

# The New York Review of Books

## Comprehending Borges

V.S. Naipaul

OCTOBER 19, 1972 ISSUE

Borges, speaking of the fame of writers, said: “The important thing is the image you create of yourself in other people’s minds. Many people think of Burns as a mediocre poet. But he stands for many things, and people like him. That image—as with Byron—may in the end be more important than the work.”

Borges is a great writer, a sweet and melancholy poet; and people who know Spanish well revere him as a writer of a direct, unrhetoical prose. But his Anglo-American reputation as a blind and elderly Argentine, the writer of a very few, very short, and very mysterious stories, is so inflated and bogus that it obscures his greatness. It has possibly cost him the Nobel Prize; and it may well happen that when the bogus reputation declines, as it must, the good work may also disappear.

The irony is that Borges, at his best, is neither mysterious nor difficult. His poetry is accessible; much of it is even romantic. His themes have remained constant for the last fifty years: his military ancestors, their deaths in battle, death itself, time, and old Buenos Aires. And there are about a dozen successful stories. Two or three are straightforward, even old-fashioned, detective stories (one was published in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*). Some deal, quite cinematically, with Buenos Aires low life at the turn of the century. Gangsters are given epic stature; they rise, they are challenged, and sometimes they run away.

The other stories—the ones which have driven the critics crazy—are in the nature of intellectual jokes. Borges takes a word like “immortal” and plays with it. Suppose, he says, men were really immortal. Not just men who had grown old and wouldn’t die, but indestructible vigorous men, surviving for eternity. What would be the result? His answer—which is his story—is that every conceivable experience would at some time befall every man, that every man would at some time assume every conceivable character, and that Homer (the disguised hero of this particular story) might in the eighteenth century even

forget he had written the *Odyssey*. Or take the word “unforgettable.” Suppose something was truly unforgettable, and couldn’t be forgotten for a single second; suppose this thing came, like a coin, into your possession. Extend that idea. Suppose there was a man—but no, he has to be a boy—who could forget nothing, whose memory therefore ballooned and ballooned with all the unforgettable details of every minute of his life.

These are some of Borges’s intellectual games. And perhaps his most successful piece of prose writing, which is also his shortest, is a pure joke. It is called “Of Exactitude in Science” and is meant to be an extract from a seventeenth-century book of travel:

In that Empire, the craft of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and coincided with it point for point. Less attentive to the Study of Cartography, succeeding Generations came to judge a map of such Magnitude cumbersome and, not without Irreverence, abandoned it to the Rigours of sun and Rain. In the western Deserts, tattered Fragments of the Map are still to be found, Sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar; in the whole Nation no other relic is left of the Discipline of Geography.

This is absurd and perfect: the accurate parody, the grotesque idea. Borges’s puzzles and jokes can be addicting. But they have to be recognized for what they are; they cannot always support the metaphysical interpretations they receive. There is, though, much to attract the academic critic. Some of Borges’s hoaxes require—and sometimes disappear below—an extravagant display of curious learning. And there is the occasional baroque language of the early stories.

**T**he Circular Ruins”—an elaborate, almost science-fiction story about a dreamer discovering that he himself exists only in somebody else’s dream—begins: “*Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unánime noche.*” Literally, “Nobody saw him disembark in the unanimous night.” Norman Thomas di Giovanni, who has been translating Borges full time for the last four years, and has done more than anyone else to push Borges’s work in the English-speaking world, says,

You can imagine how much has been written about that “unanimous.” I went to Borges with two translations, “surrounding” and “encompassing.” And I said, “Borges, what did you really mean by the unanimous night?”

That doesn't mean anything. If the unanimous night, why not the tea-drinking night or the card-playing night?" And I was astonished by his answer. He said, "Di Giovanni, that's just one example of the irresponsible way I used to write." We used "encompassing" in the translation. But a lot of the professors didn't like losing their unanimous night....

There was this woman. She wrote an essay on Borges for a book. She didn't know any Spanish and was basing her essay on two rather mediocre English translations. A long essay, about forty pages. And one of the *crucial* points was that Borges wrote a very Latinate prose. I had to point out to her that Borges could not help but write a Latinate prose, because he wrote in Spanish, and Spanish is a dialect of Latin. She didn't consult anybody when she was laying the foundation. At the end she calls out "Help!" and you run up and see this enormous skyscraper sinking in quicksand.

Di Giovanni went with Borges on a lecture tour of the United States in 1969:

Borges is a gentleman. When people come up and tell him what his stories really mean—after all, he only wrote them—he has the most wonderful line you've ever heard. "Ah, thank you! You've enriched my story. You've made me a great gift. I've come all the way from Buenos Aires to X—say Lubbock, Texas—to find out this truth about myself and my story."

**B**orges has for years enjoyed a considerable reputation in the Spanish-speaking world. But in "An Autobiographical Essay," which was published as a "Profile" in *The New Yorker* in 1970, he says that until he won the Formentor Prize in 1961—he was sixty-two then—he was "practically invisible—not only abroad but at home in Buenos Aires." This is the kind of exaggeration that dismays some of his early Argentine supporters; and there are those who would say that his "irresponsibility" has grown with his fame. But Borges has always been irresponsible. Buenos Aires is a small town; and what perhaps was inoffensive when Borges belonged only to this small town becomes less so when foreigners queue up for interviews. Once, no doubt, Borges's celebration of his military ancestors and their deaths in battle flattered the whole society, giving it a sense of the past and of completeness. Now it appears to exclude, to proclaim a private grandeur; and to many it is only egotistical and presumptuous. It is not easy to be famous in a small town.

Borges gives many interviews. And every interview seems to be like every other interview. He seems to make questions irrelevant; he plays, as one Argentine lady said, his *discos*, his records; he performs. He says that the

Spanish language is his “doom.” He criticizes Spain and the Spaniards: he still fights that colonial war, in which, however, the old issues have become confused with a simpler Argentine prejudice against the poor and backward immigrants from Northern Spain. He makes his tasteless, and expected, jokes about the pampa Indians. Tasteless, because just twenty years before he was born these Indians were systematically exterminated; and yet expected, because slaughter on this scale becomes acceptable only if the victims are made ridiculous. He talks about Chesterton, Stevenson, and Kipling. He talks about Old English with all the enthusiasm of a man who has picked up a subject by himself. He talks about his English ancestors.

It is a curiously colonial performance. His Argentine past is part of his distinction; he offers it as such; and he is after all a patriot. He honors the flag, an example of which flies from the balcony of his office in the National Library (he is the director). And he is moved by the anthem. But at the same time he seems anxious to proclaim his separateness from Argentina. The performance might seem aimed at Borges’s new Anglo-American campus audience, whom in so many ways it flatters. But the attitudes are old.

In Buenos Aires it is still remembered that in 1955, just a few days after Perón was overthrown and that nine-year dictatorship was over, Borges gave a lecture on—of all subjects—Coleridge to the ladies of the Association for English Culture. Some of Coleridge’s lines, Borges said, were among the best in English poetry, “*es decir la poesia*, that is to say poetry.” And those four words, at a time of national rejoicing, were like a gratuitous assault on the Argentine soul.

Norman di Giovanni tells a balancing story. “In December, 1969, we were at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. The man doing the introduction was an Argentine from Tucumán and he took advantage of the occasion to point out to the audience that the military repression had closed the university in Tucumán. Borges was totally oblivious of what the man had said until we were on our way to the airport. Then someone began to talk about it and Borges was suddenly very angry. ‘Did you hear what that man said? That they’d closed the university in Tucumán.’ I questioned him about his rage, and he said, ‘That man was attacking my country. They can’t talk that way about my country.’ I said, ‘Borges, what do you mean, “that man”? That man is an Argentine. And he comes from Tucumán. And what he says is true. The military *have* closed the university.’ ”

Borges is of medium height. His nearly sightless eyes and his stick add to the distinction of his appearance. He dresses carefully. He says he is a middle-class

writer; and a middle-class writer shouldn't be either a dandy or too affectedly casual. He is courtly: he thinks, with Sir Thomas Browne, that a gentleman is someone who tries to give the least amount of trouble. "But you should look that up in *Religio Medici*." It might seem then that in his accessibility, his willingness to give lengthy interviews which repeat the other interviews he has given, Borges combines the middle-class ideal of self-effacement and the gentleman's manners with the writer's privacy, the writer's need to save himself for his work.

There are hints of this privacy (in accessibility) in the way he likes to be addressed. Perhaps no more than half a dozen people have the privilege of calling him by his first name, Jorge, which they turn into "Georgie." To everyone else he likes to be just "Borges," without the *señor*, which he considers Spanish and pompous. "Borges" is, of course, distancing.

And even the fifty-page "Autobiographical Essay" doesn't violate his privacy. It is like another interview. It says little that is new. His birth in Buenos Aires in 1899, the son of a lawyer; his military ancestors; the family's seven-year sojourn in Europe from 1914 to 1921 (when the peso was valuable, and Europe was cheaper than Buenos Aires): all this is told again in outline, as in an interview. And the essay quickly becomes no more than a writer's account of his writing life, of the books he read and the books he wrote, the literary groups he joined and the magazines he founded. The life is missing. There is the barest sketch of the crisis he must have gone through in his late thirties and early forties, when—the family money lost—he was doing all kinds of journalism; when his father died, and he himself fell seriously ill and "feared for [his] mental integrity"; when he worked as an assistant in a municipal library, wellknown as a writer outside the library, unknown inside it. "I remember a fellow employee's once noting in an encyclopedia the name of a certain Jorge Luis Borges—a fact that set him wondering at the coincidence of our identical names and birth dates."

"Nine years of solid unhappiness," he says; but he gives the period only four pages. The privacy of Borges begins to appear a forbidding thing.

*Un dios me ha concedido  
Lo que es dado saber a los mortales.  
Por todo el continente anda mi nombre;  
No he vivido. Quisiera ser otro hombre.*

Mark Strand translates:

*I have been allowed  
That which is given mortal man to know.*

*The whole continent knows my name.  
I have not lived. I want to be someone else.*

This is Borges on Emerson; but it might be Borges on Borges. Life, in the “Autobiographical Essay,” is indeed missing. So that all that is important in the man has to be found in the work, which with Borges is essentially the poetry. And all the themes he has explored over a long life are contained, as he himself says, in his very first book of poems, published in 1923, a book printed in five days, 300 copies, given away free.

Here is the military ancestor dying in battle. Here, already, at the age of twenty-four, the contemplation of glory turns into a meditation on death and time and the “glass jewels” of the individual life:

*...cuando tú mismo eres la con-  
tinuación realizada  
de quienes no alcanzaron tu ti-  
empo  
y otros serán (y son) tu inmortalidad en la tierra.*

In W. S. Merwin’s translation:

*...when you yourself are the embodied continuance  
of those who did not live into your time  
and others will be (and are) your immortality on earth.*

Somewhere around that time life stopped; and all that has followed has been literature: a concern with words, an unending attempt to stay with, and not to betray, the emotions of that so particular past.

*I am myself and I am him today,  
The man who died, the man whose blood and name  
Are mine.*

This is Norman di Giovanni’s translation of a poem written forty-three years after that first book:

*Soy, pero soy también el otro, el muerto,  
El otro de mi sangre y de mi nombre.*

Since the writing of that first book nothing, except perhaps his discovery of Old English poetry, has provided Borges with matter for such intense meditation. Not even the bitter Perón years, when he was “‘promoted’ out of the library to the inspectorship of poultry and rabbits in the public markets,” and resigned. Nor his brief, unhappy marriage late in life, once the subject of magazine articles, and still a subject of gossip in Buenos Aires. Nor his

continuing companionship with his mother, now aged ninety-six.

“In 1910, the centenary of the Argentine Republic, we thought of Argentina as an honorable country and we had no doubt that the nations would come flocking in. Now the country is in a bad way. We are being threatened by the return of the horrible man.” This is how Borges speaks of Perón: he prefers not to use the name.

I get any number of personal threats. Even my mother. They rang her up in the small hours—two or three in the morning—and somebody said to her in a very gruff kind of voice, the voice you associate with a *Peronista*, “I’ve got to kill you and your son.” My mother said, “Why?” “Because I am a *Peronista*.” My mother said, “As far as my son is concerned, he is over seventy and practically blind. But in my case I should advise you to waste no time because I am ninety-five and may die on your hands before you can kill me.” Next morning I told my mother I thought I had heard the telephone ringing in the night. “Did I dream that?” She said, “Just some fool.” She’s not only witty. But courageous.... I don’t see what I can do about it—the political situation. But I think I should do what I can, having military men in my family.

**B**orges’s first book of poems was called *Fervour of Buenos Aires*. In it, he said in his preface, he was attempting to celebrate the new and expanding city in a special way. “Akin to the Romans, who would murmur the words ‘*numen inest*’ on passing through a wood, ‘Here dwells a god,’ my verses declare, stating the wonder of the streets.... Everyday places become, little by little, holy.”

But Borges has not hallowed Buenos Aires. The city the visitor sees is not the city of the poems, the way Simla (as new and as artificial as Buenos Aires) remains, after all these years, the city of Kipling’s stories. Kipling looked hard at a real town. Borges’s Buenos Aires is private, a city of the imagination. And now the city itself is in decay. In Borges’s own. Southside some old buildings survive, with their mighty front doors and their receding patios, each patio differently tiled. But more often the inner patios have been blocked up; and many of the old buildings have been pulled down. Elegance, if in this plebeian immigrant city elegance really ever existed outside the vision of expatriate architects, has vanished; there is now only disorder.

The white and pale blue Argentine flag that hangs out into Mexico Street from the balcony of Borges’s office in the National Library is dingy with dirt and fumes. And consider this building, perhaps the finest in the area, which was used as a hospital and a jail in the time of the gangster-dictator Rosas more than

120 years ago. There is beauty still in the spiked wall, the tall iron gates, the huge wooden doors. But inside the walls peel; the windows in the central patio are broken; further in, courtyard opening into courtyard, washing hangs in a corridor, steps are broken, and a metal spiral staircase is blocked with junk. This is a government office, a department of the Ministry of Labor: it speaks of an administration that has seized up, a city that is dying, a country that hasn't really worked.

Walls everywhere are scrawled with violent slogans; guerrillas operate in the streets; the peso falls; the city is full of hate. The bloody-minded slogan repeats: *Rosas vuelve*, Rosas is coming back. The country awaits a new terror.

*Numen inest*, here dwells the god: the poet's incantation hasn't worked. The military ancestors died in battle, but those petty battles and wasteful deaths have led to nothing. Only in Borges's poetry do those heroes inhabit "an epic universe, sitting tall in the saddle," "*alto...en su épico universo.*" And this is his great creation: Argentina as a simple mythical land, a complete epic world, of "republics, cavalry, and mornings," "*las repúblicas, los caballos y las mañanas,*" of battles fought, the fatherland established, the great city created, and the "streets with names recurring from the past in my blood."

That is the vision of art. And yet, out of this mythical Argentina of his creation, Borges reaches out, through his English grandmother, to his English ancestors and, through them, to their language "at its dawn." "People tell me I look English now. When I was younger I didn't look English. I was darker. I didn't feel English. Not at all. Maybe feeling English came to me through reading." And though Borges doesn't acknowledge it, a recurring theme in the later stories is of Nordics growing degenerate in a desolate Argentine landscape. Scottish Guthries become *mestizo* Gutres and no longer even know the Bible; an English girl becomes an Indian savage; men called Nilsen forget their origins and live like animals with the bestial sex code of the *macho* whoremonger.

Borges said at our first meeting, "I don't write about degenerates." But another time he said, "The country was enriched by men thinking essentially of Europe and the United States. Only the civilized people. The gauchos were very simple-minded. Barbarians." When we talked of Argentine history he said, "There is a pattern. Not an obvious pattern. I myself can't see the wood for the trees." And later he added, "Those civil wars are now meaningless."

Perhaps, then, parallel with the vision of art, there has developed, in Borges, a subsidiary vision, however unacknowledged, of reality. And now, at any rate, the real world can no longer be denied.

In the middle of May Borges went for a few days to Montevideo in Uruguay. Montevideo was one of the cities of his childhood, a city of “long, lazy holidays.” But now Uruguay, the most educated country in South America, was, in the words of an Argentine, “a caricature of a country,” bankrupt, like Argentina, after wartime wealth, and tearing itself to pieces. Montevideo was a city at war; guerrillas and soldiers fought in the streets. One day, while Borges was there, four soldiers were shot and killed.

I saw Borges when he came back. A pretty girl helped him down the steps at the Catholic University. He looked more frail; his hands shook more easily. He had shed his sprightly interview manner. He was full of the disaster of Montevideo; he was distressed. Montevideo was something else he had lost. In one poem “mornings in Montevideo” are among the things for which he thanks “the divine labyrinth of causes and effects.” Now Montevideo, like Buenos Aires, like Argentina, was gracious only in his memory, and in his art.