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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE CHALLENGE TO HUMAN LITERATURE: REVISITING BORGES AND CORTÁZAR²

Abstract

When the popularity of cinema and the emergence of mass culture shook the foundations of art as it was known and recognized until the early 20th century, Walter Benjamin wrote his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproduction” in an attempt to highlight the irreplaceability and authenticity of the artwork embodied in its *aura* and to confront the challenges posed by the new era. Almost a century later, it seems that we are facing an even greater challenge to the traditional conception of art as an authentic and unique human activity, we are facing literature created by artificial intelligence. And while many reject categorically the possibility that this “humanoid literature” could ever be considered equal to “human literature,” it cannot be denied that artificial intelligence and its creative achievements in the field of literature question the very foundations of human art. Somewhat unexpectedly, writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar and their conceptions of literature can provide possible answers to the questions of the new era. Their works show that the issue of the author and their biography should be revisited after more than a century of rejection of the 19th-century biographism in literary theory. On the other hand, the theory of reception and the relation between author and reader acquire a new dimension when seen through the lens of these authors’ oeuvre.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), Julio Cortázar (1914-1984), authorship, poetics of reading.

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INTELIGENCIA ARTIFICIAL Y EL DESAFÍO A LA LITERATURA HUMANA: UNA REVISIÓN DE BORGES Y CORTÁZAR

Resumen

Cuando la popularidad del cine y la aparición de la cultura de masas sacudieron los cimientos del arte tal como se conocía y reconocía hasta principios del siglo XX, Walter Benjamin escribió su conocido ensayo «La obra de arte en la época de su reproductibilidad técnica» como un intento de señalar la irrepetibilidad y autenticidad de la obra de arte encarnada en su *aura* y de enfrentarse a los desafíos que le planteaba la nueva realidad. Casi un siglo después, parece que nos enfrentamos a un desafío aún mayor para la concepción tradicional del arte como una actividad humana auténtica y singular, a la literatura creada por la inteligencia artificial. Y aunque muchos rechazan categóricamente la posibilidad de que esa «literatura humanoide» sea considerada alguna vez igual a la «literatura humana», no se puede negar que la inteligencia artificial y sus logros creativos en el campo de la literatura cuestionan los propios fundamentos del arte humano. La cuestión del autor y su biografía se reactualiza después de más de cien años de rechazo del historicismo y biografismo del siglo XIX en la teoría literaria, mientras que la teoría de la recepción y el énfasis que pone en el contacto entre autor y lector adquieren una nueva dimensión de importancia. Un tanto inesperadamente, escritores como Jorge Luis Borges y Julio Cortázar y sus concepciones de la literatura pueden proporcionar las respuestas buscadas a las cuestiones de la nueva era.

Palabras clave: inteligencia artificial, Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), Julio Cortázar (1914–1984), autoría, poética de lectura.

An article titled “Artificial Intelligence and the Challenge to Human Literature: Revisiting Borges and Cortázar” might seem an odd member in this special issue of *Beoiberística*, “Argentine Writers, Tradition, and World Literature: Borges and Cortázar.” Nonetheless, one could argue that few things are as “worldly” as the World Wide Web, which provides access to the most popular generative models of artificial intelligence. Few forms of writing are more directly rooted in worldly literary traditions than the literature produced by the AI programs. Finally, while the Argentine literary tradition of the 20th century is arguably most effectively embodied by Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar – two of the main contenders for the flattering title of Mr. Argentina in the grand pageant of world literature, as David Damrosch (2006: 48) so vividly described – AI-generated literature brings us into a new and urgent conversation about the future of this tradition.

World literature has consistently and actively engaged with fundamental questions about literature and its relationship to social phenomena. As Haun Saussy recently stated, world literature is “an invitation to unending discovery and revision of prior knowledge” (Saussy 2024: 185). For instance, the issue of the canon in world



literature, largely intertwined with societal changes, has been examined by David Damrosch (2006), Theo D’Haen (2011), and Zhang Longxi (2016), as well as by the contributors to *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries* (Papadima, Damrosch, D’Haen 2011), while questions of globalization and literary genres have been addressed from various perspectives by Djelal Kadir (1995 and 2004) and Mariano Siskind (2010), Franco Moretti (2000 and 2003) and Efraín Kristal (2002). Additionally, Peina and Hajdu (2024: 184) in their discussion of world literature and AI, note that “[t]he development of world literature as circulation has never been independent from changes of technology and media that naturally determine the accessibility of all literatures.”

At the turn of the 20th century, a significant shift in technology and media began to reshape our understanding of what constitutes a work of art. In the 1930s, the rise of cinema and mass culture disrupted traditional notions of art, prompting Walter Benjamin to write his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” In this essay, Benjamin addresses the challenges posed by this new era and highlights the uniqueness and authenticity of the artwork, which form its “aura.” Benjamin argues that this aura is intrinsically tied into its ritualistic function and the unrepeatability of its existence in a specific time and space: “the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular space” (Benjamin 2002: 103). According to Benjamin, “what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura” (Benjamin 2002: 104), but he also acknowledges the advantages of technological reproduction of art, noting that it could “bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (...) but not to the human eye,” or allow “the copy of the original (...) to meet the recipient halfway” (Benjamin 2002: 103).

Nearly a century later, we find ourselves confronted with an even more profound challenge to the traditional notion of art as a unique and authentic human endeavor: literature created by artificial intelligence. When I refer to “artificial intelligence,” I am speaking specifically of generative AI chatbots that have been made publicly available, such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT, launched in December 2022, and Gemini, formerly known as Bard, Google’s generative chatbot, which has been in use since March 2023. These developments have fundamentally altered our understanding of what AI is and what it can do. Yet, machine-generated literature is not a recent phenomenon. The concept of composing machines can be traced back to Ramón Llull’s vision of a “*máquina de pensar*,”³ as Borges referred to it (1989: 440), and the first inklings of what Chris Funkhouser (2007: 37) calls “prehistoric digital poetry” emerged in the mid-20th century. In 1959, Theo Lutz programmed his Zuse Z22 computer to create a series of poems, which he called “*Stochastische Texte*” [“Stochastic Texts”], derived from sixteen subjects and

³ “thinking machine” [My translation, unless otherwise noted.]



sixteen predicates taken from Kafka's *The Castle* (Lutz 1959). The result of Lutz's experiment was "[t]he text [...] that was readable but disjunctive" (Funkhouser 2007: 38), yet it paved the way for numerous authors who would later experiment with computer-generated poetry, fueling a wave of randomized literary creations in Europe in the following decades.⁴ The first complete collection of poems and short prose produced by Racter, a computer program developed by William Chamberlain and Thomas Etter, was published in 1984 under the title *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed* (Henrickson 2021). The literature generated by Racter was "always somewhat nonsensical" but it demonstrated a potential "for output that might be construed as meaningful" (Henrickson 2021).

Fifteen years later, in 1999, Mexican researcher Rafael Pérez y Pérez defended his PhD thesis which focuses on developing "a computational model of the creative process of writing in terms of engagement and reflection" (Pérez y Pérez 1999: 1). To achieve this, Pérez y Pérez created the computer program MEXICA, which wrote stories about the Mexica, the ancient inhabitants of what was once Tenochtitlan. In 2017, a collection of stories generated by this program was published under the title *Mexica: 20 años-20 historias* [*Mexica: 20 years-20 stories*]. Around the same time, or more precisely in 2016, "AI got creative" (Haridy 2016), as that year saw various artificial intelligence programs creating scripts for an episode of *Friends*, producing movie trailers, writing entire films, composing songs in the style of The Beatles, penning a Christmas Carol, creating paintings, writing poetry and even evaluating the artistic value of photographs. A striking example of the growth in machine-created literature was the launch of *CuratedAI*, "a literary magazine written by machines, for people" where all submissions were "generated by machines using the tricks of the Artificial Intelligence trade" (CuratedAI 2017). Among the most notable events in this development was the story "The Day a Computer Writes a Novel," created by an AI program developed by Hitoshi Matsubara and his team at the Future University Hakodate in Japan, which garnered significant public attention (e.g. Schaub 2016; Brogan 2016; Burgos López 2019; Basu 2023; Pawlicka Daeger 2024). The short story was submitted for the Nikkei Hoshi Shinichi Literary Award, an unusual literary prize that, since 2013, has accepted submissions from both humans and non-humans, as long as the text is written in Japanese and does not exceed ten thousand characters—roughly equivalent to four thousand words in English (Sato 2016: 31). In 2016, four AI-generated stories were submitted for the award, and "The Day a Computer Writes a Novel" successfully advanced to the second round of screening. The story did not win, and while critics pointed out that it was "not exactly Faulkner" (Schaub 2016), the final sentence of

⁴ Chris Funkhouser thoroughly described and analyzed this entire period in his book *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: an Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995* (2007).



the story left many unsettled: “This was the day a computer wrote a novel. It put the pursuit of its own pleasure first, and ceased serving people.” (Yurei Raita 2019)

Although computational literature and AI have existed in various forms for decades and began to show creative potential in 2016, it is only recently that they have started to capture widespread attention from literary theorists and researchers. This shift in interest may be attributed to the fact that, within just three months of ChatGPT's release, Amazon published approximately 200 English-language books resulting from what is known as co-authorship between humans and the chatbot (Bensinger 2023). Today, that number has surpassed one thousand books.

The sheer volume of works written by AI and the various possibilities for its application, including the last sentence of a certain AI-written short story, are sparking apocalyptic headlines in newspapers⁵ and stirring up old fears that machines will become autonomous and threaten humanity. In the literary field, these apocalyptic forecasts appear in the milder form of a fear that the emergence of literature written by artificial intelligence will lead to a reduction or loss of certain writing skills (Hellström 2023), and that job losses will occur, i.e. the so-called “technological unemployment” (Basu 2023). A particularly pronounced fear arises in discussions about the possibility that AI could create a valuable work of art, or even, as one author wonders, the possibility that the Nobel Prize in Literature might one day be awarded to an artificial intelligence rather than a human writer (Pérez Cotten 2023).

To confirm or dispel these fears, journalists and researchers often choose to explore for themselves the kind of literature that AI produces. Articles on this topic frequently follow a similar structure: the author assigns a task to a generative chatbot to produce a work of art⁶, generally by imitating the style of a particular writer, and then the result is analyzed. In the Spanish-speaking world, generative chatbots are frequently prompted to

⁵ I would like to mention just some of the titles that ponder on the possibility of a literary apocalypse: “La inteligencia artificial avanza: ¿va a destronar a los escritores?” [“Artificial intelligence is advancing: will it dethrone writers?”] (Pérez Cotten 2023), “Inteligencia Artificial (I. A.): ¿lo mejor o lo peor que le ocurrirá a la humanidad?” [“Artificial Intelligence (AI): the Best or the Worst That Could Happen to Humanity”] (Pérez Laserre 2018), “Will AI spell the end of human creativity?” (Rahman 2023), and finally, “Does AI mean the end of Literature?” (Basu 2023).

⁶ In a broader literary context, one could mention the article by David Vázquez (2023) for *Business Insider*, which recounts writer Sergi Arguimbau's experience of co-authoring a book with artificial intelligence. Interestingly, Noam Chomsky, along with co-authors Ian Roberts and Jeffrey Watumull (2023), contributed a piece for *The New York Times* discussing the expectations surrounding AI in the realm of book writing, including their own experiments with crafting prompts for generative models. A particularly unique experiment was conducted by Peina Zhuang and Péter Hajdu (2024: 188), who tasked ChatGPT with replicating the challenge given to Elektrybałt, the poetry-writing machine featured in Stanisław Lem's *Cyberiada*. To my knowledge, this is the only example of comparing the work of an imaginary AI to the creation of a real generative chatbot, but the article does not clarify the potential merit of such a comparison.



emulate the style of Cortázar and Borges, as did, for example, Spanish writer Jorge Gonzalvo when he tasked ChatGPT with writing a speech in Cortázar's style for the opening ceremony of the Guadalajara Book Fair (see González 2023). Perhaps even more intriguing is the experiment conducted by Uriel Baderman (2024) who asked both ChatGPT and Gemini to write a short story in the thematic framework and style of Julio Cortázar. AI-generated texts in most of these experiments, to varying degrees, align with the poetics and style of the authors they were instructed to imitate, and often exhibit some level of artistic value⁷. However, the analysts consistently conclude that these works fall short in comparison to human-authored literature (Arathdar 2021; Meza Ruiz 2022; González 2023; Baderman 2024). They argue that AI-produced literature lacks "feelings, emotions, experience and understanding of life" (Peina, Hajdu 2024: 185), and is devoid of true originality and creativity, often due to its adherence to moral constraints (Chomsky, Roberts, Watumull 2023; Pérez Cotton 2023; Swathi, Dhayalakrishnan 2024: 3). This results in AI-generated literature appearing lifeless or lacking depth (Peina, Hajdu 2024: 186), leading some to conclude that generative chatbots are best suited for creating "formulaic thrillers and romances" (Dawson 2024) and self-help manuals (Bensinger 2023). The prevailing sentiment in much of this discourse is the belief that imagination is an exclusively human trait, and that the idea of AI creating truly original art is, as one critic put it, "a hoax, [...] a complete cheat, a total scam" (Fletcher 2021). Many even contend that AI is merely engaging in "plagiarism" (Brogan 2016) by stitching together fragments of existing texts.

The idea that all texts have already been written, leaving nothing new to create but collages of what has come before, is far from novel – and yet it has never prevented us from valuing new literary works as artistically significant. The notion finds its roots as early as the Old Testament, where it is stated that "there is no new thing under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9, *Holy Bible*), and echoes in the Roman writer Terence's preface to *The Eunuch*, where he asserts, "nothing is said now that has not been said before" (Terence 1887: 76). André Gide approached the idea with humor and irony, remarking, "Toutes choses sont dites déjà; mais comme personne n'écoute, il faut toujours recommencer"⁸ (Gide 2023). Borges, in contrast, gave it a more somber tone in "La biblioteca de Babel"

⁷ In Baderman's (2024) experiment, the exact prompt was: "escribí un cuento breve con el estilo del escritor argentino Julio Cortázar, empleando sus temáticas más recurrentes," or "write a short story in the style of the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, using his most recurring themes." The chatbots were confused by the phrase "Argentine writer," and as a result, the stories they generated resembled Borges' work more than Cortázar's. This could be seen either as a charming reflection of the similarities between the two authors' styles or, conversely, as a suggestion that, in the view of artificial intelligence, Borges might be slightly closer to the title of Mr. Argentina. All confusion was resolved when the problematic phrase was removed from the prompt, and the resulting stories were much closer to Cortázar's distinctive style.

⁸ "Everything has already been said, but as no one listens, it must always be said again."



["The Library of Babel"], his vision of a library-universe containing every possible book, declaring, "La certidumbre de que todo está escrito nos anula o nos afantasma"⁹ (Borges 1974a: 470).

Despite the prevalence of this concept, 20th and 21st century writers have not abandoned the act of writing. They embrace the challenge of creating pastiches, palimpsests, or glosses on existing themes, much in line with Borges' own poetics. Paradoxically, this very idea – central to (post)modern literature – often becomes the basis for researchers to dismiss AI-generated literature as irrelevant to true literary creation. More often than not, these critics conclude their analyses by reassuring readers of human literature that they have nothing to fear, as AI will never have emotions or an inner world (a soul or an aura), and thus they categorically state that it will never¹⁰ be able to create a literary masterpiece on par with the works of Shakespeare or Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Augusto Escobar Mesa quoted in Vergara-Aguirre 2023: 13).

Although the efforts of literary theorists aim to dismiss the possibility of machines ever thinking and creating like humans, many researchers challenge such views (e.g. Raley, Samolsky 2024; Burgos López 2019; Pérez Laserre 2018). Diego Pérez Laserre (2018), for instance, contends that rapid technological development is inevitable. In his article titled "Inteligencia Artificial (I.A.): ¿lo mejor o lo peor que le ocurrirá a la humanidad?" ["Artificial Intelligence (AI): The Best or the Worst Thing That Could Happen to Humanity"], he examines two polar scenarios for humanity's future, emphasizing that dramatic advancements in artificial intelligence are a certainty in either case. In 2005, Ray Kurzweil predicted with confidence that "within several decades information-based technologies will encompass all human knowledge and proficiency, ultimately including the pattern-recognition powers, problem-solving skills, and emotional and moral intelligence of the human brain itself" (Kurzweil 2015 [2005]: 24). A proponent of these developments, Kurzweil envisions a future where humanity thrives through a fusion of biological existence and technology, a concept referred to as the Singularity: "The Singularity will allow us to transcend these limitations of our biological bodies and brains. We will gain power over our fates. Our mortality will be in our own hands" (Kurzweil 2015: 24). In his latest book, Kurzweil claims that the Singularity is no longer a distant goal but an imminent reality, marking the culmination of the transformative journey he first outlined in *The Singularity Is Near* (Kurzweil 2024: 15). However, not everyone shares Kurzweil's optimism. Martin Ford expresses significant

⁹ "The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms." (Borges 2007a: 58)

¹⁰ The list of the authors who claim that the AI-produced literature will never be as good as human-created literary works is extensive: e.g. Chomsky, Roberts, Watumull 2023; Vergara-Aguirre 2023; Manrique Sabogal 2023; Fletcher 2021; Burgos López 2019. There are some researchers less adamant in their views that the AI-written literature will *never* be equal in quality to human literature, but they still claim that the AI won't write excellent literature soon (see Pérez Cotten 2023; Basu 2023; Brogan 2016).



reservations, arguing that this “extraordinary exponential progress” (2015: xii) could “devastate entire industries and upend specific sectors of the economy and job market” (2015: xvii). While Ford is primarily concerned with the financial and economic consequences of these technological advancements, he also raises moral questions and considers the implications of AI-generated art (Ford 2015: 79-80, 111-113).

Regardless of which of these two possibilities proves more likely – or whether either comes to pass – the rapid pace of technological progress, particularly over the past decade, makes it improbable that the world, including the literary world, will remain unchanged in ways that now seem unlikely, impossible, or even unimaginable. Artificial intelligence will likely play a central role in this transformation.

However, my goal is not to offer grim prophecies or apocalyptic scenarios. Each significant technological shift, while often accompanied by shock and unease, also presents opportunities to rethink our values and redefine the fundamental concepts that shape us. Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” serves as a prime example of this. As Christopher Sims observes in *Tech Anxiety: Artificial Intelligence and Ontological Awakening in Four Science Fiction Novels*, a work largely devoted to exploring new technological challenges through the lens of Heidegger’s ontology, “[w]hile AIs threaten humans in these novels or cause us to question our humanity, these threats and questions help put us on a path to thinking and poiesis.” (Sims 2023: 23)

Thus, the issue is not whether we should fear the moment artificial intelligence produces good literature, but rather why we fear it in the first place. Answering this question could offer profound insights into the essence of the human condition and the nature of art – why we create it and how we define it. An overly ambitious task for any scholar, no matter how big the delusion of his or her grandeur might be. That is the reason why I have no aspiration to offer the answers myself but to propose solutions already found in the works of Borges and Cortázar.

Most of the scholarship on the relationship between Borges and Cortázar – described as “Latin American avatars of cyberliterature both worldwide and in Latin America itself” (Taylor, Pitman 2007: 19) – and technology tends to follow one of two similar paths: either exploring their texts for precursors to modern technologies or interpreting them through the lens of artificial intelligence and posthumanism. For instance, some researchers identify authors significant to the development of artificial intelligence that Borges mentions in his works (Bloch 2023; Bottou, Schölkopf 2023), recognize *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*] by Cortázar as a proto-hypertext (Rix 2007), and regard engaging with the future as a fundamental characteristic of Cortázar’s oeuvre (Eller 2017). Cortázar’s idea of the *Rayuelomatic*, a device for reading the novel of the same name, has been identified as a precursor to machine-generated literature (Chihaia, Sánchez Jiménez 2016: 25). As early as 1990, Emma Lapidot dedicated an entire book to examining the



connections between Borges' stories and informatics, with a special focus on Pierre Menard as a precursor to a program that writes in the style of Cervantes (Lapidot 1990: 24–25). Numerous works by Borges and Cortázar, such as Borges' "Funes el memorioso" ["Funes the Memorious"] and "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" ["The Garden of Forking Paths"], and Cortázar's "La continuidad de los parques" ["The Continuity of Parks"] and "Instrucciones para subir una escalera" ["Instructions on How to Climb a Staircase"], have been reexamined in the context of artificial intelligence and the rise of posthumanist thought (Dawson 2024; Porras Chaves 2024; Raley, Samolsky 2024; Wink 2024; Bloch 2023; Téllez Cisneros 2023; Carabantes López 2015; Herbrechter, Callus 2007; Hayles 1999: 8). Additionally, Borges' "La biblioteca de Babel" ["The Library of Babel"] has become a universal metaphor for the Internet¹¹ (Hammond 2024; Kurbalija 2024; Porras Chaves 2024; Wink 2024; Meza Ruiz 2022).

While Borges and Cortázar clearly offer fertile ground for analyzing themes of artificial literature, digital technologies, and the mechanization of literary creation, my focus takes a different direction. Rather than tracing a prehistory of robotics and posthumanism in their works, I aim to explore how their texts and poetics function in relation to literature generated by AI. Moreover, I seek to determine whether their works provide insights or solutions to the existential challenges facing literature as we know it – a challenge that appears both imminent and unavoidable.

The reason why we see the possibility of AI writing quality literature as a problem or "an issue" (Swathi, Dhayalakrishnan 2024: 1), most likely stems from fear concerning the possibility that we no longer remain the only beings capable of creating art. This may easily be due to our arrogance, since we would no longer be able to feel superior and to distinguish ourselves from other beings and non-beings by our imagination and desire to create works of art, free from any practical use value and not meant to satisfy any corporeal needs. At the root of this fear lies the understanding that if we are no different from machines in this delicate and highly valued capacity, perhaps we are not different from them in any way. And if so, the very core of our human identity would be shaken. In order to keep our unique ability of imaginative creation at the core of our identity, we

¹¹ "The Library of Babel" has become such an iconic symbol of the Internet that it has been recreated in digital form: Jonathan Basile first brought Borges' text to life in 2015 (<http://libraryofbabel.info/>), followed by Tom Snelling, who revived it again in March 2022 (<https://libraryofbabel.app/>). Yet, these are not the only intriguing examples of the digital world engaging with the works of Borges and Cortázar. Among the proposals for integrating AI into education (Sánchez Peña 2024) is the idea of creating a podcast in collaboration with artificial intelligence, where AI would craft a script inspired by Cortázar's *Historias de cronopios y de famas* [*Cronopios and Famas*]. Meanwhile, Borges' stories became the subject of the fourth episode of the *AI Book Club* podcast, where Bill Parker (2022) engaged in a discussion about various literary works with two artificial intelligence entities. Admittedly, the latter example does little to strengthen the notion that AI is on the verge of taking over the literary world – or the world at large.



need to understand the way in which literature created by humans is different from literature generated by machines. Would our opinion of the text and our reading experience irrevocably change at the very moment we discover that a non-human writer authored that text? If we accept the possibility that a human and an intelligent chatbot could write two identical texts, would there be any difference between them?

Assistance in addressing this issue may be found in the writer who, according to numerous scholars (e.g. Barth 1967; Fokkema 1984: 37-56; Alazraki 1988; de Toro 1992; Lefere 2000), initiated postmodernism in the Western world with his first story¹², and who precisely in that text made the seemingly impossible *comparison* of two *identical* literary texts, reflected in the attempt to write *Don Quixote* anew and reproduce Cervantes' novel "palabra por palabra y línea por línea"¹³ (Borges 1974b: 446). Let us recall that in Borges' "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*" ["Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*"], Pierre Menard does not seek to write a modern version of *Don Quixote*, nor, as the narrator states, "uno de esos libros parasitarios que sitúan a Cristo en un bulevar, a Hamlet en la Cannebière o a don Quijote en Wall Street"¹⁴ (Borges 1974b 446). He also does not wish to become Cervantes, a possibility he initially considered but deemed too easy. Instead, Pierre Menard, a Frenchman, a man of the early 20th century¹⁵, and consciously aware of history, aims to write a novel identical to the one Cervantes created in the early 17th century, as a Catholic and soldier in the service of the Spanish crown, drawing from his personal experience. Yet, the narrator insists that Menard's *Don Quixote* is only *verbally identical* to Cervantes' original, with the vastly different contexts from which these two works emerged making them entirely distinct. A particularly interesting and revealing moment occurs when the narrator compares identical paragraphs from both versions of *Don Quixote*:

Es una revelación cotejar el don Quijote de Menard con el de Cervantes. Éste, por ejemplo, escribió (Don Quijote, primera parte, noveno capítulo):

. . . la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir.

¹² Borges considered this story as his first original work of fiction, even though he had written short stories and parables before. I previously addressed the details surrounding the creation of this story in a paper dedicated to Saura's adaptation of Borges' story "El sur". See Vraneš 2020: 367.

¹³ "word for word and line for line" (Borges 2007b: 39)

¹⁴ "one of those parasitic books which situate Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannebière or Don Quixote on Wall Street" (Borges 2007b: 39)

¹⁵ The true identity of Menard was uncovered by Delia Ungureanu after decades of confusion and speculation. In her essay "Pierre Menard the *Sur*-realist" Ungureanu skillfully demonstrates the influence the surrealist movement had on Borges and especially "the ambiguous figure of the Comte de Lautréamont" (Ungureanu 2016: 115).



Redactada en el siglo diecisiete, redactada por el “ingenio lego” Cervantes, esa enumeración es un mero elogio retórico de la historia. Menard, en cambio, escribe:

. . . la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones, testigo de lo pasado, ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir.

La historia, *madre* de la verdad; la idea es asombrosa. Menard, contemporáneo de William James, no define la historia como una indagación de la realidad sino como su origen. La verdad histórica, para él, no es lo que sucedió; es lo que juzgamos que sucedió. Las cláusulas finales —*ejemplo y aviso de lo presente, advertencia de lo por venir*— son descaradamente pragmáticas.

También es vívido el contraste de los estilos. El estilo arcaizante de Menard —extranjero al fin— adolece de alguna afectación. No así el del precursor, que maneja con desenfado el español corriente de su época.¹⁶ (Borges 1974b: 449)

Researchers have recognized Borges’ text as a playful approach to the figure of the author, taken to the point of absurdity, which emphasizes the primacy of the text itself, its reader, and the context (e.g., De Man 1964; Rodríguez Monegal 1974: 99; Fokkema 1988: 54; Lapidot 1990: 28; Dapía 1996; Irby 2013: 155; Basile 2018: 234; González Echevarría 2020: 144; Geraghty 2021: 156). From the perspective of poststructuralist literary theory, this interpretation was extended further, and the ideas of Barthes and Foucault on the death of the author, as presented later in “La mort de l’auteur” [“The Death of the Author”] and “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” [“What is an Author?”], were read in the wake of Borges’ story (e.g., Irby 2013; Basile 2018: 235; Williamson 2020: 30). In response to Borges’ text, Gérard Genette (1966: 132) famously remarked on the reader as the author of the work: “Pierre Ménard est l’auteur du Quichotte pour cette raison suffisante que tout lecteur (tout vrai lecteur) l’est.”¹⁷ Later, Hans Robert Jauss (1990: 67-68) positioned

¹⁶ “It is a revelation to compare Menard’s Don Quixote with Cervantes’. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the “lay genius” Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor.

History, the mother of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases—*exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future’s counselor*—are brazenly pragmatic.

The contrast in style is also vivid. The archaic style of Menard —quite foreign, after all—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time.” (Borges 2007b: 43)

¹⁷ “Pierre Ménard is the author of the *Quixote* for this sufficient reason: every reader (every true reader) is.”



Borges as a key figure in reception theory, asserting that “Menard’s discovery of consciously anachronistic reading opens the way for an overdue rehabilitation of the reader, the boom in theories on reading and reading traditions and reader types.” For many, “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” and its critical reception marked the definitive rejection of 19th century biographical and historicist approaches, which were seen as naive and simplistic, while the author’s life experience and creative intent were deemed obsolete and irrelevant to interpretation.

There are also scholars who do not fully agree with these interpretations, even though they have undeniably been crucial for Borges’ position within 20th century literary theory. One of these authors is Robin Lefere (2000: 217), who, in his text “Borges, ante la noción de la ‘posmodernidad’”, opposes the characterization of Borges as a postmodern writer and argues that Borges rejects “[el concepto] barthesiano y posmoderno de la ‘muerte del autor’”¹⁸. In the same text, Lefere also makes an intriguing observation: throughout his entire body of work, Roland Barthes never directly cites Borges and only makes a single passing reference to him (Lefere 2000: 217). Addressing the alleged irony and playfulness in Borges’ text, John Frow (1985: 171) famously said: “Borges’s ‘Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*’ is a perfectly serious joke that we are still learning how to take seriously.” Taking Borges’ joke seriously means acknowledging that Cervantes’s and Menard’s *Don Quixote* are, in fact, different texts. In such a reading of the story, the primary role remains assigned to the active reader and creative reading, but this is not to deny the importance of the author—in fact, quite the opposite. While it’s true that in “Pierre Menard,” the change in meaning of *Don Quixote*—depending on whether it was written by Cervantes or Pierre Menard—arises in the consciousness of the active reader, this change occurs due to knowledge about the author, their life, and the historical context in which the work was created. In light of this, it could be argued that Borges takes a different stance from his postmodern commentators, asserting that the author’s desire, identity, and life experience shape the very essence of a literary work, making it authentic and unrepeatable, or, as Benjamin would put it, investing it with an aura. Borges’ view may also provide us with a response to the need to distinguish between two identical texts—one created by a human, the other by a machine. What would happen if, to stay with Borges’ example, artificial intelligence were to write an authentic and autonomous *Don Quixote* that stemmed from a machine’s “life experience”, including the unique “joys” and “frustrations” that such an existence would entail? The *Don Quixote* of Cervantes or Menard retains an undeniable and unique value as a testament to human experience. With the rise of non-human literature, the testimony of human experience takes on a special value, distinct from any other. Not necessarily greater, but profoundly important and relevant for us as a human species, as it can both reflect the diversity of human lives

¹⁸ “Barthesian and postmodern [concept of the] death of the author.”



and individual experiences while also pointing to a general notion of the universal human condition, emphasizing characteristics that have been inherent to humanity since time immemorial.

The literary exploration of what defines humanity and the human condition is central to the work of another Argentine writer, whose texts, according to Fokkema (1984: 37), form “the hard core of Postmodernism.” Julio Cortázar’s work has been instrumental in shaping literary theory: Genette (1972: 243) used it to define the concept of metalepsis, while Brian McHale (1987) drew on it to identify core features of postmodernism. In addition to his numerous acclaimed short stories and radical innovations in the form of the novel, Cortázar is particularly remembered for his poetics of reading. Few critical studies of his work fail to address, either directly or indirectly, the importance of the theme of reading and the role of the reader¹⁹ (e.g., Sosnowski 1973; Safir 1977; Ostria González 1980; D’Haen 1983; Sorensen 1986; McHale 1987: 193; Bocchino 1991; Tyrkkö 2008; Lobo 2020). Cortázar’s poetics emphasize the active engagement of the “reader-accomplice,” and while this approach is evident throughout his oeuvre, it is most explicitly articulated in his masterpiece, the novel *Rayuela*. A central theme of *Rayuela* is the quest for meaning, self-discovery, and love, pursued through the intertwined acts of reading and writing, born from a deep need to connect with the Other and to confront essential ontological questions (see Vulović 2018: 10-70).

Rayuela challenges readers from its opening pages with instructions that require them to choose between reading the novel traditionally – from the beginning to the end of the second section – or embarking on a nonlinear journey by following the author’s suggested sequence. According to Cortázar, passive readers – those for whom the novel is perhaps not truly intended – might opt for the straightforward linear reading, which reveals the plot but deprives them of a transformative and revolutionary reading experience. It is evident that Cortázar wrote the novel for those willing to take the unconventional path he proposed (or to forge their own) and embrace the challenge of active reading. Cortázar believed that creating a literary work is a collaborative process that does not end when the author lays down the pen or steps away from the typewriter. Instead, a second phase of creation begins when the active reader becomes “*mon semblable, mon frère*”²⁰ (Cortázar 1991: 326), when the author achieves the goal of “*hacer del lector*

¹⁹ The theme of reading in the novels of Julio Cortázar and Milorad Pavić played a pivotal role in my doctoral dissertation, “The Narrative of Love in the Novels of Julio Cortázar and Milorad Pavić” (Vulović 2018). I have also examined this topic in several standalone articles (Vulović 2016; 2017a; 2017b), and the fundamental ideas from those studies are re-evaluated and expanded upon from a fresh perspective in this essay.

²⁰ Cortázar quotes the last verse of Beaudelaire’s poem “Au lecteur” (“To the reader”) to stress additionally the importance of the relationship established between with the writer and his reader (cf. Beaudelaire 1917: 7).



un cómplice, un camarada de camino”²¹ (Cortázar 1991: 326). Cortázar wrote *Rayuela* for his reader-accomplice:

Simultaneizarlo, puesto que la lectura abolirá el tiempo del lector y lo trasladará al del autor. Así el lector podría llegar a ser copartícipe y copadeciente de la experiencia por la que pasa el novelista, *en el mismo momento y en la misma forma.*²² (Cortázar 1991: 327; italics in the original)

Cortázar sets high expectations for both his work and his readers, aiming for transcendence and a profound connection between writer and reader, forged through complicity and shared experience. For Julio Cortázar, literature serves as a bridge that the writer constructs only halfway through, leaving it to the reader to engage actively and complete the other half of the literary creation. Or, as he states in *Rayuela*:

Mejor, [el autor] le da como una fachada, con puertas y ventanas detrás de las cuales se está operando un misterio que el lector cómplice deberá buscar (de ahí la complicidad) y quizá no encontrará (de ahí el copadecimiento). Lo que el autor de esa novela haya logrado para sí mismo, se repetirá (agigantándose, quizá, y eso sería maravilloso) en el lector cómplice.²³ (Cortázar 1991: 327)

Cortázar’s concept of complicity and co-suffering demands a direct, immersive engagement; the reader and the writer must traverse the same intellectual and emotional landscape, undergoing a shared process of questioning, reflection, and commitment. This is not merely a passive consumption of a text, but a deeply reciprocal relationship, where both parties—author and reader—surrender themselves fully to the work. Each must actively inhabit the narrative, contributing to its unfolding, as the text becomes a space for collective creation. This experience cannot be delegated or assigned to someone—or *something*—else; it is a uniquely human process, demanding participation at its core.

Furthermore, it is clear that humans and machines still occupy entirely different ontological and metaphysical realms. The former are shaped by a consciousness deeply rooted in lived experience, marked by a history of existential struggles, profound

²¹ “making an accomplice of the reader, a traveling companion.” (Cortázar 1987: 397)

²² “Simultaneize him, provided that the reading will abolish reader’s time and substitute author’s time. Thus the reader would be able to become a coparticipant and cosufferer of the experience through which the novelist is passing, at the same moment and in the same form.” (Cortázar 1987: 397)

²³ “Better yet, give him something like a façade, with doors and windows behind which there operates a mystery which the reader-accomplice will have to look for (therefore the complicity) and perhaps will not find (therefore the cosuffering). What the author of this novel might have succeeded in for himself, will be repeated (becoming gigantic, perhaps, and that would be marvelous) in the reader-accomplice.” (Cortázar 1987: 397)



uncertainties, and the innate awareness of their own finitude. These human concerns – rooted in subjective experience – stand in stark contrast to the current mechanical nature of machines, which, however complex, do not partake in such deeply human anxieties. At this time, machines are incapable of experiencing the fears, aspirations, and uncertainties that resonate through human existence, but it would be reductive to dismiss the possibility that artificial intelligence might develop its own rich and intricate modes of existence. If machines were to possess unique experiences shaped by their interaction with the world, their “existence” could lead to entirely novel ontologies and epistemologies. These, in turn, might produce forms of literature or art that reflect the complexities and nuances of a machine's perspective. However, the core of Cortázar's vision lies in a deeply human connection, a shared complicity that transcends the text itself and situates the reader and writer in a dynamic, reciprocal relationship. This connection hinges on an awareness of mutual vulnerabilities, an understanding of shared existential dilemmas, and the possibility of collective transcendence. Supporting this idea, Cortázar writes that the ideal novel

no engaña al lector, no lo monta a caballo sobre cualquier emoción o cualquier intención, sino que le da algo así como una arcilla significativa, un comienzo de modelado, con huellas de algo que quizá sea colectivo, *humano* y no individual.²⁴ (Cortázar 1991: 327; emphasis mine)

The 21st century compels us to revisit ideas from past eras, challenging our previous dismissals of certain theories, literary works, and perspectives, encouraging us to reevaluate both literature and our place within the broader human experience. David Damrosch has illustrated how the study of world literature can provide valuable insights into contemporary debates, revealing that the works of authors like Cortázar and Borges allow comparatists to reconsider the seemingly dichotomous concepts of nation and world, or close and distant readings. Through their works, we are invited to see “[t]he world in a grain of sand; or in an aquarium, in the Jardin des Plantes, in the spring of 1951” (Damrosch 2017: 139). Revisiting Borges and Cortázar in the context of artificial intelligence offers an opportunity to respond to the challenges AI poses to human literature and prompts us to return to the very core of what literature means.

That shouldn't come as a surprise because, as Zhang Longxi (2016: 126) noted, “world literature offers a good opportunity to go back to literature”. Likewise, AI encourages us to appreciate human creativity and imagination anew. Machines lead us

²⁴ “not deceive the reader, not mount him astride any emotion or intention at all, but give him rather something like meaningful clay, the beginning of a prototype, with traces of something that may be collective perhaps, *human* and not individual.” (Cortázar 1987: 398)



back to our humanity, reminding us that it is not a mistake to believe that the greatest value of literature lies in the text, but in the text within its specific human context. Literature, after all, is born out of human experience – emotions, struggles, and stories that impart true meaning. While great and beautiful literature produced by machines would undoubtedly possess its own value – the “experience” of mechanical existence – it would lack the profound human connection, the empathy, and the relational depth that human-created literature offers. Machines may write, but they will never replicate the authentic experience of a writer extending their hand to a reader. And for this reason, we need not fear artificial intelligence or its literary creation. Not because machines will never write great literature, but because human beings will never cease to create, read, and be moved by their own literature.

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