

Borges and I

By Jorge Luis Borges

From Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* pp.246-47.

Notes and commentary by Martin Irvine.

The other one, the one called Borges[1], is the one things happen to[2]. I walk[3] through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like[4] hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship[5]; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me[6], perhaps because what is good belongs to no one[7], not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively[8], and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him[9], though I am quite aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things[10].

Spinoza[11] knew that all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now and I shall have to imagine other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him.

I do not know which of us has written this page.

[1] The writer, using a voice or persona in the first-person--"I"--, names and refers to "Borges" the public figure, the famous "author," who gets cited in the press, in book reviews, in biographical essays. The voice in the first-person creates a distance between the "I" and the proper name "Borges," and we are led to believe that this "I" is closer to a "real person," Jorge Luis Borges, who lived in Buenos Aires and had a personal life only distantly related to the "fictive" "Borges" known only in the media and through books and other writings. But read on: is this "I" a voice representing a "real self," or is it another layer of fiction, a convention, the biographical "I," which Borges knows is a traditional and literary creation?

[2] "Things happen" to the public figure, "Borges," whom people know from the media: you can read about him, his books, his accomplishments, his work. The narrator, close to an authorial "I"--or is it?--says ironically that nothing like this happens to the "real life" "I" speaking now.

[3] Using the "I" of first-person narration, which is also used in autobiographical writing in our literary tradition, the writer plays with several layers of discourse and literary convention: persona, narrator, author, the self behind the writer, the real-life person behind the "author" as a social identity, the ego, even the parts of the psyche unknown to the self or ego. Borges knows that we refer to all of these social, linguistic, and psychological qualities by the simple pronoun "I".

The first-person narrator describes activities of a private self, and not the official and public details of the life of "Borges," who is named in lists and biographical dictionaries. The "author function" takes over, and the name "Borges" has a role in public discourse outside the control of the writer or self behind the writings.

[4] The narrator, standing in for the person behind the author, further differentiates himself from "Borges," the author known in his social identity. The author in his public and literary role inevitably turns all the personal likes and tastes of the real-life person into an act, a role, or a piece of literary fiction. The biography of "Borges" known from publicly documented sources, the narrator suggests, is also contrived, fictive, and conventional since it must conform to our notions of "a writer's biography" or "the life of the author."

[5] The narrator now playfully refers to "Borges," the publicly known "author," as a separate personality, an objective identity, that the real person must carry on some kind of relationship with. The real person goes on so that the persona can exist.

[6] The "me" or "I" behind the writing and the writer finds no ultimate security or self-identity in the writings of author "Borges," not even in the renaissance sense of continuing one's fame and identity in writings that endure beyond one's lifetime. The writing and the life are thus separate things.

[7] The writer invokes an impersonal theory of literature, much like that of T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The narrator states that what he has written is not validated by anything in the person, in the self behind the writing, but by its participation in literary tradition and in the resources of the Spanish language. Borges was multi-lingual but wrote in his native language, Spanish. But by "tradition" here, he means the whole tradition of Western literature in all the literary languages. It's a short step to the notion of intertextuality: any text is a subset of a larger universe of discourse, a whole cultural library, and what we see and understand in texts is based on a life-time of accumulated reading experience. Meaning and value in literature thus always emerge from writing and reading within a larger cultural system of language and prior writings. Thus if "Borges" has written anything of value, this value will only be understood, will only be possible, in the context of a tradition and a language, contexts that are social and cultural, not personal or individual.

[8] Again, the speaker denies the humanist idea of perpetuating existence through the fame in great books. The real person behind the writer and the writing will die a real death, and only some small part of this person can be said to "survive" in the writings of "Borges."

[9] The speaker suggests that the person and the persona seem to blend together: at times the real person identifies almost fully with "Borges" the author. But since the "I" can refer itself and name "Borges" in the same context, the identities remain distinct. The "I" feels the powerful pull of the public identity, "Borges," and may often feel this is an adequate self-definition too.

[10] With continued humor and self-parody, the narrator suggests that "Borges" the author, known as an inventive creator of fiction, has a tendency to "falsify" and "magnify" things. But the writer also knows that these are features of all writing and forms of representation, including the seemingly autobiographical story-essay that contains these statements.

[11] Baruch (Benedictus) de Spinoza (1632-77), Jewish rationalist philosopher. Born in Amsterdam. Spinoza developed an ethics and metaphysics that depended on a philosophy of Being, and a ultimate Being whose existence could not be doubted. For Spinoza, everything exists in its own independent being by necessity: "everything is determined by universal laws of nature to exist and act in a certain determinate way" (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, 4).