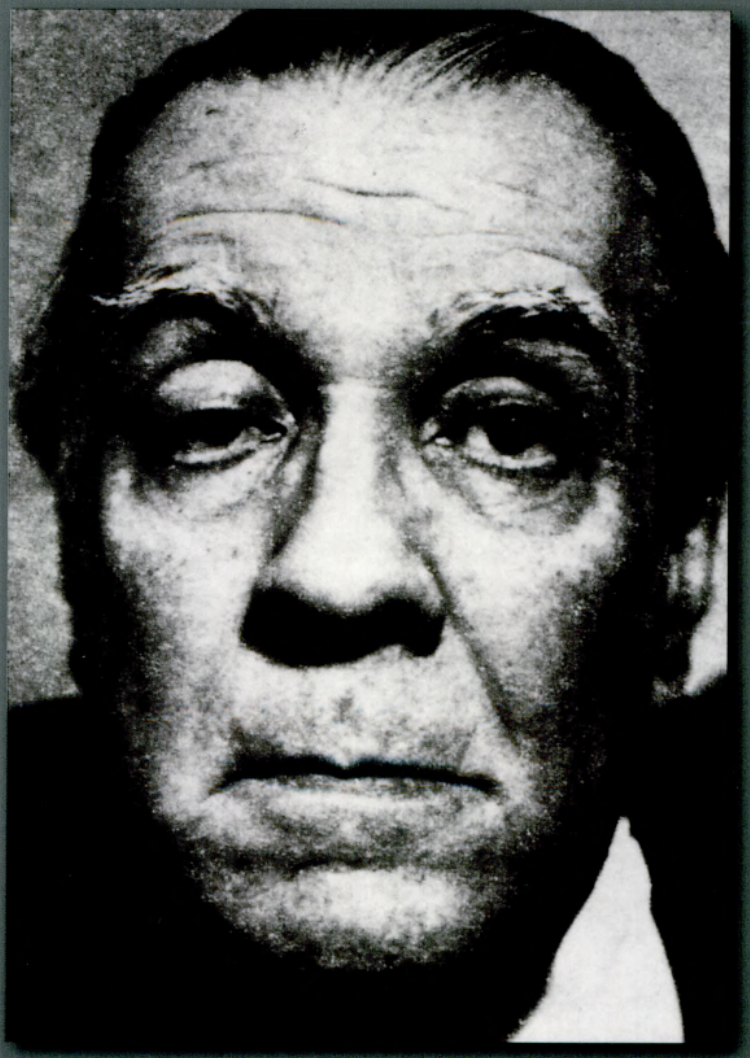
Jorge Luis Borges

Conversations



Edited by Richard Burgin

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A Personal Anthology. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
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Doctor Brodie's Report. New York: Dutton, 1971.
An Introduction to American Literature. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971.
Extraordinary Tales. With A. Bioy Casares. New York: Herder and Herder, 1971.
A Universal History of Infamy. New York: Dutton, 1972.
Selected Poems 1923–1967. Boston: Delacorte Press/ A Seymour Lawrence Book, 1972.
In Praise of Darkness. New York: Dutton, 1974.
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Contents

Introduction

When Jorge Luis Borges first became known in the United States he was often described as a ghost-like character, albeit one of forbidding intelligence, a man so consumed by books that he somehow lacked normal human desires and personality traits. It was as if his commentators took Borges's literary themes of the fictive nature of identity and the dreamlike quality of existence and ascribed them to Borges himself. In the afterword to Borges's *Personal Anthology* (1970), for instance, there's an amusing exchange of letters between Borges's translators in which they openly (and perhaps only half-jokingly) speculate about whether there really is a single, actual "Jorge Luis Borges," writing of him somewhat as Borges wrote of Shakespeare in his famous parable, "Everyone and No One."

These speculations about Borges were not so unusual at the time and remind us just how powerfully convincing the Borgesian vision initially was for his mesmerized readers. But the people who first interviewed Jorge Luis Borges knew better. They met a very real man who was warm and candid, a modest old-world gentleman with an impish sense of humor: in short, a distinct personality with strong, often unfashionable convictions.

That his point of view was fixed and often passionate should not be surprising because by the time Borges began to be widely interviewed in English he was already in his sixties and a fully formed person. Indeed, the interviews in this anthology demonstrate that his views and attitudes remained remarkably consistent for the last twenty years of his life (1966–1986). Repeatedly Borges expresses his love of English and North American literature in general, and in particular for the writers Stevenson, Kipling, Shaw, Welles, Conrad, Chesterton, De Quincey, Poe, Emerson, Twain, Whitman, and Frost. Repeatedly Borges also emphasizes his love of clarity in writing, his preference for stories over novels, his strong aversion to overly analytical literary criticism, to Communism, Perón and anti-Semitism. There are also his beliefs that the differences among the story, poem, and essay are trivial, that enjoyment is the paramount purpose of literature, that he disbelieves in an afterlife, welcomes death and fears immortality, that time is the central philosophical problem, that the influence of his childhood reading in his father's library

was primal, as is his enduring love for his family and for the friends of his youth and, in spite of his quarrels with it, for his country.

The picture that emerges is of a complicated but fully convincing human being, yet we can also understand the disbelieving awe of his early readers simply because Borges is such an imposing artistic and intellectual force. By acclamation Jorge Luis Borges is one of the century's seminal writers, but he is also more than that. He's a major innovator who has expanded forever the possibilities of both the story and the essay, and, though he would deny it, he's a thinker too (if not a philosopher with a capital P) who's introduced new themes into modern literature, such as the notion of infinity, and thereby altered the way his readers regard reality itself. No wonder people used to question his existence; Borges isn't, finally, a normal man, but he's not a demigod or ghost-like spirit either. I think the word genius is applicable, however, a gentle genius.

But if Borges is a genius with a consistent vision, that vision is also sufficiently rich that different interviewers at different times and occasions inevitably reveal new parts of it. Thus in Borges's 1966 interview with noted fiction writer Richard Stern (which appears here), Stern understandably asks about Borges's aesthetics of fiction, and Borges goes into unusual detail in answering him, expressing his desire to write more simple stories, "rather after the manner of Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills.*" In my own interviews with Borges, conducted during 1967 and '68 while I was a senior at Brandeis University and eventually published as *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (the first book-length interview with Borges in English), I concentrate primarily on discussing the meanings and techniques he employed in his prose and poetry. The excerpt reprinted here focuses on his major stories, and Borges discusses them more closely than in any other interview in this collection simply because I asked him. Throughout this anthology, Borges rarely evades a question and virtually never refuses to answer one.

The interviews gathered here also belie the notion of Borges as exclusively an ivory tower dreamer. That was certainly a part of him, but he was also a cosmopolitan man who traveled extensively, spoke several languages fluently, was open and gregarious with people, and was keenly aware of the political and social situation of his country (though he repeatedly asserts that a writer shouldn't be judged by his political opinions). Consequently, the political and social events of the time sometimes directly influence the content of these conversations. In "Borges at NYU" edited by the Borges critic and scholar Ronald Christ (a colloquium reprinted from *TriQuarterly,* 1971),

there are some pointed political questions posed by student radicals about Borges's moderate politics and lack of commitment to various leftist political causes. Oddly, this discussion also reveals an almost clownish side of Borges's humor as well as his prowess as a stand-up comedian as he rips off a series of fine one-liners. Besides reflecting the political preoccupations of the time, this discussion is notable for its extraordinary diversity of emotion. Similarly, Rita Guibert's fine, wide-ranging interview, conducted in 1968 but published in 1973, also reflects those frenetic times, as Borges is asked and talks at some length about hippies and drugs, conformism, materialism, and violence in American society. It was a measure of Borges's appeal, perhaps, that in the '60s and early '70s, a time marked by seemingly irreconcilable social conflicts, Borges was adopted by psychedelic experimenters and university professors alike.

Some of Borges's questioners knew him considerably better as a person than others. Seldon Rodman, for example, spent a good deal of time with Borges in his home city of Buenos Aires. The result is an exceptionally intimate narrative (with a generous amount of direct quotations from Borges) which gives us a good sense of Borges's everyday life. In Rodman's interviews (conducted over a three year period, 1969–72) we're given a description of Borges's apartment and his office at the National Library. We meet Borges's maid, some of his friends and collaborators, including his main translator, Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, who had moved to Buenos Aires at the time to work in direct collaboration with Borges. We also meet Borges's wife and then, two years later, learn of his reaction to his divorce from her in this excerpt:

> When I returned to Buenos Aires two years later, Borges hadn't changed but the circumstances of his life had. He was back with his mother, and he was not contesting his wife's demands for exorbitant alimony. I asked Di Giovanni why.
>
> "He's been living in constant fear that he *won't* have to pay alimony! He feels guilty as hell. He thinks he alone is responsible for the failure of the marriage and should pay for it. Also, don't forget that while Borges is kind, generous, humble, imaginative and noble, courage isn't part of his character. When his wife cursed him loudly at the airport once, with people all around listening in, he just stood there next to me with head bowed taking it without a word of rejoinder."

Like Rodman, Willis Barnstone (a Borges translator, in addition to being a poet and prolific author) had more than a professional relationship with

Borges. His interviews also show an unusually personal side of Borges. In "With Borges in Buenos Aires" (originally published in *Denver Quarterly,* 1980), we follow Borges through a typical working day as he delivers a poem to his newspaper editor's office at *La Nación.* "People came up to Borges frequently and shook his hand. Borges said he hired all these pedestrians to do this. . . . A man came up to us and rhetorically addressed Borges, seizing his hand and shaking it furiously. 'Borges, you are immortal.'

'Don't be a pessimist, sir,' Borges gently replied." The piece ends as Borges boards a plane to America to begin a five-day lecture tour.

In Barnstone's other interview published in this collection, "Thirteen Questions: A Dialogue with Jorge Luis Borges" (*Chicago Review,* 1980), Barnstone achieves a different kind of intimacy as he probes Borges about the nature of consciousness, dreaming, death, and suicide. It is at once a vaguely psychedelic, yet powerful record of Borges's metaphysics. Barnstone is also responsible for translating a delightfully informal colloquium with Borges at Indiana University in 1976 (originally published in *Boulevard* magazine, 1998) in which Borges answers questions from the panel of professors present, as well as from the audience, on a variety of topics. Among other things, Borges discusses the different impulses he feels in writing stories as opposed to essays, his inability to create characters, the ethical function of literature, how his identity has shifted in time ("I was unhappy during my adolescence, but the truth is that I wanted to be unhappy."), and his attitude toward God: "God is something we are always creating."

Alastair Reid and Donald Yates are two other interlocutors in this volume who had more than a professional interviewing relationship with Borges. Reid, an eminent poet and man of letters, is one of Borges's translators. He introduces Borges as a featured speaker in conjunction with the forum "Franz Kafka and Modern World Literature: A Centennial Perspective" at the Modern Language Association in New York (1983). After Borges's relatively brief opening statement, Reid serves as the main questioner as well as the moderator for questions from the audience. The forum is notable not only for Borges's insights into Kafka, whom he acknowledges to be a direct influence on two of his stories, but also for what it shows us about a trait of Borges's psychology one might call "people pleasing," for one can hardly help observing how Borges escalates his praise of Kafka as the proceedings go on, seemingly to please the audience of Kafka devotees.

There are two contributions from the Borges biographer Donald Yates in this volume. "A Colloquy with Jorge Luis Borges" (held at the University of

Michigan in 1976) is noteworthy for Borges's observations on the form of the novel and why he never wrote one, on Borges's insights into De Quincey and Stevenson, and on the differences between Spanish and English. Yates's "Simply a Man of Letters" is a reprint of a panel discussion held at a symposium on Borges at the University of Maine in 1982. Yates is the moderator and principal interviewer. The discussion provides some important insights into the conflict of Borges's public and private selves that he dramatized in his celebrated parable "Borges and I." In response to Yates's question about the parable, Borges says: "As for two Borges, I have been made keenly aware that there are two, because when I think of myself, I think, let us say, of a rather secret, a rather hesitant, groping man. Somehow, this can hardly be reconciled to the fact that I seem to be giving lectures all the time and traveling all over the world."

While other interviewers in this anthology may not offer the types of intimacies that often emerge when the interviewer knows Borges well, they offer instead the pleasures of a certain distance. L. S. Dembo's interview, first published in *Contemporary Literature* (1970), features an arresting discussion on the limits of man's knowledge, the labyrinth as an image of perplexity, as well as the influence of dreams on Borges's work. In the interview originally published in *Commonweal* (1968) Borges is questioned by Patricia Marx, then a weekly interviewer for WNYC, and by the esteemed drama and literary critic John Simon. The piece sparkles with intellectual energy, as Borges comments on the difference between the real and fantastic, his personal religion, and the absence of sex in his work: "I suppose the reason is that I think too much about it."

The last three interviews in this book were conducted when Borges was over 80, but his candor and intellectual vigor are still completely intact. The occasion for the interview by Jon Biguenet and Tom Whalen, editors of *The New Orleans Review,* was Borges's 1982 trip to New Orleans, one of his favorite cities, where he received various civic and academic honors. The piece reveals Borges's deep modesty as he reflects on the influence of age, loneliness, and blindness on his writing. There's a somewhat sad tone to the interview, but it's relieved at times by Borges's characteristic humor. When the inevitable question of identity arises and the editors ask him, "Which Borges are we talking to?" he replies, "Well, you pays your money and you takes your chances."

Clark M. Zlotchew traveled to Buenos Aires for this 1984 interview, originally published in *American Poetry Review,* that investigates a multiplicity of

topics such as Borges's writing habits and methods, his memory of seeing a man killed, the movie made of his life and another made of the story "The Intruder," his Jewish origin, Chess vs. Truco, and a clear-eyed description of the social ills of the Argentine.

Finally, there is Amelia Barili's interview "Borges on Life and Death." Barili, then the book review editor of the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Prensa,* befriended Borges (and began interviewing him) in 1981. Her last interview took place in November 1985, seven months before Borges died, and was published on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review* a month after Borges's death. The piece contains a sometimes searingly beautiful series of reflections by Borges on the Bible, the Kabalah, space, time, God, death, and immortality and makes a fitting conclusion to this volume.

Though Borges was deeply skeptical about chronological time, the pieces in this book (in keeping with the University Press of Mississippi Series) are presented in chronological order, uncut and edited only where there is a typographical or other obvious error. *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations* is meant to have a mix of informality and lively scholarship. Reading it over in its entirety, I find several themes that emerge and reemerge with variations like themes in a piece of music. Is there a single overarching one? Perhaps the following quotation from Borges himself provides the answer: "Through the years a man peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, tools, stars, horses and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face."

I wish to thank Rebekah Grossman for her extraordinarily valuable research and Jeremy Countryman for his greatly appreciated assistance in a variety of areas. Willis Barnstone and Clark Zlotchew were generous in helping me locate some of the interviewers and in providing materials, as was Dan Shapiro of the Américas Society, and I owe much gratitude to Julia Hanna of Washington University for her help as well. I need to thank the distinguished Borges biographer Emir Rodriguez Monengal and Clark M. Zlotchew, as I relied heavily on their material in compiling my chronology for this book. Finally, I am grateful also to my wise and patient editor Seetha A-Srinivasan, and to my young beloved son Ricky, who inspires everything good that I attempt to do. I trust, to paraphrase Borges once again, that the most important names on this list have not been omitted.

Chronology

1899 Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges is born on August 24th to Jorge Guillermo Borges and Leonor Acevedo Suárez in Buenos Aires. His father is a lawyer, a psychology teacher, and sometime writer, with poor eyesight which Borges inherits. From his father's side he has mixed English and Portuguese blood, from his mother's close relatives in Uruguay. Borges's younger sister Norah is born in 1902. He is close with her, and she becomes a well-regarded painter. (A younger brother of Borges dies in infancy.) From his earliest recollections of childhood Borges is afraid of mirrors and carnival masks and loves tigers and the books in his father's library.

1906 Encouraged by his father to be a writer, Borges writes a composition on Greek mythology in English and "La Visera Fatal" in Spanish, a story which he borrows from *Don Quixote.*

1908 Borges translates Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* into Spanish.

1912 Borges publishes his first short story, "King of the Jungle."

1914 Prior to the outbreak of World War I, Borges's father retires due to failing eyesight and the family moves to Europe. They visit London, Paris, and northern Italy before arriving in Geneva. The outbreak of war makes them stay there for four years. Already fluent in Spanish and English, Borges studies French and Latin at his Swiss school. He also studies German on his own, first by reading Heine, and eventually reads Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. In French, he reads Hugo and many of the French Symbolists. He continues reading English authors such as Carlyle and Chesterton and also discovers Whitman.

1919 The Borges family moves to Spain. In Madrid, Borges comes under the influence of the writer Rafael Cansinos-Asséns and also of the Ultraist poets. He immerses himself in Spanish literature and contributes poems, articles, and translations of the Expressionists to the Ultraist magazines. (His first poem, "Hymn to the Sea," is published in the magazine *Grecia.*) He also befriends Guillermo de Torre who helps promote Borges's literary theories and who eventually marries Norah Borges in 1928.

1921 The Borges family returns to Buenos Aires where Borges befriends a new literary/philosophical mentor, Macedonio Fernández, an old friend of his father's. Borges launches a little magazine that proclaims the Ultraist aesthetics called *Prism*—a poster-like sheet illustrated with Norah's woodcuts.

1922 With Macedonio Fernández, Borges and other friends found the little magazine *Proa* (*Prow*).

1923 Borges publishes his first book of poetry, *Passion for Buenos Aires* (featuring Norah's woodcuts). The family makes a second trip to Europe.

1924 Borges returns to Buenos Aires and re-founds *Proa* (the original magazine had stopped production) with Ricardo Güiraldes and other writers. (Güiraldes would publish *Don Segundo Sombra* in 1926, a gauchesque novel that became a classic of Argentine literature.) Borges collaborates in the influential avant-garde magazine *Martín Fierro.*

1925 Borges publishes his second book of poems, *Moon Across the Way,* and his first book of essays, *Inquisitions.* Borges eventually gathers and destroys all copies that he can of the latter and forbids its republication. Borges meets the essayist and literary patron Victorio Ocampo with whom he has a long literary relationship.

1926 Borges publishes his second book of essays, *The Extent of My Hope,* which is never reissued.

1928 Borges publishes his third book of essays, *The Language of the Argentines.* He befriends the Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes whom Borges credits with helping him abandon his "avant-garde" and baroque style for his eventual classic style.

1929 Borges publishes his third book of poems, *San Martín Copybook,* which wins second prize in a municipal literary competition.

1930 Borges publishes a literary biography about the Argentine poet (and friend of his family) Evaristo Carriego. Through Victorio Ocampo he meets Adolfo Bioy Casares. They become lifelong friends and collaborators.

1931 Victorio Ocampo founds *Sur,* which becomes Argentina's most important literary journal. Borges frequently contributes to it.

1932 Borges publishes his fourth book of essays, *Discussión.*

1933 The magazine *Megaphone* devotes part of its August issue to a consideration of Borges's work. Borges is appointed literary editor of *Crítica*'s Saturday supplement.

1935 Borges publishes *A Universal History of Infamy,* his first book of stories, containing many pieces he'd already published in *Crítica.*

1936 Borges publishes his fifth collection of essays, *History of Eternity.* He is appointed editor of the biweekly section "Foreign Books and Authors" for *El Hogar* (*Home*), a position he holds until 1939. For *Sur* he translates Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own.*

1937 The Kapelusz publishing house prints *Classical Anthology of Argentine Literature* which Borges edits with Pedro Henríquez Ureña. Borges claims Ureña did all the work. Borges translates Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* for *Sur.* Because of his father's declining health Borges secures a position as a first assistant at the Miguel Cané Municipal Library on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. He remains there (with one promotion) until 1946.

1938 An edition of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is published that Borges edits and prefaces. His father dies in February. Borges's poor eyesight contributes to a Christmas Eve accident that causes septicemia and almost costs him his life.

1939 While convalescing (to prove to himself that he's kept his sanity) Borges writes the short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote."

1940 With Bioy Casares and his new bride Silvinia Ocampo (Victorio's sister) Borges edits and publishes *Anthology of Fantastic Literature.* Borges also writes a prologue to Casares's science fiction novel, *The Invention of Morel,* which is a virtual manifesto for fantastic literature.

1941 With the Sur publishing house Borges publishes his second book of stories, *The Garden of Forking Paths.* With Silvinia and Bioy Casares he edits *Anthology of Argentine Poetry.* Borges's translations for that year include Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* for *Sudamericana.*

1942 Using the pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq, Borges and Bioy Casares collaborate on a series of parodic detective stories, *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi* by Sur publishing house. The magazine *Sur* devotes parts of the month's issue to a "Reparation for Borges" (for

The Garden of Forking Paths not receiving any literary prize) to which important writers from the Hispanic world contribute.

1943 Borges publishes his first collected poems, *Poemas,* in which he eliminates many earlier poems and rewrites others. With Casares he edits and publishes *The Best Detective Stories.*

1944 Borges publishes his most famous story collection, *Ficciones,* with Sur publishing house. The collection combines the stories of *The Garden of Forking Paths* with *Artifices.*

1945 Emecé publishes *El Compadrito,* an anthology of verse and prose about Buenos Aires hoodlums edited by Borges and Silvina Bullrich Palenque. The Argentine Society of Writers awards *Ficciones* its Grand Prix of d'Honneur.

1946 To punish Borges for having signed some political declarations against the Fascist Perón government, Borges is "promoted" from his position at the library to Inspector of Poultry. Borges resigns and begins a new career as a lecturer and public speaker. A government policeman is assigned to take notes at his lectures. *The Annals of Buenos Aires,* a new magazine, appoints Borges editor. Borges remains in this post until publication ceases in 1948. Among the new writers he introduces are Julio Cortázar. Under the pseudonym B. Suázez Lynch, Borges and Casares publish a detective novel, *A Model for Death.* With the pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq they also publish two fantastic stories entitled "Two Memorable Fantasies." Both books are privately published in limited editions and not reissued until 1970.

1947 In another private edition, Borges publishes his celebrated quasi-philosophical essay "New Refutation of Time."

1948 Borges's mother and sister are imprisoned for participating in a demonstration against Perón. His mother remains under house arrest for a month, while Norah spends time in the prostitute's section of the local prison.

1949 Losada publishes Borges's fourth book of stories, *The Aleph.*

1950 Borges is appointed Professor of English and American Literature of the Argentine Association of English Culture and President of the Argentine Society of Writers. He remains president of the society until 1953.

1951 Borges publishes an anthology of his own fiction, *Death and the*

Compass. He also publishes a scholarly book, *Ancient German Literature,* in Mexico (which he rewrites with María Esther Vázquez and re-publishes in 1965) and with Bioy Casares a second anthology of *The Best Detective Stories.*

1952 His sixth and most popular book of essays *Other Inquisitions* is published. *The Language of the Argentines* is reissued in a new edition.

1953 Borges publishes *Martin Fierro* (with Margarita Guerrero), a study of the Argentine poet. The Emecé publishing House begins publication of Borges's complete works. Borges and Leopoldo Torre Nilsson write the script for *Days of Wrath,* a film based on Borges's story "Emma Zunz."

1954 *Days of Wrath* appears. *Poems 1923–1953* and *Universal History of Infamy* are reissued as part of Borges's complete works.

1955 The military government that overthrows Perón appoints Borges Director of the National Library, a position he holds until 1973. With Bioy Casares, Borges publishes two rejected filmscripts, *The Hoodlums* and *The Believers' Paradise,* and two anthologies, *Extraordinary Tales* and *Gauchesque Poetry* (published in Mexico). With Luisa Mercedes Levinson, Borges publishes a collection of their stories, *Eloísa's Sister,* though only the title story was written in collaboration. With Betina Edelberg, Borges also publishes a study of the celebrated Argentine poet Leopoldo Lugones.

1956 The University of Cuyo in Argentina awards Borges his first of many honorary doctorates. Borges is appointed Professor of English Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in Buenos Aires. With his eyesight failing Borges is advised to stop reading and writing, and his mother becomes, in effect, his private secretary.

1957 Borges publishes *Manual of Fantastic Zoology* (with Margarita Guerrero). Borges is awarded the National Prize for Literature.

1960 Borges publishes *El Hacedor* (translated into English as *Dreamtigers*), a collection of prose and verse, and edits *Book of Heaven and Hell* with Bioy Casares.

1961 Borges is awarded the Formentor International Publishers Prize (with Samuel Beckett), a key event in developing his international reputation. Borges teaches for a year at the University of Texas. An Argentine movie based on his story "Man from the Slums" is released.

1962 Borges is translated for the first time into English in book form with

the publication of *Ficciones* and *Labyrinths.* Borges is awarded France's Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters and is elected a member of the Argentine Academy of Letters.

1963 Borges travels throughout Europe and wins the Prize of Argentina's National Endowment for the Arts.

1964 *The One, The Same,* Borges's fourth book of poetry, is published. In Paris *L'Herne* publishes the first large collection of testimonials and essays about Borges.

1965 Ana María Barrenechea publishes *Borges, the Labyrinth Maker,* the first book-length critical study of Borges in English. Borges publishes, with María Esther Vázquez, *Introduction to English Literature.* Borges is awarded the Order of the British Empire.

1966 Borges wins the 1965 Literary Prize of the Ingram Merrill Foundation of New York and is appointed Professor of English Literature at the Stella Maris Catholic University of Argentina.

1967 Borges marries Elsa Astete Millán, a childhood friend whom he meets again after she becomes a widow. They travel to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Borges is Charles Elliot Norton Lecturer at Harvard. With Casares he publishes *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq,* and with Esther Zemborain de Torres he publishes *An Introduction to American Literature.*

1968 With Margarita Guerrero, Borges publishes *The Book of Imaginary Beings.*

1969 Borges's fifth book of poetry, *In Praise of Darkness,* is published. *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* by Richard Burgin (the first book-length series of interviews with Borges in English) is published by Holt Rinehart. E.P. Dutton begins publication of Borges's complete works in English. Several films based on Borges's stories are made in France, Italy, and Argentina.

1970 Borges publishes a new short story collection, *Dr. Brodie's Report.* Borges's "Autobiographical Essay" is published by *The New Yorker.* Bernardo Bertolucci adapts the Borges story "Theme of the Traitor and Hero" for Italian TV. Borges divorces Elsa Astete Millán.

1971 Columbia University awards Borges an honorary doctorate. Borges travels to England to receive an honorary doctorate from Oxford and to Israel to receive The Jerusalem Prize.

1972 Borges publishes *The Gold of the Tigers,* his sixth book of poetry, and receives an honorary doctorate from the University of Michigan.

1973 Borges receives "permission" to retire as Director of the National Library from the new Perón government. Borges wins the Alfonso Reyes International Prize in Mexico City.

1974 In one volume Emecé publishes *The Complete Works of Jorge Luis Borges.* It is 1,164 pages long. A new movie based on a script by Borges and Casares, *The Others,* is released in France.

1975 Borges's mother dies at 99. He publishes *The Unending Rose,* his seventh book of poems, *The Book of Sand,* his fifth book of stories, and *Prologues, with a Prologue of Prologues,* a selection of 38 prefaces he has written for different books. Two more of his stories are filmed in Argentina.

1976 Borges's eighth poetry collection, *The Iron Coin,* is published. The essay by Borges and Alicia Jurado "What Is Buddhism?" is published, as is *Book of Dreams,* a collection of his and other people's dreams. Lagos publishes *Borges in Song,* with twelve scores by various composers accompanying poems by Borges.

1977 Emecé publishes *History of Night,* his ninth book of poems. With Casares, Borges publishes *New Bustos Domecq Stories.* The Sorbonne awards Borges an honorary doctorate.

1978 With María Kodama, his secretary and friend, he edits *Short Anglo-Saxon Anthology.* A second movie version of *Emma Zunz,* directed by Leonard Katz, is released in the United States.

1979 Borges publishes *Oral Borges,* a collection of his most recent lectures, and *Complete Works in Collaboration,* which despite being 989 pages long only includes some of his collaborative works. Borges receives a Gold Medal from the French Academy, the Icelandic Falcon Cross, and the Order of Merit from the German Federal Republic. Borges travels to Japan with María Kodama.

1980 Borges wins the Cervantes Prize and is received by the King and Queen of Spain. *The Intruder,* a film by Carlos Hugo Christensen, based on Borges's story of the same name, appears.

1981 Alianza Editorial publishes Borges's tenth poetry collection, *The Compendium.* Éspasa-Calpe publishes *Nine Dantesque Essays* by Borges. Harvard University awards him an honorary doctorate.

1982 The anthology, *Pages of Jorge Luis Borges,* is published by Celtia, with a preliminary study by Alica Jurado.

1983 The President of France, Francois Mitterand, bestows the Legion of Honor on Borges.

1984 Borges publishes *Atlas,* with photographs taken by María Kodama.

1985 Mondadari publishes the complete works of Borges translated into Italian. *Borges, Self-Portrait of the World,* a play by Carlo Rapetti based on Borgesian texts, debuts.

1986 Borges marries María Kodama. Jorge Luis Borges dies on June 14 in Geneva.

Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations

Borges on Borges

Richard Stern / 1966

From *The Invention of the Real,* The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1982, pp. 27–45. Reprinted by permission.

This 1966 interview with Jorge Luis Borges became a calling card during a South American trip in march 1979. (It had been distributed by my sponsors.) Borges is the closest thing to a hero on the immense continent, respected to the point of worship even by those who don't read him or who detest his politics. (He defined democracy as "forty million imbeciles who elect another who strips them bare." The definition had some authority coming from a man who'd resigned his job the day after the elected Juan Perón took power.) In March 1979, eighty years old, he looked but did not feel well. ("I cannot hold out much longer," he told a Montevideo newspaper.) But we talked nonstop for two hours, literature, history, politics, jokes. Two days later, back from lectures in Rosario and Cordoba, I returned to the little apartment on Maipú to read Browning and Rossetti to him. He directed my friend Alane Rollings and me to the shelves where his eyes functioned. (When I mentioned a poem of Jonson's, he said, "I have it, but don't know where.") The reading excited us immensely. He called out lines, said, "You see, you see, it's the Devil," or gripped my arm and cried, "*Qué lindo, Qué lindo.*" The poem that rocked us was "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." "Though I've never understood it."

> As when a sick man very near to death
> Seems dead indeed, and feels begin and end
> The tears and takes the farewell of each friend . . .

Sitting next to the blind old fellow in the bare sitting room, Roland's quest did not seem so mysterious, only exciting beyond other expression.

When an old lady walked into the room, I did not, would not stop. We were within that poem and couldn't break out. Together Borges and I chanted the last line: "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*"

Then silence and drift back to the small room, the yellow sofa, the white bookshelves. "There's some one here," I said. The white-haired lady came to the risen Borges. "Georgy," she said. "It's Esther." "*Mi prima,*" he told us. "Just back from Europe." It was time to go. "You have given me a wonderful morning."

A year later, delicate and strong as ever, he was back in the States, lecturing, or rather participating in endless question-and-answer sessions, tossing his large-toothed, blind smile toward the most intimate interrogators, answering everything as if all would be known anyway. At a party he recited German and Anglo-Saxon, asked what people

had read, what they thought. The Chicago host, René da Costa, helped him to the bathroom, where, said René, he recited, with the same scholarly exuberance, the contents of toilet walls remembered from Paris, Rome, the old days in Buenos Aires.

The Foolish Cement Pavilion on Chicago's Midway is the Center for Continuing Education. (What most continually educates is the industrial conference.) Off the low-browed, submarine-dim corridors of the bottom level is the University of Chicago's Radio and Television Office. Here came Borges, slender, frail, his walk a bit askew, arm on that of a guide. His face is thin and long, the length emphasized by vertical grooves in the cheek flesh. A physically unforceful person, but with a gift for gesture and pose. Shaking hands, he draws close, his popped, muddled, gray-blue eyes inches from the shaker's face. "I make out lights and shadows." A gentle man who quickly touches the heart.

As Proust says of kings that they are *always* remarkable for simplicity, so fine writers who have been long praised are *always* egalitarian with younger colleagues. And when they are physically fragile, they develop Chaplinesque ways of charming the sting from that belligerence all noted men encounter. (Those who've seen the tiny Sartre scurrying about to offer and light cigarettes, pay for drinks, and sit smilingly alert while gallons of stupidity and vituperation inundate him will have seen a master example.)

The night before, Borges talked to a delighted audience about Whitman. A kindly speech, apparently recollected instead of read or improvised, somewhat soft and overextended, effulgent of Hispanic charm. The best of it was his memory of reading Whitman as a student in Geneva, "taking him like a cure." That remembered Whitman, the personality of *Leaves of Grass,* was "divine," a permanent presence like Quixote and Hamlet, a totally different being from the seedy Brooklyn newspaperman shuttling to Manhattan on the ferry.

Borges and I sit facing each other at a table in the little recording studio, microphone dangled above our noses. I apologize for my ignorance of Spanish, South America, the literature and customs of Hispanic culture. He replies that he will outdo me in ignorance. The control man signals, and here is much of what was recorded.

Stern: Last night you were talking of a multiplicity of Whitmans. Looking through your poems and stories, one sees at least a number of Borgeses. Sometimes, as in the charming *Borges and I,* you have written about this.

Borges: I suppose we all are in a sense Dr. Jekylls and Mr. Hydes, any amount of Jekylls and any amount of Hydes, and a lot of others thrown in between.

Stern: For some years now, you have become a man-to-be-interviewed, a man who comments on Borges, or what Borges has done. Have you discovered a new Borges, a Borges created out of responses to attention?

Borges: I hope I have, because when I was a young man I expected no one to read my stuff. So of course I could be as baroque as I liked. I used to write in a very far-fetched and stilted style. But now I've got to think of my readers and so, of course, that makes for good literary manners. All sorts of writers act in a different way. They try to be obscure and they generally succeed. Well, I have done my best to be clear and understandable and I think—so it is said—I have succeeded. Now I'm going to begin writing as soon as I get back to Buenos Aires, my home town, a book of straightforward short stories rather after the manner of Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills.* Not the last stories he wrote, those are very complex, very involved, and very sad also. I shall try to tell in a very straightforward way, plain stories. So I will try to get away from mazes, mirrors, from daggers, from tigers, because all those things now have become a bit of a bore to me. I will try to write a book so good that nobody will think I've written it. That's my aim.

Stern: Will the hills these tales come from be as they were for Kipling, remembered ones? With remembered people?

Borges: Yes, they will be. I intend to go back to my childhood, because I think a writer should avoid contemporary subjects. If I set out to describe a particular café in a particular quarter of Buenos Aires, then people will find that I'm making all sorts of mistakes, while if I write about what happened in a northern or southern slum of Buenos Aires some sixty years ago, nobody will care or remember. And that leaves me a little literary elbow room. I can dream at my ease, I can imagine things. I don't have to go into details. I don't have to become a historian or a newspaperman. I can just dream away. If the fact are essentially true, I don't have to worry about the circumstances. So my intention is to publish a book of some ten or fifteen short stories—let's say stories seven or eight pages long. And all of them will be quite clear. I've written one already.

Stern: At some time in your life perhaps the notion came to you that these tales, stories and poems were not only worked-out reveries but something

committed to paper by an act. Though you say you expected no one to read your stuff.

Borges: There were both these facts. Of course what was important was the fact that they were reveries or they were daydreams. Of course the fight of putting them onto paper gave me some trouble and lots of fun also. I remember when I was writing a rather grim story . . . I felt quite happy, because a writer should feel happy when he writes.

Stern: When he writes well, or thinks so.

Borges: I wonder if one can speak about writing well. But at my age I know my possibilities. I know I can't write things that are far better or far worse than the things I've already written. So I let myself go. I mean, at my age—I'm sixty-eight—I suppose I've really found my own voice, my own stand.

Stern: Yet you talk of writing in another way.

Borges: Yes. I mean I want to write simple things, but at the same time, of course, I'm a writer. I can't get away from myself; I wish I could. Of course I'm tied down to my past.

Stern: You don't like the notion of art as an expression of personality.

Borges: I wrote a story once, a kind of parable about a man who began a very large picture, and therein was a kind of map, for example, hills, horses, streams, fishes, and woods and towers and men and all sorts of things. And then when the last moment came, when the day of his death came, he found that he had been making a picture of himself. That is the case with most writers. We are supposed to be writing about different things. But really what is left at the end is our memory. I mean, what the reader finds at the end is our face, our features, though we are quite unaware of it. So this means that we can't run away from ourselves. But we don't have to try to—a search goes on in ourselves all the time.

Stern: You remember the James story of the figure in the carpet. You have another version of this somewhere. In a footnote, I think. You talk about the divine mind which adds up every gesture a man makes in his life and discerns its form with the same ease that lets us see three lines as a triangle. From sixty-eight years, fifty of writing stories and poems, what do you see in the relation between the writer's figure in the carpet and this life figure?

Borges: One can hardly speak about those things. Every time I write I try to forget myself and to concentrate on the subject. Then I also think of the

reader. I try to make the thing clear for him. What I've found out is that really I've been writing the same stuff over and over again. For example, I wrote a poem to a Saxon poet. I was thinking of the author of *The Wanderer.* Then a year afterwards I wrote a sonnet on the same subject without knowing it. And, thinking of stories of mine, I thought of two stories as quite different. And then a critic found out that though the setting was different, though it happened in different countries, the story was essentially the same.

Stern: Is that what may be meant by a Borges created by a critic's awareness?

Borges: I think that in my case what I really know are my own limitations. I mean, I know that there are certain things that I cannot attempt. For example, I thought I had evolved a new plot. I told it to one of my friends who said, "Yes, that would be a fine plot but after all it's the same plot you already used," and then he mentioned a few stories I had written.

Stern: Do you think that the impulse to say "this is the same" or "I must try something new" is something which a writer living before, say, the Renaissance would have thought about?

Borges: No, I suppose he wouldn't have thought about that because in those days they had a limited number of subjects. I don't think any knowledge was expected from a writer. And perhaps it was also good, because if you write a story whose plot is known to a reader then that saves you a lot of trouble because the reader knows all about the plot and you can concentrate on the details. In the case of Browning, for example, once he had told the plot in the first book, then he could go on to follow all the interrelations. All the many painters, for example, who have painted the Crucifixion have done the same thing.

Stern: Longinus says that much "modern"—first-century—literature was the deformed outgrowth of a search for novelty.

Borges: What do you think of that? Longinus. Of course, Homer is the primitive writer. But, for example, I have known people who knew the Red Indians in my country, and they had no historic consciousness whatever. I remember one of our generals spoke to an Indian chief, and he said to him, "How awful it must be for you, how sorrowful to think that once you were the lords of the pampas, and then the white men came and now you are being driven out." And the Indian chief looked at him in amazement and said, "No. Ever since I was a boy I've seen white men." Then I remember that my

grandmother told me they had slaves at home, and the slaves were staying with the family that owned them, of course. And I asked her if the slaves had any consciousness, if the slaves knew that their fathers had come from Africa and had been sold in the marketplace. She told me they had no knowledge of it whatever. Historic memory went back to their childhood, they had no notion about their grandfathers and so on, so they never knew they had come from Africa.

Stern: You spoke of your limitations. What are they, as you see them?

Borges: For example, I would never think of attempting a novel, because I know I would get sick and tired of it before I had written the first chapter. Then I know that I can't attempt descriptions, and I think that psychological analysis is something I should avoid, because I can't do it. But if I can imagine a person, I think I would try to show what is going on in his mind through his acts. That's what happens in the Norse sagas. You're never told anything about what the character is thinking, but you find it out by his sayings or, still better, by his acts.

Stern: You've not felt an impulse to keep going, to keep on with characters, to show them in relationship to other characters?

Borges: I had no special interest in that kind of novel. And my friends tell me that there's something very childish about me because I'm very interested in plots and an intelligent man is supposed to have no use for plots. Of course, once you really enjoy novels where very little happens, where the characters are being idolized all the time, that's the kind of book I would hardly read.

Stern: Stravinsky was asked last year [1967] what new thing had come into literature in recent years. He said he never would have guessed that people could make so much of so little. He was praising Beckett and—

Borges: But was it real praise?

Stern: My version sounds ironic, but his wasn't.

Borges: I had a different experience, but still it's very enchanting. Let me tell it to you. I remember reading the *History of Argentine Literature* by Ricardo Rojas. When I looked over that book, eight volumes and perhaps utter nothingness behind the volumes, I thought how intelligent this man must be in order to have written this book and gotten away with it. He's written this book and in spite of this, he's famous, he's respected.

Stern: The elephant mustn't let the ant write his epitaph. Shall we talk about brevity as a determinant of other artistic elements? We seldom talk of

the consequences of such things as brevity. Your tales and poems, as I know them, are brief.

Borges: This is caused, of course, by laziness.

Stern: That may be its source, though I doubt it, since forty or fifty volumes testify at least to some form of energy.

Borges: When I say laziness, I mean the task of taking a pen and writing. Of course, I don't think I'm lazy at thinking or dreaming. Writing's the kind of activity between thinking and dreaming. You have a dream at the outset and then somehow you have to pin it down.

Stern: Is there perhaps a kind of symmetry or absolutism that comes with brevity? I've noticed, looking through your pages, this kind of thing. You say, "Everybody made such and such a choice," or "No one dissented."

Borges: Well, if I understand you, you mean that brevity makes for fairness.

Stern: No, I think not. Brevity makes for a kind of—

Borges: Sweeping statements.

Stern: Yes.

Borges: Yes, because if you're writing in a brief way and you interlard that with "so I think," or "perhaps," or "maybe," or "it is not impossible," it waters down and weakens what you're saying. So all that kind of thing is left to the reader. You simply give him a possible explanation of things or a statement that seems just possible to you and the reader of course has to turn it over in his mind.

Stern: One of the beauties of your stories and poems seems to be a clash between this—let's say—absoluteness and the enigmatic essence.

Borges: I'll allow myself a confession. The confession is this: whenever I write a story I know that I have to work in some details, because people expect to be told, for example, what kind of flowers will be found, for example, in that particular kind of ground. Those details are required not by the naturalists but by the realists. Now when I've written a story, I generally ask my mother, "Now this happens in a tenement house. What kind of flowers would we have?" Or, "This happens in a *quinta* near Buenos Aires fifty years ago, what kind of flowers did they have?" And then my mother gives me full realistic details and I work them in. And then I go to somebody else, because I'm very absentminded and hardly notice such things. So when I write my

stories there are practically no details and everything happens in the abstract. Well, if I know the reader may feel put out or perhaps he feels that he's floating about, then I give him a few details, but those are supplied by my family.

Stern: Well, one feels confidence in barely furnished stores; one isn't being swindled by decor. But then your stories are full of this odd tension or whatever it is, between the peculiar surety and the irreducible strangeness. Perhaps that is the Borges one wants to disinter from the various Borgeses.

Borges: Well, you see, I'm not really a thinker. I'm a literary man and I have done my best to use the literary possibilities of philosophy. I'm not a philosopher myself, except in the sense of being very much puzzled with the world and with my own life. When people ask me, for example, if I really believe that the cosmic process will go on and will repeat itself, I feel that I have nothing at all to do with that. I have tried to apply the aesthetic possibilities, let's say, of the transmutation of souls or the fourth dimension, to literature to see what could be evolved from them. But really I would not think of myself as a thinker or philosopher, and I follow no particular school.

Stern: Yet certain philosophic filings are drawn to your magnet and not others.

Borges: Well, that merely means I have my limits. I can be interested in certain subjects and not in others. For example, I've spent most of my life puzzling over time, the problem of time and of course my own identity. At least, they go together, because I feel that time is the stuff that I'm made of. But really, I have no particular theory about time. I have only felt it.

Stern: I read that one of your favorite Borges stories is "The South."

Borges: I think it's the best story because, in any case, it's the most complex. It can be read in two ways. You may read it in a straightforward way and you may think that those things happen to a hero. Then, you may think there's a kind of moral behind it—the idea that he loved the south and in the end the south destroyed him. But there's another possibility, the possibility of the second half of the story which is hallucination. When the man is killed, he's not really killed. He died in the hospital, and though that was a dream, a kind of wishful thinking, that was the kind of death he would have liked to have—in the pampas with a knife in his hand being stabbed to death. That was what he was looking forward to all the time. So I've written that story in order that it would be read both ways. Of course, I was thinking of Henry James.

Stern: I know a bit of your relationship to Argentinian ancestors who figured with San Martin and others, and, that in you home there were swords on the walls.

Borges: I've always felt a kind of wistfulness for epic. I think, for example, that my grandfather was killed in a battle, that my great-grandfather fought the Spaniards, that another of my great-grandfathers fought the Brazilians, another fought the Red Indians. I think they had a fine destiny, but at the same time, perhaps they were not as aware of their destiny as I am, because they just went throught it. But I am more aware of the epic significance of those destinies than they were, because they wanted to do their job and one of their jobs was to fight and be killed. That was all in a day's work.

Stern: So many of us praise what we feel we aren't.

Borges: Even if we think of the things we lack—I mean if you're a healthy man you don't think about health. If a woman loves you, you think of something else. You're happy, but you don't have to worry about it. At the same time, when you write about any particular unhappiness that has come to you, you're in a sense liberating yourself. Even if it is a confession. For example, if I tell you something in confidence, at the moment I'm telling you the things, I am not there as the actual person, because in the very act of telling it, I'm somebody else. I'm somebody who can look at things from a distance, who can put it into words, who can tell it to somebody else.

Stern: But here, in "The South" there's this praise of a kind of honor which—

Borges: Some sixty years ago in my country it was very important for a man to be brave or to be considered brave. I mean for a man to be a coward was a shame. I have known that feeling even, for example, among hoodlums, among very poor people. They were very ignorant, very limited men, and yet they all felt that to be a coward was the one unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Ghost. I have known, for example, the case of men defying a man that they had never seen before simply because they were sure that he was a brave man that was very handy with his knife. They wanted to find out who was a better man, so they would seek him out and sometimes get killed for their pains simply because of—what? "I'm as good a man as he is. If he's better than I am then let him prove it." Nowadays, of course, all that has completely vanished in my country. Nobody cares about being brave. People care about being rich or about being notorious, what people are talking about, and that sort of thing.

I have thought of writing a story about a man who is defied, who refuses a challenge, but he can do that because he knows he's not afraid. I thought of writing a story about a man who is just a common hoodlum, and then suddenly he sees through the utter vanity of being brave, trying to live up to a reputation. Then he's a coward, people mock at him. Well, if he knows in his heart that he's not afraid, he can take it. Of course, that's a very difficult story to write because the whole thing has to happen in his mind, unless, of course, there were two stories, unless you were told the facts at first and then in the end you might find out that the coward was really a brave man, because he knew that he wasn't afraid.

Stern: I suppose the writers who count for us most offer us the pleasures of realistic choices.

Borges: I always get rather angry at those who speak of reality on one side and of literature on the other as though literature were not a part of reality. If you read a book, it's as much of an experience as if you had traveled, or if you were jilted. As for my stories, I have tried to be loyal to them. I never write anything until I can fully imagine it as possible. I'm not out for novelty or for astounding people. When I write something, it's because I know that I can really think about it. For example, if any of my characters say anything, then it's because I feel that those are the words they might have said. I try not to work in any other matter. I've been an enemy of the Communists, of the Nazis, of our dictator, when we had him, but I never let those opinions interfere with my work. When I'm writing a story or a poem, I'm not thinking of my opinions but of the possible implications of what I write, I try to be loyal, try to draw the thing as I see it, that's all. I don't think of a writer's opinions as really very valuable. For example, in the case of Kipling. I greatly admire Kipling. I don't think we have to worry about his political opinions.

Stern: The stories frequently contradict his directly expressed opinions.

Borges: Yes, in the case of Kipling it's really remarkable. For example, in *Kim,* the finest characters are natives and he was quite unaware of that, because he was all the time speaking of the white man's burden and so on and yet the English characters are not very good.

Stern: They tear themselves apart in those hills where they don't belong.

Borges: I wonder if Kipling knew that? He must have felt it. I wonder if we see him as he was. I think of Kipling as a really great writer.

Stern: Joyce said that the three great talents of the nineteenth century were Tolstoy, Kipling and—can you guess?

Borges: No.

Stern: D'Annunzio.
Borges: That's a comedown.

Stern: I haven't read enough to say.
Borges: I've read very little D'Annunzio, and the very fact that I've read very little of him is my judgment of him. Tolstoy, Kipling and D'Annunzio. I wonder how you can admire all three. He had a very catholic mind.

Stern: Well, they all had immense energy, all were mad for straight stories. Once again, it's praising what one isn't.
Borges: Well, I admire Tolstoy, of course, but D'Annunzio, I find him so bombastic. I think if a man has moral defects, they always find their way into his work. So I think if we write in purple patches all the time, I think it's a sin of vanity and that sin should hardly be forgiven. I think a writer should be able to write in a plain way, because if he's trying to impress a reader all the time, the reader, of course, finds it out and then he refuses to be impressed.

Stern: Do you think there is any good writing that comes from personal defect? Rage? Meanness?
Borges: I wonder. Rage, of course. Now in the case of Oscar Wilde, for example—after all, he was writing purple patches all the time—but, at the same time, you feel that this was fun. That he wasn't taking them too seriously. There was also an Oscar Wilde who wrote *The Portrait of Dorian Grey.*

Stern: I suppose a life like Wilde's in which one must always disguise and then always make something of one's disguises—
Borges: Yes, but through the disguises, I think, a very level character.

Stern: And brave. You feel a man who disguises himself all the time must be a coward, but in Wilde's case you feel, "Ah, there's real bravery."
Borges: You remember what Chesterton wrote about Oscar Wilde. He had to sum him up in a page in one of the University Library books. Then he wrote a very fine book on *The Victorian Age in Literature.* And the book is full of epigrams, but they all make good points, and when he comes to Oscar Wilde he sums him up with these words, "Wilde was an Irish fighter." A thing that nobody ever thought of saying about Wilde. He says that he showed that in his trial and that all during his life he had been fighting really, fighting

The Living Labyrinth of Literature; Some Major Work; Nazis; Detective Stories; Ethics, Violence, and the Problem of Time . . .

Richard Burgin / 1967

From *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges,* Henry Holt and Company, 1969, pp. 19–65. Reprinted by permission.

Burgin: Your writing always, from the first, had its source in other books?

Borges: Yes, that's true. Well, because I think of reading a book as no less an experience than traveling or falling in love. I think that reading Berkeley or Shaw or Emerson, those are quite as real experiences to me as seeing London, for example. Of course, I saw London through Dickens and through Chesterton and through Stevenson, no? Many people are apt to think of real life on the one side, that means toothache, headache, traveling and so on, and then you have on the other side, you have imaginary life and fancy and that means the arts. But I don't think that that distinction holds water. I think that everything is a part of life. For example, today I was telling my wife, I have traveled, well, I won't say all over the world, but all over the west, no? And yet I find that I have written poems about out-of-the-way slums of Buenos Aires, I have written poems on rather drab street corners. And I have never written poems on a great subject, I mean on a famous subject. For example, I greatly enjoy New York, but I don't think I would write about New York. Maybe I'll write about some street corner, because after all so many people have done that other kind of thing.

Burgin: You wrote a poem about Emerson, though, and Jonathan Edwards and Spinoza.

Borges: That's true, yes. But in my country writing about Emerson and Jonathan Edwards is writing perhaps about rather secret characters.

Burgin: Because they're occult, almost.

Borges: Yes, more or less. I wrote a poem about Sarmiento because I had to and because I love him, but really I prefer minor characters or if not, if I write about Spinoza and Emerson or about Shakespeare and Cervantes, they

Jorge Luis Borges says

"I think that when we write about the fantastic we're trying to get away from time and to write about everlasting things."

Richard Burgin's books include the story collections *Fear of Blue Skies*, *Private Fame*, and *Man without Memory*. In his first book on Borges, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (now out of print), he was the sole interviewer. Burgin is the editor of *Boulevard* magazine and an associate professor of communications and English at Saint Louis University.

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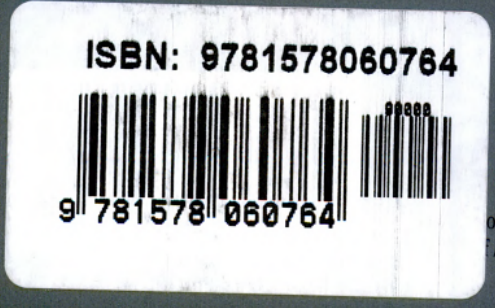

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