

“The books and the night”, neurological perspective on Jorge Luis Borges’ blindness

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Abstract

The works of Argentinian scholar Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) have captivated physicians. An assiduous reader, he was given, with magnificent irony, “books and the night”. Borges suffered from chronic and irreversible blindness, which influenced much of his work and has been the subject of different literary and diagnostic analyses from the ophthalmological point of view. However, the characteristics of his visual impairment have escaped the neurological approach, which is why we reviewed his work looking for data suggesting a concomitant brain injury. On his autobiography, he recounts how, during an episode of septicemia, he suffered hallucinations and loss of speech; in addition, in some poems and essays he describes data that suggest “phantom chromatopsia”, a lesion of cortical origin. After that accident, Borges survived with a radical change in literary style. Although a precise diagnosis is impossible, his literary work allows recognizing some elements in favor of concomitant brain involvement.

KEY WORDS: Jorge Luis Borges. Blindness. Phantom chromatopsia. Seven nights.

Introduction

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) is considered one of the greatest Argentinian (Fig. 1) and Spanish language writers. His stories have been the subject of medical-literary analysis; in particular, neurosciences have been captivated by stories such as *Funes el Memorioso*.^{1,2} Borges’ blindness, the mystery of which prevails to this day, has been subjected to various analyses of ophthalmological nature; however, it has escaped the neurological approach; therefore, we reviewed Jorge Luis Borges’ work searching for arguments in favor of neurological implications.

Medical perspective on Borges’ blindness

Borges’ relationship with blindness has been explored from the diagnostic point of view,³⁻⁵ given that his work reflects the chronic and hereditary nature of

blindness. In his first autobiographical work, he recounts how blindness “had been coming on gradually since childhood”,⁶ as well as in the poem *El Ciego II*:⁷

"Since I was born, in 1899,
beside the concave vine and the deep cistern,
frittering time, so brief in memory,
kept taking from me all my eye-shaped world."

The second, in *La ceguera*: “I should say that I am speaking for myself, and for my father and my grandmother, who both died blind-blind, laughing, and brave, as I also hope to die.”⁸ Although there is no precise diagnosis available, his work has allowed some differential diagnoses to be conjectured, out of which progressive myopia seems the most likely.^{5,9}

Neurological perspective

There are some elements in Borges’ work that generate reasonable doubt about whether there was also brain damage. Borges suffered a head trauma on 1938

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Figure 1. Poster in homage to Jorge Luis Borges, 30 years after his death, outside Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, Argentina (photograph by Sergio A. Castillo-Torres, September 2016).

Christmas Eve, about which he wrote: “In spite of first-aid treatment, the wound became poisoned, and for a period of a week or so I lay sleepless every night and had hallucinations and high fever. One evening, I lost the power of speech and had to be rushed to the hospital for an immediate operation. Septicemia had set in, and for a month I hovered, all unknowingly, between life and death.”⁶ Data suggest cerebral cortex involvement (hallucinations, speech loss) and it is not surprising that visual loss had cortical characteristics, with alterations consistent with the so-called “phantom chromatopsia”, in which the visual field of blind or almost blind patients is invaded by a cortically-generated color, usually purple or gold.^{10,11} As a proof of the above, we have some fragments of his poetry:

“Only the shades of yellow stay with me
and I can see only to look on nightmares.”⁷

“All the other overwhelming colours,
in company with the years, kept leaving me,
and now alone remains
the amorphous light, the inextricable shadow
and the gold of the beginning.”¹²

Along with his stories and essays: “When you get to my age, you will have lost your eyesight almost completely. You’ll still make out the colour yellow and lights and shadows”;¹³ “I can still make out certain colors; I can still see blue and green. And yellow, in particular, has remained faithful to me”.⁸

From his descriptions, we can rule out monochromatopsia or xanthopsia, both with preserved visual

acuity.¹¹ Patients with phantom chromatopsia tend to have associated mood disorders, and since nobody believes their color vision stories, they are taken as “hysterical”.¹⁰ This might be consistent with specific characteristics of Borges’ mood disorder, since as some of his biographers (like Alejandro Vaccaro) refer, during the years he wrote *Historia de la Eternidad* (1936, prior to his accident) and that he began to collaborate as a literary critic for *El Hogar* magazine, the idea of suicide crossed his mind now and then; after the deaths of his grandmother and his father, he plunged into long periods of depression. Although this period precedes that of total blindness, the persistence of these neurological characteristics would explain the description of colors mentioned by Borges.

Seventeen years after his accident, in 1955, he became aware of his blindness when he remained in charge of the National Library (Fig. 2). Before him, two directors had also been blind: José Mármol and Paul Groussac. Borges interpreted this as his destiny: “I, who had just lost my sight, (and) remembered — inevitably remembered — that the most illustrious of my predecessors, Groussac, had been blind and director of the library like me, thought that our destiny was the same”.¹⁴ Being the third blind director of a library is nothing more than a confirmation of his destiny: “Here appears the number three, which seals everything. Two is a mere coincidence; three a confirmation. A confirmation of a ternary order, a divine or theological



Figure 2. Former National Library, at Calle México 564, Barrio de San Telmo, Buenos Aires, Argentina (photograph by Sergio A. Castillo-Torres, September 2016).

confirmation”;⁸ as well as coinciding in place and circumstances with his predecessors is “an affirmation that the torment was past, and was a joyous, secret challenge to the frustrated forces of evil”.¹⁵

Borges turns blindness into another instrument to something else, “since I have lost the beloved world of appearances.” (The South)⁸ as he expresses in *Poema de los dones*:¹⁶

“No one should read self-pity or reproach
into this statement of the majesty of God;
who with such splendid irony
granted me books and blindness at one touch.”

Inspired by Groussac, Borges asks from us not to be condescending and to interpret his poem as proof of the greatness of divinity:¹⁶

“Something, which certainly is not defined
By the word fate, arranges all these things;
Another man was given, on other evenings,
Now gone, these many books. He too was blind.”

Conclusion

Borges’ work reveals data consistent with neurological damage. Although an accurate diagnosis is not possible, his genius reminds us that misfortunes are

made available to us “so that we may make from the miserable circumstances of our lives things that are eternal, or aspire to be so.”⁸

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