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JORGE LUIS *BORGES* & THE PLURAL I

It was ironic of fate, though perhaps predictable, to allow Jorge Luis *Borges* to develop over a long life into his own Doppelganger. In a 1922 essay entitled "The Nothingness of Personality," *Borges* asserted that "the self does not exist." Half-a-century later, an international personality laden with acclaim, he had to depend on wry, self-deprecating quips to safeguard his precious inner nullity. "Yo no soy yo" ("I am not I"), wrote Juan Ramon Jimenez; this was a proposition that *Borges* not only endorsed but also made a fundamental axiom of his oeuvre. In his story "The Zahir" written in the 1940s, he could state, "I am still, albeit only partially, *Borges*," and in "Limits," a poem from the 1964 collection aptly entitled *The Self and the Other*, he ended with the line (as translated by Alastair Reid), "Space, time, and *Borges* now are leaving me." By 1980, however, to an interviewer who said, "Everyone sitting in this audience wants to know Jorge Luis *Borges*," he would reply, "I wish I did. I am sick and tired of him." On the lecture circuit, *Borges*, playing Sancho Panza to his own Quixote, perfected the sardonic stratagems that would keep his huge prestige at bay. Not fortuitously perhaps, his renown grew as, after 1955, his final blindness deepened: fragile and vaguely Chaplinesque in his rumpled linen suit, he emanated a prophetic aura, a shy Tiresias enamored of the tango.

It had not always been thus. The prim and diffident mama's boy whose idea of a date, well into middle age, was to bring a girl home to sit dumbfounded before his overpowering dowager of a mother while she rehearsed the martial glories of "Georgie's" military forebears; the indolent librarian for whom a day of work at the Miguel Cane Municipal Library meant slipping off into some secluded nook to study works by Leon Bloy, Paul Claudel, or Edward Gibbon (a combustible *menage a trois*!); the awkward intellectual so self-conscious that he could appear in public only by hunching down behind the lectern while a friend read his words to the audience--all these tentative and inchoate identities (along with many others) coalesced to fabricate "*Borges*" that self-shaped golem of audacious erudition who accompanied, and often eclipsed, *Borges* himself on the triumphal peregrinations of his last three decades.

If the nullification of personal identity exists in his work side by side with a sort of wonder at the profusion of selves even the most ordinary life entails, this must be viewed in the context of *Borges's* larger obsessions. For he was haunted by infinitude. A horrified fascination with the limitless in space and in time animates all his finest works. The horror arises not because of immeasurable magnitude as such, but because of the fact that the unbounded is infinitely divisible. This is why *Borges* returns so frequently in essays and fictions to the ancient paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. For *Borges*, infinity is always serial; it demands replication ad infinitum. One of his favorite figures for infinitude is the mirror image, that vertiginous repetition of the same mute yet glimmering reflection. Hence, too, his related horror of mirrors: "I have been horrified before all mirrors," he

wrote in the poem "The Mirrors": "I look on them as infinite, elemental/fulfillers of a very ancient pact/to multiply the world."

In "Averroes' Search" the narrator speaks of the "dread of the grossly infinite," by which he means "mere space, mere matter." The *Borges*ian infinite, by contrast, is filled, and its images are all ultimately double. Every identity, like the commonplace but magical coin in "The Zahir," possesses its obverse: each side both negates and reaffirms the other.

The library, whether the Library of Babel in his great "fiction" of the same name or the National Library of Argentina where *Borges* served as director for some eighteen years, is a fitting metaphor for infinitude. The fact that *Borges* was almost completely blind during his tenure as national librarian must have strengthened his sense of boundlessness. Anyone who has wandered in a large library at night when all the lights are out will appreciate the eerie sensation of limitlessness; the books on serried shelves, each foreshadowing its neighbor, appear to extend into endlessness, and to perceive this purely by touch must be doubly persuasive. In his magnificent "Poem of the Gifts," *Borges* wrote, "Aimlessly, endlessly, I trace the confines,/ high and profound, of this blind library."

Borges's two predecessors as national librarian had both been blind as well; this weird coincidence led him to identify with the more distinguished of them, Paul Groussac, and to muse on whether their identities were not after all interchangeable. The sharpened sense of recurrence, the fixed conviction that nothing is truly new, the awareness of fate as a player on a field of infinite yet starkly delimited possibilities, give a claustrophobic cast to *Borges's* most powerful fantasies. Small wonder that one of his favorite lines from Shakespeare is Hamlet's "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams!" And it is this pinched infinitude, if I may so put it, that ultimately makes of *Borges*, for all his fabled brevity, an epic writer.

How to do justice to the work of this strangely mercurial master whose greatest writings often read as though written (in *Borges*ian terms) by Everybody and Nobody? How to do justice to them, especially, in English which, though beloved by *Borges* from childhood, hardly seems suitable for his chaste and cunning prose? Here the French, who have venerated *Borges* since Drieu La Rochelle "discovered" him in the 1930s, appear to have beaten us to the draw. The impressive Pleiade edition of the complete works began appearing in 1993, and this year, the centenary of *Borges's* birth, saw publication both of the second and final volume of the works and of the delightful Album de la Pleiade devoted to *Borges*. The Album contains much biographical information as well as a profusion of charming photographs. Elegantly translated and annotated, the Pleiade edition, which *Borges* himself helped plan, is far and away the most complete collection of the works; its twin volumes contain many pieces not yet available in Spanish. The three-volume Obras completas, which began to appear in Barcelona in 1989, is far from complete; a series of textos recobrados, or "recovered texts," collecting the lost, suppressed, or pseudonymous writings is now in progress, with a plump first volume (covering the decade 1919-1929) published in 1997.

Viking has now mounted a serious challenge to Gallic presumption by bringing out three superb volumes devoted, respectively, to *Borges's* fictions, poems, and "non-fictions."^[1] These are strikingly designed books, from the deckle-edged pages which invite the finger to riffle them to the embossed labyrinths of the dust jackets (a different labyrinth for each genre) to the photos of *Borges* on the spines: a young and pensive *Borges* adorns the poems, the middle-aged author in thick spectacles peers from the non-fictions, and the elderly author, already pleasantly oracular, muses, chin propped on splayed fingers, from the fiction. Lined up in a row, these author photos look less chronological than circular, three images of what *Borges* called "the plural I."

Borges wrote in the prologue to his 1975 collection of poems, The Unending Rose, that "verse should have two obligations: to communicate a precise instance and to touch us physically, as the presence of the sea does." Lovers of *Borges's* prose, especially of the incomparable stories in Fictions (1944) and The Aleph (1949), tend to dismiss his poetry; and yet, *Borges* saw himself, and

with justice, first and foremost as a poet. An oddity about *Borges*, one of several, lies in the fact that his stories are many-layered and densely allusive while his verse by and large is plain and univocal. The demonic *Borges* penned the prose but in the poetry, *Borges*--not "*Borges*" in all his sly, Protean guises, but quotidian, all-too-human Jorge Luis--spoke in his soft but unmistakable individual voice.

Borges was probably too intelligent to become a great poet, most of whom seem to have a certain saving stupidity in abundant supply. He approvingly quotes a line by his compatriot, the often marvelous poet Leopoldo Lugones: "Iba el silencio andando como un largo lebre!" ("Silence was moving like a long greyhound"). The simile is slightly comical, and yet, as *Borges* recognized, the verse has a curious magic that arises not only from its intrinsic music, but also from its very strangeness. Despite the profound strangeness of his own imagination, *Borges* rarely captured such effects in verse. He usually does "communicate a precise instance," but he almost never manages to "touch us physically."

In the Viking Selected Poems, beautifully assembled by Alexander Coleman, we can, however, appreciate *Borges's* true strengths as a poet. Though he set out to become the "poet of Buenos Aires," *Borges* mainly succeeded as a poet, it seems to me, in the quite honorable but currently unfashionable tradition exemplified in English by such authors as Kipling, Stevenson, Belloc, and Chesterton; this is the tradition which T. S. Eliot, somewhat sniffily, referred to as "verse" as opposed to "poetry." If one thinks of *Borges* as a poet in this tradition--as, that is, an English poet who happened to write in Spanish--it is easier to appreciate his poetic achievement. *Borges* the poet suffers when set beside Lorca (whom he detested as a "professional Andalusian") or Neruda, or such brilliant compatriots as Lugones or Enrique Banchs, not because he necessarily possessed lesser gifts, but because he chose to write within an alien, and sharply circumscribed, tradition.

Borges excelled particularly in such forms as the ballad. The best of these is probably "The Golem." The version in the new edition, by Alan S. Trueblood, captures its playful mood (though not its mystery) rather well:

That cabbalist who played at being God gave his spacey offspring the nickname Golem.

(In a learned passage of his volume, these truths have been conveyed to us by Scholem.)

In a 1968 recording of *Borges* reading his poems, he comments that he and his onetime collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares consider this the best poem he has ever "perpetrated," and when he reads "The Golem," one understands why. What *Borges* was attempting in this and other such poems was not to create radical imagery or startling phrases but rather, with a maximum of craft and self-effacement, to tap into the age-old and immemorial sources of balladry. In *Borges's* soft yet distinct articulation of the poem, the listener senses his awareness of the old Scots Border ballads, of the German ballad tradition, of the medieval Spanish coplas. Despite his rather childish glee in the rhyme Golem/Scholem (he uses it twice), *Borges* demonstrates that one side of him--one *Borges*, as it were--would have liked nothing better than to meld into some primordial and anonymous tradition within which he would be indistinguishable from his fellows. Indeed, in his celebrated "*Borges* and I," he notes that "good writing belongs to no one in particular, not even to my other, but rather to language and tradition."

The translations are by some thirteen different hands, including such well-known names as Willis Barnstone, Robert Fitzgerald, Alastair Reid, and John Updike; all strike me as excellent and often superb. It is a pity that certain of the earlier translations, such as John Hollander's rendering of "The Golem"--a miracle of translation if there ever was one--could not be included; but when so much has been given, it is churlish to ask for more. I do have a minor quibble: why publish so many of the same prose poems from *The Maker* (El Hacedor), *Borges's* 1960 collection, in both the Selected Poems and the Collected Fictions, all the more so since the versions in the former, with Spanish text en face, are markedly superior?

No other twentieth-century author drew so many skins about himself as *Borges* did: he moved in nimble imagination from the mind of a German concentration camp commandant ("Deutsches Requiem") to a twelfth-century Muslim philosopher ("Averroes' Search") to the Minotaur itself ("The House of Asterion"), not to mention countless others, from Byzantine theologians to detectives, caudillos to compadritos, lunatics to librarians. Moreover, *Borges's* fancy coursed at its pleasure over centuries and found no locale so alien as to be impenetrable: in sentence after magical sentence, Babylon cohabits with Buenos Aires, the pampas with the labyrinth.

Borges's dense, compressed, almost bony prose refuses frills; it would be documentary were it not for the cadenced consciousness that dictated it. The rhythm of *Borges's* language, even more in the prose than in the poetry, is--I do not know how else to put this--at once arid and incantatory. When he does permit himself a flourish, the effect is intense. In the famous sentence that opens "The Circular Ruins" *Borges* writes: "Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unanime noche." Andrew Hurley in his new translation renders this "No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night." The phrase "unanimous night" startles. In fact, it is only with the final sentence of the story that we understand what is meant by this phrase: "With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him." In "A History of Eternity," in the Selected Non-Fictions, there is the apposite remark: "This unanimous universe, this apotheosis of assimilation and interchange." In the unanimity of night we are all figments of dream; we dream others who dream us in turn.

By such secretive strokes, with immense concision, *Borges* raised his best prose to a level his poems rarely, if ever, reach. His fictions therefore require of a translator the care and the subtlety of ear which ought to be brought to the translation of poetry. Andrew Hurley is painstaking, and there is at times a blunt literalness about his versions; this makes his translations an extremely helpful guide to the originals. By any standard his accomplishment here is immense; for the first time all of *Borges's* fictions are together in English in a single volume, and all have been translated in a consistent voice by a single hand. The problems with Hurley's translation arise not because he is a poor translator but rather because he appears not to have a good sense of English prose style, or to command such a style himself. Earlier translators of the fictions--I think especially of Anthony Kerrigan and Anthony Bonner--were not always as accurate as Hurley; still, when you read their versions, you knew at once that you were in the presence of a bizarre and incomparable author. With Hurley you must work harder to recover and maintain this sense.

Consider the complete sentence with which "The Circular Ruins" opens:

Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unanime noche, nadie viola canoa de bambu sumiendose en el fango sagrado, pero a los pocos dias nadie ignoraba que el hombre taciturno venla del Sur y que su patria era una de las infinitas aldeas que estan aguas arriba, en el flanco violenta de la montana, donde el idioma zend no esta contaminada de griego y donde es enfrecuente la lepra.

Hurley translates this to read:

No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe as it sank into the sacred mud, and yet within days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man had come there from the South, and that his homeland was one of those infinite villages that lie upriver, on the violent flank of the mountain, where the language of the Zend is uncontaminated by Greek and where leprosy is uncommon.

This is certainly accurate. But why does Hurley use "slip from the boat" instead of "disembark"? Why does he render the participial *sumiendose* with three words "as it sank"? Hurley does try to preserve the em and en sounds that *Borges* used to lace his sentence tight (and which he echoed in the final line of the story; it is about circular ruins after all), but the effect falters because the sentence as translated has lost its tautness; the repetitions of *nadie* (no one), which sound like the

successive voices in a round, pull us down and inward, as though into the spirals of a maze. Then, at the word "South," the movement of the prose changes, and the translation should reflect this; we are suddenly drawn outward toward those "infinite villages." For comparison, here is the older version by Anthony Bonner:

No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe sink into the sacred mud, but in a few days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man came from the South and that his home had been one of those numberless villages upstream in the deeply cleft side of the mountain, where the Zend language has not been contaminated by Greek and where leprosy is infrequent.

Bonner has preserved the momentum and economy of the original. True, he has not been as exact ("deeply cleft side of the mountain" instead of "the violent flank"), but he has transposed something of the feel of the Spanish without committing violence to its sense. Hurley is right: the villages are "infinite," but Bonner's use of "numberless" keeps the meaning while recreating the aural pattern of the original.

Hurley's translation is weakest where he must render dialogue. Perhaps the worst examples occur in the early story "Man on Pink Corner" (not a very good story, if the truth be told). The reader winces at such lines as "the first row of fellows--pure Eytalians, an' all eyes--opened out like a fan, and fast. But that wa'n't about to last," and has become almost insensate by the time he reaches "There are people out there--I figure they're just talkers, you know--saying there's some guy down here in these boondocks that fancies himself a knife fighter, and a bad 'un--say he's called the Sticker. I'd like to make his acquaintance, so he could show me--me being nobody, you understand--what it means to be a man of courage." In these boondocks? Such passages read as if scripted by Salvador Dali for "The Lone Ranger."

There is another problem with Hurley's translation. Since he seems to approach the texts as purely linguistic or literary puzzles, he scants certain dimensions of *Borges's* vision. To translate *Borges* well, one needs not simply to know Spanish but to appreciate if not command his entire vast range of cultural reference. Perhaps only *Borges's* own Pierre Menard might accomplish this; even so, it is part of a translator's responsibility to elucidate, rather than obscure, those points on which his original texts depend for their effects.

To be specific, in certain of Hurley's notes, but especially those that deal with matters Islamic, he shows himself quite unequal to his task. *Borges* himself sometimes makes small errors when dealing with Arabic or Persian names; these errors of transliteration reflect the fact that Spanish Orientalists by and large cling to an idiosyncratic scheme of transliteration not used elsewhere. But in dealing with the wider world of Islam, which he entered in imaginative disguise as boldly as once Burton, disguised as a pilgrim, entered Mecca, *Borges* was strikingly accurate and unusually well informed. No one expects Hurley to translate or interpret Arabic or Persian names and titles with any expertise but he should not interpolate errors into texts where they were previously lacking.

Most egregious are the tinkering Hurley has performed on the text of "Averroes' Search," one of *Borges's* noblest fictions. *Borges* has Averroes--whom he also, correctly, calls Ibn Rushd--allude to Ibn Sida, an illustrious eleventh-century Arab philologist of Muslim Spain, who happened to be blind. Hurley transforms Ibn Sida into "ibn-Sina" and garbles the former's main work, known in Arabic as Al-Muhkam (i.e., the "firmly established" [book]) into the impossible form Moqqam, even though *Borges* had it right to begin with! Hurley has not heard of Ibn Sida and so makes the facile assumption that *Borges* meant to write Ibn Sina. But the real Ibn Sina, or Avicenna, died at the other end of the Islamic world some thirty years before Ibn Sida. Ibn Sina was many things, a great physician and philosopher as well as abon vivant (he brought on his own death through excessive fornication), but he was not blind. It is obvious that *Borges*, for personal as well as literary reasons, wanted to allude not to a randy metaphysician from Persia but to a blind Andalusian philologist, that

is, someone from *Borges's* (and Averroes's) world of reference who cannot see the words that are his stock in trade but who must rely on imagination, just as *Borges* must rely on imagination to "see" Averroes. In any case, should a translator meddle with an author's text in this fashion?

Again, in his notes to the same story, Hurley blunders when he says about the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, "This is a very peculiar story to put in the minds of these Islamic luminaries, for the story of the seven sleepers of Ephesus is a Christian story." As it happens, and as *Borges* well knew, this legend has long been part of the Islamic tradition; in fact, the eighteenth surah of the Qur'an devotes several verses to those whom Muslims know as "the people of the cave" ("ahl al-kahf" in Arabic).

The languages and culture of Islam were crucial to *Borges's* imagination, and a translator must appreciate this. Indeed, there is no other contemporary author who has so assimilated Islamic traditions and motifs, and treated them with such loving familiarity, as *Borges*. Polyglot from childhood, fluent in English, French, German and, of course, Spanish, and having taught himself Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse in middle age, *Borges* finally embarked on the study of classical Arabic with an Egyptian tutor whom he met in Geneva in the last year of his life. He was then eighty-six. And though his ambition in studying Arabic was to be able to read *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah*, or *The Thousand and One Nights*, in the original, *Borges* had had a lifelong interest in, and considerable knowledge of, Arabic and Persian literature. Such a fascination, of course, is not so strange for an author in the Spanish tradition. Linguists estimate that there are still some four thousand words of Arabic origin in contemporary Spanish, and Spain has had a long line of outstanding (if eccentric) Arabists, including Miguel Asin-Palacios and Emilio Garcia-Gomez, whose studies and translations of Andalusian Arabic literature *Borges* had read.

A curious token of *Borges's* fascination with Arabic literature appears in the Album de la Pleiade. This is a humble check from La Rosa Blanca, a Lebanese restaurant in Buenos Aires, where *Borges* dined one evening with friends. On the left-hand margin of the check, like the spidery gloss of a medieval commentator, runs a famous verse by the great tenth-century Arabic poet Abu Tayyib al-Mutanabbi, which *Borges* has scrawled in a literal Spanish translation. In English the verse reads: "The horsemen and the night and the desert know me,/and the sword and the lance, the paper and the pen." In a caption that can only be described as *Borgesian*, the editor of the Album has misidentified the Arabic writing on the check as *Borges's* own rendering of lines by "an imaginary Arab poet." In fact, the Arabic on the Rosa Blanca bill is nothing more mysterious or imaginary than the dinner of *Borges* and his friends--kibbeh, koftah, and meshwi, among other Lebanese delicacies.

Borges cites al-Mutanabbi's verse elsewhere; it was of obvious importance to him. The synecdoches of the verse encompass the twin realms of contemplation and action, at which, the poet boasts, he is equally adept. Unlikely as it might seem at first glance, the shy, clumsy librarian with the bad eyes was torn by the same dichotomies. *Borges's* fascination for the tango and milonga; his pleasure in the brawls and vendettas of violent districts of Buenos Aires; his knowing pronouncements on lunfardo (the Buenos Aires patois savored by literati); his immersion in gaucho tales and the life of the pampas, together with his unreserved admiration for Domingo Sarmiento's great nineteenth-century classic *Facundo*; his unseemly delight in knife fighting (has any author ever described throat-slitting with as much gusto as *Borges*?); not to mention his courageous public opposition to Peron -- these and other tendencies reveal an intense fascination with a life of action, and quite often violent action. True, his tales of war and cruelty betray a bookish streak; but then, even his most bookish tales are riven with covert violence. In the Arab poet's verse, the sword and the lance hold equal honor with the paper and the pen, and this equipoise could not but have appealed to *Borges*.

If I were to list all the subjects that attracted Jorge Luis *Borges* the feuilletonist and journalist over the course of his long career, I would have to compile an inventory rivalling the author's own catalogues--those outlandish tallies of the most disparate objects by which he was wont to evoke his sequential infinitudes. Referring solely to the new Selected Non-Fictions, in many respects the most interesting of the Viking volumes, I would have to enumerate, for example, essays on the duration of

hell, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the detective story, Ramon Llull, Germany and World War II, Kabbalah, Achilles and the tortoise, the "art of verbal abuse," *The Thousand and One Nights*, a history of angels, film criticism of King Kong, *The Informer*, *The Petrified Forest* (and other films), notices on Orson Welles (and *Citizen Kane*), T. S. Eliot, S.S. Van Dine, Isaac Babel, and Theodore Dreiser, book reviews of Faulkner, Aldous Huxley, H. G. Wells, and (not really surprisingly, given his love of the detective story) Ellery Queen, profound studies of Dante ("*Nine Dantesque Essays*"), Kafka ("*Kafka and his Precursors*") and Edward Fitzgerald, not to mention a history of the tango and a series of transcribed lectures composed after he became too blind to read his own notes. Even this list is skeletal, as the thousands of pages of the Barcelona and Pleiade editions attest; the bulk of *Borges's* output was belletristic.

Much of this work is inevitably dated. What *Borges* finds to write about, say, King Kong is less interesting than the fact that he had anything to say at all: "A monkey [sic] forty feet tall ... may have obvious charms, but those charms have not convinced this viewer. King Kong is no full-blooded ape but rather a rusty, desiccated machine." So, too, it is good to know what *Borges* had to say, in 1925, about *Ulysses* and, in 1939, about *Finnegans Wake*; and yet, one turns to these, as to the film and book reviews, more as historical curiosities than as critical essays in their own right.

Much of the volume is of this nature, and, after some acquaintance with the contents, one longs for the essays that have had to be left out--the magisterial pages on Quevedo, for example, or *Borges's* blistering attack on Americo Castro. (Where too is "An Autobiographical Essay," also omitted from the Pleiade volumes, which *Borges* put together in 1970 with the ill-fated Norman Thomas di Giovanni? A casualty, I suspect, of *Borges's* implacable widow, Maria Kodama, who guards his literary legacy more zealously than Fafnir his hoard.) To quibble further: with one exception the volume ignores all *Borges's* voluminous writings on Argentine literature specifically, and Spanish literature generally, and that exception, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," is, sad to say, quite cursory; it would have been useful, for example, to have had the entire early collection of essays, which *Borges* entitled *Inquisiciones* and then suppressed, available in English (a Spanish edition appeared after *Borges's* death in 1986).

But these are minor cavils, for what remains is generally splendid. The nine essays on Dante constitute close readings unlike anything else that I have seen on the *Commedia*, for *Borges* was a virtuoso reader, as well as a writer of genius. A meticulous analysis of a single phrase or verse, supported by scholarship in Italian, French, German, and Spanish, leads him to connections that seem preposterous and yet are plausible; he thus brings Dante into conjunction with the Persian poet and mystic Farid al-Din 'Attar ("*The Simurgh and the Eagle*") or explores the links between Dante and the Venerable Bede ("*Dante and the Anglo-Saxon Visionaries*") and does so with meticulous erudition combined with imaginative boldness--a rare combination at any time.

The *Selected Non-Fictions*, lucidly translated by Eliot Weinberger with Esther Allen and Suzanne Jill Levine, gives us *Borges* at his most various. The editor has ordered the essays chronologically; it is thus possible to get some sense of *Borges's* development. The best essays, such as "A History of Eternity," share with the best of the fictions an unmistakable intensification of language; the sentences seem so replete with thought and feeling in equal measure that they brim to the very edge of utterance.

There was after all something of the exemplum, if not exactly the saint, in *Borges*. In unexpected moments on a college stage or on some talk show, the *Borgesian* oracle would fall silent, and a personage of sly, calm, mischievous, and yet gentle demeanor would peer forth from his sightless eyes. Anecdotes abound; I give only one example from the large (and growing) literature. On his first visit to the desert in North Africa, *Borges* is seen sifting sand grains through his fingers and, when asked what he is doing, replies, "I am rearranging the Sahara." Such tales, whimsical, a bit sardonic, cryptic even, resemble the tales of the ancient philosophers as much as the tales of the Hasidim (a sect *Borges* identified with). Except for Kafka, no other modern writer has become as

emblematic of himself and his own curious world as *Borges* has.

How extraordinary that so many-selved, so ultimately vaporous, a personage as *Borges*, or "*Borges*," should come to play this role. What other modern author was routinely quizzed for his views on time and memory, the enigma of personality, the possibility of an afterlife and personal immortality, among other ponderous topics, as was *Borges*? He cheerfully declared that he held no belief in an afterlife and that he personally welcomed the inevitable oblivion that would engulf his own name, as if extinction alone offered an escape from the claustrophobia of infinitude. "No one is someone," he wrote in "The Immortal," "a single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, hero, philosopher, demon, and world--which is a long-winded way of saying that I am not." Dignified despite his dishevelment, his crumpled fedora in one hand, his inquisitive white cane in the other, Senor *Borges*, our improbable psychopomp, shows us the way into unanimous night.

[1] *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, (Viking; 565 pages, \$40). *Selected Poems*, edited by Alexander Coleman, (Viking; 478 pages, \$40). *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger, (Viking; 558 pages, \$40).

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By Eric Ormsby

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