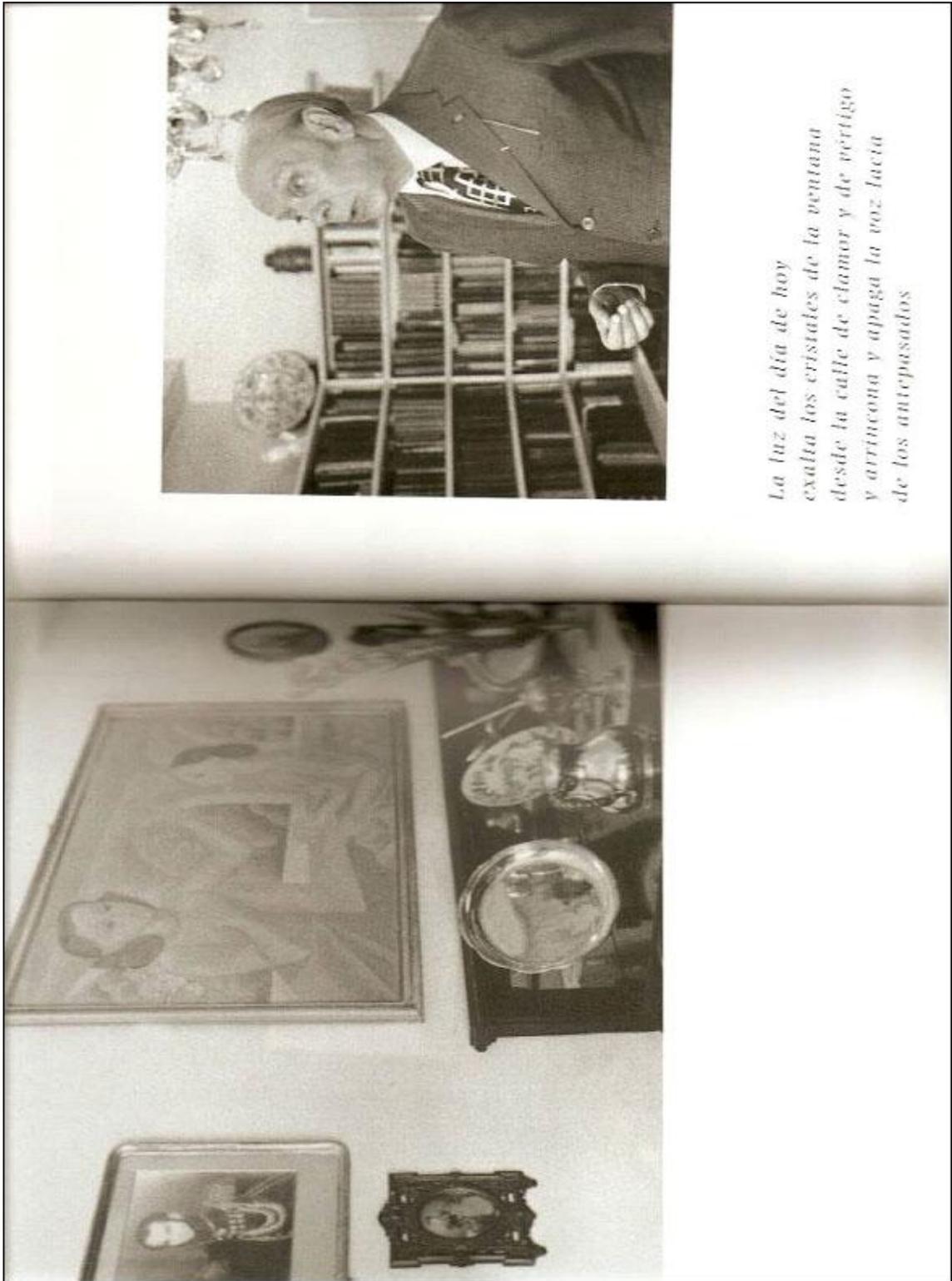


Figure 14. Facio, *Jorge Luis Borges en Buenos Aires*, pp. 62-3

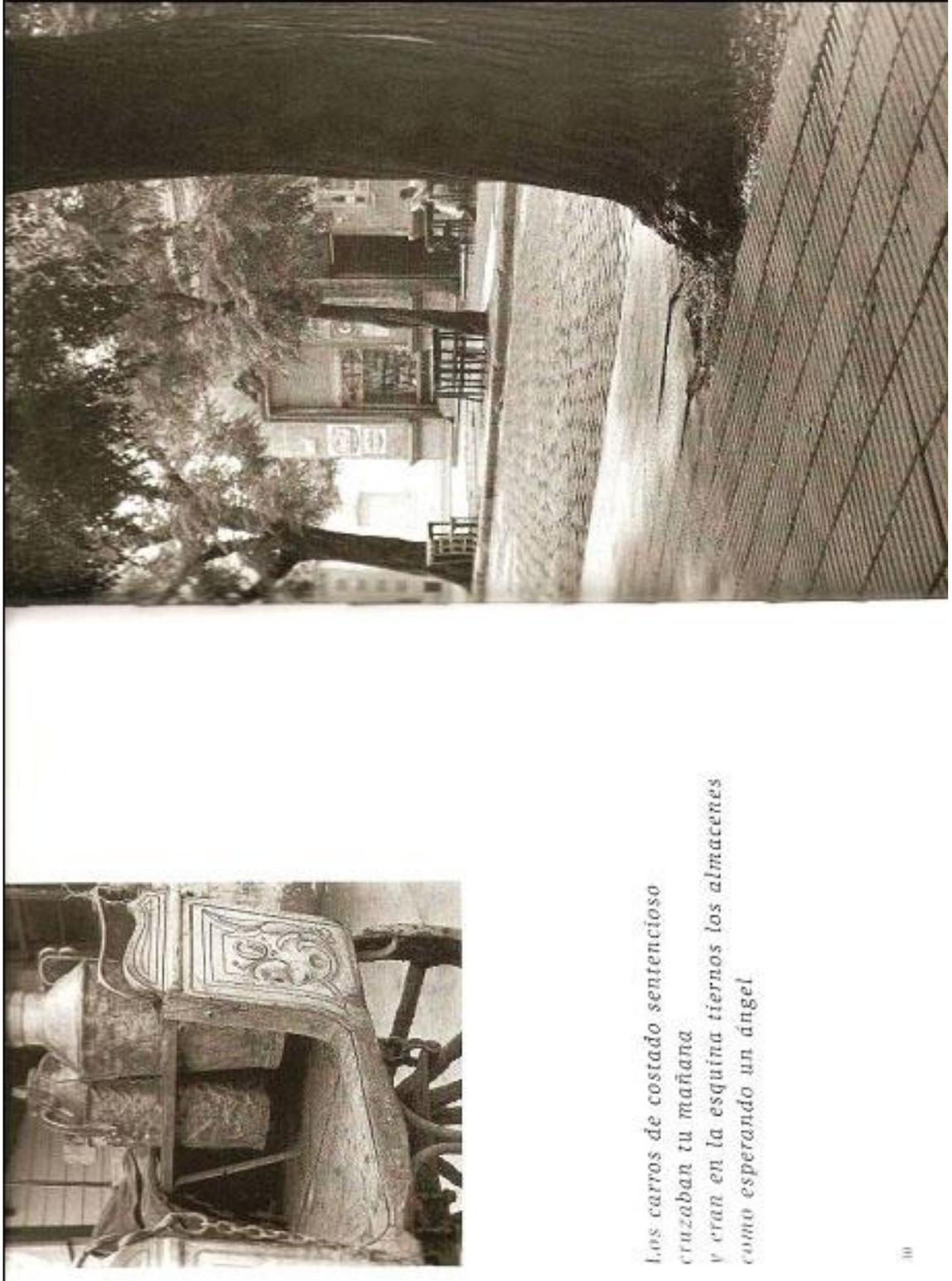


Figure 15. Facio, *Jorge Luis Borges en Buenos Aires*, pp. 30-1.

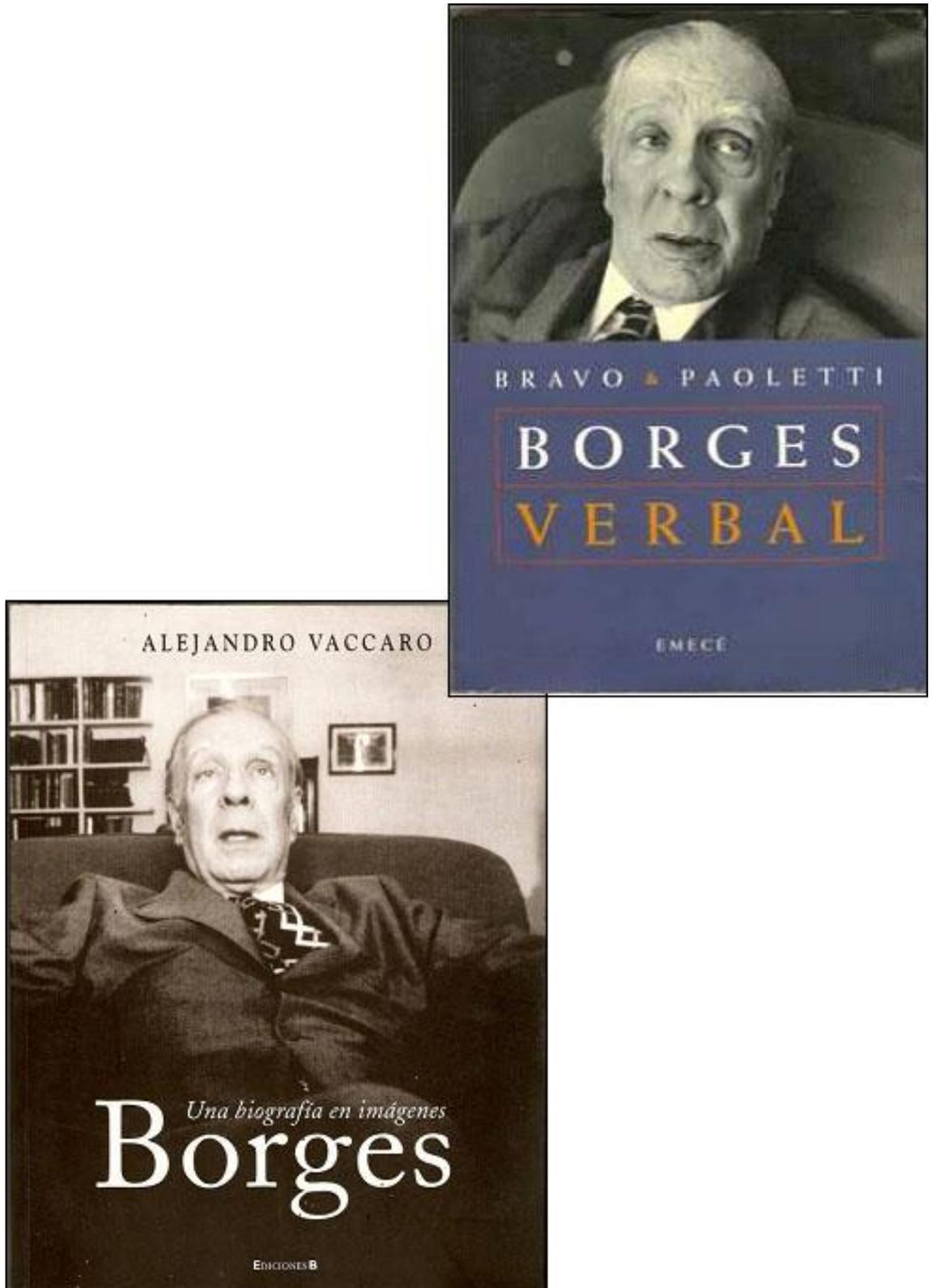


Figure 16. Borges by Sara Facio on the cover of two books published in 2004 and 2005.

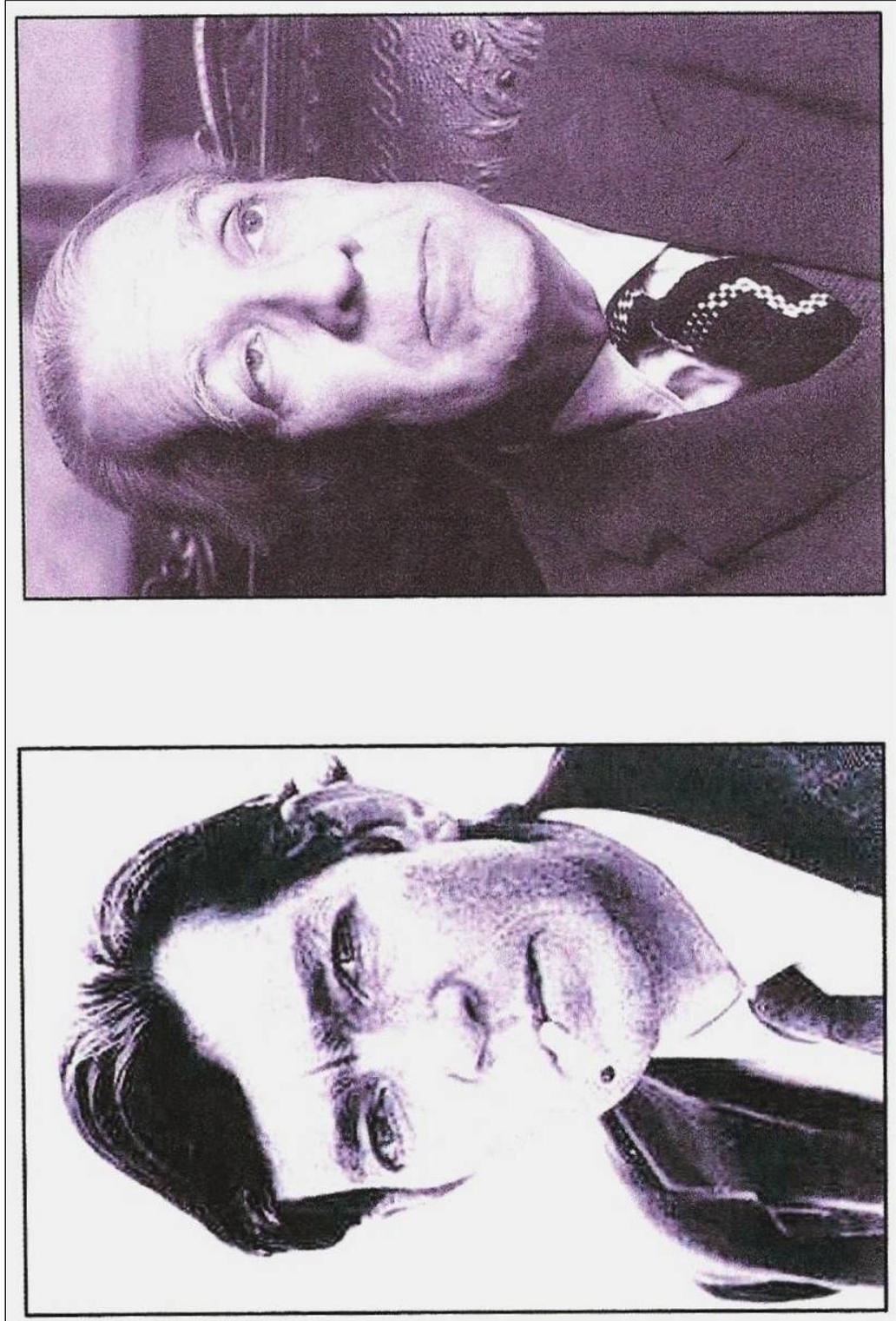


Figure 17. Julio Cortázar at age 53, in 1967 (left) and Jorge Luis Borges at age 63, in 1963 (right). Both images were taken by Sara Facio. Cortázar's image is available online at <http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Cort%C3%A1zar.jpg> [accessed 22 May 2010]. Borges's image is from Facio's *Jorge Luis Borges en Buenos Aires*, p. 14.



Figure 18. 'Borges en la Biblioteca Nacional', by Ronald Shakespear, 1967, on the cover of *Autobiografía*, designed by Lorenzo Shakespear, 1999.

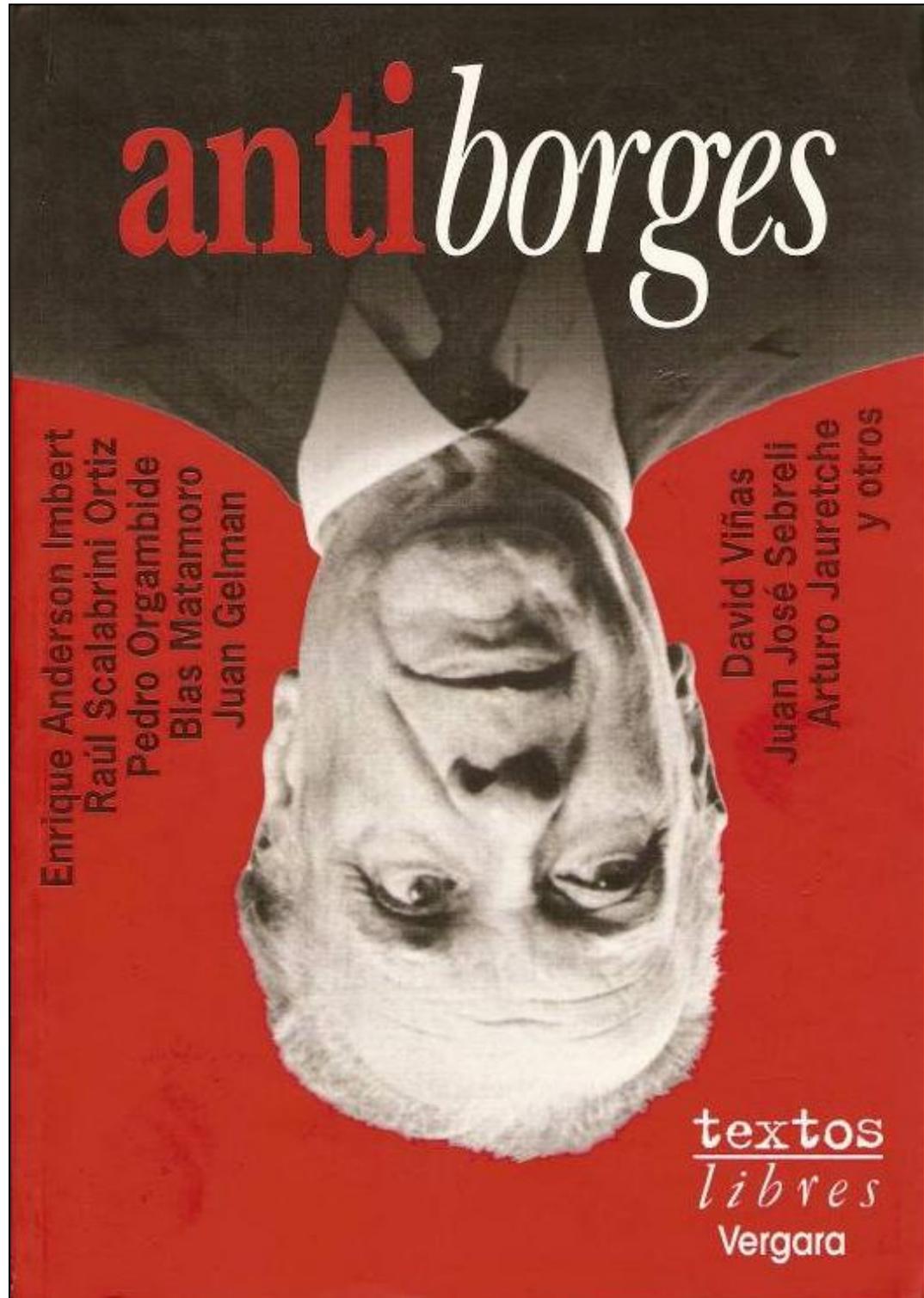


Figure 19. Cover of Lafforgue's *Antiborges*, designed by Raquel Cané, 1999.



Figure 20. Cover of Adolfo Bioy Casares's *Borges* (2006)

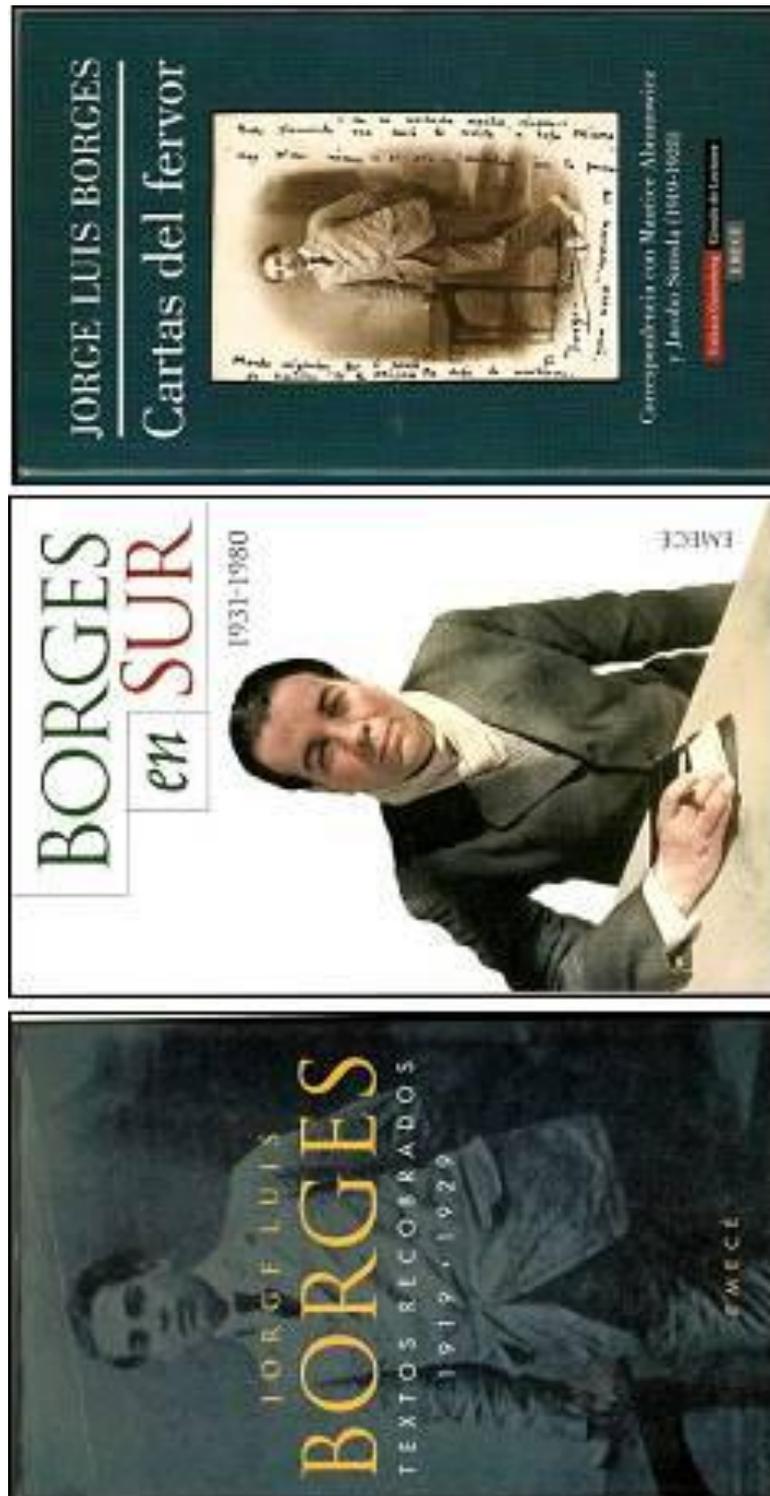


Figure 21. Covers of books published by Emece between 1997 and 1999. The centre photograph was taken in 1943, the one that appears in both end covers, is from 1919.



El escritor habló para la TV de Brasil.

Borges criticó "la justicia clandestina"

RIO DE JANEIRO, (AP) - El escritor argentino Jorge Luis Borges condenó el ejercicio clandestino de justicia durante una entrevista por la televisión brasileña.

El mundialmente famoso escritor agregó que los acusados por delitos criminales tienen derecho a abogados y juicio público.

El gobierno argentino ha sido acusado por grupos defensores de los derechos humanos por secuestro y supuesta ejecución de millares de adversarios políticos desde que los militares derrocaron el gobierno de la presidenta Isabel Perón en 1976.

Borges apoyó el golpe y el subsiguiente gobierno militar, pero recientemente firmó un aviso en un diario que pidió mayor información sobre el destino de personas que desaparecieron después de ser arrestadas por agentes de seguridad.

En su entrevista con la cadena Globo, Borges dijo que condenaba el terrorismo pero también condenó lo opuesto: el ejercicio clandestino de la justicia.

Después de asegurar que nadie puede calificarlo de nacionalista, comunista, fascista, peronista, Borges afirmó que habló sencillamente como un hombre ético...no veo razón alguna de por qué la justicia debería ser clandestina, ninguna razón por la cual un acusado no pueda tener un abogado y un juicio público.

Figure 22. *Diario Popular*, 2 November 1980.



El escritor Jorge Luis Borges: sus textos se difunden por las emisoras radiales estadounidenses.

Borges, también estrella en la radio norteamericana

La red de estaciones de radio no comerciales de Estados Unidos difundirá actualmente un ciclo dedicado al escritor argentino Jorge Luis Borges.

NUEVA YORK (AP). — Una singular amalgama de recuerdos de juventud, de misterios surrealistas y de fantasías filosóficas surge de un programa de la radio pública nacional de Estados Unidos dedicado al escritor argentino Jorge Luis Borges.

Las voces de locutores y actores y la del mismo Borges conjuran abstracciones de universos míticos y tigras imaginarios con una prosa inglesa que hace honor a la galanura con que el autor de *El Aleph*, *Ficciones* y *Centenares* de otros cuentos y ensayos las plasmó en el original español.

Otros escritores, como el uruguayo Emir Rodríguez Monegal y el norteamericano Alastair Reid, ofrecen breves facetas personales del hombre de letras argentino.

El programa, subtítulo *La risa del universo*, es el segundo de una serie de trece producidos para la red de estaciones de radio no comerciales del país con el título general de *Rostros, espejos, máscaras* —Flección latinoamericana del siglo XX. Cada uno de los segmentos está dedicado a una gran figura de la literatura contemporánea de esa región. El primero honró al colombiano Gabriel García Márquez.

En un bosquejo biográfico del hombre de letras argentino, la locutora del programa dice que "El padre de Borges, ciego a los 30 años, transmitiría su ceguera hereditaria a su hijo, que consciente de que perdería la vista, adquirió una enorme avidez por la lectura, especialmente la de la enciclopedia que había en la biblioteca de su padre..."

En un pasaje que probablemente, sin intención de los productores, resulta risueño para el oyente de habla hispana, un actor de voz perfectamente impostada y con el fondo musical de un viejo tango tocado con guitarra, recita en un inglés de pureza shakesperiana este fragmento de un ensayo de Borges:

"...Recordados contra el fondo azul de paredes o de un cielo abierto, dos maleantes de trajes negros ajustados y zapatos de gruesos tacos bailan una danza mortal, un ballet de dágas que se rozan hasta que un clavel,

aparece en la oreja de uno de ellos cuando un cucuillo encuentra su marca en él y pone fin a la danza sin acompañamiento en el piso con su muerte. Satisfecho, el otro ajusta su sombrero de copa alta y pasa sus últimos años recordando la historia de aquel duelo leal... Esa es en resumen la historia de nuestro vicio arrabal argentino..."

Para deleite de estudiosos de la obra del escritor argentino en un idioma distinto del original, el programa ofrece este ejemplo de pensamientos típicamente borgueanos trasladados con evidente admiración y afecto al inglés:

"Una siniestra sociedad secreta imaginada por Borges ha inventado el planeta Tlon mediante el simple procedimiento de insertar información acerca de él en las enciclopedias terráneas. A su debido tiempo, si el tiempo en verdad existe, la Tierra será suplantada por Tlon, un escalofriante doble de la Tierra que abarca, incluso las escuelas contradictorias de la filosofía, que de acuerdo con Borges es una rama importante de la literatura fantástica."

"Otra de esas escuelas declara que la totalidad del tiempo ya ha ocurrido y que la vida, nuestra vida, es un vago recuerdo de un tenue reflejo, fallas indudables y fragmentadas de un proceso irrevocable. Otra sostiene que la historia del universo, que contiene la historia de nuestras vidas, y los detalles más infinitesimales, es el designio producido por un dios menor a fin de comunicarse... con un demonio. Otra afirma que el universo es comparable con esos sistemas de código en los que los símbolos tienen significados en los cuales solamente lo que ocurre cada tricesésima noche es verídico. Otra piensa que cuando dormimos estamos despiertos en alguna otra parte..."

"Y así cada hombre es dos hombres... dice el propio Borges, y habla de sí mismo como si tuviera una segunda personalidad: "Yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura... Y esa literatura me justifica".

Figure 23. Clarín, 8 August 1984.

Cultura

7 □ TIEMPO Argentino
Viernes 28 de junio de 1985

En el programa cultural que, en condición de Especial, puso a Jorge Luis Borges habló de muchos de sus grandes temas: la existencia de Dios y su agnosticismo dudante; la proximidad de la muerte como algo que "no debe ser desagradable"; la mujer que lo dejó y fue origen de un poema imaginado en Barracas; su sensación de sentirse fuera del tiempo; el insomnio incurable que lo llevó a escribir su cuento sobre Funes el Memorioso, el que una vez terminado le devolvió el sueño perdido



que estaba atormentado por su memoria y había aprendido inglés, francés, portugués, latín, termina diciendo: "Sospecho, sin embargo, que no era muy capaz de pensar. Pensar es olvidar diferencias".

J.L.B.: Claro, porque pensar es abstraerse. Ya me había olvidado de eso. Ese cuento lo escribí hace tantos años y ha tenido tanta suerte. Ha sido vertido a idiomas insospechables, al árabe, al japonés, al hebreo, al húngaro... Le voy a contar otra cosa. Una vez escrito ese

cavo valle. Luego se aterriza donde se puede y se brinda por los agricultores y para eso se llevan botellas de champagne. Esto ocurre en California. El viaje dura metros de dos horas. Uno viaja de pie y apoyado contra la baranda del globo. Lo tripulan cinco personas más el piloto. Sentimos en el viaje un calor muy intenso, porque se tiene que llenar de gas el globo. El globo será como una casa de tres o cuatro pisos de alto y tiene esa linda forma como de una pera invertida, y los pintan de colores fuertes.

el mármol, sin embargo él encuentra dos metáforas imposibles. Pocos lo recuerdan a Chesterton como poeta.

—Bueno, yo recuerdo su obra "El hombre que fue jueves" y es una maravilla. Es una farsa, pero tiene valor de epopeya.

—J.L.B.: Es verdad. Ahora, yo creo que esa idea de Londres como una ciudad fantástica lo hereda Chesterton de Stevenson. Porque ya el ambiente del pueblo suicida es ese Londres fantástico... Chesterton empezó estudiando pintura y dibujo y luego se dedicó a las letras

—¿Cuándo escribe un cuento tiene previsto el desenlace?

—J.L.B.: La primera revelación que recibo es la del principio y la del fin. Yo siempre lo sé. Ahora lo que yo siempre tengo que inventar o descubrir es qué sucede entre el principio y el fin. A eso tengo que inventario y buscar qué país conviene, los nombres de los personajes, la época. Pero hay otros escritores que sólo saben el principio. Me parece absurdo que Cervantes escribiera "en" y después pensó



en Dios como en una sustancia infinita, con infinitos atributos. Los leí, pero yo no creía en nada, pero lo leía como una especie de espléndida literatura.

Figure 24. Raúl Burzaco interviews Borges for state television, 'Tiempo de Borges', *Tiempo Argentino*, 28 June 1985.

RIN ★ Buenos Aires, sábado 25 de agosto de 1979

ESPECTACULO

★ Página 11

Una antología de frases borgeanas

Consecuente con el principio que los programas urales hay que transmitirlos a la hora en que se fue a dormir, al 11 rindió un homenaje a Jorge Luis Borges y a los 80 años del escritor (la palabra no es mímico de héroe, como ellos creen). La cultura desde luego, no tiene que ser necesariamente divertida, pero nunca burrida. A menos que nes incursiones en como en un terreno guro la vuelvan sonora. Borges, lo ha de- trado con frecuencia, a mucho de ser tedious. in showman instintivo. has veces incurre, qui- brillante antes que pro- ía. Se divierte al es- iarse y oye con irónica osidad lo que dicen de "otro Borges", el de la a que no acierta a ex-



Borges: cumpleaños y programa de televisión. plicarse, como afirmó en un poema publicado en "Clarín" el jueves último.

La falla del programa (que evidenció un deseo del Canal 11 por agregar a su programación una emisión de alta jerarquía) fue, aunque suene paradójico, un exceso de respeto. Para interrogar a los grandes hombres es necesario tener menos admiración inhibitoria y más conocimiento de la obra del entrevistado. De lo contrario se corre el riesgo de dialogar con una estatua.

En toda la literatura argentina solamente hay un escritor que en su vejez haya conocido la veneración nacional que su genio, pero también los medios de difusión, han conocido para Jorge Luis Borges: Carlos Guido y Spano, al que los chicos de los colegios visitaban en su lecho patriarcal como a un héroe civil. La fama de Borges es internacional (como la de Mar-

tha Argerich, Ginastera o nuestros deportistas) y transmisiones como las de Canal 11 tienen la virtud de llevar a la conciencia del pueblo que hombres como Borges, o los grandes artistas, son algo importante para la argentinidad, que hacen por el país tanto como las vacas, Leolir o Villas. "Tengo que ir a hacerle un presupuesto a la sobrina de Borges", le dijo al cronista el pintor de pared. Esa es la fama, "la suma de los malos entendidos alrededor de un nombre famoso" según Rilke.

Ensayos, fotografías, libros, películas, discos, con- figuran un enorme testimonio para el futuro acerca de uno de los grandes escritores actuales, al que todos los años no le dan el Premio Nobel, como dijo el propio Borges con encómiable humor. En el

reportaje (ayudado por una cámara obsesionada por captar las más mínimas expresiones del entrevistado), una condescendiente admiración dificultó el rigor dialéctico que profundiza una conversación. La dulzura, y el conocimiento directo del personaje, unido a su belleza extraña, favorecieron a María Kodema, que leyó un poema de Borges escrito en inglés. Borges se repitió a sí mismo, al no ser exigido, y habló de sus antepasados que "fueron hombres de acción", aunque recordó con orgullo a Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur y al poema de éste a la muerte del general Belgrano.

Dijo lo de siempre, del excelente modo como lo ha dicho muchas otras veces. La admiración que el cronista, y muchos al igual que él, siente por Borges, es por la obra y no por el hombre consiente de su fama. Al escucharlo recordó al personaje de "Cuando se es alguen". Prisionero de sí mismo (repetió frases sobre una muerte que en lo hondo ya considera necesaria), a Borges le faltaba solo que el sillón se elevara y le cayera encima polvo de

mármol, como en la obra de Pirandello. Cuando se ha dicho tanto, muchas veces con genio, otras con inspiración y las más de las veces con perdurable oficio, poco importa convertirse en un monumento a los 80 años. Se tiene la seguridad de que ya se ha escrito cuanto se debía señalar de importante; exaltar el valor de las espaldas libertadoras, urdir algún endecasílabo recordable, contar una historia vivida por otros, ordenar en el dialecto de nuestro tiempo cinco o seis metáforas definitivas. Como una especie de antología de frases borgeanas, la transmisión de Canal 11 valió la pena de ser vista.

Helén Ferro

Figure 25. Clarín, 25 August 1979.

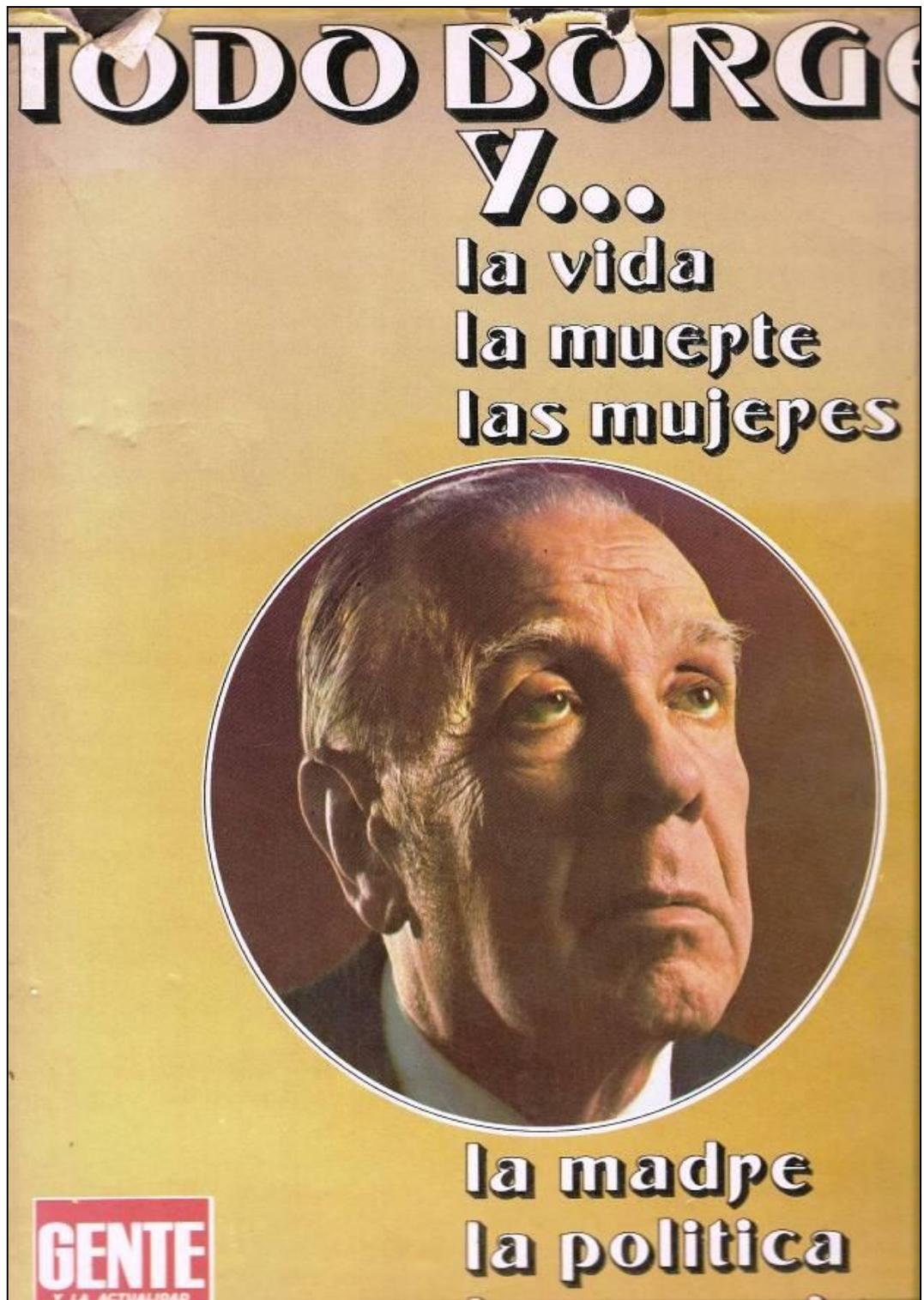


Figure 26. 'Todo Borges', *Gente*, January 1977.

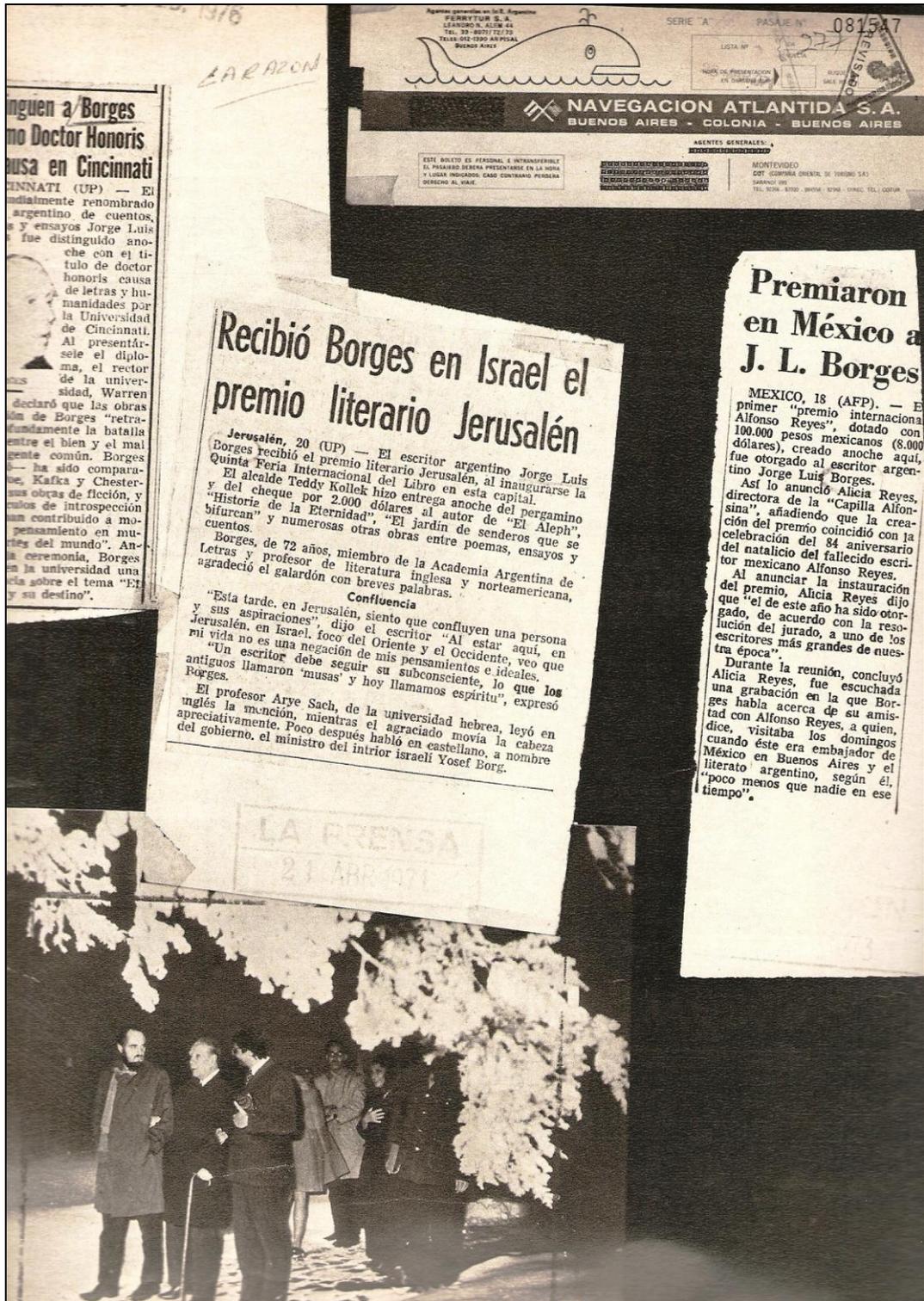


Figure 27. 'Todo Borges', p. 58.



Figure 28. Borges poses for a portrait by Elbio Fernández, 'Todo Borges', p. 150.

La televisión y un Borges para todos

El año pasado fue Antonio Carrizo quien, desde Canal Once, interrogó largamente a Jorge Luis Borges uno de los escritores más seductores de la literatura contemporánea. Este año "el show Borges" corrió a cargo de Enrique Llamas de Madariaga, por Canal 9. Un chisporroteo que del ingenio español, mostró la delictosa inteligencia de quien dio una de las más profundas definiciones del argentino medio:

"Yo, que soy ser otro..."

Para cualquier ensayista (el cronista se especializa en poesía hispanoamericana) escribir sobre Jorge Luis Borges implica el desafío a la propia inteligencia: describir una nueva faceta, atrapar una frase profunda, señalar la continuidad o la rotura de un pensamiento, mostrar más la capacidad del crítico que un acrecentamiento valorativo de la inimitable obra de un gran escritor. Pero una crónica de televisión no es un ensayo literario y el cronista deberá rechazar los rodeos personales (como lo hizo En-



Jorge Luis Borges, protagonista de una acertada emisión de "Videoshow".

rique Llamas de Madariaga, cuya sencillez solamente fue superada por la voluntaria modestia del escritor) y hablar acerca de por qué tuvo éxito un programa que contradice las normas esenciales de un medio como la T.V., que se basa en la subordinación de la palabra al poder. Los balbuceos de Borges lograron devolver a la palabra su antiguo esplendor e inmovilizar la imagen por una hora en una de las audiciones más entretenidas y de mejor rating de los últimos tiempos. Grabador en mano, o modesto maestro habrá querido captar el secreto del genio, que se mantuvo esta vez irremediablemente, acobardado por los que más gozaron de este triunfo de la palabra sobre la imagen.

Borges repiten una línea de conducta siempre igual a través de los años, filológicas (como cuando accedió: "supuesto que Dios exista") y ciudadana (su amor por los barrios de una ciudad que recuerda y ya no ve).

Borges se ha vuelto un fenómeno masivo (como Julián Marías, al que Madariaga invitó en una audición previa) porque los medios de comunicación lo han convertido en una figura masiva. Hoy día ningún argentino ignora que Borges es importante para la Argentina ("Dicen que ese Borges pateca a fondo, como Maradona", le decía al cronista un chofer de taxi), a la que interpreta con menos profundidad esencial que Mallea o Sabato, pero quizás como más objetiva convicción. La audición de Videoshow logró interesar a una audiencia "no intelectual", que comentó los fuegos de artificio de un escritor que ahorraba el ingenio, tan perecedero, cuando es el "fenix de los ingenios" de nuestra literatura contemporánea (como cuando dijo que no lee los diarios porque hablan de cosas efímeras y "lo inmediato está demasiado cerca para ser conocido"). El público masivo escuchó frases

Llamas de Madariaga tuvo la evidente simpatía del escritor (que puede ser cortésmente cruel en ocasiones) pero no intentó meterse a profundizar puntos en los que el cazador puede ser cazado. Desperdió a veces alguna oportunidad de explotar una veta poco conocida (como cuando Borges, que introdujo el ultrismo en Argentina, dijo que ese movimiento era "mala palabra"), insistió indistintamente sobre el tema del amor y forzó al escritor a repetirse, al insistir sobre su ceguera (aunque se escuchó una frase inédita y enigmáticamente borgiana: "fatigará" el co-



Figure 30. Diane Arbus, 'Three Poems (Poems by Jorge Luis Borges)', *Harper's Bazaar*, New York, March 1969, pp. 238-9. Reproduced in Doone Arbus and Marvin Israel, *Diane Arbus: Magazine Work* (New York: Aperture, 2004), pp. 118-9

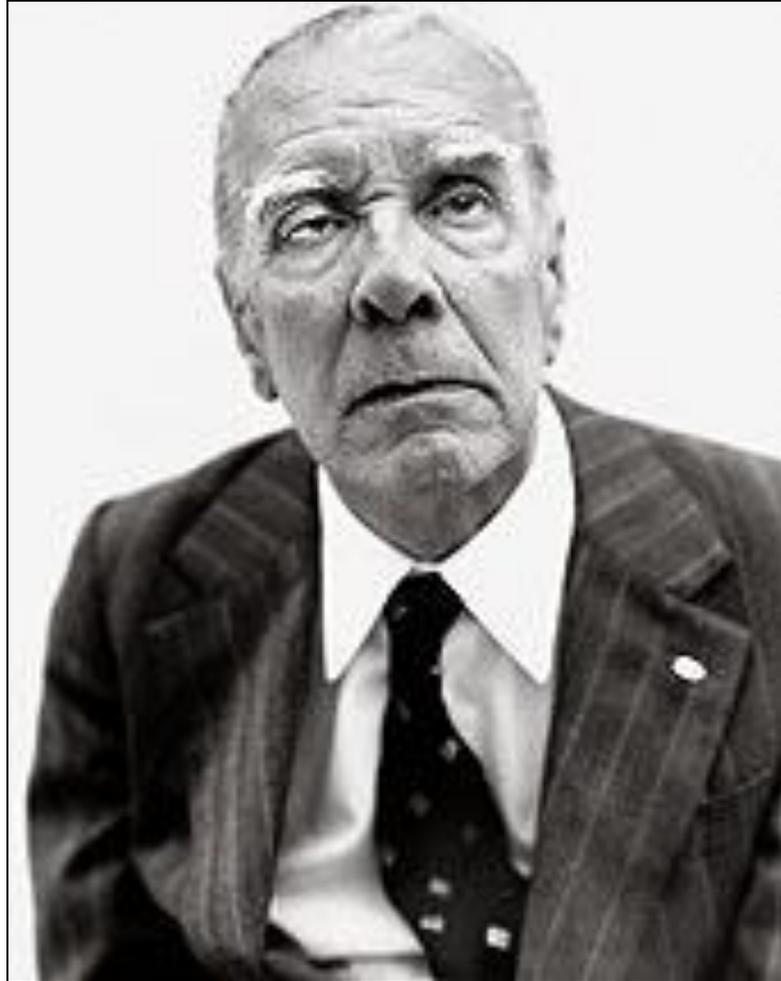


Figure 31. Borges by Richard Avedon, New York, 30 April 1976. Reproduced in Mary Shanahan (ed.), *Richard Avedon: Evidence. 1944-1994* (Random House: New York, 1994), p. 159.

Chapter Three

Borges para sobrevivientes: Culture, Politics and Comic Strips of the 1980s

Introduction

Un hombre se propone la tarea de dibujar el mundo. A lo largo de los años puebla un espacio con imágenes. [...] Poco antes de morir, descubre que ese paciente laberinto de líneas traza la imagen de su cara.

J.L.Borges, 'Epílogo', *El Hacedor*.

The relationship between the physiognomy of the world and that of a person, as Borges suggests in his epilogue to *El Hacedor* (quoted above), centres on the search for identity. The man imagined by Borges, who embarked on the task of representing the world and spent his life filling it with images, comes to the end of his life and realizes that the representation of his world and that of his personal identity coincide. Given Borges's passion for etymology, the choice of the verb 'poblar' to describe the filling of a space with images, cannot be whimsical, especially used in juxtaposition with 'espacio'. This image suggests that the identity of a space is constructed, gradually, as it becomes inhabited. The fact that these 'inhabitants' are images, and that it is only as a collective that they are able to give meaning to the space, underline the importance of the visual in collective identity construction. This chapter continues to trace the quest of a national cultural identity for Argentina through the construction of the image of Jorge Luis Borges: its aim is to tease out the mechanisms that go into the construction of those individual images that, put together, make up the face of Borges and in doing so, also construct that of Argentina.

In ‘Memorias de Borges (Artificios de la historia)’ (2000), which explores Borges’s view of the relationship between literature and history, Saúl Sosnowski claims that: ‘Mediante estrategias no del todo disímiles a las esgrimidas por la literatura, la historia es construida para otorgarle sentido a guerras y conflictos; también, para forjar una malla cohesiva que se llamará pueblo o nación.’²⁸⁸ This construction of history, which offers the people of a country a certain sense of cohesive identity, is achieved through a variety of discourses: political, artistic and mediatic amongst others. When artistic expression and the mass media converge, the meanings created achieve a significant impact on the general public. It is the case of comics, a medium that is defined by Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith as an art form whose social reality implies their mass circulation and their function as economic commodity.²⁸⁹

This chapter comprises two parts: the first part explores the changing relationship of the so-called ‘progre’ generation of intellectuals – particularly active during the 60s and 70s as intensely politically engaged critics, writers and artists – with Borges. The second part constitutes a case-study which aims to demonstrate how this change was manifested in a selection of Argentine comic strips published in the 80s. Therefore, what binds both parts together is the belief, following Duncan and Smith, that ‘comics are a viable means for shining the light of inspection upon the presumptions and practices of the dominant ideology’ (p. 267). This wide-ranging medium includes cartoons, which are normally single drawings with no accompanying text and which – in much the same way as painted or photographic portraits –

²⁸⁸Saúl Sosnowski, ‘Memorias de Borges (Artificios de la historia)’, *Variaciones Borges*, 10 (2000), 79-95 (p. 82).

²⁸⁹Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith *The Power of Comics: History, Form & Culture* (New York and London: Continuum, 2009). Duncan and Smith refer to the comic as an art form because it ‘can accommodate content as profound, moving and enduring as that found in any of the most celebrated vehicles for human expression’, pp.1-2.

concentrate their meanings particularly enthymematically,²⁹⁰ and comic strips, which are, by definition, sequential narrations through a juxtaposition of drawings and text. Even though this chapter makes reference to a few cartoons of Borges to illustrate the construction of the author in the convergence of politics and popular art, its primary focus is on comic strips.

‘Pictureness’, ‘Verbalness’ and Comic-strip Conventions

The potential for impact of comics lies primarily in their popularity, accessibility and ease of reading.²⁹¹ But it is the combination of these factors with their aesthetic potential for the conveyance of maximum meaning in minimal space that lends them their particular ‘power to provoke’ (Rubenstein). As Martin Barker explains, the ability of still frames ‘to represent an enormous range of things,’ is achieved by means of an accumulation of conventions, which allow readers to apply a set of comic-reading skills in order to make sense of the narrative that they present.²⁹² These conventions – which enable the effective juxtaposition of text and image – concern both narrative structure and graphic layout. Thus, apart from predictability and repetitiousness of setting, character and plot, the most distinctive graphic conventions are the speech balloon and the frame. The speech balloon achieves a strong condensation of meaning through the interaction between its ‘pictureness’ and its ‘verbalness’ which produces ‘the meaning of sound’ (p. 11). Most significantly, as Barker points out, ‘itself conditions the meaning’ (p. 11). Similarly, as it delineates the boundary of the picture, the frame ‘establishes our relation to the world being presented’ (p. 11). Barker concludes that

²⁹⁰Mario Saraceni compares cartoons to single sentences, as in order for their meaning to be understood, the viewer needs pre-existent contextual information. Mario Saraceni, *The Language of Comics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 36.

²⁹¹Anne Rubenstein, *Language, Naked Ladies, & Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 7.

²⁹²Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 6.

beyond transmitting meanings, comic conventions ‘condense social relationships,’ as they ‘make reading a social relationship between us and the text’ (p. 11).

The analysis of comic strips in the second part of this chapter is based on the social nature of the dialogue that this unique coalescence of elements establishes with readers. It is consistent with Barker’s own dialogical approach to the study of comics, which is in turn based on the work of early 20th-Century Russian theorist Vladimir Propp. From Propp, who famously studied the form of folk tales, Barker takes the practice of deducing from the ‘structure and transformations’ of the stories in comics ‘the typified social relations which are sedimented in them’ (p. 275). Barker’s study is thus based on the assumption that ‘understanding involves placing ourselves socially in relation to the utterer’ (p. 264).

As, in most cases, the creation of comic strips is a collaborative process, the ‘utterer’ generally refers to a team comprising writers, artists and technicians such as letterers, pencillers and colourists. As the epigraph to Duncan and Smith’s chapter on comics and ideology highlights, ‘the people who make comics have never existed in a vacuum. They instead live within a surrounding culture, a culture that is naturally reflected in their work.’²⁹³ It could be argued, in this sense, that the ideological content of a strip originates in the ideas and preconceptions that the team brings to the creative process. Consistent with Rubenstein’s view of the development of *historietas* as a ‘window’ into political and cultural processes,²⁹⁴ the analysis of a selection of Argentine comic strips of the 80s later on in this chapter will illustrate this. The extended analysis of the changing relationship of politically engaged intellectuals with the figure of Borges in the first part of the chapter is thus necessary to establish the ideological

²⁹³Quoted from from Fredrik Strömberg’s *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Korea: Fantagraphic Books, 2003), page number not provided, in Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics*, p. 246.

²⁹⁴ Rubenstein, *Language, Naked Ladies & Other Threats to the Nation*, p. 6.

background that is reflected in the creation, circulation and consumption of the comics analysed later on.

After the first modern comics appeared in the late 19th Century in magazines of political satire and in newspapers, they developed differently, as Anne Rubenstein points out, in ‘the cultural ecologies of every region where they are found, and they rarely translate well’ (p. 7). This serves as an indication of the medium’s strong links with idiosyncrasy and context. Studies of comics and ideology have focused on U.S.A. cases, but representations of history and politics and the impact of comics on public opinion have also been studied in Francophone *bandes dessinées*, Japanese *manga* and Mexican *historietas*.²⁹⁵ Argentina’s own long tradition of comics with a significant function of political and social commentary dates back to the appearance of *Caras y Caretas* magazine in 1894. The first decades of the 20th Century saw a proliferation of strips in a variety of publications, with the first comic book, *El Tony*, appearing in 1928 and continuing publication for over 70 years.²⁹⁶ A long list of outstanding Argentine *historietistas* were to follow: Lino Palacio, Raúl Roux, Germán Oesterheld and Enrique Breccia to name but a very few who were also contemporaries of Borges. All of this is testimony to the profound bond between comics and their context of production. With this in mind, this chapter pivots on the belief, as the first international conference ‘Viñetas Serias’ held in Buenos Aires sought to highlight, that it is imperative to read ‘las imágenes como documentos de época [...] pero también como interés específico de una transformación estética y política.’²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Consider, for example, Mark McKinney’s *History and Politics in French-Language Comics and Graphic Novels* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), Frederik Schodt’s *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1996), and Anne Rubenstein’s *Language, Naked Ladies & Other Threats to the Nation*.

²⁹⁶ Gociol and Rosemberg’s 2003 chronology of Argentine strips includes more than 300 titles, in Judith Gociol and Diego Rosemberg, *La historieta argentina: una historia* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 2003).

²⁹⁷ ‘1er Congreso internacional de historietas Viñetas Serias (Buenos Aires, Argentina)’, *Imaginaria*, 276 (2010), online at www.imaginaria.com.ar/?p=6889 [accessed 22/11/2010].

Cartoons, Politics and Borges

Several cartoon depictions of Borges appeared in the press in the Southern Cone, the earliest one of which is thought to be in Buenos Aires's magazine *Caras y Caretas* in the 1920s (Fig. 33). But it was only in the 1970s that both Montevideo and Buenos Aires began to see more frequent drawings of the now world-famous author in their pages. Ribeiro's cartoon (Fig. 34), for example, which shows a resigned Borges sheltering from adverse criticism, was published in 1973 in Argentine newspaper *La Opinión*, which was considered 'mandarín absoluto del mundo cultural' of the city of Buenos Aires.²⁹⁸ It is a very accurate depiction of the writer's position at the centre of fundamental debates about the place and responsibilities of literary production in the socio-political configuration of Latin America taking place on both sides of the Río de la Plata, headed, notably, by Uruguayan critics Angel Rama and Emir Rodríguez Monegal.

It was also in *La Opinión* that Uruguayan-born cartoonist Hermenegildo Sábat published many of his own drawings of Borges, which were part of a long artistic and journalistic trajectory spanning five decades.²⁹⁹ A great admirer of Borges, Sábat has drawn and painted the writer many times. In fact, one of his colour cartoons of the writer holding his walking stick and looking to the left was made into a commemorative stamp by the Argentine postal service in 2000 (Fig. 35). During his time at *La Opinión*, Sábat published a few cartoons of the author, amongst which is an extraordinary one of a hippie Borges, smoking marihuana (Fig. 36). This particular drawing subverts the 'classic' image of the canonical writer, as all the elements which are characteristic of the traditional Borges are absent: there is no walking-stick, his hair is in a mess and the suit and tie have been replaced by a tunic and jeans. All this, together with the fact that

²⁹⁸Mario Diament, 'Prólogo', in Fernando Ruiz, *Las palabras son acciones. Historia política y profesional de La Opinión de Jacobo Timerman (1971-1977)* (Buenos Aires: Perfil, 2001), p. 10.

²⁹⁹Hermenegildo Sábat is currently a cartoonist for *Clarín* newspaper.

his toes can be seen peeping out of a pair of rustic sandals, make Borges not only young but also, an ‘ordinary’ human being. It is the fact that the expected image is one of solemnity and tradition that makes this subversion shocking.

The coexistence of Borges and Sábato in this publication places them both at the core of the Argentine cultural scene of the 70s. Founded by Jacobo Timmerman in 1971, *La Opinión* was aimed, according to Fernando Ruiz, author of a history of the newspaper, at a young intellectual readership which had gained strength in the 60s and was now ‘en plena transición de la cultura hacia la política.’³⁰⁰ *La Opinión*, which therefore represented that transition, has remained a veritable referent and conveyor of recent Argentine history (p. 16). It may be considered to be broadly centre-left, even though its political allegiances are complex and at times contradictory. Its persistent denunciation of human rights violations resulted in editor Timmerman’s imprisonment and torture for two years and the newspaper’s expropriation by the military regime in 1977.

In 1973, the culture section of *La Opinión* carried an article about Surrealism in Argentine literature, which was illustrated by Sábato. Four of these illustrations were drawings of Borges and they later became part of the book *Georgie Dear* (1974) (Fig. 37). Consisting of twenty drawings, each accompanied by very brief dialogue in English with rather distorted Spanish translations in the manner of film subtitles (Fig. 38), the book shows ‘Georgie’ (Borges’s family nickname, which points to his English ancestry, is here used in a mocking tone) and the Argentine Republic in conversation. The reference to the Republic anchors the situation described to the world of politics. However, the quirky, surreal tone and content of the dialogue, together with the white background against which the drawings are set, give an impression of almost total detachment from the real world. Borges’s bookish references to foreign writers and

³⁰⁰Fernando Ruiz, *Las palabras son acciones*, pp. 43-4.

philosophers, and the fact that the conversation is held in English, not only show him in association with a foreign culture, but also create the illusion that whatever he is saying is obscure and unavailable to the ‘ordinary’ Argentine. In a similar playful style, Sábat recalls that ‘el “chiste” era un diálogo en inglés y una traducción deliberadamente arbitraria, la suma de ambas cosas resultó *a lot of fun*.’³⁰¹ It is a remarkable exchange in which a flirtatious ‘Republic’ is personified by a Phrygian cap-wearing woman, in accordance with the national symbols (borrowed from those of the French Republic) that all Argentines are taught to recognize and honour (Figs. 39 and 40).

The Republic appears demanding and insistent, as she asks Georgie to give a lecture on Borges. Interestingly, in some of the drawings her figure has been split into two or more layers (Fig. 41), whereas Borges remains one solid figure throughout, even though the dialogue suggests the existence of an alter ego. This depiction of the Republic interrogating the icon constitutes a fitting metaphor for the relationship between Borges and Argentina: the Republic is represented by a traditional symbol of liberty, which condenses the anxieties and expectations of the Argentine people. It has been repeatedly appropriated by so many groups purporting to defend it that it consequently suffers from a split identity. The Republic appears to seek the solidity and strength of the greatest mind amongst her subjects, and she chooses Georgie because the people of the nation have proclaimed him to be a monument to her culture: ‘Tu ingenio me hechiza, Georgie,’ says a smitten Republic, with what can be imagined to be a deep sigh (Figs. 38 and 39).³⁰² Desperate to nourish her mind with Borges’s wisdom, she flatters him, but he teases her, remaining noncommittal. When the Republic loses her patience, she confronts him with her real intentions and demands that he become president. Borges humbly accepts but not before he is able to choose English poet S.T.

³⁰¹E-mail conversation with Hermenegildo Sábat, 21 October 2009.

³⁰²Hermenegildo Sábat, *Georgie Dear*, 2nd edn (Nuevos Tiempos and Biblioteca Nacional, 1999), the text accompanies the eighth drawing (pages not numbered).

Coleridge as his vice-president. The dialogue ends as Georgie swears allegiance to ‘his country’. The ambiguity of these last words is emphasized by the drawing that illustrates this last exchange, where the figures of Borges and the Republic appear separated by a cow divided up in marketable sections (Fig. 42). This image associates Borges with the landowning, cattle-breeding Argentine oligarchy, placing the future of the Republic in the hands of an elitist and culturally imperialistic Borges. Borges emerges as powerful and the Republic as weak and available to the highest bidder. Sábat claims that *Georgie Dear* was very tongue-in-cheek. His mockery of Borges’s vilification illustrates his perception of Argentina as a politically weak country incapable of dealing with exceptional greatness.³⁰³

Sábat’s ironic portrayal of Borges in *Georgie Dear* epitomizes the perception of the author that was common currency in the Argentina of the 60s and 70s. In this period, the country’s greatest man of letters was internationally acclaimed but denounced and vilified at home by the influential intellectuals of the younger generation. Broadly referred to as ‘progresistas’, this generation has played a central role in the development of Argentine culture in the latter part of the 20th Century and the beginning of the 21st. Given the importance of the reception of Borges in relation to politics, this chapter devotes considerable space to examining the evolution of this relationship. It then moves on, as mentioned before, to an analysis of the changing face of Borges as constructed in comic strips of the 80s.

An appraisal of the intersections of Borges’s literary production with the milieu of popular culture will be followed by an overview of the evolution of Argentine Borgesian criticism in its political context, which describes an ideological arc from the mid-50s to the late 90s. In a discussion of mass culture in literature, Jean Franco

³⁰³Sábat begins his e-mail of 21st October 2009 by saying: ‘Mi relación con Borges comenzó con la lectura de su obra. Las envidias y los celos que sigue padeciendo Borges son la prueba de que somos un pequeño pueblo del interior que no tolera gente de excepcional inteligencia.’

considers ‘the violent rejection of mass culture as anti-art’ as ‘only the initial stage in a long and intricate relationship marked by denunciation, appropriation, and, finally, celebration.’³⁰⁴ As this analysis deals with the intersections of literature, politics and mass culture, it appears pertinent to apply the terms of Franco’s description of the changing assessment of mass culture to the relationship between the figure of Borges and the younger generations throughout the second half of the 20th Century in Argentina. This ‘ideological arc’ begins with rejection and denunciation – which sometimes coexists with, and is indeed followed by, appropriation – and culminates in celebration. The ideological arc is here examined following the development suggested by Martín Lafforgue in *Antiborges* (1999), with a focus on the stage of ‘appropriation’. This stage coincides, in the second half of the 80s, with the period of transition to democracy following the 1976-1983 dictatorship, a time in which artists revised their relationship with Borges.

I will provide an analysis of ‘Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva’, a comic strip adaptation of Borges’s story by the same title by Alfredo Flores and Norberto Buscaglia, and of excerpts from the comic strip *Perramus*, by Alberto Breccia and Juan Sasturain. Some of these appeared in *Fierro* magazine between 1984 and 1986 and the former was later published as part of Ricardo Piglia’s book *La Argentina en pedazos* in 1993. In 1984, Breccia and Sasturain also published a comic strip version of another of Borges’s stories, ‘El Fin’, in *Crisis* magazine, which later appeared in a collection of adaptations of literary works under the title *Versiones*, also in 1993. Although its circulation was significantly lower than that of the strips published in *Fierro*, this adaptation provides a fitting metaphor for the closure of an era in Borgesian criticism

³⁰⁴Jean Franco, ‘Comic Stripping: Cortázar in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’(1997), in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays*, ed. Mary Louise Pratt and Kathleen Newman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 405-25 (p. 406).

and the advent of a new one. The chapter concludes with a brief examination of this comic strip version of ‘El fin’.

‘Entre la alta cultura y las ilustraciones populares’³⁰⁵

The unapologetic irreverence of cartoon depictions, which position the figure of Borges in the world of popular culture, seems to bring his image closer to the general public. Surprising as it may seem, this was not a milieu that Borges was unfamiliar with. The image of a young Borges surreptitiously gluing the single sheet of the mural magazine *Prisma* onto the walls of Santa Fé street is perhaps not one that readily comes to mind when thinking of the author of *Ficciones*. However, this is a well documented fact that points to a young author with a democratic view of literature.³⁰⁶ Indeed, his early trajectory in the popular media is varied and substantial: his regular contributions to *El Hogar* magazine and his role as literary editor of *Revista Multicolor de los sábados*, a section of popular newspaper *Crítica*, for example, have been well documented.³⁰⁷ In *Borges: Una biografía literaria*, for example, Rodríguez Monegal enumerates the important texts published by Borges in the magazine and underlines his role in bringing a variety of authors to its pages and thus to the general public. Discussed under the title ‘La prensa literaria de escándalo’, Monegal refers to *Crítica* as ‘un buen ejemplo de [...] un diario sensacionalista que además fuera culto.’³⁰⁸ The positive value of these contributions, however, only began to be highlighted in the late 90s. In ‘Cartón pintado y metafísica’ in *El factor Borges* (2000), Alan Pauls makes precisely this point and argues the great significance of Borges’s work in the popular press:

³⁰⁵ Alan Pauls, ‘Cartón pintado y metafísica’, in *El factor Borges*, pp. 125-40 (p. 139).

³⁰⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, *Cartas del fervor: Correspondencia con Maurice Abramowicz y Jacobo Sureda (1919-1928)*, ed. by Cristóbal Pera (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg-Círculo de Lectores de Emecé, 1999), pp. 206-10.

³⁰⁷ These contributions were collected and published posthumously by Emecé in *Textos recobrados 1919-1929* (1997), *Borges en El Hogar* (2000), *Textos recobrados 1931-1955* (2001) and *Textos recobrados 1956-1986* (2003).

³⁰⁸ Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges: Una biografía literaria*, p. 227.

Recién ahora, tarde pero seguro, empieza a reconocerse que gran parte de la obra de Borges fue originalmente escrita y publicada en medios gráficos (diarios, suplementos culturales, revistas de interés general, publicaciones literarias), en un contexto de fugacidad, de normas y convenciones socioculturales que tenían muy poco que ver con ese limbo idílico llamado ‘libro’.³⁰⁹

Borges’s employment by these magazines, generally involving long hours and tight deadlines, meant that what he wrote was determined by these publications which he contributed to as a means of subsistence. He did this until he got a full-time position in the Miguel Cané Library in the late 30s; from here he went on to become director of the Biblioteca Nacional and he also held various teaching positions. The image of a working Borges, not to mention that of him as a trade unionist (as Lafforgue points out, he was president of the Argentine writers’ guild S.A.D.E. for three years),³¹⁰ is somewhat in opposition to that of the artist in an ivory tower as depicted in some early biographies and denounced by many critics between the 50s and the 70s. Quite the contrary, as Pauls underlines, the texts of that same Borges who was considered an elitist writer in the 70s ‘compartían la misma página de revista con un aviso de corpiños o de dentífrico y con artículos para esclarecer a las amas de casa.’³¹¹ Speaking from the pages of a ‘sensationalist’ publication, these texts allow him to weave his way across the world of the popular and that of so-called ‘high literature’, in order to facilitate the enrichment of both realms, which should not therefore be considered separate in the case of Borges.

³⁰⁹ Alan Pauls, ‘Cartón pintado y metafísica’, p. 128.

³¹⁰ Lafforgue, *Antiborges*, p. 123.

³¹¹ Pauls, ‘Cartón pintado y metafísica’, p. 128.

Pauls points out that these two sides to the Borgesian production – one which is ‘culta, hermética, ‘intelectual’, dirigida a un cenáculo de amigos e iniciados;’ and another one which is ‘popular, accesible, ligera, atenta a las apetencias de un público masivo y anónimo’ (p. 134) – ‘entran en una relación de reciprocidad’ (p. 135). This reciprocity is brought to the fore by the context of the popular press. The title of the essay in which Pauls discusses this is borrowed from Borges’s 1928 piece ‘El truco’, which Pauls argues illustrates the intersection of the realms of the popular and ‘high’ literature that is so typical of Borges’s literary production (p. 135).³¹² The fact that Borges’s essay was published in *La prensa* accompanied by a caricature by famous cartoonist Lino Palacio (Fig. 43), drives this point home.

The combination of text and illustration is testimony to the coexistence of different spheres of cultural production and consumption, and it evokes a certain visual quality that is also present in the work of Borges. Although his work is very seldom published with illustrations, his narratives depend greatly on a visual quality – particularly the visualization of space, illustrated by images which are central to his literature: the iconic labyrinth; the intricate designs and symmetries of gardens and libraries; the geometrical precision of the events in detective stories like ‘La muerte y la brújula’; the ever present colours yellow and red, bars, crevices and windows through which the main events of a story are seen to take place; the exploration of the boundaries of the real through the image of the mirrors; the fantastical creatures of *El libro de seres imaginarios*, and his study of the visual itself, ‘El Aleph’. This coexistence of visual imagery and printed word is made more explicit in comic strips. Franco observes that amongst other manifestations of popular culture, ‘comic strips provided new media for narrative, altering, by the very method of production, received

³¹²“Así,” termina Borges, ‘desde los laberintos de cartón pintado del truco, nos hemos acercado a la metafísica.’ Alan Pauls cites Borges’s ‘El truco’ in ‘Cartón pintado y metafísica’, p. 135.

notions of author (there is often no single author), reception and originality.³¹³ It could be argued that the crossing of boundaries of genre, language, format, narrative technique, and the problematization of the notion of authorship, are as essential to comic strips as they are to Borges's work.

As we shall see later, certain elements of the image of Borges have been appropriated by the popular genre of the comic strip. Here, the coexistence of graphics and printed text, of narration and dialogue, and the predominantly fragmentary nature of the medium, also call to mind the main elements of Borges's narrative style. It is crucial, at this point, however, to consider the politically motivated vilification of Borges on the part of the younger generation of intellectuals of the 50s, 60s and 70s, and how this evolved into a period of reassessment in the mid-80s. The next three sections are devoted to this in order to set the scene for the analysis of the significance of the presence of Borges in comic strips of the post-dictatorship period, which follows immediately after.

Argentine 'New Generations' and Borges: From Patricide to Restoration.

The figure of the literary icon encompasses a variety of constructions that originate in a number of projections made up of anxieties and expectations that relate to a national cultural identity more than just to the essence of an individual. The history of the relationship between Borges and Argentine critics is complex and at times, contradictory. However, it is possible to identify certain shifts which have accompanied different periods in Argentina's cultural history. The centrality of the figure of Borges within these debates speaks of his role as representative of a 'national' literature and, as we shall see, as a kind of cultural father-figure.

³¹³Franco, 'Comic Stripping', p. 405.

In a rather grandiloquent style, Argentine poet and former director of the Biblioteca Nacional, Héctor Yánover describes Borges as a godlike figure. In ‘Crónica de relación con Dios/Borges,’³¹⁴ written shortly after the writer’s death, Yánover sees Borges as ‘un monstruo que ha preñado a millones’ (p. 172), inspiring extreme passions such as fear and hatred (and, equally, judging from the tone and content of Yánover’s article, of undying love and adoration). The image of insemination that Yánover rather emotively uses, suggests Borges as a father-figure, whose children reject him because ‘se odia más a quien más nos ha dado’ (p. 172). This image of Borges as god-the-father has its origins in the first generation of Borgesian criticism, referred to by Emir Rodríguez Monegal as ‘the Patricides’, who in the mid-50s rejected Borges based primarily on politics.³¹⁵ Yánover uses religious imagery to describe the passionate nature of this relationship: ‘Borges se salvó de que lo crucificaran pero estuvo al borde mismo’ (p. 173). At the same time, he points out that, beyond the intellectual arena, his figure made critics equally incensed on the two sides of the divide: ‘Desde la izquierda, que proclamó distintas veces la necesidad de fusilarlo en Plaza de Mayo, a la derecha, militar o no, que miraba de reojo y con odio cuando sonaba su nombre’ (p. 173).

The changing relationship of the main intellectual actors of Argentine culture with Borges has been a sign of the times, which Beatriz Sarlo refers to as ‘the cycle of ideological, political and cultural transformations begun in 1956.’³¹⁶ There are, of course, many nuances. However, the following three decades can be broadly divided

³¹⁴Héctor Yánover, ‘Crónica de relación con Dios/Borges’, *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 505-507 (1992), 171-6.

³¹⁵Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *El juicio de los parricidas: la nueva generación argentina y sus maestros* (Buenos Aires: Deucalión, 1956).

³¹⁶Beatriz Sarlo, ‘Intellectuals: Scission or Mimesis’ (originally published as ‘Intelectuales: ¿Escisión o mimesis?’ in *Punto de Vista* 25 (1985)), trans. by Ana del Sarto, Abril Trigo and Alicia Ríos, in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. by Ana del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 250-61 (p. 251). In ‘Intérpretes culturales y democracia simbólica’, Horacio Machín assesses the rethinking of the position of the leftist intellectual in the context of the ‘Alfonsinista’ years 1983-1989. In *Nuevas perspectivas desde/sobre América Latina: el desafío de los estudios culturales*, ed. by Mabel Moraña (Providencia, Santiago: Cuarto propio/Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2000), pp. 335-50.

into two main moments: one of denunciation, in the two decades up to the beginning of the last dictatorship in 1976; and another of reclamation, which started in the transition to democracy after 1983. As regards the dictatorship years, it was a time in Argentina when, as Sarlo points out, ‘*algunas cuestiones no podían ser pensadas a fondo, se las revisaba con cautela o se las soslayaba a la espera de que cambiaran las condiciones políticas.*’³¹⁷ Therefore, although I will refer briefly to this period, I will concentrate on comparing the moments before and after it in order to underline its impact.

The time when the first phase, of vilification and denunciation of Borges, occurred is described by Sarlo as one when politics was taken as ‘the criterion of truth and assured a unique foundation for all practices.’³¹⁸ The world was seen by politicized intellectuals in strict categories and a search for certainties was predominant. This, she continues, ‘determined appropriate loci for culture and the arts’ where the ‘interlocutors, whether classified as ‘allies’ or as ‘enemies,’ were assigned permanent positions in rigid relationships’ (p. 255). In the context of such rigid compartmentalizations, Sarlo points out, there was no space for the possibility of ‘diversity, coexistence, and conflict’ (p. 254). Conversely, the second phase, of reclamation, occurs in the context of a more fragmented zeitgeist, in which, as Sarlo suggests, ‘certainties have deteriorated’ (p. 257). Comparing the 60s and 70s to the post-dictatorship 80s, she observes: ‘if in the last two decades history appeared as a repository where meanings were assembled into one all-encompassing Meaning, this homogeneity can be at last called into question’ (p. 257). It is this ‘shattering of meanings’ which characterizes the zeitgeist of the 80s.

The denunciation of Borges in the period between the mid-50s and the late 70s pivots on the relationship between literature and politics. In one of his lectures in 1985, Enrique Pezzoni identified this sector in relation to Borges as ‘*cierto tipo de izquierda*

³¹⁷Beatriz Sarlo, *Tiempo pasado. Cultura de la memoria y primera persona* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005), p. 23

³¹⁸Sarlo, ‘Intellectuals’, p. 255.

que todavía no se ha resignado a ver la subversión en ciertos órdenes del sujeto Borges y no en otros.’³¹⁹ This period was characterized by unprecedented political activity among Argentine students in particular and intellectuals in general, a moment when, as Sarlo puts it, ‘intellectual activity and the task of producing new political perspectives had come together.’³²⁰ It was in this context that the figure of the ‘intelectual comprometido’ emerged with particular force. The brutal response to this intense intellectual political activity, which was perceived as ‘subversiva’, on the part of the military dictatorship (1976-1983) and its Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (or ‘Guerra Sucia’, as it was informally known), achieved a devastating repression of anything that was perceived to be critical intellectual activity. This is summarized in a recent article in *Clarín’s Revista Ñ*:

Dentro del amplio abanico de calamidades que dejó como legado la última dictadura militar se halla la de haber cercenado de forma brutal a la escena cultural argentina. En los campos de concentración de la década del 70 desaparecieron escritores, poetas, músicos, y artistas plásticos – algunos de ellos ya consagrados, otros en vías de lograrlo – quienes, junto con aquellos que tomaron la ruta del exilio, conforman una especie de generación ausente, un eslabón roto en la cadena de la identidad cultural de este país.³²¹

This extermination of the ‘intelectual comprometido’ was both figurative and literal, as many were murdered, as Marinelli states above, and most were intimidated

³¹⁹Transcripts of the recordings of some of Pezzoni’s lectures on Borges at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires were published in *Enrique Pezzoni, lector de Borges. Lecciones de literatura 1984-1988*, ed. by Annick Louis (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999), p. 123

³²⁰Sarlo, ‘Intellectuals’, p. 251.

³²¹Diego Marinelli, ‘El sueño del Eternauta: el proyecto inconcluso de Oesterheld’, *Revista Ñ*, 21 November 2009, online at www.revistaenie.clarin.com/notas/2009/11/21/_-02045193.htm [accessed 27 April 2010].

into silence.³²² This resulted in a sense of defeat and disorientation that characterized the years immediately following the return to democracy in 1983. This period in Argentina's history saw the reconsideration, in a new context and in a new light, of the categories that had so strongly defined the cultural political activity before the 'Proceso'. The relationship between Argentine leftist intellectuals³²³ and the figure of Borges is one of the elements that was revised at this time of uncertainty, and it is the redefinition of this relationship that comic strips of the mid-80s convey. Against the background of such turmoil, Borges appears to be a constant in Argentine culture: even when denounced and denied the Nobel Prize for his alleged support of totalitarian regimes, as we shall see, he is still perceived to be Argentina's greatest writer.³²⁴ The quest for a national identity for Argentina through Borges lies at the core of this perception.

The emergence of the Sartrean idea of the *engagé* writer in the 50s inspired the first book of Borgesian criticism: Adolfo Prieto's *Borges y la nueva generación* (1954), which gathers the views of a group of Marxist existentialists who had founded literary magazine *Contorno*. Amongst these were influential intellectuals who would play a very important role in the Argentine culture of the following fifty years: writer and academic David Viñas; writer, critic and academic Noé Jitrik; sociologist, critic and historian Juan José Sebreli and philosopher and academic León Rozitchner. These prolific intellectuals are still an active, vital part of Argentine cultural life in the first decade of the 21st Century. In the 50s, they were dubbed the generation of the

³²²See Vicente Muleiro, 'Listas negras y escritores desaparecidos', *Clarín*, 24 March 2006, online at www.clarin.com/suplementos/especiales/2006/03/24/1-01164155.htm [accessed 29 april 2010].

³²³I use this denomination in full awareness, as Sarlo wisely underlines, of 'all the ambiguity and indeterminacy that the adjective ['leftist'] implies.' Sarlo, 'Intellectuals', p. 260.

³²⁴This is corroborated by Volodia Teitelboim's account of a private conversation with one of the most influential members of the Swedish Academy, Arthur Lundkvist, in which he said: 'Soy y seré un tenaz opositor a la concesión del Premio Nobel de Literatura a Borges por su apoyo a la dictadura de Pinochet, que ha sido usado por la propaganda de la tiranía para intentar una operación cosmética', in *Los dos Borges: vida, sueños, enigmas* (1996), cited in Lafforgue, *Antiborges*, pp. 253-4.

‘Parricidas’, in allusion to what was seen as their rejection of Borges (which clearly suggests that he was already considered a cultural father-figure at the time), especially by critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal, who positioned himself on the other side of the debate.

In *El juicio de los parricidas* (1956), Rodríguez Monegal was already aware of the potential extent of the influence of this generation: ‘entre 1945 y 1955, estos jóvenes harán pesar cada vez más su opinión, proyectarán cada vez más lejos su palabra, hasta hacerse oír de los mismos a quienes comentan o atacan.’³²⁵ He identifies a certain duality in the attitude of this generation, a love-hate relationship with Borges, and concludes that the young intellectuals ‘atacan-veneran’ the most prestigious literary figures of the previous generation ‘con cierta violencia saludable,’ and that in the case of Borges there is ‘el borgismo y el antiborgismo, que en definitiva son dos caras de la misma moneda’ (p. 4). Monegal sees this as a continuation of the polemic nature of Borges’s figure dating back to a debate in *Megáfono* magazine from 1933, where, ‘la dicotomía de la crítica frente a Borges: aceptación y rechazo, igualmente fervientes, igualmente apasionados’ (p. 20) arises.³²⁶ Monegal argues that the difference between the polemic of the 30s and that of two decades later lies in the change in the historical context of Argentina, which ‘sufrir tales transformaciones que ya la figura de Borges deja de proyectarse sobre el mismo fondo.’³²⁷ These words will hold true for the remainder of the century, as Argentina lives through violent upheaval for the next three decades and the changes in the construction of the Borges figure are influenced by these social, cultural and political changes.

Rodríguez Monegal sees both defence and criticism of Borges as two forms of admiration, invoking envy or resentment as the sole reason why anybody would reject

³²⁵Rodríguez Monegal, *El juicio*, p. 3.

³²⁶Lafforgue offers an extract of this debate in *Antiborges*, pp. 27-30.

³²⁷Rodríguez Monegal, *El juicio*, p. 22.

the ‘Maestro’: ‘Tanto o más borgistas son quienes lo atacan que quienes lo defienden. Porque esa larga sombra de resentimiento que provoca su obra es también hechura o proyección del borgismo’ (p. 21). He also considers the ‘rebels’ of the new generation as unruly adolescents going through a stage of rejection of the parent: ‘Los rebeldes, los que habrían de aumentar la tribu de los parricidas, manifestaron su admiración negándolo encarnizadamente’ (p. 23). True to the trend of the time, Rodríguez Monegal has a rather dualist view of the critics’ relationship with Borges, and refers to Prieto as a ‘Borgiano negativo o de sombra’ (p. 25), who denies Borges as a useful influence on the new generation while using typical Borgesian words in his criticism. Followers and admirers of Borges writing at the same time, such as Néstor Ibarra, are seen, conversely, as ‘Borgistas de luz’ (p. 25).

Alongside the *Contorno* group, Rodríguez Monegal also points out the emergence of a separate type of ‘parricida’, of distinct nationalistic orientation, whose support of Peronism set them aside from the intellectuals of the existentialist left and indeed fuelled their antipathy, as they considered Borges part of the oligarchy who bankrupted the country and opened the way for the rise of Peronism (p. 24). Martín Lafforgue identifies this group as ‘Nacional Popular’ intellectuals, whose most vocal advocate was Jorge Abelardo Ramos. Characterized by a strong anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialistic stance, this group glorified the working class and denounced Borges as elitist, foreign-loving and anti-Argentine, detached from the plight of the ‘pueblo’. In 1954, for example, Ramos wrote: ‘El odio contra los de abajo es en Borges incontenible.’³²⁸ This extremely aggressive position outlined in his widely read book *Crisis y Resurrección de la literatura argentina* (1954) had a great influence on the

³²⁸Jorge Abelardo Ramos, ‘Borges, bibliotecario de Alejandría’, *Crisis y Resurrección de la literatura Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Coyoacán, 1954), in *Antiborges*, pp. 127-40 (p. 135).

perception of Borges as an enemy of the people which, even though less fervent, it is still a view held by many today.

The early 60s saw the rise of the 'nueva izquierda intelectual' in Argentina, inspired, like many other Latin American groups of intellectuals, by the ideals of the Cuban Revolution, 'como organizadora de una oposición totalizadora al estado de cosas,' as Martín Lafforgue explains.³²⁹ 'En los siguientes años,' he says, 'los campos se delimitaron; el espacio para la duda, la ambigüedad o aun la indiferencia se pulverizó' (p. 196). In this context, even though Lafforgue hastens to relativize the extent of the vilification of Borges on the part of the intellectual left, the fact that this belief is now commonplace is relevant to the assessment of how Borges was perceived in relation to politics. Lafforgue is right to consider this group hegemonic within the Argentine cultural arena for a considerable period of time (p. 193), so the fact that they are thought of as vehement Borges detractors leads to the inevitable conclusion that this position would have been heard in lectures, read in literary magazines and newspapers and published in books and, consequently, shared by many.³³⁰

In 1969, Blas Matamoro wrote: 'La cultura y la sociedad son, para Borges, escindidas e incommunicables;'³³¹ he proceeds to assess Borges's responsibilities 'en el mundo en que está aunque no quiera' (p. 249). Matamoro reaches the conclusion, after a detailed analysis of his philosophical and aesthetic stance, that 'Borges ha sido siempre un pensador de derecha, al servicio de la factorización inglesa del país, individualista y conservador, defensor del régimen y del orden' (p. 231). But Matamoro goes further and denounces the confusion of ethics with aesthetics that he considers Borges has disseminated in the 'círculos de la izquierda falaz' (p. 248). He indignantly says: 'no

³²⁹Lafforgue, *Antiborges*, p. 196.

³³⁰Most of the intellectuals of the Nueva Izquierda writing at the time had links with the Universidad de Buenos Aires, in particular the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, where they had academic responsibilities. Since then, this has been a space for intense political activity.

³³¹Blas Matamoro, 'Detrás de la penumbra está Inglaterra', *Borges o El juego trascendente* (Buenos Aires: Peña Lillo, 1971), in *Antiborges*, pp. 193-250 (p. 201).

puede ser sino humillante para los argentinos que un escritor como Borges sea tomado por el paradigma intelectual argentino en el exterior' (p. 249). Matamoro questions Borges's position as 'jirafa sagrada, un gran escritor de derecha que ha hecho un aporte esencial a la cultura y, por lo mismo, a la historia del hombre, por lo que será reivindicado por revoluciones futuras.' He considers that this elevating of Borges to the category of great writer regardless of his political views lies at the core of the myth of the left, and complains that 'a un hombre de la izquierda no le puede importar la perfección formal o estilística de una literatura para juzgar su grandeza' (p. 245). This is because, Matamoro points out, to glorify Borges amounts to glorifying 'la sumisión y el colonialismo, [...] la incapacidad del país de gobernarse a sí mismo y [...] la obediencia a la dominación extranjera' (p. 249). This exaltation of Borges by the left which Matamoro finds inexcusably paradoxical is exemplified by the position taken by influential literary magazine *El escarabajo de oro*, founded by writers Abelardo Castillo and Liliana Heker in 1961 and whose left-wing existentialism did not prevent them from praising the qualities of Borges's oeuvre. It exemplifies the complexity within the left itself of its relationship with Borges.

Borges's perceived political leanings to the right and his support of the military governments of Chile and Argentina in the late 70s are said to have cost him the Nobel Prize, as mentioned before.³³² By contrast, the fact that it was the Chilean communist poet Pablo Neruda who was awarded it instead in 1971, sealed in the public eye, Borges's image as a conservative writer. The next section examines this in further detail.³³³

³³²Lafforgue provides a brief discussion of the possible reasons for this in *Antiborges*, pp.253-4.

³³³Williamson provides a detailed analysis of Borges's relationship with the dictatorships of Chile and Argentina in the mid-70s in *Borges*, pp. 416-27.

'Ochenta y dos disfrazados':³³⁴ Borges's Relationship with the Videla Regime

The transition from the 70s to the 80s saw the military regime's 'Proceso de Reorganización Nacional' enter its period of greatest brutality; this is also when Borges received the greatest media exposure. Borges was, by then, very well-known abroad, and the military government had to choose between condemnation or recruitment. In line with their propagandist publicizing of anything that showed Argentina positively, the regime made sure that Borges's fame and recognition abroad occupied its rightful place in the national press, which was also full of reports of outstanding sporting achievements, for example.³³⁵ This proves what Matamoro had predicted as he referred to a previous dictatorship: 'la industria publicitaria del régimen se encargará de hacernos creer que los galardones [Borges's] se prenderán en el pecho de la Argentina.'³³⁶ Thus, the junta appropriated the figure of Borges as a representative of Argentine culture, which resulted in Borges being perceived as a legitimising force for the atrocities committed during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. In 1977, from his exile in Mexico, Argentine writer Pedro Orgambide pointed out that 'la imagen internacional de Borges es aprovechada por la dictadura que encuentra en él a un vocero prestigioso.'³³⁷ Katherine Singer Kovacs's 1977 article in the *Boston Review* corroborates the efficacy of this appropriation.³³⁸

There were two widely publicized instances of Borges's association with the regime that made a lasting impression in the minds of the Argentine public: one was a

³³⁴Borges refers to Argentina's suffering, or 'adolescence', of eighty-two generals throughout its history, in Osvaldo Ferrari, *Jorge Luis Borges-Osvaldo Ferrari. Reencuentro: Diálogos Inéditos* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999), p. 60.

³³⁵Fig. 44 shows the triumphalist juxtaposition of two Argentine success stories to advertise popular football magazine *El Gráfico* in 1979: Borges and football. Argentina had hosted and won the World Cup in 1978. This brought media attention to Argentina, which led to alerting the world to the abuses of the regime. The government needed to keep the public at home focused on the country's sporting success.

³³⁶Matamoro, 'Detrás de la penumbra está Inglaterra', p. 249.

³³⁷Pedro Orgambide, 'Borges y su pensamiento político' (México: Comité de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Argentino, 1978), in *Antiborges*, pp. 257-331 (p. 327).

³³⁸Katherine Singer Kovacs, 'Borges on the Right', *Boston Review*, Fall 1977, online at bostonreview.net/BR03/kovacs.html [accessed 9 September 2009].

lunch at the Casa Rosada with the then newly appointed president of the junta, General Videla, on 19th May, 1976, which Borges and three other writers attended. This event made the front page of *La Nación* the following morning and *La Prensa* quotes Borges as having thanked Videla for ‘el golpe de Estado del 24 de marzo que salvó al país de la ignominia.’³³⁹ The other is the censoring of a very popular television program called *Operación Ja-Ja*, on 3rd July, 1981. This was due to the fact that, in the show, one of the country’s best known comedians made an impression of Borges. The airing of the sketch was prohibited and an article in *Clarín* the following day quoted the general in charge of the censoring body as saying that the imitation constituted ‘un atentado al patrimonio cultural de la Argentina.’³⁴⁰

Borges’s ill-advised remarks about three of the most notorious dictatorships of the 20th Century, namely that of his own country, General Pinochet’s in Chile and General Franco’s in Spain, also circulated in the domestic and international media. This seriously aggravated the already vehement denunciation of the leftist intellectuals in the 60s, and fed into the appropriation of the figure on the part of the Videla regime in particular. The balance was not fully redressed until after Borges’s death in 1986. Orgambide could see through this and had forecast that the Argentine people ‘asumirá [...] el ejercicio del criterio,’³⁴¹ although Borges’s image as a supporter of totalitarianisms was very difficult indeed to shake. For many years, the photograph of Borges after the lunch with General Videla – accompanied by the now infamous words of thanks – was better known than the fact that Borges signed a ‘solicitada’ in October 1980 supporting the ‘Madres de Plaza de Mayo’ who demanded the freedom of their

³³⁹Eduardo Blaustein and Martín Zubieta, *Decíamos ayer: La prensa argentina bajo el Proceso* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1998), pp. 125-6.

³⁴⁰Alberto L. Carbone, ‘Fue prohibida la emisión de un sketch sobre Borges’, *Clarín*, 4 July 1981.

³⁴¹Orgambide, ‘Borges y su pensamiento político’, p. 330.

‘disappeared’ relatives.³⁴² Curiously, the fact that Ernesto Sábato, a communist writer and editor of the *Nunca Más* document,³⁴³ was also present at the notorious lunch of 1976 is still today seldom publicized. Sábato was reported to have said about Videla: ‘Excelente. Se trata de un hombre culto, modesto e inteligente. Es un general con civismo [...] Me impresionó la amplitud de criterio y la cultura del Presidente.’³⁴⁴ Indeed, the fact that the writers’ main objective for the meeting was to bring up the issue of the recent ‘disappearance’ of writer Haroldo Conti, as well as that of sixteen other colleagues was, until recently, little talked about.³⁴⁵

The power of the construction of Borges as legitimising the atrocities of the dictatorship by association demonstrates the crucial role of the political discourses prevalent at the time: both that of the left which had denounced the author as conservative, and that of the military right who now appropriated that image to its own advantage. The advent of democracy brought about a reassessment of Borges which the following section examines.

³⁴²Blaustein and Zubieta, *Decíamos ayer*, p. 366. Williamson provides a detailed account of how this letter came about, as well as an overview of Borges’s disgust for the atrocities of the dictatorship in *Borges*, pp. 454-62.

³⁴³*Nunca Más* is the report compiled by the *Comisión Nacional Sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP). Even though the document only records some 6,800 of the estimated 30,000 cases of ‘disappearances’ during the 1976-1983 dictatorship, it made the general Argentine public acutely aware of the scale of human rights abuses and violations of their recent history, as it provided evidence for what up to then had only been rumours.

³⁴⁴‘Habló con escritores el presidente de La Nación’, *La Nación*, 20 May 1976, reproduced in Blaustein and Zubieta, *Decíamos ayer*, pp. 125-6. Hugo Montero offers a well documented ‘recorrida por el mapa de [...] hipocresías del escritor Ernesto Sábato durante los años más oscuros de nuestro país [...] un intelectual funcional a la dictadura militar en los años setenta y, años después, erigido como prócer de la democracia y los derechos humanos’ in ‘Ernesto Sábato: mejor no hablar de ciertas cosas’, *Revista Sudestada* 27 (2004), online at www.revistasudestada.com.ar/web06/article.php3?id_article=124 [accessed 29 April 2010].

³⁴⁵See María Moreno’s interview with Marxist historian Horacio Tarcus, ‘Era insoportable saber, pero sabíamos’, where Tarcus compares Borges’s attitude towards the military dictatorship with Sábato’s, in ‘Radar Libros’, *Página/12*, 25 March 2001, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/2001/suple/Libros/01-03/01-03-25/nota2.htm [accessed 29 April 2010].

The Beginning of the Restoration

The question of whether Borges should be loved or hated was approached differently towards the end of the century. The complexity of the sometimes contradictory nature of his aesthetic and philosophical disquisitions was embraced rather than dissected, as criticism itself moved with the times. In his article about history and literary discourse in Borges, Saúl Sosnowski refers to the state of affairs of Borgesian criticism at the end of the 20th Century and he points out that ‘los años han mitigado las pasiones’ and ‘los tiempos del Borges de luz y sombra [...] han sido desplazados por otros intereses.’³⁴⁶ He cites the use of history in literature by ‘escritores comprometidos’, which therefore meant that ‘la inscripción de Borges en el ala de la literatura fantástica o ‘irreal’ cegaba al lector deseoso de casilleros’ (pp. 80-1); in other words, Borges was still seen as detached from the socio-political reality of ‘ordinary’ Argentines. The need to affiliate Borges to one particular way of doing literature and politics began to give way, in the mid 80s, to a different perspective. This enabled many of the most earnest detractors to assume a different, more balanced perspective in respect of Borges. This change was heralded, as we shall see, by the appropriation of his image in comic strips, but it was only in the 90s that this change of attitude started to become more noticeable in the written press and in academic writing. It was also during this period of transition, in 1986, that Borges’s death occurred. The author’s ‘entering into immortality’³⁴⁷ allowed for the beginning of the consolidation of his iconic image, as, rather than having all his movements scrutinised by the media, he had become a historical figure, who could now

³⁴⁶Sosnowski, ‘Memorias de Borges’, p. 80

³⁴⁷ Such had been the phrase used to refer to Eva Perón’s passing. It was repeated on national radio, for example, every evening at 20.25, when the presenter would remind the audience that ‘Son las 20.25, hora en la que Eva Perón entró en la inmortalidad’, which in Evita’s case, first accompanied the creation of, and later perpetuated, her iconicity. See, for example, Hugo Gambini, *Historia del peronismo: El poder total (1943-1951)* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1999), p. 411. The fundamental significance of death in the iconization of Argentina’s Eva Perón, Carlos Gardel and Che Guevara is somewhat different from that of Borges, as the first three died at a young age and are therefore considered ‘fixed in time’ or immortal, as it were, in their prime. Unfortunately, an in-depth comparative analysis of this subject exceeds the scope of this thesis.

begin to be revised, and constructed, in retrospect. The significance of the circumstances surrounding the writer's death in Geneva, as was his choice, cannot be underestimated. This, as Chapter 4 discusses in more detail, was the last controversy surrounding the writer's life, whose repercussions echoed the attitudes towards him that had been prevalent throughout his life.

In 1993, Argentine poet and journalist Juan Gelman, an influential intellectual of the Peronist Left, wrote an article in *Página/12* where he underlines the courage it had taken for Borges to admit he had been wrong about his support for the dictatorships which he said had been due to plain ignorance. Gelman quotes an interview in which Borges, who is said to have been unable to cope with hearing of the accounts of torture and other human rights abuses in the 'Juicio a las Juntas',³⁴⁸ sadly recognized: 'Al ser ciego y no leer los diarios, yo era muy ignorante [...] pero ahora esas cosas no pueden ser ignoradas.'³⁴⁹ Gelman ends by referring to Borges as great and courageous; this would have been unthinkable during Gelman's days at *La Opinión* or during his most active years as a member of the Peronist Left.

Another clear example of this shift is Juan José Sebreli's 1996 revisiting of early anti-Borgesian criticism in his article 'Borges: el nihilismo débil'.³⁵⁰ Here, Sebreli discusses the impassioned opposition to Borges between the 50s and 70s due to his perceived lack of engagement with the – mostly political – reality of Argentina. Borges had been seen as decadent by the Sartrean new generation, and vilified as imperialistic and oligarchic by the Marxists of the New Left; they all considered Borges to have wrongly subordinated 'lo verdadero, lo bueno y lo justo' (p. 339) to the aesthetic. Sebreli then offers a revision of Borges as 'uno de los primeros y raros intelectuales en

³⁴⁸Williamson, *Borges*, p. 474.

³⁴⁹Juan Gelman, 'Borges o El valor', *Página/12*, 28 October 1993, reproduced in *Antiborges*, p. 335.

³⁵⁰Juan José Sebreli, 'Borges: El nihilismo débil', in *Escritos sobre escritos, ciudades bajo ciudades* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1997), in *Antiborges*, pp. 337-383.

valorar ciertas expresiones de la cultura de masas' (p. 343) and he praises Borges's capacity to 'mantenerse inmune al contagio de [...] esos delirios colectivos de unanimidad que suelen atacar a los argentinos en ciertas circunstancias de su turbulenta historia contemporánea' (p. 341). This is a significant statement from an influential intellectual with a six-decade-long trajectory who is considered an 'animador permanente de debate intelectual argentino mediante una profusa y siempre polémica producción.'³⁵¹

Sebreli's re-evaluation of Borges as a boundary-crossing figure, who not only crossed cultural boundaries but also those between populism/elitism and rationalism/irrationalism, uncovers him as a writer whose contact with the reality of his country is expressed in the complexity and multilayered nature of his work. This Borges, who resists simplistic labelling or pigeonholing, is the one who comes across in comic strips of the 80s. The next section examines the particular scene in which this appropriation took place.

'Historietas para sobrevivientes'

Published by Ediciones de la Urraca, *Fierro* magazine first appeared in September 1984, almost a year after the democratic elections of October 1983 which marked the end to the military regime. It was also the same year as the publication of CONADEP's report, *Nunca Más*, on the atrocities and human rights abuses that had been committed under the military dictatorship. There were one hundred issues of *Fierro*, which ceased publication in 1992. There was a second era of the magazine which started in 2007, published as part of *Página/12*, but it was obviously the issues published during the first eight post-dictatorship years that conveyed the mixed feelings singular to the time. Its full title, *Fierro a Fierro*, was taken from a strip in Raúl Roux's 30s historical and

³⁵¹Lafforgue, *Antiborges*, p. 383.

idiosyncratic comic *Patoruzito*. Even though it was not an original idea, the choice of the subtitle ‘Historietas para sobrevivientes’ clearly imagined an audience of young adults who had recently emerged from the dark years of the ‘Proceso’.³⁵² ‘Sobrevivientes’ had a wide appeal, as it encompassed the survivors of the Malvinas conflict, the survivors of the brutal years of repression during which there had been so many disappearances, and the exiles; but it also referred to a new generation of young adults who had grown up during the dictatorship, and who were confronted with the need to learn how to ‘survive’ in a democracy.

The covers of the first two issues of *Fierro* (September and October 1984, Figs. 45 and 46) illustrate the general mood of darkness and confusion, but they also offer a glimpse of hope, albeit cautious, for the future. In both, the centrality of the human figure facing the reader suggests a sense of protagonism and empowerment amidst the general murkiness and uncertainty that the use of very dark colours conveys (The colour scheme of subsequent covers becomes progressively lighter). The aggressive, highly sexualized portrayal of the female figure on the first cover (Fig. 45) is consistent with the fact that words like ‘patria’, ‘república’ and ‘Argentina’ are feminine in Spanish, and consequently personified by the female figure in the official iconography especially exploited by the extreme chauvinism of nationalistic and military governments. It also taps into the sexist side of its mostly male readers, of course. The female figure on this cover appears trapped in the claws of very heavy machinery, in such a way that it can be interpreted as being about to be crushed. It could also be interpreted as offering an – albeit faint – glimmer of hope to, somehow, defeat the mechanism and achieve freedom from it. It is a striking metaphor for the sense of challenge which the newly-found

³⁵²En cuanto a “Historietas para sobrevivientes” fue un lapsus del jefe de redacción, que extrajo con impunidad de su subconciencia el “Comics para supervivientes” de la famosa *El Vibora*. Fue una apropiación inconsciente, si es que eso existe.’ in ‘Fierro, la primera vez’, *Fierro. La historieta argentina*, 2 March 2007, online at fierro.wordpress.com [accessed 7 December 2007].

freedom posed to the youth of the time. The bright light shone on the female's genital area suggests, crudely but effectively, the birth of a new era. The figure of a young soldier stepping out of an army truck onto a sea of blood on the second cover (Fig. 46) achieves a similar effect: freed from the oppression of the regime and its senseless war, the challenge now is to pick up the pieces in order to rebuild the nation's identity.

In this second issue of *Fierro*, Martín García explores the work of H.G. Oesterheld, creator of iconic strip *El Eternauta*, who was himself a victim of the dictatorship's repression (Oesterheld and his four daughters were 'disappeared' in 1977; he is thought to have been murdered in 1978 in a detention camp). García refers to the general mood of the time, a mixture of hope and uncertainty, and to the alternating of dictatorship and democracy characteristic of much of 20th-Century Argentine history:

La vida constitucional y democrática ha vuelto a la Argentina desde 1983 [...] Con el ejercicio de las libertades constitucionales y el de la opinión crítica volveremos a creer en una realidad favorable a los intereses de la nación. La realidad posterior dirá si hemos llegado a transitar el camino de una verdadera zona liberada o [...] una nueva zona de exclusión-trampa adonde acudimos de buena fe para ser nuevamente destruidos [...] Quienes han transitado la historia de los últimos años están magullados, doloridos, descreídos.³⁵³

The article ends with two thoughts ('reflexiones'), one quoted from a character in *El Eternauta*: 'no creo que tengamos la más remota esperanza de vencer. Pero no digas a nadie lo que pienso, será más fácil sucumbir si lo hacemos peleando' (p. 36); and the other, attributed to Borges: 'Dios, se está haciendo' (p. 36). The presence of the comma

³⁵³Martín García, 'Oesterheld releído: El eternauta, la zona de exclusión y la democracia', *Fierro* I, 2, (October, 1984), p. 36.

in the latter quote makes the sentence ambiguous. However, the very fitting juxtaposition of science fiction, comic-strip character and iconic writer represents the idea of a new zeitgeist, one in which these combinations are possible. The final words leave the reader with a taste of things to come, as the path to a future, uncertain ('no creo que tengamos la más remota esperanza de vencer'), democratic Argentina, unravels as it is tread upon ('se está haciendo').

The view of history as the construction of a fiction, which Sosnowski concludes is Borges's perspective,³⁵⁴ is echoed in the words of Alberto Breccia and Juan Sasturain's cartoon 'Borges' in comic strip *Perramus*: 'La realidad es un invento fantástico, la **historia** misma lo es,' to which the famously nameless main character, Perramus, replies: 'Sin embargo, usted se mete en esa ficción; actúa, toma partido, pretende modificarla.'³⁵⁵ Thus, as we shall see, 'Borges' seamlessly moves across fiction and action, constructing history. This 'Borges' is in stark contrast with the Borges of the previous thirty years. Sosnowski concludes that both history and literature aim at the construction of memory, which in itself is 'historia tamizada de deseo, de mitos y de ambiciones individuales y comunitarias'. From history, he says, we take 'restos y fragmentos para hilar nuevas versiones que responden a necesidades nacionales.'³⁵⁶ It is the exploration of this conception of a history that is constructed, fragment by fragment, through a complex process that involves individual and collective myths and expectations, and in which Borges plays an active part, that enabled the production of many of the comic strips published in *Fierro*.

The Argentine term for 'comic strip', 'historieta', suggests that the genre constitutes a more relaxed, less serious, and most importantly, less 'official' version of

³⁵⁴Sosnowski, 'Memorias de Borges', p. 82.

³⁵⁵Alberto Breccia and Juan Sasturain, 'Perramus: No saber y saber', *Fierro* II, 18 (February, 1986), p. 60 (bold type in the original).

³⁵⁶Sosnowski, 'Memorias de Borges', p. 93.

history. In the informal register appropriate to its context, this is how editor Juan Sasturain defines it in the second issue of *Fierro*, as he marks a new, more mature era for the genre in Argentina:

Entre nosotros la denominación adoptada – **historieta** – tiene la singularidad y el oscuro privilegio de inaugurar un concepto: la simpática desvalorización.

Esa terminación entre diminutiva y cariñosa, casi paternalista, hace de la historieta algo menor y no demasiado importante, cosa de pibes [...] Sin embargo, las relaciones entre historia-madre e historieta-hija suelen ser mucho más complejas. En algunos casos, como en la actualidad, la piba debe apurar el paso para emular las violentas hazañas cotidianas de la madre. [...] Tal vez se trate [...] de darle a la historieta [...] definitiva carta de adultez. Que la piba haga su vida.³⁵⁷

The ‘pibes’ who were now living their own lives, at a time of reconstructing Argentina, included many intellectuals who were also re-thinking the cultural configuration of their newly-democratic environment, while at the same time, re-evaluating ways of questioning old hierarchies. The question of the intersections of high- and low-brow art was revisited, this time from a less rigid perspective. Sarlo considers that there is no direct (‘mimetic’) correspondence between culture and politics, but, rather, that ‘there are different sets of relationships among always heterogeneous elements.’³⁵⁸ This, she believes, ‘would also be, in itself, a theoretical resource for building relational networks between the culture of the intellectuals and popular culture’ (p. 260). As understood by Jean Franco, the aim was not to dethrone what is perceived as high art, but to consider it in a new light, reformulating it as a commodity, in order to make it possible for the

³⁵⁷Juan Sasturain, ‘Editorial’, *Fierro*, I, 2 (October, 1984), bold type in the original.

³⁵⁸Sarlo, ‘Intellectuals’, p. 260.

artwork ‘to inhabit new and unsanctified environments rubbing shoulders with the commodity.’³⁵⁹ These intersections, which Borges had already explored in the 30s, were embraced by the genre of the comic strip in the 80s, as magazines like *Fierro* created its readership, as Carlos Scolari explains in *Historietas para sobrevivientes: Comic y cultura de masas en los años 80* (1999):

El comic argentino de los años ’80 también creó su público, lectores con una concepción adulta de la historieta y con renovadas exigencias narrativas y gráficas. Fierro inventó a los lectores sobrevivientes [...] No sería justo sostener que este lector *exigente* y atento a la experimentación haya nacido en los años ’80; ya en los años ’60 los intelectuales [...] se habían acercado al lenguaje de la historieta [...] 20 años más tarde este tipo de lector modelo – ahora extendido a los jóvenes sin una específica formación teórica – consolidará su presencia dentro del sistema historietístico argentino. Será Fierro [...] la encargada de satisfacer esta demanda de historietas *high brow* que había contribuido a crear.³⁶⁰

This particular juncture at which Argentine comic strips of the 80s found themselves appears to be a propitious milieu for the appropriation of a boundary-crossing Borges, whose work had explored the various intersections of history and fiction and high-brow and popular art. The next section examines these intersections in the comic strip adaptation of a Borges story.

³⁵⁹Jean Franco, ‘Comic Stripping’, pp. 405- 406

³⁶⁰Carlos Scolari, *Historietas para sobrevivientes: Comic y cultura de masas en los años 80* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1999), pp. 271-3, italics in the original.

'Cruce y condensación': 'Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva' in *La Argentina en pedazos*.

In her 1997 essay 'Comic Stripping', Franco tackles the relationship between well-known Latin American writers and popular culture, arguing that their 'overtures' to the emergence of new, popular media were motivated by a 'need to hold on to the slipping hegemony of the intelligentsia.'³⁶¹ Franco was thinking in particular about Ricardo Piglia's original piece of 'comic strip criticism' (p. 405), *La Argentina en pedazos*, as marking the moment when 'the book itself has become an adaptable and transient commodity' (p. 405). Published in 1993, the volume *La Argentina en pedazos* is a collection, in book form, of pieces first published during *Fierro*'s first year.

Adding further nuances to Alvaro Alemán's term 'paraliterature',³⁶² Piglia's original experiment consists of comic strip adaptations of well-known Argentine – mostly literary – texts, each accompanied by an introduction written by Piglia himself. The drawing on its front cover (Fig. 47) encompasses the elements of intersection of literature and popular forms like the comic strip, but also of the so-called minor literary genre of the detective novel. The typewriter-cum-revolver appears to fire the wrath of Argentina, out of the mouth of the republic, represented as the Phrygian-cap-wearing woman that had appeared in Sábat's drawings in *Georgie Dear*.³⁶³ The title echoes, simultaneously, the fragmentation and variety characteristic of the comic strip, and the montage-style design of this particular compilation of comic strips, snippets of literary criticism, and illustrated tango lyrics. The volume is difficult to classify because of its richness: its distinct 'cambalache' nature reinforced by the juxtaposition of works by writers as diametrically opposed as Viñas and Borges, or genres as dissimilar as the

³⁶¹Franco, 'Comic Stripping', p. 405.

³⁶²Comic-strip theorist Alvaro Alemán refers to forms of narrative other than conventional literary texts, and whose popular consumption contains a 'ludic' element, as 'paraliterature', in 'Paraliterary Immersion and the Puzzleform: An Essay in Social Restitution', *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. 2.1 (2005), online at www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v2_1/aleman/ [accessed 03 March 2007].

³⁶³Cf. Figs. 38, 39 and 40, for example.

short story and the tango lyric. 'En pedazos' also brings to mind an Argentina in need of reconstruction after the bloody years of the 1976-1983 dictatorship.

The work of iconic Argentine writers as different ideologically as Borges and Arlt, through the predominantly popular Puig and the eccentric Quiroga are reinterpreted through the genre of the comic strip, each ushered in by an overall review of the author's general style, in the shape of Piglia's 'brief critical digests', as Franco describes them.³⁶⁴ The works of literature gathered in this volume have all been adapted and drawn by different comic-strip artists. The juxtaposition of illustration and minimal text, the selection of fragments of original text to be included in speech bubbles or in boxes, either as dialogue, narration or commentary, the choice of perspective and other visual elements, manage to achieve a myriad of meanings which enhance the experience of the original story from a different perspective, as we shall see.

Borges's 'Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva' is one of the stories in *La Argentina en pedazos*. It was adapted by comic-strip writer Norberto Buscaglia, who had already worked on other adaptations of literary works (notably a series of stories by H.P. Lovecraft in collaboration with Alberto Breccia).³⁶⁵ The drawings are by Alfredo Flores. First published in 1949 in *Sur* and later included in *El Aleph*, 'Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva' is a story of bravery, exile, and most importantly, of boundary-crossing. Piglia chooses to concentrate on this point in his prefatory text, 'Borges y los dos linajes', where he describes the story as a fragmented tale, 'un lugar de cruce y de condensación',³⁶⁶ in which, Piglia argues, Borges locates the roots of his literature. These imaginary properties where writing springs from, he suggests, are memory and the library:

³⁶⁴Franco, 'Comic Stripping', p. 403.

³⁶⁵Juan Sasturain, *El domicilio de la aventura* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1995), p. 35

³⁶⁶Ricardo Piglia, 'Borges y los dos linajes', *La Argentina en pedazos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Urraca, 1993), pp. 102-4 (p. 102).

Herederero contradictorio de una doble estirpe, esas dos ramas dividen formalmente su obra: son dos sistemas de relato, dos modos distintos de manejar la ficción. Por un lado aparece una serie de textos, afirmados en el relato oral, en la voz, en la memoria [...] por otro lado, una serie de textos afirmados en la lectura, en la traducción, en la cita, en la biblioteca, en el culto a los libros.³⁶⁷

It is fitting, then, that this story appears as a comic strip, which combines literature with illustration and whose format offers the immediacy of dialogue, emphasizing that sense of oral narrative that Piglia mentions. The subject of the story itself is historically at the core of one of the most relevant debates of the previous decades, as it relates to the construction of Argentine identity: civilization vs. barbarism. In this sense, Piglia highlights the importance of Borges's fictionalisation of his double heritage, as he considers that 'le permite integrar y manejar como internos a su propia familia los grandes ejes antagónicos que han dividido nuestra historia desde su origen' (p. 103).

Reinterpreted as the irreconcilable opposition between the rule of the elite or the oligarchy vs. the masses, this debate is present in many of the most politically impassioned texts of the 60s. In 1965, for example, Arturo Jauretche, the epitome of the 'intelectual nacional y popular,'³⁶⁸ interpreted the moral of this story as Borges's justification for someone who 'se da vuelta de su nación para pasarse a la otra, explicándolo por la cultura.'³⁶⁹ On this occasion, as on many others, Borges is called a 'cipayo' ('traitor'), the staple 'insult' periodically uttered in relation to the author by his

³⁶⁷Piglia, 'Borges y los dos linajes', pp. 103-4.

³⁶⁸Lafforgue, *Antiborges*, p. 177.

³⁶⁹Arturo Jauretche, 'Moraleja de Borges: su "guerrero y su cautiva"', originally published in *Marcha*, 1259 (1965), in *Antiborges*, pp. 169-76 (p. 169).

detractors at the time.³⁷⁰ Twenty years later, the words ‘No fue un traidor (los traidores no suelen inspirar epitafios piadosos); fue un iluminado, un converso’³⁷¹ are given the space of a single frame in Flores and Buscaglia’s comic strip version (Fig. 49), which emphasizes the irony of Borges’s foresight, as he had a positive vision of multiculturalism that Jauretche’s ideological blinkers did not allow him to share, but which the complex changes of the 80s made it possible to embrace.

To emphasize the coexistence of different realms (historical eras, fiction and reality), Borges’s renowned self-referentiality is expressed and given prominence in Flores and Buscaglia’s version through two frames – which appear as windows – each devoted solely to the figure of the writer (Figs. 49, 50 and 51). Through these, the reader is given the impression of the possibility of actually being invited into the story, especially in the case of page 108, by a very expressive ‘Borges’ whose intent direct gaze seems to insist on this interaction (Fig. 50). The exaggerated close-up reinforces this irruption which brings together character and reader. This depiction is very far from the image of Borges as detached from the reality of his country and the common man that had circulated in the previous three decades.

The last frame (Fig. 51) shows the character/writer ‘Borges’ speaking the very last words of the story, as he summarizes the coexistence of the strands of his mixed heritage. This emphasizes the fact that comic strip and literary text have become two sides of one same weave. Here, the physiognomy of the writer is easily recognizable and, interestingly, he has been drawn as the old man of the 80s and not the middle-aged man he would have been at the time of writing the original story. This suggests the

³⁷⁰‘Cipayo: soldado indio en una unidad militar al servicio de una potencia europea’, María Moliner, *Diccionario del uso del Español* (Madrid: Gredos, 2000).

³⁷¹Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva’, *OCI*, p. 558. In Flores and Buscaglia’s version, ‘los traidores no suelen inspirar epitafios piadosos’ appears in bold type. Alfredo Flores and Norberto Buscaglia, ‘Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva’, in Ricardo Piglia, *La Argentina en pedazos*, pp. 106-13 (p. 108).

image of the writer known at the time: old and wise. However, apart from the presence of the walking-stick, any resemblance with the Borges known to all stops there: this ‘Borges’ appears dishevelled and barefoot in an untidy house, accompanied by a woman who is pouring ‘mate’. Instead of the formal suit and tie that the real author would wear on most occasions, this Borges appears wearing a string vest: the classic attire of the working-class man (hence the term ‘descamisados’ coined at the time of Eva Perón). In the corner of the frame, on the floor, an angry cat gnaws at a discarded book, an image that is very different from that of the real Beppo, Borges’s white cat. This image is in striking opposition to the type of image of the old sage described in Chapter 2, and which still circulates in photographs. Thus, the writer who had been perceived as elitist is brought closer to the everyday reality of the ‘average’ working-class Argentine. This construction of Borges would have been unthinkable in the 60s and 70s.

Comic strips like the one analysed in this section were significantly less widely circulated and therefore had less impact, of course, which is why the meanings condensed in the photographic images are still generally prevalent. However, the contrast between the different depictions of Borges shows that the genre of the comic strip is a very powerful space of ‘cruce y condensación’, as Piglia suggests Borges’s story to be, through which the image of the writer as an untouchable monument to high Argentine culture was able to be challenged in order to be re-appropriated in a more democratic way.

Perramus: ‘Borges’ guerrillero

The bifurcating and entwining of history, memory, loyalty and identity mentioned by Piglia in ‘Borges y los dos linajes’ is taken up in *Perramus*, illustrated by Alberto Breccia and written by Juan Sasturain, a comic strip series in which there is a character

called 'Borges'. First published in French magazine *Circus* in 1982, it also appeared in Italy, Spain, Sweden, Holland, Germany and the United States, before it finally arrived in Argentina where it began to be published as a regular feature in *Fierro* in 1985. Only one of the four long stories that it comprises, which were later compiled in three separate books, appeared in *Fierro*. However, all four continue the original storyline and setting.

Nicknamed 'Maestro' or 'El viejo', Alberto Breccia was a celebrated comic strip illustrator who was much loved in the world of 'historietas', and he was also an accomplished painter. He worked with H.G. Oesterheld, notably producing *La vida del Che* (1968), which was censored and destroyed by the 'Revolución Argentina' regime (1966-1973). They also collaborated on a remake of iconic futuristic comic strip *El eternauta*, set in a Buenos Aires devastated by a dictatorship. These two collaborations in particular were evidence of an explicit political commitment which resulted in Oesterheld's abduction and execution by the military in 1978. The founder of *Fierro* magazine, Juan Sasturain is a prolific writer and journalist who also taught literature at the Universities of Rosario and Buenos Aires until he resigned in 1975 after receiving death threats from the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (commonly known as 'Triple A'). He has also written for *La Opinión* and numerous other newspapers. These two politically committed intellectuals came together for the creation of an accessible, saleable product, and instead they ended up with over four hundred pages of a comic strip which Sasturain later described as 'complicada, hermética, presuntuosa, hiperintelectual, comprometida.'³⁷² One of the main characters in the stories shares the name, physiognomy and the general demeanour of Borges.

³⁷²Juan Sasturain: cronología', *Audiovideoteca de Buenos Aires. Literatura*, online at www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/com_social/audiovideoteca/literatura/sasturain_bio2_es.php [accessed 27 October 2010].

The metonymic title of Breccia and Sasturain's strip ('Perramus' is a raincoat brand, like 'Mackintosh') is reminiscent of traditional detective fiction, and its comic strip relative, 'Dick Tracy', or to name an Argentine character who also inhabited the pages of *Fierro*, Solano Lopez's 'Evaristo'. 'Perramus' is an otherwise nameless character who loses his memory after escaping from the repression of the governing 'Mariscales' and leaving his comrades behind. The dockyard brothel where his memory loss takes place is called 'El Aleph'. The morning after his cowardly escape and his visit to the prostitute Margarita, who offers him oblivion as a way out of his anguish, he is recruited by the oppressors to dispose of the bodies of his own friends whom they have murdered. Tormented by his cowardice, and in search of his identity, Perramus later becomes a 'guerrillero', a revolutionary in the clandestine 'Vanguardia Voluntarista para la Victoria' movement conspiring against the oppressors. The involuntary collaboration with the regime, which makes a mockery of the protagonist's loyalty to his dissident friends at the beginning of 'El piloto del olvido' recalls Borges's perceived support of the junta. Perramus's redemption through rejoining the cause symbolizes the revision of Borges's 'parricidio' on the part of the intellectuals of the previous decades.

Perramus's character 'Borges' is a sleuth of sorts, a 'conspirador al servicio de la revolución,'³⁷³ a character akin to Ford Coppola's the Godfather. He is a father-figure, a sort of fount of all knowledge, working on the margins of the law. A motley crew of younger conspirators, including Perramus, turn to 'Borges' when their missions become more challenging. As Gociol and Rosemberg point out, this 'Borges', who knows Oesterheld's *El eternauta*, is also a world-known writer, who carries out his secret missions whilst moving in the usual literary circles; he uses his ballpoint pen, for

³⁷³Pablo de Santis, 'Perramus, la mítica historietita con Borges y Gardel como personajes', *Clarín*, 3 June 2006, online at www.clarin.com/diario/2006/06/03/sociedad/s-06401.htm [accessed 31 May 2010].

example, to send Perramus vital information in a coded message as he delivers a lecture about Quevedo.³⁷⁴ He is also shown in his Maipú street apartment (Fig. 52), where even ‘Mrs. Borges’, recognizable as Borges’s second wife María Kodama, makes an appearance. This is an old Borges, who revels in the unravelling of mysteries that need linguistic decoding, but who is, at the same time, passionate about the revolutionary cause. Thus, in *Perramus* ‘Borges’ becomes what the ‘progre’ intellectuals of the previous decades had said Borges was not: an ‘intelectual comprometido’. However, *Perramus*’s ‘Borges’ is not, as it might appear, a completely inverted depiction of the writer: on the contrary, the most relevant traits of the character are based on Borgesian characteristics, both biographical and literary. One of the most relevant of these is the embracing of contradictions and a sense of ‘subversion’ present in the Borgesian oeuvre. As Enrique Pezzoni suggests, ‘la obra de Borges’ is ‘sempiternamente subversiva, ideológicamente subversiva respecto de los órdenes habituales.’³⁷⁵ The exploration of what Pezzoni calls the ‘gran problema que es la superposición del sujeto empírico y el sujeto textual [...] ese conflicto entre pensamiento y acción’ (pp. 123-5) is made possible by the genre of the comic strip. It is highlighted in *Perramus* through the superimposition of ‘action’ which is depicted by the images and ‘thought’ which is conveyed by the text.

The creators of *Perramus* suggest that both its settings and characters are entirely fictional: ‘nada en *Perramus* es o aspira a la verdad: Borges no sólo no ha muerto sino que ha ganado el Nobel.’³⁷⁶ However, the strip was awarded the 1988 Amnesty International Human Rights Award for its portrayal of some of Argentina’s

³⁷⁴ Gociol and Rosemberg, *La historieta argentina*, pp. 40 and 448. Interestingly, it has since become known that Oesterheld and Borges had shared many long conversations, and that the influence of their respective oeuvres might be seen in Hugo Santiago’s 1969 film *Invasión*, for which Borges wrote the script in collaboration with Bioy Casares. Diego Marinelli, ‘El sueño del Eternauta: el proyecto inconcluso de Oesterheld’, *Revista Ñ*, 21 November 2009.

³⁷⁵ Louis, *Enrique Pezzoni*, p. 123.

³⁷⁶ Alberto Breccia and Juan Sasturain, *Perramus: Diente por diente* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 2006), back cover.

darkest years. The city through which Borges and his co-conspirators wander, for example, is easily recognizable as Buenos Aires even though it is called Santa María (Buenos Aires was founded as Santa María de los Buenos Aires, its port referred to as Puerto de Santa María in colonial times). Breccia's particular style manages to convey the fragmentary nature of the story and its context, his layered texturing technique described in *Fierro*'s third issue as having been found by the subject in *Perramus*: 'el tema ha buscado la técnica hasta encontrarla: tintas y collages consiguen una textura de grises para dar el clima de opresión y pesadilla en que se desarrolla la aventura'.³⁷⁷ Argentine novelist and comic strip writer Pablo de Santis claims that from *Perramus* onwards, 'el Maestro' 'explota el gris hasta arrancarle una paleta completa. Hay un gris que corresponde al amarillo, un gris que corresponde al rojo: Breccia ha investigado y los ha descubierto.'³⁷⁸ In Breccia's own words: 'el Buenos Aires de la represión [...] se volvía gris, perdía su alma. Todo estaba gris por el miedo, por el silencio.'³⁷⁹ This depiction of the city of Buenos Aires as menacing and oppressive in its eternal twilight is reminiscent of the first two covers of *Fierro* mentioned above and of many of the songs by Argentine rock bands popular at the time.³⁸⁰

The issues around which *Perramus* revolves: memory, history and the place of culture – of literature in this particular case – are vital for the reconstruction of a fragmented national identity. Carlos Scolari points out that Argentine comic strips of the 80s went beyond just reflecting the social or political history of their time: they fed back into it, 'aportando crítica y reflexión, ayudando a reconquistar espacios negados o acompañando estas otras historias desde las páginas de las revistas.'³⁸¹ Gociol and

³⁷⁷ *Fierro* I, 3 (November 1984), central poster.

³⁷⁸ Scolari, *Historietas para sobrevivientes*, p. 273.

³⁷⁹ Sergio Ranieri and Pablo Marchetti, 'Breccia y Borges', *La Maga* (1993), in *Archivos Negros*, 1, (2006), 2-9 (p. 3)

³⁸⁰ Notably, Soda Stereo's 'La ciudad de la furia' describes Buenos Aires as dark and deathly, an almost gothic city of fragmented identities. This song is considered emblematic of the time.

³⁸¹ Scolari, *Historietas*, pp. 298-9.

Rosemberg explain that in *Perramus* ‘se libran dos batallas. Una real, contra los represores, y otra simbólica, vinculada a la cultura. Ambas confluyen finalmente, porque la literatura [...] se vuelve el camino redentorio.’³⁸² They also argue that the choice of Borges as a conveyor of the redemptive powers of culture is significant because ‘la culpa, el olvido, el tiempo, la memoria’ (p. 448) are all recognizable Borgesian tropes. It is precisely because these tropes are also deeply rooted in the construction of an Argentine identity that Borges is able to herald the nation into a new era. In the words of its artist: ‘En *Perramus* siempre se echaron claves netamente argentinas.’³⁸³ Juan Sasturain thinks of Borges as pervading and exceeding the strip: ‘La imagen y la literatura de Borges no están antes, dentro o después de la historieta *Perramus*’ and using religious imagery explains that ‘como el Espíritu – dicen – a María [...] Borges atraviesa *Perramus* y lo calienta, le da aliento, y lo revuelve, un ingrediente y un sabor a la vez.’³⁸⁴ In 1993, Breccia expressed a similar view of Borges, this time as a cultural father-figure for the nation: ‘En *Perramus* le atribuimos el considerarse el tutor intelectual de Argentina... El Maestro.’³⁸⁵ It is unexpected, for someone of the ‘progre’ generation so politically committed in the 60s and 70s, to refer to Borges as being loved by ‘gente sencilla’ (p. 2). But Breccia explains, rather passionately, that ‘Borges era querido por el pueblo’ and those who criticized him and drove him to end his days in Geneva ‘no pertenecían al pueblo. La presencia de Borges en *Perramus* se debe a todo esto’ (p. 2).³⁸⁶

The last story in the *Perramus* saga, ‘Diente por diente’ (written and illustrated between 1988 and 1989) (Fig. 53) constitutes a good example of the exploration of

³⁸²Gociol and Rosemberg, *La historieta argentina*, p. 448.

³⁸³Scolari quotes from a 1990 interview with Alberto Breccia, published in *Señales* 1, Buenos Aires, (1990), in *Historietas para sobrevivientes*, p. 281.

³⁸⁴Scolari, *Historietas para sobrevivientes*, p. 279.

³⁸⁵Ranieri and Marchetti, ‘Breccia y Borges’, p. 2.

³⁸⁶Borges’s decision to die in Geneva is still controversial today. The polemic surrounding the writer’s last resting place is discussed in Chapter 4.

Borges's role as Argentina's intellectual leader. The mystery that it revolves around touches the heart of one of the strongest myths of 20th-Century Argentina: the teeth of the iconic tango singer Carlos Gardel have been lost, and the challenge is not only to retrieve them, but, more importantly, to make it possible to reconstruct his paradigmatic smile. What moves the narrative forward is this quest that will ultimately result in the restoration of the 'Argentine Smile': 'Esta era una tarea simbólica, nos dijeron... Recuperar la plenitud perdida hace cincuenta años...', says Perramus after the mission has been accomplished.³⁸⁷ As María Cristina Pons explains in *Delirios de grandeza* (2005), the significance of myths lies in the fact that they reflect socio-historical issues which lie at the core of identity:

Si las dinámicas histórico-sociales y culturales se reflejan en los mitos es porque ellos forman parte del universo simbólico de una cultura [...] que en ciertos momentos históricos reconoce ejes unificadores [...] De esta manera, la cultura genera identidades, un sentido de pertenencia, de raíces, de origen y de destino, de pasado y de futuro.³⁸⁸

The figure of Gardel generates a sense of cohesion and cultural identity not dissimilar to that of Borges. In 'Diente por diente', this is taken for granted in the case of Gardel and shown 'through actions', as the narrative develops, in the case of Borges.

In the second part of the story, three rather large frames depict a scene which Sasturain refers to as 'fraguada'³⁸⁹ (Fig. 54): Borges is giving a very well attended talk on the profound effect of the fifty years Argentina has had without the smile of Gardel. This would have been unthinkable in real life because Borges is known to have said that

³⁸⁷Breccia and Sasturain, *Perramus: Diente por diente*, p. 168.

³⁸⁸Pons, 'El mito', p. 18.

³⁸⁹Juan Sasturain, 'La última vuelta', in Breccia and Sasturain, *Perramus: Diente por diente*, p. 6.

he disliked Gardel because he had the same smile as Perón, whom he famously despised.³⁹⁰ A tale of the way cultural icons are created and – in particular, popularly – appropriated, ‘Diente por diente’ illustrates the need of a society to project their anxieties and expectations of reassurance onto iconic figures: Gardel embodies the ‘tangoesque’ joys of being Argentine as much as Borges constitutes the seat of wisdom and paternal ‘cultural reassurance’. Interestingly, the storyline also illustrates the construction of identity as an ongoing process, as ‘Borges’ says in one of the last few frames: ‘Lo único que existe es el camino. No se llega nunca a ninguna parte. Nada termina, Perramus’ (p. 169) The story ends with the question ‘¿Y ahora...? ¿Dónde vamos?’ and the two characters are seen walking away in the distance (p. 169) (Fig. 55).

It is not, however, only as a fictional character within a certain storyline that the figure of Borges has been appropriated by the world of the comic strip: the editorial of issue 18 of *Fierro* (February 1986) is in the shape of a comic strip frame, and the character speaking the words in the speech bubble is none other than Borges (Fig. 56).³⁹¹ The drawing of Borges’s face, taken from *Perramus* 8, in the same issue, is reminiscent of a well-known type of photograph of the writer, one of which was taken by famous Argentine photographer Pedro Luis Raota and widely circulated (Fig. 57). It is surrounded by a Warhol style montage of a portrait of the ‘real’ Borges, reproduced six times with varying degrees of distortion (Fig. 56). The effectiveness of this editorial, in which the fictional author wonders how he has come to be a ‘dibujo de Breccia que habla por tinta de otro’ (p. 12), lies in the imitation of the author’s style, including the typically Borgesian mention of biographical details, citations, name-dropping and other such quirks.

³⁹⁰Jorge Rufinelli starts his essay ‘La sonrisa de Gardel’ with the epigraphs: ‘El día que aparezca un presidente con la sonrisa de Gardel, se mete al pueblo en el bolsillo. Juan Domingo Perón’ and ‘No me gusta Gardel porque tiene la misma sonrisa que Perón. Jorge Luis Borges’, in *Delirios de grandeza*, ed. by Pons and Soria, pp. 73-100 (p. 73).

³⁹¹‘Editorieta’, *Fierro*, II, 18 (February 1986), p. 12.

The introduction of the figure of Borges in the particular context of the editorial, moving him out of the confines of the comic strip itself, reinforces his position not only as trusted leader of Argentine culture, but also, as just one more ‘ordinary’ Argentine. Thus, by the mid-80s, Borges appears to have evolved from the conservative enemy of the common people, a man who inhabited a world removed from the everyday reality of his country, to a figure of action, who is prepared to move across boundaries to explore what it means to be Argentine.

The Beginning of Closure: ‘El fin’

Another collaboration between Breccia and Sasturain was the adaptation of Borges’s story ‘El fin’ in 1984 (Fig. 58). A brief examination of this little-known cartoon version seems an adequate way to close this chapter, as it represents the end of an era: Borges ceases to be the enemy of the new generations in order to be reclaimed as a cohesive force in the reconstruction of Argentine culture, not so much as the untouchable monument, but as a ‘compañero’.

First published in *La Nación* in 1953, Borges’s ‘El fin’ provides an ending to José Hernández’s canonical gauchesque *Martín Fierro*. A seemingly simple title, its first subversion lies in the fact that one would normally expect to find these words at the end of a text or film, not at the start. ‘Fin’ denotes the demise of the ‘gaucho’ Fierro, killed in the story by the Moreno, as well providing an ending – in terms of closure – that José Hernández’s original poem did not have.³⁹² But this ‘fin’ also refers to the close of the gauchesque cycle in Argentine literary tradition, as the canonical status of the poem as the ‘Bible of Argentine letters’ is called into question.³⁹³ Thus, ‘El fin’

³⁹²Although in logical terms, this ending opens up the possibility of an infinite progression, as pointed out by Pedro Luis Barcia, cited in Alfonso García Morales, ‘Jorge Luis Borges, autor del *Martín Fierro*’, *Variaciones Borges*, 10 (2000), 29-64 (p. 61).

³⁹³See Sarlo, ‘Tradición y conflictos’, in *Borges, un escritor en las orillas*, pp. 59-68.

represents the closure of an era of Argentine literature, as it puts an end to the reverence that gauchesque literature inspired. As Alfonso García Morales points out, ‘el *Martín Fierro* fue el eje en torno al que giró gran parte de su constante preocupación por la literatura y la identidad de su país.’³⁹⁴ He considers that Borges was against the poem’s classification as ‘obra ‘clásica’’, por lo que este adjetivo reverencial tiene de institucionalización y neutralización literaria y hasta de instrumentalización ideológica’ (p. 33). With this in mind, Breccia and Sasturain’s choice acquires further significance, as Borges is celebrated as a literary subversive. Thus, by choosing to adapt Borges’s ‘revolutionary’ story to the popular genre of the comic, these two old ‘progres’ embraced Borges’s boundary crossing, finally recognising him as ‘one of us’ rather than as a political outsider, as they and their fellow left wing intellectuals had done in the 60s and 70s.

As in the original story, ‘Había matado a un hombre’ are the last words in the strip (Fig. 59). This last sentence represents Borges’s subversion of traditional hierarchies, as Martín Fierro dies at his hands, thus putting a symbolic end to the gauchesque cycle, as mentioned above. At the same time, the cartoon version of ‘El fin’ could also be seen to illustrate the end of the rejection of the old Borges and the beginning of a new construction of the author brought about by a re-evaluation of his work in a new light. It is testimony that the Borges in sharp defining lines has given way to that of hues and nuances.

Conclusion

Gociol and Rosemberg claim that Breccia and Sasturain ‘no reconstruyeron el Borges que fue sino el que ellos – y muchos argentinos progresistas – hubieran deseado que

³⁹⁴García Morales, ‘Jorge Luis Borges, autor del *Martín Fierro*’, p. 33.

fuera: una figura sin fisuras ideológicas.’³⁹⁵ This ideological coherence is, as this chapter has argued, what the intellectuals of the left would have wanted Borges to have in the 60s and 70s: a figure who could be fully committed to their cause, a ‘compañero’ and not an enemy. The ‘Borges’ that Breccia and Sasturain created in *Perramus*, however, is one that transcends those old classifications and, instead, is embraced in all his contradictions and complexities. The most effective strategy of *Perramus* lies precisely in the crossing of all manner of boundaries, consistent with the specific historical context in which the comic strip developed: the end of the ‘Proceso’ regime and the transition into early ‘Alfonsinista’³⁹⁶ democracy represented a huge challenge for Argentina. This was particularly the case for its youth: the younger generation, who were listening to song lyrics such as: ‘estoy parado en la muralla que divide todo lo que fue de lo que será,’³⁹⁷ and the older generations, who had been so politically active during the previous two decades, and who had borne the brunt of the worst of the dictatorship. Together, they were faced with the challenge of learning a new way of expression and building a new future. The ‘Borges’ constructed in *Perramus* is the father-figure who will be able to guide them through this transition. But it is a subversive Borges, whose task is to lead them to an appreciation of the richness that lies in the in-between, in the exploration of diversity rather than in its erasure. In the face of the failure of the ‘friend or foe’ way of doing politics prevalent in the 60s and 70s, this Borges can offer a more consensual and diverse mode. It is not Borges that has changed: his work, as we have mentioned, had questioned the old hierarchies of authorship and had problematized the boundaries of fiction, proposing a revolutionary approach to writing. It was the way he was constructed that began to change in the 80s,

³⁹⁵Gociol and Rosemberg, *La historieta argentina*, p. 448.

³⁹⁶Raúl Alfonsín was elected president in free democratic elections in 1983, marking the end of the dictatorship that had started in 1976. Alfonsín’s presidency ended in 1989.

³⁹⁷Los enanitos verdes, ‘La muralla verde’ (1986).

as the way Argentine cultural identity was constructed also began to be revised. At this crucial juncture, Argentines needed their icon to usher them into the future.

The inclusion of the figure of Borges in the particular way of artistic expression of the comic strips represents a very clear and creative example of the many ways in which the celebrated author has been appropriated in order to be constructed according to such complex set of motivations within Argentine society and culture of the 80s. It has been the purpose of this chapter to explore the ways in which the particular generation of young Argentines mentioned above, who had lived through rejection and denunciation of Borges based on political motivations, chose to reclaim him in order to count with the author on their side, not just the representative of national values and tradition, but also, as an agent of change. In Pablo de Santis's words, Borges was seen as a Tiresias, the blind guide who is able to show them the way to the future.³⁹⁸

This post-dictatorship, post-transition period is examined further in the next chapter through the construction of 'Borgesian spaces' in the city of Buenos Aires as a strategy for the promotion of cultural tourism in the context of a globalized world. As the final chapter in this thesis, Chapter 4 assesses the impact of the constructions of Borges throughout the 20th Century examined so far, and their evolution, in the political context of early 21st-Century Buenos Aires.

³⁹⁸Pablo de Santis, *La historieta en la edad de la razón* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1998), no page number given, cited in Gociol and Rosemberg, *La historieta argentina*, p. 448.



Figure 32. Alberto Breccia, 'Perramus: No saber y saber', *Fierro II*, 18 (February 1986), p. 63.



Figure 33. *Caras y Caretas*, Buenos Aires, 1929, reproduced in Alejandro Vaccaro, *Borges: una biografía en imágenes* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones B, 2005), p. 69.

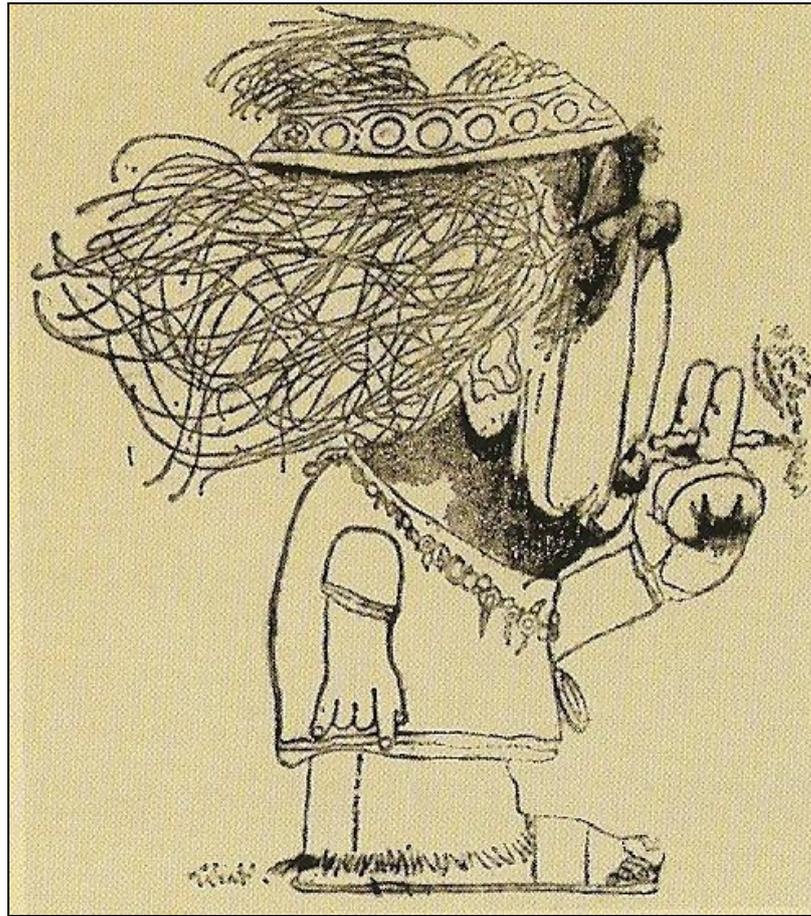


Figure 36. Hermenegildo Sábat, *La Opinión*, 4 February 1973, reproduced in *Borges: 1001 Imágenes*, p. 26.

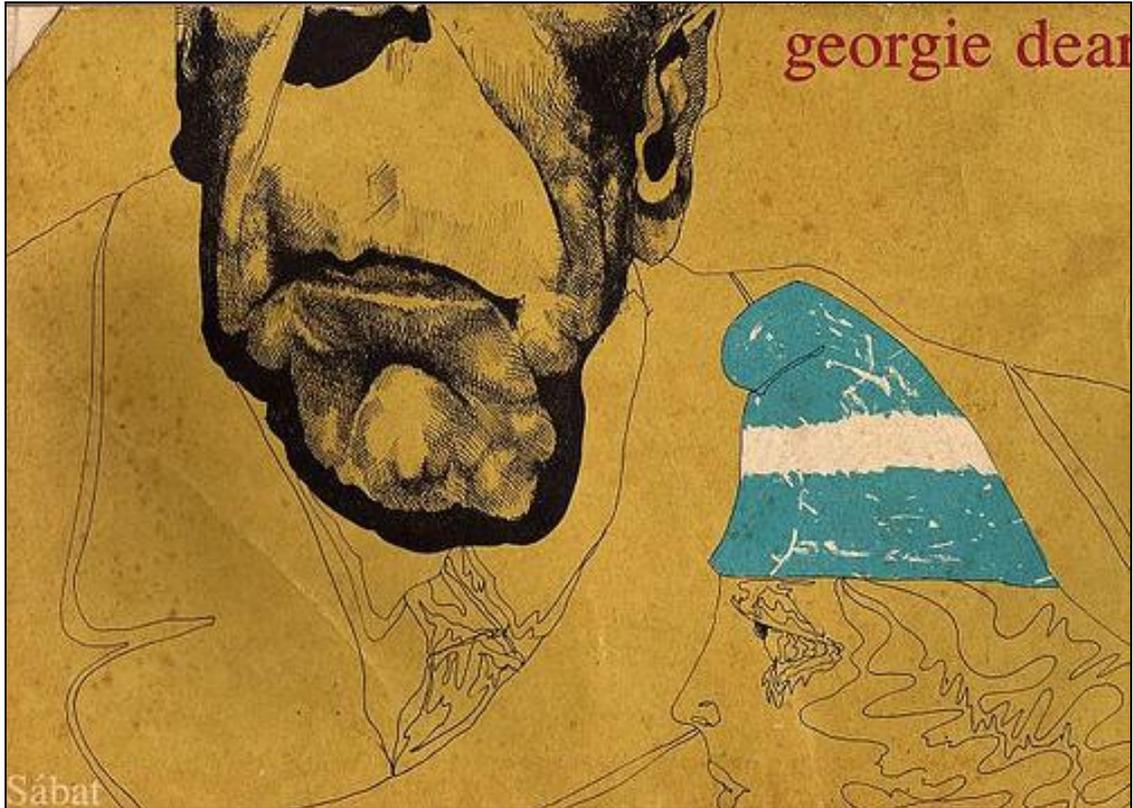


Figure 37. Cover of the 1974 edition of Hermenegildo Sábat's *Georgie Dear* (Buenos Aires: Crisis).



Figure 38. Text corresponding to the 8th drawing, Hermenegildo Sábat, *Georgie Dear*, 2nd edn (Nuevos Tiempos and Biblioteca Nacional, 1999), page unnumbered.

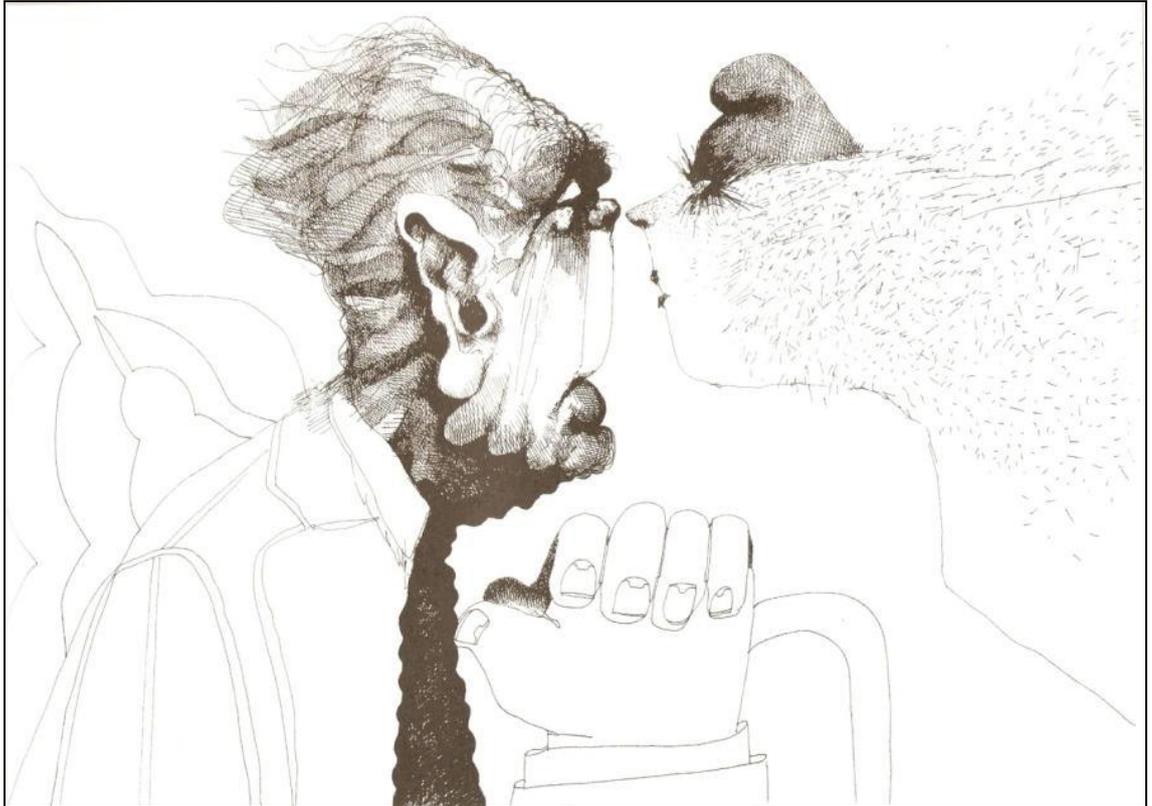


Figure 39. 'I'm mesmerized by your wit, Georgie,' 8th drawing, Sábat, *Georgie Dear*, 2nd edn, page unnumbered.



Figure 40. Phrygian-cap clad Republic and Phrygian cap on coat of arms on 1889 Argentine coin, *OMNI Taller numismático*, online at www.identificacion-numismatica.com/contemporaneas-f11/2-centavos-argentina-1889-t27085.htm [accessed 31 May 2010].

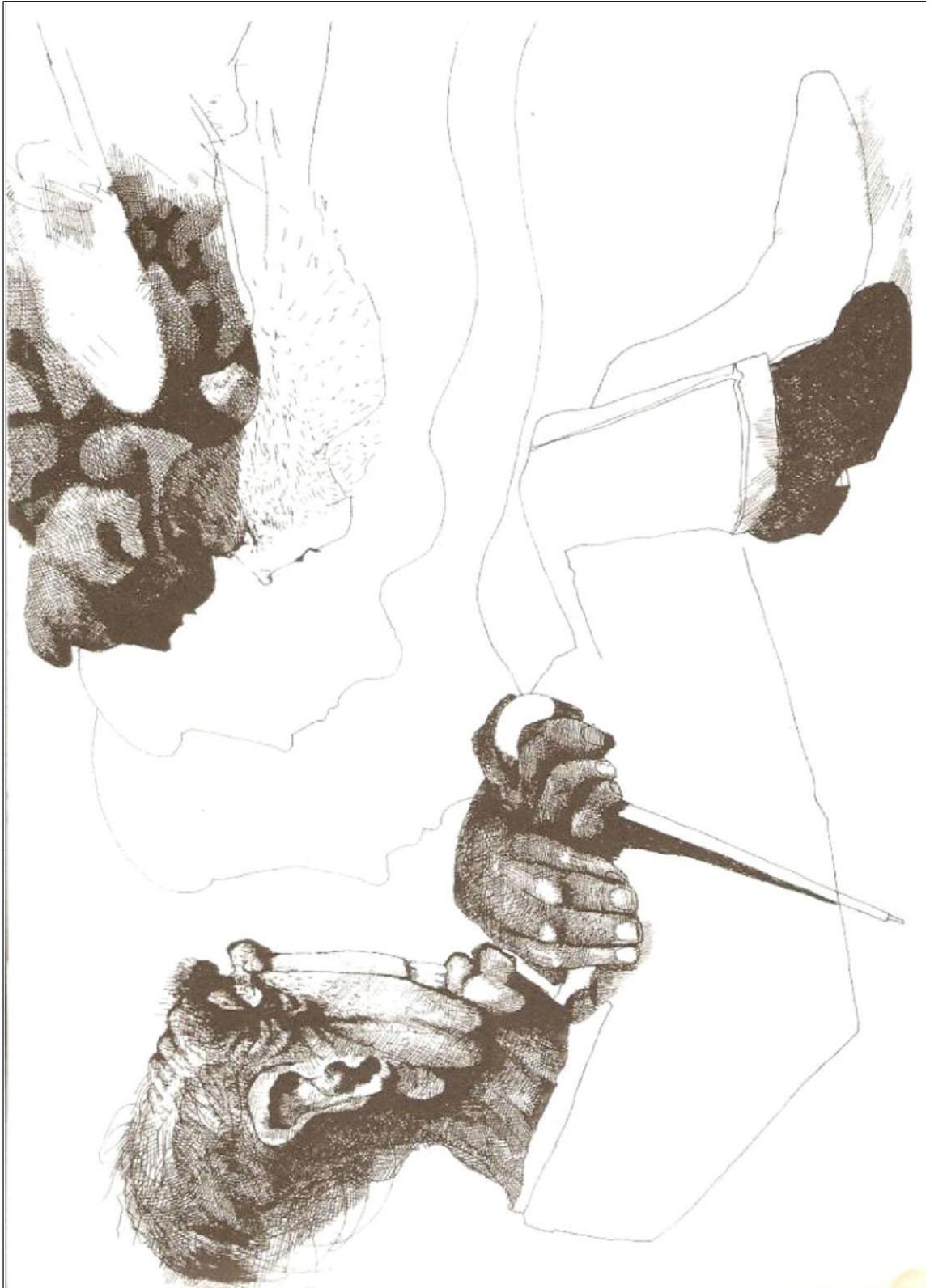


Figure 41. 'Isn't that a little bit of an understatement, Georgie?/No digas la mitad de lo que sabes, Georgie,' 2nd drawing, Sábat, *Georgie Dear*, 2nd edn, page unnumbered.

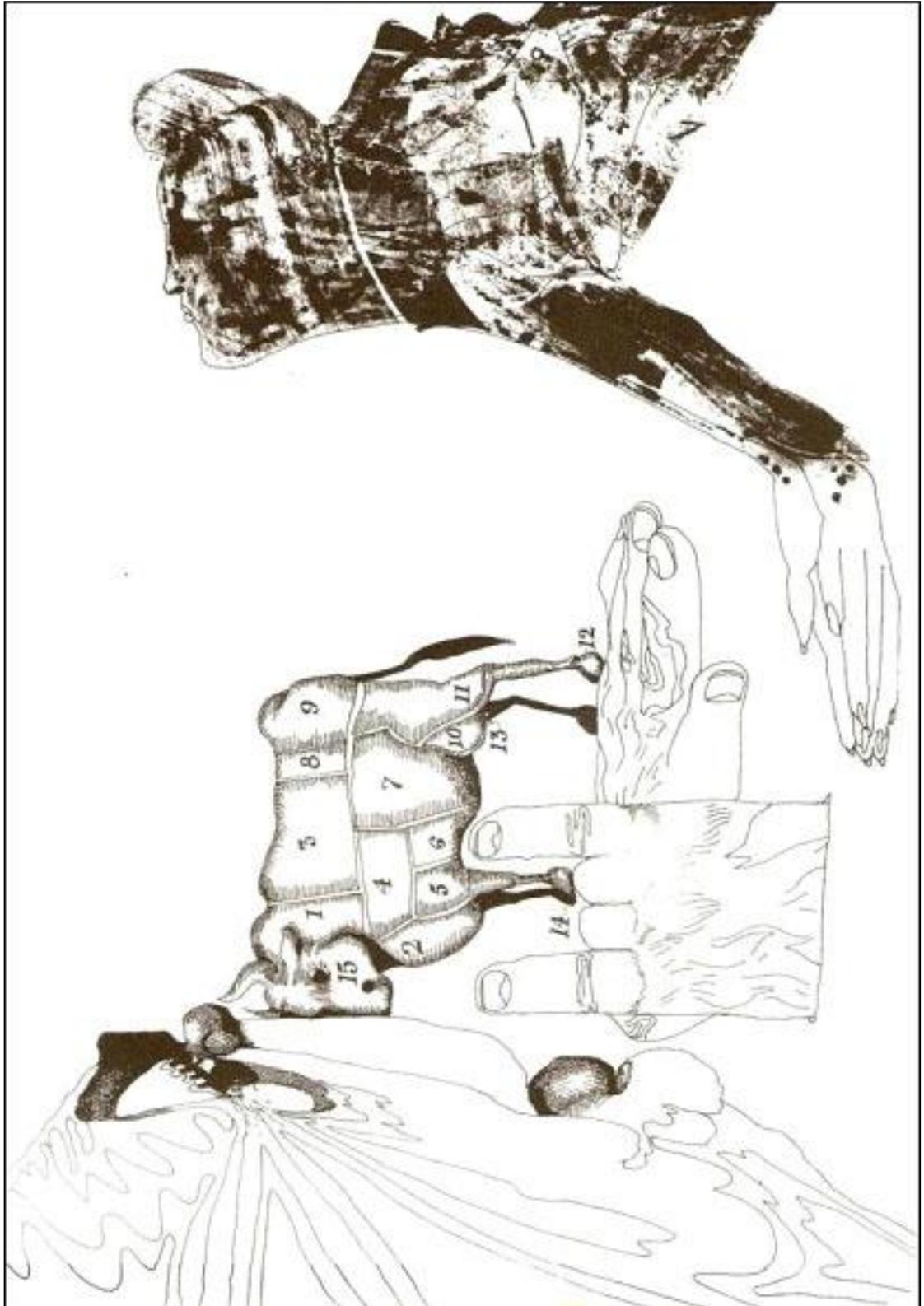


Figure 42. 'I solemnly swear to respect the Constitution of my country', 21st (and last) drawing, Sábat, *Georgie Dear*, 2nd edn, page unnumbered.

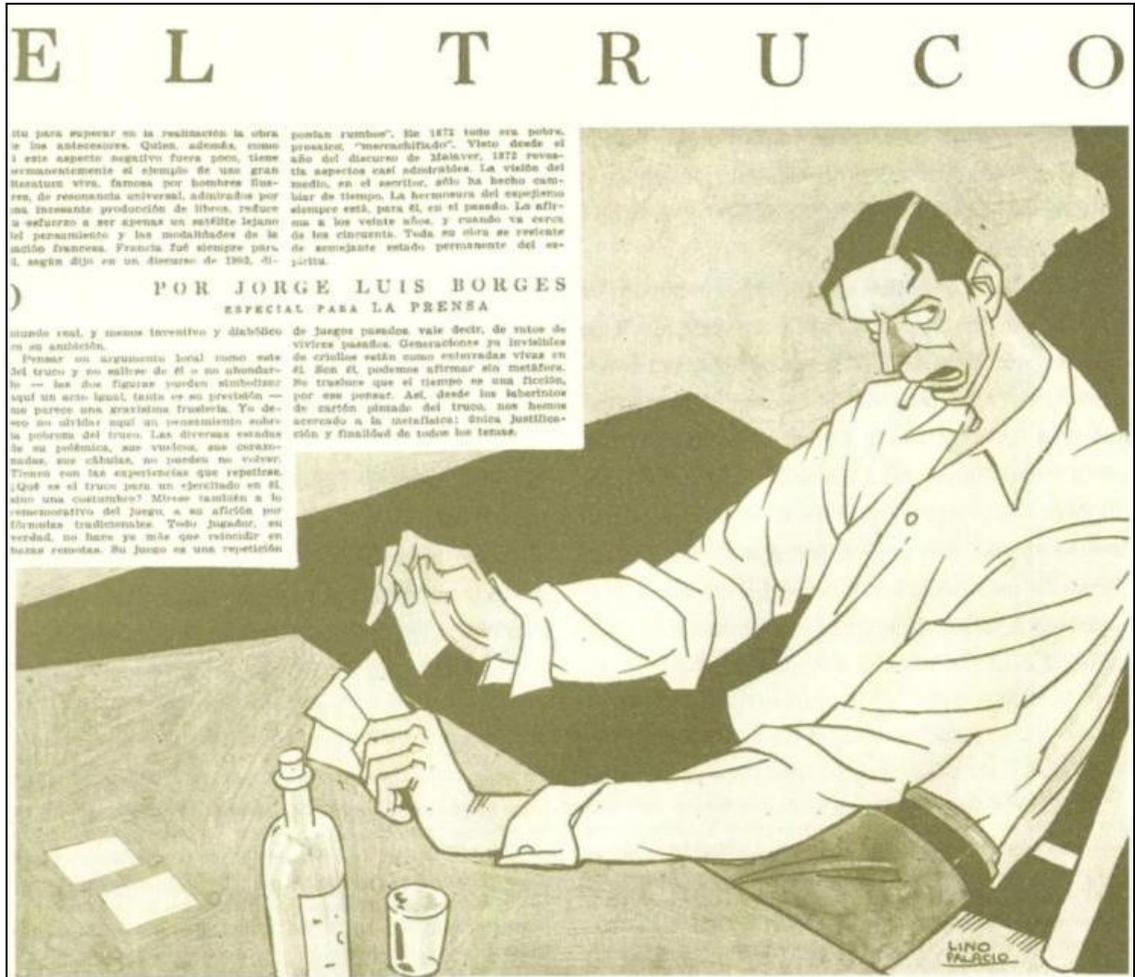


Figure 43. Jorge Luis Borges, 'El truco', *La Prensa*, 1 January 1928, illustrated by Lino Palacio, in Pauls, *El factor Borges*, p. 138.

EXCLUSIVO:
BORGES
YA PUEDE LEER
EL GRAFICO

EL GRAFICO

RIVER VELEZ

Daniel Alberto Passarella:
jerarquía para intentar la
conquista del Metra.

Julio Cesar Jimenez:
símbolo de un equipo que se
clasificó por su temperamento.

Alguna vez Jorge Luis Borges, nuestro gran escritor, sostuvo que sólo vale la pena leer libros que hayan superado los cincuenta años. Dicho en términos deportivos, literatura que ha vencido la prueba del tiempo.

En nuestro periodismo deportivo, ningún ejemplo más gráfico que... EL GRAFICO, precisamente.

Un verdadero clásico argentino que durante sesenta años ha superado todas las marcas en información, calidad, servicio y cobertura de notas. Borges ya puede leerlo... y todos nosotros estar definitivamente orgullosos de EL GRAFICO.

Por eso, en su 60 aniversario, le deseamos muchos sesenta años más.

GDG
asesores publicitarios

Figure 44. Advertisement in sports magazine *El Gráfico*, 1979, in *Borges: 1001 Imágenes*, p. 55.



Figure 45. First issue of *Fierro* (September 1984), cover design by Chichoni.



Figure 46. Second issue of *Fierro* (October 1984), cover design by Chichoni.

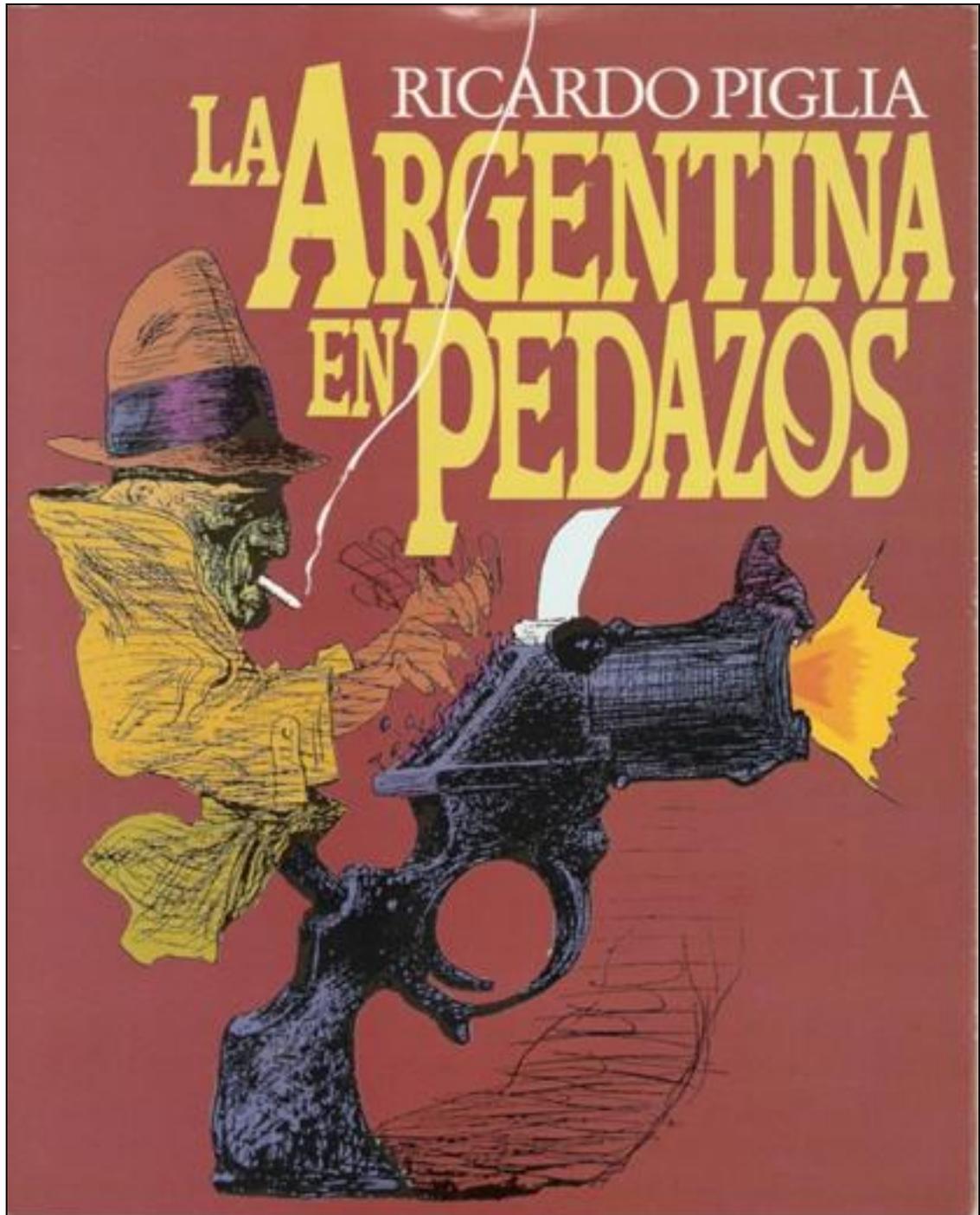
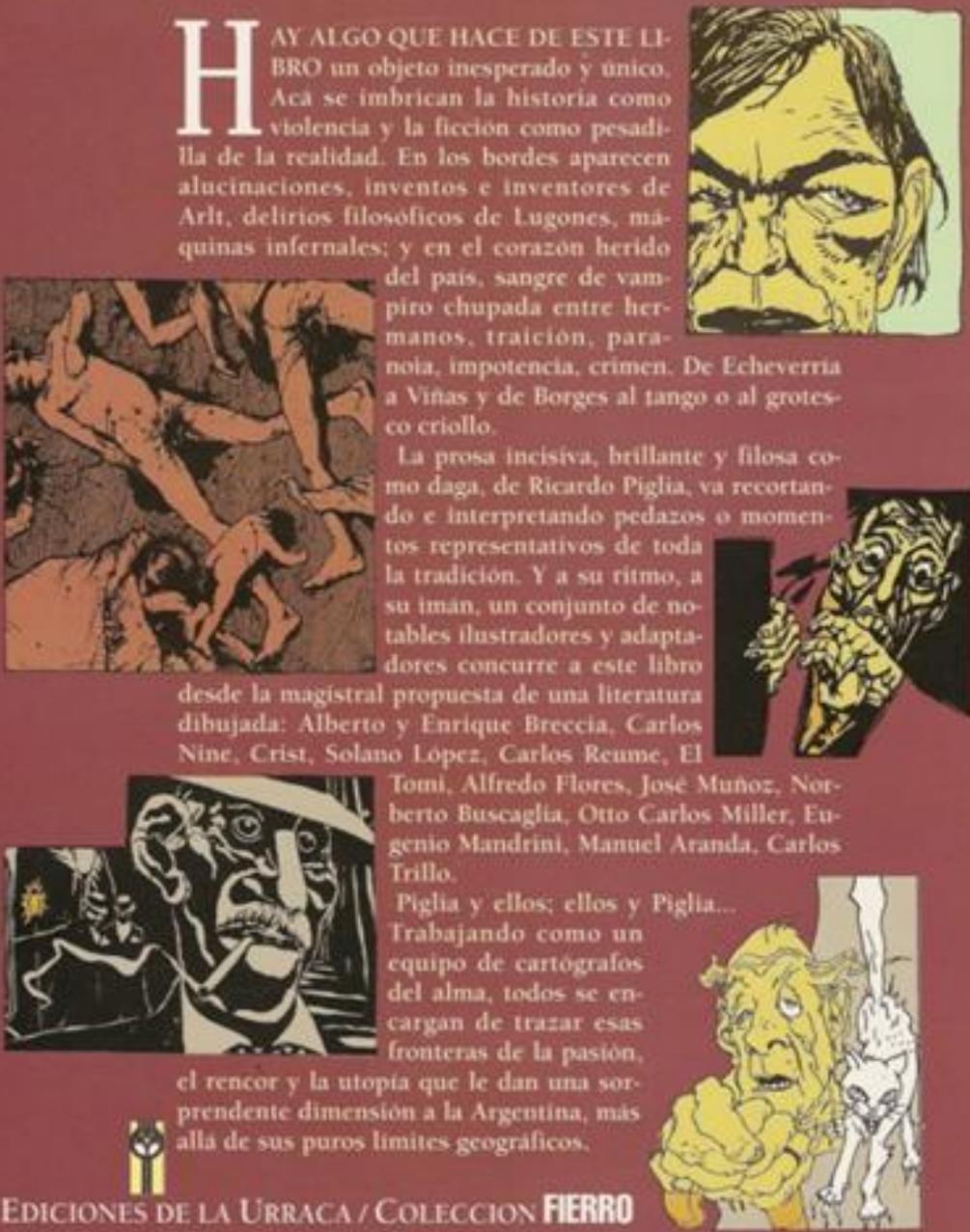


Figure 47. Cover of Ricardo Piglia's *La Argentina en pedazos* (Buenos Aires: Eds. de la Urraca, 1993)

HAY ALGO QUE HACE DE ESTE LIBRO un objeto inesperado y único. Acá se imbrican la historia como violencia y la ficción como pesadilla de la realidad. En los bordes aparecen alucinaciones, inventos e inventores de Arlt, delirios filosóficos de Lugones, máquinas infernales; y en el corazón herido del país, sangre de vampiro chupada entre hermanos, traición, paranoia, impotencia, crimen. De Echeverría a Viñas y de Borges al tango o al grotesco criollo.

La prosa incisiva, brillante y filosa como daga, de Ricardo Piglia, va recortando e interpretando pedazos o momentos representativos de toda la tradición. Y a su ritmo, a su imán, un conjunto de notables ilustradores y adaptadores concurre a este libro desde la magistral propuesta de una literatura dibujada: Alberto y Enrique Breccia, Carlos Nine, Crist, Solano López, Carlos Reume, El Tomi, Alfredo Flores, José Muñoz, Norberto Buscaglia, Otto Carlos Miller, Eugenio Mandrini, Manuel Aranda, Carlos Trillo.

Piglia y ellos; ellos y Piglia... Trabajando como un equipo de cartógrafos del alma, todos se encargan de trazar esas fronteras de la pasión, el rencor y la utopía que le dan una sorprendente dimensión a la Argentina, más allá de sus puros límites geográficos.



EDICIONES DE LA URRACA / COLECCION **FIERRO**

Figure 48. Piglia, *La Argentina en pedazos* (back cover)



Figure 49. Alfredo Flores and Norberto Buscaglia's version of Borges's 'Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva', in Piglia, *La Argentina en pedazos*, p. 108.



Figure 50. Flores and Buscaglia, 'Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva' (detail), p. 108.



Figure 51. Flores and Buscaglia, 'Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva' (detail), p. 113.



Figure 52. Breccia and Sasturain, 'Perramus: No saber y saber', in *Fierro*, II, 18 (February, 1986), p. 60.

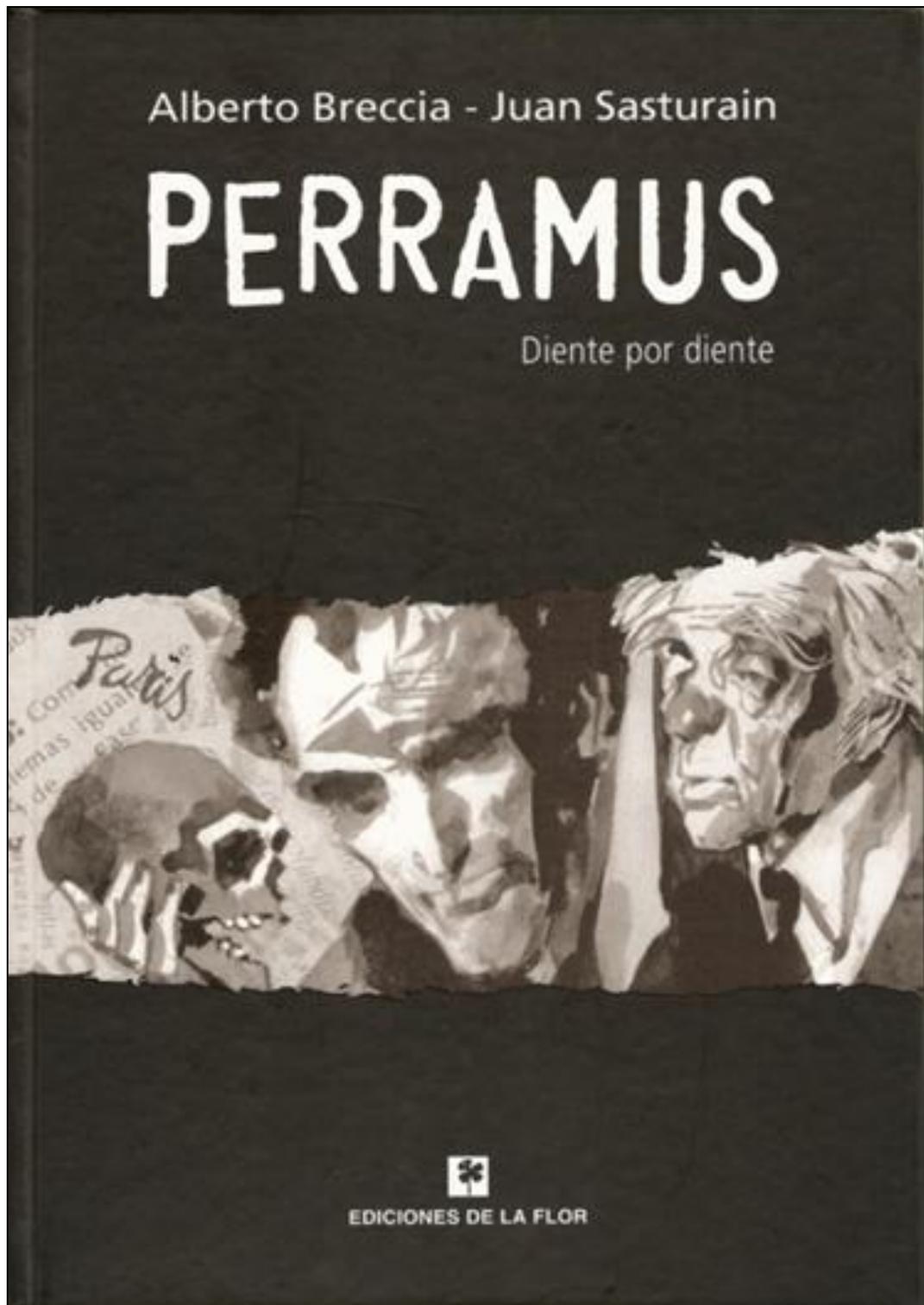


Figure 53. Breccia and Sasturain, *Perramus. Diente por diente*, front cover.



Figure 54. Breccia and Sasturain, 'La sonrisa perdida', *Perramus. Diente por diente*, p. 36.



Figure 55. Breccia and Sasturain, 'Epilogo', *Perramus. Diente por diente*, p. 169.

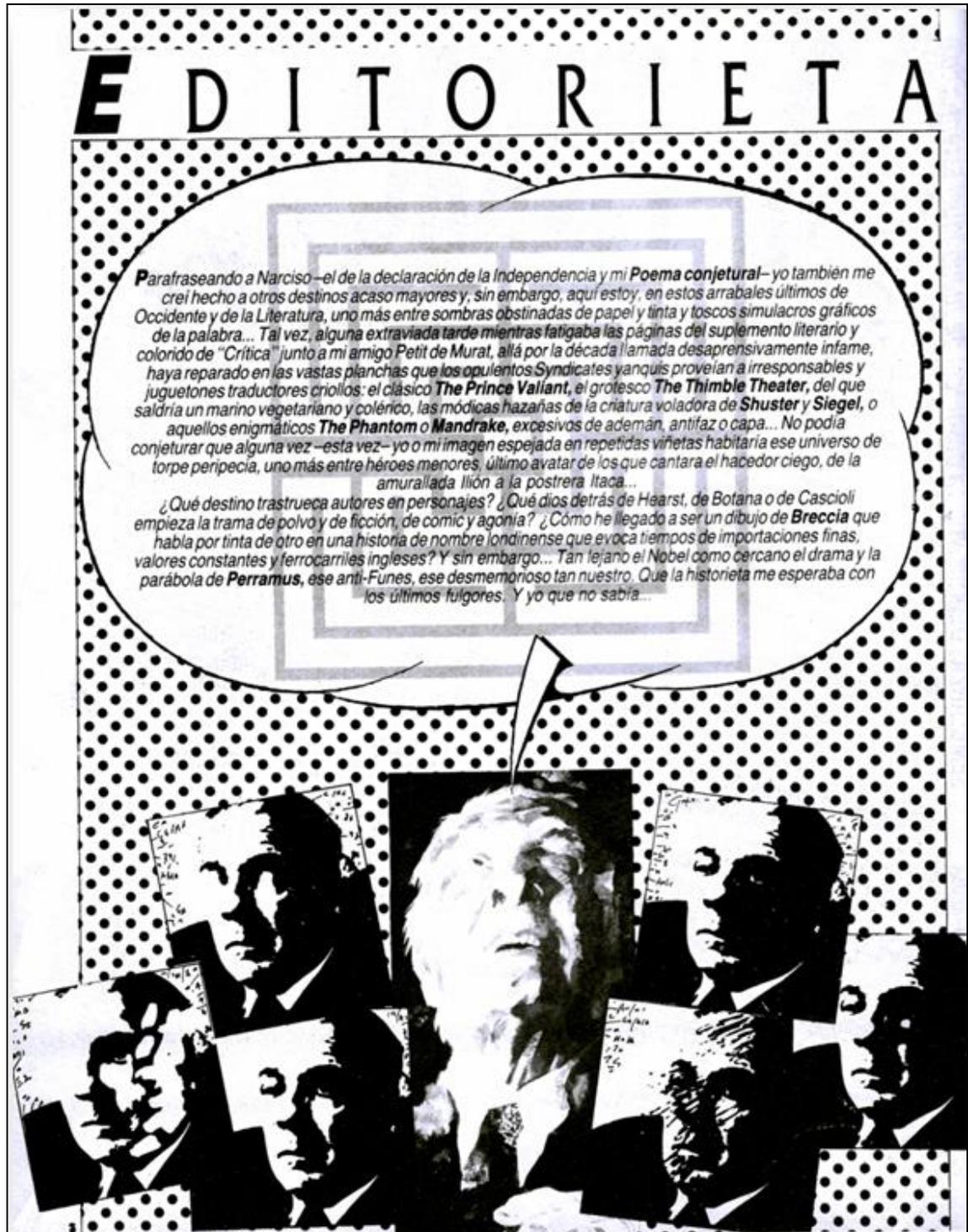


Figure 56. 'Editorieta', *Fierro*, II, 18 (February 1986), p. 12

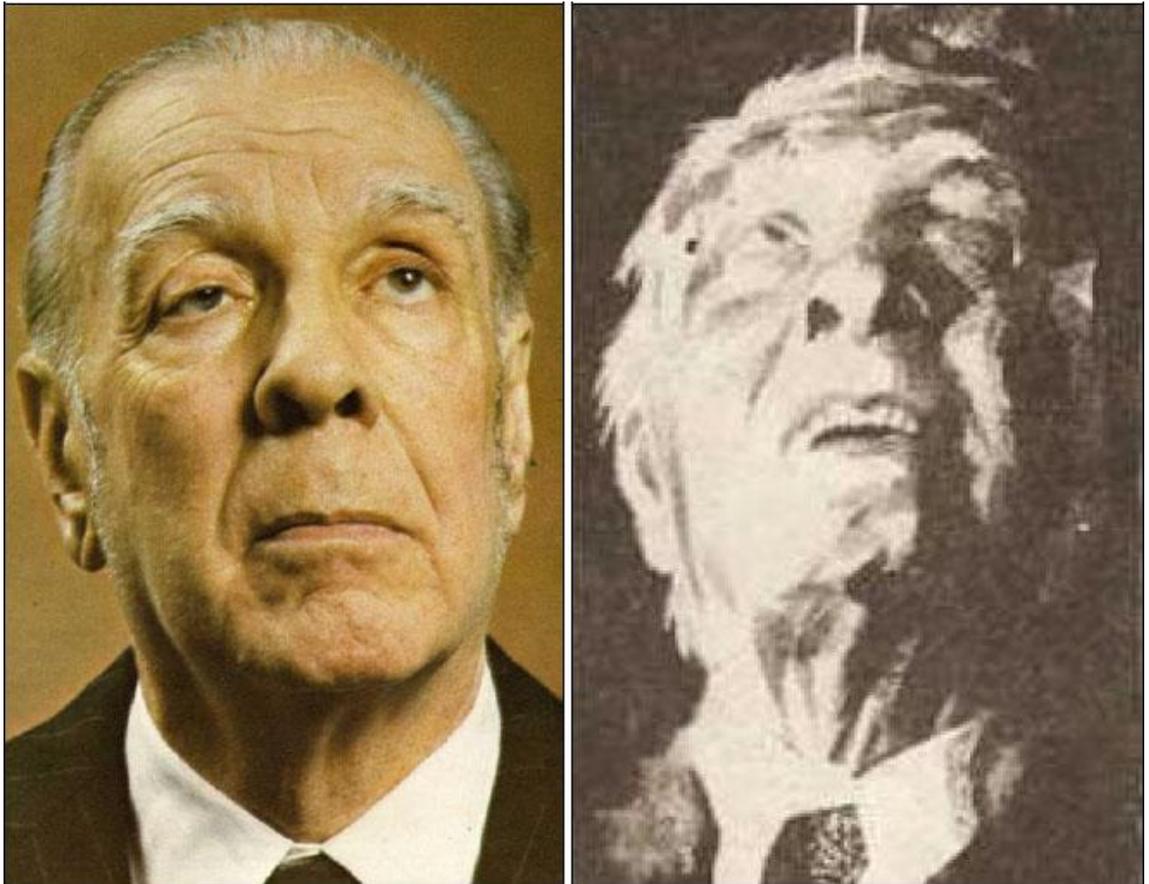


Figure 57. Borges by Pedro Luis Raota (left) and Borges drawn by Enrique Breccia (right). Raota's photograph is reproduced in 'Todo Borges', p. 159; Breccia's drawing is from *Perramus, Fierro II*, 18 (February, 1986), p. 63.



Figure 58. Alberto Breccia and Juan Sasturain, 'El fin', in *Alberto Breccia, Obras Completas*, vol.1 (Buenos Aires: Doedytores, 1994), p.1.



Figure 59. Breccia and Sasturain, 'El fin', p. 8.

Chapter Four

El desafortado caminador: Buenos Aires's 'Borgesian Spaces'

Introduction

Yo estaba siempre (y estaré) en Buenos Aires

J.L. Borges, 'Arrabal' (1923)

The relationship between Borges and Buenos Aires is a complex one which can be studied from a variety of angles. Borges gives to and takes from the city: Buenos Aires is described, fictionalized and mythologized in Borges's work, and the figure of Borges is constructed and narrated in the life and spaces of the city. As Argentine writer and journalist Carlos Alberto Zito points out: 'Buenos Aires cría (crea) a Borges, y Borges re-crea a Buenos Aires, hasta llegar a inventarle una nueva fundación, poética y excéntrica.'³⁹⁹ Zito refers to the poetic founding of the city powerfully depicted in Borges's 'Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires', a poem with a rich and varied genesis. Famously revised numerous times – various versions exist – 'Fundación mitológica de Buenos Aires' was first published in 1926 in *Nosotros* magazine (issue 204), and its last revision, where 'mitológica' in the title is replaced by 'mítica', was included in *Cuaderno de San Martín* in *Obras Completas I* (1974).⁴⁰⁰ In it, Borges intimately ties the origin of the city to his own, as he sets the arrival of the founding ships within the area where he spent much of his childhood: 'Fue una manzana entera y en mi barrio: Palermo,' now known as 'manzana mítica.'⁴⁰¹ The poem conjugates mythological

³⁹⁹ Carlos Alberto Zito, 'El Buenos Aires de Borges', *Variaciones Borges*, 8 (1999), 108-21 (p. 108).

⁴⁰⁰ Curator Juan Insúa produced a version of the poem which includes all the known revisions and corrections for the exhibition *Cosmópolis. Borges y Buenos Aires* (Barcelona, October 2002). The poem, where the changes are highlighted by the use of varying fonts, is reproduced in the book *Cosmópolis. Borges y Buenos Aires* (Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània, 2002), p. 18. (See Fig. 60).

⁴⁰¹ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires', *OCI*, p. 81

creatures ('sirenas y endriagos') with concrete 20th-Century features of the 'arrabales' (marginal areas) of Buenos Aires ('almacén', 'truco', 'compadre'), as it suggests that its past is illusory and Borges comes to the conclusion that its foundation is a fiction: 'A mí se me hace cuento que empezó Buenos Aires / La juzgo tan eterna como el agua y el aire' (p. 81).

The relationship between Borges and Buenos Aires, however, is far from bilateral, as it intersects with other people's relationships with the writer and with the city, producing constant revisions and reconstructions. Following Henri Lefebvre, considered as 'social space,' the space of these intersections 'is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity.'⁴⁰² This social space known as 'El Buenos Aires de Borges' (as depicted, for example, in Sara Facio's book by this title, and the 2002 exhibition 'Cosmópolis') 'cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object,' as 'it is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations' (p. 73).

However, as we shall see, these spaces have been treated as homogeneous entities in order to be objectified and commodified to serve political and economic interests. This is what Lefebvre, commenting on Gramsci, refers to as the use of social space to maintain the dominance of a hegemonic class, by promoting certain cultural values spatially by means of policies. This, as Lefebvre points out, makes 'the connection between knowledge [...] and power [...] manifest' and 'points up the antagonism between a knowledge which serves power and a form of knowing which refuses to acknowledge power' (p. 10). It is therefore the purpose of this final chapter to examine the strategies put in place, particularly, though not exclusively, by the current administration of the city of Buenos Aires in the transition to the 21st Century, for the

⁴⁰²Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), originally published as *Production de l'espace* in 1974, p. 73.

creation of ‘Borgesian spaces’ for the promotion of its status as a ‘literary city’. In this context, a ‘Borgesian space’ would be a space carved out in the urban landscape, in relation to its biographical or literary associations with the author, and its inclusion in a tourist trajectory (‘recorrido’), its representation on a tourist map and its publication, particularly online. Specifically, the chapter centres on Borgesian spaces that have been included in the ‘Recorrido Jorge Luis Borges’, a tour suggested by the ‘Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires’, which is available in the tourism section of its official website.⁴⁰³ In the broader context of the present study, the examination of ‘Borgesian spaces’ sheds further light on the multifaceted process of construction of the iconic figure of Borges as a step towards a definition of an Argentine cultural identity. It also exposes the tension between the circulation of certain hegemonic perceptions of the writer and other, alternative constructions that oppose them. Thinking in terms of the ‘polyvalence’ of social space which is in constant production and consumption (Lefebvre) allows us to think of the construction of a national cultural identity along similar lines: as a process which, in turn, resembles Borges’s notion of the aesthetic phenomenon as ‘the imminence of a revelation that never occurs.’⁴⁰⁴

Considering the city as a multiplicity of spaces which is in constant construction, a text that is continuously being written, as suggested by Michel de Certeau, the superimposition of Borgesian spaces on the part, mainly, of the government of the city, constitutes one of many ways of narrating the city, and in doing so, of narrating Borges.⁴⁰⁵ This is in spite of the claim that such Borgesian spaces are capable of capturing and transmitting a certain essence, both of the city and of the writer, as we shall see later on. As stated above, I base my approach to space on Lefebvre’s notion of

⁴⁰³ Online at www.bue.gov.ar/recorridos/?menu_id=13&info=borges [accessed 25 January 2010].

⁴⁰⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘La muralla y los libros’, *La Nación*, 22 October 1950. Later published in *Otras Inquisiciones*, OCII, p. 13.

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Michel de Certeau, ‘Walking in the City’, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 93.

‘social space’. I also draw on Michel de Certeau’s view of the city as speech act in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). Kenny Cupers’s ‘Towards a Nomadic Geography’ (2005), which problematizes the traditional concept of public space and dualist readings of the contemporary city (in terms of ‘inside’ and ‘out’, and consequently of exclusion), provides a basic framework, to my view, of the city as one of ‘multiple spatialities’ in constant evolution.⁴⁰⁶ This is complemented by Andreas Huyssen’s reading of urban space as palimpsest in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003). The work of Argentine critics Adrián Gorelik and Beatriz Sarlo provides a view of the development of the city of Buenos Aires and its ‘barrios’ throughout the 20th Century. A brief survey of the role of the city in Borges’s work and his positioning as a *flâneur* will follow.

This will set the scene for the analysis of how this relationship is reversed as the city looks at Borges in search of its cultural identity through the creation of Borgesian spaces. The chapter will subsequently examine some of the stops of the ‘Recorrido Jorge Luis Borges’ in order to explore the mechanisms of their construction.⁴⁰⁷ I will also refer to other instances of Borgesian spaces in order to illustrate the complex relationship between economic and political interests and the cultural icon. The first is largely a private enterprise: the creation of a Borges museum within the iconic Café Tortoni; and the second is an initiative of the city council: the renaming of a street in Borges’s honour (1996). To conclude, I will briefly consider the final objectification of the writer in the shape of the proposed repatriation of his remains from the cemetery of Plainpalais in Geneva to Buenos Aires’s historical Recoleta cemetery on two separate occasions in 1988 and 2009. This is a significant example of the city’s ultimate desire to

⁴⁰⁶Kenny Cupers, ‘Towards a Nomadic Geography: Rethinking Space and Identity for the Potentials of Progressive Politics in the Contemporary City’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Vol. 29, No. 4 (2005), 729-39 (p. 737).

⁴⁰⁷www.bue.gov.ar/recorridos/?menu_id=13&info=borges [accessed 25 January 2010].

‘possess’ Borges. The fact that this chapter focuses on a period of fourteen years of recent history, from 1996 to 2010, provides a sense of appropriate closure and brings the present study up to date.

Spatialities and Identity Formation

In *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* (2007), Beatriz Sarlo, who has written extensively about the relationship between Buenos Aires and its intelligentsia, reaffirms that in the 20th Century, ‘el imaginario urbano es hegemónico en la cultura rioplatense’ and that ‘la lengua de la ficción rioplatense es la lengua de las ciudades.’⁴⁰⁸ In her survey of the strong protagonism of the city in its literary production, Sarlo includes many of its signifying practices: ‘La ciudad es un lugar de producción formal y mitológica: la cultura de masas, la política, la moda [...] las pasiones y las astucias de la ciudad son materia de la literatura’ (p. 15). Buenos Aires is thus considered as a backdrop against which literature is written: ‘la ciudad es el teatro por excelencia del intelectual, y tanto los escritores como su público son actores urbanos’ (p. 12). The key to her description of the urban landscape as central to the cultural production of the region is the role of this cultural production itself as one of the signifying practices that invent and re-invent the city as ‘un espacio imaginario que la literatura desea, inventa y ocupa’ (p. 12).

As suggested in previous chapters, the publication of Sarlo’s book marked a change in Borgesian criticism, as she considers Borges’s positioning, both in terms of narrative technique, and also in relation to the literary establishment. Contrary to the traditionally-held view of the writer as universal, Sarlo explores his inhabiting of marginal spaces which is evident in his approach to writing (his unique use of marginal

⁴⁰⁸ Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2007), pp. 13-14. Sarlo’s *Borges, A Writer on the Edge* was originally published in London by Verso in 1993. In 1995, it was translated into Spanish and published in Buenos Aires by Ariel as *Borges, un escritor en las orillas*. In 2001, *Variaciones Borges* also published both versions online. Available at www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsi0.php and www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bse0.php [accessed 17 February 2010].

notes – footnotes – and prologues are the most obvious examples). But she especially tackles Borges's relationship with the edges of the city of Buenos Aires. Apart from meaning 'edge', in the Spanish version of her title, the word 'orillas' particularly refers to the peripheral areas of the city. These edges provide the locus for many blurrings of boundaries: between the rural and the urban, the local and the foreign, the criminal and the law-abiding. This complexity finds linguistic expression in 'lunfardo', a language born of the admixture of Spanish, Italian and other immigrant languages, but also of the surreptitiousness of criminal activity. Borges's relationship with these areas and their popular culture became the focus of a great deal of critical work especially after the publication of Sarlo's book.⁴⁰⁹

Urban historian Adrián Gorelik follows Sarlo's view of the key role of Buenos Aires in 20th-Century Argentine literary production, and he points out that 'nadie fue tan consciente como él [Borges] de la importancia de un pasado apócrifo para constituir una cultura moderna en Buenos Aires.'⁴¹⁰ The most relevant aspect of this relationship between literature and the city is 'la necesidad de una epopeya para condensar los valores esenciales de la nacionalidad' (p. 51). Gorelik further echoes Sarlo in positioning Borges on the marginal space of the 'barrios', or more specifically, across them: 'la novedad que introduce Borges es un cambio radical del escenario de esas búsquedas. [...] El barrio para Borges es [...] el lugar existencial de producción de la identidad social y cultural' (pp. 51-2).

Gorelik's interpretation of the 'barrio' as a space of production echoes Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, whose most salient contribution is the notion of

⁴⁰⁹The publication of an important number of Borges's early pieces not included in *Obras Completas*, as well as magazine and newspaper articles and reviews in *Textos Recobrados (1919-1929)* (1997) and *Textos Recobrados (1931-1955)* (2001); and the proliferation of publications exploring Borges's relationship with the city, including Sara Facio's *Borges en Buenos Aires* (2005) to name just one, go hand in hand with this phenomenon.

⁴¹⁰Adrián Gorelik, 'El color del barrio', *Variaciones Borges*, 8 (1999), 36-68 (p. 51). A point which is illustrated by Borges's 'Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires', *OCI*, p. 81.

space as a social product (p. 26), and as ‘a means of production’ (p. 85). This view of space as socially produced rests, crucially, on the concept of space being ‘non-Euclidean’. That is, ‘not as an absolute or neutral ‘container’ where humans or objects locate themselves, but as an integral part of human activity.’⁴¹¹ This is in opposition to ‘Euclidean’ space, which is abstract and homogeneous. In Lefebvre’s words, Euclidean space ‘is political; instituted by a state, it is institutional’(p. 285) and creates an illusion of homogeneity, serving ‘those forces which make a *tabula rasa* of whatever stands in their way’(p. 285). Thus, its isotopic nature ‘guarantees its social and political utility’ and confers ‘a redoubtable power upon it’ (p. 285). In this sense, such linear, containable, homogeneous space is one which can be controlled. Further, Lefebvre particularly refers to how Euclidean space lends itself to ‘the reduction of three-dimensional realities to two dimensions’ (p. 258): thus, it undergoes a double abstraction when its already homogenized categorization is reduced to its two-dimensional representation on map. The economic motivation for this strategy (as part of the development of urban cultural tourism) on the part of the city relies on the strong predominance of the visual and the fact that ‘we buy on the basis of images’ (p. 76). It does not, however, take into account that in order to include ‘the codes – the map’s legend, the conventional signs of map-making and map-reading – that are liable to change,’ and ‘the objects represented, the lens through which they are viewed, and the scale used,’ (pp. 85-6) an infinite number of maps would be needed. This more comprehensive view of space as non-linear, which takes account of the complexity of social relationships, is what Lefebvre terms ‘non-Euclidean’.

Ten years after Lefebvre’s book was published, Michel de Certeau picked up the concept of production of space in his exploration of consuming activity, *The Practice of*

⁴¹¹Lúcia Sá, *Life in the Megalopolis. Mexico City and São Paulo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 83.

Everyday Life (1984). In it, de Certeau applied linguistic concepts to the study of urban spaces and compared the act of wandering through the city with the speech act. He argued that pedestrians relate to the city as text: ‘The ordinary practitioners of the city [...] are walkers [...] whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write.’⁴¹² Thus, the city is constantly written and re-written. In this context, and following Lefebvre, de Certeau points out that the notion of ‘trajectory’, as a two-dimensional representation, ‘suggests a movement, but it also involves a plane projection, a flattening out. It is a transcription’ (p. xviii). As we shall see, the ‘flattening out’ of the urban landscape and the artificial selection of relevant details that go into the design of maps and tourist itineraries, such as the ones offered by the ‘Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires’ mentioned above, entails a simplification of the multi-layered reality of the city as experienced and therefore, as constructed, by its inhabitants and visitors. Such imposition of a fixed pattern on an ever-changing configuration is only possible as an assertion of hegemonic institutional power, as Lefebvre points out, and constitutes an example of what de Certeau terms ‘strategy’: ‘the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an ‘environment’’ (p. xix). In this context, city dwellers, as well as visitors, carve out and signify spaces for themselves, away from the controlling gaze of such power.

Two decades after de Certeau, Kenny Cupers also takes up Lefebvre’s refutation of Euclidean space and comes to the conclusion that the idea of a ‘public sphere’, traditionally ‘envisioned as uncontested abstract space’ on which institutional strategies are based, can ‘be dismantled as an *ideological construct*.’⁴¹³ He focuses on the fact that such a view of space relies on the repression of difference in the service of homogeneity

⁴¹²de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 93.

⁴¹³Cupers, ‘Towards a Nomadic Geography’, p. 730, italics in the original.

and ‘ultimately fails to understand the complexities of space and identity formation in the contemporary city’ (p. 731). In his opinion, ‘progressive politics can stimulate urban change in a world where urban planning has been used too often as a spatial technology of domination under the banner of betterment, order or progress’ (p. 737), only by considering the nomadic nature of spaces and identities. ‘Nomadism,’ he explains, ‘takes place in an ambivalent position between strangeness and familiarity’ (p. 737), which embraces change and multiplicity. Identity, Cupers claims, is shaped in spaces ‘occupied by difference,’ which are ‘full of traces of past identities and memories, allowing us to read the city in terms of the presence of uncertain, uncontrolled identities in contested spaces that are in the process of transformation’ (p. 737). In this way, the city as nomadic space can be thought of as a “palimpsest” of historical layers’ (p. 734), each of which leaves a trace that in turn narrates it.

The palimpsestic nature of urban space was explored before Cupers by cultural historian and literary critic Andreas Huyssen, as he studied the links between space and memory in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003). Huyssen chooses to return to de Certeau’s notion of the city as text in order to focus on temporality and intertextuality, reading the city historically as palimpsest:

My focus on reading palimpsests [...] is the conviction that literary techniques of reading historically, intertextually, constructively, and deconstructively at the same time can be woven into our understanding of urban spaces as lived spaces that shape collective imaginaries [...] to understand the fundamental temporality of even those human endeavours that pretend to transcend time through their material reality and relative durability.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹⁴Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 7.

As Huyssen hastens to point out, this way of reading cities does not necessarily imply a denial of the materiality of its existing buildings (p. 7), as it focuses not solely on the representation of an imagined past, but on its role as harbinger of the future, without neglecting the fundamental tension between past and present. Huyssen's approach is helpful, particularly, for the analysis of empty spaces in the city and how these have been constructed as Borgesian spaces, representations of memory where past and present coalesce.

The next section considers the evolution of the city of Buenos Aires during the 20th Century in order to explore the tension between the will of political forces that design and implement strategies in an attempt to homogenize the city, and the actual, social nature of lived, collective space.

Buenos Aires siglo XX: From Homogenizing Project to Fractured Reality

The modernizing process of urbanization which saw the city of Buenos Aires transformed from 'gran aldea' to modern city in the transition from the 19th to the 20th Centuries was a vertiginous one, at the core of which was a sort of symbolic void representing its lack of a history.⁴¹⁵ It was this void which Borges's 'Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires' sought to fill, as mentioned before. The evolution of the city runs parallel to Borges's life at the same time as it serves as setting for his early poetry.

The urban development of the city was based on the imposition of a grid design on the flatness of the 'pampas', which was modelled on that of Paris.⁴¹⁶ This modernization was launched during the so-called rule of the oligarchy, represented by

⁴¹⁵Beatriz Sarlo, 'Buenos Aires, el exilio de Europa', *Escritos sobre literatura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2007), pp. 30-45 (p. 32).

⁴¹⁶See Flora Pescador Monagas, 'De la ciudad de Buenos Aires de Borges a la calle sin esperanza de Le Corbusier', in *Variaciones Borges*, 8 (1999), 121-32 (pp.121-2).

ten presidencies of the conservative P.A.N. (Partido Autonomista Nacional, 1880-1916). It was this party who imposed the ‘modelo agroexportador’ on the Argentine economy (based mainly on the export of beef and grain to Europe), privileging the great cattle-rearing landowners of the country.⁴¹⁷ The mandate of these liberal right-wing presidents was also characterized by a clear Eurocentrism, a position which gave rise to the various plans for the transformation of Buenos Aires into the ‘Paris of South America’.⁴¹⁸ The process of modernization began with the laying of the grid system in 1898. This was followed-up by the design of avenues and boulevards in the Parisian Haussmanian style by French architect Joseph Bouvard in 1907.⁴¹⁹ This design populated the urban space with parks and avenues in an effort to escape ‘el hermetismo del espacio libre ciudadano heredado de la forma española de construir la ciudad.’⁴²⁰ It was complemented, notably, by the work of the French landscape designer Charles Thays (named ‘director de Parques y Paseos’ in 1891) and French urban design consultant Jean Claude Nicolas Forestier (employed by the city’s ‘Comisión de Estética Edilicia’ as consultant in 1923).⁴²¹

Parallel to the beautification of the city was the reconfiguration of its population from the predominance of ‘criollo’ inhabitants to an explosion of multiculturalism brought by large waves of immigration from European countries (mainly Spain and Italy) as well as farther afield, like Japan and Lebanon.⁴²² This did not exactly match the expectations of the ruling elite, whose plans for the city were based on the formula

⁴¹⁷See, for example, Rock, *Argentina 1516-1982*, pp. 167-72. Also Torcuato S. Di Tella, *History of Political Parties in Twentieth-Century Latin America*, pp. 12-13.

⁴¹⁸The myth of Buenos Aires as ‘la París de Sudamérica’ is mentioned, for example, in Andrew Graham-Yooll’s *Buenos Aires, otoño de 1982: la guerra de Malvinas según las crónicas de un corresponsal inglés* (Buenos Aires: Marea, 2007), p. 80.

⁴¹⁹See Rock, *Argentina*, p. 144.

⁴²⁰Pescador Monagas, ‘De la ciudad de Buenos Aires’, p. 122.

⁴²¹The city’s archives at the ‘Centro documental de información y archivo legislativo’ has documents that illustrate the work of both Thays and Forestier, available online at www.cedom.gov.ar/es/ciudad/paseos/capitulo4_c.html [accessed 17 May 2010].

⁴²²Gorelik discusses this in detail in *La grilla y el parque: espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936* (Bernal: Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998).

‘proyecto urbano más inmigración,’ as it did not fit the *‘perfil del inmigrante ideal fantaseado por las elites (que buscaban artesanos y campesinos nórdicos que, a su vez, sensatamente, preferían inmigrar a Estados Unidos).’*⁴²³ As a consequence of mass immigration, Buenos Aires entered the 20th Century as a ‘city of foreigners’ (p. 38). Faced with this, the ruling ‘criollo’ elite responded with homogenizing projects of nationalization which ran parallel to the modernization of the urban landscape, and in 1910, ‘mientras se festeja la independencia de España y se cumplen todos los ritos de reafirmación de la nacionalidad, por las calles de Buenos Aires se escuchan esas lenguas exóticas o el castellano con acento peninsular’ (p. 38). In the 20s and 30s, the cultural homogenizing of this kaleidoscopic mass was extended to first-generation Argentines, as the children of immigrants were ‘alfabetizados y nacionalizados en la escuela pública, laica, gratuita y obligatoria para niñas y niños,’ which repressed all cultural diversity and ‘a la fuerza [...] enseñaba a ser argentino’ (p. 39). However, as Cupers underlines, ‘space and identity cannot be fused unproblematically,’ and therefore, these ‘dualist readings of the city,’ tend to construct ‘boundaries between inside and outside,’ resulting in policies of exclusion.⁴²⁴ Interestingly, the life stories of contemporaries Borges and Arlt (who were at opposite ends of the socio-political spectrum) are marked by their failure to thrive in the Argentine school system. The cultural and linguistic diversity of the period is evident, particularly, in Arlt’s work.

By the mid-40s, the masses which were originally constituted by immigrants blended with internal migrants from the provinces searching for work, and developed into the Peronist hordes. The negative connotations of the collective termed ‘the masses’ (*‘esa sustancia amorfa, ingobernable y no sujeta a las regulaciones ni de la*

⁴²³Sarlo, ‘Buenos Aires’, p. 38. Italics in the original.

⁴²⁴Cupers, ‘Towards a Nomadic Geography’, p. 733.

razón ni de la moral'⁴²⁵) as a threat to the plans for a cosmopolitan modern city, appeared to justify the will to construct a 'national identity' based on a totalising erasure of difference. As a result, by the middle of the 20th Century, the end result of such demographic transformations showed that 'la modernidad ha cumplido algunas de sus promesas y ha mostrado sus injusticias y conflictos,' as Sarlo points out, and 'Buenos Aires ya es la ciudad predominantemente blanca, rodeada de suburbios prósperos, de barrios obreros y de villas miseria' (p. 43). Policies of exclusion were taken to the extreme during the last period of military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-83), with a 'política tecnocrática de modernización autoritaria, que comienza por la expulsión de pobres y migrantes hacia fuera del casco urbano y la consolidación de desigualdades materiales que dividen más que nunca en zonas ricas y pobres' (p. 44).

Towards the end of the 90s Buenos Aires's urban cycle closed with the city becoming the space of powerful businesses, as the modernizing thrust of the old state-centred elite was replaced by that of market forces (Sarlo, p. 44). In the same way as the earlier process of modernization had attempted the defence of an imagined and desired national cultural homogeneity for the city, current capitalist interests focused not on the city itself, but on the businesses that operated in it (Sarlo, p. 44). Thus, with the exodus of the economic elites and a portion of the middle class towards the suburbs and the banishing of the poorer sectors to the edges, the city reached the end of the 20th Century with a changed configuration, based on exclusion.⁴²⁶

In the first years of the 21st Century, the once proud city which combined a variety of European models in its eclecticism now showed signs of obvious decline and appeared fractured. Borges's rather romanticized outlying 'sur' area, as Sarlo points out,

⁴²⁵Sarlo, 'Buenos Aires', p. 43.

⁴²⁶Such attempts at ironing out difference (particularly though not exclusively, of ethnic origin, class and history), is portrayed in Argentine novelist Claudia Piñeiro's *Las viudas de los jueves* (2005), which is set in a gated community, a relatively recent suburban phenomenon in Buenos Aires which responds to the particular needs of former urban dwellers who continue to commute to the city for work.

constituted ‘la otra cara del Buenos Aires que conocen los turistas o les muestran a los visitantes extranjeros.’⁴²⁷ As the city was ushered into the new century, the centre was gradually transformed into spaces of tourist interest and ‘zonas museificadas’ (p. 44). As powerful multinationals appropriated the cityscape, ‘el exilio europeo ha concluido,’ and the foreigners roaming Buenos Aires ‘se dividen entre los latinoamericanos pobres, y los turistas que deambulan por el norte de la ciudad con una guía que les informa que Buenos Aires es la ciudad más europea de América’ (p. 44). The result of a complex history of diversity and exclusion, this is the 21st Century context in which Borgesian spaces have been constructed for the benefit, largely, of foreign tourists.

This focus on cultural tourism in the context of Argentina’s problematic attempt at globalization, is taken up by Argentine writer Tomás Eloy Martínez in his novel *El cantor de tango* (2004). Set in Buenos Aires, it revolves around the parallel quests of a certain elusive tango singer and the equally elusive Borgesian Aleph, as the places shown in it are ‘los del turismo y los del desarrollo económico argentino, mostrados a partir de sus recorridos de ‘turismo cultural’’. Todo (lo poco) que Argentina tiene ahora para vender y vende es lo que nos muestra.’⁴²⁸ The next section explores the development of this type of cultural tourism in Buenos Aires. It particularly focuses on how the current administration has capitalized on the figure of Borges as one of its most valuable and easily marketable cultural asset.

⁴²⁷Sarlo, ‘Buenos Aires’, p. 44.

⁴²⁸Ariel Schettini, ‘Un turista nada accidental’, *Página12*, 8 May 2004, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-1042-2004-05-08.html [accessed 26 February 2010]. Interestingly, Eloy Martínez had written about the objectification and veneration of Eva Perón in *Santa Evita* (1996).

Buenos Aires Today

Since the constitutional reform of 1994, the city of Buenos Aires has had autonomous jurisdiction (a status equivalent to that of the 23 provinces that make up the Argentine Republic). Before the reform, the city's mayor used to be appointed by the President of the Republic, whereas now the 'chief of government' is elected directly by the city's constituents. The 'PRO' party – currently in power, with Mauricio Macri as Mayor of the city – is a centre-right coalition which was formed to run for the mayoralty in 2005. Their economic position is largely liberal and its policies have caused the party to become known as technocratic. In terms of current local politics, the 'branding' of the city as the hub of (particularly though not exclusively high) cultural activity, can be interpreted as a move on the part of the Macri administration to establish a strong contrast with the populism of the 'Kirchnerist' Peronism of the federal government, which could be said to lean towards the centre-left of the political spectrum.⁴²⁹ Buenos Aires shows signs of reinvigorated interest in education and the arts and, in particular, an emphasis on its beautification and marketing as a tourist destination, with an accent on its renewed Europeanized identity as 'la París del Plata.'⁴³⁰ This may be generally interpreted as a nod to the elitist traditions of city design of a century ago, while, at the same time, it sends a clear, if rather simplistic, anti-populist (and therefore anti-Peronist) message. Broadly speaking, it is one of the myths of Peronism that manual work has priority over culture, as expressed in the 1945 Peronist slogan 'Alpargatas sí, libros no' (literally 'yes to working shoes, no to books', a heavily charged phrase which

⁴²⁹Argentine historian and academic Ernesto Laclau discusses this opposition in an interview published in Rio Negro Online, online at www1.rionegro.com.ar/diario/tools/imprimir.php?id=7075 [accessed 25 February 2010]. Néstor Kirchner was president of Argentina between 2003 and 2007 and he was succeeded by his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who is currently in power (both elected democratically).

⁴³⁰Pescador Monagas, 'De la ciudad de Buenos Aires', p. 122.

opposes the most basic welfare, symbolized by shoes, to the ‘indulgence’ of learning).⁴³¹

The city as a space in dispute between mass-serving Peronism and the intelligentsia is illustrated in Borges and Bioy Casares’s story of mob brutality ‘La fiesta del monstruo’ (1947).⁴³² Here, a Jewish student is spontaneously executed by a large group of working-class Peronist supporters (‘la merza’)⁴³³ on their way to a public appearance of their leader, referred to as ‘el Monstruo’ and clearly implying Perón: ‘No pensaba más que en el Monstruo y que al otro día lo vería sonreírse y hablar como el gran laburante argentino que es.’⁴³⁴ The narration follows the slow and eventful approach of the mob from the barrio to the heart of the city, Plaza de Mayo, where the rally is to be held. It describes how this gradual movement results in Buenos Aires appearing as a ‘ciudad ocupada’, as Rodríguez Monegal referred to Borges’s impression of Peronist Buenos Aires.⁴³⁵

The association of the city with the figure of Borges, one of the country’s best known anti-Peronists, is consistent with the semantic appropriation of space represented by the renaming of Serrano street as ‘Jorge Luis Borges’ by the UCR (Unión Cívica Radical) administration of the city in 1996. And it is especially in-keeping with the image of the cultural capital that the Macri administration appears keen to promote, as we shall see next.

⁴³¹Noé Jitrik offers a conciliatory revision of this opposition in his 2007 article ‘Exquisitos y justos’, in *Página/12*, 3 April 2007, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/imprimir/diario/contratapa/13-82698-2007-04-03.html [accessed 19 February 2010].

⁴³²For a discussion of populism and its perception as ideologically simple and empty which normally leads to elitist dismissal, see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

⁴³³Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, ‘La fiesta del monstruo’, *Nuevos Cuentos de Bustos Domecq, OCEC*, p. 400. ‘Merza’ is lunfardo for ‘rabble’. ‘Merza. v. Mersa: conjunto de personas de baja condición.’, José Gobello, *Nuevo diccionario lunfardo* (Buenos Aires, Corregidor, 1998), p. 170.

⁴³⁴Borges and Bioy Casares, ‘La fiesta del monstruo’, p. 393.

⁴³⁵Emir Rodríguez Monegal, ‘Viviendo en una ciudad ocupada’, *Borges: Una biografía literaria*, pp. 354-62 (p. 356).

Buenos Aires ‘marca literaria’: Recorrido Jorge Luis Borges

The initiatives for the promotion of cultural tourism by the government of the city of Buenos Aires in recent years have been characterized by a strong emphasis on image. This section examines the creation of Borgesian spaces as instances of ‘aesthetic spaces for cultural consumption.’⁴³⁶

In September 2008, former entrepreneur, and Buenos Aires Minister for Culture and Tourism, Hernán Lombardi explained his plans to turn the city into a ‘literary brand’: ‘Vamos a revalorizar el patrimonio literario, a través de las bibliotecas y los sitios de interés [...] y ampliaremos las acciones relacionadas con escritores. Además, vamos a desarrollar circuitos literarios, por autores y por barrios.’⁴³⁷ The fact that, as Lombardi explains, part of the project includes a European tour of ‘tres de los referentes más destacados de la literatura – Jorge Luis Borges, Manuel Puig y Mujica Lainez’ through ‘muestras fotográficas y de objetos’ suggests a strong interest in publicizing the city abroad as a ‘literary brand’. Lombardi refers, particularly, to the case of ‘“El Atlas de Borges”, exposición fotográfica con textos del autor del Aleph,’ which was in Paris at the time and would also be shown in Salamanca and Berlin. ‘Buenos Aires,’ he said, ‘merece ser literaria por los escenarios de obras plasmados en la ciudad, por sus monumentos y sitios de interés literario, por sus escritores’ (para. 7).

In 2009, Lombardi explained that initiatives like open top tourist buses are a way of developing ‘nuestros productos turísticos que son básicamente culturales,’ in the same way as the great cities of the world do.⁴³⁸ A few months later, Buenos Aires was

⁴³⁶ Andreas Huyssen, ‘The voids of Berlin’, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 49-71 (p. 50).

⁴³⁷ ‘Lombardi proyecta convertir a Buenos Aires en una marca literaria’, *La Nación*, 26 September 2008, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1053835 [accessed 30 January 2010] (para. 8 of 12)

⁴³⁸ ‘Conmauricio’, 8 April 2009, online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGu73QX5b2g&feature=video_response [accessed 29 January 2010]

designated World Book Capital City for 2011 by UNESCO,⁴³⁹ which brings this literary association to the international public eye and paves the way for potential economic benefits:

Durante un año, toda la producción literaria y de publicaciones porteña se desplegará ante el mundo, se multiplicarán aquí las actividades vinculadas con los libros y la lectura, y se estrecharán vínculos con editoriales de distintos países, que abrirán la puerta a nuevos negocios.⁴⁴⁰

Efforts of this kind are meant to show that Buenos Aires is in line with the great cities of the world in terms of what it can offer to cultural tourism (Lombardi had referred to Edinburgh as an example of a successful ‘literary city’). They also bring to mind Huyssen’s reflection on the efforts of a changing city ‘to better attract international attention: not the city as multiply coded text to be filled with life by its dwellers and its readers, but the city as image and design.’⁴⁴¹

Amongst the ‘monumentos y sitios de interés literarios’ mentioned by Lombardi in 2008, are the landmarks included in the ‘Portal oficial de turismo de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires,’ the city’s official tourism website.⁴⁴² Launched in 2004 by the mayoralty of the city, it contains a variety of clearly laid out and user-friendly ways of exploring the city. Using up to date technology, it offers interactive maps, printable guides in foreign languages, and even a space where users are invited to create their own profiles and in turn, participate in the configuration of a new space: ‘Armá tu

⁴³⁹‘World Book Capital City. Buenos Aires World Book Capital 2011’, *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, online at portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=39258&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html [accessed 27 February 2010].

⁴⁴⁰‘Buenos Aires fue elegida capital mundial del libro 2011’, *La Nación*, 14 June 2009, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1139109 [accessed 27 February 2010].

⁴⁴¹Huyssen, ‘The voids’, p. 63.

⁴⁴²Online at www.bue.gov.ar/home/ [accessed 12 January 2010].

propio mapa de la ciudad. Subí tus fotos, ranqueá los sitios y formá parte de la comunidad virtual de amantes de Buenos Aires.⁴⁴³ The site is available in Spanish, English and Portuguese, providing ease of access to both local and foreign visitors. Through use of alluring graphics and friendly language, the site invites and guides the user through a carefully mapped out urban experience. The layered complexity of Buenos Aires is expressed in the montage of maps, old photographs, drawings of historical buildings and advertising logos. The site appears as a comprehensive service, offering easy access to information online or by telephone. Accessibility to the city – actual or virtual – is assisted by virtual photo-galleries, information about transport links and a variety of maps and itineraries.

One of the ways ‘bue.gov.ar’ proposes visitors should experience Buenos Aires is by taking one of the many tours based on prominent figures from the city’s history and culture, amongst whom is Borges. The figure of the writer appears in three different ‘circuitos’: an audio guide which is downloadable to mobile phones and MP3 players, which offers a recording of Borges’s voice referring to the area of Palermo Viejo; a literary tour which shows sites of biographical interest and literary settings pinpointed on an interactive map of the city; and a biographical tour, which is the focus of this chapter (Figs. 61 and 62).⁴⁴⁴ A combination of media makes this an attractive sensorial experience: the visitor can take a walk around the areas where Borges used to walk and, while doing so, listen to an audio file containing a recording of Borges’s voice. To complete the package, each of the stops signposted on the printable map is marked by a brass plaque on the pavement. There are two other biographical tours available apart from the one on Borges: that of ‘el cantante de tango que se convirtió en símbolo de

⁴⁴³ ‘Mi Buenos Aires querido’, online at www.bue.gov.ar/home/ [accessed 6 May 2010].

⁴⁴⁴ Online at www.bue.gov.ar/audioguia/?info=recorrido&idrecorrido=37; www.bue.gov.ar/literario/?inc=recorrido&ncRecorrido=204 and www.bue.gov.ar/recorridos/index.php?menu_id=13&info=borges [all accessed 19 January 2010].

Buenos Aires,' Carlos Gardel, and 'la mujer más influyente de la política argentina,' Eva Perón.⁴⁴⁵ Interestingly, Borges's is the one which includes the greatest number of landmarks. References to this tour can be found in foreign media, such as *The New York Times* (May 2006), and prestigious travel guides like *Frommers*.⁴⁴⁶

Following de Certeau, this strategy of mapping out the city 'assumes a place that can be circumscribed' and thus appropriated as a packageable, consumable whole.⁴⁴⁷ As discussed before, the design and publication of 'bue.gov.ar' is part of a 'political [and] economic [...] rationality' that 'has been constructed on this strategic model' (p. xix). Superimposing the figure of Borges onto the cityscape, the city can be said to 'become' Borges, thus attracting visitors with the promise of access to a certain cultural pedigree or authenticity which is, in actual fact, elusive, as Henri Lefebvre points out:

Maps that show [...] historical sites and monuments to the accompaniment of an appropriate rhetoric, aim to mystify in fairly obvious ways. This kind of map designates places where a ravenous consumption picks over the last remnants [...] of the past in search of [...] the *signs* of anything historical or original. If the maps and guides are to be believed, a veritable feast of authenticity awaits the tourist. The conventional signs used on these documents constitute a code even more deceptive than the things themselves.⁴⁴⁸

In this way, the creation of Borgesian spaces as a commercial strategy appears as an instance of the marketing strategy of 'retrograde innovation,' which taps into the

⁴⁴⁵Online at www.bue.gov.ar/recorridos/?menu_id=12&info=biograficos#item0_Biográficos [accessed 19 January 2010].

⁴⁴⁶Larry Rother, 'Borges's Buenos Aires. A City Populated by a Native Son's Imagination', *The New York Times*, 14 May 2006, online at travel.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/travel/14foot.html?pagewanted=2;www.frommers.com/destinations/buenosaires/2299010008.html [accessed 26 February 2010].

⁴⁴⁷de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xix.

⁴⁴⁸Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 84.

need for consumption of the past.⁴⁴⁹ As discussed in Chapter 2, Argentine publishers attempted a ‘re-packaging’ of Borges as a young man in the late 90s, achieving instead a perpetuation of his image as an old man by emphasizing a sense of age and tradition through the medium of old photographs. In a similar way, the city council’s effort to create new Borgesian spaces produces the effect of reviving the historical reality of places – especially of missing buildings, as we shall see later on, and consequently, of Borges as a historical figure – in his recreation within the new virtual space of the ‘Recorrido’. Adrián Gorelik calls this essential signifying tension between old and new, ‘operación mistificadora’.⁴⁵⁰ Gorelik uses the term in the context of the process of construction of the identity of the ‘barrio’ within the city of Buenos Aires in the early part of the 20th Century. However, it may be applied to the analysis of present-day ‘Borgesian spaces’ insofar as they are expected to ‘dar cuerpo a la identidad’ (p. 46), in this case, a Borgesian identity which will contribute to the process of delineation of an identity for the city itself, condensing the image of Borges as an old sage with a strong aura of tradition for the city as cultural hub of the nation. It also taps into a dual perception of Buenos Aires’s eminent cosmopolitanism and strong porteño sense. Borges, who constructs himself in terms of this dualism within his work, mirrors the city’s mixed heritage and is himself constructed as a product of Buenos Aires.

Buenos Aires’s Borgesian spaces construct the author in different ways, but they have been created in real places that bear some relationship with his life. The next section examines Borges’s chosen way of personally relating to these spaces and to the city in general, and the impact of this relationship in his work.

⁴⁴⁹‘Retrograde innovation’ is Nick Perry’s phrase in ‘Post-Pictures and Ec(h)o effects’ in *Hyperreality and Global Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 38-9. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is a case of relying on the meanings already associated with the name to construct, in this case, a new (virtual) space by means of new technology.

⁴⁵⁰Gorelik, ‘El color del barrio’, pp. 45-46.

Borges's Singular Mode of *Flânerie*

As discussed before, the image of Borges as a *flâneur* has been particularly brought to light in the critical bibliography of the last 20 years, which saw renewed interest in his earlier work and his relationship with the socio-political reality of Argentina. Up until then, there had been a strong focus on the 'universal' aspect of his work, which resulted in the perpetuation of the image of a writer detached from a context, as Adriana Bergero explains: 'La crítica tradicional ha tendido a leer la obra borgeana como una escritura capaz de sobrevolar y *trascender* los contextos materiales e históricos que la rodearon, empecinada en sortear toda referencia a realidades concretas.'⁴⁵¹ Carlos Alberto Zito summarizes the contemporary view which contradicts 'traditional' Borgesian criticism and that is echoed by contemporary critics, notably Beatriz Sarlo: 'De todos los temas que abarcó su creación, pocos persisten a lo largo de toda su obra como la ciudad de Buenos Aires.'⁴⁵² Numerous works that mark this change of view from that of a predominantly 'universal' writer to a profoundly 'porteño' Borges have been published. As mentioned before, amongst these studies of his intimate relationship with Buenos Aires perhaps the most influential is Sarlo's *Borges, un escritor en las orillas* (2007).

Borges's poetry has been interpreted as an attempt to create an apocryphal history for the city, particularly in his first published collections, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925) and *Cuaderno de San Martín* (1929), followed by *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), a biography of sorts which at times reads as an excuse to delve deeper into the identity of his changing city by positioning himself on the edge of the 'arrabal'. The poems written on his return after spending his adolescence in Europe, mourn the loss of the landscape he knew as a child and its transformation into the

⁴⁵¹ Adriana Bergero, 'Jorge Luis Borges/Buenos Aires: arrabales, fobias y dioramas de sublimación en la primera modernización de Buenos Aires', in *Delirios de grandeza; los mitos argentinos: memoria, identidad, cultura* ed. by Pons and Soria, pp. 309-31 (p. 309), italics in the original.

⁴⁵² Zito, 'El Buenos Aires de Borges', p. 108.

bustling metropolis that would see its apogee of development and beautification in the first half of the 20th Century, a period which coincides with Borges's personal journey into adulthood and maturity.⁴⁵³ His love for it is well documented, in critical studies of his work, biographical accounts and interviews and documentaries.⁴⁵⁴ Many of Borges's friends experienced the writer's incessant 'callejeo', part roaming, part conversation and part creation, a distinct habit that is also picked up by Jason Wilson in *Buenos Aires: A Cultural and Literary History* (1999).⁴⁵⁵ Some of these accounts mention the crossing of bridges and railways, which mirrors Borges's well-known border-crossing as an aesthetic choice. María Esther Vázquez also underlines the extent of this life-long habit:

Mantuvo el hábito de las caminatas nocturnas a lo largo de casi cuarenta años. [...] Tenía la costumbre de recorrer, entre el hollín y el humo, los puentes extendidos sobre las vías en la estación Constitución [...] Y luego volver por el Bajo hasta la calle 25 de Mayo [...] Desandábamos el camino hasta mi casa, y, ya del otro lado de la puerta, lo veía irse quizás hacia la Plaza San Martín. Y digo 'quizá' porque para este incansable caminador no se había agotado la noche.⁴⁵⁶

Borges's personal history defines his relationship with the city in varying ways. With the complete loss of his eyesight towards 1955, the city of the second half of the century ceases to be a visual experience. In his 1959 'Poema de los dones', for example,

⁴⁵³In the poem 'La vuelta' (published in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* in 1923), Borges reflects on the process of re-familiarization that he must undergo on his return to the city, *OCI*, p. 36. Williamson examines Borges's avid roaming of the edges of Buenos Aires in this period in 'Buenos Aires', *Borges*, pp. 93-114.

⁴⁵⁴Studies published in the last two decades include Carlos A. Zito's *El Buenos Aires de Borges* (1998); the ten articles published in the dossier 'Borges y la ciudad' in *Variaciones Borges* 8, 1999 and León Tenenbaum's *Buenos Aires, tiempo de Borges* (2001). Many documentaries and televised interviews filmed in the 1970s also resort to the stroll around Buenos Aires as a preferred setting, thus emphasizing the ties between the writer and his environment. Consider, for example, *Los paseos con Borges* (Blakman, 1977).

⁴⁵⁵Jason Wilson, *Buenos Aires: A Cultural and Literary History* (Oxford: Signal, 1999), p. 47.

⁴⁵⁶Vázquez, *Borges*, pp. 73-4.

Borges condenses this particular way of feeling the city with his experience as the blind director of the Biblioteca Nacional, combining the idea of ‘knowing himself’ with images of roaming through a space he knows intimately but is unable to see: ‘yo fatigo sin rumbo los confines / de esa alta y honda biblioteca ciega.’⁴⁵⁷ This visually deprived experience of familiar spaces, which Borges knew existed but was unable to perceive, may be transferred to that of the tourist who makes the pilgrimage to the selfsame space which he or she is not able to see but which contains so much meaning. The visual imagery of Borges’s early poetry dominates the way in which the writer reacted against the sounds, smells and textures of a modernized city of highways and skyscrapers that he could no longer see. As Júlio Pimentel Pinto points out: ‘A contramano de las celebraciones vanguardistas de la urbe como símbolo de furor modernizante, Borges hace de su memoria un recurso poderoso para exorcizar la nueva Buenos Aires.’⁴⁵⁸ Thus in ‘Elogio de la sombra’ (1969), the city which ‘antes se desgarraba en arrabales / hacia la llanura incesante,’ has now returned to ‘las borrosas calles del Once / las precarias casas viejas / que aun llamamos el Sur.’⁴⁵⁹ This poem, which appears to follow the perambulations of the elderly writer through the streets of Buenos Aires, equates the topographical identity of the city to that of his face (an idea that he had explored in the epilogue to *El Hacedor* in 1960⁴⁶⁰). Here, blindness and old age are praised as signs of a maturity which Borges believes will allow him to finally know himself: ‘Pronto sabré quién soy.’⁴⁶¹ And, again, the city itself is seen as the fateful setting of his pathway to the discovery of his intimate centre: ‘Del Sur, del Este, del Oeste, del Norte / convergen los caminos que me han traído / a mi secreto centro’ (p. 395). It is this superimposition of cityscape and personal identity that the porteño city council later exploited to

⁴⁵⁷Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Poema de los dones’, *El Hacedor, OCII*, p. 187.

⁴⁵⁸Júlio Pimentel Pinto, ‘Borges lee Buenos Aires. Un ejercicio crítico frente a la modernización de la ciudad’, *Variaciones Borges*, 8 (1999), 82-94 (p. 83).

⁴⁵⁹Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Elogio de la sombra’, *OCII*, p. 395.

⁴⁶⁰Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Epílogo’, *El Hacedor, OCII*, p. 232.

⁴⁶¹Borges, ‘Elogio de la sombra’, p. 396.

accompany the rebranding of Borges as eminently porteño with that of Buenos Aires as profoundly Borgesian, that is, traditionally literary and cosmopolitan.

In the words of Argentine critic and academic Sylvia Molloy, ‘La *flânerie* ávida ya signa la letra borgesiana como justificación ontológica y a la vez crítica.’⁴⁶² For Borges, then, the city plays a vital role, as walking around it was the way the writer related to the everyday practices of his environment. In ‘*Flâneries* textuales: Borges, Benjamin y Baudelaire’ (1999), which explores Borges’s narration of the city in both a biographical and an aesthetic sense, Molloy differentiates Borges’s mode of *flânerie* from the modernist Baudelairian roaming. The latter, she points out, consists of two stages: one of dispersion amongst the crowd followed by a gathering in and return to the unity of the self. Borges, on the other hand, remains forever as a dispersed subject, dispensing with ‘el recogimiento, el refugio en la unicidad, el regreso al yo’ and instead remaining ‘en suspenso’ (p. 18).⁴⁶³ This particular positioning in the context of the city has echoes of Borges’s definition of the aesthetic phenomenon as the imminence of a revelation that never occurs (as Molloy also points out in relation to Borges’s choice of the sunset as setting for much of his poetry (p. 25)): as in Borges’s poem ‘Caminata’ (*Fervor de Buenos Aires*, *OCI*, p. 43), ‘el sujeto se da a la deriva, en continuo acto de percepción’ (p. 19). Molloy thus concludes that ‘ser yo, en el texto borgesiano, no es centralizarse y fundamentarse en el espacio solipsista del *flâneur* sino ser anhelo o codicia *flotantes*, no aposentados en un sujeto’ (p. 19). The layered nature of this aimless walking which produces meaningful spaces is crucial: Borges narrates the city, as do his fellow city dwellers and visitors, superimposing layers of meaning which constantly weave and unravel the text that is the city, in the manner described by de

⁴⁶²Sylvia Molloy, ‘*Flâneries* textuales: Borges, Benjamin y Baudelaire’, *Variaciones Borges*, 8 (1999), 16-29 (p. 18).

⁴⁶³Cf. Cristián Cisternas Ampuero’s focus on Borges as a unified subject in ‘Jorge Luis Borges: El “otro flâneur”’, *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, 62 (2003), pp. 79-104.

Certeau: ‘consumers produce through their signifying practices [...] ‘indirect’ or ‘errant’ trajectories obeying their own logic,’ and ‘their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences.’⁴⁶⁴ This is an ongoing process in perpetual change and evolution. But, Borges’s roaming in particular, suggests Molloy, also constitutes ‘una maniobra de inserción en una tradición literaria precisamente argentina [...] gesto que recalca (que inventa) una filiación nacional.’⁴⁶⁵ This intimate link between Borges’s *flanêrie* and the construction of national identity plays out in a Buenos Aires that Borges invents in his poetry from its ‘mínimos, elementales aspectos,’ largely drawing from a ‘memoria colectiva y ceremonial pero a la vez recuerdo preciso tomado del bric-à-brac mnemónico’ (p. 28). The mechanisms of the interaction of city dwellers and visitors with this particular Borgesian imprint on Buenos Aires, is what de Certeau would call ‘making the text habitable.’⁴⁶⁶ This is comparable to what speakers do ‘in the language into which they insert both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent [...] their own history:’ so ‘do pedestrians, in the streets they fill with [...] their desires and goals’ (p. xxi).

Molloy points out the complexity of the tension between the *flâneur* as a ‘sujeto deambulante que percibe la ciudad y, en esa percepción, se percibe a sí mismo,’ and a city ‘en vías de modernización.’ This relationship, she claims, is a double-sided exercise in self-portrayal, in which both the city and the *flâneur* are evanescent: the city is at the same time, ‘telón de fondo y substancia misma del yo’ (p. 17). It is fundamental to bear in mind, therefore, that the shared characteristic of the writer and the city is a transient nature. The reciprocity within this relationship makes it possible to turn it around and examine it from the point of view of the city as a space that ‘actively remembers’ and ‘bears active witness to human action,’ considering the city as self-defining subject in

⁴⁶⁴ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xviii.

⁴⁶⁵ Molloy, ‘*Flâneries textuales*’, p. 27.

⁴⁶⁶ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xxi.

its relationship with the *flâneur*.⁴⁶⁷ Thus, Buenos Aires's Borgesian spaces, where the author's life story and writing, the motivations behind their creation and the expectations of visitors, converge, construct both the writer and the city. They condense the Borges that emanates from the poems in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, and the Borges that the city council constructs as a product for international consumption.

Crossing Borders: 'La inútil discusión de Boedo y Florida'

This section explores Borges's positioning on the edge – both literal and figurative – in relation to the 'barrio', which, according to Adrián Gorelik, in the 20s had become the centre of the 'polémica política, urbana y cultural.'⁴⁶⁸ It explores Borges's view of urban space as 'spatial complexity'⁴⁶⁹ rather than an abstract rationalization which can be divided into zones of exclusion. During the first decades of the 20th Century, Buenos Aires saw itself divided into two literary sides, each given the name of a street: Florida and Boedo. As Roberto Segre explains:

De la antítesis entre riqueza y pobreza surgió el contraste entre la modernidad de los edificios altos del centro y las estructuras tradicionales de los barrios suburbanos [...] Es la contraposición entre [...] las divergencias culturales entre el este de la élite de Florida y los artistas populares de Boedo al oeste.⁴⁷⁰

This distinction was not taken seriously when it first arose, but it subsequently had a significant impact on the way these writers were thought of, particularly, as studied in

⁴⁶⁷Cupers, 'Towards a Nomadic Geography', p. 731.

⁴⁶⁸Gorelik, 'El color del barrio', p. 36.

⁴⁶⁹Cupers, 'Towards a Nomadic Geography', p. 731.

⁴⁷⁰ Roberto Segre, 'Buenos Aires en sus treinta. Los profetas de la modernidad porteña: Gardel y Le Corbusier', in *Delirios de grandeza*, ed. by Pons and Soria, pp. 289-307 (p. 292).

Chapter 3, in the 60s and 70s when Borges's perception as an elitist writer had strong political connotations.

Borges's traditional association with the Florida group fuelled the construction of the writer's image as elitist and in opposition to Boedo writers like Roberto Arlt, for example. However, Borges is known to have been unhappy with such labels, and as early as 1928, he felt it necessary to clarify the contrived nature of what he regarded as 'La inútil discusión de Boedo y Florida'.⁴⁷¹ In this article, which in parts anticipates the debate later revisited in 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' (1955), he rightly warns his readers that 'la ascendencia o justificación de los símbolos es lo de menos: lo importante es su aceptación' before he proceeds to analyze the symbols associated with each of the opposed literary groups.⁴⁷² Borges demonstrates the futility of such polarization of Argentine literature by first referring to the areas of the city which they supposedly represented. His argument centres around the complex social and cultural topology of Boedo and Florida streets, from which he deduces the absurdity of such an apparently clear-cut distinction. This article, which is testimony to Borges's intimate knowledge of the city and the multifaceted meanings attached to places within it, conveys an image of a writer who protests his impartiality regarding the pigeonholing of cultural activity. This is far removed from that of the elitist, ivory-tower author examined in previous chapters of this study. The image is especially clear in his analysis of the 'contradictorias falacias' at the heart of the Boedo-Florida opposition, one of which is 'la connotación erudita de la palabra "arte", superstición que nos invita a conceder categoría de arte a un soneto malo, pero a negársela a una bien versificada

⁴⁷¹Jorge Luis Borges, 'La inútil discusión de Boedo y Florida', *La Prensa*, Buenos Aires, 30 September 1928. After its first publication in the generally conservative Buenos Aires daily *La Prensa*, this article remained in obscurity for almost seven decades until it was included in Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos Recobrados. 1919-1929*, ed. by Sara Luisa del Carril (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997), pp. 365-8.

⁴⁷²Jorge Luis Borges, 'El escritor argentino y la tradición', *Sur*, 232 (1955), 1-8.

milonga.⁴⁷³ The arbitrary nature of the definition of a literary style and identity in relation to a geographical area is revisited by Borges in 1937 in ‘Los escritores argentinos y Buenos Aires’. Reinforcing his belief that there is much more to urban spaces than simplified labels, he insists on the strength of the symbolic significance ascribed to places, as he considers ‘Barrio Norte,’ a ‘categoría social más que topográfica.’⁴⁷⁴

Many decades later, Borges writes that he would have preferred to be part of the ‘grupo de Boedo, considerando que escribía sobre el viejo Barrio Norte y los conventillos, sobre la tristeza y el ocaso,’ and rather mockingly regrets that ‘uno de los dos conjurados [...] me informó que yo era un guerrero de Florida y ya no quedaba tiempo para cambiar de bando,’ insisting that ‘todo aquello estuvo amañado.’⁴⁷⁵ Borges was aware that, as Cupers points out, ‘the problem with dualist readings of the city is that they tend to run parallel with a kind of political theory that privileges binaries, and thus constructs boundaries between inside and outside.’⁴⁷⁶ Borges’s view of the city was one of a space of multiplicity whose boundaries are fluid rather than excluding. In this context, Gorelik explains that Borges attempts to expose the ‘carácter mitificado del Boedo bohemio y humanitarista’ since he considers that ‘el barrio es en sí mismo el objeto literario que debería producir la mitología y no, como para el realismo humanitarista o la bohemia tanguera, un escenario arquetípico en el que transcurren las historias.’⁴⁷⁷

Borges’s early appreciation of the complexity of meanings that construct these spaces is supported by Gorelik, who contends that it is Boedo’s ‘aureola cultural [...] cuya fuerza imaginaria es la única explicación de la adopción del nombre Boedo por los

⁴⁷³Borges, ‘La inútil discusión’, p. 366.

⁴⁷⁴Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Los escritores argentinos y Buenos Aires’, *Textos cautivos, OC IV*, 254 (First published in *El Hogar*, 12 February, 1937), p. 254.

⁴⁷⁵Jorge Luis Borges, *Autobiografía*, pp. 90-91.

⁴⁷⁶Cupers, ‘Towards a nomadic geography’, p. 733.

⁴⁷⁷Gorelik, ‘El color del barrio’, p. 53.

escritores que buscaron oponer en los años veinte una literatura de compromiso social a los experimentos de la vanguardia de Florida' (p. 48). He goes on to say, confirming Borges's views, that it is 'un error recurrente en la historia de la literatura suponer, en cambio, que el barrio de Boedo era en sí mismo el motor de esa preocupación social, en tanto barrio obrero, fabril o marginal' (p. 48). Borges thus exposes the contrived nature of the association of each of these streets with a particular political view and literary style, whilst conceding the strong influence that widespread belief in them can have. History has proved Borges right: his image as an elitist writer is generally based on his association with the Florida group. This, in turn, fuelled the dislike of left-wing intellectuals of the 'Parricidas' generation, as explored in Chapter 3, and has only recently been revised in depth in critical studies which reposition the writer on the edge, as we have seen.

Far from Borges's view of the city as a fluid space of identity construction, the city council has made this Borgesian space 'politically useful'⁴⁷⁸ by constructing both a deeply porteño and Anglophile Borges. As the analysis of his work demonstrates, in his writing Borges creates a city which is mobile and nomadic, a non-Euclidean space in constant construction, whereas the policies of the local council 'flatten' the relationship between the writer and the city in order to create a simplified space which can be easily packaged and commercialised in order to advertise the city as 'literary'. In this way, where Sarlo had seen the urban landscape as the hegemonic subject of 20th-Century literary production, this relationship is turned around to make of literature – and of Borges in particular – a tool for generating revenue through advertising the city.

Borges preferred to embrace the complexity of what others seem to perceive as a contradiction or dichotomy, as is the case with the Boedo/Florida distinction. This complexity is evident in the Biblioteca Miguel Cané (Fig. 63), where once conflicting

⁴⁷⁸Cf. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 285.

images of Borges are juxtaposed to create a product for cultural tourism. Situated in the ‘barrio porteño’ of Boedo and founded in 1927, this local public library is part of a long tradition of ‘bibliotecas populares’ first promoted by President Sarmiento in 1870. It has been an integral part of the cultural patrimony of the area ever since, and it is where Borges worked until his resignation after his notorious transfer to the ‘inspectorship of poultry’ by the Peronist government in 1946.⁴⁷⁹ Borges had sad memories of his time at the library, in particular due to his difficulty in relating to the particular work habits of his colleagues, who both resented his hard work and ignored him as a writer. (pp. 106-7). However, the nine years that the writer spent working in the library were a period of close experience of the barrio, travelling through its landscape in the tram and enjoying the view of the traditional low rooftops which formed the backdrop to his reading sessions on the terrace of the library (Fig. 64).

The Miguel Cané library is included in the ‘Recorrido Biográfico Jorge Luis Borges’ (Stop 3), which British writer Julian Barnes took in February 2008, as he went in search of the traces of Borges, one of his favourite writers. This had clear echoes of the lust for relics explored in his own novel *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), where the narrator wonders: ‘Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can’t we leave well alone? Why aren’t the books enough?’⁴⁸⁰ Impeccably organized by the British Council in Buenos Aires in collaboration with the government of the city, Barnes’s visit to the library in particular, centred around a rather specific literary joke. This consisted of the creation of a space called ‘El patio de los loros de Flaubert’ on the first floor of the library (to coincide with Barnes’s visit), as a reference to the aforementioned novel, which follows the search for the authentic stuffed parrot believed to have sat on Gustave

⁴⁷⁹Borges, *Autobiografía*, p. 112. This incident has been retold numerous times by biographers and critics to illustrate the dichotomies Borges/Perón and intellectualism/populism, although Williamson offers a rather more conciliatory account in *Borges*, pp. 292-3.

⁴⁸⁰Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (London: Picador, 1984), pp. 2-3.

Flaubert's desk.⁴⁸¹ Here, the British writer was invited to certify, in English, that 'muy posiblemente éste sea el auténtico loro de Flaubert' (para. 8), on a plaque underneath the wooden figure of a parrot (Fig. 65).

The events surrounding the visit of the British writer provided valuable publicity for the city, tapping into and perpetuating the image of Borges as an Anglophile: the fact that the commemorative plaque (which was placed to match, symmetrically, Borges's on the other side of the front door of the library) reads 'el escritor británico', attests to this (Figs. 66 and 67).⁴⁸² The fact that the naming of the patio might only be understood by a chosen few (that is, only those who have knowledge of Barnes's novel), contributes to the construction of Borges as an elite writer, associated with a type of literature that is only available to an intellectual minority. This reinforces the opposition between the populism of the periphery (Boedo) and the elitism of the intellectuals linked with the centre of the city (Florida). There is no plaque commemorating the visit of Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa – a fellow Latin American who writes in Spanish and therefore, arguably, more widely read in Argentina – to the Miguel Cané library the following month, even though he was declared 'huésped de honor de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires' in a ceremony held there.⁴⁸³ Nor is there a plaque for the Chilean Jorge Edwards or any of the other Spanish language writers that subsequently visited the library. This points to a series of decisions, on the part of the city council, to superimpose the constructions of Borges as elitist and Anglophile, which are, in themselves, simplifications, on a landscape that Borges

⁴⁸¹Susana Reinoso, 'Julian Barnes: la *road movie* de su paso por Buenos Aires', *La Nación*, 7 February 2008, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=985099 [accessed 19 January 2010].

⁴⁸²The visit had coverage in the leading national papers (*Clarín*, *La Nación* and *Página/12*): www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=985099; www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=985099; www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/4-9138-2008-02-07.html [all accessed 27 February 2010].

⁴⁸³'Vargas Llosa fue declarado Huésped de Honor', online at the official website of the Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires: www.buenosaires.gov.ar/noticias/?modulo=ver&item_id=3&contenido_id=21729&idioma=es [accessed 11 May 2010].

himself had constructed as mobile. This, in turn, taps into the construction of Borges as epitomizing the marriage of literature and the city, which favours the promotion of Buenos Aires as literary capital, as mentioned before.

The current fate of Boedo's local library, whose users and staff find themselves struggling against the efforts of the city's government to appropriate it as a 'Borgesian' tourist attraction, is an example of the tension between the powerful imposition of political strategies and the local tactics to retain a sense of community identity that both Lefebvre and de Certeau talk about. In this context, the figure of Borges becomes a clear exponent of a commodity whose exchange value resides in its power to 'sell' the city as a destination for cultural tourism. This appears as an artificial imposition, particularly on the current employees of the library (whose job is to promote reading in their barrio and not to market the city), and it creates a certain antagonism at the local level, thus emphasizing the perception of Borges as removed from the actual needs of the community and perpetuating his image as an elitist, Florida writer.

After visiting the Miguel Cané library, Julian Barnes was treated to a drink at the traditional café Margot on Avenida Boedo, which, according to the city's official website, constitutes 'un cierre bien porteño para una tradición que recién comienza.'⁴⁸⁴ Cafés are, undeniably, Buenos Aires's meeting place *par excellence*: they are also, traditionally, spaces for political and intellectual debate. This is another profoundly porteño trait that the city council exploits as tourist attraction, by naming 59 cafés as

⁴⁸⁴'Biblioteca municipal Miguel Cané', *Espacios*, Subsecretaría de Patrimonio Cultural, Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, online at www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/cultura/patrimonio_historico_cultural/biblioteca_cane.php [accessed 19 January 2010]. Spanish writer Juan Cruz Ruiz tells a similar story of his visit to Biblioteca Miguel Cané and subsequently to various nearby cafés: 'Luego llegó Josefina Delgado, la directora de todas las bibliotecas de Buenos Aires, y nos llevó a los viejos cafés que parecen rescatar del fondo de la historia aquellos cafés españoles o italianos de los que se hizo el alma de los cafés de Buenos Aires,' in *Egos Revueltos. Una memoria personal de la vida literaria* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2010), p. 200.

‘bares notables’ of Buenos Aires.⁴⁸⁵ The Margot is one of these, and by organizing a visit to it to immediately follow any official visits to the Miguel Cané, the council establishes a link between Borges and café culture, which reinforces the idea of the city as literary. This, as mentioned before, is achieved by making urban space fit the Euclidean space of tourist trajectories. The next section examines how cafés such as the Margot condense meanings associated with porteño culture and have, as such, been appropriated as Borgesian spaces. This is particularly in the context of one of the local government’s initiatives to promote the city as ‘Capital Mundial del Libro 2011.’⁴⁸⁶

‘Yo leo en el bar’: ‘Cafés porteños’ as Borgesian Spaces

In February 2010, Buenos Aires’s minister for Culture, Hernán Lombardi, launched an initiative to promote reading in unconventional places, like merry-go-rounds and cafés. ‘Yo leo en el bar’ consists in ‘la instalación de bibliotecas con la colección completa de Borges en quince bares notables de la capital argentina.’ As Lombardi points out, reinforcing Buenos Aires’s literary identity, libraries and cafés are ‘dos de los mejores aspectos de la porteñidad y dos características de una ciudad que se define como cultura y sobre todo literaria.’⁴⁸⁷ This political strategy has the double effect of associating Borges with the eminently social space of the café, and therefore reinforcing his deeply porteño identity, whilst publicizing an attempt to bringing his work closer to the common man and woman.⁴⁸⁸ Thus, in a rare political move, and after many decades of the image of the man being disconnected from his work, the two come together and

⁴⁸⁵Online at www.bue.gov.ar/actividades/index.php?buscar=1&info=bares&menu_id=74 [accessed 18 May 2010].

⁴⁸⁶Online at www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/cultura/al_dia/lectura_bar_10.php?menu_id=20277 [accessed 27 February 2010].

⁴⁸⁷‘La obra de Borges, disponible desde hoy en bares porteños’, ‘Revista Ñ’, *Clarín*, 25 February 2010, online at www.revistaenie.clarin.com/notas/2010/02/25/_-02147652.htm [accessed 27 February 2010].

⁴⁸⁸This was recently reported in the BBC News website: Candace Piette, ‘Argentina aims to rediscover a love of books’, 23 April 2010, online at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8635289.stm [accessed 11 May 2010].

closer to the people of Buenos Aires.

Amongst the initial 15 notable cafés where the government of the city is to place copies of Borges's work (donated by publishing house *Planeta*) is the traditional Café Tortoni, whose iconic 'porteñidad' has been linked to the figure of the writer. Founded in 1858, it is a living testament, not only to the significance of café culture in the city, but also, together with Avenida de Mayo, where it is located, to its multifaceted cultural origins (Fig. 68). These, in turn, echo the city's own cultural configuration, as Beatriz Sarlo explains:

Como en la cultura argentina, la originalidad está en los elementos que entran en la mezcla, atrapados, transformados y deformados por un gigantesco sistema de traducción. Buenos Aires es una traducción de Europa, de muchas lenguas y de textos urbanos en conflicto, refractada por el hecho inevitable de su ubicación en América. Hay tanta imitación como *bricolaje* y reciclaje.⁴⁸⁹

Strongly Haussmaniann in design, Avenida de Mayo (built between 1883 and 1894) is also known as 'la avenida de los españoles' or 'la gran vía porteña' and it is said to have been 'pensada por argentinos que querían imitar a los franceses, construida por italianos y habitada por españoles.'⁴⁹⁰ Considered the civic axis of the city, it joins the historic Plaza de Mayo and its Casa Rosada (the seat of the national executive) with Plaza del Congreso and its legislative palace. The historical significance of Avenida de Mayo lies

⁴⁸⁹Beatriz Sarlo, 'Buenos Aires', p. 32.

⁴⁹⁰This is a piece of local wisdom which is repeated by various local and international tourist websites and blogs, such as visitasurbanas.blogspot.com; www.almargen.com.ar/sitio/seccion/turismo/baires4/index.html; www.turismoyargentina.com/avenida-de-mayo-el-primer-bulevar-de-buenos-aires; www.novelhotel.com.ar/Ing/A_Histo.htm [all accessed 28 May 2010]. It is an accurate summary of the avenue's politico-historical origins and its multicultural social profile: planned and started during the Europeanizing conservative government of Julio Argentino Roca, it is likely that the workforce hired to do the building works was mainly of Italian origin, as it coincides with the first wave of Italian immigration in Argentina. Spanish immigrants are known to have settled around the avenue, hence its nickname.

in that it ‘transforma la “gran aldea” en una ciudad moderna que no reniega de sus raíces europeas. Por su kilómetro y medio pasaron los grandes acontecimientos de la historia de nuestro país.’⁴⁹¹ This distinctly Parisian feature of the porteño landscape is a strong vestige of the years of the oligarchic presidencies mentioned before, during which much of the modern urbanization of the city took place.

Café Tortoni, in turn, takes its name from a 19th-Century Parisian café located on Boulevard des Italiens. Traditionally a space for literary, artistic and political debate, it has become one of the tourist destinations of the city of Buenos Aires.⁴⁹² The café is situated in a beautiful art nouveau building and it boasts interiors of great architectural interest, as they retain their original character. But its main attraction lies in its illustrious regulars, as early 20th-Century owner Celestino Curutchet is known to have said ‘los artistas gastan poco pero le dan lustre y fama al café.’⁴⁹³ The café cleverly exploits this by displaying photographs and other memorabilia to document it. Museum-style display cabinets flank the front door, showing images of the most select visitors and habitués (Fig. 69), amongst whom is Jorge Luis Borges. However, Borges did not visit the café particularly regularly, as León Tenenbaum points out in *Buenos Aires tiempo de Borges* (2001), where he underlines Borges’s preference for roaming: ‘No fue Borges un concurrente regular, asiduo, empedernido del sedentario café barrial. Sin dudas sus inclinaciones [...] eran peripatéticas. La charla andando.’⁴⁹⁴ Café Tortoni, he suggests, is among those cafés which Borges sporadically frequented but which left no individual mark on him.

Borges is also one of the three life-size figures around one of the café tables that make up a rather amateurish sculpture placed towards the back of the long room of the

⁴⁹¹Online at www.avenidademayo.org.ar/ [accessed 25 January 2010].

⁴⁹²As publicized on the café’s homepage: www.cafetortoni.com.ar/html/tortoni.html [accessed 25 January 2010].

⁴⁹³Online at www.cafetortoni.com.ar/html/historia.html [accessed 6 May 2010].

⁴⁹⁴León Tenenbaum, *Buenos Aires tiempo de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Turísticas, 2001), p. 278.

café (Fig. 70). The sculpture brings together the writer, tango singer Carlos Gardel and poet Alfonsina Storni, a scene only possible in fiction, as, interestingly, an elderly Borges leaning on his walking-stick, is portrayed next to a young Gardel. The iconic singer died in the 1930s, when Borges was still a young man, which means that the sculpture does not show the historical figures but, rather, the myths: Gardel as perpetually young and Borges as perpetually old. Tourists queue up to take the empty chair left just by it, to become part of this simulacrum by having their photograph taken with the great Argentine icons. Funded by Paris-based ‘Art Saint Michel’ to promote ‘la integración y el conocimiento de la cultura y el patrimonio franco-argentino,’ the sculpture is further testimony to the French cultural connection, which in turn taps into the legend of Gardel’s French origins and the apogee of export tango in Paris in the 20s and 30s.⁴⁹⁵

At the back of the café, a room which used to function as a barber’s shop has become a museum (Fig. 71), containing books, stamps and photographs related to Borges and other famous figures of porteño culture. This space was partially reproduced for the Café’s stand at the 2008 Feria del Libro (Fig. 72), which adds a further dimension to the efforts of the Tortoni’s owners to fix a cultural identity to the café. The centrality of the figure of Borges both in the café and in its display at the book fair, speaks of the great benefits of these Borgesian spaces in terms of publicity for the café, and ultimately, for the city. The profound influence of Parisian culture in the history of the city’s modernization and in the development of both its high and popular culture coalesce under one roof, constituting an attractive cultural tourist package. The city’s ‘Yo leo en el bar’ initiative further reinforces Café Tortoni’s construction as a Borgesian space and it constitutes an example of the combination of public and private initiatives that are associated with the management style of the current administration.

⁴⁹⁵Online at www.cafetortoni.com.ar/html/visitantes2.html [accessed 27 February 2010].

The next section explores the role of memory and history in the creation of ‘empty’ Borgesian spaces in areas of the city of Buenos Aires where the boundary between public and private is blurred.

‘Ghostly’ Borgesian Spaces

In his study of urban spaces as palimpsests, Andreas Huyssen notes that even those spaces that seem ‘among the most stable and fixed: cities, monuments, architecture, and sculpture’ have become infused with ‘memory and temporality,’ in such a way that ‘we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space, monuments as transformable and transitory.’⁴⁹⁶ In the case of some of the stops in the ‘Recorrido Jorge Luis Borges’, this transformability of historical spaces has been taken full circle, as these spaces no longer ‘exist’ physically, or their function or ownership has changed, therefore losing any physical trace of Borges. In this sense, they can be referred to as ‘ghost’ spaces, since, as Huyssen argues, they are both replete with historical meanings and open to current resignifications.

These spaces, which contain a strong ghostly presence of Borges, are indeed in constant construction, as Kenny Cupers points out: ‘Space can be reconceptualized as being fundamentally constituted by past and present ideologies.’⁴⁹⁷ Cupers refers to Henri Lefebvre’s notion that ‘space is always something that is being actively reproduced to sustain or alter socio-economic and cultural differences’ (p. 734). The city can thus be understood as a ‘fundamental multiplicity of spatialities where old and new ideologies, homogeneous and differential space, coexist’ (p. 734). The space created by the government of the city is a virtual space, whose visual representation on the web has its referent in history, and whose multiplicity is constructed through the

⁴⁹⁶Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 7.

⁴⁹⁷Cupers, ‘Towards a Nomadic Geography’, p. 734.

interaction between these meanings and the experiences and expectations that each visitor brings along. In Cupers's words: 'Space can thus be envisaged as a 'palimpsest' of historical layers, some of which have disappeared while others remain active in constituting identities' (p. 734).

Two of the spaces referred to above have been demolished: Borges's birthplace, house number 842 of calle Tucumán; and his calle Serrano home (Fig. 73). The two original buildings have disappeared from the landscape, leaving no material trace, which means that the roaming Borges enthusiast may be surprised to see that the map from the city's official website has taken him/her to an apparent dead end. Those enthusiasts who have also read his work may be amused by such a Borgesian twist and may imagine, for example, that the house itself exists in a parallel universe of a Buenos Aires of forking paths, or in a creator's dream. Zito disentangles a few of the layers of historical signification of Borges's birthplace, or 'solar natal.'⁴⁹⁸ The use of 'solar' in this phrase, which is used in tourism discourse to refer to the birthplace of a historical figure, is appropriately vague, as it refers to a non-defined space (that is, not a house or building in particular). This space may be thought of as constituting 'the site of the ruins of previous orders in which diverse histories, languages, memories and traces continually entwine and recombine in the construction of new horizons.'⁴⁹⁹ This palimpsest of old and new, a ghostly space where historical meanings relating to Borges are revived by its inclusion in a tourist itinerary is described by Zito:

La propia casa natal de Borges desaparecerá en ese terremoto edificio que sacudió al centro de la ciudad en los primeros años del siglo. En ese lugar, ahora con la numeración 838, hay un local comercial. Sin embargo, la placa recordatoria del

⁴⁹⁸Carlos Alberto Zito, *El Buenos Aires de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Aguilar, 1999), p. 64.

⁴⁹⁹Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues. Journeys in postmodernity*. (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 112, cited in Cupers, 'Towards a Nomadic Geography', p. 734.

sitio natal de Borges se colocó en el edificio contiguo (Tucumán 842 al 846). Se trata de una casa de dos plantas, de fachada italianizante, construida en 1929 para sede del Club Oriental. Actualmente funciona allí la Asociación Cristiana Femenina.⁵⁰⁰

The house on calle Serrano is also absent. But the mention of the name ‘Serrano’ itself evokes the poem ‘Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires’, which situates this space within the so-called ‘manzana mítica’: ‘La manzana pareja que persiste en mi barrio: / Guatemala, Serrano, Paraguay, Gurruchaga.’⁵⁰¹ And, in turn, the name of the street also brings to mind the fact that the name of a section of this street has been changed into ‘Jorge Luis Borges’ (Fig. 74), something which was ironically prefigured by the writer in life: ‘Sería horrible pensar que algún día habrá una calle que se llame Jorge Luis Borges, yo no quiero ser una calle.’⁵⁰² Sandra Pien points out that Borges would have disapproved because ‘rebautizaron con su nombre un tramo de la palermitana calle Serrano, destruyendo la idealizada manzana de su poema Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires.’⁵⁰³

Thus, Borges ended up ‘being a street’, as the will of the city administration was to emphasize the presence of the figure of the writer in a concrete urban space. In this way, a tangible Borgesian area was generated which was later incorporated into the ‘Recorrido’ by the following administration, as Jorge Luis Borges street extends and makes visible the ‘manzana mítica’ to link up with the metropolitan Zoo nearby (now stops 10 and 11). As chapter 2 explored, this is yet another instance of the construction of the image of the writer as mythical as the characters he created and also, as the urban

⁵⁰⁰Zito, *El Buenos Aires de Borges*, p. 64.

⁵⁰¹Borges, ‘Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires’, p. 81

⁵⁰²Jorge Luis Borges in *Borges para millones* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1997), cited by Zito in *El Buenos Aires de Borges*, p. 246.

⁵⁰³Sandra Pien, ‘Ciudad de mitos’, *La Nación*, 28 January 2007, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?Nota_id=877662 [accessed 13 January 2010]

landscape that he narrated. This is illustrated by the words of the then mayor of the city of Buenos Aires, U.C.R. (Unión Cívica Radical) Fernando de la Rúa, as he declared this section of calle Serrano officially renamed ‘Jorge Luis Borges’ in 1996:

‘Borges amó a Buenos Aires y la recorrió incansablemente’, expresó De la Rúa. ‘Su figura, la de un anciano apoyándose en un bastón alcanza hoy, como la de los personajes que creó, la estatura de mito. No lo olvidarán ni la calle Serrano, ni Palermo; pero tampoco la calle Brasil, el área de Constitución o Villa Crespo. Los hombres de un suburbio que nos devolvió, transformados en belleza.’⁵⁰⁴

De la Rúa’s words thus contributed to the perpetuation of the image of the writer as the city’s mythical elderly *flâneur*.

The ‘Ex sede de la Biblioteca Nacional’, where Borges served as director from 1955 until his resignation in 1973, is another ‘ghost’ space. In this case, this is due to its change of function: no longer a library, the links to Borges’s life only exist in historical documents and memory. Opened in 1901, the building in calle México housed the National Library until it was moved to a purpose-built modern venue in calle Agüero in 1992; the old building now houses the ‘Dirección Nacional de Música y Danza’. Designed by Italian architect Carlos Morra, the imposing Beaux-Arts building comprises three levels which combine an Italianate layout with classical decorative elements. At its core, what used to be the central reading room, directly underneath a cathedral-style dome, has had lines painted on the floor, turning the extensive space into a court to double up as sports facility and rehearsal space (Fig. 75).

⁵⁰⁴Jorge Rouillon, ‘En Palermo Viejo, Borges tiene calle’, *La Nación*, 24 August 1996, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=171789 [accessed 13 January 2010].

Looking up at the empty shelves of the former library draws the eye to the source of light of the stained glassed dome, causing the impression of an empty ancient site of worship, containing the vestiges of a previous order. As Huyssen explains:

An urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what there was before, imagined alternatives of what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias.⁵⁰⁵

In the case of the former Biblioteca Nacional, the sense of the space as palimpsest is great. The physical presence of books has been erased and the silence of the reading room has been lost. However, the age and architectural style of the building speaks of the grand plans of the turn-of-the-century ruling conservative elite for a powerful metropolis that, modelled on Paris, emulated the great capitals of Europe. In particular, this architectural grandeur associated Buenos Aires with European art, thus expressing the city's great cultural and intellectual ambitions. In addition, the particular historical context of Borges's appointment as director (by the military government of the 'Revolución Libertadora') and, later, his resignation (on Perón's return to power), is imbued with significant political connotations, as it places him in clear opposition to Peronism and causes him to be perceived as being in favour of military regimes in general.⁵⁰⁶ The almost legendary fact that Borges was one of the three blind directors of the library (famously picked up in the character of the blind librarian in Umberto Eco's 1980 novel *Il nome della rosa*) and the conjunction of blindness and the seeming infinity of the empty library find literary expression in 'Poema de los dones', where

⁵⁰⁵Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 7.

⁵⁰⁶Williamson examines the political aspect of Borges's directorship in 'Borges Against Perón', 'La Revolución Libertadora' and 'Between Sunset and Dawn', in *Borges*, pp. 311-41 and 403-15.

even the library is referred to as ‘blind’.⁵⁰⁷ Here, the use of the word ‘ciega’ – which also means ‘bottomless’ or ‘infinite’ – brings Borges’s experience of himself and of the library together. These are some of the most prominent traces of layers, although by no means the only ones, of this palimpsest.

Two other sites in Buenos Aires are worth mentioning in this context. The next section concentrates on the juxtaposition of public and private enterprise in another recently created Borgesian space. After that, the last site to be considered here is a ‘void’ which represents the reclamation of the body of Borges.

From ‘correcta interpretación’ to Posthumous Possession

Headed by Borges’s widow María Kodama, the ‘Fundación Jorge Luis Borges’ (Stop 14 of the ‘Recorrido’) is located at number 1660 of Buenos Aires’s calle Anchorena, directly next-door to one of many of Borges’s places of residence (number 1672). This proximity constitutes the Fundación’s most immediately observable claim to Borgesian authenticity. A private residence, the neighbouring house, in turn, asserts its own Borgesian identity by boasting a plaque with a quotation from the story ‘Las ruinas circulares’, which Borges is said to have written whilst living there (Figs. 76 and 77). The Fundación, whose mission statement is to ‘difundir la obra de Jorge Luis Borges contribuyendo a su conocimiento y propiciando su correcta interpretación,’ is a resource centre, with archives containing the writer’s personal library, manuscripts and a variety of personal objects.⁵⁰⁸ The organization of its events is both related to the life and work of the writer, including specialist conferences and other activities (bizarrely, a birthday party is organized here in his honour every 24th of August, cake and candles included) and also contributing to the cultural life of the city, through the arranging of literary

⁵⁰⁷Borges, ‘Poema de los dones’, p. 187. José Mármol and Paul Groussac were the other two illustrious blind men of letters who were directors of the Biblioteca Nacional before Borges.

⁵⁰⁸Online at www.fundacionborges.com/lafundacion/objetivos.html [accessed 27 January 2010].

contests in local schools, for example, and the provision of Spanish language tuition for foreign visitors.⁵⁰⁹ Visiting times are restricted and access to the collections is by appointment only, so that the spontaneous visitor following the Recorrido would normally be unable to enter or have any direct access to everything the Fundación has to offer. Its website contains information about the various activities available but it serves more as a publicity tool than as a user-friendly resource.

Interestingly, the Fundación has recently recreated the bedroom Borges occupied in his last address in the city, Maipú 994. Thus, in spite of the efforts to legitimize certain places in the city as Borgesian spaces, it is impossible to reclaim all of the physical places which once provided a setting for the writer's life. This demonstrates that the creation of Borgesian spaces involves a complexity of meanings which do not necessarily have a real, physical embodiment in the form of bricks and mortar. Rather, Borgesian spaces are a weave of experiences, memories and expectations which are in constant construction and development and which can be superimposed onto an actual space for the sake of cultural capital. With this in mind, the proposed repatriation of Borges's remains represents a desire to possess the writer physically, filling the void left by his perceived absence. This is in spite of Borges's repeated assertion that his work and his history would always be in Buenos Aires: 'Mi cuerpo físico puede estar en Lucerna, en Colorado o en El Cairo, pero al despertarme cada mañana, al retomar el hábito de ser Borges, emerjo invariablemente de un sueño que ocurre en Buenos Aires.'⁵¹⁰

The controversy surrounding the place and manner of Borges's death is where the notorious feud between Borges's family and his widow, María Kodama, most visibly plays out, although it has reverberations in the wider national context. In *Borges a*

⁵⁰⁹Online at www.fundacionborges.com/actividades/actividades.html [accessed 26 January 2010].

⁵¹⁰In Darío L. Luciano, *Borges en San Fernando. Jorge Luis Borges en el Ateneo Popular Esteban Echeverría* (Victoria, Pcia. Bs. As.: Ediciones Ocruxaves, 1996), p. 86.

Contraluz, Estela Canto comments that Borges's decision to die in Geneva was felt as a betrayal in Argentina, but she considers that far from a betrayal, it constituted 'su gran gesto de liberación.'⁵¹¹ Thus, the writer's final decision was generally perceived by some as consistent with his image of an artist in an ivory tower, with no link to his homeland. The fact that Borges wished to die privately, rather than in the public eye, was seen as a shunning of the people, who were not allowed access to his final hours. Further, María Kodama, whom Borges married just days before he died, has since been vilified in the public eye, as she was perceived to be an opportunist who took Borges away from the 'patria' for her own personal benefit. Public opinion has been divided ever since, between a majority who saw Borges as cultural patrimony of Argentina, and therefore, having a duty to his country to remain in it; and those who perceive him as a private individual with the freedom to decide where his mortal remains rest. This polemic can still be seen today in readers' comments about a possible repatriation in national newspapers. In February 2009, a reader of *La Nación*, for example, says: 'fue un error llevarlo a morir a Suiza. Debería estar junto a su madre en Recoleta. Fue un argentino indiscutible, aquí vivió siempre, aquí veneró a sus antepasados, aquí caminó hasta el agotamiento Buenos Aires;' while another reader responds to the same article by saying: 'por más que haya sido un escritor fantástico, a los muertos hay que dejarlos descansar en paz, y en este caso seguir leyendo sus obras.'⁵¹²

In the context of this dispute, the city of Buenos Aires also has claims over the remains of Borges, effecting the ultimate objectification of the writer. Borges is thus constructed as a tangible 'national' treasure, a son of Buenos Aires, whose physical

⁵¹¹ Canto, *Borges*, p. 15.

⁵¹² Readers' comments to 'Nace un proyecto para repatriar los restos de Borges', *La Nación*, 10 February 2009, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1098437. A similar discussion can be seen in Mendoza's *Los Andes* newspaper, online at www.losandes.com.ar/notas/2009/2/20/un-409241.asp; and an especially incensed exchange which mainly pivots on the Peronist issue can be seen at www.perfil.com/contenidos/2009/02/08/noticia_0012.html?commentsPageNumber=3#comentario1 [all accessed 28 February 2010].

reality, the city claims, belongs in its bosom. The writer's 'betrayal' will be overlooked as long as he is prepared to do his duty and return to where he belongs. Juan Gasparini, author of *Borges: La posesión póstuma* (2000), cites a series of conversations in which Borges talks about his remains being buried in Recoleta as a matter of course. In one of them, Borges says: 'yo seré enterrado aquí, pero eso no tiene mucha importancia pues [...] yo no soy mi cuerpo, yo no creo ser solamente mi cuerpo.'⁵¹³ Gasparini states that 'no se conoce ningún testimonio legal que haya sido rubricado por su firma donde se trasluciera su deseo de ser enterrado en algún lugar en concreto' (p. 114). However, in 1988, Borges's nephew, Miguel de Torre, attempted the repatriation of the writer's remains from Geneva to Buenos Aires. This was unsuccessful, as María Kodama managed to block the proceedings, beginning a long battle between the parties in the Swiss courts. According to Argentine historian Raúl Efrom, cited by Gasparini, the solution lay in 'que el parlamento de la República Argentina adopte una ley por consenso de los diferentes grupos legislativos,' based on the precedent cases of other historical figures like José de San Martín, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento or Juan Manuel de Rosas, all of whom died abroad and whose remains were subsequently successfully repatriated to Argentina.

This task was taken up by Peronist 'diputada' for the city of Buenos Aires, María Beatriz Lenz, who in February 2009 presented a bill to this effect.⁵¹⁴ This time, the person behind the repatriation of the author's remains was collector, biographer and president of S.A.D.E. (Sociedad Argentina de Escritores), Alejandro Vaccaro, famously opposed to María Kodama, as the following declarations to the Argentine media show: 'Sólo se podría oponer María Kodama. ¿Por qué? [...] si Borges viene a la

⁵¹³Juan Gasparini, *La posesión póstuma* (Madrid: Foca, 2000), p. 171.

⁵¹⁴'Nace un proyecto para repatriar los restos de Borges', *La Nación*, 10 February 2009, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1098437 [accessed 30 January 2010].

Argentina, ella lo pierde ya que va a la bóveda de los sobrinos de Borges.’⁵¹⁵ This debate, where Borges’s widow sees herself involved in all manners of legal proceedings concerning the figure of Borges, which Gasparini aptly calls ‘the battle for posthumous possession’, is a complex one. As the case of Borges’s final resting place stands at the moment, Kodama has a ‘concesión gratuita por 99 años otorgada por la municipalidad de Ginebra [...] para que en el cementerio de Plainpalais duerman de por muerte los restos de “su esposo”.’⁵¹⁶ Even though her proposal had been given support in parliament, Lenz finally desisted after a meeting with Kodama, who expressed her disapproval and stated its legal weight.⁵¹⁷

A phenomenon similar to the veneration of Eva Perón’s grave at Recoleta cemetery has been taking place at Plainpalais. Here, the writer’s grave has become a site of pilgrimage where people have taken to leaving letters to the writer, as *La Nación*’s Susana Reinoso observes: ‘la tumba de Jorge Luis Borges en el cementerio de los reyes de Plainpalais, en Ginebra, convertida en una meca de lectores de todo el mundo, es testigo mudo de la admiración y el cariño.’⁵¹⁸ The empty space that his family claims is ready to welcome his mortal remains, has thus become a void saturated with desire, which, together with many other Borgesian spaces in the city, ‘in yet another layer of signification, seemed to be called upon to represent the invisible.’⁵¹⁹ It would be natural to expect the technocrats of the city to regret the loss of potential revenue that Borges’s ‘physical’ absence in the city may cause. After all, as the local tour guides of the Recoleta cemetery can always be heard saying, as they stand before the Borges family vault: ‘El gran ausente de la Recoleta es Jorge Luis Borges’ (Fig.78). However, Lenz’s

⁵¹⁵‘Borges, de Ginebra a la Recoleta’, *Diario Perfil*, 8 February 2009, online at www.diarioperfil.com.ar/edimp/0337/articulo.php?art=12618&ed=0337 [accessed 30 January 2010].

⁵¹⁶Gasparini, *La posesión póstuma*, p. 128.

⁵¹⁷‘Un refugio contra el asedio’, *Página/12*, 28 February 2009, online at www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/espectaculos/4-13004-2009-02-28.html [accessed 30 January 2010].

⁵¹⁸‘Lectores de diversos países dejan mensajes en la tumba de Borges’, *La Nación*, 9 February 2009, online at www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1098156 [accessed 30 January 2010].

⁵¹⁹Huysen, *Present Pasts*, pp. 58-9.

proposal is better interpreted as a populist move: a grandiloquent gesture that resembles the capturing of the body of the enemy more than it does the veneration of the sage. A form of revenge, it may be argued, for ‘La fiesta del monstruo’, where the ‘merza’ were disappointed that they were not able to carry out a ‘remate de anteojos y vestuario’⁵²⁰ belonging to their victim, the intellectual who had failed to venerate the ‘estandarte y foto del Monstruo’ (p. 400).

Yet again, the battle for the ‘possession’ of Borges is played out at various, interconnected, levels: that of the private circle of his close family and friends, that of politicians whose appropriation of the body of the writer serves to make various political and ideological points, and that of Borges ‘experts’ whose interest in the writer has crossed over to the public arena and serves their own self-publicity. Each constructs a different Borges, according to their motivation and agenda. Perhaps most relevant, however, is the role of Argentine public opinion, the sounding board for these interconnected debates. Everybody seems to want a piece of Borges, as pilgrims of the Middle Ages treasured their relics, and this constructs the author as an objectified figure of veneration.

Conclusion

It was the purpose of this closing chapter to examine the creation of Borgesian spaces in the city of Buenos Aires as an economic and political strategy: to contribute to the formation of the city’s identity as eminently cultural (literary in particular) for the promotion of cultural tourism; which in turn feeds into the delineation of the current administration’s anti-populist and anti-Peronist stance. This is in the particular context of a city whose configuration has seen enormous change since the beginning of its modern urbanization towards the end of the 19th Century, a particular view of which

⁵²⁰Borges and Bioy Casares, ‘La fiesta del monstruo’, p. 402.

permeates the life and work of Borges, especially his poetry. Thus, in writing the city's mythology, Borges wrote himself into the fabric of the urban landscape. The city, on its part, has recognized that its history and idiosyncrasy are inextricably linked to the writer. Borges is thus constructed as intimately porteño and eminently international at the same time. This complexity is in turn associated with the city of Buenos Aires, as the backdrop to his work and flanêries but also, crucially, as 'essence of the Borges self' (Molloy), the city is constructed along the same lines: cultural and cosmopolitan. At a deeper level, while cultural policies rest on a 'new', more local Borges, the political implications of this double construction of the author and the city not only tap into Borges's undeniable anti-Peronism, but also, exploit and perpetuate his construction as an elite writer to serve the clear anti-populist stance of the current administration. The relationship between the writer as creator of an 'apocryphal past' for the city, and the city as muse, but also as 'creator' of the author's image, provided the framework within which the strategies of a capitalist project motivated by economic gain, develop Borgesian spaces, simplifying and excluding the innumerable narratives that constantly define the identity of the city. Borges and Buenos Aires are undoubtedly inextricably linked: this chapter unveiled some of the complex ways in which, paraphrasing the writer, 'Borges estaba y estará en Buenos Aires.'⁵²¹

⁵²¹Jorge Luis Borges, 'Arrabal', *OCI*, p. 32.

FUNDACIÓN MÍTICA DE BUENOS AIRES

¿Y fue por este río de sueñera y de barro
que las proas vinieron a fundarme la patria?
Irían a los tumbos los barquitos pintados
entre los camalotes de la corriente zaina

Pensando bien la cosa, supondremos que el río
era azulejo entonces como oriundo del cielo
con su estrellita roja para marcar el sitio
en que ayunó Juan Díaz y los indios comieron.

Lo cierto es que mil hombres y otros mil arribaron
por un mar que tenía cinco lunas de anchura
y aun estaba poblado de sirenas y endriagos
y de piedras imanes que enloquecen la brújula.

Prendieron unos ranchos trémulos en la costa,
durmieron extrañados. Dicen que en el Riachuelo,
pero son embelecocos fraguados en la Boca
Fue una manzana entera y en mi barrio: en Palermo.

Una manzana entera pero en mitá del campo
expuesta a las auroras y lluvias y suestadas.
La manzana pareja que persiste en mi barrio:
Guatemala, Serrano, Paraguay, Gurruchaga

Un almacén rosado como revés de naipe
brilló y en la trastienda conversaron un truco
el almacén rosado floreció en un compadre,
ya patrón de la esquina, ya resentido y duro.

El primer organito salvaba el horizonte,
con su achacoso porte, su habanera y su gringo.
El corralón seguro ya opinaba YRIGOYEN.
Algún piano mandaba tangos de Saborido.

Una cigarrería sahumó como una rosa
el desierto. La tarde se había ahondado en ayer,
los hombres compartieron un pasado ilusorio.
Sólo faltó una cosa: la vereda de enfrente.

A mí se me hace cuento que empezó Buenos Aires:
la juzgo tan eterna como el agua y el aire.

Jorge Luis Borges, 1974

Figure 60. Text of Borges's 'Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires', which incorporates various changes. Juan Insúa, 'Fundación mítica', *Cosmópolis. Borges y Buenos Aires* (Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània, 2002), p. 18.

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RECORRIDO JORGE LUIS BORGES

Instrucciones: Elija el punto de interés y haga clic

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ETAPAS DEL RECORRIDO

1. Solar natal (Tucumán 840 / 844)
2. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras (Viamonte 430)
3. Biblioteca Municipal Miguel Cané (Carlos Calvo 4319)
4. Ex sede de la Biblioteca Nacional (México 564)
5. Departamento de la calle Maipú 994, 6º "B".
6. La casa de Quintana 222
7. La casa de Pueyrredón 2190
8. La casa de Quintana 263
9. Jardín Japonés (Avdas. Casares y Berro)
10. Jardín Zoológico (Avdas. del Libertador y Sarmiento)
11. La casa de la calle Serrano 2147. Manzana mítica
12. La casa de Evaristo Carriego (Honduras 3784)
13. La Casa museo de Xul Solar (Laprida 1212 / 14)
14. Fundación Internacional Jorge Luis Borges (Anchorena 1660)

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Figure 61. Recorrido biográfico ‘Jorge Luis Borges’, online at www.bue.gov.ar/recorridos/index.php?menu_id=13&info=borges [accessed 11 May 2010].

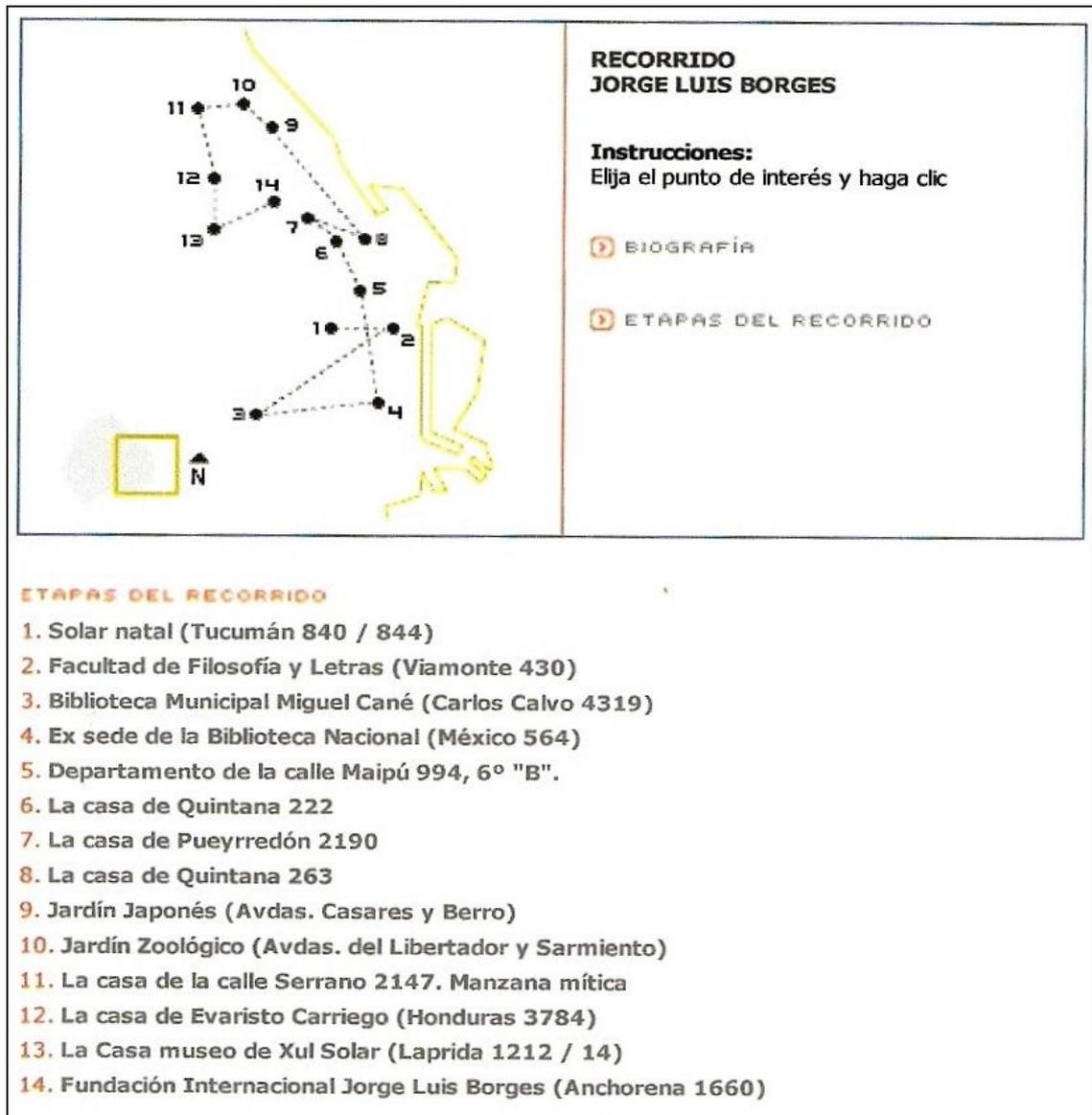


Figure 62. Recorrido biográfico 'Jorge Luis Borges' (detail).

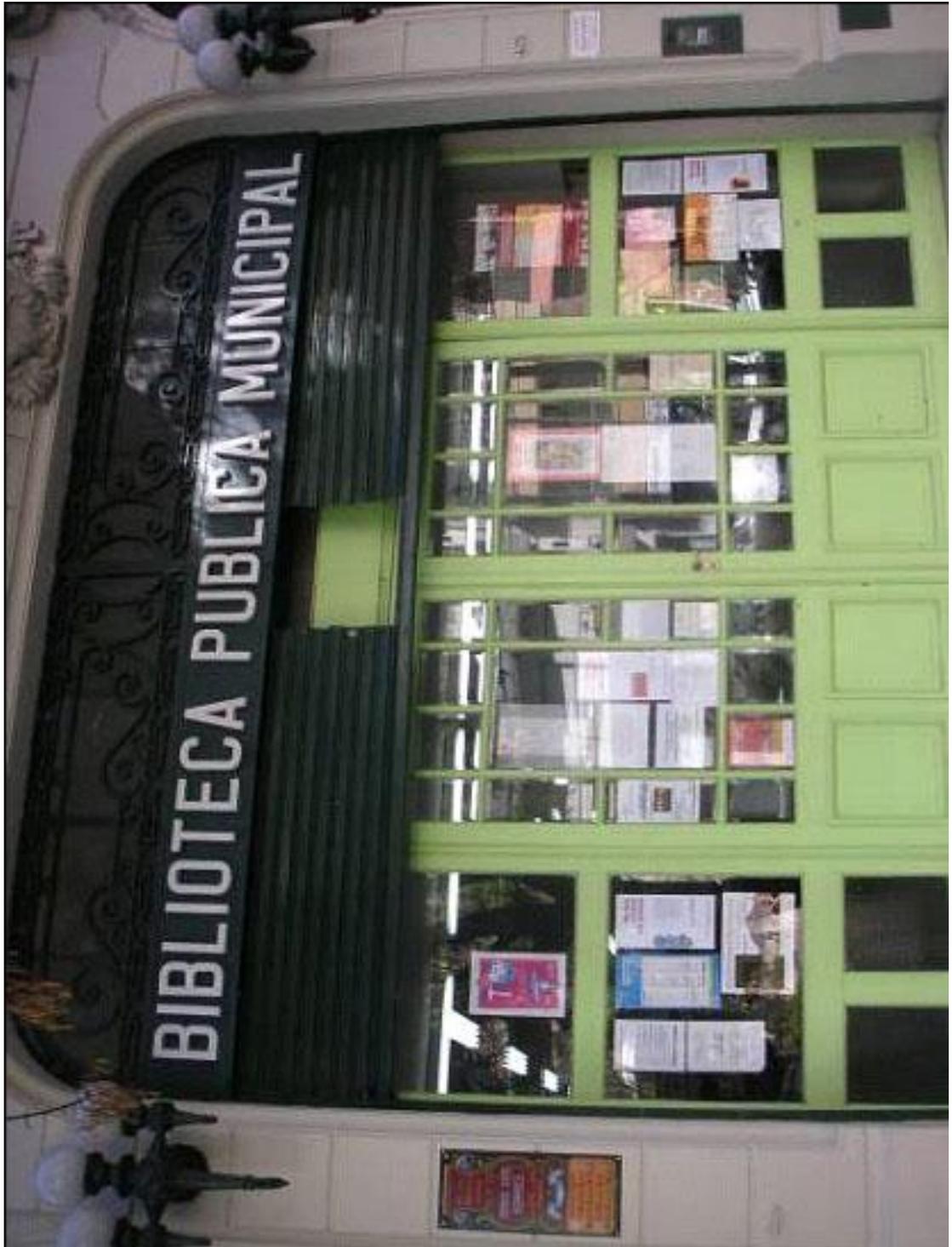


Figure 63. Biblioteca Miguel Cané, Buenos Aires, May 2008.



Figure 64. View of Boedo from just below the terrace of the Biblioteca Miguel Cané (in spite of the relatively recent addition of apartment blocks to the landscape, some traditional ‘casas bajas’ remain), April, 2008.



Figure 65. Julian Barnes ‘certifies’ the parrot’s ‘authenticity’, Biblioteca Miguel Cané, Buenos Aires, 6 February 2008. Photograph courtesy of Mary Godward, British Council, Buenos Aires.

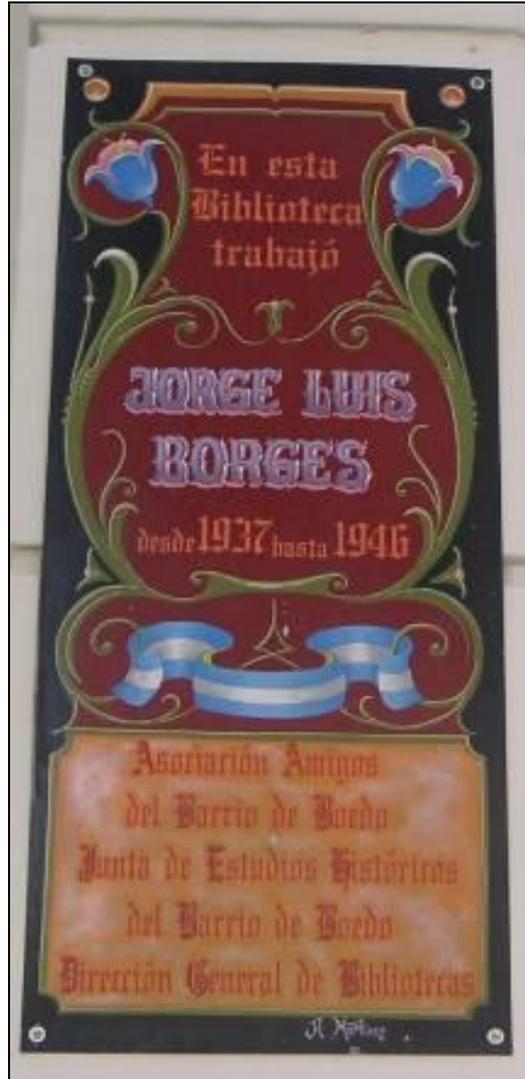


Figure 66. Commemorative plaque to the left of the front door, Biblioteca Miguel Cané, Buenos Aires, May 2008.



Figure 67. Commemorative plaque to the right of the front door, Biblioteca Miguel Cané, Buenos Aires, May 2008.



Figure 68. Café Tortoni, on Avenida de Mayo, Buenos Aires.



Figure 69. Display cabinet by the front door, documenting illustrious visits, Café Tortoni. The bottom two shelves contain photographs of Borges.



Figure 70. A contemporary sculpture brings together Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Gardel and Alfonsina Storni at Café Tortoni, Buenos Aires, May 2008.



Figure 71. 'La peluquería', mini-museum, Café Tortoni, Buenos Aires, May 2008.



Figure 72. Publicity for Café Tortoni in the Feria del Libro, Buenos Aires, May 2008.



Figure 73. House on calle Serrano 2147 where Borges spent much of his childhood. The house itself has been demolished. Miguel de Torre Borges (ed.), *Borges. Fotografías y manuscritos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Renglón, 1987), p 22



Figure 74. Calle Jorge Luis Borges (formerly Serrano), Barrio de Palermo, Buenos Aires, April 2008.



Figure 75. The empty shelves of the former Biblioteca Nacional on Calle México, currently a sports facility, Buenos Aires, May 2008.



Figure 76. Fundación Jorge Luis Borges (left) and the neighbouring house where Borges wrote 'Las ruinas circulares' (center, see detail of plaque below), Buenos Aires, May 2008.

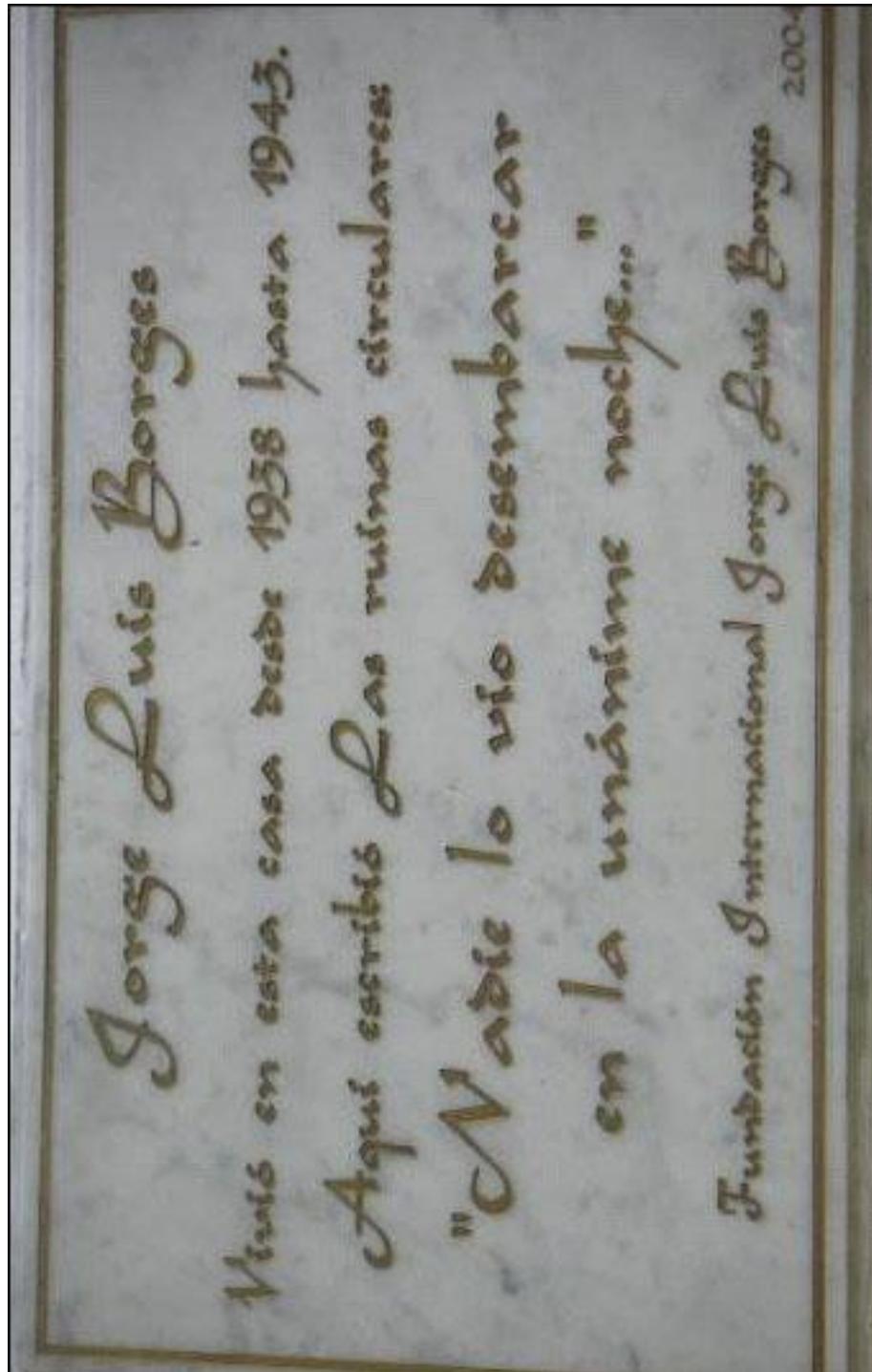


Figure 77. Plaque on the house next to Fundación Jorge Luis Borges, Buenos Aires, May 2008.



Figure 78. Standing in front of Borges's ancestors' vault, the tour guide announces that 'el gran ausente del cementerio de la Recoleta es, por supuesto, Jorge Luis Borges,' Cementerio de la Recoleta, Buenos Aires, May 2008.

Conclusion

Lo único que existe es el camino. No se llega nunca a ninguna parte. Nada termina, Perramus.⁵²²

In the context of Argentina's bicentenary celebrations, which propitiates the consideration of the concept of 'Argentineness', the figure of Borges emerges as a constant in a variety of discourses. These discourses pertain, in turn, to the construction of a sense of national cultural identity. This thesis has explored this link and it has come to the conclusion that the anxieties and expectations projected onto the iconic figure of Borges are those which have contributed to defining Argentina's sense of cultural identity. These rest largely on the oscillation between being 'local' and being 'foreign', an opposition which is intimately linked with another set of binaries at the heart of Argentina's historical development: civilization v. barbarism. These oscillations manifested themselves in Argentine literary production, as Piglia argued, since its inception and throughout much of the 20th Century. Therefore, this thesis concludes that the unique coincidence and intertwining of Argentine historical circumstances with those pertaining to Borges's own life-span – in terms of his personal and his public life, and also, in terms of his literary yield – have resulted in his construction as a national cultural icon.

As Chapter 1 argued, the construction of Borges as an Anglophile, which Rodríguez Monegal in particular construes in relation to the anti-Argentine prejudice, which di Tella refers to as 'Borges nightmare', responds to this conflicting relationship

⁵²²These words are spoken by the character 'Borges' in Alberto Breccia and Juan Sasturain, *Perramus: Diente por diente* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor, 2006), p. 169.

between being Argentine and being foreign.⁵²³ The scenario described in Borges's 'El sur', for example, where all manner of boundaries – geographical, cultural and narrative – are crossed, is a reflection of this type of conflict, and it attests to Borges's choice to position himself in between, that is, astride these oppositions. The tension between imitation and rejection of the foreign, in turn, has played out in the reception of Borges in Argentina, in the shape of both his condemnation as anti-Argentine on the part of the left-wing intelligentsia and the celebration of his greatness as corroborated by his consecration in Europe and the United States, which acknowledges the legitimising power of the foreign. In his narratives, Borges does not tackle these tensions by choosing sides. Instead, he develops a sense of 'Argentineness' which embraces what would otherwise be perceived as irreconcilable differences. This is perhaps his most valuable contribution to the process of construction of Argentine identity.

The figure of Borges has been approached here as a set of narratives about him and which in so doing narrate elements of Argentine history and idiosyncrasy (foreign constructions achieve this by contrast). This link has been explored by examining the discourses that went into the construction of Borges as a cultural icon in Argentina in the course of the 20th Century and the transition into the 21st Century. The cultural artefacts and urban spaces examined, through which Borges's visual image, his biographical details and his work have been appropriated were shown to have contributed, and to continue to contribute, to the unending configuration of a mosaic which will never be completed, but which we refer to as 'Borges'.

The thesis focused on the concepts of de-centring and in-betweenness and challenged the notion of identity as homogeneous end-result, embracing, instead, a fragmented, fluid, kaleidoscopic view of the process of construction of what it is to be

⁵²³ Torcuato S. di Tella, *History of Political Parties in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2004), p. 34, as quoted in the Introduction of this thesis.

Borges, and through this, of what it is to be Argentine. It has been able to regard the construction of identity as a perpetual process. This is also consistent with Borges's narrative technique, and with his idea of the aesthetic phenomenon as a journey rather than a destination, as Chapter 1 in particular explored in relation to the futile quest for the Borges essence by the 'genre' of literary biography.

Chapter 1 exposed the illusory nature of the notion of an essence of Borges by examining the narrative devices that construct the author as biographical subject, and which, in turn, construct a biographer's own identity. The examination of literary biographies here established the methodology that the other three chapters followed. By focusing on the narrative nature of the genre of biography and exposing the mechanisms which narrate the life and work of Borges, it drew attention to the significance of these mechanisms. In this way, the material that was subsequently analysed was approached with this in mind, that is, as mentioned in the Introduction, with a permanent suspicion which would allow the discovery, not of things beneath discourses, but of discourses beneath things.⁵²⁴ The chapter also argued for the paramount importance of how cultural products such as biographies and photographs were packaged and marketed as mediations between the readers and the Borgesian oeuvre. The comparison of the five biographies in relation with the particular contexts in which each was written has allowed the thesis to assess the historical evolution of certain constructions of Borges and to demonstrate that these responded to certain issues pertaining to Argentine identity. The contrast between biographies by Argentine writers and one by a non-Argentine served to emphasize these conclusions.

Chapter 2 concentrated on the visual aspect of the construction of Borges as an icon. To do this, it addressed the question of Borges's portrayal as elderly, and came to the conclusion that this responds to the need to erect him as cultural monument, a figure

⁵²⁴Umberto Eco, *La estrategia de la ilusión*, pp. 9-10.

of cultural authority that could provide a sense of cultural history, condensing a desire for a lasting and cohesive sense of national identity. Chapter 2 argued that by constructing Borges as a cohesive force, following his international acclaim, this showed a certain national sense of inferiority, given the anti-Argentine prejudice mentioned by di Tella. This took the shape of a need for foreign legitimisation, from Europe and the United States in particular.

In the particularly turbulent years of the 60s and 70s, expectations regarding cultural cohesion in Argentina were expressed in relation to political engagement: on the left meant siding with the people – and therefore, with a ‘national’ culture; on the right, with the foreign-loving oligarchy. Chapter 3 demonstrated that this tension was played out in the construction of Borges as a traitor by the Argentine left-wing intelligentsia and the attempt, on the part of the military regime, to appropriate him. The constructions of Borges as an Anglophile, foreign-loving writer, who was detached from the reality of his country, which were emphasized in the first biographies and were then perpetuated by the intellectuals of the left, pivot around the political implications of the definition of Argentine culture as peripheral which dominated the predominantly national-populist critical scene of the time. In this sense, what was demanded of Borges by the left in the 60s and 70s related to a need for political definition: Borges should assume a clear ‘Argentine’ position that was in touch with its people, or be condemned as an enemy. Either way, Borges was seen as a way of legitimising a particular version of Argentine identity.

By analysing the appropriation of the writer by comic strip artists in the 80s, Chapter 3 argued that the transition to democracy, after 1983, ushered in a new way of confronting political and cultural activity in relation to Borges and a need to reassess the ways in which national identity was constructed. This occurred as a consequence of a

sense of defeat, which forced a repositioning of the left-wing intelligentsia. The chapter showed that this, in turn, favoured a revision of the construction of Borges as political enemy and, consequently, brought about a renewed perception of a more diverse Borges who could be a cultural father-figure, embracing – rather than attempting to erase – what had been perceived as contradictions. This was established by an examination of the depiction of a subversive Borges in the comic strip *Perramus*, in particular.

The present day finds the city of Buenos Aires being marketed as a product for international cultural tourism, with Borges as integral part of that package. An analysis of the city's Borgesian spaces has shown how the various constructions of Borges considered in the first three chapters converge in them. It also revealed how, in spite of the efforts of the city council to homogenize them, these are social spaces in constant construction. Argentina's complex relationship with foreignness also comes into play here: these spaces also bring to mind a Borges who inhabits the in-between, who is eminently local and cosmopolitan at the same time, whose ultimate definition is as elusive as that of an Argentine identity.

As suggested in the Introduction, common epithets chosen to refer to Borges, such as 'vende patria' and 'maestro' have coexisted in Argentina over the last sixty years. Although they are at opposite ends of the spectrum, both terms are equally valid, equally true of how Argentines have related to Borges over the years: each of these names is imbued with meanings originating in a variety of discourses that construct a multiplicity of Borgeses and stem from Argentina's need to fix a cultural identity for itself.

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