
Review: Balderston, Daniel. *How Borges Wrote*.

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Balderston, Daniel. *How Borges Wrote*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018. Pp. 375. ISBN 978-0-8139-3964-3.

Daniel Balderston's newest book, *How Borges Wrote*, seeks to elucidate the meticulous—though intensely fragmentary—writing process of Jorge Luis Borges, a man known as both an expert reader and wordsmith. As director of the Borges Center and a professor of Modern Languages at the University of Pittsburgh, Balderston's nearly four-decade-long interest in Borges has made him one of the foremost experts in his field. Through such dedication, Balderston has acquired the expertise necessary to analyze the scattered Borgesian archive, a puzzle which the researcher must piece together himself from a myriad of sources held in a variety of physical locations. Upon surveying such an archive, the question of how to conceive of the fragments as making up a whole that can be “read” and understood is certainly challenging. (One can only imagine that from beyond the grave Borges is pleased that he has left us yet another enigma to incessantly mull over.)

Due to such difficulties, the material gathered here does not allow us to observe each successive stage of the same story or essay from genesis to publication—an unsurprising fact considering that Borges published approximately 2,700 separate texts during his lifetime. Although such an example would be most instructive, this is no fault of Balderston's; as he explains, collectors that acquired notebooks and manuscripts often cut up or destroyed portions to drive up the price of remaining pages, leaving us with a fragmented archive. Notably, it is a telling reflection of Borgesian texts, which also often leave us with more questions than answers. As a result of the archival limitations, rather than approach Borges's works chronologically, Balderston chooses to reconstruct model stages of the writing process using examples from the nearly 200 archival documents that he has accessed since 2009. Balderston follows Borges from his early stages of reading and research through his repeated revisions of published material. Chapters on “Reading,” “Jottings,” “Notebooks,” “Possibilities,” “Copies,” “Typescripts,” “Revisions,” and “Fragments” allow us to capture a fairly comprehensive view of Borges's reading and writing habits, which Balderston convincingly posits is a reflection of the content and structure of his published works. We come to see that Borges rarely outlines his works in advance, relying on jottings and notes which are intriguingly written in all sorts of directions, sometimes on the front covers of notebooks, often in the first and last pages of books from his personal library. As we open the appendices that contain

facsimiles of Borges' work, we get an intimate view of the miniscule block letters that follow the disciplined lines of graph paper, at times growing messy and falling into disarray. We witness neat geometric symbols in the left-hand margin outlining crucial bibliographic references, often overt though sometimes latent in the final text, obsessively checked and rechecked by our author. We examine the constant reworking and reimagining of works already published, which may contain significant alternate endings or, as Balderston argues, signs of a deliberately suppressed Baroque style or *criollismo*.

Balderston goes beyond simple archival research, skillfully connecting the philosophy and process of Borges's writing with the themes and structures of his stories. Most importantly, he demonstrates that the characteristic ambiguity of Borgesian texts is inherent from the beginning of the writing process in which Borges allows multiple possibilities to coexist as he literally inscribes meaning in between the lines of his own texts, jotting a series of possible words from the same semantic field or several possible phrases, sometimes with radically different meanings. Such bifurcations and ambiguities seem to not only permeate his works, but also his very mode of thinking, which offer us fascinating insights into Borges's mental universe. Even more interesting, in fact, is that these possibilities continue generating themselves once work is published in print. Because Borges completely rejects the idea of a definitive, completed text, he chooses to keep revising his works long after his own philosophies and stylistic preferences have evolved, which yield even deeper insights into how Borges constructs his identity as both reader and writer as he cyclically evaluates and reevaluates his own texts in the same way that we do when we read them. As Balderston explains, "[t]he unfinished nature of the text, even the published text, is bound with an aesthetic of the fragment: the idea that the unfinished, messy, self-contradictory draft, with its plethora of variants, is for him *an ideal literary text*" (210, emphasis mine).

In sum, *How Borges Wrote* provides valuable and intensive case studies of both Borges's writing process and the overarching characteristics that seem to grow out of that process; however, the specific texts analyzed in-depth seem biased towards Borges's lesser-known works, which may not be as useful to the average scholar. Despite this, Balderston does include intriguing though brief explorations of more widely read texts, such as "La lotería en Babilonia," "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan," "El Sur," "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and "El Aleph." Balderston's close readings strike me as the beginning of a much larger project that would not only provide illustrative examples of the stages of Borges's writing projects with close textual analysis, but also demonstrate the consistency of such stages with more ample evidence and a wider range of examples. The incomplete and scattered nature of the archive, however, may preclude the completion of a more comprehensive project. The most useful sections of this book for scholarly research may be Appendices 2 and 3, which contain crisp facsimiles of numerous primary documents conveniently gathered in one place.

As a quite specialized overview of the Borgesian archive, Balderston's work is likely to be of value for researchers who are reasonably familiar with Borges's work.