Poems of the Night by Jorge Luis Borges

Review by Patrick Kurp — Published on December 6, 2010

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Borges—as with Aristotle, one name will do—migrated to North American shores early in the 1960s and was identified by critics as a doubly exotic species—a “Latin American” and a spinner of such metaphysical tales as “Funes the
Memorious,” “The Library of Babel” and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.” The field-guide classification has largely stuck. With Beckett and Nabokov, he has been taxonomized as a senior precursor to the trendy “meta-fiction” practiced half a century ago by such juniors as John Barth and Donald Barthelme. Without benefit of his Argentine context, critics have misunderstood this deeply tradition-minded and allusive writer, and failed to notice we had a major poet on our hands, an elegant Spanish-language alternative to the odious Pablo Neruda.

Born in 1899, Borges began writing poems as a boy and published his first volume of verse, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, in 1923, a decade before he started writing his best-known *ficciones*. Throughout his life (he died in 1986) Borges deemed himself principally a poet, secondarily a writer of fiction. In his prologue to a revised edition of *Fervor* (1969), Borges said he had “moderated its baroque excesses” and “eliminated sentimentality and haziness.” He declined to renounce his younger self, however, and said: “At the time, I was seeking out late afternoons, drab outskirts, and unhappiness; now I seek mornings, the center of town, peace.” The poem chosen by Efraín Kristal to open *Poems of the Night*, “The Forging,” is taken from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. Here is Christopher Maurer’s English version:

Like the blind man whose hands are precursors that push aside walls and glimpse heavens slowly, flustered, I feel in the crack of night the verses that are to come. I must burn the abominable darkness in their limpid bonfire: the purple of words on the flagellated shoulder of time. I must enclose the tears of evening in the hard diamond of the poem. No matter if the soul walks naked and lonely as the wind if the universe of a glorious kiss still embraces my life. The night is good fertile ground for a sower of verses.

This is overwrought and portentous, the verse of a young man who had read too much and lived too little. It’s more poetic gesture than poem but contains nuggets of promise. The image of the blind man is touching and prescient, while “flagellated shoulder of time” is embarrassing, as are “naked and lonely” and “the universe of a glorious kiss.” As the closing lines seem to imply, Borges hadn’t yet grown into his verse-making gift.
This needs to be emphasized: But for some youthful, avant-garde self-indulgence, Borges is an accessible, engaging, “reader-friendly” poet (and maker of ficiones, for that matter: his first story in English translation, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” appeared in 1948 in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine). It’s useful to place him in another tradition, one he reworked idiosyncratically, mindful of Modernist mannerisms but blithely proceeding without them: the long tradition of English poetry. Here his precursors are such acknowledged admirations as Kipling, Stevenson and Chesterton. Borges spoke (and more importantly, read) English from childhood. His poetic models seem more English than Spanish. He preferred “verse” to “poems,” and happily wrote such ballads like “The Golem” (translated by Alan S. Trueblood), including this stanza verging on light verse:

That cabbalist who played at being God
Gave his spacey offspring the nickname Golem.
(In a learned passage of his volume,
These truths have been conveyed to us by Scholem.)

The Borges bibliography remains tangled in Spanish and English, in part because the poet was an inveterate reviser of earlier published work. There’s much overlap among translations, and the two Penguin volumes contain many of the versions collected in Selected Poems (edited by Alexander Coleman, Viking, 1999). For now, that volume of almost five-hundred pages remains the most complete and reliable gathering we have in English, but Poems of the Night and The Sonnets are intelligently edited and probably more inviting, in particular to readers new to the master’s work or lost in the bibliographical labyrinth.

In his introduction Kristal notes that Borges claimed many poems came to him in dreams. He called them “gifts of the night, or more precisely, of the dawn.” Poems of the Night includes sixty-five poems in Spanish, and English versions by fourteen translators. All the vital Borgesian themes are represented—death, mirrors, darkness and blindness, multiple selves, labyrinths, knives, books, reality as fiction, fiction as reality, the vertigo of infinity.

Consider one of his finest creations, “Poem of the Gifts,” ten quatrains of beautifully rhymed verse turned into an excellent English poem by Alastair Reid. In 1955, following the overthrow of Juan Perón, and when blindness was overtaking this formidable reader, Borges was named director of the National Library in Buenos Aires. He later said: “I speak of God’s splendid irony in granting me at once 800,000 books and darkness.” Even more splendidly, Borges’ two predecessors as director of the library had also been blind. Here are the final four stanzas, which refer to one of those predecessors, Paul Groussac:

Something, which certainly is not defined
by the word fate, arranges all these thing;
another man was given, on other evenings
now gone, these many books. He too was blind.
Wandering through the gradual galleries,
I often feel with vague and holy dread
I am that other dead one, who attempted
The same uncertain steps on similar days.

Which of the two is setting down this poem—
a single sightless self, a plural I?
What can it matter, then, the name that names me,
given our curse is common and the same?

Groussac or Borges, now I look upon
this dear world losing shape, fading away
into a pale uncertain ashy-gray
that feels like sleep, or else oblivion.

In poetry and prose Borges is among the supreme shape-shifters, donning other selves as though putting on Halloween costumes, the difference being that the costume becomes the self, at least for the span of the poem.

_The Sonnets_, edited by Stephen Kessler, is devoted to Borges’ poems in that most traditional of forms, and includes Spanish texts and English versions, by twelve translators, one hundred thirty-seven poems in all. Borges seems well served. Most of the translated sonnets stand as good poems in English. Here is Alistair Reid’s rendering of “Religio Medici, 1643” from _In Praise of Darkness (Elogio de la Sombra, 1969)_:

Save me, O Lord. (That I use a name for you
does not imply a Being. It’s just a word
from that vocabulary the tenuous use,
and that I use now, in an evening of panic.)
Save me from myself. Others have asked the same—
Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne, an unknown Spaniard.
Something remains in me of these golden visions
That my fading eyesight can still recognize.
Save me, O Lord, from that impatient urge:
To yield myself to tombstones and oblivion.
Save me from facing all that I have been,
That person I have been irreparably.
Not from the sword-thrust or the bloodstained lance.
Save me, at least, from all those golden fictions.

An Old Testament invocation followed by three and a half lines of parenthetical clarification, in turn followed by anguished confession—this is quintessential Borges, his
trademark bookishness, philosophical scrupulosity and personal anguish. If this longtime English-language reader of Borges has a quibble, it’s that Borges the poet is seldom so drily concise as Borges the writer of prose. At times one senses poetry was a release, a letting go, a fond indulgence for this blind visionary and adept of irony.

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