

Donald A. Yates

JORGE LUIS BORGES: LIFE, WORK, AND CRITICISM.

Authoritative Studies in World Literature.

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Reviewed by James E. Holloway, Jr.

Exhibiting a format now familiar in the expanding series "Authoritative Studies in World Literature," this brief volume embraces five distinct sections: (1) a distilled biography of Borges, (2) a chronological list of his major works, (3) the summary of his principal writings, (4) an evaluation of his achievement, and (5) a selected, annotated bibliography. Candidly conceived as an aid for the uninitiated, *Jorge Luis Borges; Life, Work, and Criticism* appropriately develops no new insights into its subject, but rather maps the known and illuminates promising paths of discovery for the now oriented initiate to pursue.

The series' authority lies in that of the individuals who pen the specific study guides, and Donald A. Yates, long personally familiar with both Spanish-American literature and Borges, also holds the distinction of having coedited the first anthology of Borges's prose to appear in English. This acquaintanceship serves him well as he chronicles a life generally perceived to be usually bookish and sedentary. Yates's sturdy prose, particularly as he recounts more recent events, occasionally conveys a warmth infrequently achieved in other, more thorough accounts. The virtue of personal familiarity, however, may betray him into placing unwarranted reliance on Borges's own testimony, for he seems to overlook Borges's propensity for creatively refashioning his own life: Despite Ronald Christ's penetrating analysis to the contrary, Yates perpetuates Borges's preference for some sort of mysterious, psychological phenomenon as the true genesis of his fiction.

In the eight page summary of Borges's principal writings, however, Yates finds his stride. He separates Borges's major collections into three genres which he orders according to their relative date of development within Borges's career; poetry, essay, and fiction, and he then essays chronologically the volumes within each genre, ably synthesizing the individual content and dominant characteristics of Borges's most significant books while at the same time implicitly—and often explicitly—charting major patterns of growth in Borges's career, i.e., his artistic development from poetry through expository prose to fiction and the shifting weight of thematic development from the personal and Argentine to the philosophical and universal.

Though constrained by series format to only five pages, Yates is equally effective in his evaluation of Borges's achievement, primarily because while he does point to areas which will richly reward the exploratory efforts of the interested reader (Borges's symbolism, etc.), he himself avoids entrapment in the many complexities of detail which have so widely engaged Borges's specialized audience. He indicates Borges's worth by suggestion, pointing out that the adjective "Borgesian" has gained universal critical currency and noting further the great esteem which other contemporary masters accord him. Still, he avoids overstatement, remarking the limits of Borges's interests and the fact that his fame really rests on two slim volumes of stories. Neither does he overlook the essential "uncommitted playfulness" of Borges's art, a major characteristic which stimulates many of his readers, but which has also from the outset rallied Borges's most earnest detractors. Most importantly, Yates underscores the debt which Spanish-American literature, and even world literature, owes Borges for helping to liberate the creative imagination from a stale realism and *de rigueur* sociopolitical commentary.

A bit more attention to editorial detail would enhance the volume: "effect" not "affect" (p. 12), "25" not "23" for "*Veinticinco*" (p. 17), etc. Nevertheless, this study is a useful tool which will serve valuably the uninitiated reader of Borges, at sea in a four digit bibliography.