Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 10(1):65–88, 2000

Borges and the Art of Mourning

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In this paper, I explore "the art of mourning" in the course of discussing two Borges prose poems, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (1941) and "Borges and I" (1957), both of which were written soon after Borges suffered enormous emotional losses. I suggest that successful mourning centrally involves a demand that we make on ourselves to create something—whether it be a memory, a dream, a story, a poem, a response to a poem—that begins to meet, to be equal to, the full complexity of our relationship to what has been lost and to the experience of loss itself. Paradoxically, in this process, we are enlivened by the experience of loss and death, even when what is given up or is taken from us is an aspect of ourselves.

> Every poem in time becomes an elegy.
> —Borges, "Possession of Yesterday"

IN THE COURSE OF THE PAST DECADE, IT HAS INCREASINGLY SEEMED TO me that one of the principal tasks facing contemporary psychoanalysis is the development of our capacities as analysts to listen to and use language in a way that is adequate to the subtlety and complexity of the human experience that we are attempting to speak to and speak from in the analytic dialogue. My own efforts in recent years have been directed at developing more fully an ear for what is happening both in the language used by poets and writers of fiction and in the language that we as analysts hear and use in the analytic

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I offer this paper as part of my ongoing effort to contribute to the development of a use of language adequate to speak to, and to speak from, the vast range and depth of human experience that we encounter in ourselves and in our patients in the analytic setting.

Poems "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," and "Borges and I" by Jorge Louis Borges, translated by James E. Irby, from *Labyrinths*. Copyright © 1962, 1964 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

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12

setting. I have attempted to look closely at the ways in which feelings and thoughts are not simply conveyed by ("carried in") words and sentences but, to a very large degree, are created, brought to life, in the process of being spoken or written (see Ogden, 1997a, b, c, d, e, 1998, 1999).

In this paper, I discuss aspects of the experience of mourning as created in the writing of Jorge Luis Borges. In particular, I explore the idea that mourning is not simply a form of psychological work; it is a process centrally involving the experience of making something, creating something adequate to the experience of loss. What is "made" and the experience of making it—which together might be thought of as "the art of mourning"—represent the individual's effort to meet, to be equal to, to do justice to, the fullness and complexity of his or her relationship to what has been lost and to the experience of loss itself.

The creativity involved in the art of mourning need not be the highly developed creativity of the talented artist. The notion of creativity, as I am conceiving of it here, applies equally to the creativity of the artist and to "ordinary creativity"—that is, to the creativity of everyday life. What one "makes" in the process of mourning—whether it be a thought, a feeling, a gesture, a perception, a poem, a response to a poem, a conversation—is far less important than the experience of making it.

I discuss two of Borges's writings, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (1941) and "Borges and I" (1957). The particular significance of these works in relation to the experience of mourning derives in part from a set of internal and external circumstances in Borges's life surrounding the writing of these prose poems. Both were written at critical junctures in Borges's life, each involving experiences of enormous loss. As one would expect, a musician will mourn by "making music," a painter will mourn in the act of painting, an analyst in the experience of engaging in an analytic relationship or perhaps in the experience of writing about (and from) his or her analytic experiences. Borges mourned in the act of writing poems. It is the experience of mourning brought to life in the two prose poems to be discussed that will be the principal subject of this paper.

The format of this paper is a rather loose one, intentionally so. Each of the three sections of the paper (the biographical sketch and the discussions of the two Borges poems) is of interest to me in its own right, independent of its connection to the experience of mourning. No life and no poem addresses itself to a single facet of human experience: Every aspect of one's life, every feeling state generated in a lived experience or in a successful piece of writing, is integrally connected with every other aspect of life and every other feeling state.

In the brief biographical sketch that begins this paper, I will be treating the events of Borges's life not as a way of "explaining" his writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, but as a set of experiences that stands in conversation with his writing. To a very large degree, the biography of a writer is to be found in the author's writing: The life of a writer is, in a sense, the life of his writing. The experience of writing is the place where a writer is most alive; it is the place where he lives. I will, with only a few exceptions, leave it to the reader to listen for, and do what he or she will, with the resonances between the life of the man and the life of the writing. In this sense, we as readers are not simply eavesdroppers on, but participants in, the "conversation" between the life and the work.

In the second part of this paper, I discuss the Borges fiction, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (1941), in an effort to listen to the ways Borges uses language within the structure of the literary genre that he invented early in a period of profound mourning. That literary form, as Borges developed it over time, would come to significantly influence the development not only of 20th-century Latin American and Spanish literature but of Western literature as a whole.

In the final section, I will discuss the prose poem, "Borges and I" (1957), which was also written near the beginning of a period of great loss in Borges's life, the repercussions of which would powerfully color the last three decades of his life. The sound and structure of mourning in "Borges and I" are quite different from those found in "Pierre Menard." As was the case 15 years earlier in "Pierre Menard," Borges, in "Borges and I," creates a literary form with which to bring to life (and bring to death) a particular experience of mourning.

Borges: A Man of Letters

From his birth in 1899, and perhaps even before his birth, circumstances conspired to bring Borges into the world of a family in which a schism regarding language itself seemed to structure a good deal of the emotional life of the family. Borges's parents, as was the custom of young couples in turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires, lived with Borges's paternal grandmother. (His grandfather had died some years earlier.) This rather banal matter of social custom, driven by economic expediency, set the stage for a fateful family division. Borges's paternal grandmother, born and raised in Staffordshire, England, married an Argentine man and lived the rest of her life in Buenos Aires. Her son, Borges's father, grew up speaking English with his mother, whose strong Anglophilic temperament led her to make only modest efforts to achieve fluency in Spanish. From very early on, Borges's grandmother read stories to him in English. As he grew, Borges read widely from the almost exclusively English language books comprising his father's extensive library: "If I were asked 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 of that library" (Borges, 1970, p. 209).

Borges's mother was an Argentine woman from a family with a long and distinguished military history. The house in which Borges grew up was something of a family "military museum" (Rodriguez Monegal, 1978, p. 6) for the display of photographs, uniforms, swords, and other military objects paying homage to the valor, courage, and dignity of Borges's forebears on his mother's side of the family. These silent men of action and these stalwart, devoted women had little interest in literature.

Not surprisingly, given the family constellation just described, Borges learned to read English before he could read Spanish. Borges, in fact, was so thoroughly bilingual that, for a period of time in childhood, he recalls not knowing that he was speaking two different languages. It felt to him that he was speaking a single language that had different forms depending on the circumstances (Guibert, 1973, p. 81).[1] For Borges, what he later learned to be the English language was the form of language he spoke with his father and paternal grandmother, the language of stories and ideas, the language of the books in his father's library. Spanish was the form of language he used when speaking of the events of everyday life, the language he spoke with his mother and her parents as well as with servants. Borges (1970) recounts that, having first read *Don Quixote* in English, "when later I read *Don Quixote* in the original, it sounded like a bad translation to me" (p. 209).[2]

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[1] It must be kept in mind that Borges's "recollections" are stories told by one of the great storytellers of the twentieth century—a man who wrote book reviews of nonexistent books by imaginary authors.

[2] The English that Borges was hearing in the stories his grandmother read to him and in the books he read from his father's library was 19th-century literary English. In recent translations of Borges's writing from Spanish to English (e.g., Hurley's translation of Borges's [1998] fictions) the translators attempted to create a style of English that corresponds to the 20th-century Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires and used by Borges in writing his poetry and fictions. These translators believe that earlier English translations of Borges's work into English (e.g., DiGiovanni's translations, in which Borges very actively collaborated) used a formal, "old-fashioned" style of

It is impossible to overestimate the depth of Borges's love and admiration for his father: "My father was very intelligent, and like all intelligent men, very kind. . . . It was he who would reveal the power of poetry to me—the fact that words are not only a means of communication but also magic symbols and music" (Borges, 1970, pp. 206–207). Borges's father aspired to be a writer and managed to complete a novel along with several other books and a series of poems, none of which was ever published. "From the time I was a boy, when blindness came to him [Borges's father], it was tacitly understood that I was to fulfill the literary destiny that circumstances had denied my father. This was something that was taken for granted (such things are far more important than things that are merely said)" (Borges, 1970, p. 211). As is characteristic of Borges, the final parenthetical aside, delivered with such nonchalance, is the most lively and telling part of what is otherwise a rather unremarkable account of a son's wish/burden to attempt to fulfill his father's dreams.

Though the Borges household employed servants, they were a middle-class family living in the Palermo district of Buenos Aires, one of the shabby outskirts of the city. It was a district in which middle-class and working-class families lived (with a moderate sense of danger) in close quarters with hoodlums and prostitutes. Aside from the hours passed in his father's library, most of Borges's time as a child was spent in the garden at the rear of the house, where he and his younger sister, Norah, would invent games to play. There were no other children in Borges's early life, in part because his father and grandmother insisted that he be educated at home until he was more fully formed (which turned out to be the age of nine).

Along with his father and grandmother and three generations before her, Borges was born with a congenital malformation of the eyes, which results in impaired vision from birth and leads to a progressive

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English (Rodriguez Monegal, 1978) that fails to capture Borges's Spanish writing style and voice. To my mind, this is as it should be: Borges's English was 19th-century literary English, not 20th-century spoken English. This was the English that Borges spoke when delivering lectures to English-speaking audiences. Consequently, I have elected to use one of the earlier translations of Borges (1962)—the one edited by Donald Yates and James Irby—as the text for my discussions of Borges's literature.

deterioration of sight until total blindness is reached in middle age. (Borges's father lost his sight completely not long after turning 40.)

Impaired eyesight and a frail constitution rendered Borges utterly unsuited to a military life:

> As most of my people had been soldiers—even my father's brother had been a naval officer—and I knew I would never be, I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish kind of person and not a man of action. . . . I did not feel I deserved any particular love, and I remember my birthdays filled me with shame, because everyone heaped gifts on me when I thought that I had done nothing to deserve them—that I was a kind of fake. After the age of thirty or so, I got over the feeling [Borges, 1970, pp. 208–209].

Borges's depiction of himself as a youth unexpectedly takes on a darkly humorous tone in the final sentence of this passage, where he "slips in" the fact that what had sounded like feelings restricted to childhood were, in fact, a sense of himself that took decades, not months or years, to overcome. In truth, he never did completely overcome these feelings, which in adult life took the form of revulsion for his body (Rodriguez Monegal, 1978, pp. 348–349). Borges (1946) no doubt included himself when he wrote wryly of an early 19th century Argentine writer, "Like all men, he was given bad times in which to live" (p. 218).

Borges was something of a child prodigy who, at the age of nine, published in a prestigious Buenos Aires literary magazine his Spanish translation of an Oscar Wilde story. "Since it was signed merely 'Jorge Borges,' people naturally assumed that the translation was my father's [Jorge Guillermo Borges, who worked as a lawyer and as a teacher of psychology and English]" (Borges, 1970, p. 211). Borges's sense of his own worth, from very early in childhood, was inseparable from his sense of himself as a reader, writer, and thinker.

Despite the fact that by the age of thirty, Borges had published three volumes of poetry as well as a large number of essays on philosophical and literary topics, he was still a relatively unknown poet and literary figure, even in Buenos Aires. Borges paid for the publication of 300 copies of his first volume of poems, which he gave away to friends and slipped into the pockets of coats in the coatroom of a major Buenos Aires magazine publisher. About that volume of poetry, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), Borges (1970) late in his life commented, with his usual entanglement of sincerity and self-parody, "I feel that all during my lifetime I have been re-writing that one book" (p. 225).

Unable to earn a living as a contributor of articles to newspapers and literary magazines, Borges, still living at home at 36, took a position as an assistant librarian in a small regional branch of the municipal library. His nine years there were lonely and extremely unhappy ones filled with a profound sense of futility. As there was virtually no work to be done by the library staff, Borges spent his days hidden among uncatalogued stacks of books writing poetry and essays.

Borges's father died in February, 1938. Borges is unusually silent in his autobiographical essay (1970) and in interviews concerning the meaning that that event held for him. He says only that there was a sense of relief associated with his father's death as it brought an end to his father's physical suffering, which had gone on much too long. Perhaps the most telling commentary on his father's death is Borges's linking of that event with another event that same year: "It was on Christmas Eve of 1938—the same year my father died—that I had a severe accident" (Borges, 1970, p. 242). That Christmas Eve, Borges had arranged to introduce his mother to a young woman he was very fond of. That morning, as he was rushing up the staircase of the library in which he worked, he cut his head on the edge of a recently painted casement window that had been left open to dry. Borges's poor eyesight probably contributed to his not seeing that the window had been left open. The wound became infected and led to a septicemia, very high fevers, hallucinations and the loss of his capacity to speak. For almost two weeks, it was unclear whether Borges would survive.

On recovering from the illness, Borges was terrified that it had left him unable to read or write or to think imaginatively. In an effort to demonstrate to himself that these capacities had not been lost or impaired, he set himself the task of writing "something I had never really done before . . . I decided I would try to write a story. The result was 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*'" (Borges, 1970, p. 243).

As is characteristic of Borges, there are both overstatement and understatement in his account of this critical juncture of his life. In fact, he had published one fictional story five years earlier, "The Street Corner Man" (1933), which he later said was so bad that it was an embarrassment to him. He also had published, in an established literary magazine, the book reviews of nonexistent books by nonexistent authors. Initially, these book reviews were successful hoaxes; over time, they became simply a form in which Borges liked to write. Consequently, writing fiction was not entirely new to Borges in 1938. The overstated element of Borges's story, however, is dwarfed by the dimensions of the understatement: Borges, in attempting "something I had never really done before," was in fact trying something nobody had ever really done before. He had set himself the task of creating a new literary genre—a genre that would bear his unique signature.

It is difficult to define the essential qualities of the literary genre created by Borges. His *ficciones* ("fictions"), as he called them, were short pieces, usually four to eight pages in length, that have in common with poetry an extreme compactness and self-sufficiency of language as well as a highly refined sensitivity to the sound and rhythm of words and sentences. When they succeed, they earn the name "prose poems."[3] The language in them is so distilled that often a single word or phrase or parenthetical aside conveys what might take other writers a lengthy paragraph or a chapter to achieve.

Borges's fictions almost always involve an encounter with, or a discovery of, someone or something "fantastic"—that is, something discontinuous with ordinary waking life, as if dream-life had subtly, unobtrusively insinuated itself into a corner of waking life (or vice versa). As is the case with lyric poetry, Borges's fictions are virtually without plot; they are also without developed characters, save the voice of the speaker.[4] The speaker is both the author, Borges (the real person writing the fiction) and a character in the fiction. It is here that Borges's fictions are most enigmatically, paradoxically, energetically alive and continually at play: The character/speaker is the invention of the author, while at the same time, the author is brought to life (created) in the writing through the voice of the speaker/character. The storytelling, not the story or the symbolism, is the real literary event in these fictions.

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[3] In the foreword to a collection of his poems (including several prose poems), Borges (1971) wrote, "I suspect that poetry differs from prose not, as many have claimed, through their dissimilar word patterns, but by the fact that each is read in a different way. A passage read as though addressed to the reason is prose; read as though addressed to the imagination, it might be poetry. I cannot say whether my work is poetry or not; I can only say that my appeal is to the imagination" (p. xv). Some years later, he added, "Good prose must be poetry" (1984, pp. 52–53). For these reasons, I use the term "poetry" to refer to Borges's fictions (when the writing is good). In the recent Viking publications, *Jorge Luis Borges: Collected Fictions* (1998) and *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Poems* (1999), many of the collected fictions are also included in the book of selected poems.

[4] What Borges (1984) said of the characters (the ciphers) in Dante's *Inferno* is equally true of the characters in his fictions: "They live in a word, in a gesture; they need do nothing more" (p. 15).

The intricate structure of the writing in Borges's fictions is perhaps what is most remarkable and most distinctive about these fictions: They have the structure of an endless labyrinth with no center and no exit; the labyrinth and the universe become indistinguishable, as do dreaming and waking life, imagination and reality, character and writer.

Borges's manuscripts, despite his failing eyesight, were invariably written with meticulous, tiny handwriting that seems to reflect the delicate structure of his writing. The manuscripts, with their seemingly endless crossed-out words and sentences, bear witness to the extraordinary number of revisions that each of Borges's fictions underwent in the process of his paring away every unnecessary word in his attempts to arrive at irreducible essences.

Borges, Author of "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*"

In the years immediately following his father's death and "the accident" in 1938, Borges entered a period of enormous creativity as he developed and refined the genre of "the fiction." Borges's fictions, collected in two volumes, *Ficciones* (1944) and *El Aleph* (1949) are considered by literary critics, and by Borges himself, as his "two major works" (Borges, 1970, p. 244).

These years following his father's death and the accident were not only a period of great literary achievement—they were also years of intense loneliness. In a piece written in 1940, but not published until 1973, Borges wrote a fictional account of his own suicide. (There is no evidence to suggest that Borges was suicidal during this period.)

It was in this emotional context that Borges (1941) composed the first of his fictions, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." This work moves at a dizzying pace. In the space of the two opening sentences, the story establishes its form as a mock essay written to rectify a fallacious and diminishing cataloguing of the work of the recently deceased novelist, Pierre Menard. The speaker/Borges, in his feverish effort to correct this indignity, after having examined Menard's "personal files," provides a meticulous listing (lettered "a" through "s") of Menard's complete "visible work." Among the 19 writings listed (none of which is a novel), is item e: "a technical article on the possibility of improving the game of chess, eliminating one of the rook's pawns. Menard proposes, recommends, discusses and finally rejects this innovation" (Borges, 1941, p. 37).

Other entries include "an examination of the essential metric laws of French prose, illustrated with examples taken from Saint-Simon (*Revue des langues romanes*, Montpellier, October 1909)" (p. 37) and "a manuscript list of verses which owe their efficacy to their punctuation" (p. 38).

There is a sadly comic quality to the "rectified" catalogue. The list feels strained in its self-conscious cleverness and generates a sense of the flatness of "the remains" of a deceased writer. It has something of the maudlin sobriety of a mortician's handing "the effects of the deceased" to the grieving family.

"Pierre Menard" takes a surprising turn after the meticulous, chronological, utterly absurd listing of Menard's complete "visible" work. The shift that takes place is not so much a shift in plot (because there is no plot); rather, the transformation is achieved largely in a change in voice from the almost maniacal passion of the first part of the "essay" to the awestruck, almost reverential tones of the second part. Even in its awe, the speaking voice is never without its ironic edge. The "other work" that is to be introduced is "the subterranean, the interminably heroic, the peerless" (p. 38) work of Menard.

Borges, through a series of letters written to him by Menard, learned of Menard's attempt to achieve a literary feat so daunting that it is doubtful that anyone had ever conceived of such an undertaking, much less attempted to carry it out. Menard had set himself the task of writing the *Quixote*, not a pointless manual transcription of Cervantes's *Quixote*, or additional chapters for the *Quixote*, or even a modern version of *Don Quixote*. He had set out to write the *Quixote* itself. "The first method he conceived was relatively simple. Know Spanish well, recover the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or the Turk, forget the history of Europe between 1602 and 1918, *be* Miguel de Cervantes. Pierre Menard studied this procedure (I know he attained a fairly accurate command of seventeenth-century Spanish) but discarded it as too easy" (p. 40). These sentences have all the speed and density and luminosity of the poetry of Dante or Blake or Yeats or William Carlos Williams, but would never for a moment be mistaken for the work of any of these poets because of the sad, ironic edge that undercuts the bravado or humor or charm of each sentence. How could one achieve in a form other than the one arrived at by Borges the effects created by this list of impossible preliminary tasks that ends in an unexpected, sweep-of-the-hand, two-word dismissal of the project as "too easy"?

Borges follows with an aside (for him, a favorite form in which he seems to step out of the fiction into "reality," which turns out to be only another fiction). In this aside, Borges addresses the reader's inevitable response to Menard's brazen claim that becoming Cervantes is too easy a method of writing the *Quixote*. "Rather as impossible! my reader will say. Granted, but the undertaking was impossible from the very beginning and of all the impossible ways of carrying it out, this was the least interesting" (p. 40). These words are spoken with a sense that the logic underlying the statement is irresistible, inevitable: If one is going to go to all the effort of attempting the impossible, of course one would adopt the most interesting even if the most difficult of all the impossible methods one could imagine. To *be* Cervantes and to arrive at the *Quixote* through him would be pointless, even if achieved: That feat had already been accomplished by Cervantes. Why do it again? The great difficulty and the great significance of Menard's attempt to write the *Quixote* lie in the fact that he would achieve it through his own experience as a man of the 20th century. There is, at the same time, "a certain melancholy" (to borrow Borges's words from the opening paragraph of the fiction) associated with the sense of Menard's/ Borges's (the two are gradually becoming one) devoting the major effort of his literary life to finding his own way into a text already written.

Menard and Borges vacillate with regard to the question of whether the task Menard had set for himself is impossible or merely "almost impossible" (p. 41). Menard concedes, "I should only have to be immortal to carry it out" (p. 40), but a page later reasons that his task of writing the *Quixote* was no more difficult than that faced by Cervantes before he had written the *Quixote*: "My general recollection of the *Quixote*, simplified by forgetfulness and indifference, can well equal the imprecise and prior image of a book not yet written" (p. 41).

The poem seems to be preparing itself and the reader for the most decentering moment of the fiction, which occurs when Borges juxtaposes a passage from Cervantes's *Quixote* and the same passage from Menard's *Quixote*:

> It is a revelation to compare Menard's *Don Quixote* with Cervantes'. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):
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>> . . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

> . . . Menard, on the other hand, writes:
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> . . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor [p. 43].

The reader cannot resist moving back and forth between the two passages—only to discover that they are identical, word for word, comma for comma. In so doing, the reader finds that he has become a character in the story—a character bearing witness to the fact that Menard did indeed succeed in writing a portion of the *Quixote*. More important, the reader will attest to the fact that the experience of reading Menard's *Quixote* is an experience altogether different from reading Cervantes's *Quixote* and far more interesting—"more ambiguous, his detractors will say, but ambiguity is richness" (p. 42). The experience of reading the passage written by Cervantes is an experience of wonder at the beauty of the sound of the words and the grace with which the phrases and ideas are poured, one into the next, creating in the language the feeling of sounds and ideas coming into being, each giving birth to the next.

Menard's "version," while identical to that of Cervantes, creates quite a different effect and generates a radically different set of meanings: "History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened" (p. 43).

Menard, a 20th-century "novelist," invests the 17th-century narrator of the *Quixote* with a 20th-century pragmatist sensibility and casts 20th-century ideas in 17th-century language. What is "astounding" about Menard's version is that the movement of this metaphoric "flow" of phrases and ideas is not only a movement forward—from the past to the present to the future—but is at the same time a movement backward against itself, as the past is created by the present. The invasion of the 17th century by the 20th century and vice versa is not simply anachronistic; rather, it creates its own idiosyncratic experience of time. Borges knew from his own childhood experience the imaginative possibilities, as well as the impossible entanglements, that are created when one interfuses the language and literature and spirit of 20th-century Spanish and 19th-century English "(perhaps without wanting to)" (p. 44).

What is most alive about this prose poem is not the magic of the "fantastic" undertaking and the partial (but extraordinary) success of Pierre Menard in writing the *Quixote*; rather, something far more important to Borges is being addressed. We begin to sense subliminally, as the two versions of the *Quixote* are juxtaposed, that Menard's writing of the *Quixote* is a wonderful metaphor, not for writing, but for reading—a metaphor for "good reading," a type of reading that invents the writing, that invents the *Quixote*, that invents the 17th century, that invents the fiction we are reading.

Borges is interested in (more accurately, consumed by) the way in which one generation of writers (and readers) influences/creates another:

> Some nights past, while leafing through chapter XXVI [of the *Quixote*]—never essayed by him [Menard]—I recognized our friend's [Menard's] style and something of his voice in this exceptional phrase: "the river nymphs, and the dolorous and humid Echo." This happy conjunction of a spiritual [dolorous] and a physical [humid] adjective brought to my mind a verse by Shakespeare which we [Menard and Borges] discussed one afternoon:
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> Where a malignant and turbaned Turk . . . [p. 40].

In this passage, Borges is subtly suggesting that the sound of Menard's writing voice can be heard in Cervantes's style and voice and that the voices of Menard and Cervantes (and Borges) can be heard in Shakespeare's style and voice (and Shakespeare's voice in theirs).

"Pierre Menard" is an extraordinary experience in "ear training" (Pritchard, 1991), which succeeds as an un-self-conscious lesson in reading, as few other pieces of writing do. This fiction manages to convey a visceral awareness that language has a life of its own. Menard's language, and Shakespeare's and Cervantes's and Borges's (four different tongues spanning four centuries) are nonetheless one language that is nobody's possession—they (and we) each borrow it, and use it, and it uses us, for a time.

Immediately after Borges's stunning juxtaposition of the two passages from Menard's and from Cervantes's *Quixote*, something jarring happens in the writing. Beginning with the sentences, "There is no exercise of the intellect which is not, in the final analysis, useless" (p. 43), the identity of the speaker becomes ambiguous. In this way, the language continues to meld Menard the character, Borges the character, and Borges the writer. This sentence and those that follow have a nihilistic shrillness that is quite absent from the playfulness of the first two "sections" of this fiction—the parody of academics picking at the bones of a recently deceased author and the account of Menard's maniacal/heroic (quixotic) effort to write the *Quixote*. These tones give way in the final paragraphs of the fiction to a resigned acknowledgment that applies equally to Menard, to Borges the speaker/character, and to Borges the author: "He set himself to an undertaking which was exceedingly complex and, from the very beginning, futile. He dedicated his scruples and his sleepless nights to repeating an already extant book in an alien tongue. He multiplied draft upon draft, revised tenaciously and tore up thousands of manuscript pages" (pp. 43–44).

In a footnote (a pedantic, self-parodying structure) attached to the end of these sentences, Borges recalls Menard's "quadricular notebooks, his black crossed-out passages, his peculiar typographical symbols and his insect-like handwriting" as well as Menard's solitary afternoon walks "around the outskirts of Nîmes . . . [where] he would . . . make a merry bonfire" of those notebooks (p. 44).

It is impossible to read these lines without being reminded that, for Borges, to write in Spanish was to write in a second literary language—second to the English language of the stories that his grandmother read to him and second to the English language of the books in his father's library, outside of which he sometimes felt he "never strayed" (Borges, 1970, p. 209).

Further, the "already extant book" that Menard/Borges aspired to write cannot be separated in the mind of the reader from Borges's desire/need to write the books "already extant" in his father's unfulfilled literary aspirations.

There is great poignancy to Borges's footnote, which, for the first time in this fiction, creates images and a language for Menard's/Borges's loneliness and profound sense of futility. We are reminded of Borges's own endless revisions in his own tiny handwriting, which in these sentences is rendered nonhuman and more than a little bizarre and repellent by the adjective "insect-like."

Borges adds, immediately after the footnote, "He did not let anyone examine these drafts and took care they should not survive him. In vain have I tried to reconstruct them" (p. 44). At no other point in this fiction is the finality of death so starkly confronted. There is an absolute end to writing—an end to a life that even Borges (the character, the writer, the man) and his conceptions of circular time cannot undo or "reconstruct" (p. 44).

The poem continues: "Thinking, analyzing, inventing (he also wrote me) are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence" (p. 44). As is his habit, Borges is writing about the experience of writing and reading. Thinking, inventing, reading, and writing imaginatively are rather ordinary, very human, highly essential events—the "normal respiration" of our thoughts and feelings and imagination, including the ways we go about grieving for what we cannot achieve for ourselves and for others and for what we have lost and cannot "reconstruct."

The final paragraph of the fiction begins: "Menard (perhaps without wanting to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution" (p. 44). Borges is describing (rather plainly) the literary genre that he is in the process of inventing even as we are reading these lines. The sound of Borges's sentence is not the sound of the recognition of an enormous achievement (an achievement of the impossible!); rather, it is an unassuming, quietly elegant statement about the achievement of good reading and, secondarily, of good writing. The sentence, with its simple, lovely phrase, "the halting and rudimentary art of reading," has the feel of Borges, with genuine humility, writing his own epitaph (and that of his father and grandmother). It is an epitaph for those who have enriched, not primarily the art of writing, for that has a life of its own, but the art of reading.

Borges and "Borges and I"

In 1938, the year of Borges's father's death and "the accident," Borges's poetry and essays were popular among the literati of Buenos Aires but were virtually unknown outside that city. Borges's fictions, written over the succeeding 15 years, were well received and gradually established Borges's literary reputation, not only among the readers

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[5] It was not until 1961, when Borges shared with Samuel Beckett the first Fomentor Prize, that Borges achieved international recognition.

of the Buenos Aires literary magazines, but among a general readership throughout Argentina.[5] As his reputation as a writer was growing, his vision was deteriorating. Borges's doctors warned him in the late 1940s that, if he continued to read and write, the loss of his remaining sight would be accelerated. (Of course, he ignored their warnings. What else could he do?) By 1955, his blindness reached the point where he could no longer read and write. In roughly the same period in which Borges's fictions were being published (1939 through 1955), Borges found to his surprise that he had become a symbol of Argentine opposition to the Perón regime. This occurred in part as a consequence of his publication of allegorical poems and essays celebrating civil resistance to dictatorships in earlier epochs of Argentine history. With the overthrow of the Perón government in 1955, Borges was appointed director of the National Library in Buenos Aires, which at that time contained more than 800,000 volumes. In his "Poem of the Gifts" (1960), Borges writes of a God "who with such splendid irony/Granted me books and blindness at one touch" (p. 117).

After 1955, Borges found that he was no longer able to write his fictions since their highly distilled sentences and delicate structures involving innumerable reworkings, endless "crossed-out passages . . . in his insect-like handwriting," required his being able to see the words and sentences on the page. He could compose only by dictating to anyone who was willing to be his scribe. His writing was limited to shorter prose poems, of a far less tightly woven structure than those of the earlier fictions, and to poetry of metrical verse as opposed to his earlier free verse. Borges found that he was better able to retain these literary forms in his memory while composing.

"Borges and I" (1957) is a prose poem written not long after Borges lost the ability to read and write:

> The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this

> literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him, though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things. Spinoza knew that all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs[6] to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.
>
> I do not know which of us has written this page [pp. 246–247].

The opening line of the poem feels like an invitation to the reader to enter a labyrinth; the open space behind is still visible if we turn to look, but we do not look back because there is something compelling, almost mesmerizing, going on in the forward movement of the deceptively simple language: "The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to." These words have a doleful sound in part generated by the series of concessions that the language is making. "The other one" is given pride of place, as it stands alone in the opening phrase of the poem. "The other one" is not only seen but "called," a pun pointing both to the sense of being sought (called after) and having a "calling," a force that affords direction and a sense of purpose. "The other one" is called "Borges," a name that he shares with the author but apparently does not share with the speaker. (Only a few words into the opening sentence, divisions of divisions of self are taking place like an endless elaboration of forking paths.)

The fact that "the other one" shares a name with the author creates in the language a writer as character alongside (or is it within or identical to?) the author as "flesh-and-bone" person who lives in a place "not found in verse" (Borges, 1968, p. 131). The reader is by this time fully within the poem as labyrinth, where the words serve as a guide "who only has at heart your getting lost" (Frost, 1947, p. 341).

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[6] "Suburbs" is a poor translation of the Spanish *arrabal*, which in this line refers to the shabby outskirts of Buenos Aires where Borges grew up and about which he wrote innumerable poems and stories.

The final phrase of the opening sentence further names "the other one" as "the one things happen to." What would it mean to be someone to whom things do not happen? Is that what it means to cease coming into being, or to being no one, or to not being?

The voice of the opening sentence has a sadness conveyed by the continual negation of the speaker, who is the one who is not called, who has no calling, who has no name (not even the pronoun "I"), and who lacks even sufficient substance to be a self-as-object ("me") who might become "visible" as a consequence of things happening to oneself. And yet, in this elegantly simple, highly compact sentence, something else is happening in a way that is so delicate and subtle that it is hardly noticeable. Despite the multilayered negation of the speaker, it is the speaker, and not "Borges," who has a voice and consequently has the potential to bring himself into being in this poem through his use of language. "The other one, the one called Borges," is mute, disconnected from the act of speaking.

"I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary." The "I" of this second sentence is a weak "I" who aimlessly walks the streets of Buenos Aires and stops "perhaps mechanically now." An important dimension of what is occurring in the language here and throughout the poem is the continuous tension between the negation of "I" (here an aimless and at times mechanical "I") and the immediacy of the voice that speaks not only in the present tense but in the present moment, "now." The speaker seems to be addressing neither the reader nor even himself in a meditative way; rather, there is a feeling that the speaker has gone over this ground, both in the literal sense of endlessly walking the streets of Buenos Aires and in the metaphorical sense of ruminatively repeating the content of these thoughts, with no expectation of achieving a fresh idea or feeling.

As is the case in the opening sentence, and as is true of virtually every sentence of this poem, this second sentence is a divided one. In its second half, the speaker explains that what he knows of "the one called Borges" he knows through written words—his name on letters received in the mail, on a list of professors, in an entry in a biographical dictionary. While the speaker lives in the present (the present tense of "I know" and "[I] see"), "Borges" is a part of the past. The letters written to him, the list of professors, the entry in the biographical dictionary are all writing that was done at some previous point in time.

The speaker's voice becomes far more personal as he lists the things he "likes": "I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor." Almost 20 years after "Pierre Menard," the list—with all its density, its tension between the sequential and the simultaneous, and its myriad felt but unstated linkages among its elements—is still a favorite structure for Borges. The list of things that "I like" ("like" is such an unpresuming verb) has a wholeness, an integrity only in relation to the person who made it, and that person is, in a sense, composed in the process of "making" the list. The "list" seems to draw together, in fewer than 15 words, the essential being of the speaker. Hourglasses make time visible to one who can see, and audible and palpable to one who cannot. They are the embodiment of the consecutive nature of time, each grain piled on top of the ones preceding it, like corpses dropped into a mass grave. But, with a turn of the wrist, time becomes circular—the corpses of one moment become the newborns of the next, softly, quietly elbowing one another in their jostling for entry into the world from inside the body of time.[7]

Second only to hourglasses on "the list" are maps. Maps do with space what hourglasses do with time: Streets, cities, countries, planets, galaxies are transformed into markings on paper that can be held and felt in one's hands and seen, if one can see, in a single glance. Thus, in the space of two words, all time and space are "captured," not in sand and glass and paper and ink, but in words used metaphorically. Certainly, the words comprising this list are "not only a means of communication but also magic symbols and music" (Borges, 1970, pp. 206–207). In a sense, the elements making up the list and the list making up the speaker (and the writer) are fundamentally metaphors for the imaginative making of metaphors and for the act of bringing oneself into being through the imaginative use of language.

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[7] From very early on, Borges must have been painfully aware (unconsciously, if not consciously) of the relentless progression of time as measured by the progressive loss of his vision. It would be difficult to imagine that he did not see himself in the future in the unforgiving, irreversible descent into blindness that he was witnessing in his father and grandmother.

The feeling in the voice of the poem shifts in the space between the two halves of this sentence. The things liked (and likened), which tumble over one another in the list comprising the first half of the sentence, give way to the sound of a voice not often heard in Borges's work. It is a voice that feels naked, stripped of irony and wit: "he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor." The juxtaposition of the two halves of this sentence creates a sense of giving and taking away. The serenely beautiful words of the first half of the sentence, each selected with care—"Hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson"—are scorched by the aridity and barrenness of the language of the second half: "He shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor." These are abstract, textureless words ("vain" and "the attributes of an actor") that feel more spit out than spoken. The soft, simple words "I like" become the stiff, formal clause "he shares these preferences" in the second half of the sentence.

The tone of the poem undergoes a powerful shift in the caesura in the middle of this sentence. There is a sense of things unraveling, spiraling downward in what follows: "It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, I let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me." The words and clauses of this sentence have the sound and cadence of the thud of body blows being delivered solidly, unrelentingly. This is achieved through the cumulative heaviness of the phrases "I live," "let myself go on living," "so that Borges may contrive his literature," and "this literature justifies me." (The stiff, formal, moralistic, legalistic "justifies" has a chilling deadness to it.)

"It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition." The idea that language "belongs to no one" plays a role in one way or another in almost all of Borges's poems, fictions, and essays. The idea is, of course, not original to Borges but is brought to life freshly each time Borges makes use of it (when his writing is good). For instance, the excitement of the "discovery" of this idea, as if for the first time, in "Pierre Menard," stands in contrast to its use in "Borges and I" where it becomes a club with which to lay bare "Borges's" illusions of originality.

The speaker's combativeness and bitterness (at times posing as evenhandedness) are transformed into something subtly new in the succeeding sentence: "Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him." There are undisguised sadness and resignation in these words. The speaker, who had earlier been speaking in and for the present ("now"), is a voice becoming the past (concerned not with life, but with afterlife—a writer's surviving in his literature after his death). Surviving in "Borges," "the other one," is not to survive as a person living in the present. "Borges" is a stolid monument that "survives"—not in the sense of living and changing and becoming but in the sense of commemorating the writer who he used to be and the writing he used to make.

As the speaker goes on to talk about Spinoza's notion that "all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger," the reader can hear the unspoken final clause of the thought: "And the writer longs to persist in his being as a writer." From this point onward (and backward to the beginning), the poem delves more and more deeply into the experience of the speaker/author struggling (at times unsuccessfully) to persist in his being as a writer: "I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar."

No simple division between "Borges," the public figure, and Borges, the private, everyday man, is adequate to what is going on in this poem. "Borges" is not simply a construction of the literary world or a construction (a mask, a persona) invented by Borges, the man. Rather, "Borges" *is* Borges, who is no longer Borges, no longer the writer recognizable to himself in the writing that has earned him a modicum of fame.

If the speaker is to become someone, if Borges is to become Borges, he will have to achieve it in his writing, in the writing of this poem, "now," in the ever-insistent, almost mocking present tense of this poem. If he is to become someone, it will not be in the form of re-creating the writing of Borges, the author of *ficciones*, for that Borges is gone, memorialized in biographical dictionaries and in the memory of the speaker (and of the reader). The loss of Borges is almost annihilating, almost beyond comprehension, almost beyond grief. The struggle embedded in the sound of the words and in the torn structure of the sentences of this poem is the struggle to find a way to grieve when there may be nothing left with which to grieve (when one genuinely does not know "if it is true that I am someone"). "Borges and I" is, in this sense, an elegy arising not from the experience of grief but from the effort to come into being as a writer by arriving at the feeling of grief through the experience of writing. The poem is an elegy for Borges (who is "Borges"), the imaginative writer who once took such pleasure in playing with the structure of language in the course of writing his fictions.

That the work of mourning is achieved (or at least is begun) in "Borges and I" is experienced by the reader in the final line of the poem: "I do not know which of us has written this page." This final line is no mere literary trick; it comes as a genuine surprise, a surprise that remakes itself freshly each time I read this poem. The poem, up to its closing sentence, is structured as a series of intoning declarative statements of "I": "I walk," "I know," "I like," "I live," "I am destined," "I am giving over," "I am quite aware," "I shall remain," "I recognize," "I tried," "I shall have to imagine," "I lose." And then, finally, the edifice of the poem, like a pyramid balanced on its pinnacle, concentrates itself into a second paragraph of less than a single line, beginning with the words "I do not know."

The final line is a surprise because the speaking voice, the "I" of the sentence, is a new and remarkable event. It is an event that could not have taken place until this moment, a sound that could not have been made in the absence of the work and the art of mourning that precedes it. The final line speaks with a voice of an "I" who can speak for "us"—for Borges and "I"—for the first time. There is something both triumphant and sadly accepting in the final statement of not knowing. The triumph of the line and the success of the poem as a whole lie in the paradox it creates: In order for a writer to address his experience of no longer being able to write in the way he once had been able to, he must write an elegy that imaginatively, enigmatically, musically achieves in the language itself something adequate to all that has been lost. An elegy, this elegy, does not begin with grief; it is an effort to achieve grief in the experience of writing. An elegy, unlike a eulogy, must take in, must be equal to (which is not to say identical to) the full complexity of the life that has been lost. The language of a poem that is an elegy must be enlivened by the loss or death of the person or aspect of oneself who is no longer. In other words, an elegy, if it is to succeed as "Borges and I" succeeds, must capture in its own voice, not the voice that has been lost, but a voice brought to life in the experiencing of that loss, a voice enlivened by the experience of that death. The new voice cannot replace the old ones and does not attempt to do so; one voice, one person, one aspect of one's life cannot replace another. But there can be a sense that the new voice has somehow been there all along in the old ones, as a child is somehow an imminence in his ancestors and is brought to life both through their lives and through their deaths.

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