

Classic Poetry Series

Jorge Luis Borges
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Jorge Luis Borges(24 August 1899 – 14 June 1986)

Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges Acevedo was an Argentine writer and poet born in Buenos Aires. In 1914, his family moved to Switzerland where he attended school and traveled to Spain. On his return to Argentina in 1921, Borges began publishing his poems and essays in Surrealist literary journals. He also worked as a librarian and public lecturer. Borges was bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English. He was a target of political persecution during the Peron regime.

Due to a hereditary condition, Borges became blind in his late fifties. In 1955, he was appointed director of the National Public Library (Biblioteca Nacional) and professor of Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. In 1961, he came to international attention when he received the first International Publishers' Prize Prix Formentor. His work was translated and published widely in the United States and in Europe. He died in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1986.

J. M. Coetzee said of Borges: "He, more than anyone, renovated the language of fiction and thus opened the way to a remarkable generation of Spanish American novelists."

Early life and education

Jorge Luis Borges was born to an educated middle-class family. Borges's mother, Leonor Acevedo Suárez, came from a traditional Uruguayan family. His 1929 book *Cuaderno San Martín* included a poem "Isidoro Acevedo," commemorating his maternal grandfather, Isidoro de Acevedo Laprida, a soldier of the Buenos Aires Army who stood against dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas. A descendant of the Argentine lawyer and politician Francisco Narciso de Laprida, Acevedo fought in the battles of Cepeda in 1859, Pavón in 1861, and Los Corrales in 1880. Isidoro de Acevedo Laprida died of pulmonary congestion in the house where his grandson Jorge Luis Borges was born.

Borges's father, Jorge Guillermo Borges Haslam, was a lawyer and psychology teacher with literary aspirations. ("...he tried to become a writer and failed in the attempt," Borges once said, "... composed some very good sonnets"). His father was part Spanish, part Portuguese, and half English; his father's mother was English and maintained a strong spirit of English culture in Borges's home. In this home, both Spanish and English were spoken. From earliest childhood Borges was bilingual, reading Shakespeare in English at the age of 12. The family lived in a large house equipped with an extensive English library. They were in

comfortable circumstances; but not being wealthy enough to live in downtown Buenos Aires, they resided in Palermo, then a poorer suburb of the city.

His father was forced to give up practicing law due to the failing eyesight that would eventually afflict his son. In 1914, the family moved to Geneva, Switzerland. Borges senior was treated by a Geneva eye specialist, while his son and daughter Norah attended school, where Borges junior learned French and taught himself German. He received his baccalauréat from the Collège de Genève in 1918. The Borges family decided that, due to political unrest in Argentina, they would remain in Switzerland. This lasted until 1921 when, after World War I, the family spent three years living in various cities: Lugano (Switzerland), Barcelona, Majorca, Seville, and Madrid.

At that time Borges discovered the writing of Arthur Schopenhauer and Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem* (1915) which were to become influential to his work. In Spain, Borges became a member of the avant-garde Ultraist literary movement (anti-Modernism, which ended in 1922 with the cessation of the journal *Ultra*). His first poem, "Hymn to the Sea", written in the style of Walt Whitman, was published in the magazine *Grecia*. While in Spain, he met noted Spanish writers, including Rafael Cansinos Assens and Ramón Gómez de la Serna.

Early writing career

In 1921, Borges returned with his family to Buenos Aires, where he imported the doctrine of Ultraism and launched his career, publishing surreal poems and essays in literary journals. In 1930, Nestor Ibarra called Borges the "Great Apostle of Criollismo." His first published collection of poetry was *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923). He contributed to the avant-garde review *Martín Fierro* (whose "art for art's sake" approach contrasted to that of the more politically involved Boedo group). Borges co-founded the journals *Prisma*, a broadsheet distributed largely by pasting copies to walls in Buenos Aires, and *Proa*. Later in life Borges regretted some of these early publications, and attempted to purchase all known copies to ensure their destruction.

By the mid-1930s, he began to explore existential questions. He also worked in a style that Ana María Barrenechea has called "irreality." Borges was not alone in this task. Many other Latin American writers, such as Juan Rulfo, Juan José Arreola, and Alejo Carpentier, investigated these themes, influenced by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger or the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Even though existentialism saw its apogee during the years of Borges's greatest artistic production, it can be argued that his choice of topics largely ignored existentialism's central tenets. To that point, critic Paul de Man wrote:

"Whatever Borges's existential anxieties may be, they have little in common with Sartre's robustly prosaic view of literature, with the earnestness of Camus' moralism, or with the weighty profundity of German existential thought. Rather, they are the consistent expansion of a purely poetic consciousness to its furthest limits."

From the first issue, Borges was a regular contributor to *Sur*, founded in 1931 by Victoria Ocampo. It was then Argentina's most important literary journal. Ocampo introduced Borges to Adolfo Bioy Casares, another well-known figure of Argentine literature, who was to become a frequent collaborator and dear friend. Together they wrote a number of works, some under the nom de plume H. Bustos Domecq, including a parody detective series and fantasy stories.

During these years a family friend Macedonio Fernández became a major influence on Borges. The two would preside over discussions in cafés, country retreats, or Fernández' tiny apartment in the Balvanera district.

In 1933 Borges gained an editorial appointment at the literary supplement of the newspaper *Crítica*, where he first published the pieces later collected as the *Historia universal de la infamia* (A Universal History of Infamy). This involved two types of pieces. The first lay somewhere between non-fictional essays and short stories, using fictional techniques to tell essentially true stories. The second consisted of literary forgeries, which Borges initially passed off as translations of passages from famous but seldom-read works. In the following years, he served as a literary adviser for the publishing house Emecé Editores and wrote weekly columns for *El Hogar*, which appeared from 1936 to 1939.

In 1937, Borges found work as first assistant at the Miguel Cané branch of the Buenos Aires Municipal Library. His fellow employees forbade him from cataloguing more than 100 books per day, a task which took him about an hour. The rest of his time he spent in the basement of the library, writing articles and short stories.

Borges's urbane character allowed him to free himself from the trap of local color. The varying genealogies of characters, settings, and themes in his stories, such as "La muerte y la brújula", used Argentine models without pandering to his readers. In his essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición", Borges notes that the very absence of camels in the Qu'ran was proof enough that it was an Arabian work. He suggested that only someone trying to write an "Arab" work would purposefully include a camel. He uses this example to illustrate how his dialogue with universal existential concerns was just as Argentine as writing about

gauchos and tangos (subjects he himself used).

A Patio

At evening
they grow weary, the patio's two or three colours.
Tonight, the moon, bright circle,
fails to dominate space.
Patio, channel of sky.
The patio is the slope
down which sky flows into the house.
Serene,
eternity waits at the crossroad of stars.
It's pleasant to live in the friendly dark
of entrance-way, arbour, and cistern.

Jorge Luis Borges

Simplicity

It opens, the gate to the garden
with the docility of a page
that frequent devotion questions
and inside, my gaze
has no need to fix on objects
that already exist, exact, in memory.
I know the customs and souls
and that dialect of allusions
that every human gathering goes weaving.
I've no need to speak
nor claim false privilege;
they know me well who surround me here,
know well my afflictions and weakness.
This is to reach the highest thing,
that Heaven perhaps will grant us:
not admiration or victory
but simply to be accepted
as part of an undeniable Reality,
like stones and trees.

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