

Chapter & Verse

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Growing Old In Many Mirrors: Jorge Luis Borges (1899 - 1986)

It's only the fame of the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges' prose which has prevented him from becoming known much better known as a poet. He is one of those rare poets whose poetry transcends the usual limits of translation. This is particularly true of his English translations as Borges was able to advise his translators personally. He had a considerable knowledge of the English language and he had developed a great love of English Literature since childhood. Like almost all great writers, he was an omnivorous reader. However, due to a hereditary condition, he became completely blind by the age of fifty-five and was unable to read again. Strangely, he never did learn to read braille.

He was born in Buenos Aires but his family moved to Switzerland when he was fifteen and they travelled throughout Europe. At the age of twenty-two, Borges returned to Argentina and began publishing his brief, paradoxical 'fictions', many of which read like parables with layer after layer of possible meanings. He worked as a librarian for many years and libraries often feature in his prose as metaphors for the bewildering nature of human existence. His eventual inability to see made his visual imagination even more extraordinary. Like Samuel Beckett (who also wrote poetry) with whom he is often compared, he was steeped in the long traditions of Western philosophy and he fictionalizes philosophical ideas in his work. Also like Beckett, he had a particular love of the seventeenth century Flemish philosopher, Arnold

Geulincx whose solution to the mind / body problem was to suggest that every time a man wanted to raise his arm, for example, God stepped in and raised it for him. Beckett simply came along and removed God and therefore his characters are left crippled and helpless.

Borges' poetry is often more personal, direct and moving than his prose. Many of his poems deal with the mysterious power of love. In one of his finest poems simply called *Elegy*, he outlines the strange voyage through life on which we all

embark. A voyage made stranger still by the haunting image of the fleeting face of a passing stranger. As so often in his writing, mirrors are used as a metaphor for the shifting nature of reality, it's never clear where the real and the reflected begin or end.



Oh destiny of Borges
to have sailed across the diverse seas of the world
or across that single and solitary sea of diverse
names,
to have been a part of Edinburgh, of Zurich, of the
two Cordobas,
of Colombia and of Texas,
to have returned at the end of changing generations
to the ancient lands of his forebears,
to Andalucia, to Portugal and to those counties
where the Saxon warred with the Dane and they
mixed their blood,
to have wandered through the red and tranquil
labyrinth of London,
to have grown old in so many mirrors,
to have sought in vain the marble gaze of the statues,
to have questioned lithographs, encyclopaedias,
atlases,
to have seen the things that men see,
death, the sluggish dawn, the plains,
and the delicate stars,
and to have seen nothing, or almost nothing
except the face of a girl from Buenos Aires
a face that does not want you to remember it.
Oh destiny of Borges,
perhaps no stranger than your own.

His love poems are not always addressed to people as, like many acutely sensitive and complex humans, he had a great fondness for that most sensitive and complex of pets: cats. In the memorable poem *To A Cat* one senses that in describing the cat, he is partly describing his solitary and secretive self who writes with such stealth that it is only later that the responsive reader realizes that his perspective on what is real has been turned upside down.

In a poem written shortly before his death, he advises his reader to do more to embrace the present moment, to throw caution to the winds and to try to live life with more joyful spontaneity. The poem ends with three dots which suggest the limitless possibilities yet to come.

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To A Cat

Mirrors are not more silent
nor the creeping dawn more secretive;
in the moonlight, you are that panther
we catch sight of from afar.
By the inexplicable workings of a divine law,
we look for you in vain;
More remote, even, than the Ganges or the setting sun,
yours is the solitude, yours the secret.
Your haunch allows the lingering
caress of my hand. You have accepted,
since that long forgotten past,
the love of the distrustful hand.
You belong to another time. You are lord
of a place bounded like a dream.

from Instants

*Don't lose the now!
I was one of those who never goes anywhere
without a thermometer,
without a hot-water bottle,
and without an umbrella and without a parachute,
If I could live again; I will travel light,
If I could live again; I'll try to work bare feet
at the beginning of spring till
the end of autumn,
I'll ride more carts,
I'll watch more sunrises and play with more children,
If I have the life to live; but now I am 85,
and I know that I am dying ...*

