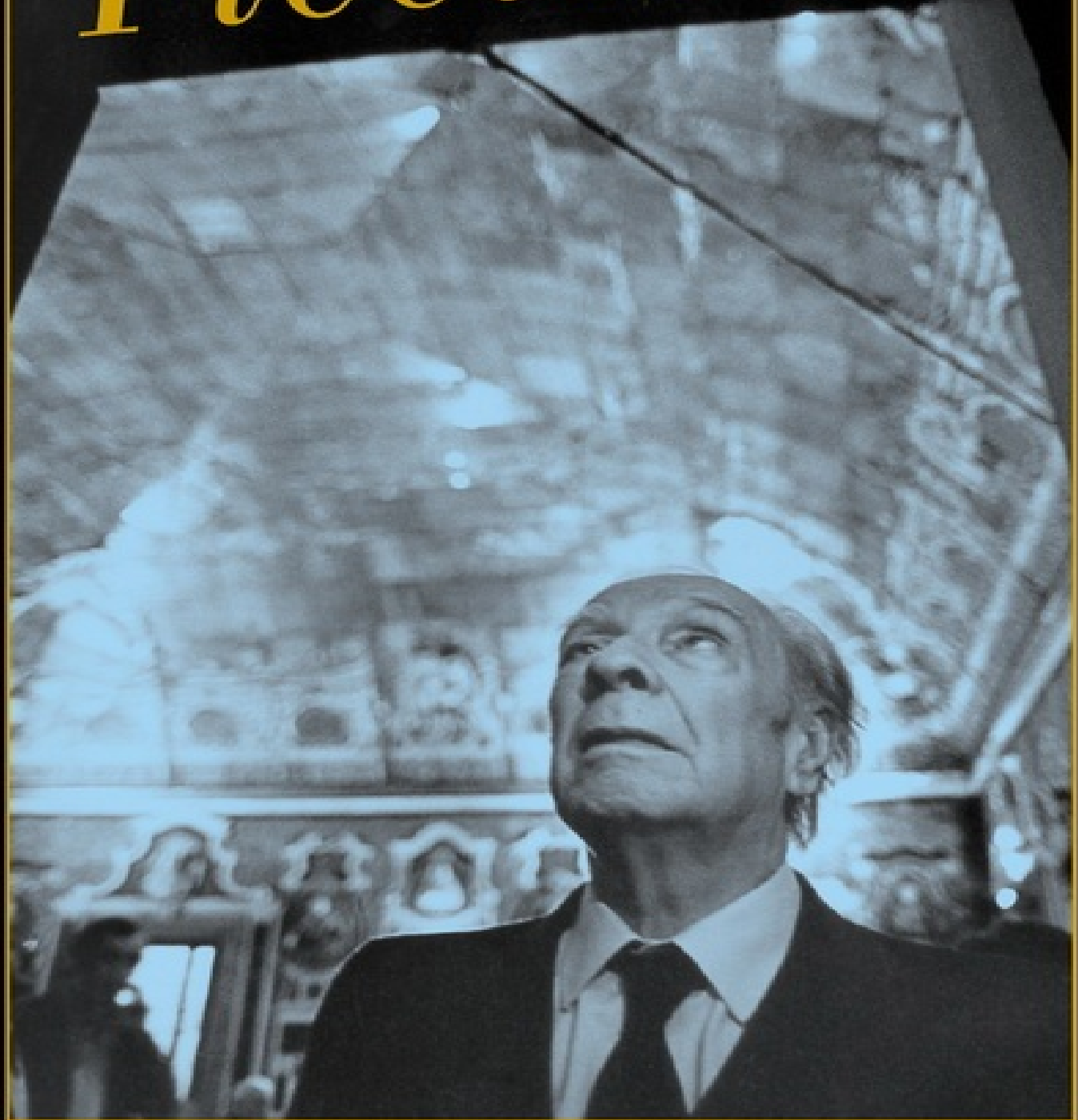


"Without Borges the modern Latin American novel
simply would not exist." —CARLOS FUENTES

Ficciones



Jorge
Luis

BORGES

FICCIONES

Also by Jorge Luis Borges

Published by Grove Press

A Personal Anthology

FICCIONES

by

Jorge Luis Borges

*Edited and with an Introduction
by Anthony Kerrigan*



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To
Esther Zemborain de Torres

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INTRODUCTION

The work of Jorge Luis Borges is a species of international literary metaphor. He knowledgeably makes a transfer of inherited meanings from Spanish and English, French and German, and sums up a series of analogies, of confrontations, of appositions in other nations' literatures. His Argentinians act out Parisian dramas, his Central European Jews are wise in the ways of the Amazon, his Babylonians are fluent in the paradigms of Babel. Probably, withal, he is the most succinct writer of this century, and one of the most incisive as to conclusions, daring dryly to go beyond such a Mannerist master as James Joyce, who knew philology and felt legends, but eschewed meanings. Perhaps, though, his meaning is simply in the ritual tone of voice with which he suggests some eternal, unanswerable question.

Philosophy, comparative philologies, archaeology, everything has been evolving, progressing, breaking new ground. But we know little as ever about why we are born again each morning. Despite the comings and goings of the collective unconscious, we know equally little about the meanings of our very symbols. Borges restates, in a few allegorical pages, the circular, ceremonial direction of our curious, groping, thrilling and atrocious ignorance. Since he has made the acquaintance of all religions, he does not blush to write a tender poem from within a propitiatory lupanar. Because he knows Madrid, Paris, and Geneva—Buenos Aires, even New York do not make him shudder. As an Argentine, he is perhaps one of the last German Expressionists (in 1919 he was associated with the *ultraista* movement). Because *he has read all the books*, because he has translated Gide, Kafka, Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, the burning of the library at Alexandria—or in Don Quixote's backyard—does not make him blanch anew. All the books were sacred and inviolable. They all proclaimed the True God. Our immediate forebears saw the ineffable face of the Creator, and reeled back, stopping to write

Torat yyy Hedut yyy Piquude yyy

where the series of y's stood for Jehovah.

More hard-mouthed now, though with the same arbitrary, stylized Solomonic stars in our eyes, we venture to challenge the heavens. Borges bears witness with

us in this century, with shabby Faust, but is mercifully economic. No Gargantuan novel says more than he can in one of his *ficciones*. Borges is no Gorgias (who invented the art of expressing himself either briefly or at endless length); his brevity is no device, as brevity was in the Middle Ages. His style is as laconic in statement as a parallel, as suggestively infinite. He is an imagist of cultural fugues and choreographies, of the faltering, lamentable Dance of Life. One cinquepace is not the same as another, but there is no need to dance until one drops in the marathon. In literature it is only necessary to outline the steps. Let the people dance!

Among his themes are a mythology of dagger thrusts; the fearful sphere of Pascal's abyss; the labyrinths which are books; *cogito, ergo sum cogitatio*; the genealogy of insomnia; the iconography of the eternal return.

Until you can say "The criminal coming at me? The criminal coming at me is I!," you can not know the Stoic philosophy. This notion burgeons in Borges to the point where he can adduce that at the moment of coitus every man is one man. And that when a man recites William Shakespeare, he *is* William Shakespeare. (Perhaps, after all, every man is one man, every book one book; though Borges insists that every book is also a specific and particular *dialogue*.)

Borges is an exegete, a commentator on the texts, on the Books. And exegesis is the mother of heresy. But Borges is not naturally a heresiarch. He is merely a vindicator of heresies. And heresies, as Miguel de Unamuno pointed out, are necessary for the philosophical, and even more, for the theological health of a culture. Borges, nevertheless, has nothing to do either with the well-being of our culture, or its languishment. His postulates, though portentous, are awesome incidental speculations; they undermine the universe only casually. As a vindicator of heresies, Borges will brave the exoneration of eternity or the refutation of Time: the concrete justification of a sunset, of the Plain, of identical mutations; the chance undermining of a chronology. Possibly, every instant in time is the Creation, or conversely, there is only spent accretion, and we are vagabonds at a universal dump.

The cruel jests of history are "solved" only by violence. The equal idiocy of all totalitarianism, the swinishness of Communism or Nazism, and the deadliness of conformity to an accepted form of sterility, are unmasked to no point. Men long for their deceits. A few will blindly fight back.

Borges does not shy away from senseless truth. In his own preferred story, "The South," a man must pick up a knife (is he dreaming?) and go out into the brainless night to face bestiality. Why? He does not know. All our knowledge