

# Borges on the Couch

*A biographer turns to the author's labyrinthine stories to search for clues about his life.*

## BORGES

*A Life.*

By Edwin Williamson.

Illustrated. 574 pp. Viking. \$34.95.

By DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

**T**HERE'S an unhappy paradox about literary biographies. The majority of readers who will be interested in a writer's bio, especially one as long and exhaustive as Edwin Williamson's "Borges: A Life," will be admirers of the writer's work. They will therefore usually be idealizers of that writer and perpetrators (consciously or not) of the intentional fallacy. Part of the appeal of the writer's work for these fans will be the distinctive stamp of that writer's personality, predilections, style, particular tics and obsessions — the sense that these stories were written by this author and could have been done by no other.\* And yet it often seems that the person we encounter in the literary biography

\* Of course, Borges's famous "Pierre Menard, Author of the 'Quixote'" makes sport of this very conviction, just as his later "Borges and I" anticipates and refutes the whole idea of a literary biography. The fact that his fiction is always several steps ahead of its interpreters is one of the things that make Borges so great, and so modern.

could not possibly have written the works we admire. And the more intimate and thorough the bio, the stronger this feeling usually is. In the present case, the Jorge Luis Borges who emerges in Williamson's book — a vain, timid, pompous mama's boy, given for much of his life to dithery romantic obsessions — is about as different as one can get from the limpid, witty, pansophical, profoundly adult writer we know from his stories. Rightly or no, anyone who reveres Borges as one of the best and most important fiction writers of the last century will resist this dissonance, and will look, as a way to explain and mitigate it, for obvious defects in Williamson's life study. The book won't disappoint them.

Edwin Williamson is an Oxford don and esteemed Hispanist whose "Penguin History of Latin America" is a small masterpiece of lucidity and triage. It is therefore unsurprising that his "Borges" starts strong, with a fascinating sketch of Argentine history and the Borges family's place within it. For Williamson, the great conflict in the Argentine national character is that between the "sword" of civilizing European liberalism and the "dagger" of romantic gaucho individualism, and he argues that Borges's life and work can be properly understood only in reference to this conflict, particularly as it plays out in his childhood. In the 19th century, grandfathers on both sides of his family distinguished themselves in important battles for South American independence from Spain and the establishment of a centralized Argentine government, and Borges's mother was obsessed with the family's historical glory. Borges's father, a man stunted by the heroic paternal shadow in which he lived, evidently did things like give his son an actual dagger to use on bullies at school, and later sent him to a brothel for devirgination. The young Borges failed both these "tests," the scars of which marked him forever and show up all over the place in his fiction, Williamson thinks.

It is in these claims about personal stuff encoded in the writer's art that the book's real defect lies. In fairness, it's just a pronounced case of a syndrome that seems common to literary biographies, so common that it might point to a design flaw in the whole enterprise. The big problem with "Borges: A Life" is that Williamson is an atrocious reader of Borges's work; his interpretations amount to a simplistic, dishonest kind of psychological criticism. You can see why this problem might be intrinsic to the genre. A biographer wants his story to be not only interesting but literarily valuable.\*\* In order to en-

\*\* Actually, these two agendas dovetail, since the only reason anybody's interested in a writer's life is because of his literary importance. (Think about it — the personal lives of most people who spend 14 hours a day sitting there alone, reading and writing, are not going to be thrill rides to hear about.)

sure this, the bio has to make the writer's personal life and psychic travails seem vital to his work. The idea is that we can't correctly interpret a piece of verbal art unless we know the personal and/or psychological circumstances surrounding its creation. That this is simply assumed as an axiom by many biographers is one problem; another is that the approach works a lot better on some writers than on others. It works well on Kafka — Borges's only modern equal as an allegorist, with whom he's often compared — because Kafka's fictions are expressionist, projective, and personal; they make artistic sense only as manifestations of Kafka's psyche. But Borges's stories are very different. They are designed primarily as metaphysical arguments<sup>†</sup>; they are dense, self-enclosed, with their own deviant logics. Above all, they are meant to be impersonal, to transcend individual consciousness — "to be incorporated," as Borges puts it, "like the fables of Theseus or Ahasuerus, into the general memory of the species and even transcend the fame of their creator or the extinction of the language in which they were written." One reason for this is that Borges is a mystic, or at least a sort of radical Neoplatonist — human thought, behavior and history are all the product of one big Mind, or are elements of an immense cabalistic Book that includes its own decoding. Biography-wise, then, we have a strange situation in which Borges's individual personality and circumstances matter only insofar as they lead him to create artworks in which such personal facts are held to be unreal.

"Borges: A Life," which is strongest in its treatments of Argentine history and politics,<sup>††</sup> is at its very worst when Williamson is discussing specific pieces in light of Borges's personal life. Unfortunately, he discusses just about everything Borges ever wrote. Williamson's critical thesis is clear: "Bereft of a key to their autobiographical context, no one could have grasped the vivid significance these pieces actually had for

† This is part of what gives Borges's stories their mythic, precognitive quality (all cultures' earliest, most vital metaphysics is mythopoetic), which quality in turn helps explain how they can be at once so abstract and so moving.

†† The biography is probably most valuable in its account of Borges's political evolution. A common bit of literary gossip about Borges is that the reason he wasn't awarded a Nobel Prize was his supposed support for Argentina's ghastly authoritarian juntas of the 1960's and 70's. From Williamson, though, we learn that Borges's politics were actually far more complex and tragic. The child of an old liberal family, and an unabashed leftist in his youth, Borges was one of the first and bravest public opponents of European fascism and the rightist nationalism it spawned in Argentina. What changed him was Perón, whose creepy right-wing populist dictatorship aroused such loathing in Borges that he allied himself with the repressively anti-Perón *Revolución Libertadora*. Borges's situation following Perón's first ouster in 1955 is full of unsettling parallels for American readers. Because Peronism still had great popularity with Argentina's working poor, the exiled dictator retained enormous political power, and would have won any democratic national election held in the 1950's. This placed believers in liberal democracy (such as J. L. Borges) in the same sort of bind that the United States faced in South



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Borges in 1962; by the decade's end, his international reputation was established.



CARLOS GOLDIN/CORBIS

Borges in old age, in his home in Buenos Aires, about 1982. He was distressed by the rule of generals in Argentina and by the war with Britain over the Falkland Islands.

their author." And in case after case, the resultant readings are shallow, forced and distorted — as indeed they must be if the biographer's project is to be justified. Random example: "The Wait," a marvelous short-short that appears in the 1949 story collection "The Aleph," takes the form of a layered homage to Hemingway, gangster movies and the Buenos Aires underworld. An Argentine mobster, in hiding from another mobster and living under the pursuer's name, dreams so often of his killers' appearance in his bedroom that, when the assassins finally come for him, he "gestured at them to wait, and he turned over and faced the wall, as though going back to sleep. Did he do that to awaken the pity of the men that killed him, or because it's easier to endure a terrifying event than to imagine it, wait for it endlessly — or (and this is perhaps the most likely possibility) so that his murderers would become a dream, as they had already

Vietnam a few years later — how do you promote democracy when you know that a majority of people will, if given the chance, vote for an end to democratic voting? In essence, Borges decided that the Argentine masses had been so hoodwinked by Perón and his wife that a return to democracy was possible only after the nation had been cleansed of Peronism. Williamson's analysis of the slippery slope this decision put Borges on, and his account of the hatchet job that Argentina's leftists did on Borges's political reputation in retaliation for his defection (such that by 1967, when the writer came to Harvard to lecture, the students practically expected him to have epaulettes and a riding crop), make for his book's best chapters.

been so many times, in that same place, at that same hour?"

The distant interrogative ending — a Borges trademark — becomes an inquisition into dreams, reality, guilt, augury and mortal terror. For Williamson, though, the real key to the story's significance appears to be that "Borges had failed to win the love of Estela Canto. . . . With Estela gone, there seemed nothing to live for," and he represents the story's ending all and only as a depressed whimper: "When his killers finally track him down, he just rolls over meekly to face the wall and resigns himself to the inevitable."

It is not merely that Williamson reads every last thing in Borges's oeuvre as a correlative of the author's emotional state. It is that he tends to reduce all of Borges's psychic conflicts and personal problems to the pursuit of women. Williamson's theory here involves two big elements: Borges's inability to stand up to his domineering mother,<sup>‡</sup> and his belief, codified in a starry-eyed reading of Dante, that "it was the love of a woman that alone could deliver him from the hellish unreality he shared with his father and inspire him to write a masterpiece that would justify his life." Story after story is thus interpreted by Williamson as a coded dispatch on Borges's amorous career,

<sup>‡</sup> Be warned that much of the mom-based psychologizing seems right out of "Oprah": e.g., "However, by urging her son to realize the ambitions she had defined for herself, she unwittingly induced a sense of unworthiness in him that became the chief obstacle to his self-assertion."

which career turns out to be sad, timorous, puerile, moony and (like most people's) extremely boring. The formula is applied equally to famous pieces, such as "The Aleph" (1945), whose autobiographical subtext alludes to his thwarted love for Norah Lange, and to lesser-known stories like "The Zahir":

"The torments described by Borges in this story . . . are, of course, displaced confessions of the extremity of his plight. Estela [Canto, who'd just broken up with him] was to have been the 'new Beatrice,' inspiring him to create a work that would be 'the Rose without purpose, the Platonic, intemporal Rose,' but here he was again, sunk in the unreality of the labyrinthine self, with no prospect now of contemplating the mystic Rose of love."

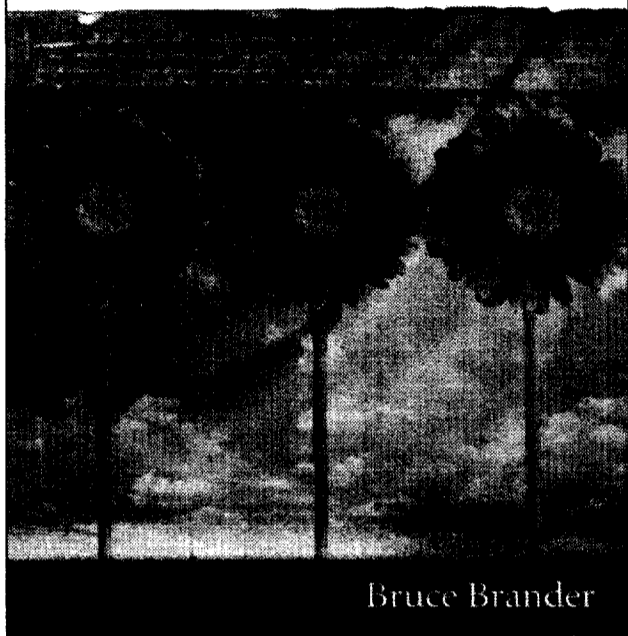
Thin though this kind of explication is, it's preferable to the reverse process by which Williamson sometimes presents Borges's stories and poems as "evidence" that he was in emotional extremities. Williamson's claim, for instance, that in 1934, "after his definitive rejection by Norah Lange, Borges . . . came to the brink of killing himself" is based entirely on two tiny pieces of contemporaneous fiction in which the protagonists struggle with suicide. Not only is this a bizarre way to read and reason — was the Flaubert who wrote "Madame Bovary" *eo ipso* suicidal? — but Williamson seems to believe that it licenses him to make all sorts of dubious, humiliating claims about Borges's interior life: "A poem called 'The Cyclical Night' . . . which he published in *La Nación* on October 6, reveals him to be in the

*Continued on next page*

**Borges's amorous career turns out to be sad, timorous, puerile, moony and — like most people's — boring.**

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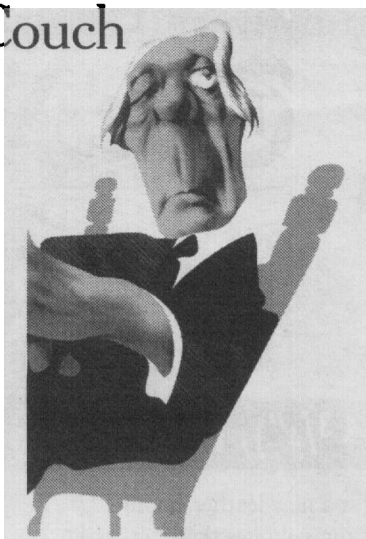
## Borges on the Couch

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throes of a personal crisis"; "In the extracts from this unfinished poem . . . we can see that the reason for wishing to commit suicide was literary failure, stemming ultimately from sexual self-doubt." Bluck.

**A**GAIN, it is primarily because of Borges's short stories that anyone will care enough to read about his life. And while Williamson spends a lot of time detailing the explosive success that Borges enjoyed in middle age, after the 1961 International Publishers' Prize (shared with Samuel Beckett) introduced his work to audiences in the United States and Europe,## there is little in his book about just why Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) is an important enough fiction writer to deserve such a microscopic bio. The truth, briefly stated, is that Borges is arguably the great bridge between modernism and post-modernism in world literature. He is modernist in that his fiction shows a first-rate human mind stripped of all foundations in religious or ideological certainty — a mind turned thus wholly in on itself.## His stories are inebriated and hermetic, with the oblique terror of a game whose rules are unknown and its stakes everything.

And the mind of those stories is nearly always a mind that lives in and through books. This is because Borges the writer is, fundamentally, a reader. The dense, obscure allusiveness of his fiction is not a tic, or even really a style; and it is no accident that his best stories are often fake essays, or reviews of fictitious books, or have texts at their plots' centers, or have as protagonists Homer or Dante or Averroës. Whether for seminal artistic reasons or neurotic personal ones or both, Borges collapses reader and writer into a new kind of aesthetic agent, one who makes stories out of stories, one for whom reading is essentially — consciously — a creative act. This is not, however, because Borges is a metafictionist or a cleverly



disguised critic. It is because he knows that there's finally no difference — that murderer and victim, detective and fugitive, performer and audience are the same. Obviously, this has postmodern implications (hence the pontine claim above), but Borges's is really a mystical insight, and a profound one. It's also frightening, since the line between monism and solipsism is thin and porous, more to do with spirit than with mind per se. And, as an artistic program, this kind of collapse/transcendence of individual identity is also paradoxical, requiring a grotesque self-obsession combined with an almost total effacement of self and personality. Tics and obsessions aside, what makes a Borges story Borgesian is the odd, ineluctable sense you get that no one and everyone did it. This is why, for instance, it is so irksome to see Williamson describe "The Immortal" and "The Writing of the God" — two of the greatest, most scalp-crinkling mystical stories ever, next to which the epiphanies of Joyce or redemptions of O'Connor seem pallid and crude — as respective products of Borges's "many-layered distress" and "indifference to his fate" after various idealized girlfriends dump him. Stuff like this misses the whole point. Even if Williamson's claims are true, the stories so completely transcend their motive cause that the biographical facts become, in the deepest and most literal way, irrelevant. □

## Williamson's chapters on Borges's sudden world fame will be of special interest to those American readers who weren't yet alive or reading in the mid-1960's. I was lucky enough to discover Borges as a child, but only because I happened to find "Labyrinths," an early English-language collection of his most famous stories, on my father's bookshelves in 1974. I believed that the book was there only because of my parents' unusually fine taste and discernment — which verily they do possess — but what I didn't know was that by 1974 "Labyrinths" was also on tens of thousands of other homes' shelves in this country, that Borges had actually been a sensation on the order of Tolkien and Gibran among hip readers of the previous decade.

## Labyrinths, mirrors, dreams, doubles — so many of the elements that appear over and over in Borges's fiction are symbols of the psyche turned inward.

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