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TIGERS in the mirror

GEORGE STEINER

EXTRA-
TERRITORIAL

*Papers on Literature
and the Language
Revolution*

FABER AND FABER
3 QUEEN SQUARE
LONDON

*First Published in the USA
by Atheneum, New York
This edition published 1972
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London W.C.1.
Printed by Latimer Trend & Co Ltd Whitstable*

ISBN 0 571 09798 7

For Ivor and Dorothy Richards

The following articles appeared originally in *The New Yorker*: "Of Nuance and Scruple," "Tigers in the Mirror," "Cry Havoc," "A Death of Kings," "Tongues of Men" and "Life-Lines." "Extraterritorial" and "Linguistics and Poetics" first appeared in *Tri-Quarterly*. "The Language Animal" first appeared in *Encounter*. "In a Post-Culture" first appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*.

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TIGERS IN THE MIRROR

Inevitably, the current world fame of Jorge Luis Borges entails a sense of private loss. As when a view long treasured—the shadow-mass of Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh seen, uniquely, from the back of number sixty The Pleasance, or Fifty-first Street in Manhattan angled to a bronze and racing canyon through a trick of elevation and light in my dentist's window—a collector's item of and for the inner eye, becomes a panoptic spectacle for the tourist horde. For a long time, the splendor of Borges was clandestine, signaled to the happy few, bartered in undertones and mutual recognitions. How many knew of his first work, a summary of Greek myths, written in English in Buenos Aires, the author aged seven? Or of opus two, dated 1907 and distinctly premonitory, a translation into Spanish of Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*? To affirm today that "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" is one of the sheer wonders of human contrivance, that the several facets of Borges' shy genius are almost wholly gathered in that spare fable, is a platitude. But how many own the *editio princeps* of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (Sur, Buenos Aires, 1941) in which the tale first appeared? Only ten years ago, it was a mark of arcane erudition and a wink to the initiate to realize that H. Bustos Domecq was the joint pseudonym of Borges and his close collaborator, Adolfo Bioy Casares, or that the Borges who, with Delia In-

genieros, published a learned monograph on ancient Germanic and Anglo-Saxon literatures (Mexico, 1951) was indeed the Master. Such information was close-guarded, parsimoniously dispensed, often nearly impossible to come by, as were Borges' poems, stories, essays themselves, scattered, out of print, pseudonymous. I recall an early connoisseur, in the cavernous rear of a bookstore in Lisbon, showing me—this, remember, was in the early 1950's—Borges' translation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, his preface to a Buenos Aires edition of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, his key essay on the artificial language devised by Bishop John Wilkins, published in *La Nación* on February 8, 1942, and, rarest of rare items, *Dimensions of My Hope*, a collection of short essays issued in 1926 but, by Borges' own wish, not reprinted since. These slim objects were displayed to me with an air of fastidious condescension. And rightly so. I had arrived late at the secret place.

The turning point came in 1961. Together with Beckett, Borges was awarded the Formentor Prize. A year later, *Labyrinths* and *Fictions* appeared in English. Honors rained. The Italian government made Borges *Commendatore*. At the suggestion of M. Malraux, President de Gaulle conferred on his illustrious fellow writer and master of myths the title of Commander of the *Ordre des Lettres et des Arts*. The sudden lion found himself lecturing in Madrid, Paris, Geneva, London, Oxford, Edinburgh, Harvard, Texas. "At a ripe old age," muses Borges, "I began to find that many people were interested in my work all over the world. It seems strange: many of my writings have been done into English, into Swedish, into French, into Italian, into German, into Portuguese, into some of the Slav languages, into Danish. And always this comes as a great surprise to me, because I remember I published a book—that must have been way back in 1932, I think—and at the end of the year I found out that no less than thirty-seven copies had been sold!" A leanness that had its compensations: "Those people are real, I mean every one

of them has a face of his own, a family, he lives in his own particular street. Why, if you sell, say, two thousand copies, it is the same thing as if you had sold nothing at all, because two thousand is too vast, I mean for the imagination to grasp . . . perhaps seventeen would have been better or even seven." Cognoscenti will spot the symbolic role of each of these numbers, and of the kabbalistic diminishing series, in Borges' fables.

Today, the secret thirty-seven have become an industry. Critical commentaries on Borges, interviews with, memoirs about, special issues of quarterlies devoted to, editions of, pullulate. Already the 520-page exegetic, biographical, and bibliographical Borges compendium issued in Paris, by *L'Herne*, in 1964, is out of date. The air is gray with theses: on "Borges and Beowulf," on "The Influence of the Western on the Narrative Pace of the Later Borges," on "Borges' Enigmatic Concern with *West Side Story*" ("I have seen it many times"), on "The Real Origins of the Words *Tlön* and *Uqbar* in Borges' Stories," on "Borges and the Zohar." There have been Borges weekends at Austin, seminars at Harvard, a large-scale symposium at the University of Oklahoma—a festivity perhaps previewed in Kafka's *Amerika*. Borges himself was present, watching the learned sanctification of his other self, or, as he calls it, *Borges y yo*. A journal of Borgesian studies is being founded. Its first issue will deal with the function of the mirror and the labyrinth in Borges' art, and with the dreamtigers that wait behind the mirror or, rather, in its silent crystal maze.

With the academic circus have come the mimes. Borges' manner is being widely aped. There are magic turns which many writers, and even undergraduates gifted with a knowing ear, can simulate: the self-deprecatory deflection of Borges' tone, the occult fantastications of literary, historical reference which pepper his narrative, the alternance of direct, bone-spare statement with sinuous evasion. The key images and heraldic markers of the Borges world have

passed into literary currency. "I've grown weary of labyrinths and mirrors and of tigers and of all that sort of thing. Especially when others are using them. . . . That's the advantage of imitators. They cure one of one's literary ills. Because one thinks: there are so many people doing that sort of thing now, there's no need for one to do it any more. Now let the others do it, and good riddance." But it is not pseudo-Borges that matters.

The enigma is this: that tactics of feeling so specialized, so intricately enmeshed with a sensibility that is private in the extreme, should have so wide, so natural, an echo. Like Lewis Carroll, Borges has made of his autistic dreams discreet but exacting summons which readers the world over are responding to with a sense of recognition. Our streets and gardens, the arrowing of a lizard across the warm light, our libraries and circular staircases are beginning to look precisely as Borges dreamed them, though the sources of his vision remain irreducibly singular, hermetic, at moments almost moon-mad.

The process whereby a fantastically private picture of the world leaps beyond the wall of mirrors behind which it was created, and reaches out to change the general landscape of awareness, is manifest but exceedingly difficult to talk about (how much of the vast critical literature on Kafka is baffled verbiage). That Borges' entrance on the larger scene of the imagination was preceded by a local genius of extreme rigor and linguistic *métier* is certain. But that will not get us very far. The fact is that even lame translations communicate much of his spell. The message, set in a kabbalistic code, written, as it were, in invisible ink, thrust, with the proud casualness of deep modesty, into the most fragile of bottles, has crossed the seven seas (there are, of course, many more in the Borges atlas, but they are always multiples of seven), to reach every kind of shore. Even to those who know nothing of his masters and early companions—Lugones, Macedonio Fernandez, Evaristo Carriego—or to whom the Palermo district of

Buenos Aires and the tradition of gaucho ballads are little more than names, have found access to Borges' *Fictions*. There is a sense in which the Director of the Biblioteca Nacional of Argentina is now the most original of Anglo-American writers. This extraterritoriality may be a clue.

Borges is a universalist. In part, this is a question of upbringing, of the years from 1914 to 1921, which he spent in Switzerland, Italy, Spain. And it arises from Borges' prodigious talents as a linguist. He is at home in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxon, and Old Norse, as well as in a Spanish that is constantly shot through with Argentine elements. Like other writers whose sight has failed, Borges moves with a cat's assurance through the sound-world of many tongues. He tells memorably of "Beginning the Study of Anglo-Saxon Grammar":

At fifty generations' end
 (And such abysses time affords us all)
 I returned to the further shore of a great river
 That the vikings' dragons did not reach,
 To the harsh and arduous words
 That, with a mouth now turned to dust,
 I used in my Northumbrian, Mercian days
 Before I became a Haslam or a Borges. . . .
 Praised be the infinite
 Mesh of effect and causes
 Which, before it shews me the mirror
 In which I shall see no one or I shall see another,
 Grants me now this contemplation pure
 Of a language of the dawn.

"Before I became a Borges." There is in Borges' penetration of different cultures a secret of literal metamorphosis. In "Deutsches Requiem," the narrator becomes, *is*, Otto Dietrich zu Linde, condemned Nazi war criminal. Vincent Moon's confession, "The Shape of the Sword," is a classic in the ample literature of the Irish troubles. Elsewhere,

Borges assumes the mask of Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English at the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao, or of Averroes, the great Islamic commentator on Aristotle. Each quick-change brings with it its own persuasive aura, yet all are Borges. He delights in extending this sense of the unhoused, of the mysteriously conglomerate, to his own past: "I may have Jewish ancestors, but I can't tell. My mother's name is Acevedo: Acevedo may be a name for a Portuguese Jew, but again it may not. . . . The word *acevedo*, of course, means a kind of tree; the word is not especially Jewish, though many Jews are called Acevedo. I can't tell." As Borges sees it, other masters may derive their strength from a similar stance of strangeness: "I don't know why, but I always feel something Italian, something Jewish about Shakespeare, and perhaps Englishmen admire him because of that, because it's so unlike them." It is not the specific doubt or fantastication that counts. It is the central notion of the writer as a guest, as a human being whose job it is to stay vulnerable to manifold strange presences, who must keep the doors of his momentary lodging open to all winds:

I know little—or nothing—of my own forebears;
 The Borges back in Portugal; vague folk
 That in my flesh, obscurely, still evoke
 Their customs, and their firmnesses and fears.
 As slight as if they'd never lived in the sun
 And free from any trafficking with art,
 They form an indecipherable part
 Of time, of earth, and of oblivion.

This universality and disdain of anchor is directly reflected in Borges' fabled erudition. Whether or not it is "merely put there as a kind of private joke," the fabric of bibliographical allusions, philosophic tags, literary citations, kabbalistic references, mathematical and philological acrostics which crowd Borges' stories and poems is, obviously, crucial to the way he experiences reality. A per-

ceptive French critic has argued that in an age of deepening illiteracy, when even the educated have only a smattering of classical or theological knowledge, erudition is of itself a kind of fantasy, a surrealistic construct. Moving, with muted omniscience, from eleventh-century heretical fragments to baroque algebra and multi-tomed Victorian *œuvres* on the fauna of the Aral Sea, Borges builds an anti-world, a perfectly coherent space in which his mind can conjure at will. The fact that a good deal of the alleged source material and mosaic of allusion is a pure fabrication—a device which Borges shares with Nabokov and for which both may be indebted to Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*—paradoxically strengthens the impression of solidity. Pierre Menard stands before us, instantaneously substantial and implausible, through the invented catalogue of his "visible works"; in turn, each arcane item in the catalogue points to the meaning of the parable. And who would doubt the veracity of the "Three Versions of Judas" once Borges has assured us that Nils Runeberg—note the runes in the name—published *Den hemlige Frälsaren* in 1909 but did not know a book by Euclides da Cunha (*Revolt in the Backlands*, exclaims the reader) in which it is affirmed that for the "heresiarch of Canudos, Antonio Conselheiro, virtue 'was almost an impiety'?"

Unquestionably, there is humor in this polymath montage. And there is, as in Pound, a deliberate enterprise of total recall, a graphic inventory of classical and Western civilization in a time in which much of the latter is forgot or vulgarized. Borges is a curator at heart, a treasurer of unconsidered trifles, an indexer of the antique truths and waste conjectures which throng the attic of history. All this arch learning has its comical and gently histrionic sides. But a much deeper meaning as well.

Borges holds, or, rather, makes precise imaginative use of, a kabbalistic image of the world, a master metaphor of existence, which he may have become familiar with as early as 1914, in Geneva, when reading Gustav Meyrink's

novel *The Golem*, and when in close contact with the scholar Maurice Abramowicz. The metaphor goes something like this: the Universe is a great Book; each material and mental phenomenon in it carries meaning. The world is an immense alphabet. Physical reality, the facts of history, whatever men have created, are, as it were, syllables of a perpetual message. We are surrounded by a limitless network of significance, whose every thread carries a pulse of being and connects, ultimately, to what Borges, in an enigmatic tale of great power, calls the Aleph. The narrator sees this inexpressible pivot of the cosmos in the dusty corner of the cellar of the house of Carlos Argentino in Garay Street on an October afternoon. It is the space of all spaces, the kabbalistic sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, it is the wheel of Ezekiel's vision but also the quiet small bird of Sufi mysticism, which, in some manner, contains all birds: "I was dizzy and I wept, for mine eyes had beheld this secret and conjectural object, whose name is usurped by men, but which no man has looked upon: the inconceivable universe."

From the point of view of the writer, "the universe, which others call the Library," has several notable features. It embraces *all* books, not only those that have already been written, but every page of every tome that will be written in the future and, which matters more, that could conceivably be written. Re-grouped, the letters of all known or lost scripts and alphabets, as they have been set down in extant volumes, can produce every imaginable human thought, every line of verse or prose paragraph to the limits of time. The Library also contains all extant languages and those languages that either have perished or are yet to come. Plainly, Borges is fascinated by the notion, so prominent in the linguistic speculations of the Kabbala and of Jacob Boehme, that a secret primal speech, an *Ur-sprache* from before Babel, underlies the multitude of human tongues. If, as blind poets can, we pass our fin-

gers along the living edge of words—Spanish words, Russian words, Aramaic words, the syllables of a singer in Cathay—we shall feel in them the subtle beat of a great current, pulsing from a common center, the final word made up of all letters and combinations of letters in all tongues that is the name of God.

Thus, Borges' universalism is a deeply felt imaginative strategy, a maneuver to be in touch with the great winds that blow from the heart of things. When he invents fictitious titles, imaginary cross-references, folios and writers that have never existed, Borges is simply re-grouping counters of reality into the shape of other possible worlds. When he moves, by word-play and echo, from language to language, he is turning the kaleidoscope, throwing the light on another patch of the wall. Like Emerson, whom he cites indefatigably, Borges is confident that this vision of a totally meshed, symbolic universe is a jubilation: "From the tireless labyrinth of dreams I returned as if to my home to the harsh prison. I blessed its dampness, I blessed its tiger, I blessed the crevice of light, I blessed my old, suffering body, I blessed the darkness and the stone." To Borges, as to the transcendentalists, no living thing or sound but contains a cipher of all.

This dream-logic—Borges often asks whether we ourselves, our dreams included, are not being dreamed from without—has generated some of the most witty, original short fiction in Western literature. "Pierre Menard," "The Library of Babel," "The Circular Ruins," "The Aleph," "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "Averroes' Search" are laconic masterpieces. Their concise perfection, as that of a great poem, builds a world that is closed, with the reader inescapably inside it, yet open to the widest resonance. Some of the parables, scarcely a page long, such as "Ragnarök," "Everything and Nothing" or "Borges and I," stand beside Kafka's as the only successes in that notoriously labile form. Had he produced no more than the *Fictions* (1956), Borges would rank among the very few

fresh dreamers since Poe and Baudelaire. He has, that being the mark of a truly major artist, deepened the landscape of our memories.

Nonetheless, despite its formal universality and the vertigo breadths of his allusive range, the fabric of Borges' art has severe gaps. Only once, in a story called "Emma Zunz," has Borges realized a credible woman. Throughout the rest of his work, women are the blurred objects of men's fantasies or recollections. Even among men, the lines of imaginative force in a Borges fiction are stringently simplified. The fundamental equation is that of a duel. Pacific encounters are cast in the mode of a collision between the "I" of the narrator and the more or less obtrusive shadow of "the other one." Where a third person turns up, his will be, almost invariably, a presence alluded to or remembered or perceived, unsteadily, at the very edge of the retina. The space of action in which a Borges figure moves is mythical but never social. Where a setting of locale or historical circumstance intrudes, it does so in free-floating bits, exactly as in a dream. Hence the weird, cool emptiness which breathes from many Borges texts as from a sudden window on the night. It is these lacunae, these intense specializations of awareness, which account, I think, for Borges' suspicions of the novel. He reverts frequently to the question. He says that a writer whom dimmed eyesight forces to compose mentally, and, as it were, at one go, must stick to very short narratives. And it is instructive that the first important fictions follow immediately on the grave accident which Borges suffered in December, 1938. He feels also that the novel, like the verse epic before it, is a transitory form: "the novel is a form that may pass, doubtless will pass; but I don't think the story will . . . It's so much older." It is the teller of tales on the highroad, the *skald*, the raconteur of the pampas, men whose blindness is often a statement of the brightness and crowding of life they have experienced, who incarnate Borges' notion of the writer. Homer is often invoked as a

talisman. Granted. But it is as likely that the novel represents precisely the main dimensions lacking in Borges. The rounded presence of women, their relations to men, are of the essence of full-scale fiction. As is a matrix of society. Number theory and mathematical logic charm Borges (see his "Avatars of the Tortoise"). There has to be a good deal of engineering, of applied mathematics, in a novel.

The concentrated strangeness of Borges' repertoire makes for a certain preciousness, a rococo elaboration that can be spellbinding but also airless. More than once, the pale lights and ivory forms of his invention move away from the active disarray of life. Borges has declared that he regards English literature, including American, as "by far the richest in the world." He is admirably at home in it. But his personal anthology of English writers is a curious one. The figures who signify most to him, who serve very nearly as alternate masks to his own person, are De Quincey, Robert Louis Stevenson, G. K. Chesterton, and Rudyard Kipling. Undoubtedly, these are masters, but of a tangential kind. Borges is perfectly right to remind us of De Quincey's organ-peeling prose, and of the sheer control and economy of recital in Stevenson and Kipling. Chesterton is a very odd choice, though again one can make out what *The Man Who Was Thursday* has contributed to Borges' love of charade and high intellectual slapstick. But not one of these writers is among the natural springs of energy in the language or in the history of feeling. And when Borges affirms, teasingly perhaps, that Samuel Johnson "was a far more English writer than Shakespeare," one's sense of the willfully bizarre sharpens. Holding himself beautifully aloof from the bombast, the bullying, the strident ideological pretensions that characterize so much of current letters, Borges has built for himself a center that is, as in the mystical sphere of the Zohar, also a far-out place.

He himself seems conscious of the drawbacks. He has said, in more than one recent interview, that he is now

aiming at extreme simplicity, at composing short tales of a flat, sinewy directness. The spare encounter of knife against knife has always fascinated Borges. Some of his earliest and best work derives from the legends of knifings in the Palermo quarter of Buenos Aires, and from the heroic razzias of gauchos and frontier soldiers. He takes eloquent pride in his warring forebears: in his grandfather, Colonel Borges, who fought the Indians and died in a revolution; in Colonel Suarez, his great-grandfather, who led a Peruvian cavalry charge in one of the last great battles against the Spaniards; in a great-uncle who commanded the vanguard of San Martín's army:

My feet tread the shadows of the lances that spar for the kill. The taunts of my death, the horses, the horsemen, the horses' manes, tighten the ring around me. . . . Now the first blow, the lance's hard steel ripping my chest, and across my throat the intimate knife.

"The Intruder," a very short story, illustrates Borges' present ideal. Two brothers share a young woman. One of them kills her so that their fraternity may again be whole. They now enjoy a new bond: "the obligation to forget her." Borges himself compares this vignette to Kipling's first tales. "The Intruder" is a slight thing, but flawless and strangely moving. It is as if Borges, after his rare voyage through languages, cultures, mythologies, had come home, and found the Aleph in the next patio.

In a wonderful poem, "In Praise of Darkness," which equivocates with amused irony on the fitness of a man nearly blind to know all books but to forget whichever he chooses, Borges numbers the roads that have led him to his secret center:

These roads were footsteps and echoes,
women, men, agonies, rebirths,
days and nights,
falling asleep and dreams,

each single moment of my yesterdays
 and of the world's yesterdays,
 the firm sword of the Dane and the moon of the
 Persians,
 the deeds of the dead,
 shared love, words,
 Emerson, and snow, and so many things.
 Now I can forget them. I reach my center,
 my mirror.
 Soon I shall know who I am.

It would be foolish to offer a simple paraphrase for that final core of meaning, for the encounter of perfect identity which takes place at the heart of the mirror. But it is related, vitally, to freedom. In an arch note, Borges has come out in defense of censorship. The true writer uses allusions and metaphors. Censorship compels him to sharpen, to handle more expertly the prime instruments of his trade. There is, implies Borges, no real freedom in the loud graffiti of erotic and political emancipation that currently pass for fiction and poetry. The liberating function of art lies in its singular capacity to "dream against the world," to structure worlds that are *otherwise*. The great writer is both anarchist and architect, his dreams sap and rebuild the botched, provisional landscape of reality. In 1940, Borges called on the "certain ghost" of De Quincey to "Weave nightmare nets / as a bulwark for your island." His own work has woven nightmares in many tongues, but far more often dreams of wit and elegance. All these dreams are, inalienably, Borges'. But it is we who wake from them, increased.

CRY HAVOC

Lecturing at Oxford in 1870, Ruskin stated what was to him and his audience almost a platitude when he said, "Accuracy in proportion to the rightness of the cause, and purity of the emotion, is the possibility of fine art. You cannot paint or sing yourself into being good men; you must be good men before you can either paint or sing, and then the colour and sound will complete in you all that is best." In 1948, in *What Is Literature?*, Sartre made the point more specific, but again with assumptions old as Plato about the essential morality and humanism of art: "No one could suppose for an instant that it would be possible to write a good novel in praise of anti-semitism." In a footnote, Sartre challenges those who would disagree with him to name such a novel. If you counter that such a book *might* be written, he says, you are merely taking refuge in abstract theorizing.

Matters are, however, not so straightforward. Even if we set aside the fact that a work of art or literature can affect its audience in unforeseeable ways, that a particular play or picture may move one man to compassion and another to hatred, there is now a good deal of evidence that artistic sensibility and the production of art are no bar to active barbarism. It is a fact, though one with which neither our theories of education nor our humanistic, liberal ideals have even begun to come to grips, that a human be-