

Simone de Beauvoir

Beauvoir and decided that such a statement would not be true. Although I had only spent approximately two hours face to face with the author, the time spent reading and reacting to what she had to say would be more than enough to qualify ours as a long-standing relationship of over thirty years.

For me as for many of her other readers, her disappearance from the fourteenth *arrondissement* has created both a sense of personal loss and of an empty place in the universe that can never be filled again in quite the same way.

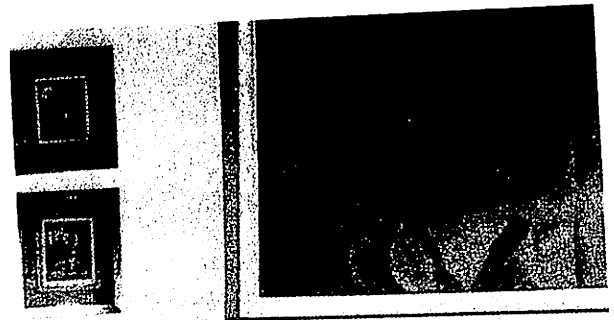
Jorge Luis Borges

(24 August 1899-14 June 1986)

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On 14 June of last year, at about 4:30 in the afternoon, I was working on a long essay on Borges for the *Latin American Encyclopedia* (Scribners) in my home in Sarria, Barcelona. The telephone rang. It was Borges's wife, María Kodama. Her voice sounded muffled but firm: "It's over. Borges is dead." I thought of a dozen replies, but none reached my mouth. I mumbled a few broken sentences, but I couldn't bring myself to ask her about funeral or burial arrangements. Borges was too much of a living presence to be thought of as a dead body. Besides, how do you go about sending into the grave a man whose *life* had been a figment of his own literature, the letter of his own spirit? I hung up more confused than disturbed. One of those situations in which you don't know what it is that events expect from you, how you fit into the scheme of things. And then, of course, the regrets for not having found out the details about his burial. While I was pondering these and other questions, I found myself calling the Sants Railroad Station in Barcelona to get information about the first train leaving for Geneva.

I had been with Borges in Geneva only three weeks earlier. His voice sounded husky and punctured with mute or muffled blanks. It was very hard to follow his speech. At times, he had to repeat the same sentence a couple of times before I was able to understand. The last time I had seen Borges was at a symposium at Dickinson College in April of 1983. During the sessions he appeared lively and energetic, vigorous and tireless. The Borges I was sitting next to in Geneva, three years later, was a shadow of the other, a physical ruin. His head was deformed, as if the frontal bone had grown beyond



Jorge Luis Borges (Gale International Portrait Gallery)

proportion and was threatening to tear the skin through. It was not so much the ravages of time as the onslaught of disease, as if his mind kept growing while his body decayed. Publicly, Borges was suffering from a pulmonary emphysema. The cancer of the liver that eventually killed him was a secret known only to himself, his doctor, and María

Kodama. Borges and María left Buenos Aires in November of 1985 after a biopsy revealed the terminal nature of his illness. They spent a short period in Italy and then settled in Geneva. When I visited them, three weeks before the final collapse, María told me that Borges was adamant about not returning to Argentina. Friends and relatives were pressing for his return and María became the target of abuse. Borges's answer was his marriage by proxy in Paraguay to María Kodama.

He received me kindly and with a warning: "No politics, please." "Borges"—I replied—, "I came to see you and wish you well." From then on the conversation was smooth, and at times intimate. Of that exchange, I only have the records of my memory somewhat eroded by the moving circumstances of the encounter. I remember isolated phrases: "Argentine history is a work of fiction, that is, the official version of it." "The military have turned the country into a financial private business." "I am not loved in Argentina." He added details about his break with his closest friend and collaborator, Adolfo Bioy Casares, about his refusal to return to Argentina, about the French edition of his complete works in the series "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade" of Gallimard (Cervantes and García Lorca being the only other Spanish-language authors included in that series). We reminisced about previous encounters in Oklahoma, San Diego, Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, Maine, Chicago, Pennsylvania, and Harvard, where he received an honorary degree in 1981. It was a rambling conversation, digressing from personal comments into literary matters, from food into the ways of the Swiss. But then, that has always been Borges's favorite way of chatting: going wherever the branching and winding corridors of his formidable memory would take him.

By noontime, a nurse showed up to bathe him, help him with daily physical exercises, and feed him lunch. Since Borges needed an afternoon nap, María suggested we go out for lunch. We walked through the town and headed to the John Calvin *collège* where Borges had attended school between 1914 and 1919 while his family was living in Geneva. In that yard we were standing, and under those same arches and galleries, Borges spent a good chunk of his life learning Latin, German, and French, and actually laying the foundations of his legendary erudition. "The city,"—he would say later of Geneva—"where I read all the great books, from Verlaine to Virgil." Of those adolescent years, Borges wrote: "The first fall of 1914 I started school at the College of Geneva founded by John

Calvin. It was a day school. In my class there were some forty of us; a good half were foreigners. The chief subject was Latin, and I soon found out that one could let other studies slide a bit as long as one's Latin was good. . . . We lived in a flat on the southern, or old, side of town."

The memory of those years in Geneva, far from having been erased by time or oblivion, was very much kept alive in Borges's mind and even grew to become the affectionate territory of a second country. In his 1970 "Autobiographical Essay," he wrote: "I still know Geneva far better than I know Buenos Aires, which is easily explained by the fact that in Geneva no two streetcorners are alike and one quickly learns the differences. Every day, I walked along that green and icy river, the Rhone, which runs through the very heart of the city, spanned by seven quite different-looking bridges."

Borges chose to die in Geneva. In his last published book, *Los conjurados* (The Conjurors), a 1985 collection of poems, he called Geneva one of his motherlands, and he defines Switzerland as "a tower of reason and solid faith." Borges came to Geneva searching for a country which, through the years, had become very much his own. Argentina, his own country—he felt—had been lost to him, and Switzerland offered him a peace he could not find in his native land.

Argentina was, for Borges, a handful of friends, a few national and family myths, the Spanish language, intimate corners and wistful streets of Buenos Aires. But Argentina was far more than that: a nation that since Perón in the 1940s went through a period of profound changes in its social and political makeup. Borges refused to acknowledge and come to terms with those changes. Like Leopoldo Lugones, a leading Argentine writer of the 1920s, Borges believed that the military should intervene in the nation's political life and seize power by force. He identified the generals with the fathers of Argentine Independence and believed that the military were "the only gentlemen left capable of saving the country." Those gentlemen are now behind bars, tried by civilian courts and sentenced by Argentine laws. Borges could not find solace, let alone national recognition, in that tormented and soul-searching country. So, he came to die in the country of his adolescence, in that "tower of reason" where life is as private as its aloof citizens and runs as serene as the Rhone waters. That environment was much closer to his intellectual constructs and labyrinthian artifices. Perhaps Borges was mistakenly born in Buenos Aires. He

wanted to believe—as he wrote—that “the Argentine tradition is all of Western culture.” “And I also believe”—he added—“we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have.”

Of course I could not discuss this with Borges. I came to renew an old acquaintanceship and to pay homage to the artist. And there I was, with María, back from our stroll, standing by his side, taking photographs: Borges hugging María, clinging to her like a child, holding her as in a permanent farewell. The most vivid and moving impression of that last visit happened at the time of saying good-bye. Borges pressed my hand very hard, with a strength most unusual for him.

When my train arrived in Geneva at seven thirty in the morning on 15 June, it was too early to look for María Kodama. I walked from the railroad station to the Hotel L'Arbalète at a slow pace. It was Sunday and the city was deserted. I eventually found an open coffee shop and had breakfast. Only then, I crossed one of the seven bridges that spanned the Rhone and headed for the hotel. María was up, but she was surrounded by journalists and photographers and flooded with telegrams and phone calls. When finally I got to talk to her I learned that there was no date for the funeral. Arrangements were being made to bury him in Plainpalais, the cemetery reserved for the Swiss notables, but that was not an easy undertaking. When finally the Swiss authorities approved the burial in Plainpalais, the funeral was scheduled for Wednesday, 18 June.

A few of us went together to Plainpalais to help María choose the plot for Borges's grave. We were shown the few sites available, and as we walked through we passed Alberto Ginastera's tomb, the only other Latin American buried there. María hesitated until she saw the last plot under a mature and beautiful yew tree, which in French is called *if*, and only a few yards from a very modest grave that turned out to be John Calvin's. The tree, evoking Kipling's poem (Borges was a loyal admirer of Kipling), the closeness to Calvin's shadow, and the quiet peacefulness of that particular corner made the decision for María. Two days later, Borges was buried in that spot where he rests now.

The funeral service was conducted at the Saint Pierre Cathedral, a majestic church located in the highest and oldest part of town. There were two eulogies: one delivered by a Catholic priest and the other by a Protestant minister. The press explained that this was so because Borges's mother was a staunch Catholic whereas his paternal grand-

mother was Protestant. The press failed to explain, though, that Borges had been a committed agnostic throughout his life. However, the priest disclosed during his eulogy that he had assisted Borges the night before his death, heard his confession, and given him absolution.

Borges's work is a prodigious artifice, an iridescent language, a self-contained form cut off from historic reality. It was forged within the boundaries of that library he never, in his own words, ventured out of. John Ashbery has defined Borges's art as “the work of a metaphysical Fa-bergé,” and in comparing him with Kafka, he added: “We read Kafka from something like necessity; we read Borges for enjoyment, our own indifference taking pleasure in the frightful but robust spectacle of a disinherited cosmos.” As Borges, the man, was being dispossessed of the world, the world was merciless in restating the terms of that old divorce he so much believed in, between him and the world. With the exception of María Kodama—his old student and friend, his daughter figure and wife—Borges died in the most absolute solitude. One may say that he chose to die that way, but then the choice was the result of a slow and gradual losing of the world. First, by confining himself within the walls of the library. Then, he lost the Argentine people by siding with the torturers and assassins of his own nation. This led to the loss of his native country. Eventually, for very complicated reasons and bitter feuds, he also lost the remaining part of his family. Finally, he lost his best friends for obscure and controversial motives. All this was somewhat reflected in his funeral. All of Borges's most important publishers were there: Diego Hidalgo from Alianza Editorial, Claude Gallimard who escorted María, Franco María Ricci for whom Borges directed the series “The Library of Babel.” There were a couple of official delegations from Spain and Argentina, a few local academicians, a handful of Argentine residents, and dozens of journalists, photographers, and cameramen. Conspicuous in their absence were family members, personal friends, and fellow writers.

John Updike closes his essay “The Author as Librarian” with the following rumination: “We move, with Borges, beyond psychology, beyond the human, and confront in his work, the world atomized and vacant. Perhaps not since Lucretius has a poet so definitely felt men as incidents in space.” His funeral at the Saint Pierre Cathedral and his death in Geneva were metaphors for that solipsistic existence: his residence was not so much the world

as the chambers of the library where he truly dwelled. His story "The House of Asterion" can be read as Borges's own metaphor. There, the Minotaur *chooses* to stay in the labyrinth where he has been imprisoned. "One afternoon"—he confesses—"I did step into the street; if I returned before night, I did so because of the fear that faces of the common people inspired in me." Confronted with the chaos of the world, Asterion the Minotaur chooses the orderly space he has found in a human construction, Daedalus' labyrinth. Borges made a similar choice: confronted with the chaos of the world, he chose the order of the library, the safety of a decipherable labyrinth. His books grew out of other books. He wrote fiction based on theologies and philosophies, literature founded in literature. He knew that the hard face of reality lurks in every corner of life, but he renounced the world because, he said, of its impenetrable nature. Instead, he anchored his writings in the order of the intellect, in the chartable waters of the library. What he wrote about Paul Valéry is applicable to himself: "In a century that adores idols of blood, earth and passion, he always preferred the lucid pleasures of thought and the secret adventures of order." Any form of knowledge that challenged his skeptical understanding of the world met with his strong disapproval and even condemnation. In the same essay, he wrote: "The meritorious mission that Valéry performed (and continues to perform) is that he proposed lucidity to men in a basely romantic age, in the melancholy age of dialectical materialism, the age of the augurs of Freud's doctrine and

traffickers in surrealism." Borges indicted literary movements (romanticism and surrealism) and forms of thought (Marxism and psychoanalysis) that deal not so much with sheer abstract reasoning (although in a highly abstract fashion), but with questions concerning life: distrust of and revolt against the abuses of rational order, class order, and ego order. Life in its subliminal plane, as struggle or desire, seemed to horrify him. Borges was an intellectual animal, a solipsist locked—like the Minotaur of his story—in a labyrinth of his own construction.

Because he saw writing as rewriting, and because he showed—in theory as well as in practice—that "one literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read," he fascinated structuralists as well as semioticians. Because he concluded in "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" that "Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer," he dazzled the followers of intertextuality. When he wrote, in 1953, that since Homer all metaphors had been recorded, and yet the ways of stating at the terms of a given metaphor are, in fact, endless, he advanced an essential tenet in the theory of the Russian formalists, and prompted John Barth to write his essay "Literature of Exhaustion." Finally, because of his invisible and rigorous style, Borges became, as Carlos Fuentes put it, a sort of father figure of the contemporary Spanish American novel.

The Poetry of Jorge Luis Borges

Stuart Evans

Enchanted (and sometimes mystified) as his admirers are by the labyrinthine subtleties of the stories and tales of Jorge Luis Borges, many of us find his poems more accessible, although they too are many faceted, the focuses giving light to many peripheral insights and reflections. I propose, therefore, since much has been and will be written about Borges's prose to concentrate in this brief essay on Borges the poet.

In the "Author's Foreword" to his *Selected Poems, 1923-1967* (1972) Borges wrote: "All that is personal to me, all that my friends good-naturedly tolerate in me—my likes and dislikes, my hobbies, my habits—are to be found in my verse. In the long run, perhaps, I shall stand or fall by my poems." Norman Thomas di Giovanni, the volume's editor and the supervising translator of much of Borges's work, recorded in his "Intro-

duction" an early exchange in his relationship with the author: " 'What I liked about you, di Giovanni,' Borges confided to me on my arrival in Buenos Aires almost a year after we first met, 'was that there in Harvard you were the only person who took me seriously as a poet.' 'But I see you as a poet, Borges.' 'Yes,' he said, 'I see myself as a poet—that's our link.' "

Borges insisted in various interviews and prefaces on the "fundamental paucity" of his work, asserting that he wrote on very few themes, that he was limited. This will surely come as a most disputable surprise to those readers who are convinced of the richness of Borges's writing.

Admittedly he returned to several important themes time and again and concentrated on recurring, even obsessive images—dreams, tigers, fantasies, weapons, battles, violence, mirrors, labyrinths, but in an index made up some years ago for personal interest of ideas explicit or implicit in those poems of Borges's that I had then read I noted some 109 different perceptions. And I probably missed a few. Any one poem might have multiple implications and, as is proper, might assume this or that meaning according to a particular reader's mood or preoccupation. It is not so with all poetry, which indicates the scope of Borges's intellect, sensibility, and imagination. Borges would not quarrel with the relationship of poem and reader. He believed that once written the poem and its reader work on one another and that the poet's own intentions in writing that particular piece are no longer relevant. Indeed, in later editions of his early work, he has virtually disowned whole collections. In the 1969 preface to *Luna de enfrente—Cuaderno San Martín*, he noted laconically: "The fact is that I feel removed from them: I take no responsibility for their mistakes or for their possible virtues. . . . I have made few changes in these two collections. They are no longer mine."

In spite of my submission that Borges was a poet of abundant, cross-fertilizing ideas, it is necessary here to concentrate on the main themes of his work as he pursued them with abiding, maturing fascination. What moved the young man and Borges, the aspirant writer, still moved the elderly blind librarian and international poet and fictionalist. He was at pains to point out in the short piece "Borges and Myself" that they were different people.

It is to the other man, to Borges that things happen. . . . I live, I let myself live, so that Borges can weave his tales and poems, and

those tales and poems are my justification. Little by little, I have been surrendering everything to him, even though I have evidence of his stubborn habit of falsification and exaggerating. . . . 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 those 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 don't know.

Otherness is an enigmatic preoccupation for Borges, while oblivion becomes a repeated theme in his later work, where it superseded his earlier obsession with death.

In almost all the poems dealing with death there is a quiet, lasting compassion ("Remorse for Any Death," "Inscription on Any Tomb") which extends to Borges's many poems about his ancestors. In these poems about family pride and the poet's respect for courage on the battlefield and against ferocious political adversaries, his admiration for their feats in arms is tempered by an underlying sadness and understanding. Isidoro Suarez and Isidoro Acevedo were his great-grandfather and grandfather on his mother's side. But perhaps the ancestor he most admired was his paternal grandfather, Colonel Francisco Borges, to whom he addressed several poems. All three men, in their time, favoured a unified Argentinian state and suffered for it at the hands of the *caudillos*, or local war-lords, so-called federalists, in whose interest it was to keep the country divided. Whether fighting for other causes in exile or for Argentina they acquitted themselves with dedication and honor.

Perhaps this tradition explains Borges's interest in men-of-action of all sorts and acts of violence, even when these acts are perpetrated by scoundrels and tyrants. The same contemplation of death occurs in poems addressed to a "Shadow of the Nineties," the knife-fighter Muraña, and to the savage General Quiroga, even to the hated dictator, Rosas (who confronts Quiroga in one of Borges's stories, "Dialogue of the Dead"). However hostile these poems are, however violent, there is still (even in the poem to Rosas) more than a hint of pity, as there is in the "Milonga of the Two Brothers."

More important are Borges's generalized poems about death. In "The Recoleta" he writes of