

Lost In The Labyrinth

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Centennial celebrations for Jorge Luis Borges have reached a bursting point. Is there a real author buried beneath the hype? Chase Madar investigates.

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GUSHY ADULATION IS STRANGE tribute to give master of enigmatic understatement. But that's just what Jorge Luis Borges has been getting throughout the course of his centenary year. At the New School's celebration last October, writerly types from Paul Auster, to Maureen Howard, to Robert Stone showed up to voice their appreciation; Borges' American editor spun anecdotes about Borges taking a bath and being with Borges in the Holy Land; and novelist Rosario Ferré even proclaimed, "We have all become better people because of Borges' beautiful words."

The evening was emblematic of the long, uninterrupted love-fest that began with Viking's publication of three new semi-definitive anthologies. *The Collected Fictions, Selected Poems* and *Selected Non-Fictions* occasioned a stream of panting reviews. To amalgamate plugs from the *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune* and *LA Times*: Borges is "probably the most influential Latin American writer of the century", "who with a tiny cohort of peers, and seers, (Kafka and Joyce come to mind), is a mirror who reflects the spirit of his time," and whose work contains "the deeper, ineffably human magic of all great literature." Even critics of global stature have been left breathless: "Though so different in style, two writers have offered us an image for the next millennium: Joyce and Borges," shouts Umberto Eco while Mario Vargas Llosa confesses "I do not consider it rash to acclaim him... one of the most memorable artists of our age."

Borges has indeed written memorably in many genres, from lyric to biographical essay to movie review (though no novels). All of his work displays a massive literary erudition. His style is an unlikely marriage of over-the-top baroque conceits and something approaching English understatement -- a rare quality in Spanish prose. Of all Borges' oeuvre what really excites readers and critics world-wide are his famous stories: Short, intricate, enigmatic tales of freaks and wonders, like a boy who doesn't forget anything, not even the minutest detail of each moment, or a literally infinite library, or a map that covers the terrain it represents, or a man who draws a map only to find that its labyrinthine

lines depict his face. Even Borges naysayers (most penetrating among them V.S. Naipaul, whose *The Return of Eva Peron* contains the sharpest analysis of Argentina's most famous writer) find his tales of the bizarre to be fun and addictive. But are they really as deep and as meaningful as the punch-drunk reviewers all say?

IN MANY WAYS, Borges' stories are the literary equivalent of M.C. Escher's graphic work -- those iconic prints of Möbius stairways, hands drawing each other, birds turning into carp. Both artists construct flashy and elegant head-games that draw you in and "make you think" (you think), but ultimately give off only a fake odor of philosophy. The trippiness grows old rather quickly, like a diet of hash brownies. (It's small wonder that Borges and Escher are favorites of stoners around the world.) Like Escher's etchings, Borges' stories can be momentarily vertiginous, but little more.

Just as Escher has his trusty bag of visual tricks -- conflicting perspectives, interlocking animals -- so Borges has his literary gimmicks, foremost among them being the inventory of exotic objects and sensations. From "The Aleph":

I saw the populous sea, saw dawn and dusk, saw the multitudes of the Americas, saw a silvery spiderweb at the center of a black pyramid, saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), saw endless eyes, all very close... saw all the mirrors on the planet (and none of them reflecting me), saw in a rear courtyard on Calle Soler the same tiles I'd seen twenty years before in the entryway of a house in Fray Bentos...

This is boilerplate Borges, and a good half of his poetry consists of similar lists and catalogs: an "infinite chessboard" here, a "mirror of eternity" there, a "river of Heraclitus" stirred in and everywhere Borges' tedious, talismanic mantra, "labyrinth." These terms sound very impressive but overuse of such million-dollar concepts leaves Borges' linguistic currency as debauched as the Argentine peso circa 1984.

When not precious, Borges' baroque language is often arbitrary and careless. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, who remains Borges' preeminent translator, once asked the author about the first sentence of the story "The Circular Ruins," translated in the Viking edition as, "No

one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night...":

I said Borges, what did you really mean by the unanimous night? That doesn't mean anything. If the unanimous night, why not the tea-drinking night, or the card-playing night? And I was astonished by his answer. He said, "Di Giovanni, that's just one example of the irresponsible way I used to write." We used "encompassing" in the translation. But a lot of professors didn't like losing their unanimous night.

They certainly didn't, and ever since, Di Giovanni has been attacked by the Borges professoriate. After all, as V.S. Naipaul has pointed out, academics are Borges primary boosters,: "Borges' puzzle and jokes can be addictive. But they have to be recognized for what they are; they cannot always support the metaphysical interpretations they receive. There is much, though, to attract the academic critic."

What attracts many academic critics is not just the pseudo-profundity but Borges' erudition, often so weightily impressive as to smother his little stories. His bottomless knowledge finds a better outlet in his essays and criticism. The polyglot Borges may be the most widely, even deeply-read critic of the century and a glance at the index to his *Selected Nonfictions* makes one think that when working as National Librarian he read everything in the building. While the revival of defunct genres discovered through research has long been a revitalizing force in literature, it seems that for Borges bookishness is an end in itself; even his stories and poems are so overstuffed with miscellaneous facts they read like an annotated card catalog. The polyptychal "Museum" for example, holds six short poems by six imaginary poets from four centuries, three continents, four native languages, and unlike Eliot's breadth of allusion, Borges' is for its own sake. As Luis Buñuel complained, all Borges' work contains "quelque chose de doctoral (sienta catedra, comme on dit en espagnol) et d'exhibitionniste." Real thought is not the same thing as a peacock-in-heat display of knowledge. And as great critics from Baudelaire to Pauline Kael have known, encyclopedic learning alone does not make for first-rate criticism, which requires an intemperate passion. Slogging through Borges can make even the most abject book fetishist echo Philip Larkin's line: "Get stewed:/Books are a load of crap." (Larkin, incidentally,

was also a day-job librarian.)

SO WHY THE BIG FUSS over Borges? How did he become such an institution? Many get their first taste of him as "required reading" towards the end of one of those freshman Western Civilization courses, the Argentine writer often standing in as the requisite non-European. This is ironic, for Borges' frame of reference is incredibly European, more European than most Europeans'. Just scanning the "B" entry in the *Selected Non-Fictions' Index* we have Babel, Bach, Francis Bacon, Balzac, Barbusse, Baudelaire, Beatrice Portinari, Beowulf not to mention Henri Bergson, Blake, Boswell, Léon Bloy and Boethius, to name just a few.

Coming from far, far away can only have helped Borges' message. Writers have always looked for transoceanic role models: benign, inspirational parent figures across the sea who safely present no threat or challenge. Just as Baudelaire had his Poe and Martin Amis has his Bellow, so have many writers in Europe and North America projected their longings onto a mythical Borges living in a spuriously glamorous Buenos Aires, an illusion that Naipual has dispelled with characteristic bile in *The Return of Eva Peron*. This is not to say that all Sudamericanos are read only because they're exotic -- indeed, the reputations of Paz, Neruda and García Márquez are well-deserved. But it seems that the great Latin literary boom of the 1970s inflated some minor talents completely out of scale.

Unfortunately, "out of scale" happens to be not a bad thing for publishers; over-hyped reputations can, while they last, sell books. It's a lot easier to market a blockbuster or "undisputed literary genius of the century"(Brad Morrow's slap-happy epithet for Borges) than to peddle a good but minor writer with specific strengths and failings. We are in a period of indiscriminate superlatives: it's "Absolutely fabulous!" or "Worst book ever!" with subtler judgments drowned out. And this is bizarre: even though the greenist oenophile would admit some middle ground between a 1962 Lafite-Rothschild and jug of Gallo rotgut, in literature the vast and subtle space between the absolute best and absolute crap is quickly vanishing as our critical culture substitutes a binary code of thumbs-up or thumbs-down for real discernment.

All these shouted superlatives may temporarily exalt

some bad writers, whose rickety reputations the next generation of critics can merrily sharpen their teeth on: This is a healthy part of the literary ecology. Less wholesome is that unmitigated hype may permanently destroy good writers. As Naipaul has noted, when Borges' reputation goes under, as it must, it may well take the good work down with it. For buried beneath this year's fulsome praise is a Borges well worth reading. Sandwiched between reams of badly translated mediocrity one finds in the *Selected Poems* one of Borges' most remarkable and surprising achievements: his reworkings of the *milonga*, Buenos Aires' pre-tango urban folk ballad, five of which are reproduced. The subject matter of these songs -- betrayal, fate and violent death in the Buenos Aires underworld -- gives Borges' usual gimmicks an emotional bite not felt elsewhere in his work.

There are also many engaging pieces in the *Collected Non-Fictions*, which editor Eliot Weinberger has admirably packed with material never before translated into English. It is these seriocomic essays -- some of them just throwaways for *El Hogar*, the Argentine equivalent of the *Ladies' Home Journal* -- which represent Borges at his best. A pair of snippets here:

[Theodore] Dreisser's head is an arduous, monumental head, geological in character, a head of the afflicted Prometheus bound to the Caucasus, and which, across the inexorable centuries, has become ingrained with the Caucasus and now has a fundamental component of rock that is pained by life.

It may be legitimately observed (with the lightness and peculiar brutality of such observations) that the philosophers of England and France are directly interested in the universe itself, or in one or another of its features, while the Germans tend to consider it a simple motive, a mere material cause for their enormous dialectical edifices, which are always groundless but grandiose.

The over-the-top conceits; the dry and slightly "out of it" sense of humor; the blasé generalizations: Borges' strengths converge nicely in these affable scraps. And much of his campy, rococo braininess truly does merit reprinting and rereading, but not the exuberant, ignorant adoration which in the end does only harm. At present his very real accomplishments run the risk of

disappearing for good beneath the heaps of plastic laurels. As Borges himself presciently put it, "Fame is a form -- perhaps the worst form -- of incomprehension."

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Is there a danger to inflating literary reputations?

Share your thoughts on Borges in the Loop.

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