

Jorge Luis Borges
***This Craft of Verse.* Ed. Calin-Andrei Mihailescu**
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000

After being lost on some reel to reel tapes in a dusty corner of the Harvard library for thirty years, Borges's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures from 1967 and 1968 have suddenly become available to us in print form (and also on a compact disc, which I have not yet seen or heard). They are a wonderful find. Borges is in great form: witty, lucid, learned, self-deprecating. And coming as they do at the beginning of the period when his world fame made him one of the most interviewed writers ever, he does not yet repeat himself (as he would go on to do in hundreds of interviews, in which he often responds to similar questions in the same words). This is also a carefully edited volume with fine notes, making it a much more valuable resource than the later lectures that are collected in *Borges, oral* and *Siete noches*.

The titles of the lectures are: "The Riddle of Poetry," "The Metaphor," "The Telling of the Tale," "Word-Music and Translation," "Thought and Poetry" and "A Poet's Creed." Ranging widely, Borges comments on Old English poetry and Homeric epic, on Omar Khayyam and Edward Fitzgerald, on Yeats and Keats and Joyce and Stevenson, on San Juan de la Cruz and Rafael Cansinos-Asséns, on his own work. The performances are dazzling, considering that these were lectures given without notes—by 1967 Borges was too blind to read from a written text—and that he quotes poems and other texts in a number of languages, from memory. (In a footnote in the final essay [pp. 148-59] the editor notes that in a 1976 conversation with a Romanian critic—presumably Ion Agheana—Borges quoted an eight stanza Romanian poem—in Romanian—that he had learned from a classmate in Geneva in 1916; his prodigious memory is also on display in these lectures.) But even more important is the fact that his thoughts on the subjects of the lectures come across so many years later as fresh and spontaneous. Even though they were the distillation of a career as an essayist that had already lasted more than forty years, the formulation of his ideas in these talks sound new.

In the talk on metaphor, for instance, he does not merely restate his idea so often expressed after the *ultraísta* period that there are only a few essential metaphors (river = life, sea = death, life = dream, wo-man = flower and so forth). Instead of the conservative position expressed elsewhere (which was a reaction against his youthful enthusiasms), he is here concerned with the function of metaphor in language and with the endless variations possible in the ways in which metaphor functions. He quotes a line about "A rose-red city, half as old as Time," and comments that it is the "magic precision" of that "half as old" (36). (The notes inform us that Kipling is quoting here from the poem "Petra" by Dean Burgon from 1845, which in turn echoes a poem about Italy written by Samuel Rogers in 1828.) He concludes the essay by noting that there are hundreds or thousands of patterns in poetic metaphor, many of them variations on a smaller number of patterns, but that there are also some metaphors (and "half as old as Time" would seem to be an example) that do not fit into existing patterns. And he ends the talk (the spirit of the young *ultraísta* still very much alive in him) by saying that "it may also be given to us to invent metaphors that do not belong, or that do not yet belong, to accepted patterns" (41).

The lecture on translation includes a wonderful discussion of translations of San Juan de la Cruz's "Noche oscura del alma," where he comments that Roy Campbell's translation of the famous line "estando ya mi casa sosegada"—"When all the house was hushed"—"seems to give us somehow the very music of silence" (61). He comments at length in this talk on translations that improve on their originals (an idea he had already expressed in the essay on Beckford in *Otras inquisiciones*), but notes that though he thinks Stefan George's translations of Baudelaire are better than Baudelaire, yet "this will do Stefan George no good, since people who are interested in Baudelaire—and I have been very much interested in Baudelaire—think of his words as coming from him" (74). This observation is a gloss on the idea expressed earlier in the same paragraph that "a translation is never judged verbally. It should be judged verbally, but it never is" (73-74). He is driving at an interesting idea that the beauty of a poem—be it an original or a translation—matters to many writers less than the circumstances of the beauty of the poem. The reason that Baudelaire's "voice" in the French original matters is because that "voice" is interpreted as "coming from" that author, and from "the context of his whole life" (74).

At the end of the fifth talk Borges writes that his final talk will be about "a lesser poet—a poet whose works I never read, but a poet whose works I have to write" (95). This ironic presentation of self leads into a superb final talk where he notes that he always thought of himself "as being 'literary'" (100), and that "the central fact of my life has been the existence of words and the possibility of weaving those words into poetry" (100). Interestingly, though, this final talk is largely about the pleasure that he takes in reading literature. And that pleasure is what Emily Dickinson called "aslant," as Borges notes near the end of the final talk:

I no longer believe in expression: I believe only in allusion. After all, what are words? Words are symbols of shared memories. If I use a word, then you should have some experience of what the word stands for. If not, the word means nothing to you. I think we can only allude, we can only try to make the reader imagine. The reader, if he is quick enough, can be satisfied with our merely hinting at something (117).

The crystallization of earlier reflections (one recognizes here echoes of the essays on Dante, for instance), these nevertheless stand alone. In their way, these lectures are an excellent introduction to Borges, as well as a graceful summation of his thoughts on literature.

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