

Colin Hamilton

A 101 FICTIONS

"The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges."

"It is equally true," wrote the Uruguayan critic Benjamin Otorola in a 1986 obituary for the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, "to say he authored many brilliant works and that he authored only one, for it can be legitimately argued that having read just one of his fictions, each of which requires just a few pages, one has read them all."

They are remarkably repetitive. Throughout Borges' work, the same stock props—mirrors, labyrinths, books and knives—appear and reappear. Women and children are notoriously foreign. In plot as well as prop, Borges' fictions (is there another writer whose works could be simply referred to as "fictions"?) rely on just a handful of devices. The climax of numerous stories—including "The Improbable Imposter Tom Castro," "Man on Pink Corner," "Borges and I," "The Dead Man" and "Shakespeare's Memory"—is the seizure of one character's identity by another. A second device—at work in "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" and "In Memoriam, J.F.K." among others—is the subjugation of characters to historically defined roles that compel them to act out dramas of which they are often unaware.

The Danish critic Edward Nilsen has written, "The essential paradox of the Borgesian universe is that any two things can be exchanged, but nothing can escape its destiny. There are random events, but there is no free will." In "The South," for example, Dahlmann, a man of Buenos Aires, travels to the country, where he is challenged to a knife fight. It is clearly suicide, but this is "the South," and in the South, men fight with knives when insulted. When an old gaucho, who had seemed to be a sympathetic character, hands Dahlmann a knife, he has no choice but to use it, even if that means to use it clumsily. Nevertheless, "[Dahlmann] sensed that had he been able to choose or dream his death that night, this is the death he would have dreamed or chosen."

Collected Fictions, Jorge Luis Borges, Andrew Hurley, trans., Viking Press, 1998, 580 pages, \$40.

Much like his famous Aleph (a single spot which contains all space), Borges took a minute form, limited in both pages and themes, and used it as a mirror of infinity, or at least something tremendously vast. In his *Collected Fictions*, a reader will find: a Chinese pirate, Billy the Kid and a New York gangster; an Indian Muslim in search of a god-like figure; drunken samurai out to avenge their murdered master; a Chinese spy for the Nazi forces about to be caught by an English captain; countless gauchos and would-be toughs; two brothers divided, then joined, by their love for a woman; Irish revolutionaries; and various religious sects. And their stories are told in stunning, unexpected bursts of science fiction, gothic narrative, Gnostic theology, Jewish mysticism and magical realism.

Photos of the haughty, awkward, bookish, blind man reveal a great deal. Borges read deeply in metaphysical and arcane texts, and those who love his work love the mental labyrinths they weave. What the photos mask is that he respected *The Arabian Nights*, H. G. Wells and Kipling as much as he respected Leibnitz or Schopenhauer. Like Poe before him, Borges never failed to tell a *good* story, a *fun* story; like Poe, Borges' sense of fun is often very cruel.

"The Lottery in Babylon" describes a world completely ruled by chance, where "the purchaser of a dozen amphorae of Damascene wine will not be surprised if one contains a talisman, or viper; the scribe who writes out a contract never fails to include some error." "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," from the same original collection, describes the chance discovery of a world meticulously crafted by a secret cabal of "astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists . . ." that is slowly eclipsing our own.

Some critics complain that Borges experienced a brief high period, bordered by *Ficciones* (1944) and *The Aleph* (1949), and that most everything else is a pale imitation. (I am reminded of Borges' defense of Oscar Wilde: "His enemies may say that it is the only thing he has; but to me to have charm is fundamental. That accusation is like saying this fellow is only a genius, or that fellow is only an angel.") While it's true that the early and later collections are less even, and often less startling, fictions such as "The Interloper," "The General and His Maps," "Et Cetera," etc. can stand beside the best of Borges.

Or take, for example, "The Gospel According to Mark," from *Brodie's Report* (1970). A bookish "free-thinker," Baltasar Espinosa, goes to visit his cousin's ranch. A storm breaks, followed by floods, isolating Espinosa at the ranch with a farm hand, Gutre, his son and a girl who may or may not be

Gutre's daughter. It's all quite boring—there is nothing to do, nothing to read. At last, Espinosa finds the Gutre family Bible, a relic from an age when the Gutres could read. To pass the time, he reads them the Gospel According to St. Mark, and this reading becomes their daily habit, and then obsession. Once an outsider, he becomes accepted by the family. One night the girl comes naked to his room. The next day Gutre asks if Christ “allowed himself to be killed in order to save all mankind” and if “those that drove the nails will also be saved?” Although Espinosa's “theology was a bit shaky,” he answers, fatally, “yes.” “Then they cursed him, spat on him, and drove him to the back of the house. The girl was weeping. Espinosa realized what awaited him on the other side of the door. When they opened it, he saw the sky. A bird screamed; *it's a goldfinch*, Espinosa thought. There was no roof on the shed; they had torn down the roof beams to build the Cross.”

Yet the challenge begs the question, “Do we need a *collected* fictions?” We've gone thirteen years since his death without one, and more than twenty years since his last new book of fictions appeared in English. Now, as part of a three-phase project to collect, re-translate* and re-release his fictions, poems and essays, Andrew Hurley and Viking Press have published the *Collected Fictions*. There is no denying that a selected would be more perfect, or that it would principally feature works from *Ficciones* and *The Aleph*. What the *Collected Fictions* reveal, however, is the astonishing depth and range of a form whose limits are so quickly evident. To praise Borges in words that might move him, if I had 1,001 nights to pass, there is no work I would prefer for company more than these 101 fictions.

*Ignorant of Spanish, I hesitate to comment on the quality of Hurley's translations. As a reader, however, I do feel that two titles have been lessened: “Funes, the Memorious” has become “Funes, His Memory” and “The Intruder” has become the less blunt “The Interloper.”