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## JORGE LUIS BORGES AND ICELANDIC LITERATURE

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Borges' knowledge of Icelandic literature was not an occasional or superficial one. It is true that his readings might seem haphazard, uneven or erratic, but this is only from a canonical perspective, precisely one which Borges' intervention would replace with the new point of view he proposed: a diagonal approach to the norm which, following the logic of a new concept of literature, allows the articulation of areas previously not considered. It is in the aesthetic-literary concept where we should situate Borges' relationship with Germanic literatures and Icelandic literature in particular. This relationship is one which is manifested in references from time to time throughout the life and work of the writer from Buenos Aires.

Many critical studies have in fact focused on a good number, if not all, of these examples which are spread in several modes and throughout the various genres which Borges cultivated. A quick overview necessarily includes the texts which contain recollections of his readings since adolescence, and thus pertain to his education as a reader; translations; poetic compositions such as "Fragmento" ['Fragment'], "A un poeta sajón" ['To a Saxon

Poet'], or *Seis poemas escandinavos* (1966) ['Six Scandinavian Poems'] in which he utilizes images similar to those of the *kenningar*; essays such as "Las kenningar" ['The kenningar'] or "La metáfora" ['The metaphor'], which reveal a wide-ranging interest in this figure, or books, such as *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (1951) ['Ancient Germanic Literatures'], which is reorganized in *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (1966) ['Medieval Germanic Literatures'], which he also planned to publish in another, corrected edition; and, finally, short stories, such as "El desafío" ['The Challenge'], which have a direct presence of Icelandic culture and others in which, in the opinion of critics and by direct admission by Borges, the assimilation of procedures or themes of this origin can be identified: "El disco" ['The discus'], "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", "La intrusa" ['The Intruding Woman']. We should note that Borges learned Anglo Saxon in order to write his second book on these themes, around 1955-56, and later he learned Ancient Icelandic. Nevertheless, this overview would be incomplete if we did not mention that Borges expressed his relationship with Germanic cultures on a more personal level. This is when he questions the effect that his English ancestors, his early familiarity with the literatures, and in particular his mastery of English had on leading him to feel comfortable in that world which was so different from Latin culture.

Borges' most ambitious work was his book on Germanic literatures; the second edition was the result of a direct study of the texts and a greater knowledge of their languages. The work does not pretend to be academic, although it recognizes the contributions of philological studies, which must be consulted, but is instead didactic, as he himself affirms. It thereby corresponds to the desire to present a literary production which was widely unknown and which nevertheless had very special characteristics. Precisely because of this lack of familiarity to the public he decided to include numerous examples and broad plot summaries so that the reader could have as direct a contact as pos-

sible. The result is that the book becomes to a certain extent an anthology.

These are the reasons why the work is organized along the lines of philological studies as far as the references to periods (the genres, poetic and narrative forms, or the selection of authors) are concerned. Using this systematization as a base, Borges inserts a certain point of view of the texts in accordance with his concept of what is literary, which is incorporated into the discussion rather than analytically presented. He introduces brief defining commentaries, which are very selective and directed toward the aspects of genre, theme or style. Together with the learned facts, he interpolates personal judgments which tend to center in a more concentrated manner on certain points of the text. The essayist focus structures the form of his prose.

What interests us here above all is what is particularly Borgian about this approach to Icelandic literature, that is, the interpretations and influences which correspond to aesthetic-literary concepts of the author. The fact that Borges was deeply attracted to this literature is proven by the various declarations in which he as reader and writer shows his involvement. But he also finds a feature which gives an enigmatic character to its destiny: its extensive development but yet its complete loss in history, with no surviving reference to its existence. This is a development for which he finds antecedents in the narrative order, a "prefiguration" of the novelistic procedures of later centuries. He underlines the fact that two great Icelandic discoveries - America and the art of narrating - have been lost without a single consequence.

In *Medieval Germanic Literatures*, Borges observes: "Of greater interest to us than Snorri's sources are the literary techniques he uses". We can take this affirmation as a general perspective and as proof of how Borges saw his relationship with that literature, as a terrain where questions could be raised - questions originated by the Borgian theoretical space - and ones that were literary in nature, whether concerning narrative and the sagas, or poetic-metaphorical ones in

relation to the *kenningar*, which at the same time show their surprising modernity. Thus it is possible to see a character's adventure or fate, the use of a motif, or the laconic nature of a phrase, as features of Borgian style.

Critical studies have given examples of these similarities or what Borges saw as anticipations. The role of the *kenningar* in Borgian symbolism has already been pointed out, as well as their relation to the later ideas of the writer from Buenos Aires regarding the metaphor and word play in his prose, the transformation of his style under their influence from an early, overdone and contrived period to another in which, under the attraction of the sagas, the tendency is to precision and circumspection; the recognition of a presence in Borgian texts of a similar Icelandic norm of brevity and economy of sentences which is in accordance with a certain concept of the manner of telling, the narrator's behavior, which should allow the details of the action to create a direct impact on readers. The intellectual control of the narration should provide a modality for dramatic situations but it should also avoid pathetic situations or expressions.

In fact, when Borges comments on the sagas he introduces a greater number of details about the elaborated narrative style of the Icelandic writers. These features can be seen in the texts of the Argentinian writer. Among the most evident are the distance of the narrator with respect to what is narrated; the fact that he does not comment on what is narrated nor stop to study the characters, which are created on the basis of their words and behavior. According to him, this is something which will be widely used in cinematic techniques. In the same way it is significant that he emphasizes his awareness of the value and function acquired by the events in the action, giving the indication, silence, surprise, knowing how not to mention the importance of a component that will later be revealed as decisive, surprising modernity. On the other hand, he emphasizes the sagas' realism, a concept which the author outlines, carefully comparing it to other realistic tech-

niques.

We should not overlook the fact that Borges makes an abstraction from the extensive descriptions of intertwined plots and the heroes' adventures, the dizzying combination, the chance symmetries, repetitions and minimal differences, the reflections, denouements and beginnings which resemble geometric figures. The idea of variations is tied to that of invariants, of literary motifs, which arise over long periods of time. This is implied by Borges in his reference to a specific work, the *Laxdoela saga*, but the commentary may be extended to the entire group. They concern the way in which literary creations are repeated in very distant eras: between Ibsen and the anonymous writers of *Laxdoela*.

They are chronologically prior to Ibsen but they also partially reproduced a previous text with complete awareness of their repetition, and so were integrating themselves into a tradition: "[...] the authors and their intention has been to point out the correspondence between what appears to be new and what is ancient". It is evident in the text that he is fascinated by the vast inextricability of events, places and characters which seem to be repeated infinitely. It should not seem unexpected that he includes an allusion to the concept of series and its (il)logical nature when in the *Gylfaginning* (Gylfi's Hallucination) the things that comprise the wolf's chain are an anticipation of the Chinese series of categories that Borges describes in "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" ['John Wilkin's analytic language'], and which Foucault would comment upon, underlining the unsettling humor of such a construction.

To conclude, we shall add a final mention of what we have said concerning the ideas and techniques that are relevant to the work of the author from Buenos Aires. The criticism has referred to the presence in the sagas of such a constant theme in Borges' work as that of betrayal. The life of Sturluson is an opportunity for this theme to slip into the events described. But it is in the story of his death, in the way in which it is told and in the conclusions, where we perceive what

Borges felt as his own. His words emphasize the symmetrical nature of the death of Snorri and his assassin and in addition he interprets the latter's death as imagined by his antagonist. Death is in relation to a few words: "Arni's death seems imagined by Snorri. That man to whom a few laconic words announce his death sentence is one of Snorri's characters, a figure under the control of destiny and even that of the rhetoric of the sagas".

In *Medieval Germanic Literatures*, the author takes up the question of the metaphor again, and often returned to it in connection with the *kenning* or metaphorical form of Ancient Icelandic. During his Martinfierrista period Borges had written about this figure, locating the question in the very framework of the avant-garde. The essay "Las kenningar" is included in a book of particular importance in the author's theoretical-artistic projection, *Historia de la eternidad* (1933) ['History of Eternity']. Much later, the poem "Fragment", from *El otro, el mismo* ['The Other, the Same One'] (1964) will include several *kenningar*, adapted as much as possible to Spanish.

It has been said that Borges turns to the *kenningar* because of a theoretical change: he saw what there is of creativity and at the same time repetition in the framework of a series. The *kenning* is not important to the Argentinian writer because of a desire for radical novelty, from the moment in which he believes that only a small repertoire of metaphors has been provided in history, what becomes decisive is the variant, the fragment, which can be introduced within the large patterns. The *kenningar* with their intensely crafted nature, belong to a heritage, an established model. Each one represents the carrying out of a possibility in an abstract system, thus it acts not as an irruption of the new but as the metaphorical image of cultural values of the Icelandic community. The *kenning* is the example of how the new cannot be considered an absolutely surprising act, but rather that one must see in it, according to Borges, that what is strange or new should not be reduced nor situated in a mysterious isolation but that