Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)

Jorge Luis Borges is among the writers who have brought international fame to Latin American Literature. A fabulist, poet, essayist and translator, Borges shaped modern literary perception and became a classic of modern letters. His influential concept of writing as rewriting and his view that each word or group of words has a determinant impact on literature’s effectiveness are crucial to understanding of his texts, and exemplify a modern approach to literary theory.

Borges, whose ancestors were among the first Europeans to arrive in America, was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, a lawyer and psychology teacher with anarchist views, taught Jorge Luis philosophy. His mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges, a proud descendant of a long line of soldiers and freedom fighters, was a dedicated companion to her son until her death at the age of 99. Her help was indispensable, especially when Jorge Luis’s blindness made it very difficult for him to read and write. Two years after Jorge Luis’ birth, his sister Norah, his closest childhood friend and his first illustrator, was born. Both English and Spanish were used in Borges’s house, and he learned to read English before he could read Spanish. This knowledge played a key role in his work as a translator. He introduced James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Wolf, and William Faulkner to the Spanish-speaking world.

Before the onset of the First World War, Borges’s family moved to Geneva, Switzerland, where Jorge Luis learned French and German, and discovered philosophers and writers who would be influential throughout his life, including Thomas Carlyle, Arthur Schopenhauer, Walt Whitman, G. K. Chesterton, Franz Kafka, and Gustav Flaubert. He also encountered Jewish culture, which would inspire many of his future literary works. When the war was over, the family travelled around Spain, where Borges met a group of Spanish poets, the *ultraístas*, who were in the process of discovering the European avant-garde. One of the leaders of this group was Rafael Cansinos de Asséns, who had a major influence on young Borges.

This influence became evident upon Borges’s return to Buenos Aires, where he became an active contributor to the literary magazine *Martin Fierro*, and among the founders of *ultraista* mural magazine *Prisma*, the publication of which marks the birth of the Argentine avant-garde. Borges’s first book of poetry, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (*Adoration of Buenos Aires*) (1923), where the poet is looking for reconciliation with his native city after four years absence, is among the best examples of Argentine ultraism. However, Borges became increasingly disappointed with Spanish and Argentine avant-garde because of its obsession with metaphor, especially after his reading of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which he reviewed in the journal *Proa*.

In the 1930s Borges began contributing to Victoria Ocampo’s journal *Sur*, which for the next three decades would become the most influential literary publication in Latin America. Some of Borges’s most famous stories, including “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*” and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” were published there*.*

Borges considered the beginning of his career as a story writer to be the publication of *La historia universal de la infamia* (*A Universal History of Infamy)* in 1935, when he took characters and ideas from other published works and “re-invented” them. The same year he wrote a fictional book review “The Approach to al-Mu’tasim,” which was supposed to be published in a compilation of essays. The deception worked, and it fooled even Borges’s close friend, the writer Adolfo Bioy Casares, with whom he later collaborated in *Seis problemas para don Isidoro Parodi* (*Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*) (1942), under the joint pen-name of “Bustos Domecq.” Most importantly, with this story Borges launched the original format for his future fiction, which insists on its self-conscious status as an artifact. This fiction is included in *Ficciones* (1944), arguably the most important book written in Spanish in the twentieth century. At the time, Borges defended a fiction that followed the order and logic of magic, the view which became very influential among Latin American ‘magical realists,’ many of whom would cite Borges as their primary inspiration.

In addition to his new stories, which mixed philosophy, fact, fantasy, and mystery, Borges also began to write political articles. Published in *El Hogar,* these articles criticized many of the general trends of the time, including anti-semitism, Nazism, and Argentina’s increasing slide into fascism.

With the release of *The Aleph* in 1949 and *Otras Inquisiciones* (*Other Inquisitions*) in 1952, Borges began to be acknowledged as Argentina’s most distinguished writer and the best prose writer in the Spanish language. After the publication of *El hacedor* (*Dreamtigers*) in 1960, Borges was awarded jointly with Samuel Beckett the first Formentor Prize, marking the beginning of his international fame. From then on, Borges was acknowledged as a modern master. In 1971, Columbia University awarded him the first of many degrees of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*. In the same year, he received the fifth biennial Jerusalem Prize. In 1980, he shared with Gerardo Diego the Cervantes Prize, the highest literary award in the Spanish-speaking world.

Borges’s essays, together with his short stories, brought the author international fame. In the writer’s own words, his style does not change when he composes essays, which are indispensable for an understanding of the author’s metapoetical ideas. Among them is the first principle of poetic influence: each writer creates his own precursors, as discussed in the seminal essay “Kafka y sus precursors” (“Kafka and His Precursors”). This challenges the idea of the chronology as an organizing principle of literary history, by suggesting that the strong writer precedes his or her own precursors. Aptly challenging the cosmopolitanism vs. localism dichotomy, Borges redefines the concept of national literature, placing it in the framework of universal fiction, as, for example, in “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (”The Argentine Writer and Tradition” ). He summed up his vision of literature as a repetition with variations in *This Craft of Verse*, his Charles Eliot Norton lectures, which he gave at Harvard in 1967-1968.

His own poetic work, which draws on many literary traditions, among them Nordic mythology and short Japanese forms, includes such important collections as *Luna de enfrente* (*Moon Across the Way*) (1925), *El otro y el mismo* (*The Self and the Other*) (1964); *El oro de los tigres* (*The Gold of the Tigers*”) (1972) and *Los conjurados* (1985).

Borges mentioned on numerous occasions that he prefers translations to his original works. Considering translation among his own major literary pursuits, Borges views translation as transformation, when the successor can enrich the original, and suggests that translation needs to be evaluated in accordance with the same criteria as original works of literature. Translation is a key topic in such essays as “Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*” (“The Translators of the *Thousand and One Nights*”) and “Las versiones homéricas” (“Some Versions of Homer”).

An avid reader, Borges is the author of numerous prologues, which were compiled in a book *Prólogos con un prólogo de prólogos* (*Prologues, with a Prologue of Prologues*)(1975). While providing readers with insightful introductions to an array of literary works of undeniable quality, they also shed light on Borges’ vision of literature as the creation of verbal objects. In his prologue to Bioy Casares’s novel *La invención de Morel* (*The Invention of Morel*), for example, he defends fiction that follows the order and logic of magic, expanding his views on fantastic literature, articulated also in his earlier essay “El arte narrativo y la magia” (“Narrative Art and Magic”) (1932) as well as in his numerous short stories and in *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (*Anthology of Fantastic Literature*) (1977), co-edited with Silvina Ocampo and Bioy Casares.

Borges’s works inspired such important thinkers and Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Gérard Genette. He had a significant influence on contemporary Latin American fiction, acknowledged by Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Octavio Paz, and Roberto Bolaño among many others. Though the physical man died in 1986 in Geneva from liver cancer, the ongoing discussions that his works provoke exemplify that his spirit is still very much alive among his readers.

**Selected Works**

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**References and Further Readings**

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Nataly Tcherepashenets

Images (my suggestions)

1. <http://www.google.com/imgres?q=Borges&num=10&hl=en&biw=1536&bih=693&tbm=isch&tbnid=Wef22PNUUPMNmM:&imgrefurl=http://www.idelberavelar.com/archives/2007/10/emma_zunz_de_borges.php&docid=ROm2xvHcK_QpBM&imgurl=http://www.idelberavelar.com/borges2.jpg&w=400&h=334&ei=9soWUMixBomX6AHMzYHIDQ&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=745&vpy=376&dur=3132&hovh=205&hovw=246&tx=103&ty=134&sig=103556095005664642885&page=1&tbnh=142&tbnw=160&start=0&ndsp=30&ved=1t:429,r:24,s:0,i:202>
2. http://www.google.com/imgres?q=ficciones&hl=en&biw=1536&bih=693&tbm=isch&tbnid=7I-ihVZfSGxROM:&imgrefurl=http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficciones&docid=WvCaUk60CyOENM&imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/de/Ficciones\_(1944).jpg/220px-Ficciones\_(1944).jpg&w=220&h=338&ei=9csWUJ6HMeWL6gGs5YCwBQ&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=1317&vpy=130&dur=852&hovh=270&hovw=176&tx=44&ty=70&sig=103556095005664642885&page=1&tbnh=176&tbnw=125&start=0&ndsp=25&ved=1t:429,r:8,s:0,i:96