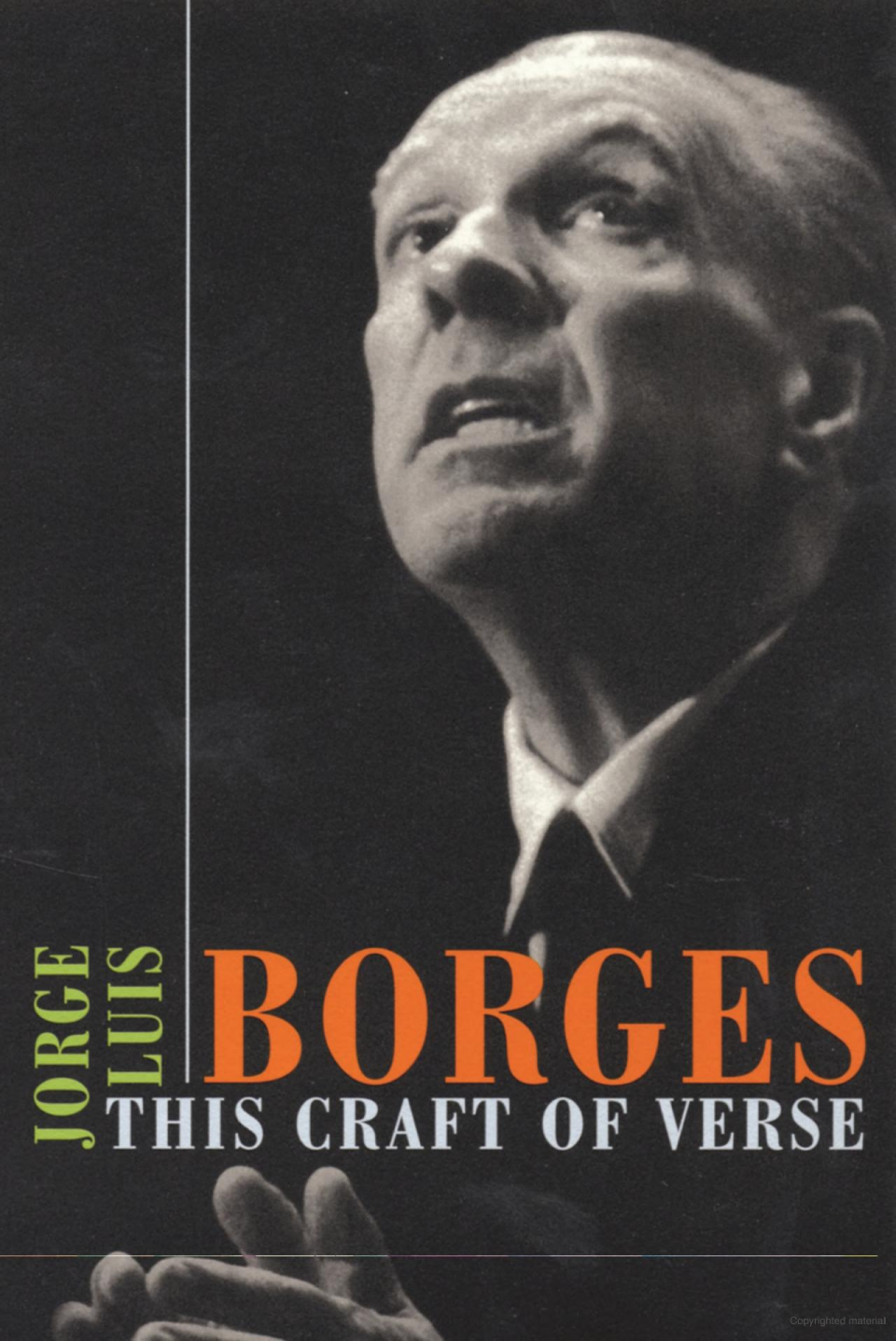

THIS CRAFT OF VERSE

JORGE LUIS BORGES
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1

THE RIDDLE OF POETRY

At the outset, I would like to give you fair warning of what to expect—or rather, of what not to expect—from me. I find that I have made a slip in the very title of my first lecture. The title is, if we are not mistaken, "The Riddle of Poetry," and the stress of course is on the first word, "riddle." So you may think the riddle is all-important. Or, what might be still worse, you may think I have deluded myself into believing that I have somehow discovered the true reading of the riddle. The truth is that I have no revelations to offer. I have spent my life reading, analyzing, writing (or trying my hand at writing), and enjoying. I found the last to be the most important thing of all. "Drinking in" poetry, I have come to a

final conclusion about it. Indeed, every time I am faced with a blank page, I feel that I have to rediscover literature for myself. But the past is of no avail whatever to me. So, as I have said, I have only my perplexities to offer you. I am nearing seventy. I have given the major part of my life to literature, and I can offer you only doubts.

The great English writer and dreamer Thomas De Quincey wrote—in some of the thousands of pages of his fourteen volumes—that to discover a new problem was quite as important as discovering the solution to an old one. But I cannot even offer you that; I can offer you only time-honored perplexities. And yet, why need I worry about this? What is a history of philosophy, but a history of the perplexities of the Hindus, of the Chinese, of the Greeks, of the Schoolmen, of Bishop Berkeley, of Hume, of Schopenhauer, and so on? I merely wish to share those perplexities with you.

Whenever I have dipped into books of aesthetics, I have had an uncomfortable feeling that I was reading the works of astronomers who never looked at the stars. I mean that they were writing about poetry as if poetry were a task, and not what it really is: a passion and a joy. For example, I have read with great respect Benedetto Croce's book on aesthetics, and I have been

handed the definition that poetry and language are an "expression." Now, if we think of an expression of something, then we land back at the old problem of form and matter; and if we think about the expression of nothing in particular, that gives us really nothing. So we respectfully receive that definition, and then we go on to something else. We go on to poetry; we go on to life. And life is, I am sure, made of poetry. Poetry is not alien—poetry is, as we shall see, lurking round the corner. It may spring on us at any moment.

Now, we are apt to fall into a common confusion. We think, for example, that if we study Homer, or the *Divine Comedy,* or Fray Luis de León, or *Macbeth,* we are studying poetry. But books are only occasions for poetry.

I think Emerson wrote somewhere that a library is a kind of magic cavern which is full of dead men. And those dead men can be reborn, can be brought to life when you open their pages.

Speaking about Bishop Berkeley (who, may I remind you, was a prophet of the greatness of America), I remember he wrote that the taste of the apple is neither in the apple itself—the apple cannot taste itself—nor in the mouth of the eater. It requires a contact between them. The same thing happens to a

book or to a collection of books, to a library. For what is a book in itself? A book is a physical object in a world of physical objects. It is a set of dead symbols. And then the right reader comes along, and the words—or rather the poetry behind the words, for the words themselves are mere symbols—spring to life, and we have a resurrection of the word.

I am reminded now of a poem you all know by heart; but you will never have noticed, perhaps, how strange it is. For perfect things in poetry do not seem strange; they seem inevitable. And so we hardly thank the writer for his pains. I am thinking of a sonnet written more than a hundred years ago by a young man in London (in Hampstead, I think), a young man who died of lung disease, John Keats, and of his famous and perhaps hackneyed sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." What is strange about that poem—and I thought of this only three or four days ago, when I was pondering this lecture—is the fact that it is a poem written about the poetic experience itself. You know it by heart, yet I would like you to hear once more the surge and thunder of its final lines,

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

Perhaps I may give a brief survey of the history of books. So far as I can remember, the Greeks had no great use for books. It is a fact, indeed, that most of the great teachers of mankind have been not writers but speakers. Think of Pythagoras, Christ, Socrates, the Buddha, and so on. And since I have spoken of Socrates, I would like to say something about Plato. I remember Bernard Shaw said that Plato was the dramatist who invented Socrates, even as the four evangelists were the dramatists who invented Jesus. This may be going too far, but there is a certain truth in it. In one of the dialogues of Plato, he speaks about books in a rather disparaging way: "What is a book? A book seems, like a picture, to be a living being; and yet if we ask it something, it does not answer. Then we see that it is dead."[2] In order to make the book into a living thing, he invented—happily for us—the Platonic dialogue, which forestalls the reader's doubts and questions.

But we might say also that Plato was wistful about Socrates. After Socrates' death, he would say to himself, "Now, what would Socrates have said about this particular doubt of mine?" And then, in order to hear once again the voice of the master he loved, he wrote the dialogues. In some of these dialogues, Socrates

stands for the truth. In others, Plato has dramatized his many moods. And some of those dialogues come to no conclusion whatever, because Plato was thinking as he wrote them; he did not know the last page when he wrote the first. He was letting his mind wander, and he was dramatizing that mind into many people. I suppose his chief aim was the illusion that, despite the fact that Socrates had drunk the hemlock, Socrates was still with him. I feel this to be true because I have had many masters in my life. I am proud to be a disciple—a good disciple, I hope. And when I think of my father, when I think of the great Jewish-Spanish author Rafael Cansinos-Asséns,[3] when I think of Macedonio Fernández,[4] I would also like to hear their voices. And sometimes I train my voice into a trick of imitating their voices, in order that I may think as they would have thought. They are always around me.

There is another sentence, in one of the Fathers of the Church. He said that it was as dangerous to put a book into the hands of an ignorant man as to put a sword into the hands of children. So books, to the ancients, were mere makeshifts. In one of his many letters, Seneca wrote against large libraries; and long afterwards, Schopenhauer wrote that many people mistook the buying of a book for the buying of the

contents of the book. Sometimes, looking at the many books I have at home, I feel I shall die before I come to the end of them, yet I cannot resist the temptation of buying new books. Whenever I walk into a bookstore and find a book on one of my hobbies—for example, Old English or Old Norse poetry—I say to myself, "What a pity I can't buy that book, for I already have a copy at home."

After the ancients, from the East there came a different idea of the book. There came the idea of Holy Writ, of books written by the Holy Ghost; there came Korans, Bibles, and so on. Following the example of Spengler in his *Untergang des Abendlandes—The Decline of the West*—I would like to take the Koran as an example. If I am not mistaken, Muslim theologians think of it as being prior to the creation of the world. The Koran is written in Arabic, yet Muslims think of it as being prior to the language. Indeed, I have read that they think of the Koran not as a work of God but as an attribute of God, even as His justice, His mercy, and His whole wisdom are.

And thus there came into Europe the idea of Holy Writ—an idea that is, I think, not wholly mistaken. Bernard Shaw (to whom I am always going back) was asked once whether he really thought the Bible was

the work of the Holy Ghost. And he said, "I think the Holy Ghost has written not only the Bible, but all books." This is rather hard on the Holy Ghost, of course—but all books are worth re-reading, I suppose. This, I think, is what Homer meant when he spoke to the muse. And this is what the Hebrews and what Milton meant when they talked of the Holy Ghost whose temple is the upright and pure heart of men. And in our less beautiful mythology, we speak of the "subliminal self," of the "subconscious." Of course, these words are rather uncouth when we compare them to the muses or to the Holy Ghost. Still, we have to put up with the mythology of our time. For the words mean essentially the same thing.

We come now to the notion of the "classics." I must confess that I think a book is really not an immortal object to be picked up and duly worshiped, but rather an occasion for beauty. And it has to be so, for language is shifting all the time. I am very fond of etymologies and would like to recall to you (for I am sure you know much more about these things than I do) some rather curious etymologies.

For example, we have in English the verb "to tease"—a mischievous word. It means a kind of joke. Yet in Old English *tesan* meant "to wound with a

sword," even as in French *navrer* meant "to thrust a sword through somebody." Then, to take a different Old English word, *þreat,* you may find out from the very first verses of *Beowulf* that it meant "an angry crowd"—that is to say, the cause of the "threat." And thus we might go on endlessly.

But now let us consider some particular verses. I take my examples from English, since I have a particular love for English literature—though my knowledge of it is, of course, limited. There are cases where poetry creates itself. For example, I don't think the words "quietus" and "bodkin" are especially beautiful; indeed, I would say they are rather uncouth. But if we think of "When he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin," we are reminded of the great speech by Hamlet.[5] And thus the context creates poetry for those words—words that no one would ever dare to use nowadays, because they would be mere quotations.

Then there are other examples, and perhaps simpler ones. Let us take the title of one of the most famous books in the world, *Historia del ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha.* The word *hidalgo* has today a peculiar dignity all its own, yet when Cervantes wrote it, the word *hidalgo* meant "a country

write in a poem "the wine-dark sea," this is not a mere repetition of what the Greeks wrote. Rather, it is a going back to tradition. When we speak of "the wine-dark sea," we think of Homer and of the thirty centuries that lie between us and him. So that although the words may be much the same, when we write "the wine-dark sea" we are really writing something quite different from what Homer was writing.

Thus, the language is shifting; the Latins knew all about that. And the reader is shifting also. This brings us back to the old metaphor of the Greeks—the metaphor, or rather the truth, about no man stepping twice into the same river.[7] And there is, I think, an element of fear here. At first we are apt to think of the river as flowing. We think, "Of course, the river goes on but the water is changing." Then, with an emerging sense of awe, we feel that we too are changing—that we are as shifting and evanescent as the river is.

However, we need not worry too much about the fate of the classics, because beauty is always with us. Here I would like to quote another verse, by Browning, perhaps a now-forgotten poet. He says:

> Just when we're safest, there's a sunset-touch,
> A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
> A chorus-ending from Euripides.[8]

Yet the first line is enough: "Just when we're safest . . ." That is to say, beauty is lurking all about us. It may come to us in the name of a film; it may come to us in some popular lyric; we may even find it in the pages of a great or famous writer.

And since I have spoken of a dead master of mine, Rafael Cansinos-Asséns (maybe this is the second time you've heard his name; I don't quite know why he is forgotten),[9] I remember that Cansinos-Asséns wrote a very fine prose poem wherein he asked God to defend him, to save him from beauty, because, he says, "there is too much beauty in the world." He thought that beauty was overwhelming it. Although I do not know if I have been a particularly happy man (I hope I am going to be happy at the ripe age of sixty-seven), I still think that beauty is all around us.

As to whether a poem has been written by a great poet or not, this is important only to historians of literature. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that I have written a beautiful line; let us take this as a working hypothesis. Once I have written it, that line does me no good, because, as I've already said, that line came to me from the Holy Ghost, from the subliminal self, or perhaps from some other writer. I often find I am merely quoting something I read some

time ago, and then that becomes a rediscovering. Perhaps it is better that a poet should be nameless.

I spoke of "the wine-dark sea," and since my hobby is Old English (I am afraid that, if you have the courage or the patience to come back to some of my lectures, you may have more Old English inflicted on you), I would like to recall some lines that I think beautiful. I will say them first in English, and then in the stark and voweled Old English of the ninth century.

It snowed from the north;
rime bound the fields;
hail fell on earth,
the coldest of seeds.

Norþan sniwde
hrim hrusan bond
hægl feol on eorþan
corna caldast.[10]

This takes us back to what I said about Homer: when the poet wrote these lines, he was merely recording things that had happened. This was of course very strange in the ninth century, when people thought in terms of mythology, allegorical images, and so on. He

was merely telling very commonplace things. But nowadays when we read

> It snowed from the north;
> rime bound the fields;
> hail fell on earth,
> the coldest of seeds . . .

there is an added poetry. There is the poetry of a nameless Saxon having written those lines by the shores of the North Sea—in Northumberland, I think; and of those lines coming to us so straightforward, so plain, and so pathetic through the centuries. So we have both cases: the case (I need hardly dwell upon it) when time debases a poem, when the words lose their beauty; and also the case when time enriches rather than debases a poem.

I talked at the beginning about definitions. To end up, I would like to say that we make a very common mistake when we think that we're ignorant of something because we are unable to define it. If we are in a Chestertonian mood (one of the very best moods to be in, I think), we might say that we can define something only when we know nothing about it.

For example, if I have to define poetry, and if I feel rather shaky about it, if I'm not too sure about it, I say

something like: "Poetry is the expression of the beautiful through the medium of words artfully woven together." This definition may be good enough for a dictionary or for a textbook, but we all feel that it is rather feeble. There is something far more important—something that may encourage us to go on not only trying our hand at writing poetry, but enjoying it and feeling that we know all about it.

This is that we *know* what poetry is. We know it so well that we cannot define it in other words, even as we cannot define the taste of coffee, the color red or yellow, or the meaning of anger, of love, of hatred, of the sunrise, of the sunset, or of our love for our country. These things are so deep in us that they can be expressed only by those common symbols that we share. So why should we need other words?

You may not agree with the examples I have chosen. Perhaps tomorrow I may think of better examples, may think I might have quoted other lines. But as you can pick and choose your own examples, it is not needful that you care greatly about Homer, or about the Anglo-Saxon poets, or about Rossetti. Because everyone knows where to find poetry. And when it comes, one feels the touch of poetry, that particular tingling of poetry.

THE METAPHOR

As the subject of today's talk is the metaphor, I shall begin with a metaphor. This first of the many metaphors I shall try to recall comes from the Far East, from China. If I am not mistaken, the Chinese call the world "the ten thousand things," or—and this depends on the taste and fancy of the translator—"the ten thousand beings."

We may accept, I suppose, the very conservative estimate of ten thousand. Surely there are more than ten thousand ants, ten thousand men, ten thousand hopes, fears, or nightmares in the world. But if we accept the number ten thousand, and if we think that all metaphors are made by linking two different things together, then, had we time enough, we might work

out an almost unbelievable sum of possible metaphors. I have forgotten my algebra, but I think that the sum should be 10,000 multiplied by 9,999, multiplied by 9,998, and so on. Of course the sum of possible combinations is not endless, but it staggers the imagination. So we might be led to think: Why on earth should poets all over the world, and all through time, be using the same stock metaphors, when there are so many possible combinations?

The Argentine poet Lugones, way back in the year 1909, wrote that he thought poets were always using the same metaphors, and that he would try his hand at discovering new metaphors for the moon. And in fact he concocted many hundreds of them. He also said, in the foreword to a book called *Lunario sentimental,*[1] that every word is a dead metaphor. This statement is, of course, a metaphor. Yet I think we all feel the difference between dead and living metaphors. If we take any good etymological dictionary (I am thinking of my old unknown friend Dr. Skeat)[2] and if we look up any word, we are sure to find a metaphor tucked away somewhere.

For example—and you can find this in the very first lines of *Beowulf*—the word *þreat* meant "an angry mob," but now the word is given to the effect and

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