An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges

WILLIS BARNSTONE: I'm going to ask a few questions to Borges and as usual he doesn't want to have any idea what they're about so he won't run dry. Those instruments the eyes, in your last book, *Historia de la Noche* (History of the Night), are the subject of your last published poem. Could you tell us about the physical eyes, and perhaps, to use Plato's phrase, "the eye of the soul"?

JORGE LUIS BORGES: My physical eyes have left me. I can decipher only yellow. Red and black are denied me. But I look in the center of a luminous mist—let's say a grayish or greenish or bluish mist. Thereof I know. Of the eyes of the mind, I wonder. I live in memory, but I also live in anticipation, in hope. I think it's very unhealthy to live in memory. One should look forward to the gifts that the future holds in store for us.

BARNSTONE: Borges, in every literature, authors use myth — Joyce, Milton, Virgil. Your own work has many myths in it. Could you tell us about the use of myth in your own writing?

BORGES: I have never attempted myth. Myth was *given* me, perhaps, but I never attempted it or thought about it.

BARNSTONE: Would you tell us why you chose to write a poem about Endymion?

BORGES: I wrote a poem of Endymion because I wanted to say something every man knows: every man who has been loved, has been loved by a goddess. So I wrote of Endymion as being, say, matter of fact and not myth. I have been Endymion. All of us have been Endymion who have been loved by the moon, who have felt unworthy of it, and who have sought to thank it. That

was the meaning of the poem. I wasn't playing around with myth.

BARNSTONE: You have done a lot of translation in your day. When you translate from other languages, do you feel that you've learned something for your own poetry?

BORGES: Yes, not only when I translate but when I read. I'm learning all the time. I'm a disciple, not a master.

BARNSTONE: To what extent to you think that books in translation have changed the Spanish language or the English language? That is, does the existence of, say, the King James translation in English affect the use of the English language?

BORGES: I think the King James translation of the Bible is really the book of England. I think of it as being the essential book, even as Wordsworth is essential, even as Chaucer is essential. I don't think of Shakespeare as being essential — I think of him as being alien to the English tradition, since the English go in for understatement and Shakespeare goes in for violent metaphors. So, when I think of an English writer, I tend to think of Johnson, of Wordsworth, of Coleridge, of course. And why not of Robert Frost? He was an English writer also!

BARNSTONE: I wanted to ask you about your use in your own poems of free verse and also of traditional forms such as the sonnet.

BORGES: I think that free verse is the most difficult of forms of verse, unless you take the precaution of being Walt Whitman!

I think that the classic forms are easier, because they provide you with a pattern. Now I'm merely repeating what Stevenson said. Stevenson wrote that when you had a verse, a unit, then you would go on repeating that unit. Now that unit might be made by alliteration (as in the case of Old English poems, the old Norse poems), or by rhymes, or by a certain number of syllables, like the short or round accents. But once you had a unit, you merely had to repeat the pattern. In the case of prose, the pattern has to be changed all the time. It should be changed in a way pleasing to the reader, pleasing to the ear. And that

may be the reason why verse, in all literature, comes before prose. Verse is easier, especially if there is a form to be followed.

Now in the case of free verse, free verse is as difficult as prose, I should say. Many people think that when we speak orally we use prose. It's a misconception. I think that oral language is alien to the literature. I think of prose as being very difficult. Prose should always come after classic verse. Of course, I made the mistake that all young men do, to think that free verse was easier. So, my first book was a failure in many senses . . . (not only in the sense that no copies were sold — I never intended that!) but in the sense that the verses were very awkward. I should advise the young poet to begin by the classic forms, to begin by the classic patterns.

One of the most beautiful of all patterns, I should say, is the sonnet. What a strange thing that a form that seems so haphazard as the sonnet — two stanzas, two quartets, or three stanzas, then two rhyming lines — should be used for such different purposes! If I think of a sonnet by Shakespeare, a sonnet by Milton, a sonnet by Rossetti, a sonnet by Swinburne, a sonnet by William Butler Yeats, I am thinking of things that are entirely different. Yet the structure is the same, for that structure allows the voice to find its own intonation, so that sonnets all over the world have the same structure and are entirely different. Each poet contributes something to it. So, I would advise a young poet — except that who am I to advise anybody? — I would advise him to begin by the rigorous stanzas.

BARNSTONE: Would you like to compare the various sonnets in the English language with the use of sonnets in the Spanish language and your own writing of sonnets?

BORGES: My own writing of sonnets should be forgotten. We speak of literature!

BARNSTONE: Nevertheless, your own writing of sonnets has something to do with the English language.

BORGES: Well, I hope it has. Of course, the Spanish language sonnets can be very different also. If we take a sonnet by

Góngora, a sonnet by Garcilaciso, a sonnet by Quevedo, by Lugones, by Enriqué Banchs, they are quite different. And yet, the form is the same. But the voice, the intonation behind the sonnet, is completely distinct.

BARNSTONE: I was going to ask you about the formal aspects of the sonnet. The Spanish normally follows the Petrarchan whereas you frequently follow a Shakespearean sonnet in the Spanish language.

BORGES: Enriqué Banchs wrote the finest sonnets in the language, perhaps, and he used the Shakespearean or the Spenserian pattern. For example, the sonnet "The Mirror", which you know, was written after the Shakespearean manner, and I think it is one of the finest sonnets in the Spanish language.

BARNSTONE: Borges, if I could return to another kind of question, and ask you about your feelings, when have you had a feeling of peace, if ever?

BORGES: Yes, but perhaps not now. Yes, I have had some moments of peace. They were given me perhaps sometimes by mere solitude. Sometimes by books, and sometimes in memory. And sometimes, when I wake and find myself, strangely enough, in Japan or New York. Those are very pleasant gifts and moments of peace.

BARNSTONE: When have you felt moments of fear?

BORGES: I am feeling it now at this moment. I have stage fright, and my dentist knows all about it also.

BARNSTONE: Any other moments, Borges?

BORGES: Well, I have felt also the fear of beauty. Sometimes reading Swinburne, or reading Rossetti, or reading Yeats, or reading Wordsworth, I may have thought, well, this is too beautiful. I am unworthy of the verses I am reading. But I have felt fear also. Before writing, I always think who am I to attempt writing? What do I know about it? And then I make a fool of myself . . . but I've done that so many times one more time won't matter.

And I also fear that certain fear before the blank page. And then I say to myself, after all, what does it matter? I've written far too many books. What else can I do but go on writing, since literature seems to be — I will not say "my destiny" — my "to do" — and I am grateful for it. Any other kind of destiny I cannot imagine.

BARNSTONE: Recently, in Indiana, you spoke about having experienced, twice, moments you would call timeless, mystical. Would you be willing to speak about the unspeakable?

BORGES: Yes. Two timeless moments have been given me. One came through quite an ordinary way. Suddenly I felt somehow I am beyond time. And the other came after a woman had told me that she did not love me and I felt very unhappy. I went for a long walk. I went to a railway station in Buenos Aires. Then, suddenly, I got that feeling of timelessness, of eternity. I don't know how long it lasted, since it was timeless. But I felt very grateful for it . . . then I wrote a poem on the railway station wall (I shouldn't have done that!). The poem is still there.

So, I've had the experience only twice in my life. But at the same time, I know people who've never had it and I know people who are having it all the time. My friend, a mystic, for example, abounds in ecstasies. I don't. I've only had two experiences of timeless time in 80 years.

BARNSTONE: When you are in time —

BORGES: I'm in time all the time.

BARNSTONE: — the other 98 moments of your life, there's the time of your mind, of dream and then there's the external time, the clock time, the measured time. You talk and write very much about time.

BORGES: Time is essential, really.

BARNSTONE: Would you speak to us about the time of dream?

BORGES: If you use the word "dream," I think of it in terms of that tiger of a dream, the nightmare. I have the nightmare every

other night. The pattern is always the same. I find myself, let's say, always at work in a street corner in Buenos Aires or in a room, quite an ordinary room, and then I attempt another street corner and another room and they are the same. That goes on and on. Then I say to myself, well, this is the nightmare of the labyrinth. I merely have to wait, and I wake up in due time.

But sometimes I dream I wake up and find myself in the same streetcorner, in the same room, or in the same marshland, ringed in by the same fog or looking into the same mirror — and then I know that I am not really awake. I go on dreaming until I wake, but the nightmare feeling lasts for two minutes, perhaps, until I feel that I am going mad. Then, suddenly, all that vanishes. I can go back to sleep. That happens every other night. One of my bad habits, the nightmare, I should say.

Since we speak of nightmare, I would like to speak of the word "nightmare." I looked it up in the dictionary. Two etymologies are possible: it might be "mare" — the demon of the night. And also, another Saxon word akin to the German, "märchen" — so it might be the fable of the night. The demon of the night, or the tale, the fable of the night. Now in French, the word is very beautiful also: "cauchemar." In German, the word "alp" stands for "elf" — it sits upon your breast and gives you a nightmare. Victor Hugo appreciated the beauty of the English word. In one of his poems, he calls the nightmare, the cauchemar, "Le Cheval Noir de la Nuit" — the black horse of the night.

BARNSTONE: One of your old habits is friendship. What has happened to your friendships over the last sixty years?

BORGES: All of my habits are old. Unhappily, when I think of my friends, I am thinking of dead men or dead ladies. But I have still some living friends. Of course, at my age, I have practically no contemporaries. Who is to blame? Nobody. I should have died long before. And yet still, life has been very good, since I am here in America and since I am among you.

BARNSTONE: You have contempt for most fame and even for your own publications.

BORGES: Of course.

BARNSTONE: Yet today, we're speaking to this very friendly group here. Tell me how you feel about speaking to them and letting them in on your knowledge.

BORGES: I am not speaking to them. I am speaking to every individual of you. After all, a crowd is an illusion. No such thing exists. I am talking to you personally. We are — Walt Whitman had it — he said, "Night, are we here together alone?" Well, we are alone, you and I, and *you* stands for an individual, not for the crowd, which is nonexistent, of course. Even I myself may be nonexistent also.

BARNSTONE: We would like to take questions from the audience now.

QUESTION: It is said that you are very fond of New York City.

BORGES: I am of course. I am not a lunatic!

BARNSTONE: (repeating question from the audience) Why do you think New York City is such a special place?

BORGES: I suppose there are many reasons. One reason may be that when I think of New York, I think of Walt Whitman. The other reason is the fact that I think of a city as living. I think of New York as being a city of fountains and those fountains are the skyscrapers. And then I also think back about O. Henry, let's say. Those three reasons should prove sufficient. And then, I will tell you what Adolfo Bioy Casares told me. He said, "I love Buenos Aires (that's his home town and my home town). I love London. I love Rome. I love Paris. But when I came to New York, I thought I'd spent all my life in the provinces. Here's the capital city." He felt very happy about it and so do I. Here we are in the capital.

QUESTION: We're in a library now. What about your story "The Library"?

BORGES: Yes, I wrote that story when I was playing the sedulous ape to Kafka. I wrote it 40 years ago and I don't remember it, really. But I always thought of paradise as being a library. That's my idea of paradise.

QUESTION: You once said that a writer starts out to describe a kingdom of castles and horses, but ends by tracing the lines of his own face.

BORGES: Did I say that? I wish I had said that! Ah, but of course, I remember that page. It is about a man who has an endless world before him and then he begins drawing some ships, anchors, towers, horses, birds, and so on. In the end he finds out that what he has designed is a picture of his own face. That, of course, is a metaphor of the writer: what the writer leaves behind him is not what he has written, but his image. So that is added to the written word. In the case of many writers, every page may be poor, but the sum total is the image the writer leaves of himself. The image, for example, of Edgar Allen Pow is far superior, I should say, to any one of the pages Poe wrote (even that very wonderful *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym,* his best work). So that may be the destiny of a writer.

But I would prefer another destiny. I would like to leave no image of me. I would like my name to be forgotten, and to leave, perhaps, a few verses or a fable — a fable to be told by others and to become a part of tradition. I would prefer to be nameless and forgotten when I am dead. But if I could add a word to the Spanish language, or a fable to the memory of mankind — that should be sufficient reward for me.

QUESTION: Would you talk about your interest in Judaism?

BORGES: I suppose there are many reasons. Firstly, my grandmother was English. She came from a stock of Methodist preachers and she knew her Bible by heart. She would give you chapter and verse. So I was brought up, let's say, hearing the English Bible over and over again. And then, I have done my best to be a Jew. I may have failed.

This is more important: if we belong to Western civilization then all of us, despite the many adventures of the blood, all of us are Greeks and Jews. Those are the two essential nations, since Rome, after all, is but an extension of Greece. And if we are Christians, then of course we also belong to the Bible and to the Jews.

I owe so many things to the Jews. I taught myself German

way back in 1917, and I found the very best method of doing so: I got a copy of Heinrich Heine's poetry and a German-English dictionary. After two or three months I was reading the finest poetry in the world. I could do without the dictionary. I recommend that method to everybody: to begin by Heine.

(For people who are learning English, I always tell them to begin by reading Oscar Wilde, though Wilde was a minor poet, and Heine, of course, was a man of genius, as we all know.) I have also dabbled in the Khabbala, I wrote a poem on the Golan, and I have written many poems on Israel. But I wonder whether those reasons are sufficient. I suppose they are. Many a time I think of myself as a Jew, but I wonder whether I have the right to think so. It may be wishful thinking, but there it is.

QUESTION: Do you have any plans to write part three of *Don Quixote*?

BORGES: No. Nothing is to be expected or feared from me.

QUESTION: In your writing, you concern yourself with the uncanny, the supernatural, the fantastic . . . why is this?

BORGES: You might as well ask "Why am I interested in love or in the moon?" I don't see anything strange about it. Of course, the word "uncanny" only exists in the Germanic languages, but in Romance languages, people did not feel the need for that word. But I do, partly because of my English blood, perhaps. I have a feeling for the uncanny; many people don't. Since there is no such word in Spanish, another is a fine Scottish word — "eerie" — that also stands for something not felt by Latin people. (We may be guilty for all I know.)

QUESTION: What is the difference between your impulse in writing poetry and in writing prose?

BORGES: Poetry and prose are essentially the same thing. There is only a formal difference. But there is also a difference in the reader. For example, if you look at a printed page in prose, then you expect or fear information or advice or arguments, but if you see something printed as verse, then you feel that what

you will take in is passion, emotion, felicity, sadness, or whatever it may be. But essentially I suppose they are the same.

QUESTION: In "Pierre Menard" (in *Ficciones*), you discuss the literary technique of creative anachonism. What literary anachronisms do you see today?

BORGES: I wonder if anachronism is possible. I suppose that since we're all living in the same century we are all writing the same book and thinking the same things. For example, Flaubert sat down to write a novel about ancient Carthage, but if I had to name a typical 19th century French novel I would choose *Salammboî.*

QUESTION: Is it possible for anyone to emerge from the labyrinth of time and space that you write about?

BORGES: I hope so!

QUESTION: Please discuss the character of "Funes, the Memorious."

BORGES: I wrote that story as a metaphor or allegory of insomnia. Because I had been sleepless many nights over, I then thought that a man bordering on infinite memory would go mad. So the whole story is meant as a kind of metaphor for insomnia. I was suffering under insomnia at the time, and oddly enough, after that story, I began to sleep quite well.

BARNSTONE: Of all the characters you've created — if you've created any —

BORGES: No, I haven't. It was always the same old Borges, only slightly disguised.

BARNSTONE: — who is the one you feel closest to?

BORGES: I wonder if I have created any characters. I don't think so. I am already one myself, using different myths.

BARNSTONE: Does Funes have a priority among those characters whom you've not created?

BORGES: Yes, I think of that story as being quite a good story, though I wrote it.

BARNSTONE: You're asked to say something about "Death and the Compass."

BORGES: I hardly remember that story. I was meant to be a detective story. It won a second prize in an Ellery Queen mystery magazine — I'm very proud of it.

QUESTION: What do you think about Julio Cortázar?

BORGES: I remember Cortázar. Some 30 years ago I was editing a small and noble secret magazine* and he came to me with a story and wanted to have my opinion on it. I said, "Come back in 10 days." He came back before the week was out. And I told him the story was being printed and my sister was doing illustrations for it. That story was a very fine story, and the only thing I've read by him, called "La Casa Tomada" (The House Taken Over). I saw him no more. We met once in Paris and he reminded me of the episode — and that's that. You see, I am old, blind, I do not read my contemporaries. But I do remember that very fine story and the illustrations made by my sister. And that was the first time he got something printed in Buenos Aires. I was his first publisher.

QUESTION: Someone characterized our age as a time when humanism is of diminished importance in our arts and culture. Do you consider yourself to be a humanist and would you comment on this hypothesis?

BORGES: I think we should do our best to save humanism. It is the one thing we have. I do what I can. I think of myself as a humanist, of course. I take no interest whatsoever in, say, politics, in money making, in fame — all those things are alien to me. But of course I worship Virgil, I worship, well, all litera-

*(*The Annals of Buenos Aires* — ed.)

tures. I worship the past . . . we need it in order to create the future. Yes, I think in terms of the decline of the West, but we may be saved for all I know by the Far East, by Japan, for example. We should try to do our own saving of ourselves; that would be better.

QUESTION: You once said that a writer has as much style as his conviction will give him, and not more. If a writer disbelieves what he is writing, then he can hardly expect the readers to believe it. What do you believe in?

BORGES: I was merely quoting Bernard Shaw. He made that statement, not I.

QUESTION: What do you think of the future of literature?

BORGES: I think that literature is quite safe. Literature is a necessity of the human mind.