

Fitzgerald, be made into a kind of witchcraft, a kind of music—and if a man is a poet, he can do that.

After all, what do the meanings of verses mean? They stand for very little. If I say, for example, “And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars/ From this world-weary flesh,” we may not believe in astrology, but the verses are very fine. (They are by Shakespeare, incidentally.) And then of course we have the many Saxon words and the fine Latin word, “inauspicious”: “And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars.” Then the Saxon words, “From this world-weary flesh,” that have come out of Old English poetry: there you have witchcraft. And that is not enough. For example, when Shakespeare wrote,

Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?  
Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy:  
Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly?

you should feel that the idea of being amazed at someone enjoying sad music is really a silly idea. I think I could feel the beauty of “Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy,” even without comprehending the meaning of the words, since the meaning is after all something added to the verses. The verses stand for a witchcraft of their own: they are strange verbal objects in their own right.

And now, I suppose I have spoken too much. . . .

---

## CRITICISM / ROBERT SCHOLES

---

### The Reality of Borges

*“Fame is a form of incomprehension,  
perhaps the worst.” J. L. B.*

My title is presumptuous—as is the very act of writing about an author who is not only well-known but has actually shaped many of our perceptions about the possibilities of literature. Borges needs neither praise nor explanation from me or anyone else. My discussion of him, then, must be neither of these, though it may partake of both. It is a personal statement

in the form of a modest fiction: the creation of a character named Borges, based on certain documents that have appeared in the English language bearing that name. The title of this performance might have been even more presumptuous—"Borges and I"—or, most presumptuous, "My Borges."

My Borges writes in English, of course, though he has gone to some lengths to disguise this fact. Sometimes his works appear as translations made by people with patently fictional names like Norman Thomas di Giovanni. On other occasions he has published poems, designating these English texts as translations made by some of the finest poets of our day. Talk of presumption! He has enough for both of us. He has even gone so far as to arrange for publication of his works in the Spanish language, in rather pedestrian versions, which often read like too literal copies of the English originals. If there really is a Norman Thomas di Giovanni, perhaps he is responsible for this hackwork.\*

The ingenuity of Borges in disguising his true situation can hardly be credited. He has gone to the incredible length of planting different versions of his English texts, sometimes so strikingly at odds that mere error can hardly account for the differences. Let me cite an instance of this, in which he has clearly overplayed his hand. In a book called *Other Inquisitions*, in a text bearing the possibly spurious dateline Buenos Aires, December 23, 1946, he writes of a supposed ancestor who

left Argentine letters some memorable poetry, and who tried to reform the teaching of philosophy by purifying it of theological shadows and exposing the principles of Locke and Condillac. He died in exile; like all men, he was born at the wrong time. (OI, 172)

And in another book called *Labyrinths* he has given us a different version of this same text, which could easily be mistaken for another and more literal translation of some Spanish original. In this version, though the date is the same, it is presented in the European and Latin American style, with the number first: 23 December 1946. The text itself is even more blatantly manipulated. This same "ancestor," who has now become a "forebear," is called one who

---

\* Naturally, all citations will refer to the English texts, as designated by the following abbreviations:

OI = *Other Inquisitions* (Clarion, 1968).

L = *Labyrinths* (New Directions, 1964).

BOW = *Borges on Writing* (Dutton, 1973).

COB = *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (Discuss, 1970).

In one or two instances, where the Spanish suggests the possibility of a happier English phraseology, I have silently changed the English. I am sure Borges would approve.

left some memorable endecasyllables to Argentine letters and who tried to reform the teaching of philosophy, purifying it of theological shadows and expounding in his courses the principles of Locke and Condillac. He died in exile; like all men, he was given bad times in which to live. (L, 218)

The perfidy, the trickery of this Borges can hardly be exaggerated. This same ancestor—or forebear—is said in the one case to have *expounded* the philosophy of Locke and in the other to have *exposed* this very philosophy. Which side is he on? It is enough to make us wish that there were indeed some *ur-text* in Spanish that might be consulted to resolve this difficulty. But if we should approach the pretended Spanish “original” of this passage, we might find only that it was clearly derived from one or the other of the two English versions, which would settle nothing. Or we might discover in the Spanish some third term altogether, or possibly even another philosopher, added to confound us further—Leibnitz, perhaps, or Descartes. It is this fear of finding myself in some cul-de-sac of pseudo-translation which denies me the satisfaction of examining the Spanish version, just to see what tricks this Borges has been up to.

The clinching case for the Anglicism (whether British or North American) of this elusive author may be found in the writers he alludes to most frequently. There are in his works, of course, a few perfunctory references to Cervantes, Quevedo, and Unamuno, designed to provide a sort of literary local color, and there are even pseudo-allusions to South American authors who are probably inventions of Borges himself, like the notorious Honorio Bustos Domecq and B. Suarez Lynch. But the authors he returns to most often are a relatively small group of British men of letters who were prominent at the end of the last century: G. K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, G. B. Shaw, Rudyard Kipling, and H. G. Wells. He knows these writers better and reads them more sympathetically than most English teachers do. Can you imagine an English professor saying of Wilde, “He was an ingenious man who was also right”? (OI, 81). It is even harder to imagine an Argentine writer saying it. After all, not even the French, who dare to admire Poe, have gone so far as to admire Wilde. Even Gide only pitied him. But Borges is clearly steeped in the work of these British writers. They, along with the North Americans, Poe and Hawthorne, and a few Europeans like Kafka and Valéry, are his true literary ancestors. The man may indeed, as he claims, have been born and raised in the Argentine—but would an Argentine writer have so many gauchos in his work? He himself has argued subtly that there are no camels in the Koran because they went without saying, so to speak. Well, surely, gauchos ought to be equally invisible in the

work of a genuinely Argentine writer. No, the man is English to the core, though he may indeed reside in Argentina in order to disguise his origins in the English *fin de siècle*.

You may now find it even more presumptuous of me to have prefaced these words with the title "The Reality of Borges"—but if you think my fictional Borges is a mere game, totally lacking in truth value, you will have understood neither me nor him. As he has said himself, "A false fact may be essentially true" (OI, 71). By sketching for you a factually false version of Borges, I have intended to raise some questions about the relationship between fiction and reality which he has considered himself and upon which he has shed as much light as any living writer. And I have also intended to warn you that in my less obviously false presentation of Borges in the remainder of this essay, there will also be a certain measure of fiction. But now I propose to consider what Borges has had to say about the fact/fiction relationship, beginning in a very humble way by considering some of the instances of the word "reality" in his texts. My first set of illustrations will be taken from his essays on other writers collected in *Other Inquisitions*, where he takes up this problem on many occasions, with different emphases that are often quite illuminating.

Writing of Quevedo, he introduces a persistent theme in his critical work. He says of one sonnet, "I shall not say that it is a transcription of reality, for reality is not verbal. . . ." This opposition between language and reality, the unbridgeable gap between them, is fundamental to the Borgesian vision, and to much of modern epistemology and poetic theory. In particular, the notion of a lack of contact between language and world is a characteristic of those schools of critical thought that are usually called "formalist." In its extreme form this view is highly vulnerable to attacks such as that made by Fredric Jameson in *The Prison-House of Language*, for language is seen in this view as cutting man off from authentic experience by its artificialities and evasions. It is frequently assumed that Borges is a typical formalist, who holds that language is self-contained and self-sufficient—self-referential, in fact. But this is simply not the case. Let us return to that statement about the Quevedo poem. In presenting it to you the first time I actually cut it off in mid-sentence. Here is the whole thing:

I shall not say that it is a transcription of reality, for reality is not verbal, but I can say that the words are less important than the scene they evoke or the virile accent that seems to inform them. (OI, 40)

Poems are made of words and reality is not, yet there is something here between the words and the reality which is important. In this case there

are actually two things: a “scene” evoked by the words and an “accent” that seems to inform them. This scene and this accent, then, are mediations between language and world. Born of words, they have nevertheless moved beyond words toward experiences. The words suggest a speaker with a virile accent; they imply a human being of an order of reality greater than their own. And they also present a scene which is realer than language, though it falls short of reality. These fictions or inventions, then, move language *toward* reality, not away from it. Artful writing offers a key that can open the doors of the prison-house of language.

Borges develops this idea further in his philosophic discussion, “Avatars of the Tortoise”:

It is hazardous to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing else) can have much resemblance to the universe. It is also hazardous to think that one of those famous coordinations does not resemble it a little more than the others, if only in an infinitesimal way.  
(OI, 114)

The term “coordination of words,” of course, applies equally well to philosophies and stories. They are all fictions because they are verbal and the universe is not. But again comes the qualifying notion. Some of these coordinations catch more of the universe than others. And Borges adds that, of those he has considered in this context, the only one in which he recognizes “some vestige of the universe” is Schopenhauer’s. Reading this, we are permitted, or even obliged, to ask by what faculty Borges or anyone else is capable of recognizing vestiges of the universe in a mere coordination of words. I don’t want to pause and consider this question here. Or you might say I can’t. But Borges’s statement seems to imply that we are in touch with reality in some way, either through valid perceptions or through intuitions which are non-verbal. Considering this further would lead us into philosophical labyrinths darker than the ones Borges himself constructs, so let us avoid them and pick up the thread of his thought.

Twice, when turning to the question of the relationship between language—especially the language of fiction—and reality, Borges has recourse to the same quotation from Chesterton. Summarizing Chesterton’s view, he writes, “He reasons that reality is interminably rich and that the language of men does not exhaust that vertiginous treasure” (OI, 50). This position is very close to the others we have been considering, but here the solution is a bit more explicit. In both cases the quotation from Chesterton leads to a discussion of allegory, and in both cases Borges is cautious about revealing his own views—or perhaps he is simply uncertain of them. But he clearly entertains the possibility that a certain kind of allegory may serve as the

vehicle that links the verbal cosmos with the greater reality. In one discussion he reports that Chesterton considered allegories capable of “somehow” corresponding to “ungraspable reality” (OI, 50). And in the other he develops the same notion somewhat more thoroughly, suggesting that allegory may be a useful mediator between language and reality because “it is made up of words but it is not a language of language, a sign of other signs” (OI, 155). And he adds, following Chesterton, that Dante’s Beatrice, for example, “is not a sign of the word *faith*; she is a sign of the active virtue and the secret illuminations that this word indicates—a more precise sign, a richer and happier sign than the monosyllable *faith*” (OI, 155).

In both these discussions of allegory, Borges suggests that allegory fails when its fictions are reducible back to single word-concepts, but succeeds when its fictions function as complex signs moving away from simple concepts toward the “ungraspable reality.” For Borges the tendency in language toward logic is a movement away from reality. The more precise and fixed the terminology, the more inadequate it must become. Thus allegory, at its best, is thinking in images, intuitive, and open to truth. Whereas logic is a kind of game, often admirable, but not likely to catch much of the universe in its play. An allegory like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, which at its best is “refractory, so to speak, to reason,” may indeed approach the ungraspable. But Borges reproaches Hawthorne for a tendency toward reducing his own allegorical intuitions to mere moral fables. The pointing of a moral at the end of a tale is, of course, an attempt to reduce the complex to the simple, to substitute a concept for an image, and hence is a move away from the possibility of truth. “Better,” he says, “are those pure fantasies that do not look for a justification or moral and that seem to have no other substance than an obscure terror” (OI, 51).

In discussing the writer to whom he is most justly generous, he elaborates this notion further, making his illustrations concrete and specific. Having discussed the excellence of H. G. Wells as a storyteller, and recounted with amusement the reaction of Jules Verne to Wells’s *The First Men in the Moon* (Verne “exclaimed indignantly, ‘*Il invente!*’”), Borges suggests that Wells’s achievement rests on something even more important than ingenuity:

In my opinion, the excellence of Wells’s first novels—*The Island of Dr. Moreau*, for example, or *The Invisible Man*—has a deeper origin. Not only do they tell an ingenious story, but they tell a story symbolic of processes that are somehow inherent in all human destinies. The harassed invisible man who has to sleep as though his eyes were wide open because his eyelids do not exclude light is our solitude and our terror; the conventicle of seated monsters who mouth a servile creed in

their night is the Vatican and is Lhasa. Work that endures is always capable of an infinite and plastic ambiguity; it is all things to all men, like the Apostle; it is a mirror that reflects the reader's own features and it is also a map of the world. And it must be ambiguous in an evanescent and modest way, almost in spite of the author; he must appear to be ignorant of all symbolism. Wells displayed that lucid innocence in his first fantastic exercises, which are to me the most admirable part of his admirable work. (OI, 87)

This is one of the most perceptive and succinct paragraphs of literary criticism that I have encountered, and it takes us to the heart of Borges's notion of literary reality. Wells's work is a "*mirror* that reflects the reader's own features and it is also a *map* of the world." I wish to suggest that the two images employed here were not chosen lightly. Mirrors and maps are two highly different ways of imaging the world around us. They are also images that Borges returns to again and again in his own fiction. They are, of course, pointedly non-verbal signs of reality, and they are signs of different sorts. Mapping is based on a sign system that is highly arbitrary in its symbols but aspires toward an exact iconicity in its proportions. Mirrors, on the other hand, are superbly iconic in their reflections of reality, but patently artificial in at least three respects. They reduce three dimensions to a plane surface of two; they double distance and reduce size (our face in a mirror is only half its true size), and, most significantly, they reverse right and left.

The distortions of maps and mirrors, because they are visible and comparable with the reality they image, are obvious. With language, however, the distortions are less obvious and therefore more sinister. Thus fiction, which gives us images of human situations and actions, is superior to philosophy, which tries to capture these things in more abstract coordinations of words. Like Sidney, like Shelley, and other apologists for literature, Borges is answering Plato's charge that poets falsify the universe. But this is a more total answer and a stronger one for two reasons. Unlike the others it does not weaken itself by accepting the Platonic premise. Borges does *not* argue that literature points toward some eternal realm of perfect ideas. His argument concerns a complex human reality. And furthermore, he uses this complexity as the ground for an attack on philosophy itself. He denies it a privileged position from which to judge the value of literature. His very praise of philosophy robs it of its power of evaluation. Philosophy, he says, "dissolves reality," giving it "a kind of haziness." "I think that people who have no philosophy live a poor kind of life, no? People who are too sure about reality and about themselves. . . . I think that philosophy may give

the world a kind of haziness, but that haziness is all to the good" (CWB, 156).

Returning now to the passage on Wells, there is yet one more aspect of it that must be considered. The notion that art is a mirror is not a new one. We are all familiar with the classical view that art is a mirror held up to nature, and with Stendhal's more pointed version of this notion—a mirror being carried down a roadway, reflecting the mud below and the sky above. But Borges's mirror is more modest, and does only what ordinary mirrors do. We see in it not nature or the world but only ourselves: "it is a mirror that reflects the reader's own features." Of the world, art is merely a map, but it is a map that points accurately to things that are there in reality. In Wells's image of the invisible man we recognize "our own solitude and our terror"; and in the "conventicle of seated monsters who mouth a servile creed in their night" we see an image of "the Vatican" and "Lhasa." Such mirroring and such mapping take us deeply into reality though the images are obviously fabrications rather than transcriptions. And this is a major point. Reality is too subtle for realism to catch it. It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, by fabrication, we may open a way toward reality that will come as close to it as human ingenuity may come. We rely on maps and mirrors precisely because we know their limitations and know how to allow for them. But fiction functions as both map and mirror at the same time. Its images are fixed, as the configurations of a map are fixed, and perpetually various, like the features reflected by a mirror, which never gives the same image to the same person. "Work that endures," says Borges, "is capable of an infinite and plastic ambiguity."

The world that Borges maps for us in his own fictions seems at first to be as strange an image of reality as the work of a medieval cartographer. It is a world populated mainly by gauchos and librarians, men of mindless brutality and others of lettered inactivity. These extremes meet, of course, in the figure of the detective, who both acts and ratiocinates. But for the most part the extremes are what Borges chooses to present to us. His map of the world excludes much of the middle ground of life. He concentrates on the fringes, where heroes and monsters, warriors and demigods, meet and interact. And his map abounds in cartographers, busily making their own maps and titling them "Reality." For Borges the ultimate futility is that of the creature in "The Circular Ruins" who hopes to "dream a man . . . with minute integrity and insert him into reality"—only to discover that he is himself a fiction in someone else's dream world, and not in "reality" at all. This vertiginous notion that the world may be a dream is perhaps what most people think of when they hear the name Borges. But I am trying to suggest that this notion is not a value held by him but a fictitious position

assumed by him to provoke reality into showing itself. Unlike the figure in "The Circular Ruins," Borges is in reality himself and knows it. The fires of time are consuming him, even as they are consuming us and all we perceive:

Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges. (L, 234; OI, 187)

The world in all its awful reality is finally inescapable. When asked whether the writer has a responsibility to the world which he must discharge by writing fiction that is "engaged in the political and social issues of the times," Borges has not answered simply, "No," with formalist disdain, but spoken as follows:

I think it is engaged all the time. We don't have to worry about that. Being contemporaries, we have to write in the style and mode of our times. If I write a story—even about the man in the moon—it would be an Argentine story, because I'm an Argentine; and it would fall back on Western civilization because that's the civilization I belong to. I don't think we have to be conscious about it. Let's take Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* as an example. He called it a Carthaginian novel, but anyone can see that it was written by a nineteenth-century French realist. I don't suppose a real Carthaginian would make anything out of it; for all I know, he might consider it a bad joke. I don't think you should try to be loyal to your century or your opinions, because you are being loyal to them all the time. You have a certain voice, a certain kind of face, a certain way of writing, and you can't run away from them, even if you want to. So why bother to be modern or contemporary, since you can't be anything else? (BOW, 51)

The problem for the writer is not to "represent" his own time. This he cannot help but do. The problem is to be like the apostle, all things to all men. To reach beyond reality to truth, beyond the immediate and contemporary to those aspects of the real which will endure and recur. No dream tiger ever becomes a real tiger, but the image of a man of letters struggling to capture the tiger's reality is an image that may still be valid when both men and tigers are extinct and replaced by other forms of life. The writer seeks this kind of durability for his work—against great odds:

There is no exercise of the intellect which is not, in the final analysis,

useless. A philosophical doctrine begins as a plausible description of the universe; with the passage of the years it becomes a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or a name—in the history of philosophy. In literature this eventual caducity is even more notorious. (L, 43)

These are the views of Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*, who is in one sense Borges's greatest hero and in another his greatest fool. By acting on the feelings of futility expressed in this passage, Menard has refused the possibilities of literary creation. He has sought to defy time by plunging backward through it toward seventeenth-century Spain. But his work, because it is *his* and to the extent that it is *his*, must be read as that of a *fin de siècle* Frenchman affecting an archaic style. He is as tied to his time as Flaubert, even though he sought to avoid the curse of temporality by hiding in the past and assuming the voice of Cervantes. Either he has no reality, and is absorbed into the voice of the dead Spaniard, or he has his own, that of a contemporary of William James and the friend of Valéry. Readers will see him as "brazenly pragmatic" or hopelessly relativistic. Borges is reminding us in this tale that there is no meaning without a meaner. Language itself always assumes a larger context. It can never be self-referential, because in order to interpret it we must locate it in a frame of reference which is ineluctably temporal and cultural. The world is real and Menard, alas, is Menard.

There is a further paradox here, which I have only hinted at so far, but which Borges himself has clearly articulated. Reality itself is real, is in time and subject to the same consuming fires as the creatures and things which constitute it. He has expressed this exquisitely in his "Parable of Cervantes and the *Quixote*," from which I quote:

Vanquished by reality, by Spain, Don Quixote died in his native village in the year 1614. He was survived but a short time by Miguel de Cervantes.

For both of them, for the dreamer and the dreamed one, the whole scheme of the work consisted in the opposition of two worlds: the unreal world of the books of chivalry, the ordinary everyday world of the seventeenth century.

They did not suspect that the years would finally smooth away that discord, they did not suspect that La Mancha and Montiel and the knight's lean figure would be, for posterity, no less poetic than the episodes of Sinbad or the vast geographies of Ariosto.

For in the beginning of literature is the myth, and in the end as well. (L, 242)

Thus reality itself is a thing which fades into mythology with the passage of time. Or rather, most of reality fades into obscurity, and what endures is transformed into mythology. Truth vanishes. Fiction endures if it partakes of that reality beyond reality, which enables it to survive as myth. The real reality is that which has not yet happened but is to come. In one of his finest essays, "The Modesty of History," Borges encourages us to consider this situation. He begins by remarking on the way that governments try to manufacture or simulate historical occasions with an "abundance of pre-conditioning propaganda followed by relentless publicity" (OI, 167). But behind this fraudulent facade there is a "real history," which is "more modest," he suggests, with "essential dates that may be, for a long time, secret." He cites as one instance an occasion which passed with no chronological marker but certainly altered the world of letters—the date when Aeschylus is said to have changed the shape of drama by introducing a second actor upon the scene. Where only the chorus and a single speaker had appeared, on some "remote spring day, in that honey-colored theater" a second figure took up a position on stage, and with this event,

came the dialogue and the infinite possibilities of the reaction of some characters to others. A prophetic spectator would have seen that multitudes of future appearances accompanied him: Hamlet and Faust and Segismundo and Macbeth and Peer Gynt and others our eyes cannot yet discern." (OI, 168)

This was a truly historic occasion because the future ratified it and made it such. In the same essay Borges then speaks of another occasion, this one not in the world of letters but in that of heroic action. When the Vikings invaded England in the eleventh century, led by Harald Sigurdarson and Tostig, the brother of England's Saxon King Harold, there occurred a confrontation in which the English King spoke words of great valor and followed them with deeds that led to the death of the two invading chieftains and a great victory for the Saxons. As recorded almost two centuries later by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturlason, this confrontation has what Borges calls "the fundamental flavor of the heroic," which he considers a value in itself. But he adds,

Only one thing is more admirable than the admirable reply of the Saxon King: that an Iclander, a man of the lineage of the vanquished, has perpetuated the reply. It is as if a Carthaginian had bequeathed to us the memory of the exploit of Regulus. Saxo Grammaticus wrote with justification in his *Gesta Danorum*: "The men of Thule [Iceland] are very fond of learning and of recording the history of all peoples

and they are equally pleased to reveal the excellences of others or of themselves.”

Not the day when the Saxon said the words, but the day when an enemy perpetuated them, was the historic date. A date that is a prophecy of something still in the future: the day when races and nations will be cast into oblivion, and the solidarity of all mankind will be established. The offer owes its virtue to the concept of a fatherland. By relating it, Snorri surmounts and transcends that concept. (OI, 169-70)

Thus politics, wars, exchanges of words and sword-thrusts, are saved from oblivion by the historian who turns them into instances of heroic myth, and by doing so offers us a glimpse of a humanity beyond nationalistic pride. The men of heroic action need the men of letters if they and their deeds are to survive. And the men of letters need the heroic actors in order to keep their letters alive. The gaucho on the pampas and the librarian in Buenos Aires are the parts of a mythical beast, a kind of centaur, each needing the other for completion.

History, for Borges, is a matter of witnessing as much as a matter of doing. The forms of the past are preserved in frail human vessels which are themselves destined to die—and these deaths, too, are historic though unrecorded. In his parable of “The Witness” Borges writes,

In time there was a day that extinguished the last eyes to see Christ; the battle of Junin and the love of Helen died with the death of a man. What will die with me when I die, what pathetic or fragile form will the world lose? The voice of Macedonio Fernández, the image of a red horse in the vacant lot at Serrano and Charcas, a bar of sulphur in the drawer of a mahogany desk?  
(L, 243)

Here, in accents reminiscent of Pater, Borges reminds us not of the intractability of reality but of the fragility of it. How it resides in little things as well as great, and how they pass away, and how finally even those who have seen them pass away as well. And though Borges can mention the voice of Macedonio Fernández, his words will never capture that voice. What they will convey, however, is something even more fragile: his feeling about the voice. And this, too, is a kind of reality and not the least kind.

Approaching the end of an essay or a lecture, one's thoughts turn toward conclusions. Speaker and spectator glance surreptitiously at clocks and watches, both, perhaps, looking forward to release from the rigidity of their rôles. Still, there is a painful dimension to conclusions, which has animated one of Borges's finest poems, “Límites,” which like much of his lit-

erary work is about something very real indeed. Speaking of that poem to Richard Burgin, he observed,

It's quite easy to write an original poem, let's say, with original thoughts or surprising thoughts. I mean, if you think, that's what the metaphysical poets did in England, no? But in the case of "Límites," I have had the great luck to write a poem about something that everybody has felt or may feel. For example, what I am feeling today in Cambridge—I am going tomorrow to New York and won't be back until Wednesday or Tuesday and I feel that I am doing things for the last time.

And yet, I mean that most common feelings, most human feelings, have found their way into poetry and been worked over and over again, as they should have been, for the last thousand years. But here I've been very lucky, because having a long literary past, I mean, having read in many literatures, I seem to have found a subject that is fairly new and yet a subject that is not thought extravagant. Because when I say, especially at a certain age, that we are doing many things for the last time and may not be aware of it—for all I know I may be looking out of this window for the last time, or there are books that I shall never read, books that I have already read for the last time—I think that I have opened, let's say, the door, to a feeling that all men have.

(COB, 90, 91)

The value of the poem is seen by Borges as less in its originality than in its universality: "something that everybody has felt, or may feel"—a sentiment that brings Borges very close to Samuel Johnson. There is a reality of shared human experiences, then, that justifies poems and fictions by their encompassing it. Far from being self-referential or a labyrinthine cul-de-sac, poem and story exist to bridge the gap between people and things—and between one person and another. In this connection it is interesting to observe that Borges's poem bears a startling resemblance to a fugitive piece written by Johnson himself—*Idler* 103, the closing paper in the *Idler* series, in which he speculates on the phenomenon of finality:

Though the *Idler* and his readers have contracted no close friendship, they are perhaps both unwilling to part. There are few things not purely evil, of which we can say, without some emotion of uneasiness, *this is the last*. Those who never could agree together, shed tears when mutual discontent has determined them to final separation; of a place which has been frequently visited, though without pleasure, the last look is taken with heaviness of heart; and the *Idler*, with all his chilness of

tranquility, is not wholly unaffected by the thought that his last essay is now before him.

This secret horror of the last is inseparable from a thinking being, whose life is limited, and to whom death is dreadful.

I do not mean to suggest that Borges, like Pierre Menard, has been trying to rewrite Dr. Johnson. Quite the opposite. For, though their subjects are quite similar, they are each irrevocably of their time, in style and emphasis, and in those unspoken values that inform style and emphasis. What links them despite these differences is reality itself, and in particular the human condition of that reality. And Johnson, I am sure, would applaud Borges's most succinct statement of his position in this matter. Literature, he has said, "is not a mere juggling of words" (BOW, 164). It requires that a writer have what Chesterton called "everything." A notion which Borges glosses in the following way:

To a writer this everything is more than an encompassing word; it is literal. It stands for the chief, for the essential, human experiences. For example, a writer needs loneliness, and he gets his share of it. He needs love, and he gets shared and also unshared love. He needs friendship. In fact, he needs the universe. (BOW, 163)

And the universe—the universe of men and women at any rate—needs the writer. We need him to say the big things, of course, but also the little ones: things like, "Perhaps a bird was singing and I felt for him a small, birdlike affection" (OI, 180). And when I say the writer I mean specifically the one who is called Jorge Luis Borges, for whom many people in many lands feel a strong human affection, and of whom it is very appropriate to speak in precisely the same language in which he spoke of H. G. Wells. Referring to Wells's early scientific romances, Borges wrote:

I think they will be incorporated, like the fables of Theseus or Ahasuerus, into the general memory of the species and even transcend the fame of their creator or the extinction of the language in which they were written." (OI, 88)

So be it.