

Six Poems · *Jorge Luis Borges*

PROTEUS

Before the oarsmen of Odysseus
Troubled the waters of the winedark sea,
I can catch glimpses of the slippery
Shapes of the god whose name was Proteus.
Proteus, shepherd of the herds of ocean,
Possessing as he did prophetic power,
Preferred to hide his wisdom and his lore
And weave together wayward divinations.
Held fast by stubborn men, he slipped his matter
And took a lion's shape, the shape of fire,
A shadetree shimmering in summer air,
Or water that cannot be found in water.
You think the Egyptian Proteus uncanny,
You, who are one and at the same time many?

translated by Robert Mezey

ANOTHER VERSION OF PROTEUS

Inhabitant of suspicious-looking sand,
Half deity, half animal of the deep,
He lacked memory, which bends to keep
Watch over yesterday and things that end.
But he was tortured by another engine
At least as cruel, and that was prophecy:
To know the door that shuts eternally,
The fate of the Achaean and the Trojan.
Held captive, he took on unstable matter
In shifting forms, a tempest or a bonfire,
A golden tiger or a shadowy panther,

Or water that cannot be seen in water.
You too are made of wavering, unsure
Yesterdays and tomorrows. During, before . . .

translated by Robert Mezey

ALEXANDRIA, 641 A.D.

Since the first Adam who beheld the night,
The fresh day, and the shape of his own hand,
Men have spun stories and word by word preserved
In stone or metal or on scrolls of parchment
All that the earth engirdles or dream shapes.
Here is their labor's fruit: the Library.
They say that all the volumes it comprises
Would far exceed the number of the stars
Or sand grains of the desert. Any man
Who might be bent on reading all of them
Would lose his reason and his rash eyesight.
Here the vast memory of the centuries
That came to pass, the heroes and the swords,
The symbols, terse and bare, of algebra,
The discipline that sounds the seven planets
That rule our destiny, the virtues of herbs,
The powers of talismanic ivories,
The line of verse in which the kiss abides,
Theology, the science that can thread
The solitary labyrinth of God,
Alchemy, that looks for gold in mud,
And all the images of the idolatrous.
The infidels declare that if it burned,
All history would burn. They are mistaken.
Nothing but human wakefulness brought forth
The infinity of books. If there remained
Not even a single one, it would once more