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Borges, A Blind Writer with Insight

By Israel Shenker 

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In *The Book of Imaginary Beings* by Jorge Luis Borges there are many strange creatures such as the Unicorn, the Hippogriff, the Wulfnik and the Basilisk. But there is no Jorge Luis Borges. What shall he be?

Is Borges -- could he be -- a Literary Lion? "I hope not," he says in the tentative voice of a man whose native language is Spanish and whose English is literary and word-perfect. To his sensitive ear a Literary Lion craves fame, riches, success.

"When I began writing in the 1920's in Buenos Aires, nobody thought of literature in terms of failure or success," he says. "You might publish an edition of 300 copies and these you gave away to your friends."

He remembers musing to himself: "People in this country may be idiotic, but they won't be that idiotic -- nobody would think of buying anything I've written."

The American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters made him an honorary member on March 25. "My mother will be 95 on May 22," he says. "I thought it a pity she couldn't be there -- she would have enjoyed it far more than I did. She's interested in my literary career, I'm not interested in my literary career."

Columbia University today awards him an honorary Doctor of Letters degree. He will teach a class of student writers, and a reception will follow. His mother will not be there.

Even after he went blind, in 1955, Borges went on writing -- essays, stories, poems -- and, together with Samuel Beckett, won the Formentor Prize in 1961. "Suddenly, people in Buenos Aires began to think of my work," he says. "Well, there must be something in it since it's been taken seriously in Europe."

Today his short stories -- some hardly dawdle past a paragraph -- appear in *The New Yorker*, and they are collected in books. Essences of essences. Labyrinths within mazes within mirrors.

When he comes to this country -- he is here on a visit now -- he has an utterly respectful audience. How many Latin-American authors are so well translated? He is naturally taken as a candidate for elevation to the Nobel Prize.

Beware! Who knows what this Imaginary Being will say next? On the "Today" show on television he invoked the name of Gustave Flaubert, and actually whispered a book's title in excellent French. The effect could not have been more startling had he changed into a Hippogriff and pecked at the startled interviewer.

Replying to questions, he draws from the cadences of memory. Borges says, "At my age [71], what can I do but plagiarize what I've already said, no?"

What shall a writer be in the glare of glosses on glosses and endless honors? Scholars consecrate volumes to his carefully turned ironies. Is he a Domesticated Industry?

Borges lives on the north side of Buenos Aires. Recently he took a taxi to the National Library on the south side. The taxi driver said, "Are you by any chance Borges?"

Borges said "Well, more or less" or "I think so."

The taxi driver refused to take any money -- and the same thing happened on the way home. "He hadn't read a line of what I'd written," says Borges. "Well, maybe I didn't have to pay because he hadn't read a line I'd written. He thinks, 'I'm an ignorant boor, I know nothing whatever. But this man stands for poetry, for culture, for those things that my gods have denied me.'"

"I knew I would go blind, because my father, my paternal grandmother, my great-grandfather, they had all gone blind," Borges says. "Since the year we got rid of the unspeakable scoundrel Perón, I have been unable to read or write. Consequently, if somebody tells me 'Well, I'll have to go and you'll be by yourself,' then I can just sit down and think or perhaps not think at all but let myself go on living."

He has written about the irony of going blind and simultaneously becoming director of the National Library. "I take good care that my books shouldn't quarrel with each other," he says. "I don't suppose you should have your Bible and your Voltaire side by side. They wouldn't be comfortable, no? Voltaire might be poking fun at the Bible, or the Bible might be ignoring him, no?"

"When I lost my sight I was rather worried over it, and in my dreams I was always reading. Then somehow I never could read because a word became twice or thrice as long as it was, or rather instead of one line there would be other lines springing like branches out of it. Now I no longer dream of reading, because I know that's beyond me.

"Sometimes I see a closed book and then I say, 'I could read this particular book,' but at the same time even inside my dream I know I can't, so I take good care not to open that particular book."

He dislikes envy, hatred, malice. Not sloth. Borges likes to say that he is lazy: "If some notion comes into my head, and now and then it does, let's say a notion about a story or about a poem, I do my best to discourage it. But if it keeps on worrying me then I let it have its way with me and I try to write it down in order to be rid of it.

"I have to dictate. I can't write. And that's why I have fallen back on classic forms of verse. I find that sonnets for example are very portable. You can walk all over a city and carry a sonnet inside your head, while you can hardly do that with free verse.

"As a very young man you don't know who you are. You may be

Lincoln for all you know. You may be Walt Whitman. Then you're looking for yourself, while at my age one is only too keenly aware of one's limitations. For example, I know the kind of story I can write and the kind of story I may not attempt.

"I'm chiefly thinking in terms of the future, and this means I'm not really an old man. I'm looking forward not to stories I've written. After all, let them go their way. I'm rather thinking of what I'm about to write. In fact I think I have some five or six plots for new stories, and when I get back to Buenos Aires in a couple of months I'll begin working at them. When I come to dictate them they'll be much clearer than today, and they're clearer now than a week ago."

"I'm very fond of my native city, I love Buenos Aires. In fact I love it so much that I dislike other people liking it. Somebody told me the other day he was thinking of going to South America. I said, 'Well, I think you should go to Colombia. It's a very fine country.'"

Borges delights in skepticism, certainly about political leaders. "Of course in my country most political leaders are really, well, I suppose I think of them in a sense as being, well, not gangsters but more or less the same kind of thing, no? I mean -- people who go in for getting elected. What can you expect of a man like that?"

Long ago, he promised his mother to say the Lord's Prayer every night. "And ever since then I always say it. I don't know whether there's anybody at the other end of the line.

"Being an agnostic means all things are possible, even God, even the Holy Trinity. This world is so strange that anything may happen, or may not happen. Being an agnostic makes me live in a larger, a more fantastic kind of world, almost uncanny. It makes me more tolerant."

"Personally I'm not afraid of dying. I think that if somebody told me, 'You'll be executed tonight,' I'd say, 'Well, that's that! Of course one never knows. Maybe I would break down.

"I have a sort of fear of not dying, of going on. And I have also a personal fear about the immortality of the soul, because I wouldn't care to go on and on. I mean if I were sure of immortality and at the same time of utter oblivion then I wouldn't mind. But in that case what would immortality mean?

Sometimes I think, 'Why on earth should I die, since I have never done it? Why should I start a new habit at my age?'"

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