

## Borges and immortality

*Leonardo S. Rodríguez*

I am afraid that this presentation has been prompted by a little misunderstanding, or as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it in relation to the slip of the tongue and other paraprases, ‘a successful mistake’.<sup>1</sup>

Jocelyn Dunphy-Blomfield kindly asked me to present a paper at this Seminar, an offer that, coming from her, I could not possibly refuse. I told her that I had written something on immortality, partly inspired by a tale by Jorge Luis Borges, and she said that it would be appropriate to discuss it at our Seminar. A few weeks later I realised that the title that Jocelyn gave to my presentation and which appeared in the program reads: “Immortality” — a presentation on the work of Borges’. Now, I did not intend to present a paper on the work of Borges — that would be beyond my capacity; but nevertheless I did not attempt to persuade Jocelyn to change the title, and thought to myself that this was an opportunity to write a few reflections on the life and work of a poet who, among the Spanish-speaking writers, has been the most influential for me, as he was for generations of Argentines — particularly for Argentine readers, writers, philosophers and psychoanalysts. So, I wrote a few lines that can only be considered as a very fragmentary and abbreviated introduction to the work of Borges. I am not a specialist in literary matters and what I can transmit is only the testimony of the reader of a poet who is regarded as the most important in Argentina’s history and one of the greatest in the Spanish language — a language that has produced great poets: Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Federico García Lorca, Antonio Machado, Rafael Alberti — to mention just a few of those who lived in the twentieth century.

Of my paper on immortality I would only read a few passages that may serve as a bridge with the lines on Borges.

I was reminded of Borges’ tale, *The Immortal*, published in 1949 as part of a collection of stories under the title of *The Aleph* (which is also the title of one of the tales), in the course of some research on what I took to be a symptom of the malaise of our culture, a series of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the Research Seminar of the Department of Psychiatry, Monash University, in 2011 and includes and extends upon a paper written earlier in 2008.

developments in technology and ideological formations that has created disquiet among a few thinkers and which has come to be known as ‘the post-human era’.

Jorge Luis Borges tells the tale of a race of immortal men who, having lost all desire to live an existence without temporal limits, built a city that turned out to be uninhabitable due to the sheer madness of its design. The troglodytes had possessed everything and had known it all — at the price of their desire, their language and their sanity.

Yet our finitude and transience, ultimate conditions of human desire, are misrecognised and regarded as the sources of our misery, when they are in fact the foundation for any possible creative existence. The proclaimed ‘post-human’ era (during which life would be prolonged indefinitely) figures prominently among the symptomatic manifestations of contemporary malaise, correlative of the individual subject’s satiety with an unbearable *jouissance*.

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In his tale *The Immortal*, Jorge Luis Borges tells the adventures of an explorer who after much trouble manages to reach the city of the Immortals. The place is deserted and its disposition and buildings most strange. They do not appear to serve any purpose: windows that are too high; doors that open to empty spaces or holes in the ground; corridors and staircases that lead nowhere; staircases constructed upside down; other staircases with steps so irregular that it is very hard to walk on them; constructions with unintelligible shapes. The race of immortals that built the city now lives elsewhere, in caves or in the open. They are troglodytes: they do no practice, as Borges puts it, ‘the commerce of the word’. They live in a state of lethargic apathy, totally indifferent to the world. The visitor notices a troglodyte lying on the ground with a bird’s nest on his chest built in immemorial times. Their bodies are lifeless; their immortality has guaranteed them complete, infinite satisfaction and all possible human experiences — and as a result, their desire has died. Borges writes:

The republic of immortal men had achieved the perfection of tolerance and almost of disdain. They knew that when time is infinite everything happens to every man. For his past or future virtues, every man has the right to every form of kindness, but he is also open to every form of treason, for his crimes of the past and future. [...] In

such a world, all our acts are just, but also indifferent. There is no moral or intellectual merit. Homer created *The Odyssey*; if time is infinite, if circumstances and changes are infinite, then the impossible thing is not to write *The Odyssey* at least once. Nobody is somebody; a single immortal man is every man. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am a philosopher, I am a demon and I am the world, which is a rather tedious way of saying that I am not. (Borges, 541)

Immortality, the abolition of death, entails the death of desire; but also, according to the poet, it induces a form of radical insanity whose salient feature is a state of catatonic autism. Borges' explorer looks at a palace in the city of the Immortals and thinks: 'This palace has been built by the gods'. Then he reflects further and corrects himself: 'The gods that erected this palace have died'. And finally he concludes: 'The gods that constructed this palace were mad'. With the death of desire comes the death of creativity. Borges writes:

The foundation of their city was the last symbol to which the Immortals consented; it signalled a stage when, concluding that all enterprise is futile, they decided to live only in thought, in pure speculation. They erected the city, forgot about it and went to live in caves. Permanently in a trance-like state, they barely perceived the physical world. (Borges, 540)

Death, which by virtue of our subjection to language is a necessary presence in our being, is the ultimate motor of desire. Our finite condition makes us human, subjects of a restricted temporality, of a circumscribed, singular and necessarily mutilated history, always running out of time, permanently losing opportunities; 'Being-unto-death' is the name Heidegger gave to this ultimate condition of the human being (Heidegger 1962).

Freud thought that we fear castration rather than death, and this is so precisely because our mortal condition makes our lacks and losses truly irreversible within our limited allocated time. He did not see in our mortal condition a handicap but rather a fertile incentive. It is our dreaded mortality that promotes desire and creativity. In his short essay, 'On Transience', Freud writes:

Not long ago I went on a summer walk through a smiling countryside in the company of a taciturn friend and of a young but already famous poet. The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom. [...] I could not see my way to dispute the transience of all things [...]. But I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss of its worth. On the contrary, an increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. (Freud 1916, 305)

Freud then says that what is at stake is our human revolt against mourning, against the detachment of libido from objects that have been lost, 'even when a substitute lies ready to hand' (1916, 306–7).

To me this suggests that the act of creation does not provide a replacement for our losses (as some conceptions of creativity, including the Kleinian concept of reparation, maintain). Creation is rather the gestation and birth of things that come to inhabit the world and which, like their creators and the things that already exist, are destined to perish. Freud writes in the same essay:

A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely. Nor can I understand any better why the beauty and perfection of a work of art or of an intellectual achievement should lose its worth because of its temporal limitation. A time may indeed come when the pictures and statues which we admire today will crumble to dust, or a race of men may follow us who no longer understand the works of our poets and thinkers, or a geological epoch may even arrive when all animate life upon the earth ceases; but since the value of all this beauty and perfection is determined only by its significance for our own emotional lives, it has no need to survive us and is therefore independent of absolute duration. (Freud 1916, 306)

Our capacity to sustain our desire and creativity is correlative of our capacity to mourn past, present and future losses. Lacan's concept of the object *a*, the object *cause* of desire, owes its originality precisely to its definition as a circumscribed *lack* whose positive, structuring effects depend on its being assumed by the subject as a *loss*, with the psychological work of mourning that this assumption requires.

The discontents of our civilisation have affected human creativity in a pervasive way. This is not to say that creativity has declined — on the contrary. But creativity completes a full circle: propelled by human mortality, it populates the human world with its creations and creatures; and because nothing guarantees that it be put to the service of the living, it introduces what Lacan called 'the lethal factor', the mortifying effect of the signifier. In our times, two cases are salient.

In the first place, we are all witnesses to what Giorgio Agamben has called 'the destruction of experience'. The uncontrolled and uncontrollable progress of the technological applications of modern science has resulted in the massive emergence of experiences that we undergo passively and which are destined to be destroyed at the very moment of their inception; experiences that are not worth registering, either because they involve the senseless satisfactions provided by the prevalent compulsive consumption of goods and gadgets, or because they are experiences that we actively foreclose, as they are nothing but a complete waste of time that we (subjects always running out of time that we are) cannot really afford; experiences that do not get recorded in our personal or collective histories. (Agamben, 1993)

In the second place, recent developments in the biological sciences and biotechnology have promoted serious projects that aim at prolonging human life indefinitely — this, through the implantation and replacement of organs that contemporary technological creations are making possible. These developments have led some authors to speak of a 'post-human' era, an era which in fact has already started: an era that offers a distinct possibility for the material realisation of a very extended, if not immortal, life, and the selective promotion of traits that would make of humans an altogether new species, where desire as we know it would be out of place. We can imagine the rest; or rather, we can read it in those pages that Jorge Luis Borges wrote as fiction. Yet our reduction to being troglodytes unable to engage in the commerce of the word, is already a firm possibility in a culture that promotes silent, inert, uncritical consumption and discourages all forms of

creative discourse. This culture, however, is not homogeneous in its foundations or in its effects, so that a dialectically contradictory counter-current of human creative activities are still alive.

In his work, *Humain post-humain*, Dominique Lecourt discusses the forecasts and prophecies that artificial intelligence and other scientific disciplines have generated concerning the 'post-human' era. Lecourt argues that among those who have formulated these predictions two groups of thinkers can be distinguished (Lecourt, 2003a).

The thinkers of the first group, which Lecourt calls 'technoprophets', envisage the creation of robots that will not only have the intellectual capacity of the human brain but will also add new abilities in a prodigious scale. Lecourt says that 'they announce the advent of minds without constraints, liberated from bodies, free from passions and with access to immortality.' (Lecourt, 2003a, 35)

The second conception of 'post-humanity', proposed by the authors that Lecourt calls 'biocatastrophists', and best represented by the works of Francis Fukuyama (the author of *Our Posthuman Future*), is concerned with the ethical, social and political effects of the advances in biological sciences and technologies. They predict:

The process of procreation will be mastered. The sex of the infant who arrives in this world will not be aleatoric again. Inherited diseases will never be fatal. The process of aging will be retarded, and death itself will be postponed indefinitely. Neither haphazard nor destiny: in applying his genius to that living being that he is among other living beings, the human being will change the conditions of his own life; he will trespass the limits of what constitutes the essence of its finitude. (Lecourt, 2003b, 36)

The selection of the genotype before conception, which would make possible the exclusion of undesirable traits, would affect the social structure itself. Another author, Hans Jonas, predicts that:

Different social groups will try to *improve* their descendants; certainly the rich, but also religious sects, and some ethnic groups. [...] The risk of this would be [...] the emergence of new forms of discrimination. (Lecourt, 2003b, 36)

These are only projections onto the future of what are already daily exercises in a megalomaniac *jouissance*, one of the symptoms of the discontents, or malaise, of our culture.

In his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis, Lacan stressed the need to consider the relationship of the subject of desire (the desiring subject) to his death as an integral part of analysis. He said then:

The function of desire must remain in a fundamental relationship to death. The question I ask is this: shouldn't the true termination of an analysis — and by that I mean the kind that prepares you to become an analyst — in the end confront the one who undergoes it with the reality of the human condition? It is precisely this, that in connection with anguish, Freud designated as the level at which its signal is produced, namely, *Hilfslosigkeit* or helplessness, the state in which man is in that relationship to himself which is his own death [...] [where he] can expect help from no one. (Lacan, 1992, 303–4)

As one of the few discourses still viable to us, as Lacan put it thirty-six years ago (Lacan 1990), psychoanalysis is therefore engaged in the acknowledgement of the human mortal condition in a way that is not anymore the territory of ontology and theology, but that of the defence of our time: our time as finite subjects in this still human era, precarious as our humanity may be.

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The most recently published biography of Borges is the excellent work of Edwin Williamson, Professor of Spanish at the University of Oxford (Williamson, 2004). The comprehensive bibliography included in this book mentions eleven other major biographies, mostly in Spanish but also some in English. There are probably other biographies in other languages, as well as hundreds, if not thousands, of critical studies of the works of Borges and shorter biographical pieces. Borges' complete works in Spanish are published in four volumes. There is a French annotated translation of his complete works published by Gallimard in its Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Penguin has published three volumes (not the

complete works) in English, and over the years other English translations of individual works have appeared.

Although it is not a scholarly piece, my preference among the biographical works on Borges is his own autobiographical essay, written in English for a 1970 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine, and then published again the same year as part of a collection under the title of *The Aleph and other Stories*, which includes *The Immortal*. The American poet Norman Thomas di Giovanni, who translated much of Borges' poetry into English, collaborated in the writing of the autobiographical essay.

Borges was a Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Buenos Aires, where I first met him. He wrote a few pieces (poems and essays) in English; he also wrote in French. He had a great facility with languages; but most of his writing is in Spanish, a fact that he regretted, as he did not particularly like the language, at least for poetic writing, because, he used to say, 'the words in Spanish are too long', making the writing of poetry in that language impossible. Pablo Neruda, the great Chilean poet, also complained about what he called 'the awkwardness' of the Spanish language. Borges eventually conceded that he had done his best to overcome the deficiencies of the Spanish language.

Borges was born in Buenos Aires on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 1899, and died in Geneva, Switzerland, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1986. Both his parents were the descendants of the Spaniards who in the 16<sup>th</sup> century colonised what is now Argentina. There was one significant exception, which was decisive in Borges' personal and literary life. His paternal grandmother, Frances (Fanny) Haslam, was an English woman who migrated to Argentina in the late 1860s and married Colonel Francisco Borges. The Colonel was killed at a young age in one of the civil wars that since the time of the war of independence (which started in 1810) afflicted Argentina for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was through that marriage that the English language was introduced in the Borges family. Fanny Haslam was also a great reader, and introduced the young Jorge Luis to a number of English authors. Borges' father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, was a lawyer, a writer and a teacher of English and Psychology at a college specialised in modern languages. He imposed the English language at home, and the family became effectively bilingual. The paternal influence was the main factor behind the son's preference for English and American poets and short-story writers. He was not particularly fond of novels or novelists; he never wrote a novel, claiming that it was too



difficult, which in his case, I think, cannot possibly be the only reason, and not the most important true reason — he certainly attempted, and successfully attained, a few very difficult things. Perhaps he was more truthful when he wrote that the novelist is forced to write too many pages and fill them with things of little literary merit and very few original ideas. He was a poet; he wrote extensively, and became famous and a best seller mostly because a good number of his short stories and essays were published in the literary supplements of the popular press, which have always occupied a prominent position in Argentine letters and culture. His poems became known as he became famous for his other writing; but the readership for poetry in Argentina — as elsewhere, I believe — is smaller than the readership for tales and essays. At any rate, Borges remains a poet when he writes prose: even his shortest and less significant pieces are written in a poetic prose that is highly original and that leaves the reader thinking because it is the product of a serious thinker. That is why, I think, some critics have compared him to James Joyce and Franz Kafka, with one suggesting that Borges is to the Spanish language what Joyce is to English and Kafka to German. (Some years ago there was in Barcelona a superb succession of three exhibitions on the lives and works of the three writers and their cities: Dublin, Prague and Buenos Aires).

From his father Borges inherited the love for books, literature and ideas, and a fondness for cooperation and universalism. He writes in his autobiographical essay:

My father was very intelligent and, like all intelligent men, very kind. Once, he told me that I should take a good look at soldiers, uniforms, barracks, flags, churches, priests, and butcher shops, since all these things were about to disappear, and I could tell my children that I had actually seen them. The prophecy has not yet come true, unfortunately. (Borges 1970, 41)

His father's idols were Shelley, Keats and Swinburne:

It was he who revealed the power of poetry to me — the fact that words are not only a means of communication but also magic symbols and music.

The father was, according to his own account, an anarchist, although not aligned with any of the anarchist parties of the time, as he also had sympathies for conservative values and for

the privileges of the Argentine aristocracy, to which his family of origins partly belonged. Borges inherited his father's ideological inclinations. After being an admirer of the Russian Bolshevik revolution, he became increasingly conservative in his political views; but he still maintained his 'anarchist' identity: he did not trust the State, despised nationalisms, was contemptuous of consumerism and all forms of snobbery, and was not interested in religion. His relations with God remained unstable, oscillating between references to the divine and straight atheism.

His mother, Leonor Acevedo, was a Catholic who did not approve of the ideological inclinations of father and son but who put up with them. She was also a great reader, and became a translator into Spanish of great works of English literature. This was a family of readers; so much so that Borges could write as an epigraph to one of his books: 'Some boast about the books they have written. I am proud of the books I have read'. Borges had a sister two years younger, Norah, who became an artist, and with whom he remained close, as with his mother (about whom I will return).

Borges started writing at six or seven, trying to imitate classic Spanish writers like Cervantes. He did not attend school until he was nine, and that year he translated impeccably Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* into Spanish. His translation was published in *El País*, a newspaper of Buenos Aires, and because it was signed 'Jorge Borges' people assumed that his father was the translator. I saw the manuscript at another superb exhibition of his life and work, some fifteen years ago, at the Pompidou Centre of modern art in Paris. It was written in neat child handwriting on the pages of a primary school notebook.

In 1914 (Borges was 15) the family travelled to Geneva, as Borges the father wanted that his children received a European education. He also wanted to have treatment for cataracts. A few years later the father became blind; blindness ran in the family, and Jorge Luis also went blind and could not read anymore after 1955, when he turned 56. Borges had always suffered from problems with his eyes (myopia and other problems), and had eight eye operations before becoming blind. His blindness became one of the main topics of his poetry, and his writing, perhaps, his most effective way of somehow working over the tragic loss of the most important instrument for a writer and reader. He suffered episodes of depression and even contemplated suicide (although it is not certain that this was a direct effect of his going blind); but in his old age he was able to achieve the most dignified and even creative attitude towards his blindness. A friend of mine and colleague told me that she

met Borges one day at one of his public talks (he was constantly invited to speak for more than half of his life). Borges had his best clothes on, and she complimented him: ‘You look very handsome, Professor!’ — ‘Ah!’ he replied, ‘if only I could see myself!’.

His time in Geneva and then in other parts of Europe, mainly Spain, was very rewarding. The First World War broke out shortly after the family’s arrival in Geneva; they remained stuck there, as there was no safe transportation back to Argentina. Borges did not mind. He spent seven years in Europe, learning French, Latin and German, obtaining a bachelor’s degree, expanding his studies of English literature and mixing with the main Spanish writers of the time. He wrote stories, essays and poetry during that period, none of which he considered, years later, to be worth including in his collected works.

His first book of poetry appeared in Buenos Aires when he was 24. It is entitled *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. It is a collection of 33 poems that reflect his re-discovery of his city after the years of absence. In the preface written 46 years after its first publication, he wrote:

I have not re-written this book. I have mitigated its Baroque excesses, polished some rough edges, erased sentimentalities and vagaries and, in the course of a task that has been some times pleasant and other times uncomfortable, I have felt that the boy who in 1923 wrote it was essentially — but what does essentially mean? — the gentleman that now submits himself or amends. We are both the same: neither of us believes in failure or success, neither of us believes in literary schools and their dogmas. We are both devotees of Schopenhauer, Stevenson and Whitman. To me *Fervor de Buenos Aires* prefigures everything I did later. [...] In those days I looked for sunsets, suburbs and unhappiness; now, I look for mornings, the city centre and serenity.

From then on, Borges never stopped writing; not even after his becoming blind. His mother was his support: secretary, scribe, researcher, travel companion. Because of his closeness with his mother, some malicious characters in Buenos Aires considered him a very bad case of the Oedipus Complex. He did not care. He married twice. He was 68 the first time (the marriage did not last long) and close to his death (at 86) the second time.

Borges could work very well with his mother; but not only with her. There is a big volume of his complete works *in collaboration* with other writers (all Argentines). The best

known works of this collection are his detective stories and other works of fiction written with his friend, the eminent story-teller and novelist Adolfo Buoy Casers. They wrote under their names and also under the pseudonym of 'H. Busts Domecq'. For years readers believed that there was a real Busts Domecq who had written the popular adventures of the detective Isidro Parody, whose incomparable style of solving the problems brought to him by victims of crime, solely by logical deduction, derived from the fact (a fictional fact) that the detective was a prisoner in Buenos Aires' largest prison — so his investigations were entirely conducted within his cell. The reader is never told why the detective is in prison, but he is presented as the most honest investigator and a brilliant logician, a character perhaps inspired by Edgar Alan Poe's Inspector Dupin.

Most of the other works written in collaboration (all with women writers) are fine literary studies and essays on a great variety of topics. With Maria Esther Vazquez Borges wrote an Introduction to English Literature and a study of different medieval Germanic literatures; with Maria Kodama (who was to become his second wife), a brief Anglo-Saxon anthology; with Marta Guerrero, essays on Argentine writers and many fictional and legendary characters; with Betina Edelberg, critical studies of another Argentine poet, Leopoldo Lugones; and with Alicia Jurado, a study of Buddhism.

Time, mortality, the infinite and its different modalities and the surrealistic, dream-like existence of some fundamental human realities reappear throughout his tales and essays. Some of his titles give an idea of his fictional enquiries: *The Universal History of Infamy*; *A History of Eternity*; *In Praise of Darkness*; *Funes the Memory Man* (the story of a man who cannot forget anything, a man without an unconscious who remembers every detail of all situations in his entire life); *The Book of Sand*, a collection of tales that Borges considered his best (the book of sand being a book with infinite number of pages and illustrations that appear every two thousand pages without ever repeating — a fiction that has some resemblance with his 'universal library': the library that contains *all* the books in the Universe — past, present and future books, real or imaginary).

In December 1984, for the first time in Buenos Aires after a few years in exile, I had the good fortune of having two long conversations with Jorge Luis Borges, which I transcribed and which have been published in French, Spanish and English: in English, eighteen years after the event, in 2002, first in *Southerly*, the Sydney literary journal, and later in the same year as part of the collection entitled *The Best Australian Essays 2002*. Borges was

then 85, and exceptionally lucid, as open to the world and eager to learn as when he started writing, at six or seven. He was then learning Japanese with María Kodama and Guaraní (the language of the native Amerindians of Paraguay, Northern Argentina and Southern Brazil) with his faithful housekeeper, Fani Úveda. I visited him to ask him some questions, but he was more interested in learning about Australia (a country he never visited), its fauna, its people and its writers.

It is perhaps appropriate to finish this very sketchy presentation with the last paragraph of Borges' autobiographical essay:

I suppose my best work is over. This gives me a certain quiet satisfaction and ease. And yet I do not feel I have written myself out. In a way, youthfulness seems closer to me today than when I was a young man. I no longer regard happiness as unattainable; once, long ago, I did. Now I know that it may occur at any moment but that it should never be sought after. As to failure or fame, they are quite irrelevant and I never bother about them. What I'm out for now is peace, the enjoyment of thinking and of friendship, and, though it may be too ambitious, a sense of loving and of being loved. (Borges 1970, 99)

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