

# Book Reviews

BALDERSTON, Daniel. 2018. *How Borges Wrote*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. ISBN 9780813939643. Pp. 392. Hardback \$49.50.

In one of Jorge Luis Borges's last short stories, "Shakespeare's Memory", the main character, a professor of English literature called Hermann Soergel, inherits the memory of the great playwright through a miraculous yet trivial act. After a while Soergel realizes, much to his disappointment, that his understanding of Shakespeare's work is not better than that of scholars who do not possess his magical gift. "Change or fate", he declares, "dealt Shakespeare those trivial things that all men know; it was his gift to transmute them into fables, into characters that were much more alive than the gray man who dreamed them". Soergel concludes that literary creation is a mysterious process; it is better not to examine too much how life experiences are transformed into artistic works.

The story came to my mind again when I was reading Daniel Balderston's *How Borges Wrote*, as it had before when his first article on Borges's manuscripts appeared in 2009. Will we, as Soergel puts it, "unravel that wondrous fabric, besiege and mine the tower" when the secrets contained in an author's drafts are uncovered? Of course, the task of studying manuscripts is considerably less daunting than trying to understand the mental and creative processes that go from experience, either lived in the real world or through fiction (is there a difference in Borges?), to the final work. Yet they seem to have something in common: through the study of manuscripts we expect to see at least a glimpse of the author's creative process, his hesitations, the connections between the readings he was doing at the time and the texts he was producing, between his immediate context and the literary work. Perhaps we hope to find evidence that a consecrated writer also rewrote, was indecisive, and that the final text required a laborious process.

The archive of Borges represents a peculiar case: although many of his manuscripts survive, access to them has proven quite difficult. Balderston, one of Borges's foremost scholars, devoted more than ten years to gaining access to the author's manuscripts and studying them. As Balderston states,

since Borges's papers are dispersed, "the archive must be constructed", a situation that differs from that of other writers whose working papers are situated in more accessible collections. *How Borges Wrote* represents the culmination of this project, which Balderston calls "the most important work of my scholarly career" (5). This is a significant statement, coming from someone who published two other seminal books on the Argentine writer: *El precursor velado: R. L. Stevenson en la obra de Borges* (1985), which revealed Borges's use and creative manipulation of one of his fundamental sources; and *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (1993), an influential study revealing the writer's consequential relationship with history and the treatment of it in his work.

In some ways, Borges seems to have operated like his character Pierre Menard, who "wrote" *Don Quixote* in notebooks he later destroyed. In these notebooks, Menard tried variations of the original text, crossed many passages out, but we know only the final result: a few fragments of the *Quixote* that coincide word by word with Cervantes's novel. Yet Borges was also aware of the value of his manuscripts. He would occasionally offer them as gifts — cleaner versions, but ones that still contain revisions — and he almost never got rid of them. It is amazing to learn there are surviving manuscripts from his beginnings as a poet, a fact that illustrates Borges's obsession with preserving and re-using them for future writings.

Using the techniques of what the French call *critique génétique*, Balderston examines Borges's creative process as revealed in his manuscripts. This is characterized by his peculiar handwriting, the habit of noting down source materials in the manuscripts' margins, the substantial number of variants Borges considered for many passages (more often than not, the variants were not crossed out, leaving the possibilities open until the text was typed or published), and the typographical signs he employed to rearrange sentences, insert new text or make corrections.

Balderston's book begins with the study of a practice that was essential to Borges's writing system. As he read, Borges would use the book (usually the blank pages at the end of it) to "note down the page reference and a few words of a quotation in the original language" (22) with the intention of checking the passage later if needed. This practice is consistent with the one Borges employed in his manuscripts: on their left margins he would write down the bibliographical information for a passage quoted directly or connected to the short story or essay. "Reading" is the title of the book's first chapter, which analyzes this system and convincingly refutes the misconception that Borges's erudition was partially invented or

that his sources were often imprecisely handled. All of the book's chapters are named after a compositional element or step in Borges's writing process: "Reading" is followed by "Jottings", "Notebooks", "Possibilities", "Copies", "Typescripts", "Revisions", and "Fragments". In "Notebooks", we find out they were fundamental to Borges's writing method and that there are revealing connections between the several texts contained in a single notebook, even when those texts belong to different genres. In "Typescripts", we learn that Borges did not know how to use a typewriter, so he depended on other people for this task. Each particular analysis is illustrated with images of Borges's manuscripts, diplomatic transcriptions and translations into English.

The book includes several useful appendices. The first lists all the manuscripts consulted, organized by year, with information about their location and publication history. Appendix 2A consists of a facsimile of the 1950 Cuaderno Avon Notebook, which includes the short story "La espera" and a draft of the important essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición". The last appendix includes images of the entire pages from which Balderston extracted the details that he examined in each chapter. Thanks to this, the reader has access not only to the facsimile excerpts that Balderston uses for his analyses, but also to the larger manuscript context. The quality of these images varies, reflecting the condition of Borges's manuscripts and the problematic access to them: photographs, photocopies (sometimes of other photocopies), scans or handwritten transcriptions are some of the methods Balderston used to compile these valuable papers.

One imagines that great writers of the past had a clarity of purpose that made them, precisely, into the creators we admire today. Seeing Borges's manuscripts, analyzing his numerous corrections and indecisions, does not diminish his literary genius. Balderston's book illustrates how the final product evolved from succinct notes and the way Borges's ideas crystallized after considering multiple options and eliminating details that were either superfluous or exposed too much the circumstances that informed a given text. This last process is noteworthy: Borges tended to discard concrete references to political and other circumstantial elements, apparently to make his writing more universal. This erasure has led many critics to think there were few connections between Borges's writings and his immediate surroundings. We have learned to read backwards, though, to find the specific references Borges was making to the problems of his time. *How Borges Wrote* makes an exceptional contribution to our understanding of this process.

One of the book's appendices reproduces Borges's own printed copy of his short story "La lotería en Babilonia" as it appeared in the journal *Sur* in 1941. This copy shows hundreds of corrections in Borges's hand, to the point of creating an almost entirely different text, in its language if not in its content. Even the title is transformed, becoming "El Babilónico azar". However, these corrections never made it into *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, where the short story appeared later that year. Was Borges serious about these changes or was he simply playing with the possibilities? Balderston suggests that for Borges there never existed a final text; the ones we take for definitive today would have kept changing if the author had had the opportunity.

Alfredo Alonso Estenoz  
Luther College

BORSUK, Amaranth. 2018. *The Book*. Cambridge: MIT. ISBN 9780262535410. Pp. 344. Paper \$15.95.

Amaranth Borsuk's *The Book* works from the premise that our understanding of the titular subject is often a hazy nebula encompassing a range of texts, technologies, genres, ideas, experiences, and experiments. Audio-books, for example, occupy an identifiable position in this book galaxy, as do papyrus scrolls, unreadable "bookworks", and narrative-driven iPad apps. The codex is identified early and often, naturally, though its position in Borsuk's star chart is deliberately decentralized — except, perhaps, in the case of *The Book's* own material form, a "beautifully produced pocket-size" (5×7-inch) paperback (vii).

While primarily critical and historical in content, *The Book* also demonstrates a keen theoretical capacity through its four major subdivisions: "The Book as Object"; "The Book as Content"; "The Book as Idea"; "The Book as Interface". Borsuk characterizes the book as a "fluid artifact" (xiii), a productive contradiction of flow and stasis that encourages us to slide freely among different conceptions of it. "The Book as Object" begins in the traditional history-of-the-book fashion, with cuneiform wedges in Sumerian clay, meandering east and west until finally arriving at the codices of European manuscript culture in the Middle Ages. What distinguishes Borsuk's account is the commitment to fusing digital and print attitudes toward book study from the outset. In the opening paragraph, for example, the book is neatly distilled as a "portable data storage and distribution method", and the development of Egyptian hieroglyphics is likened to the proliferation of interactive video clips. "The Book as Content" shifts