

ESSAYS and INTERVENTIONS

ChatGPF

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Three months ago I signed a contract with a leading academic publisher to write a book about Borges – not a scholarly monograph for specialists, but a concise introduction in English to his life and work. Since I'd never written this kind of book before – the Twayne era passed me by – I thought it would be interesting to do. Having recently retired and believing (with the English poet Thomas Gray) that the business of life is busyness, I also wanted a reason to get out of bed in the morning. I'd enjoyed teaching Borges, mostly to undergraduates, for many years, but had never published one word about him. This was my chance.

I was introduced to Borges – I had not read him until I had to teach him – as a TA. At the time my classroom canon was limited to the six stories in Alexander Coleman's legendary anthology, *Cinco maestros*. As the years went by, I added about a dozen other stories, a couple of essays and a handful of poems. Since I taught Borges in courses on Latin American short fiction, I didn't have occasion to devote more than three or four weeks to his work. Before the semester began, I'd pick out a few items from my repertoire and go with those. The contract would make me read Borges more extensively, a long-deferred plan that somehow I'd never found the time to execute.

When enlarging my classroom canon, I gravitated toward texts whose personal dimension was evident, at least to me. Early in my career I reveled in his mazes and puzzles – that straight-line labyrinth at the end of "La muerte y la brújula," so evocative of writing – but as I got older I became less interested in the labyrinth than in the man at its center. I taught "Las ruinas circulares" not as a meditation on the dreamlike nature of reality, but as an allegory about paternity: Borges's *Pinocchio*, as it were.

Borges himself often remarked that his characters were all versions of himself. Perhaps the most moving statement of his view occurs in a fable in *El hacedor*, where he describes a cartographer who spends years constructing a detailed map of the world. The map notes every river, every mountain, every island. Fantastically, it even accounts for all the flora and fauna of the world. As he nears the end of his life, the task completed, the cartographer holds the map up and sees that he has drawn his own portrait. As Borges says, the "patient labyrinth of lines" traces the features of the cartographer's face. Some years later, in collaboration with María Kodama, he published a book entitled *Atlas*.

This was the approach I intended to take. Without being plainly biographical, I wanted to pay equal attention to the mapmaker

and the map. The Borges I loved was neither the analyst on the couch, as in Edwin Williamson's biography, nor the labyrinth maker. Yes, there are labyrinths aplenty, but I believed they sketched the lineaments of their architect. I didn't intend to scant the "esoteric" Borges, the one who takes pride of place in critical studies, but I wanted to concentrate on the "exoteric" Borges, the man who reflected, obliquely or overtly, on such non-arcane topics as fatherhood, friendship, desire, loyalty, jealousy, loneliness.

Once the contract was done, I started going through my handwritten Borges notes, models of Borgesian minimalism. Early in my career I realized that when I typed class notes, I wrote too much. And if I taught that text again and came up with new ideas, I'd have to retype the whole thing. Soon I switched to scribbling short prompts in pencil on yellow legal pads. For "El Sur" I have two pages filled with notations like: "discordia," "hechos de sangre," "Increíblemente," "realidad/simetrías/anacronismos," "tiempo/espacio," "indicativo/subjuntivo," "criollismo," "Westerns." In a rectangular box on the second page, a quotation from Lovejoy: "Primitivism is the discontent of the civilized with civilization." Under it, Victor Segalen's definition of exoticism: "the knowledge that something is other than oneself." For "Borges y yo," my skeletal notes included: "¿quién habla? (Barthes)," "antinomía," "cara/más-cara," "hombre/nombre/renombre," "página," "yo/Georgie." At the bottom of the page, another quotation, this one by John Ciardi: "I believe in disguises. / Most real comes masked unlikely. / Tell me, who has ever really seen you?"

It took me about a month to flesh out my notes – a happy time because it made me relive all those years of joyful teaching. Next came the task of reading or rereading the texts I didn't teach, which I also was looking forward to. My classroom canon, heavily weighted toward the stories, spanned only a small parcel in Borges-land. I didn't intend, nor did I think it was necessary, to explore every corner, but I had to read enough to sketch an overview of his work and analyze representative texts.

After a couple of months educating myself about the Borges I didn't know, I came to a surprising and melancholy conclusion: I didn't like the author of "Borges y yo" as much as I thought. In that segment of his work unknown to me, there was much less *cara* than *máscara*. The map obscured the mapmaker. Not only that: the games and conundrums that thrilled me when I was younger, now felt contrived. The footnotes to imaginary books, infantile. Even his celebrated prose began to annoy me. I grew tired of recurring ad-

jectives like *baladí*, *vasto*, *arduo*, *remoto*, and of verbs like *prodigar*, *trabajar*, *fatigar*. His inveterate habit of hedging – *acaso*, *quizá*, *tal vez*, *más bien* – grated. The opposite of a hedge is a howl. I was looking for Borges to howl, the way he does, albeit timidly, in late poems like “El amenazado” or “El remordimiento.”

I had assumed that the intimate Borges I had spotted in “Las ruinas circulares,” “El hijo de Asterión” or “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” would appear in the rest of his writing. For the most part, it didn’t. The consensual view of Borges as diffident and cerebral, which I wanted to rectify, was correct after all. Borges once said that Quevedo is not a writer but an entire library. If Borges were one also, “my” Borges would fill a thin volume. I wasn’t aware of it, but the idea I had formed of Borges reflected personal interests and inclinations. My classroom canon refashioned Borges in my own image. He was the map, but I was the mapmaker. If interpretation recreates identity, as Norman Holland wrote, so do syllabi. You are what you teach.

That I didn’t like Borges as much as I thought was sobering, but it didn’t deter me. If the book wasn’t going to be what I originally intended, I could still get “my” Borges into it, slant the discussion in his (my) direction. Then I got to know generative AI.

It’s standard in a book of this type to introduce the analysis of a story or essay with a brief summary of its contents. As I worked my way through those texts I didn’t care for, I found myself using Gen AI programs (Copilot, ChatGPT, Grok) to produce the summaries. Typically, to drive engagement these programs insert follow-up questions as part of the answer. At first I ignored them, since all I wanted was to avoid the drudgery of writing plot summaries, but one afternoon I yielded to the temptation of taking another byte at the AI apple. I asked AI to analyze particular pieces and relate them to others by Borges. When I did, it would often come up with angles or connections I hadn’t thought of. What’s more, even when it rehashed familiar ideas, it did so in enviably articulate prose. Sometimes it takes me hours to write a coherent paragraph; ChatGPT does it in a flash.

One day I challenged ChatGPT to come up with a typology of Borges’s stories. In a couple of seconds it answered that they fall into two groups: “narrative fictions” and “fiction essays.” It explained that narrative fictions are plot driven and often end in violence; the fiction essays it compared to thought experiments: imagine a library that contains all books in all languages or a novel whose every incident generates a “cascade” (its word) of other incidents.

Grok knows, this isn’t exactly breaking news, but it’s the kind of insight that can structure a discussion of Borges’s fiction, even if the elaboration of the typology contained a few hallucinations (AI-speak for mistakes). For example, it classed “El lenguaje analítico de John Wilkins,” an essay in *Otras Inquisiciones*, as fiction. When I flagged the error, ChatGPT apologized, explaining that “probably” it was the result of the “generic indeterminacy” of Borges’s essays: another useful insight for my increasingly AI-inflected book. (In defense of ChatGPT, the essay about Wilkins does confuse fact and

fiction, as in the famous taxonomy of animals in an nonexistent Chinese encyclopedia.)

I kept pushing. I asked ChatGPT to give me an original take on all of Borges’s stories. I figured this was a tough one. Its reply began: “Borges invites interpretation because his stories are like machines for producing ideas.” Aha! It seems that for ChatGPT interpretation also recreates identity. It proceeded to describe several stories and concluded: “If we tie all these stories together, one interpretation is: Borges’s entire fiction is a critique of information overload. Long before the digital age, he foresaw that infinite memory, infinite books, infinite possibilities all lead not to enlightenment, but to paralysis. His labyrinths predict the way we get lost in today’s infinite internet.” Intrigued by its response (which isn’t entirely original but is impressive nonetheless), I said: “So you’re telling me that Borges is launching a preemptive attack on the likes of you?” It replied: “Ha! So yes – Borges was writing not against *me specifically*, but against the idea of an infinite combinatorial intelligence without limits of storage or creation. He seemed to intuit that such a thing would generate both marvels and horrors.” Marvels and horrors indeed.

As a last ditch attempt to bring AI to heel, I decided to try out one of my own pet ideas on Copilot. In “La intrusa,” a well-known story of femicide, two brothers fall for the same woman and one of them, to preserve fraternal comity, ends up killing her. Borges describes the Nilsens as lost in “la maraña (que era también una rutina) de aquel monstruoso amor.” Given that this is a writer who encounters labyrinths everywhere, it seemed to me odd that he says *maraña* rather than *labyrintho*, especially given the “monstruous” nature of the brothers’ predicament. Odder still, according to the concordance of his work published in the 1990s, this is the one and only time that the word surfaces in Borges’s writing. My theory was that labyrinths, however intricate, are intelligible, cognizable, whereas a *maraña* is not. I thought, therefore, that in “La intrusa” Borges was handling material that he found uncognizable, invulnerable to decryption, at least his own.

I knew that Estela Canto, to whom Borges was briefly engaged in the 1940s and to whom he dedicated “El Aleph,” had written a book claiming that *she* was “la intrusa.” I also knew that Borges had dictated the story to his mother, who had opposed her son’s relationship with Canto, and that it was doña Leonor who had suggested the gory ending. Pour into the mix the story’s Biblical epigraph, where fraternal love is compared to the love of a mother for her son – and presto! I have a psychoanalytic reading that Williamson would have killed for. And whether or not Canto’s self-important claim is true, the meaning of *maraña* remains the same. For complicated reasons, sex for Borges was a *maraña*, not a *labyrintho*. Inside a labyrinth, he never loses the thread. Caught in a *maraña*, he gets entangled.

I said to Copilot: “In Borges’s story “La intrusa” the following phrase appears: ‘la maraña (que también era una rutina) de aquel monstruoso amor.’ I would have anticipated *labyrintho* in this

phrase, given the reference to monstrosity. So why *maraña*?" Instantly it replied:

Ah, excellent observation! [flattery also drives engagement]. Borges's choice of *maraña* over *laberinto* in "la maraña (que era también una rutina) de aquel monstruoso amor" is subtle but deliberate – and quite revealing. Why *maraña* instead of *laberinto*? *Maraña* evokes a tangled mess – like knotted threads or overgrown weeds. It suggests something organic, uncontrolled, and snarled. Unlike a *laberinto*, which implies design, structure, and even the possibility of escape, a *maraña* is wild and suffocating. The love between the Nilsen brothers and Juliana is not a puzzle to be solved – it's a thicket of emotion, jealousy, and degradation. The phrase *monstruoso amor* already signals something unnatural or grotesque. By pairing it with *maraña*, Borges emphasizes the moral confusion and emotional entrapment. So while *laberinto* might seem Borgesian in the abstract, *maraña* is the perfect word for this particular story. It's a mess you don't navigate – you're trapped in it. The brothers' shared relationship with Juliana is not just complex – it's indecent, humiliating, and inescapable. A *laberinto* might have rules; a *maraña* has none. So while *laberinto* might seem Borgesian in the abstract, *maraña* is the perfect word for this particular story. It's a mess you don't navigate—you're trapped in it.

The prose is a little overwrought for an academic article, but otherwise I couldn't have said it better myself! Copilot even picked up on the "thread" as a point of contact and contrast between a labyrinth and a tangle.

I don't think that AI could, by itself, produce a book like the one I've promised to write. It will output some real howlers and may be unaware of a paradigm shattering interpretation of "Pierre Menard" locked away, bereft of an abstract, inside Jstor (though this is highly unlikely). But with competent prompting and curation by someone like me, it could produce a better introduction to Borges than I could alone. Copilot doesn't play favorites, doesn't get tired, doesn't get bored, and (like Borges's own Funes), doesn't forget anything. What it lacks is a voice, the stamp of personality, but that's easy enough to change. In fact, Copilot can tell you how to do it.

The ease with which LLM models can be used to cheat has made AI a hot topic among teachers at different levels. It may well be that the era of take-home exams and term papers is over. As Katie Day Good recently argued in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,

it's back to blue books. Less acknowledged, because more difficult to deal with, is the impact of AI on the assessment of critical and creative writing. Many journals now require authors to attest that their submissions weren't generated by AI. Others simply warn that they won't consider AI-generated writing. But how can they tell? Make a few stylistic and lexical tweaks, and even an AI-detecting program like ChatZero will not recognize a text as having been generated by its GPT sibling. I know because ChatGPT told me.

The response of publishers to the perils of AI-generated manuscripts has been no more reassuring. Cambridge University Press expects its authors ("content creators" it calls us: an unwelcome nod to the digital age) to reveal the use of AI tools, though it doesn't make clear how much AI is too much AI. Then it adds: "AI does not meet the Cambridge requirements for authorship, given the need for accountability." That's true, but there's far more to authorship than accountability. You can't be held accountable before there's content to be accountable for. Its creator, or if you wish, its originator is what we call an "author." The old question of "what is an author?" has come back with a virtual vengeance. If not an author, perhaps we can say, following Foucault, that ChatGPT fulfills the "author function."

About the limits to the use of AI: take my hypothetical "La intrusa" article. The kernel idea occurred to me, but Copilot wrote it out. A few more prompts, and I'd have the essay all but written. Clearly it's not my writing and I couldn't in good conscience call myself the author. But clearly it's also not not my work. It's a collaboration: ChatGPF. For writers and editors (not to mention tenure committees), the quandaries posed by AI may seem intractable, which explains the human tendency to look away. And so journals and publishers pretend that as long as they issue an AI-free-zone warning, we can go on with business as usual, but I don't think we can. I'd be surprised if unacknowledged ChatGPF-type hybrids weren't in circulation already.

By now you must have guessed that I don't intend to write the Borges book. There wouldn't be enough of me in it for me. I need to get back in touch with my editor to weasel out of the contract, but I keep putting it off because I'm embarrassed. I've always felt grateful for book contracts and have never welched on any. This time I felt especially grateful, given that I've already entered what Spanish elegantly calls *la tercera edad*. But I don't know what to say. I'm no good at apologizing.

Come to think of it, I know what I'll do: ask ChatGPT to write me the email.