

POETRY

Jorge Luis Borges

Selected and introduced by Edward Hirsch

We tend to think of Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) exclusively in terms of fiction, as the author of luminous and mind-bending metaphysical parables that cross the boundaries between the short story and the essay. But Borges always identified himself first as a reader, then as a poet, finally as a prose writer. He found the borders between genres permeable and lived in the magic space, the imaginary world, created by books. “If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father’s library,” he said in 1970. “In fact, sometimes I think I have never strayed outside that library.”

Borges was so incited, so inflamed by what he read, so beholden to what he encountered, that it demanded from him an answer in kind, a creative response. He was an Argentine polyglot who learned English even before he learned Spanish (in a sense he grew up in the dual world of his father’s library of unlimited English books and his mother’s sensuous Hispanic garden). As a teenager in Geneva during World War I he also learned Latin and German, which he considered the language of the philosophers, and in old age he devoted himself to studying old Germanic languages. One could say that reading others spurred him into writing poetry, which was for him something so intimate, so essential, it could not be defined without oversimplifying it. “It would be like attempting to define the color yellow, love, the fall of leaves in autumn,” he said. He loved Plato’s characterization of poetry as “that light substance, winged and sacred.”

One of the persistent motifs in Borges’s work is that our egos persist, but that selfhood is a passing illusion, that we are all in the end one, that in reading Shakespeare we somehow become Shakespeare. “For many years I believed that literature, which is almost infinite, is one man,” he said. “I want to give thanks,” he wrote in “Another Poem of Thanksgiving,”

For the fact that the poem is inexhaustible
And becomes one with the sum of all created things
And will never reach its last verse
And varies according to its writers. . . .

Borges never viewed poetry in the way the New Critics did, as an object, a thing unto itself, but rather as a collaborative act between the writer and the reader. Reading requires complicity. He wrote:

The taste of the apple (states Berkeley) lies in the contact of the fruit and the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way (I would say), poetry lies in the meeting of poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed in the pages of a book. What is so essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical sensation that comes with each reading.

Borges’s first book of poems, *Fervor of Buenos Aires* (1921), was inspired by his native city and written under the sign of a vanguard imagist sect

called the *ultraists*, a group of Spanish poets who believed in the supreme power of metaphor and the liberating music of free verse. “I feel that all during my lifetime I have been rewriting that one book,” he said. He wrote poetry throughout the 1920s, but then it mysteriously deserted him as he went on to create a new kind of narrative prose, the astonishing work that registered his greatness: *Inquisitions* (1925), *Universal History of Infamy* (1935), *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), *Ficciones* (1944), and *A New Refutation of Time* (1987), among others. (The first English collections of Borges’s writing, *Labyrinths* and *Ficciones*, appeared in 1962.)

Borges suffered from hereditarily weak eyesight and eventually became the sixth generation of his family to go blind. This was an especially tragic fate for the reader and writer who was also the director of Argentina’s National Library. In “Poem of the Gifts,” written in the 1950s, he speaks of God’s splendid irony in granting him at one time 800,000 books and total darkness. The conclusion of the poem underscores the tragedy of a man who had been denied access to what he most loved:

Painfully probing the dark, I grope toward
The void of the twilight with the point of my faltering
Cane—I for whom Paradise was always a metaphor,
An image of libraries.

The fabulist returned to poetry in the 1950s with a more direct and straightforward style, a beguiling and deceptive simplicity. He dictated his poems to classical meters and chanted them aloud at readings. He wrote about the flow of rivers and the nature of time, his ardor for Buenos Aires, the cult of his ancestors, his study of Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon, the contradictions of temporal experience, the power of certain sunsets, certain dawns, the immanence of a revelation always about to arrive. His poems show how much he loved to read the narrative language of storytelling (of Rudyard Kipling, G. K. Chesterton, and Robert Louis Stevenson, of *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf*), and the magical language of lyric poetry (of runes, riddles, and spells, of Walt Whitman at his most incantatory and Ralph Waldo Emerson at his most oracular), and the investigatory language of metaphysical speculation (from Spinoza to Kafka, from Schopenhauer to Berkeley, Swedenborg, and Unamuno). He was a rapturous writer, a literary alchemist who emerged as an explorer of labyrinths, an adventurer in the fantastic, a poet of mysterious intimacies who probed the infinite postponements and cycles of time, the shimmering mirrors of fiction and reality, the symbols of unreality, the illusions of identity, the disintegration of the self into the universe, into the realm of the Archetypes and the Splendors.

Limits

Of all the streets that blur into the sunset,
There must be one (which, I am not sure)
That I by now have walked for the last time
Without guessing it, the pawn of that Someone

Who fixes in advance omnipotent laws,
Sets up a secret and unwavering scale
For all the shadows, dreams, and forms
Woven into the texture of this life.

If there is a limit to all things and a measure
And a last time and nothing more and forgetfulness,
Who will tell us to whom in this house
We without knowing it have said farewell?

Through the dawning window night withdraws
And among the stacked books which throw
Irregular shadows on the dim table,
There must be one which I will never read.

There is in the South more than one worn gate,
With its cement urns and planted cactus,
Which is already forbidden to my entry,
Inaccessible, as in a lithograph.

There is a door you have closed forever
And some mirror is expecting you in vain;
To you the crossroads seem wide open,
Yet watching you, four-faced, is a Janus.

There is among all your memories one
Which has now been lost beyond recall.
You will not be seen going down to that fountain
Neither by white sun nor by yellow moon.

You will never recapture what the Persian
Said in his language woven with birds and roses,
When, in the sunset, before the light disperses,
You wish to give words to unforgettable things.

And the steadily flowing Rhone and the lake,
All that vast yesterday over which today I bend?
They will be as lost as Carthage,
Scourged by the Romans with fire and salt.

At dawn I seem to hear the turbulent
Murmur of crowds milling and fading away;
They are all I have been loved by, forgotten by;
Space, time, and Borges now are leaving me.

Translated by Alastair Reid

Poem of the Gifts

To María Esther Vázquez

Let no one impute to self-pity or censure
The power of the thing I affirm: that God
With magnificent irony has dealt me the gift
Of these books and the dark, with one stroke.

He has lifted these eyes, now made lightless,
To be lords of this city of books, though all that they read
In my dream of a library are insensible paragraphs
Disclosed to their longing

Each passing day. Vainly dawn multiplies book
After book to infinity, each one
Inaccessible, each lost to me now, like the manuscripts
Alexandria fed to the flame.

Greek anecdote tells of a king who lived among
Gardens and fountains, and died of thirst and starvation;
I toil in the breadth and the depth and the blindness
Of libraries, without strength or direction.

Encyclopedias, atlases, Orient,
Occident, dynasties, ages,
Symbols and cosmos, cosmogonies
Call to me from the walls—ineffectual images!

Painfully probing the dark, I grope toward
The void of the twilight with the point of my faltering
Cane—I for whom Paradise was always a metaphor,
An image of libraries.

Something—no need to prattle of chance
Or contingency—presides over these matters;
Long before me, some other man took these books and the dark
In a fading of dusk for his lot.

Astray in meandering galleries,
It comes to me now with a holy, impalpable
Dread, that I am that other, the dead man, and walk
With identical steps and identical days to the end.

Which of us two is writing this poem
In the I of the first person plural, in identical darkness?
What good is the word that speaks for me now in my name,
If the curse of the dark is implacably one and the same?

Groussac or Borges, I watch the delectable
World first disfigure then extinguish itself
In a pallor of ashes, until all that is gone
Seems at one with sleep and at one with oblivion.

Translated by Ben Belitt

The Other Tiger

And the craft that createth a semblance
MORRIS: *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876)

A tiger comes to mind. The twilight here
Exalts the vast and busy Library
And seems to set the bookshelves back in gloom;
Innocent, ruthless, bloodstained, sleek,
It wanders through its forest and its day
Printing a track along the muddy banks
Of sluggish streams whose names it does not know
(In its world there are no names or past
Or time to come, only the vivid now)
And makes its way across wild distances
Sniffing the braided labyrinth of smells
And in the wind picking the smell of dawn
And tantalizing scent of grazing deer;
Among the bamboo's slanting stripes I glimpse
The tiger's stripes and sense the bony frame
Under the splendid, quivering cover of skin.
Curving oceans and the planet's wastes keep us
Apart in vain; from here in a house far off
In South America I dream of you,
Track you, O tiger of the Ganges' banks.
It strikes me now as evening fills my soul
That the tiger addressed in my poem
Is a shadowy beast, a tiger of symbols
And scraps picked up at random out of books,
A string of labored tropes that have no life,
And not the fated tiger, the deadly jewel

That under sun or stars or changing moon
Goes on in Bengal or Sumatra fulfilling
Its rounds of love and indolence and death.
To the tiger of symbols I hold opposed
The one that's real, the one whose blood runs hot
As it cuts down a herd of buffaloes,
And that today, this August third, nineteen
Fifty-nine, throws its shadow on the grass;
But by the act of giving it a name,
By trying to fix the limits of its world,
It becomes a fiction, not a living beast,
Not a tiger out roaming the wilds of earth.

We'll hunt for a third tiger now, but like
The others this one too will be a form
Of what I dream, a structure of words, and not
The flesh and bone tiger that beyond all myths
Paces the earth. I know these things quite well,
Yet nonetheless some force keeps driving me
In this vague, unreasonable, and ancient quest,
And I go on pursuing through the hours
Another tiger, the beast not found in verse.

Translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni

The Borges

I know little or nothing of the Borges,
My Portuguese forebears. They were a ghostly race,
Who still ply in my body their mysterious
Disciplines, habits, and anxieties.
Shadowy, as if they had never been,
And strangers to the processes of art,
Indecipherably they form a part
Of time, of earth, and of oblivion.
Better so. When everything is said,
They are Portugal, they are that famous people
Who forced the Great Wall of the East, and fell
To the sea, and to that other sea of sand.
They are that king lost on the mystic strand
And those at home who swear he is not dead.

Translated by Alastair Reid

Ars Poetica

To look at the river made of time and water
And remember that time is another river,
To know that we are lost like the river
And that faces dissolve like water.

To be aware that waking dreams it is not asleep
While it is another dream, and that the death
That our flesh goes in fear of is that death
Which comes every night and is called sleep.

To see in the day or in the year a symbol
Of the days of man and of his years,
To transmute the outrage of the years
Into a music, a murmur of voices, and a symbol,

To see in death sleep, and in the sunset
A sad gold—such is poetry,

Which is immortal and poor. Poetry
Returns like the dawn and the sunset.

At times in the evenings a face
Looks at us out of the depths of a mirror;
Art should be like that mirror
Which reveals to us our own face.

They say that Ulysses, sated with marvels,
Wept tears of love at the sight of his Ithaca,
Green and humble. Art is that Ithaca
Of green eternity, not of marvels.

It is also like the river with no end
That flows and remains and is the mirror of one same
Inconstant Heraclitus, who is the same
And is another, like the river with no end.

Translated by W. S. Merwin

Camden 1892

The fragrance of coffee and newspapers.
Sunday and its tedium. This morning,
On the uninvestigated page, that vain
Column of allegorical verses
By a happy colleague. The old man lies
Prostrate, pale, even white in his decent
Room, the room of a poor man. Needlessly
He glances at his face in the exhausted
Mirror. He thinks, without surprise now,
That face is me. One fumbling hand touches
The tangled beard, the devastated mouth.
The end is not far off. His voice declares:
I am almost gone. But my verses scan
Life and its splendor. I was Walt Whitman.

Translated by Richard Howard and César Rennert

The Enigmas

I who am singing these lines today
Will be tomorrow the enigmatic corpse
Who dwells in a realm, magical and barren,
Without a before or an after or a when.
So say the mystics. I say I believe
Myself undeserving of Heaven or of Hell,
But make no predictions. Each man's tale
Shifts like the watery forms of Proteus.
What errant labyrinth, what blinding flash
Of splendor and glory shall become my fate
When the end of this adventure presents me with
The curious experience of death?
I want to drink its crystal-pure oblivion,
To be forever; but never to have been.

Translated by John Updike

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