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A FORM OF INCOMPREHENSION

The curious phenomenon of Borges

By Guy Davenport

Discussed in this essay:

Borges: A Life, by Edwin Williamson. Viking, 2004. 592 pages. $34.95.

Considering that most reviews are written in extensive ignorance of an author's other works as well as even emptier ignorance, both natural and acquired, of any historical or literary context whatsoever, I feel obliged to say that I have read Argentine literature, all three books of it: Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo: o, Civilización y barbarie*, Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra*, and their bogus folk-epic *Martín Fierro*. For good measure, I can throw in Sarmiento's *Viajes por Europa, Africa y América* and W. H. Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*. To these works the whole world decided in the 1960s to add the *opera omnia* of Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), whose biography Edwin Williamson has written in 592 crowded pages, the eleventh life of Borges to be published (twelfth, if you count Fernando Savater's recent *Jorge Luis Borges*, from Omega's "Literary Lives" series in Barcelona).

One of Borges's earliest stories, "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*," was published in Victoria Ocampo's magazine *Sur* (May 1939). Twenty-three years later, we got to see it in English in the Grove Press *Ficciones* and the New Directions *Labyrinths*, rival selections neck and neck in their ardor to bring us Borges. The French had already discovered him; Italo Calvino had declared him a genius; André Maurois had laid on the French Academy's blessing. Only England remained in the dark. We normally get European culture fifty years after its creation: a quarter century to cross the Atlantic, a quarter century to become a fad. But culture from Argentina? Borges had to bounce off France for us to hear of him. Students began to carry around unread paperbacks of Borges along with their unread Hermann Hesse.

"Pierre Menard" comes from the ambience of Paul Valéry and Mallarmé, of exquisite sensibilities tuned to rarer and rarer subtleties. (All of Borges is "out of phase," more kin to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France than to English or American writing.) Menard's fictional bibliography would have, if real, lain around Remy de Gourmont's rooms, or Stuart Merrill's, glanced at by Ezra Pound. His feat is curiously misreported by critics. What Menard did was so acclimatize himself with Cervantes's historical moment that, after many tries, he could write one page (not all) of *Don Quixote* word-for-word identically with Cervantes's. This gives Borges the leverage to observe that Menard's page was "much richer," which pleased Hugh Kenner immensely, who at the time was fascinated by the palpable difference of a can of Campbell's soup signed and exhibited by Andy Warhol as art and an identical can for sale at the grocery. Neither Kenner, Warhol, nor Borges was aware that Ludwig Wittgenstein had spent the previous two decades agonizing over things that look alike but are wholly different.

The scholar who can see unapparent similarities and affinities in disparate

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texts is Professor John T. Irwin, at Johns Hopkins (he's in Williamson's bibliography), whose *Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* (1994) argues that Poe is at the root of much of Borges. Poe could have written "Pierre Menard" or a story very like it. Borges has acknowledged his debt to Poe. Kipling, too, has a story about a forged manuscript, and forgeries of all sorts, especially their detection, interest everybody. What I've always liked about "Pierre Menard" is Borges's insistence that the forged page of the *Quijote* is helplessly contemporary, a paragraph of it sounding like William James.*

And in the story is a sentence defining its fate: "Fame is a form of incomprehension, perhaps the worst." Borges's instant fame in the 1960s—nothing like it since Byron—was from wild incomprehension. The sixties wanted incomprehension. They fed on New Age bilge, on flimflam from oriental religions and philosophies, Hesse's *Magister Ludi*, Tolkien (misread as a battle of wizards), mysticism, and tushery. That's Robert Louis Stevenson's word, "tushery," for all the impressive sleight of hand he could get away with (made-up history, evil chemicals, South Sea sorceries). Borges was new, tricky, and strange, with congenial familiarities (American names, the flat two-dimensionality of Conan Doyle and John Buchan, a partiality for enigmas).

Borges's next story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (*Sur*, May 1940) is also the one best known after "Pierre Menard." It is science fiction inside a mystery story of box-within-a-box complexity. The outer tale is about Borges himself and his collaborator, Bioy Casares (by the way, I've read one of *his* books too). A secret society of fantasists publishes fake articles in real encyclopedias. Tlön is an imaginary planet in the literature of Uqbar, an imaginary country. Borges's imagination is at its most fertile in inventorying the strangeness of Tlön and Uqbar ("transparent tigers and towers of blood"). Williamson sees this story as a kind of satire on Berkeleyan idealism. It is Borges's most rigorously metaphysical work, ultimately about the cultural superstructure human beings have built upon nature. If the Swedish Academy was indeed thinking of giving Borges a Nobel, it would have been for these two stories, and a few others, for after them his talent in prose became morbidly obsessed with the barbaric violence that has characterized Argentine civil life. (It is understood that the Swedes got wind of Borges's dining with Pinochet, in Chile, and felt that this disqualified him for the *idealismen* of Nobel's will.)

Williamson has Borges caught between the noble sword of his heroic grandfather and the gaucho knife. His mother enforced the one; his father, the other. Borges went off to his first day of school with a knife his father gave him for fighting duels on the playground. A South Carolinian, I have seen knife fights between eleven-year-olds; they are not pretty. The accomplished *cuchillero* (knife fighter) is the Argentine ideal of manhood. (Eighteenth-century English mothers sent their adolescent sons to sword-fighting academies, traditionally conducted by Italians who also taught dancing and *manners*.)

Borges's stories about knife fighting are as bloody and savage as Cormac McCarthy's. Sarmiento's subtitle to *Facundo* is "Civilization and Barbarity." Buenos Aires, where Borges lived all his life, is a half-and-half mixture of the two, with barbarity in the ascendant from Juan and Evita Perón forward. In Borges's old age there were death squads "disappearing" thousands of people. A man overheard to say "Einstein" in a café was dropped from a small plane into the River Plate, uncharged, untried, and unsentenced. A crowd of mothers (Borges's among them), gathered in protest in front of the President's Palace, were told by a colonel, *The* desaparecidos *are all dead. You can forget about them.* Argentina was the exile of choice for Nazis in 1945. Many Germans took comfort in believing that Hitler was safely there.

Williamson follows Borges's political philosophy from his theoretical belief in democracy (constantly frustrated by knowing that in any election Argentines will always vote for a *caudillo* like Perón) to his pragmatic acceptance of "enlightened dictators" on out to his despairing predilection for anarchy, and

* *The Spanish is* "Quijote," *with a* "j." *Menard, being French, would use* "Quixote."

he reads Borges's stories and poems as encrypted crises in his emotional life. Borges lived with his mother, under her thumb, until her death at age ninety-nine. One loses track of his love affairs. The great one was a passion for a redhead of Norwegian descent, Norah Lange, who turned him down to marry his chief literary antagonist in the small circle of avant-garde literary magazines in Buenos Aires. Against all likelihood, Borges was twice married, first to a widow chosen by Mama, more as a seeing-eye companion to accompany him on his extensive travels than as a wife. Their honeymoon was in Cambridge, where Borges was giving the Charles Eliot Norton lectures. The wife lived in an apartment provided by Harvard; Borges, at a hotel. A lawyer back in Argentina arranged a legal separation (Argentine law prohibited divorce) soon afterward. After his mother's death he fell in love with a young woman named María Kodama, half-Japanese, who cherished a feminist reluctance to marry anybody. She served as his "Beatrice," helpmeet and muse. All of his life Borges searched for a woman like Dante's Beatrice Portinari. He even believed that the *Divine Comedy* was principally a Courtly Love poem that has its climax and resolution in Dante's seeing the glory of God reflected in Beatrice's eyes as "the mystic rose" of angels and saints shout *hallelujah!* for all eternity around our Creator in Heaven.

Borges admitted to a psychiatrist that he suspected sex of being unspeakably filthy. He married Señorita Kodama on his deathbed in Geneva, hoping to ensure her being his legal heir. The marriage was by proxy, via Paraguayan lawyers, and did not stop Borges's nephews (his sister's children) from contesting his will for the next ten years. An atheist, Borges nevertheless had a Protestant minister *and* a priest as counselors when death approached, a connoisseur of ambiguity to the last. Like Sarmiento before him, he found Protestantism a refreshing alternative to Argentina's ultraconservative Catholicism—he once said that he was an "amateur Protestant." He is buried a few graves down from Jean Calvin.

Williamson's ingenuity in deciphering Borges's cryptic allusions goes furthest out on a limb when he decodes the dedication to *A Universal History of Infamy*. It is to one "I. J." Here is Williamson's elucidation:

> No one has identified the object of this impassioned dedication, but, given the circumstances, I have no doubt that she was Norah Lange. The initials I. J. remain something of a mystery, but they may stand for "Ingrid Julia." The heroine of Norah Lange's novel, *45 dias y 30 marineros*, is called Ingrid, and in one of the articles by "José Tuntar" about the decadence of ancient Rome, which Borges published at a time when Norah was frequenting parties and so-called orgies with Neruda and Girondo, he referred to the Emperor Augustus's lascivious daughter and his equally dissolute granddaughter, both of whom were called Julia. Additionally, in his story "The Secret Miracle" ("El milagro secreto," collected in *The Aleph*), the protagonist is writing a play about the rivalry between two men for the love of a girl called Julia. Both Ingrid and Julia, therefore, were names that Borges would have associated with his loss of Norah Lange.

Perhaps Borges's loves fled to the embraces of the nearest *peronista* colonel because they couldn't figure out what in the name of God he was talking about. When Borges was a shy adolescent, his father made an appointment for him at a Swiss whorehouse. He couldn't bring himself to go. The trauma of this reluctance, Williamson explains, remained with him throughout life: he had let down his father's chivalric ideal of a man wielding sword and penis with equal fervor, a man with balls enough to engage in a bloody knife fight at every opportunity. On the other hand, he had lived up to his mother's ideal of moral purity.

No wonder he wrote about labyrinths.

When, a few years back, the cultural minister of some South American republic (Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, I forget which) turned up at my door (John Barth had mischievously added my name to a list of State Department–approved writers), he took from his briefcase a glossy photograph of himself standing *near* Borges at some colloquium. This was offered as bona fides that he had talked with Borges. I realized that Borges was a kind of totem that bestowed prestige.

I was only halfway through Williamson's meticulous biography when I felt that the Borges I admired was steadily being replaced by a minor, neurotic, hand-wringing Argentine dilettante whose sense of his own worth was not his discovery by Grove Press and New Directions but that he'd first been published in North America in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

It must be said, however, that his modesty and self-deprecation were genuine. I was present in Louisville when two professors of Spanish attempted to interview him, hampered by their total ignorance of Kipling, Chesterton, Stevenson, and Shaw. It was evident that Borges lived in a world of books, in his rich imagination. He was gentle with his uneducated interlocutors, who had never heard of Edward FitzGerald, Santayana, or William Henry Hudson, and whose opening gambit was to ask him what he thought of Kentucky now that he's *seen* it.

"I have not seen it," he replied patiently. "I am blind."

He added that even though he could not see it either, he would like to travel the length of the Great Trunk Road, like Kim. This got blank stares from the professors, but Borges continued to look like Oedipus at Kolonos, regal and calm.

This embarrassing moment can restore my admiration for Borges. His was, after all, a mind constantly alive to cultures remote from his own. In old age he learned Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic. In Scotland, facing *Norroway*, he recited "Sir Patrick Spens" on the beach. He recited "The Raven" at Poe's grave in Baltimore. He was as much a fan of low culture as of high; he knew his Earle Stanley Gardner and Edgar Rice Burroughs as well as he knew Homer and the *Heimskringla*. If I had Edwin Williamson's skill in exegesis, I could go a long way in demonstrating the influence of Burroughs on Borges. *Tarzan of the Apes* came out in 1914, when Borges, in a Swiss lycée, was at his most impressionable. Tarzan was, like a gaucho, a man of the knife, a *double* (as Borges preferred his characters to be, Lord Greystoke and Rousseau's noble savage), and a man who could converse with leopards. Burroughs's handy way with Arabic may account for Borges's use of it as an exotic language. Burroughs's and Borges's sense of the foreign *other* feels the same; they even shared a genius for naming imaginary places: Pellucidar, Tlön, Opar, Uqbar.

Perhaps we should not read biographies of writers we admire. Richard Ellmann's James Joyce could not have written *Ulysses*, much less *Finnegans Wake*. Lives of Shelley, Byron, and Scott leave me wondering who wrote their books. Mark Twain's daughters rejected Joel Chandler Harris as the begetter of Uncle Remus—"Daddy, he's *white!*"—and the old street person in homemade clothes at Yasnaya Polyana that people made long journeys to meet, that's Tolstoy?

Borges at least anticipated a biographer by writing "Borges y yo." Borges the sub-librarian in a Buenos Aires branch library who was demoted by Perón to Inspector of Chickens on the Civil Service Payroll, rising in time to be Director of the National Library, was not the author of metaphysical fictions signed Jorge Luis Borges. And then there was Georgie Borges, fussbudget and inept lover, and the loyal son who answered to "Baby" (*Niño*) all of his mother's life.

It was not Chicken Inspector that Borges was made, by the way. A clerk typed "aviary" for "apiary": inspector of bee culture. Borges liked the absurdity of "chicken," however, adding "and rabbits" in his account. Although Williamson keeps us abreast of Argentine politics, Borges was a victim rather than a participant in his country's civil violence. He admired the peace of the Swiss cantons.

Sarmiento tells in his *Viajes* of his wonderment in a small Ohio town. A Catholic and Protestant church faced each other on the main street (unthinkable in Argentina). All the children were taught at the same school, by a *woman*! The citizens—Irish, German, Welsh, English—were not knifing each other on the day he visited. They lived in wood-frame houses with no walls around the yard, and seldom bothered to lock their doors. He reported, to a deaf Argentina, as Borges after him, that Americans are an ethical people, caring nothing for a proud family name or aristocratic connections by marriage. The blacksmith sat beside the mayor in church. Even so, Borges followed Mama in knowing that the *criollos* (founding families) are better than everybody else. If Georgie had been given a Nobel, she would have asked if the king of Sweden was kin to anybody important.

Scholarship has followed journalism into assuming that people who have done something notable have relinquished all claims to privacy. Williamson's life of Borges suffers from its relentless snooping into his affairs of the heart, however desperately he has tried to find traces of these emotional disasters in the stories. "Desperate" is the word. For example: There's an innocent street in one story the name of which suggests *thunder*. Thunder comes from Thor, right? Thor was a Norwegian god; Norah Lange was Norwegian. So in an innocuous street name we can detect Borges still grieving for the lost Norah.

My feeling is that Borges quite early used up his resources. He is straining for effects his readers can't feel when he gets into hypothetical libraries that contain all possible combinations of the alphabet. He fixates on fortune-tellers' crystal balls that show everything in the world at once, on people afflicted with total recall of their past. These wonderments are not functions of a plot. They're exhibited by themselves.

Borges is at his best in his miniature essays, where his opsimathy and lack of an education come across as fresh as paint from a wet swipe of the brush. Some of his erudition is purest tushery, and some of it depends on our sharing his superstition (FitzGerald, for instance, as a reincarnation of Omar Khayyám). He himself knew that he would, in time, be caught out in his quasi-plagiarisms. Meanwhile, he garnered honorary degrees from the major universities, and lectured as a veritable wizard. He wrote obscure poems. He had the world's honor at the end of every transcontinental flight. And at the end of his life he had, at long last, an apartment of his own with a wife who returned his love in it. The inscription on his tombstone is in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse. The Buenos Aires press called him a traitor for dying in Geneva. ■