

Tropos

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AN AFTERNOON WITH JORGE LUIS BORGES

[Jorge Luis Borges was the guest of honor at The Modern Literature Conference of 1975 on October 2-4 at Michigan State University, presented by The Department of Romance and Classical Languages and Literatures and the Department of English: "Tribute to Jorge Luis Borges."]

The following is an edited transcript from the session entitled "An Afternoon with Jorge Luis Borges."]

Introduction: Donald A. Yates

It is a very special pleasure for me, and a strange, unique pleasure for me, to be here today, and in this position, because over the past three weeks, when I was in Argentina with Borges, over the past 13 years when I've been back and forth, nearly a dozen times, to Argentina, with Borges, I've always been out front when this moment came. And I've listened to someone else make an attempt at introducing Jorge Luis Borges. There are only a few things I'd like to say and I hope that they will all tie in with what Borges himself is going to say to you this afternoon.

Jorge Luis Borges, in his career, is still a living tribute to reading. If there has been one thing in Borges' life which has meant more to him than anything else, it is reading. In the papers that we have heard, particularly Professor Robert Schole's paper this morning, Professor Bella Jozef's paper this morning, we see how the act of reading, with Borges, at Borges' insistence, is much more than the passive thing that we customarily consider it as. Borges insists that the reader is the writer, and he has insisted on this repeatedly in his writings. But also you have to consider the other side of the coin: that Borges is a writer who is a reader--if he is anything, he is a reader, and if he has one single goal, it is to someday write a page that, to all of the readers, in all of the world, will mean everything.

The persistence of Borges' image, the pervasion of his thought and his language into the culture of our times, is, in a certain sense, as notable here as it is in Buenos Aires, as I tried to suggest yesterday afternoon. Something as popular and as recent as the movie Last Tango in Paris is a tip of the hat to Borges, because Borges wrote a line that the director of Last Tango in Paris, Bertolucci, picked up and used as a title. Borges has said: "The tango is a way of walking through life." In the end of that film, there is another, guarded, tip of the hat to Borges, when Bertolucci, without any

announcement, lifts the ending of a Borges story, "Emma Zunz," for the conclusion of his own film, Last Tango in Paris. Borges is in other films, Borges is in other people's thoughts and other people's minds. I might suggest, to finish these remarks, that if 'the tango is a way of walking through life,' Borges, essentially, fundamentally, is a way of thinking about life. Ladies and gentlemen, Jorge Luis Borges.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am really a very simple-minded man. I have elemental needs, elemental hopes, elemental fears of all men. And so my thinking has been done for me by, let's say, Hume, Berkeley, Schopenhauer, William James, and my father. But I have, also, the harmless hobby of writing. And I am sorry to say that I have yielded to that hobby during more than 50 years--half a century. And it is because of that hobby that people think of me in terms of algebra. They think of me as a kind of monster compounded of mirrors, of mazes, of knives, of darkness, of anguish, and I'm sorry to say that I am none of those things. I could have used those properties, let us say, for the purposes of writing. But I'm not a thinker at all. I have been interested in many things during my life. And then I have used them, as I say, for literary purposes. And I will begin, since I have to make a beginning of some kind, and since I have no set lecture--and since I'm very curious about what I'm going to say. I will begin by a comparison between two men who have little in common with each other. And that may lead us to what we may call, at least during thirty minutes, the heart of the matter, my 'work'--inverted commas--if it can be called so.

The first man is Captain Sir Richard Burton. As we all know, he made a fine translation of the Arabian Nights, calling it The Thousand Nights and the Night. He also went, disguised as a Persian pilgrim, on a pilgrimage to the holy cities of Almedina and Mecca, and then he wrote a very interesting account of it. We may find this irrelevant, really; but, on my word of honor, it isn't. Well, he shared in the pilgrimage, he ran the risk of being found out as a disguised Christian; and he then wrote an account of it in a book praised by a writer I hardly admire: José Ortega y Gasset. I apologize to any admirers of José Ortega y Gasset who may be present. But he wrote an account of it as a sharer in the pilgrimage. I mean, he went as an onlooker, as a reporter or, we may say, a spy, for they mean much the same thing. And then he wrote that book--I have read and reread it--but as he was, even as I am, a free thinker, he did not imagine himself within the character of a pilgrim. He was merely a very intelligent and curious observer. And so his book has fallen out of literature and is hardly ever read at all nowadays; it's hard to find a copy of it. Well, had Burton become a convert to Islam, had he become a Moslem, then the pilgrimage would have meant something to him and he might have written a book not from the outside,

but from the inside. And that book would be a better book than the book he wrote.

And now I will take another writer, also an Englishman, who has little in common with Burton. I will take our friend, Defoe. Defoe never lived on a desert island, except in the sense that we all live on desert islands; solipsism is always around the corner. But he heard about Alexander Selkirk and about his having to live on a desert island for a long time, and then he tried--oh, I don't think he tried--I think that he imagined himself into Alexander Selkirk. And then he wrote a book that is a part of our childhood memories, he wrote Robinson Crusoe. And that book that came, let us say, from a willful dream of Defoe is now a book that has more reality than Burton's account of the pilgrimage to the holy cities of Islam.

Let us find that there are at least two ways of writing. And that I think it a mistake to experience something in order to write about it, because that falsifies things. I think experience should come to us through the usual process of remembering and forgetting. Also, because when we remember, we simplify things. I suspect that events are not important when they happen; they are important when they are remembered. And I can tell you a personal anecdote about that. I saw an old Uruguyan gaucho killed on the borderline between Brazil and Uruguay. He was murdered, I saw the murder: it happened in a café, some 30 or 40 years ago, and at the time it was merely--an annoyance, I can say. I was having a long conversation with Enrique Amorím on philosophy, or aesthetics--I don't remember--or maybe something far more trivial than that. And then we saw the man fall dead, shot dead, a few yards away from us. I thought little of it at the moment, except the usual conventional indignation at such things happening. But now, that scene that I witnessed, almost with indifference, almost with inhumanity, has come back to me. And I have written many stories and a film script, and they all happened on that frontier where I spent ten days of my life. And I have seen great cities, I have greatly loved them, but somehow, when I write, I fall back on that little town on the borderline between Uruguay and Brazil.

Now, what are we to think about this? Of course, we may think of the imagination as a gift--a gift from the Holy Ghost, or the Muse, as the Romans had it. But I think that imagination is really a blend, something in between oblivion and memory. Swedenborg had it that the chief function of the brain was to forget things, and I think he was right. And I wrote a story once called "Funes, el memorioso," where a man dies under the weight of an intolerable, perfect memory; he has only memory, so he cannot reason, he cannot make concrete images into abstract ideas--and he dies in that way. That story is one of the few stories of mine that I really like.

I have been reading and writing all my life. I prefer reading to writing. I would suppose most of my readers would prefer that I should never have written. But somehow, I feel the need to write. Now, I never hunt for a subject; I want you to understand that. I hate subjects--I think that I should be the prey, and the subject should be the hunter. I feel it that way: when a subject comes to me, for example, it may be a plot, it may be a poem, it may be a short story, I don't know, at the time, I do my best to reject it. But if the thing happens to insist upon my wanting to write it, then I sit down, and I write it down in order to be rid of it. Or, as Alfonso Reyes, I'm always glad to name him, since he was so kind to me, so indulgent--Alfonso Reyes had it that we publish our writings in order to be rid of them, so as not to spend all our lives rewriting them. That's exactly the way I feel. When I publish a book, I say: Well, now I am rid of it. I take little interest in its fortune. Well, this is not a particular trait of mine. It belongs to my generation. I was born way back in 1899. And when I began writing--well, I have always been writing--but when I went back to Buenos Aires (as I lived many years in Europe), when I discovered my home town, Buenos Aires, then, in those days, nobody talked of failure or success. We knew what Kipling had said (in fact we had no need of Kipling having said so), that failure and success are two impostors: they should be treated just the same. Then I also remember what Robert Louis Stevenson said: "Whatever man is meant for, if he is meant for anything, it is not for success." And I wrote a poem--a very short poem--about a minor poet. And the poem--well, maybe I am not a good translator--the poem runs thus: "Failure is the goal; I have arrived before the others." And this I think is true.

Well, a moment ago I was speaking of Defoe. And now the idea of his Robinson Crusoe has come back to me. Since our own childhood, we have all been Robinson Crusoe, as also Sherlock Holmes, Hamlet the Dane, Don Quixote, Huck Finn, and so on. We have been all those people. And perhaps more keenly than the writers themselves, since they have to tend to the minor business of constructing sentences, of avoiding rhymes, of making their sentences sound well, and so on. Well, I go back to the image of the island, and I think of a long island. We may think, of course, of fish-shaped Pomanock and of Whitman--I always like to think of Whitman.

And then, I will return to this business of writing. Not to this craft of writing, but let's say to this hobby of mine, of writing. Well, I may be walking up and down the street, or in the library, and then suddenly, I seem to glimpse something, something that is a long way off, something dim. That dim thing, that blurred thing, is, we may say--if a metaphor be allowed--an island, a long island, like Pomanock, and I can only make out the two ends of it. We may call them--this is a metaphor, after all--we may call them the end and the beginning. So that before sitting down or even attempting

to conceive a story or a poem, I see the whole thing as some kind of an island, and I see the two ends. But I don't know what happens in between. And I discover that when I write it. And then sometimes I take a wrong turning and I have to turn back, I mean I have to fill in what happens between the beginning and the end. In a story, for example, I always know the matter of the first paragraph and I know how the story will end. But maybe the story will take its way with me, and that will be all for the better, for I try not to interfere with what I'm writing. And then I discover gradually what it is. At first, I do not know whether I am about to write a story or a poem. I think the difference between prose and poetry has been overstated. And at first, as you all know, they were the same. At the beginning was Homer, or the many Greek poets we call Homer, or at the beginning was the unknown writer of Beowulf or the fragment of Finnsburh, so that poetry and story-telling were the same. And I tend to think of a poem as being, in a sense, a story. I see it as a succession of events.

Then, after I have found more or less the right plot--let us think in terms of a story--then I have to find the setting. Now, I suppose that every craftsman has his own method. But my method is this: I generally take either the East--which stands for a rich confusion (I think in terms of the Arabian Nights and so on)--or if not, I take the immediate past, and what I call the immediate past may be the turn of the century. I do that because I know that I can imagine it, I can imagine it well enough; not to be wholly wrong about the details. And at the same time, if I write about contemporary subjects, then I will be found out by the reader, who always is a kind of spy on the writer; he says, "No, that kind of slang isn't spoken at such-and-such end of the town," or that kind of thing. Well, for my stories--the stories with hoodlums, for example--I generally have either, let's say, the frontier of Brazil and Uruguay, or if not--they're nearer to me--I take the northern slum of Palermo, in my youth, or the southern slum of Turdera, since I have known some of the men, and I can imagine the way they acted. And if I go wrong, nobody will know. I am 76 and, let's take my word for it, when a man is 76, he has fallen into the habit of lying about the past, and he's believed and people like that sort of thing. So this is another way of saying that history is less important than legend or than tradition. Because after all, history is what happens only once, while a tradition or a myth stands for many centuries, for a long time. So that if I write about what happened in the northern suburb of Palermo in Buenos Aires, I have plenty of elbow room; I can do as I like. Nobody will find me out, and if they do, it doesn't matter.

Well, I have been chiefly concerned about a problem, the problem of time. I think that time is the problem, the essential problem. I think that if we knew what time was, we would know everything. Time is the central riddle. All of the others are irrelevant or non-important. Space, for example: we could imagine a spaceless

universe; the universe of music, let us say, has no space, or the universe of a poem has no space, but it exists in time, in succession. but we cannot imagine a timeless universe; for if all time were to cease, then there would be a moment after time left off. And that moment then would be time itself also. But we can imagine a world compounded solely of time. And this is, I think, very interesting. Of course, I have read most of the chief metaphysical works on the subject. And I remember in Bradley's Appearance and Reality that he wrote with the possibility of there being many time series in the universe, contradicting Newton's idea of time as an ever-flowing, regular river. That is to say, when we are here, sharing time, time is going on, let's say, well, in the basement of Dr. Yates' house, and going on in lonely places, and so on.

And now, we shall go on to what I have never understood, really: the sharing of time. That, I don't think, has been worked out. Let us take the case of two men. Of those two men--unknown to each other--one lives, let us say, in Michigan, and the other lives in Junín in the province of Buenos Aires. Now, their dates are the same, but in what sense can they be said to share the same time? Only through somebody else making guesses at it, or comparing the dates; they're not really sharing the same time. Well, perhaps it might be better to take an illustration from literature, which always seems to me more real. Let us think, for example, of Cervantes, and let us think of Hamlet the Dane--not as he was on the pages of Saxo Grammaticus, but as he was in the imagination of Shakespeare, the real Hamlet, the Hamlet of the play, not the Hamlet of history. And we may think of them as being contemporaries if you look up their dates. But in what sense are they contemporaries? They were not aware of each other. How can time be shared? This is one of the things that has worried me. And I have written many stories about it. But I have not started from the abstract problem of time because that would be no good; I have let the stories foist themselves on me, and then I have written them.

There is a story that maybe you have read, but in any case, I'll do my best to recall the bare outline of the story called "The Secret Miracle." And there we have the problem of time, or the problem of the sharing of time, rather, the problem of independent times, as Bradley had them. At the beginning of the story there is a small fable concerning a feud between two families about something very important--it may be land, it may be fortune, it may be a kingdom, whatever you like. But they agree to a judgment of a game of chess. Now, a game of chess does not last very long, but in my story the first move is made by the father. Then, some ten years afterwards, or 50 years afterwards, the father of the other family makes a move. And then, let's say, 100 years afterwards, one of the sons makes a move, and then another makes a move. And thus we have that very slow game of chess going on throughout centuries. Now, this story was not meant to be merely clever, but it served as an

introduction, being the reverse of what my story actually was. In my story we have a man sentenced to death. That man is an unsuccessful writer who has dreamed the first part, the part about the long game of chess between the two families. He did not wholly believe in God (I personally do not believe in Him), but he asked God, "If you exist, grant me a year and I will write that play." And then he's led before the firing squad, and then it begins to rain. And suddenly the rain stops for him, yet not for the men who are about to execute him. It takes him some time to understand, he's being granted a year. And that year will last only a minute or so before he's shot. Within that year he composes his poem: he trims it, he finds the right adjective, he finds the right metaphor. Then he knows that he has gone astray and he goes back to the first; he changes it, then he goes back to the old one. And then, at the end, he comes to the last verse. And when that verse is polished, when that verse is perfect, then the man is shot dead. And here we have the two times: a man has that very long time of his own, a year, wherein to compose in his mind and to remember by heart his three-act play, while that firing squad has only a minute, because that's all that they've been given. This is one of the stories I wrote, and I think it quite a successful one.

We go on to another story, perhaps the most ambitious of all. It is called "Tlön, Ugbar, Orbis Tertius." Anderson Imbert told me last night that the word "Ugbar" had been suggested by Baruch Spinoza, and I thank him for the information. I never knew that. I thought it seemed Eastern-looking and quaint. And then you have "Tlön"; Tlön, I think, is the right word. I think it has something to do with the Norse 'draumere'--'dream'--with the German 'Traum'; but "Tlön," I think, goes deeper down. And then, after those two queer words, we have something with the Latin rigidity about it, with the Latin, well, let us say, angular quality--"Orbis Tertius." You have those two strange words, then "Orbis Tertius," Latin words standing out very clear, no? "Latin, marvelous language," said Browning. Now the story, the real beginning of the story happens in America. It happens before what we call in Texas the War Between the States, what you call in the North the Civil War--but the same war, of course. And there we have a millionaire who is very ambitious. And he conceives the idea of a new world, a really new world conceived according to the idealism of Berkeley, Hume, and Schopenhauer. (I always like to speak of them.) And then he commissions some 300 persons--those persons are mathematicians, logicians, men of science, politicians, all kinds of men--and he makes them write an encyclopedia of that imaginary world. And that world is called "Orbis Tertius" because it comes after the second one, called "Ugbar," which is to be found in the pages of a spurious imaginary encyclopedia. And then, when the 30 volumes, I think, are discovered, a strange thing happens--the whole world is changed by the imaginary book. The whole world is changed because people find in the book something regular, something quite unlike the rich confusion, the haphazard habits of the world. And then people fall to thinking that what is to be found in this encyclopedia, even these fantastic animals and fantastic

languages, is the real thing. And thus history is changed because of a book.

And when I wrote that story, people thought the whole idea was too strange an idea, the idea of a book changing the world. But this is what has really happened many a time over. For example, let us think in terms of the Bible or in terms of the works of Confucius in China: there the world has been changed by a book. Or if we think of our contemporary history, our contemporary history was really, let's say, if we think of fascism, it was a dream of Carlyle or of Fichte and now it has come true, when we think of communism as a dream of Marx and now it has come true, and democracy was, as we know, a dream, and perhaps the lost dream, of Walt Whitman. So, the thing has actually happened. The world is changed by books.

And books, also, have a habit, as a Brazilian lady said this morning, of changing all the time. Let us go back to Hamlet. Why not go back to Shakespeare? Hamlet, as imagined by Shakespeare, is not the Hamlet he was after, let us say, Johnson and Goethe and Coleridge and Bradley had their way with him. He's now a far richer character. And I should say that a book changes every time it is read. I wrote a short story, or I began writing it, about a literature consisting of a single word, only one word. And that word was handed down throughout the centuries. And that word meant, well, all things to all men; that was all the literature, they had nothing else, but they had that word to fall back upon. I have to talk of other stories of mine: I am fated to do what I am told.

There is a story also about time called "La otra muerte," "The Other Death." And therein a man changes his past. That man has fought in the Battle of Masoller, the battle between Aparicio Saravia and the government in Uruguay, and he has behaved as a coward. He goes back to his own province of Entre Rios and then he falls to thinking of the way people will think about him, the way they will think about his country in Uruguay. And so he says, "I will become a brave man." And he becomes a brave man. He does not fight anybody. He lives in loneliness. He lives among the cattle. He lives a wild solitary life of his own. And then in the end, when he is about to die, we have another secret miracle: he has undone the past, he has managed to die bravely in the Battle of Masoller 30 or 40 years ago. And then the whole story is about how the thing is discovered because there are a lot of people who remember him and then those people have to die in order that the recollection of his life after his imaginary death should be blotted out. That is one of the stories of mine that I really like.

Another story, the first I ever wrote, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote." Pierre Menard is a very French man of letters. And he feels, as we all feel, that there are too many books in the world, that books are a nuisance, that we have to destroy the library of Alexandria every now and then, we have to burn it down. Because, if not, we would hardly be able to live, for the encumbrance of books. And then he says, "I have a taste for literature but I am also a gentleman. I will disturb no one by my literary efforts. And I will rewrite a book that is already written, so it need not be written over again, and I will get all the pleasures of literature out of writing down that book." Then he reads Don Quixote, he does his best to forget it and then he thinks that he's but dimly conscious of it. He says, "That dim consciousness I have now is like the dim consciousness Cervantes had before he wrote the book, there's no difference whatever. And I will sit down and write Don Quixote." And then he sits down; the attempt is difficult, he has to do it in a foreign language. But he manages to write down the first five lines of Don Quixote before he dies, and that takes him years and years. But alas! He has left the work unfinished. And then the man who writes the article says, "What a pity! We will never know what he was about to write, that work has been lost--he died too young, he was only 90 when he died." Well, I'll be speaking seriously now. And then, there is a difference, because if Don Quixote were written today, the whole context would be different. When Cervantes wrote it, he had his seventeenth-century context; so as we read it, we're really being Pierre Menard and rewriting it.

Now, all this does not mean that I believe that those things can be done; they're mere literary tricks. And of course, when the gaze of criticism comes over me, then I feel that I'm being enriched by critics. At the same time, I have no inkling whatever of what I intended to do, since when I write I write for the purpose of writing--that's all. I have, of course, my own ideas, my own whims perhaps, my own mistakes about many things, my own opinions--that would be a better word. But I do my best in order that I should never intrude into what I am writing. So that when I write a story, I may need, for the time being, to be a Buddhist, or a fascist, or a communist, or anything you like. That has nothing whatever to do with my real opinions, which I have always stated very, very freely, with no fear whatever. But I think that writing should not be tampered with. Indeed, we can't do it. I think Kipling said that it was allowed to a writer to write a fable but not to know what the moral of the fable was. Then he quoted the case of Swift, who wanted to write an indictment of mankind. Then that very bitter man sat down, he wrote his book, and now, except for the last chapters about the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms, and so on, it is a book meant for children. And this is as it should be. I think literature should have its way with us. We're the toys of something we do not know, something we cannot explain.

And I may give a few examples. Let us take such a fine line as "Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky." Now that line, I think, is a perfect line: "Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky." And the key word is, I suspect, "left," because had I said, had Edward Fitzgerald, the translator of The Rubaiyât, written, "Dreaming when dawn's right hand was in the sky," that would have been no good whatever. But he found the right adjective, "Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky." Now can we analyze that? Should we try to analyze that? In a note he adds that he refers to a false dawn, to a false light that comes before the true morning. But that's quite irrelevant, because the line "Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky" exists by itself: it is an object added to the universe, it has no need for the rest of the universe. Or for example, "And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars from our world-weary flesh": that's Shakespeare. Of course, we understand what he means; he was thinking in terms of astrology and so on: "And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars." Then, after that Latin word "inauspicious," we have the very Saxon "world-weary flesh"--it might almost be said to be an Old English word--"from our world-weary flesh." We need no explanation. I think we should accept literature, at least literature written by other men, as a gift. Explanation is useless: those things cannot be explained. They either happen or they don't. In my case, they don't.

But, in thinking in terms of a reader, I said in the beginning there was no difference between prose and verse. But there is a difference for the writer, I think--and also for the reader, but a slighter difference. The difference is that, writing a poem, writing a sonnet, let us say, to take that strangely beautiful form invented by haphazard and now used in so many different ways--well, let's say by Wordsworth, by Shakespeare, by Keats, by Yeats, by Rossetti, and so on. . . . If we attempt a sonnet, then we are under the illusion, we labor under the illusion, or we are hit by the illusion, that we already have done something, and that something is a mere framework, we have only to fill it out. And, of course we do. And then there is also another difference. The difference is that if you print your poem as a poem, tending to questions of typography, more or less, then the reader knows that he is about to receive passion, to receive emotion; and then he reads it in a special way. But if it is printed as prose, he may think he is about to be told a story or to be given information; and then he reads it in a different way. So that, I think, is an essential difference between prose and verse.

Now Stevenson had it that prose was simply a richer kind of verse, richer because in prose you have to change the rhythm all the time, and the rhythm has to be a right one, it has to be the right one, while in verse, when you have written the first verse,

that is the pattern for all the other verses. And thus I think that free verse is very difficult, unless you take the precaution to be Walt Whitman. I began my free verse, thinking that it was far easier, but I was wrong, of course. I made my own mistakes. My father said, "You should make your own mistakes and find out when it's too late"--that was all he told me. So I will follow his example and abstain from advice of any kind.

We have the history of literature to prove that Stevenson was right. I think Mallarmé said much the same thing, that there was no such thing as prose, that Molière's idea that we are speaking prose all the time, was wrong: we are not. This can be seen, for example, if you take a tape recorder and then see how the whole thing, well, is fumbling all the time, how that isn't really prose. And we can see in the case of literature, that literature began with poetry. And we see, for example, in the case of Old English poetry, that in the course of five centuries they wrote very fine poetry and that their prose was quite a fumbling prose, was quite bad, because prose is perhaps far more difficult.

But really, I wonder if I should speak of things being difficult. Things are either real or impossible. If you can do something, then you can do it; if you can't, then, well, a miss is as good as a mile. So, that at the end of 50 years I can give no advice to anybody, except the advice, let's say, that a writer should not avoid experience, because that would be wrong, that would impoverish his world, but let experience have its way with him. And experience, I should say, comes back to us as a blending of memory and oblivion. That's the only advice I can give: not to look for a subject, not to think of a book in terms of what may happen to it--those things are a concern of publishers, booksellers, and so on, but have nothing whatever to do with literature. I think that if a writer be true to his imagination, not to his opinions--opinions, after all, are on the surface, if the metaphor be allowed--if a writer be true to his own imagination, then he can't go wrong. And that is the only loyalty that may be asked from a writer, to be loyal to his own imagination. Well, there are writers, of course, who are only loyal to words; and now and then they may do something--I suspect that much has been done merely by words. But I think that the right way to find words is through imagination, through passion. Because, after all, without imagination, without passion, literature would be a pure game with words.