

JORGE LUIS BORGES

Mapmaker of Imaginary Worlds

Shortly after receiving the 1982 Nobel Prize for literature, Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez remarked upon the mysterious failure of the Nobel committee to recognize the elder statesman of modern Latin American letters, Jorge Luis Borges: "I still don't understand why they don't give it to him." It was not false modesty. Like other Latin American writers, Garcia Marquez owes much to the labyrinthine imagination of Borges, who died last summer. His luminous *ficciones* combine playful metaphysical musings with tight, detective-story plotting. The result, as Alastair Reid here explains, is a rare form of writing that takes us "to the very limits of language."

by Alastair Reid

News of the death of Jorge Luis Borges, in Geneva, on June 14th at the age of 86, reached me in Mexico. Paradoxically, that gloomy circumstance brought on not just a flood of eulogy in the press but the replaying, on television, of some of the interviews he had given over the last 20 years, so that, having died, he reappeared nightly, on one occasion even talking about his own death. His greatest horror, he often used to say, was of immortality; and he looked on death as a familiar, as a surcease that would separate him once and for all from "Borges," that Other on whom he would often vent his ironies, and who now survives him, in book form.

At the insistence of an Argentine friend, I first began to read Borges in the early 1950s, when he was little known outside Argentina, and I was so astonished by his writing that I began to translate him. To translate the work of any writer requires a total immersion in the text, but in Borges's case I was amply rewarded: Once read, his brief fictions go on reverberating in the mind.

I met him first in Buenos Aires, in 1964, and encountered him with some regularity, in different parts of the world, for, as his reputation spread through translation, he traveled widely, giving lectures and readings, and granting interviews indefatigably. We kept up over the next two decades a running conversation, mostly about writers and writing, and I never failed to be astonished



Jorge Luis Borges at Columbia University in 1980.

at the breadth of his reading, the crispness of his memory, and the subtlety and wit of his observations.

In the autobiographical essay he wrote in 1970, he remarks: "If I were to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library." His father's library consisted mainly of English books, for Borges's paternal grandmother was English, and Borges learned English as a matter of course. His father, a lawyer, lecturer, and occasional writer, began to lose his sight early, a hereditary affliction that passed to Borges in his fifties. Borges writes: "From the time that I was a boy, when blindness came to him, it was tacitly understood that I had to fulfill the literary destiny that circumstances had denied my father. This was something that was taken for granted (and such things are far more important than things that are merely said). I was expected to be a writer."

In his childhood, the greatest punishment his mother could inflict on him was to threaten to take away his books. In 1914, Borges's father took an early retirement, and the family moved from Buenos Aires to Europe, where they were to remain for the next seven years. Borges went to school in Geneva, learning Latin, French, and German, and reading voraciously in these languages; and, during the time the family spent in Spain before returning to Argentina in 1921, he began to publish poems, reviews, and literary essays.

I can think of no other writer whose life was so bound up with books as was Borges's. In Buenos Aires, he edited and wrote for a number of small literary magazines, and introduced many foreign writers into Spanish. He also began to translate, for which he was admirably prepared, and produced distinguished translations of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner; he became a cornerstone of Victoria Ocampo's celebrated review, *Sur*, which regularly published his writings. His early books of poems and collections of literary essays gained him a not inconsiderable reputation as a writer, and he enjoyed the company and conversation of the literary figures of the day.

In 1938, he took a job as assistant in a municipal library on the outskirts of the city, a post he held for eight years until he was dismissed on the orders of Argentina's dictator Juan Perón, against whom he had spoken out. After that, he maintained himself by lecturing on literary subjects, all the while continuing to write and publish. Then, in 1955, with the overthrow of Perón, he was appointed director of the National Library in Buenos Aires, a supreme irony, for his sight had diminished to the point of making reading almost impossible, an irony that he dwells on in his most moving "Poem of the Gifts."

Borges lived in and through books. He often used to say that reading was a form of traveling in time, and he would speak of writers like Stevenson, Chesterton, de Quincey, and Coleridge as if they were friends. "I have always been a greater reader than a writer," he says in one interview, and, even in his fantastic stories, the point of departure is most often a book or a text. In his early poems and literary essays, however, there is yet no inkling of the extraordinary writer he was to become, although his sense of irony is apparent. The crucial year in Borges's life is 1938, the year in which his father died and in which he himself suffered an accident that led to grave septicemia. From that point on, he began to write the inimitable stories that are collected in *Ficciones* (1944), his most celebrated single volume.

Games with Time and Infinity

Borges called his stories "fictions," and it is worth stopping to consider what he means, for the word has in Latin America a different sense, I think, than it has in English-speaking countries. Borges's stories are always reminding us that they are verbal constructs. To mistake them for reality is to be deceived, because the gap between language and reality is uncrossable. In one of his most celebrated stories, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Borges makes passing reference to a work, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (The Philosophy of "As If"), a study of the nature of fictions by the German metaphysician, Hans Vaihinger. Unlike hypotheses, which posit a possibility and go on to test its truth, fictions are understood to be no more than linguistic formulations. They are ways of bringing chaos into a temporary verbal order, rather than the

Alastair Reid, 60, a current Wilson Center Fellow, is a poet, translator, and staff writer for the New Yorker. Born in Whithorn, Scotland, he received an M.A. in classics from St. Andrews University (1949). In addition to translating the poetry of Borges, Pablo Neruda, and others, Reid is the author of several volumes of poetry, including, most recently, Weatherings (1978). Copyright © 1986 by Alastair Reid.

SELECTED TRANSLATIONS OF BORGES'S WORK

The Aleph and Other Stories. Dutton, 1970.

The Book of Imaginary Beings. Dutton, 1969.

Borges: A Reader. Edited by Emir Rodriguez Monegal and Alastair Reid. Dutton, 1981.

Dreamtigers. University of Texas Press, 1964.

Ficciones. Edited by Anthony Kerrigan. Grove Press, 1962.

Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings. Edited by Donald Yates and James Irby. New Directions, 1972.

Other Inquisitions, 1937–1952. University of Texas Press, 1964.

A Personal Anthology. Edited by Anthony Kerrigan. Grove Press, 1967.

Selected Poems, 1923–1967. Edited by Norman Thomas di Giovanni. Delta, 1972.

expressions of conviction or even of opinion.

Borges goes on to add: "The metaphysicians of Tlön are not looking for truth, nor even for an approximation of it; they are after a kind of amazement. They consider metaphysics a branch of fantastic literature." For Borges, all literary creations are fictions, games played with words, which, treated *as if* they were true, may throw light on reality, but must never be confused with it.

This paradox is at the heart of Borges's work. Inherent in the notion of fictions is a fundamental distrust of language, a wariness, an irony. A book, as Borges shows us often, is itself an irony: Held in the hand, it mocks the writer who created it, for it has moved out of the physical realm of time into the dimension of the timeless, while the writer must go on living in time and, eventually, die.

In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the point of departure is a book. Borges and his friend Bioy Casares discover in an encyclopedia a reference to a mysterious planet called Tlön. Little by little, further references to Tlön turn up, until it is eventually revealed that Tlön has been created by a secret company of scholars as a counterreality, which the inhabitants of this planet, however, are eager to embrace, preferring the intelligible, created reality to the real. So it is with literature, in which we willingly embrace the illusions created in language, but out of which we must inevitably return into time. The worlds created through language, then, are illusions, but glorious illusions.

At the conclusion of the story, Borges writes: "I go on revising, in the quiet of the days in the hotel at Adrogué, a tentative translation into Spanish, in the style of Quevedo, of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*, which I do not intend to see published." Literature will change nothing, but it exists as solace, magnificent solace, to the mind.

In a celebrated essay, "Pascal's Sphere," Borges makes the following observation: "Perhaps the history of the universe is the history of the diverse intonations of a few metaphors." The essential metaphors for existence recur, and the business of the writer is to restate them, give them a new incarnation.

Let us look at one of these, the duality of the Self and the Other, to which Borges gave new life. In the short parable "Borges and I," he separates the living self from "Borges," the Other, the literary figure, to whom, however, he is inevitably shackled. The piece concludes: "Years ago, I tried ridding myself of him and I went from myths of the outlying slums of the city to games with time and infinity, but these games are now part of Borges and I will have to turn to other things. And so, my life is running away, and I lose everything and everything is left to oblivion or to the other man. Which of us is writing this page I do not know." He made this duality tangible and real.

In recent years, he grew reluctant to lecture, and would ask me to sit with him and give a *charla*, in which I would ask him questions, or read out questions from his audience. Quite often, his questioners would quote him, bringing up something he had said or written and, just as often, he would disclaim it, attributing it to "Borges," the Other, who had become to him a separate being. His modesty was legendary, so that, when anyone praised his work in his company, he would redirect the praise to "Borges," of whom he often took a very wry view.

Peering over the Edge

The circumstances of Borges's life, spent among books, occupied with literature, are directly transmuted into the central images and figures in his writing. The library becomes the infinite library of Babel, containing all possible books and turning into nightmare. The accident he suffered in 1938 becomes a symbolic death in "The South." The recurring image of the mirror crystallizes duality. The tiger, an obsession of his childhood, crops up again and again to represent pure physicality, being beyond language. The insomnia from which Borges suffered is transposed to the figure of Funes the Memorios, who is condemned to remember everything in its inexhaustible particularity. And Buenos Aires, whose streets he never tired of walking, becomes in his stories the setting for miraculous happenings.

What distinguishes Borges from other writers, I think, is the particular effect his writings have on his readers. Certain words crop up again and again in his work to become his trademarks: The Spanish word *asombro*, which means "amazement, awe," and the adjective *vertiginoso*, "vertiginous, vertigo-inducing." His writings take us to the very limits of language, and make us peer over the edge, so that, after reading certain stories of his, some quite ordinary event like, say, missing a bus, will suddenly become charged with ominous significance.

This sense of awe is, for Borges, what lies at the heart of great literature, through which we truly contemplate the whole mystery of existence. It was part of Borges's genius to find such moments in the writing of others, like the passage from Coleridge's notebooks that he was fond of quoting: "If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke—Ay!—and what then?"

Borges's brief texts are amply strewn with reference and quotation. It is only on close scrutiny, however, that the reader discovers that a fair proportion of these sources are imaginary, their authors nonexistent, that Borges

really did regard scholarship as a branch of fantastic literature. Borges is a literary minimalist, capable of containing infinitely resounding paradoxes in the compass of a brief paragraph.

Let me proffer two examples, from the volume *El hacedor* (The maker) (1960). The first Borges attributes to one Suárez Miranda, from an apocryphal text dated 1658 that carries the title, *On Precision in the Sciences*:

...in that Empire, the Art of Cartography had achieved such perfection that the map of a single Province occupied a whole City, and the map of the Empire, a whole Province. With time, these disproportionate maps gave no satisfaction, and the College of Cartographers conceived a Map of the Empire that had the same dimensions as the Empire, and that coincided with it at every point. Subsequent Generations, less concerned with the study of Cartography, understood that the extended map was useless and with a certain impiety abandoned it to the inclemencies of the Sun and of Winters. In the deserts of the West, certain tattered fragments of the Map are still to be found, sheltering Animals and Beggars; in the whole country, nothing else remains of the Discipline of Geography ...

The other passage concludes Borges's epilogue to the same book, and also makes use of the figure of a map. Read it aloud:

A man sets himself the task of making a plan of the universe. After many years, he fills a whole space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. On the threshold of death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines has traced the likeness of his own face.



THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

For...lin
June 13, '31 5c THE COPY



Booth Tarkington—Horatio Winslow—Brooke Hanlon—Corra Harris
Norman Reilly Raine—James Warner Bellah—Ben Ames Williams

Cramming (1931) by Norman Rockwell.