

**DONALD A. YATES**

**JORGE LUIS BORGES  
LIFE, WORK, AND CRITICISM**

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## I. A BIOGRAPHY OF JORGE LUIS BORGES

Jorge Luis Borges was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on August 24, 1899, the son of Jorge Guillermo Borges and Leonor Acevedo. There were prominent Argentine military and historical figures on both sides of his family, which instilled in him a sense of being irrevocably Argentine. On the other hand, his paternal grandmother, Frances Haslam, was an Englishwoman who bestowed on her grandson, both directly and through his father, the contrasting heritage of the English language and English literature. A sister, Norah, was born in 1901 shortly after the family moved toward the outskirts of the city. While the Borgeses lived in the only two-storey house in their working-class neighborhood at the time, they did not enjoy wealth, despite their distinguished ancestry. Borges's father, who held a law degree, was employed as a court secretary and also taught psychology at a teachers' institute in the city. Borges's mother had received training appropriate to a young woman of her social stature. She was gracious, conversed easily, played the piano and sang.

The young Borges began reading at an early age, first in English, tutored by his English grandmother, and later in Spanish. Georgie, as he was always addressed by his family, and Norah received instruction from a private governess, since Jorge Borges's then fashionable anarchistic inclination prevented him from entrusting his children to a state school. Borges's father also gave his son the free run of his own library of books, mostly in English, touching on a wide variety of subjects. The boy was enthralled. These first readings were to shape his view of the world forever. At the age of six, he declared to his father that he wanted to be a writer. When he was nine, it was finally decided that he should go off to a neighborhood school. With his head now full of mythology, novels of chivalry, Huckleberry Finn, and the Arabian Nights, he found himself something of a square peg in a round hole. Since his unenlightened classmates were hard pressed to understand what he was talking about most of the time, there were some difficult moments. Eventually, Borges made the adjustment, learning in the process much about a rough-and-ready world outside books. Later he moved on to the Colegio Nacional, where he pursued his secondary education. There, at the age of thirteen, his first original story was published, a dramatic sketch about his favorite animal, the tiger, entitled "El rey de la selva" (The King of the Jungle).

The Argentine phase of Borges's formal education ended early in 1914 when the family left on an extended trip to Europe. However, their travels were soon interrupted when the First World War broke out and they took up residence in Geneva, Switzerland, for the duration. Borges was enrolled there in the Collège de Calvin, where the principal language was French and most important subject Latin. The young scholar dutifully learned French and Latin and soon embarked enthusiastically on the independent study of German, which he taught himself with a volume of Heine's poetry and a dictionary. Intensely stimulated by poetry during these Geneva years, he attempted writing poems in French and began to read German Expressionistic poetry, some examples of which he would eventually translate into Spanish. Literature, in one form or another, was almost exclusively engaging his attention. Myopic and suffering from a congenital eye disorder that clouded reality from more than a few feet away, he seemed destined rather to inhabit a more intimate world of printed words. It was now that he discovered Whitman, Chinese literature, and Schopenhauer, to mention but a few of his literary passions of this period, and he regularly reaffirmed his Argentine identity by reading volumes of gauchesca poetry that were part of the small library that his father had brought along on the trip.

When the war ended, the Borges family resumed its travels, having decided to take up residence in Spain. Palma, on the Balearic island of Majorca, attracted them first; then in the winter of 1919-1920, they relocated in Seville. Here Borges fell under the sway of a newly formed group of young writers who, under the benevolent guidance of the older polyglot and translator Rafael Cansinos-Asséns called themselves Ultraists. Their aim was to renew the form and tone of Spanish poetry, in concerted reaction against the earlier Modernist tendencies. Borges's first poems began appearing in the principal magazines nourished by the Ultraist sect. Later, when the family moved on to Madrid, Borges gave himself over enthusiastically to the literary life of manifestos and marathon nocturnal discussions at designated cafés. There he met Rafael Cansinos-Asséns and was dazzled by his intelligence and knowledge of languages.

Whitman's indelible influence was apparent in the young poet's early verse, but Borges's prodigious literary background and deep-seated philosophical leanings promptly came to the fore and modified his imitative style into something no longer Whitmanesque but not particularly akin to Ultraism either. While in Palma, Borges had sent a letter containing reviews of three books recently published in Spain to his intimate intellectual companion from Geneva days, Maurice Abramovich. Borges had written the letter in French; Abramovich submitted the reviews to La Feuille, a local journal, where they appeared in August of 1919--the first published prose piece by the twenty-year-old writer, marked by an ironic tone, a veneer of serene self-assurance, and the lucidity of a

first-rate mind. In 1921 the Borgeses returned to Buenos Aires, where the material of the young author's first volume of poetry was awaiting him. Borges was deeply moved by his reacquaintance with the city of his birth, and the poems of Fervor de Buenos Aires (Fervor of Buenos Aires; 1923) are the calm, controlled, coolly emotional evocation of quiet, humble aspects of that city's suburbs. As principal spokesman for the Ultraist platform, he was soon involved with a group of young Argentine poets, perpetrating a poster-type publication that, under cover of darkness, was pasted on prominent walls in downtown Buenos Aires. He was also coeditor of other short-lived magazines where fresh new poetry was displayed.

Another family trip to Europe in 1923-1924 enabled Borges to discover, when he reached Spain, that his first volume of poems had attracted attention and some favorable reviews from Spanish critics. Once again back in Buenos Aires, he began to write essays on local themes as well as on Spanish and English topics. His earliest concerns were the nature of the Argentine character, language viewed analytically, and literary subjects drawn from his extensive readings. The first collection of these essays, written in a polished but labored and self-conscious style, was Inquisiciones (Inquisitions; 1925). Later that year his second book of poetry, Luna de enfrente (Moon Across the Way; 1925) was published, followed in 1926 by a second collection of essays, El tamaño de mi esperanza (The Dimensions of My Hope).

A third group of Borges's essays, culled from the pages of Argentine newspapers and literary magazines, appeared in 1928 under the title El idioma de los argentinos (The Language of the Argentines). A third and final brief collection of Borges's verses from this decade, Cuaderno San Martín (San Martín Notebook), was published in 1929. While he was manifestly not pleased with the work he had produced during the twenties, encouragement came nonetheless with the conferring of a 3,000 peso award, as the Second Municipal Prize for literature, on El idioma de los argentinos. Borges used the money to acquire a set of the eleventh edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and to buy himself some time off from other pursuits to write a biography of a popular Argentine poet of the slums who had been a friend of the family and a frequent visitor to their home. The fragmentary and impressionistic "biography," Evaristo Carriego, appeared in 1930 and stands today as the earliest dated work that Borges has allowed to be included, without extensive revision, in his "complete" works. However, the thirties was to be a period of continued searching for his own voice as well as a time of considerable instability in his life. A new volume of essays, Discusión (Discussion) was published in 1932, composed in a style that appeared to resolve some of the problems of expression that Borges had experienced in the previous decade. Another collection of essays in 1936, Historia de la eternidad (History of Eternity) closed out his second stage in the develop-

ment of his expository style. There would not be a new volume of essays for sixteen years.

In 1931 Borges had begun to contribute to a magazine called Sur, founded in that year as an ambitious cultural enterprise by Victoria Ocampo. His association with this highly successful and respected publication lasted for many years. It was also through Victoria Ocampo that Borges met in the early thirties the young aspiring writer Adolfo Bioy Casares with whom he would establish an enduring friendship and a fruitful literary collaboration. While his work for Sur was extensive and important, it was not compensated. It had been decided that foreign writers who wrote for the magazine would be paid, but not the Argentine collaborators. Partly as a consequence of this, Borges was determined to find some sort of regular employment. Around 1933 a friend secured him a job as director of a new literary supplement, published as a special Saturday section of the Buenos Aires newspaper Crítica. He held the position little more than a year, but it marked a supremely significant turning point in his career. Motivated no doubt by the need to fill out the pages under his supervision, Borges tentatively began to do something he had always considered beyond his abilities: writing fiction. Since the earliest days of his introduction to literature he had been so overwhelmed by the narrative wonders of the Arabian Nights, H.G. Wells's compelling imaginary adventures, Twain's saga of Huck Finn, Kipling's masterfully told tales, and the literary charm of so many other writers that he had convinced himself that such storytelling prowess was something he would never attain.

By 1933 he had fashioned numerous prose translations from English into Spanish, mainly for the pages of Sur; but now he went a step further. Drawing tales of crime and rascality from disparate sources, he undertook rewriting them in his own style, freely editing and touching up the originals as he saw fit. Reelaborated in his own original manner, they began to appear week after week under his name in Crítica. This seemed to work, so after about a month he went all the way: he wrote an original story, "Hombres de las orillas" (Men from the Outskirts), based on his fond recollections of an old-time neighborhood compadrito, or tough. This story of murder, committed in keeping with the compadrito's "cult of courage," which, according to Borges was endlessly revised and rewritten, appeared in the September 16, 1933 issue of Crítica. Borges, perhaps out of caution, published it under a pseudonym. In 1935, gathering together these Crítica pieces, Borges brought forth Historia universal de la infamia (A Universal History of Infamy), representing his first major, if hesitant, step in the direction of fiction.

His next job, begun in late 1936, was that of preparing a book review page for a domestic magazine, El Hogar (The Home). His speciality was covering books by foreign authors. As part of his biweekly chore he worked up a Biographía Sintética (Brief Biography) of an author he had

chosen to feature. Possibly encouraged by the success of his prose tales, or perhaps out of boredom with a job that he may have felt was beneath him, he drifted into the habit of occasionally inventing imaginary (but interestingly titled) books that he appended to his subjects' bibliographies. At times he would also improvise colorful anecdotes or picturesque scenes for the purpose of livening up the biographical account of a particularly uneventful literary career. It is evident from this early moment that the conventional demarcation between fact and fantasy was but casually regarded by Borges.

By 1937 his father's health had declined seriously, and Borges decided that it would be in the best interest of the family if he were to seek full-time employment. Consequently, in late 1937 he obtained a position as an assistant librarian in a suburban Buenos Aires municipal library and began the unhappy nine-year-long tenure of what was essentially a sinecure. It was a small library in a shabby part of town, yet it was staffed by some forty employees, for the most part untrained and with but modest education. He accomplished each day the little work that was assigned to him--mainly cataloging books--and spent the rest of the day reading and writing in a secluded spot in the library.

In February of 1938 Borges's father died. At year's end Borges himself suffered an accident that nearly proved fatal. A carelessly treated head injury developed into septicemia and he was rushed to a sanitarium gravely ill and unable to speak. He spent some seventeen days and nights of delirium and hallucinations before the persistent high fever was finally broken. His mother sat constantly by his side. Owing to the traumatic effect of the mental horrors he had experienced, Borges subsequently feared for his mental integrity. For a while he did not even want his mother to continue with the book from which she had been reading to him before the accident, dreading now that he might no longer understand the words. During his convalescence in early 1939, for reasons that are not entirely clear, but that are surely linked to the events of the previous year, he came to a crucial decision: he would now try writing short stories. The first of an extraordinary series of narratives, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" (Pierre Menard, Author of the Quijote), appeared in Sur in May of 1939. It signaled a new direction for Borges in the forties, one that would lead to the elaboration of a singular type of fiction whose cultivation would elevate him into prominence among the most influential prose writers of this century.

During his years at the library in Almagro, Borges was productive in a number of other areas. In addition to his stories, he was involved in preparing translations for several publishing houses. Virginia Woolf's Orlando and William Faulkner's The Wild Palms were but two of the works he rendered into Spanish during these years. He also did translations of many other shorter pieces by English-language writers for the pages of Sur. Around this time, his friendship with Adolfo Bioy

Casares and Silvina Ocampo, whom Bioy married in 1940, blossomed into a literary collaboration. An anthology of fantastic tales from around the world was published under their names in 1940 and an anthology of Argentine poetry in 1941. In 1942 Borges and Bioy undertook the composition of a group of detective short stories. The fruit of their joint labor was Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi (Six Problems for Don Isidro), published under the pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq--which they made up of names plucked from their family trees. The enduring Borges-Bioy collaboration would bring forth more than a dozen books over the period of some forty years.

Borges, now attracting attention as the author of strikingly original fantastic and metaphysical tales, published El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan (The Garden of Forking Paths) in 1941. Included therein were the first eight of his new stories. It was an astonishing debut for a man who felt that he was unworthy of writing narratives. In 1944 Borges added six more tales to the original eight and, under the title Ficciones (Fictions), offered to the world a book whose merit could not be denied. The Argentine Society of Writers created a prize and awarded it to Borges, no doubt to correct the oversight of the Municipality, which did not favor Ficciones with one of its annual literary awards.

However, trying times lay ahead for Borges. In 1946 Juan Perón's hold on the Argentine government was secured and Borges from the outset was a critic of the dictatorship. Few intellectuals demonstrated his moral courage in speaking out publicly and signing his name to petitions and protests that decried measures and practices that Perón was instituting. In 1946 some Peronist bureaucrat decided that Borges would not repeatedly raise his voice in this way with impunity. He was notified by letter that he had been transferred from his duties as a librarian in Almagro to the post of inspector of poultry and eggs in the municipal market. Borges resigned.

Slowly overcoming his terror of public speaking and fighting a stammer that he has never managed completely to conquer, Borges set out to become a teacher and lecturer. He and his mother had taken a small apartment in downtown Buenos Aires overlooking San Martín Square, and with this new source of income they managed to get along. Sister Norah, who in 1928 had married the Spanish literary critic Guillermo de Torre and was the mother of two sons, lived not far away. The Peronist nightmare was to culminate for Borges when his mother and sister were arrested as participants in a public protest against the dictator. Doña Leonor was placed under house arrest, and Norah spent a month in a woman's prison before being released. Borges endured these indignities as best he could and went on writing. He was at the height of his narrative power during this decade, and the stories he wrote between 1944 and 1949, thirteen in all, were collected in the second of his two milestone volumes, El Aleph (The Aleph; 1949). In 1950 Borges accepted the

presidency of the Argentine Society of Writers, a post he bravely held for a period of three years, during which many writers thought it best to suspend their association with an organization that steadfastly maintained an anti-Peronist orientation.

Borges's poetry from the twenties had been dusted off, carefully revised, and then reprinted in 1943, together with a scant five new poems from intervening years. Now, in 1952, a selection of the essays he had published since 1936 appeared under the title Otras inquisiciones (Other Inquisitions). This was the last work he would complete before two events of incalculable significance in his life occurred in 1955: Perón was overthrown by a military coup, and Borges lost his eyesight. In the wake of the "liberating revolution" of September, 1955, an attempt was made to de-Peronize all public institutions. Borges was an obvious choice to assume the duties of director of the National Library in Buenos Aires, which with 800,000 volumes was the largest library in Latin America. He was elated over the revolution and deeply pleased with the post conferred on him, but the long decline in his vision had finally reached the point now where he could no longer read or write. Believing that his creative days had ended, he busied himself with lectures, classes, and administrative matters. However, he soon learned that it was possible to compose verses in his head, polish them mentally, and then dictate near-finished poems to secretaries or friends. He attempted the same procedure with prose and found he could still work in that medium; but he limited himself to short pieces--of course totally Borgesian in tone--of only a few hundred words. These new poems and parablelike prose sketches were collected in 1960 in a slim volume entitled El hecedor (The Maker), which appeared as the ninth title in the series of "complete works" that his publisher, Emecé, had initiated in 1953.

The first significant international recognition of Borges's importance was the International Editors Prize of \$10,000, which he shared in 1961 with Samuel Beckett. Things would not be the same for Borges after this award. In the fall of that year he accepted an invitation to teach a semester at the University of Texas and, in the company of his mother, made his first visit to the U.S., the first trip in fact of any distance from the River Plate area since his return from Europe in 1924. The first English-language collections of his work, Labyrinths and Ficciones, both appeared in 1962. Since then foreign-language translations of his writings have abounded, as have invitations to travel around the world to teach, lecture, and attend conferences on his work or to receive literary awards.

In 1967 Borges completed the first lengthy narrative he had written since losing his sight, a realistic tale entitled "La intrusa" (The Intruder). It was clear proof that he could still cultivate the longer narrative form, but his style now was different, more colloquial, less laden with striking images and less populated with his favorite symbols.

With "La intrusa," a grim tale of the tragic consequences of the love of two brothers for the same woman, a new stage in his career as a writer of fiction was announced. Over the years, Borges had been in love with many women. The evidence of his passionate attachments can be read in his poetry and stories; but he had never married. Now, in 1967, he wed a woman he had briefly courted in his youth, Elsa Astete Millán, a widow and mother of a grown son. The marriage lasted three years, at the end of which Borges returned to the home he had shared so long with his mother, now aged ninety-five. A collection of his new longer stories, El informe de Brodie (Brodie's Report), was published in 1970. In 1973 Perón returned from exile in Spain to assume once more the presidency of Argentina. Finding his situation as director of the National Library compromised by the dictator's return, Borges resigned. In July of 1975, Doña Leonor Acevedo de Borges died at the age of ninety-nine.

During the decade past, Borges has become not only a prominent figure on the international literary scene, but also a familiar public voice in his native Argentina. Always skeptical of government, he has characteristically avoided specific political affiliations. However, in recent years he has seen fit to issue his opinions frequently on a variety of nonliterary subjects. He gives generously of his time to journalists and interviewers who come to his modest apartment to seek his judgments on world and national affairs. Moreover, as a consequence of his availability, numerous book-length interviews with Borges about his life and work--in Spanish, English, and French--have taken their place alongside the volumes of critical commentary on his writings that have proliferated over the past twenty-five years. His own literary activity has scarcely abated. With the assistance of friends and collaborators he is still today fashioning essays, poems, and stories. Scarcely a year goes by without a new book from Borges. Today praise and admiration are his, as is consecration in his own lifetime. He has virtually all the literary awards for his work that any writer could expect to receive. Only the Nobel Prize, for which he has been nominated repeatedly, has eluded him. It is the one jewel lacking in his diadem. In the world of Borges's aesthetics, things that are about to happen, but that never quite do, produce an entrancing, magical affect. Perhaps his life is to be a metaphor of sorts of that concept. Perhaps in some way that is his key and his destiny.

## II. A CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF BORGES'S MAJOR WORKS

For a comprehensive bibliography of Borges's published works, see David William Foster, Jorge Luis Borges: An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1984).

### 1. MAJOR BOOK PUBLICATIONS

1923

Fervor de Buenos Aires (Fervor of Buenos Aires), poems. Buenos Aires: Privately printed, 1923; 64 pp. (unpaginated).

1925

Luna de enfrente (Moon Across the Way), poems. Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925; 42 pp.

Inquisiciones (Inquisitions), essays. Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925; 160 pp.

1926

El tamaño de mi esperanza (The Dimensions of My Hope), essays. Buenos Aires: Proa, 1926; 153 pp.

1928

El idioma de los argentinos (The Language of the Argentines), essays. Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1928; 185 pp.

1929

Cuaderno San Martín (San Martín Notebook), poems. Buenos Aires: Proa, 1929; 63 pp.

1930

Evaristo Carriego. Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1930; 118 pp. Borges's subjective and fragmentary "biography" of a popular Buenos Aires suburban poet.

1932

Discusión (Discussion), essays. Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1932; 161 pp.

1935

Historia universal de la infamia (Universal History of Infamy). Buenos Aires: Tor, 1935; 139 pp. A collection of generally derivative but deftly narrated sketches. Borges's first volume of fiction.

1936

Historia de la eternidad (History of Eternity), essays. Buenos Aires: Vial y Zona, 1936; 121 pp.

1941

El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan (The Garden of Forking Paths), short stories. Buenos Aires: Sur, 1941; 124 pp.

1943

Poemas (1922-1943) (Poems [1922-1943]). Buenos Aires: Losada, 1943; 181 pp. A collection that brings Borges's poetry up to date: selections from Fervor de Buenos Aires, Luna de enfrente, and Cuaderno San Martín (many revised) together with a group of new poems. Later editions (1953; 1958) are revised and augmented.

1944

Ficciones (1935-1944) (Fictions), short stories. Buenos Aires: Sur, 1944; 203 pp. Later editions (after 1956) contain three additional stories.

1949

El Aleph (The Aleph), short stories. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1949; 146 pp. There is a second edition (1952) with four additional stories.

1951

La muerte y la brújula (Death and the Compass), short stories. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1951; 149 pp. A selection of tales previously published in Borges's short story collections.

1952

Otras inquisiciones (1937-1952) (Other Inquisitions), essays. Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952; 226 pp.

1960

El hacedor (The Maker), poems and short prose pieces. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1960; 116 pp.

14

1961

Antología personal (Personal Anthology), essays, poems, prose. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1961; 195 pp. A collection of previously published pieces.

1964

Obra poética (1923-1964) (Poetic Works). Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1964; 280 pp. Another updating of Borges's poetry. Fundamentally, this is the 1958 edition of Poemas, somewhat reorganized, with a selection of verses from El hacedor and other new poems. All post-1929 poetry is now gathered under the general title of "El otro, el mismo" (The Other One, the Same One). There are two subsequent editions (1966; 1967) with the customary suppressions, revisions, and additions.

1965

Para las seis cuerdas (For the Six Strings), lyrics composed for traditional Argentine guitar music. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1965; 56 pp. (unpaginated).

1968

Nueva antología personal (New Personal Anthology), essays, poems, prose. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1968; 305 pp. A second selection of Borges's representative works.

1969

Elogio de la sombra (In Praise of Shadow), poems and prose. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969; 160 pp.

El otro, el mismo (The Other One, the Same One), poems. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1969; 263 pp. Essentially, this is the text of the 1964 edition of Borges's Obra poética, minus the poetry from the twenties and with the addition of Para las seis cuerdas.

1970

El informe de Brodie (Brodie's Report), short stories. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1970; 153 pp.

1971

El Congreso (The Congress), story. Buenos Aires: El Archibrazo, 1971; 56 pp.

15



1972

El oro de los tigres (The Gold of the Tigers), poems and prose. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1972; 168 pp.

1975

Prólogos con un prólogo de prólogos (Prologues with a Prologue of Prologues). Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1975. A collection of prologues Borges wrote for a wide variety of books between 1925 and 1975.

El libro de arena (The Book of Sand), short stories. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1975; 182 pp.

La rosa profunda (The Unending Rose), poems. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1975; 162 pp.

1976

Libro de sueños (Book of Dreams). Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1976; 152 pp. A collection of literary accounts of dreams drawn from many sources.

La moneda de hierro (The Coin of Iron), poems and prose. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1976; 162 pp.

1977

Adrogüé, poems. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Adrogüé, 1977; 66 pp. A collection of Borges's poems associated with the suburban Buenos Aires town of the title, with illustrations by Norah Borges.

1978

Obra poética (1923-1976) (Poetic Works). Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1978; 514 pp. The latest comprehensive edition of Borges's collected poetry.

1981

La Cifra (The Cipher), poems and prose. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981; 108 pp.

1982

Nueve ensayos dantescos (Nine Essays on Dante). Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982; 161 pp.

1983

Veinticinco Agosto 1983 y otros cuentos de Jorge Luis Borges (23 August 1983 and Other Stories by Jorge Luis Borges), short stories. Madrid: Siruela, 1983.

1984

Atlas (Atlas). Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1984; 91 pp. A collection of short prose pieces that evoke places Borges has visited in his extensive travels; written with the collaboration of María Kodama.

## 2. COLLECTED WORKS

Obras completas (Complete Works). 9 vols. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1953-1960. Between 1953 and 1960, Emecé reprinted in uniform format the following books by Borges: 1. Historia de la eternidad. 2. Poemas, 1923-1953. 3. Historia universal de la infamia. 4. Evaristo Carriego. 5. Ficciones. 6. Discusión. 7. El Aleph. 8. Otras inquisiciones. The original 1960 Emecé edition of El hacedor was designated as the ninth (and last) volume in this series. In 1969 Emecé also published a three-volume edition of the above collected works with the usual updating of the collections of poems, and, to a lesser degree, of the short story collections.

Obras completas (Complete Works). Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974; 1161 pp. A different edition of Borges's "complete" works, this version includes a broader selection of his poetry.

## 3. WORKS IN COLLABORATION

Obras completas en colaboracion (Complete Works in Collaboration). Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1979; 989 pp. This assembly of Borges's writings done in collaboration with other authors is also incomplete. The Foster bibliography offers full details.

#### 4. SELECTED WORKS AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH

##### a. TEXTS

- Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings. Ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. Preface by André Maurois. New York: New Directions, 1962; 248 pp.
- Ficciones. Ed., with an introduction, Anthony Kerrigan. New York: Grove Press, 1962; 174 pp.
- Dreamtigers. Translated from El hacedor by Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland. Introduction by Miguel Enguidanos. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964; 95 pp.
- Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952. Trans. Ruth L. Simms. Introduction by James E. Irby. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964; 205 pp.
- A Personal Anthology. Ed., with a foreword, Anthony Kerrigan. New York: Grove Press, 1967; 210 pp.
- The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969, Together with Commentaries and an Autobiographical Essay. Ed. and Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author. New York: Dutton, 1970; 210 pp.
- Doctor Brodie's Report. Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author. New York: Dutton, 1972; 128 pp.
- Selected Poems, 1923-1967. Ed., with an introduction and notes, Norman Thomas di Giovanni. New York: Delacorte, 1972; 328 pp.
- A Universal History of Infamy. Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni. New York: Dutton, 1972; 146 pp.
- In Praise of Darkness. Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni. A bilingual ed. New York: Dutton, 1974; 142 pp.
- The Gold of the Tigers, Selected Later Poems: A Bilingual Edition. Trans. Alastair Reid. New York: Dutton, 1977; 95 pp.
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### III. A SUMMARY OF BORGES'S PRINCIPAL WRITINGS

#### 1. POETRY

Fervor of Buenos Aires (1923) suggests that the poetry Borges wrote after his literary apprenticeship in Spain would be more a vehicle of ideas than of sentiment. The feeling for things and places and persons is here and henceforth filtered through a kind of philosophical mesh, the effect of which is to produce poetry wherein emotions are serenely but firmly shaped and ordered. One tenet of the Ultraist program for poetry that Borges adhered to in this volume was the suppression of "artificial" elements, such as rhyme and meter, that could hamper poetic voice or vision. The structuring of experience is in evidence in these free-verse compositions of widely varying lengths, but not the measuring and rhyming of language. The subjects of these poems are peaceful Buenos Aires suburban scenes--a patio, a quiet street, a cemetery--as well as topics remote in time and space. There are also several love poems, characterized by restraint and sincerity. Some of the most interesting verses are those that evoke metaphysical questions, in particular ideas Borges had taken from Berkeley and Schopenhauer regarding time and the concept that holds that there is no external reality, only those features that the human senses choose to perceive. In their totality, these forty-six poems reveal a young man who is embracing a humble, unspectacular existence in which it is possible to feel comfort and a sense of acceptance and peace through a lofty philosophical--as opposed to circumstantial--understanding of the nature of things. This could have been the world as the young poet saw it, or a world that he fervently wished for.

Moon Across the Way (1925) is a briefer (twenty-seven poems) collection, in which Borges moves away from a preference for poeticizing inanimate objects and settings toward a broader representation of persons: a lover, his family's ancestors, Argentine historical figures. There is deep feeling in these verses, sentiments perhaps more evident than in Fervor, but the poet's innate restraint mutes the passion of his relationships with these subjects. There is no exaltation here in the adventure of living, but rather a pervading sadness that seems to derive from Borges's profound sense of oneness with humanity, of being swept along in a tide of events that are essentially the same for all mankind. Each individual can thus be seen to be everyone, which, viewed in another way, amounts to being no one. This idea echoes the brief prefatory note that Borges placed in Fervor: "If the pages of this book allow some

felicitous line, the reader will forgive me the discourtesy of having usurped it previously. Our nothingnesses differ but little; the circumstance that you are the reader of these exercises and I their author is trivial and accidental." There are also meditations on the phenomenon of memory, which, linked to oblivion, gives the measure of time. The love poems reflect the mind of a man not stirred by the singular qualities of his beloved, but moved instead to ponder the universality of his situation, and perceive Platonic archetypes in their relationship. In contrast to Fervor, a considerable number of these poems effectively utilize traditional meter and rhyme schemes.

As the twenties drew to a close, Borges was writing fewer poems. When he was invited in 1929 to assemble a new collection of his poetry, Borges was able to come up with only a dozen verses. San Martín Notebook (1929) can be seen as the poet's last concerted attempt to provide his native city with a kind of mythology. He persists here in infusing the plains of its past and the streets of its present with a timeless quality that renders it eternal in his view. Death also appears here as a theme, in two guises. The first of these complements Buenos Aires's timelessness: in the cemeteries of the city, the dead and the past live into the present. The second is more personal, expressed in a poem written on the death of a close friend, the poet Francisco Lopez Merino who committed suicide in 1928 at the age of twenty-four. It is possibly the most touching poem of the collection; in its emotional tone it stands in contrast to the fanciful imaginings of the most-celebrated composition from this volume, "The Mythical Founding of Buenos Aires."

In Poems (1923-1943) Borges salvaged from these first three collections the pieces he considered worthy of revising and added to their sum only six new poems, representing the period 1929-1943. Memorable among the latter group are the two "Prose Poems for I. J.," the only compositions Borges has ever published, in any genre, in the English language. They are remarkable verses under any circumstances. The first of these ends with the lines: "I must get at you somehow: I put away those illustrious toys you have left me, I want your hidden look, your real smile--that lonely, mocking smile that your cool mirror knows." The second, equally arresting, begins with the question: "What can I hold you with?" and ends with: "I can give you my loneliness, my darkness, the hunger of my heart; I am trying to bribe you with uncertainty, with danger, with defeat." These lines were written in a language Borges convinced himself he would never be able to use for artistic expression.

With the loss of his vision in 1955, Borges gradually returned to the writing of poetry, his original medium. His later verse, with few exceptions, employs traditional meter and rhyme. It is unornamented, intellectual, and deals largely with literary and historical themes, which Borges derives from his long life of reading and thinking. Disciplined, subdued in tone, it is essentially the expression of a poet who

has led a bookish existence. The philosophical and metaphysical questions treated in his essays and fiction are also subjects for his poems: time, identity, conjecture on the possible design of our days and of the universe. In a poetic voice that denies itself filigree and flourish, Borges's recurring symbols--mirrors, tigers, labyrinths--are magically and masterfully deployed.

The latest volume of his collected poems, Poetic Works (1923-1976), runs to over 500 pages, and Borges has produced more books of poetry since. In these pages is gathered some of the most distinguished poetry of the intellect written in this century. In a judgment that surely would not displease him, Borges could be considered the Emerson of our time.

## 2. ESSAYS

Borges began publishing articles, essays, and book reviews early in his career. Given his extraordinary background of readings, it is not surprising that he had opinions to voice on the subjects of literature and language. While he was modest and shy in most social situations, his intelligence and wit came aggressively into play in his critical writings. Inquisitions (1925) is a generous sampling of the essays Borges published between 1923 and 1925. The majority of pieces deal with literary matters and writers (European as well as Spanish) whose work had attracted his attention. There are also several essays devoted to literary theory, particularly as Borges felt it should be applied to the creation of an appropriately criollo (native) Argentine poetry. In general terms, it is a young man's book, in which Borges defines some of his early literary preferences and promotes a new approach to writing for the benefit of his fellow Argentines.

The Dimensions of My Hope (1926) continues and intensifies his probing into the nature of what it is that constitutes being Argentine. While there are half a dozen commentaries on subjects derived from other literatures and other cultures, Argentine essence is the dominant theme in this second essay collection. There are also pieces that analyze problems of composition. Literary theory is still of prime concern to Borges, but in this book one observes that he appears to be writing less for other poets than for himself, and that the search for an acceptable mode of expression has become a personal one.

The Language of the Argentines (1928) brings together essays that deal with a somewhat broader spectrum of topics. There are more examinations of the work of Argentine and Spanish writers, a section of book reviews and further reflections on the nature of language and the act of literary composition. The more serene and controlled style that Borges displays here suggests that he was working his way toward resolutions of

some of the problems of literary expression that had engaged him for a decade. The collection also includes two prose sketches, "Feeling in Death" and "Men Fought" that he would draw on for other works he published in the thirties. These two pieces, together with the title essay, are virtually all that survived, in one form or another, from Borges's first three essay collections. The latter are excluded from his Collected Works, and for a time he scoured Buenos Aires bookstores, hunting down copies that he would buy and then destroy.

Evaristo Carriego (1930) takes the form of a casual biography of Carriego, a poet of the Buenos Aires outskirts and, in particular, of the neighborhood of Palermo where Borges lived as a boy. In five chapters, not all related directly to Carriego and his work, Borges constructs an image of the city of his earliest memories and of the barrio that he had experienced so profoundly and that Carriego celebrated in his verse.

Discussion (1932) marks a distinct change in both the themes of Borges's essays and their style. He seems now to be beyond the stage in which he felt compelled to exalt criollismo (authentically native expression) and has moved on to the broad area of European and American letters. He also gives more attention to the philosophical concerns introduced in his earlier essays. A shift in his style is noted in the absence of the self-conscious attempt to astonish his readers with baroque or Latinate syntax and obscure Argentinisms. Moreover, his prose has begun to acquire the surface tension that will characterize both his subsequent expository and narrative writings. In other words, he starts to sound here like the Borges who, a decade later, would be confecting his singular "fictions."

In the title essay of History of Eternity (1936), Borges turns his attention to a lengthy discussion of time, eternity, and philosophical idealism, setting down a series of ideas on these subjects that he had extracted from his readings. In this essay, as well as in another one from this collection entitled "The Doctrine of the Cycles," Borges offers more of a review of concepts than a development of them. In an indirect manner, he seems to suggest that he was defeated in his attempt to organize his materials into a statement. Two other pieces deal with subjects that would have seemed unusual had they been chosen by anyone other than Borges: the traditional Icelandic metaphor called kennings and the various translators of the Arabian Nights. The book concludes with a showcase of examples of insults and verbal abuse that had caught Borges's fancy, and a curious piece, "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," that purports to be a review of a detective novel of that name published in Bombay, India, in 1932. Borges pens an engaging commentary on the work, examining and evaluating its plot and execution. It was not until months after the "review" had appeared in this collection that the truth was revealed. The novel did not exist; the idea for the book and for the

substance of the review were completely Borges's invention.

Other Inquisitions (1937-1952) is Borges's last major collection of essays and it is by far his best one. The thirty-nine pieces touch on a characteristically broad selection of subjects that include literary theory and criticism, language, philosophy and metaphysics, and religion. In their totality, these essays suggest that in the view of the author, who has examined countless sources from many ages and cultures, all knowledge is relative, and in some elusive sense, interrelated. Intuition and conjecture offer Borges suitable methods for approaching the subjects of his "Inquisitions." In "The Wall and the Books," "Kafka and His Precursors," "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," and other pieces, Borges deploys insights, startling symmetries, and paradoxes into a fragile semblance of balance and order. But fundamentally a skeptic, Borges will entertain any number of theories and concepts and, in the end, give his credence to none. This may explain why a considerable number of these pieces communicate a mood of ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Since in the end all truth remains beyond his grasp, one senses in a number of the essays an underlying mood of resignation. On this subject, Borges has made a revealing statement. At the conclusion of his long essay from 1937 entitled "A New Refutation of Time," included in this collection, Borges admits, in a rare moment of candor, to the ultimate futility of his persistent examination of philosophical systems in search of alternate versions of reality. He writes: "And yet, and yet—to deny temporal succession, to deny the ego, to deny the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret assuagements. Our destiny . . . is not horrible because of its unreality; it is horrible because it is irreversible and ironbound. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges" (p. 187).

### 3. FICTION.

Universal History of Infamy (1935) brings together material Borges had published in the literary supplement of the Buenos Aires newspaper Crítica. The seven "tales of infamy" are retellings of colorful accounts he had drawn from sources as disparate as Twain's Huckleberry Finn and the Encyclopaedia Britannica. He does not hesitate to identify the specific texts from which they had been borrowed, but not all of these citations are dependable. There is also a selection of shorter prose pieces written for Crítica, magical and fantastic in nature, and similarly identified as having been derived from other books. Here, too, is Borges's first original short story, "The Man from the Pink Corner," which reflects once again his fascination with the old-time Palermo and

the compadrito's cult of courage. Years later Borges referred to the contents of this volume as the exercises of a timid person who did not dare to write his own stories.

In late 1941 Sur published The Garden of the Forking Paths, collecting the first eight stories of a new and entirely different character. Seven of them belong to the period 1939-1941; the eighth is the imaginary book review from History of Eternity, which Borges now assigns to the more appropriate category of fiction. In 1944, six additional narratives were added, and the volume was retitled as Fictions. A number of the earlier stories are so "bookish" in nature that they give the impression of being essays. But in others, even though the concept developed is of a philosophical or intellectual character, Borges's treatment of the material is patently that of a writer of prose fiction. In these narratives, Borges is as adept at inventing writers (Pierre Menard and Herbert Quain) and discussing their totally apocryphal work as he is at imagining a world that represents a fanciful alternative version of our own and calmly reviewing its encyclopedia ("Lion, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"). In "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "Death and the Compass," Borges infuses traditional forms such as the espionage tale and the detective story with fresh poetic and philosophical potential. As his poetry echoes the same set of concepts that engage him in his essays, so do these stories now dramatize his intellectual concerns. Characterization, in the conventional sense, is not developed in Borges's fictions, since their plots deal less with physical action than they do with mental activity. The people of these narratives can be viewed properly as elements in an intellectual equation that the author is constructing.

The Aleph (1949), the second collection of Borges's highly original prose tales, includes thirteen stories written between 1944 and 1949. A second edition in 1952 adds four more pieces, but the best of Borges's work from this period is found in the earlier edition. The majority of these stories share the characteristics of those that appeared in Fictions. In this respect, The Aleph is an extension of that book, displaying the same sort of curious fictional enactment of intellectual positions that Borges cultivated previously. However, there are several stories that offer more intimate glimpses of the author's personality and that contrast in their emotional tone with the aloof, somewhat arid narrative voice that one encounters in the majority of these pieces. In "The Zahir" and "The Aleph," the narrators are rendered more human through the deep suffering they experience over the love of a woman lost to them. Nonetheless, characteristically the heart does not dominate over the mind in these narratives. In "The Zahir" Borges explores the nightmarish sense that the term "unforgettable" in extreme application can hold for a human being. And in "The Aleph," one of his most successful stories, he blends satire and fantasy in an imaginative depiction of

the guise that the theoretical concept of all space existing in one single place might assume.

The last of what can be designated as Borges's "fictions" was published in 1953. The twenty-two brief parables and sketches that appeared with a group of new poems in The Maker (1960) signal the next stage in Borges's career as a prose writer. They were written after he lost his sight in 1955 and represent all he felt he was able to manage in that medium, since customary composition, rewriting, and revision were denied him. Whether they are properly considered to be brief essays or prose fiction is unimportant. His themes and manner of reflecting on them remain unchanged. However, the language is now tauter, more intense and concise. Borges is present as a personage in the best of these exquisitely balanced pages. One of his best-known pieces is included here, the haunting confession entitled "Borges and I," which offers the reader one of Borges's most intimate views of himself. (The English-language translation of this book appeared in 1964 under the title Dreamtigers.)

Selections of more recent prose pieces, mostly of the succinct type found in The Maker, are gathered, together with new poems, in four subsequent books by Borges: In Praise of Shadow (1969), The Gold of the Tigers (1972), The Coin of Iron (1976), and History of the Night (1977). However, two other volumes, made up of longer stories, should be noted here.

Brodie's Report (1970), published in English translation as Dr. Brodie's Report (1972), was the first collection of Borges's medium-length narratives to appear since the 1952 edition of The Aleph. There are eleven tales, all composed during the period 1967-1970. Borges has stated that these narratives reflect the influence of a new model: the "straightforward" early stories of Rudyard Kipling. He had apparently come to the conclusion that the intricacy and complexity of his earlier fiction could not be carried off by a man who was blind. That Borges's style has undergone modifications cannot be denied. "Borges the writer" is now much more present in the process of narrating, often figuring as a kind of intermediary between story and reader. With but few exceptions these stories deal with Argentine themes. Symbols and literary allusions are less frequent in these pieces, which reveal a much less intellectual character. There is, in fact, a thread of stark realism that runs through many of the stories. The author is painstaking in his evocation of the brutal fabric of an earlier, more primitive style of life in Argentina, set in a time of violence, crime, bloody duels, and civil wars. However, two stories, "Guayaquil" and "The Gospel According to Mark," which rank among Borges's best, transcend their realistic local settings through techniques that recall the Borges of the forties. Secret interior symmetries in the first and allegory in the other are deftly brought into play.

The Book of Sand (1975) is a collection of thirteen stories written between 1970 and 1975 that reaffirms the narrative preferences that Borges established in Brodie's Report. However, there is a shift in setting. Roughly half of the stories have Argentine locales; the rest are situated in the English-speaking world: America, England, and, reflecting Borges's twenty-year dedication to the study of Old English, several historical Anglo-Saxon settings. The action of "The Other" takes place on the banks of the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There in 1969 the seventy-year-old Borges is allowed a magical encounter with the eighteen-year-old Borges, who is seated on the banks of the Rhone in Geneva, Switzerland in 1918. In a privileged moment outside of time, the two compare impressions from the opposite ends of a long life. "The Congress," first published in 1971 as a separate volume, is possibly Borges's best story from the decade past. It incorporates the most successful image he has been able to fashion for one of his most persistent themes--the search for order and understanding in human existence. The ambitious enterprise described in the story, whose astonishing purpose is to subject external reality to a definitive ordering, flourishes for a while, but ultimately founders and--Borges has been insinuating the idea throughout his lifetime of writing--has to be abandoned as unattainable.

#### IV. AN EVALUATION OF BORGES'S ACHIEVEMENT

The writings of Jorge Luis Borges have come to represent in our time a point of reference, providing a categorical label for a type of literary composition whose blend of style, tone, and vision mark it in a singular fashion. Just as the term "Kafkaesque" serves to designate a particular kind of mood or situation, so today does the adjective "Borgesian" identify for a large audience a specific authorial voice and world view. While Kafka, whose writings, not surprisingly, have stimulated Borges's thought, did not live to witness the incorporation of his Weltanschauung into the consciousness of mid-twentieth-century Western civilization, Borges, in contrast, has personally presided over the shaping of his own substantial literary legend. His role in the context of world literature today is surely unique. At eighty-six, he still travels continually about the world, collecting literary prizes and honors, while at the same time tending to the ceaseless polishing, revising, and reorganizing of his sizable corpus of writing into something approaching its definitive form. He has also actively participated in the translation of a number of his own works from Spanish to English. To a degree matched by few writers before him, Borges's life has been literature.

He has written poetry, essays, and short fiction, but has never attempted a novel. However, it is in the narrative genre that, by general agreement, he has made his most significant contribution. André Maurois noted some twenty-five years ago, in his preface to Labyrinths, that "Jorge Luis Borges is a great writer who has composed only little essays or short narratives. Yet they suffice for us to call him great because of their wonderful intelligence, their wealth of invention and their tight, almost mathematical style" (p. ix). That judgment, accurate in 1961, holds as true still today, for in a sense, Borges's reputation and the essential character of his work had been established by that year in which he won the International Editors Prize; and they have been modified only slightly since then, although he has continued to write and publish without pause.

Borges's fame has come to be based mainly on his two volumes of stories from the forties: Ficciones (1944) and El Aleph (1949). This seems entirely reasonable since, while he has written some memorable poems and has developed late in his career a distinctive poetic voice and has also composed some strikingly original essays, it is in the narrative form that he has achieved greatest distinction and had been

most influential. Thus, in the end, he will be evaluated for his short stories, even though the same thematic concerns are common to his writings in all three genres.

At the heart of Borges's genius lies what his late brother-in-law, the Spanish critic Guillermo de Torre, identified as "an attitude of innate distrust of anything affirmative and a perverse preference for doubts and perplexities of philosophical as well as esthetic nature" (Alazraki, Jorge Luis Borges; p. 81). Borges's long-time friend Ulyses Petit de Murat has similarly spoken of his positive horror of the commonplace. Borges's "perverse" way of regarding things is fundamental to his thought and his art. Oversimplifying the matter, Borges himself has played down his achievement, stating that he is merely a writer who has used metaphysical and theological systems for literary purposes. He has further insisted that he is not a serious thinker, that he treats philosophical and metaphysical questions only for their capacity to inspire in one a certain sense of wonder. This is completely in keeping with his oft-repeated claim that he has been always a hedonistic reader, seeking only the gratification of his own personal preferences in what he has read.

When he began to compose his "fictions" in 1939, Borges quite naturally and spontaneously worked into them the sources of keen intellectual enjoyment that he has gleaned from his wide-ranging and unorthodox readings. The latter have included texts dealing with Platonic archetypes, pre-Socratic philosophy, Gnosticism, Christianity, Buddhism, and the Cabala, to give but a sampling. The concepts that were woven into his stories are by now familiar to his readers: time, infinity, dreams, memory and oblivion, versions of God and of the universe, identity and courage, among numerous others.

Borges's attitude of irreverence toward certain basic literary conventions and the trappings of scholarship in general, together with a freewheeling disregard for the traditional distinctions maintained between expository and creative prose, contributed to the original character of the pieces he collected in his two celebrated volumes. Moreover, his meticulously polished, intense and concise style--at once lucid and poetic--lent to his stories a flavor that resembled that of no other writer's prose.

Among the first Argentine critics who evaluated his work were a number who reacted negatively to his writing. For the most part they based their judgments on extraliterary considerations. He was viewed as a sophist, an escapist detached from Argentine reality, and his writings were seen as representative of the elitist character of the oligarchy and the Sur "establishment," whose apologist they took him to be. These opinions need not be refuted here. However, it is appropriate to point out that one of the most important effects that Borges's narratives have

had on Spanish-American writers was, in fact, to redirect their attention away from a traditional dependence on the techniques of literary realism and from the tendency to consider literature as a vehicle for statements of political and social nature. Indeed, it may be justifiably claimed that through his own model (and particularly through the success of that model) Borges has effected a "freeing up" of the literary imagination of countless writers, among whom can be included many of the authors who have contributed to the emergence of the Spanish-American "New Narrative" over the period of the past thirty years. Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Márquez (Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982) have all acknowledged their debts to Borges. Imagination and fantasy are hallmarks of Latin-American fiction today and their invigorating effect on that literature can be traced back and identified as having been inspired, in large part, by Borges's work.

It should not be surprising that Borges has held such an attraction for so many writers, for perhaps no other author of our time has so persistently and thoroughly (in his poems and essays, as well as in his fiction) examined the subjects of language and literary composition. Moreover, his writings frequently deal with the role of the artist and the very process of literary creation. The terse statement of his celebrated short sketch, "Borges and I," addresses a preoccupation peculiar to the condition of the writer; and the disconcerting revelation at the conclusion of one of his earliest "fictions," "The Circular Ruins"--wherein a man laboriously dreams another man, only to come to the sudden understanding that he, too, is a dream in another mind--gives metaphorical expression to the experience of literary invention.

Borges has often been called a "writer's writer." There is abundant evidence that he has long enjoyed the admiration of other authors. When The Garden of Forking Paths failed to win a Municipal Prize in 1941, it was a group of writers associated with the literary magazine Sur who together filled half an issue of the journal in 1942 with their individual statements in support of his work and critical of the decision of the judges not to award the book a prize. Similarly, when Ficciones was bypassed for an award in 1944, it was the Argentine Society of Writers that devised its Grand Award of Honor and conferred it on Borges.

The gradual widening of his audience is explained in large part by the appeal of the singular manner in which he explores and evaluates ideas. His conviction that philosophical and theological systems are not explanations of reality but only other things added to reality, imparts a disturbing tone to much of his work. In his writings Borges has dramatized his search for truths, sorting through the various theories devised by all men in all ages. That his quest for truth in the end produces no affirmations, characteristically leaves his readers with a strange sense of bewilderment. Ambiguity and inconclusiveness are the

ultimate moods communicated by his work, and they form part of his aesthetic doctrine. Borges has given formulation to this concept in the concluding lines of his essay "The Wall and the Books," included in Other Inquisitions. He writes: "Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces molded by time, certain twilights and certain places--all these are trying to tell us something, or have told us something we should not have missed, or are about to tell us something: that imminence of a revelation that is not produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality" (p. 5). Thus, it can be seen that in his writings Borges characteristically (and paradoxically) seeks for nonfulfillment of his searches. Having rejected the possibility of acquiring concrete knowledge, but believing still in the assuaging grace of artifice, he composes his artistically impeccable pages, creating with them mirrors of disbelief in which the reader perceives his own visage. The elusive Borges lurks somewhere in the vague depths of those mirrors.

The quality of Borges's writing, of course, invites, if not actually incites, critical response. That response developed locally, then internationally. First in France in the fifties when his stories began to appear in translation, then later in England and the U.S. in the sixties when his work became available in English, a veritable flood of criticism began to issue forth. It has scarcely abated, but some sort of crest was achieved in 1964 when the French journal L'Herne devoted an entire issue to Borges, including more than fifty essays dealing with his work. This was the international critical consecration of Jorge Luis Borges. Two decades later, David William Foster's 1984 annotated listing of critical writings about Borges and his work cites 1,200 items, and it is selective.

Writers continue today to discover in Borges's writings statements that appear to apply to contemporary literary circumstances. In America, both John Updike and John Barth have written essays in which they suggest that Borges's work signals the way out of a state of stagnation of much modern fiction, and that the crisis of the contemporary novel might be resolved by learning from Borges's creations the central role that conscious artifice could play in rescuing narrative prose from its state of perceived exhaustion. European literary theorists, especially those writing in France--Lévi-Strauss, Genette, Foucault, Barthes--have also discovered in Borges's texts insights to inform their structuralist and post-structuralist conceptualizations. Taking note of Borges's ever-increasing fame, Argentine author and critic Enrique Anderson Imbert has proposed that the spreading popularity of Borges's work in many quarters is based on erroneous readings. In an essay entitled "El éxito de Borges" (The Success of Borges), Anderson Imbert archly suggests that the enthusiasm for Borges's work expressed by student activists, Marxists, existentialists, Freudians, and populists derives from a lack of awareness of the uncommitted playfulness inherent in his fiction and a



similar failure to understand that the subjects of his concerns are drawn from literary sources and not from social contexts.

The distinctive set of symbols that populate Borges's writings have attracted much critical attention. While they are too numerous to discuss at length, some brief consideration should be given to the central symbol of his fictional world, the labyrinth. Its evocation, as Borges has stated, serves the purpose of alluding to the sense of disorientation and wonder experienced by man, who is left alone to explore a universe he cannot comprehend. He has conjured up the image of the labyrinth in a considerable number of his stories. In "The House of Asterion," included in his 1949 collection, El Aleph, Borges goes back to the mythological source and recreates the circumstances of the Minotaur in his Cretan labyrinth. However, he achieves a singular effect by situating the narrative point of view in the consciousness of the pathetic creature himself. Labyrinths of a more conceptual nature appear in "The Garden of Forking Paths" and "Death and the Compass," two of his earliest "fictions." In the first of these, the labyrinth is proposed as the image of the infinite web of bifurcating paths along which man travels, arbitrarily and randomly electing the series of turns that will inevitably determine his destiny. In "Death and the Compass," which draws for its structure on the formal detective story, Borges demonstrates how it is possible to find oneself trapped in a labyrinth consisting of but a few lines, a mental maze into which one's intellect may lead him. This story may well be the best of Borges's metaphysical adventures. It combines the abstract symbol of the labyrinth with a delicately evoked sense of cosmic melancholy--the emotion that envelops the excessively cerebral detective, Erik Lönnrot, as he moves inexorably toward his fate through the geometrical nightmare of the deserted villa of Triste-le-Roy.

Finally, it has been pointed out that the scope of Borges's writings is severely limited. He is concerned above all with the phenomenon of language and the formal processes through which it can be utilized to represent human existence. Literature viewed analytically is, of course, but one aspect of a multifaceted world. Nonetheless, the ceaseless examination and cultivation of the craft of writing has been for Borges a lifelong necessity. Perhaps he himself, better than anyone, has expressed what the ultimate significance of his labors will be. In the epilogue to his 1960 collection of poems and short prose pieces, El hacedor (published in English as Dreamtigers), he has written the following: "A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face" (p. 93).

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Jorge Luis Borges (1899- )

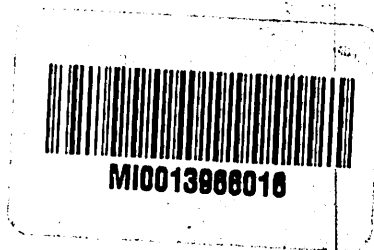
is today the most widely known and acclaimed writer in Latin America. Poet, essayist, and short story author, his work has been extensively translated and has attracted over the past three decades an extraordinary amount of critical commentary. It is evident that his prose narratives have profoundly influenced not only the literature of the Americas but also the character of contemporary fiction in general. Long a candidate for the Nobel Prize, he has received countless literary awards in Europe as well as in the New World. Still active in his mid-eighties, he lives and works in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the city of his birth.

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JORGE LUIS BORGES

## JORGE LUIS BORGES LIFE, WORK, AND CRITICISM

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