

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

109

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook*, which was discontinued in 1998.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Managing Editor:

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Jorge Luis Borges

1899-1986

(Also wrote under the pseudonym F. Bustos; with Adolfo Bioy Casares wrote under the joint pseudonyms H. Bustos Domecq, B. Lynch Davis, and B. Suarez Lynch) Argentinian short story writer, poet, essayist, critic, translator, biographer, and screenwriter.

INTRODUCTION

During his lifetime, Borges was highly regarded as the author of baroque and labyrinthine short fictions, often written in the form of metaphysical detective stories. Characteristically, they blur the distinction between reality and the perception of reality, between the possible and the fantastic, between matter and spirit, between past, present, and future, and between the self and the other. They usually are situated in the nebulous confines of allegorical locations, whether identified as bizarre dimensions of the universe, Arabian cities, English gardens, the Argentine pampas, amazing libraries, or the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. Since his death, Borges has attained the status of one of the major literary figures of the twentieth century, a master poet and essayist, as well as an architect of the short story. His work not only has influenced the way Latin American and non-Latin American writers write, but also the way readers read.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Borges was born into an old, Argentinian family of soldiers, patriots, and scholars in Buenos Aires, where he spent most of his childhood. His father was an intellectual, a university professor of psychology and modern languages, a lawyer, and a writer, who possessed an extensive library, which was the boy's delight. Borges, whose paternal grandmother was English, was raised bilingual and read English before Spanish. For example, his first encounter with Cervantes was in English, and when he was seven, his Spanish translation of Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" appeared in a Uruguayan newspaper. A visit to Switzerland in 1914 became an extended stay when the outbreak of the First World War made it impossible for the family to return to Argentina. Borges enrolled in the College de Geneve, where he studied Latin, French, German, and the European philosophers, especially Schopenhauer and Bishop Berkley, whose dark pessimistic and antimaterialist influences can be perceived in the worldview of his literary work. After receiving his degree in 1918, and with the termination of the war, Borges traveled to Spain. There he joined with the avant-garde *Ultraistas*,



who combined elements of Dadaism, Imagism, and German Expressionism, and published reviews, essays, and poetry. Borges returned to Buenos Aires in 1921, and, with the publication of his first books of poetry, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), and *Cuaderno San Martin* (1929) was recognized as a leading literary figure in Argentina. During these years, Borges helped establish several literary journals, and published essays on metaphysics and language, which were collected in *Inquisiciones* (1925) and *El tamano de mi esperanza* (1927). In 1938, the same year his father died, Borges developed a form of blood poisoning after a wound he received was poorly tended. Fearful that his ability to write might have been impaired by his illness, Borges took up short fiction rather than poetry, intending to attribute possible failure to inexperience in the genre rather than diminished literary skill. The result was "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*," a story highly acclaimed both as a fiction and as a precursor to deconstructionist textual analysis. There followed a period of composition in which the stories regarded as masterpieces were written. Though he spoke of his disdain for

politics, Borges was always politically outspoken. He opposed European fascism and anti-Semitism, and the dictatorship of Juan Perón in Argentina. In 1946, Perón removed Borges from his post as an assistant at the National Library of Argentina, due to his opposition to the regime. In 1955, however, following the overthrow of Perón, Borges, now almost totally blind from an inherited condition, was made director of the National Library. In 1957 he was appointed professor of English Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. In 1961, he was a co-recipient, along with Samuel Beckett, of the Prix Formentor, the prestigious International Publishers Prize, which gave him international fame. Borges did not oppose the Argentinian military coup or the terrorism of the Videla junta in the seventies until 1980, when, apologizing, he signed a plea for those whom the regime had caused to “disappear.” Similarly he supported the Ugarle Pinochet coup and dictatorship in Chile, calling the general a “gentleman,” and commending his imposition of “order” in the face of communism. It was for these failings, rather than for any failure as an artist, many believe, that Borges never was awarded the Nobel Prize. The catalog of his awards and honors, nevertheless, is long and distinguished. He spent his last years a literary celebrity, traveling and lecturing. Totally blind, he continued to write by dictation—to his mother, who died in 1975 at the age of ninety-nine—and to his student and companion, María Kodama, whom he married shortly before his death. His enduring love of languages was marked by his late study of Icelandic. Borges died of cancer of the liver in 1986 and was buried in Geneva.

MAJOR WORKS

Borges produced major works in three genres—poetry, essays, and short fiction. He also translated works by (among others) Virginia Woolf, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, and Thomas Carlyle. His first major books of poetry, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* and *Luna de enfrente*, are avant-garde collections influenced by the *Ultraist* movement. The young Borges wrote a baroque verse free of rhyme, surrealistic, even brutal, in imagery and metaphor, dedicated to the incorporation of Argentinian locations, locutions and themes, and establishing the poet as the soul of his subject. By the end of the thirties, however, Borges repudiated his early verse, revised it and worked, until his death, with traditional devices: rhyme, meter, elucidation, and time-honored metaphors. He utilized traditional forms such as the sonnet and haiku, aiming at simplicity of expression through the use of common language and colloquial word order. His work projects a tone of tranquil irony, and a wisdom concerned with, but tempered by an indifference to, time, desire, and mortality. Borges's works of fiction and nonfiction, critics have noted, are often difficult to distinguish from one another. Many of the short stories are written in essay form; the essays often treat subject matter that might be dealt with in fiction. The very short pieces, the “parables,” share the qualities of poetry, essay, and short story. Borges's essay

collections—including *Inquisiciones*, *Discusión* (1932), and *Otras Inquisiciones*, 1937-1952 (1952; *Other Inquisitions*, 1937-1952) address a wide variety of issues, and represent a diversity of styles. *Discusión*, for example, contains film reviews, essays on metaphysical and aesthetic topics, and includes “Narrative Art and Magic,” in which Borges asserts the capacity of fantasy literature to address realistic concerns. As well as his philosophical suppleness, his essays also reveal the depth of his scholarship, as in a monograph on ancient Germanic and Anglo-Saxon literatures he wrote in 1951 in collaboration with Delia Ingenieros. His first collection of short stories, *Historia universal de la infamia*, (1935; *A Universal History of Infamy*), purports to be an encyclopedia of world criminals, containing brief, seemingly factual accounts of real and mythical figures. The stories themselves are exercises in local color and the lowdown argot of gangsters. Written with the erudition of an intellectual posing as a roughneck, they show posturing toughs engaged in macho assertion through gratuitous and egotistical violence. In his collection, *Ficciones*, 1935-1944, published in 1944, Borges invented a form for the short story which combines elements of detective fiction, metaphysical fantasy, philosophical discourse, and the scholarly monograph complete with footnotes, references, and commentary. Thematically the stories are about the conflict between the integrity of the “I” and the overwhelming power of the other, whether the other is a person, a force, a book, a dream, or a labyrinth. In the late 1950s, partially because he felt he had exhausted the genre and partially because his failing eyesight made written composition difficult and dictation necessary, Borges began to write simplified short stories, parables, and fables less baroque in structure and diction than the masterpieces of his middle period. They are, nonetheless, paradoxical, philosophically complex, mythic narratives. New translations of Borges's works—*Selected Non-Fiction*, *Selected Poems*, and *Collected Fictions*—were published in 1999 on the occasion of the centenary of his birth.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Borges stands as one of the major writers of the twentieth century, acclaimed for his fiction, his poetry, and his essays. His works have been translated into numerous languages. Among the first contemporary Latin American authors to achieve international recognition, Borges is lauded for his stylistic and philosophical innovations, which have redefined the boundaries of fiction and of the essay. Citing his imaginative infusion of fantasy into South America's essentially realistic literary tradition, critics see Borges's influence in the work of Julio Cortázar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Mempo Giardinelli, among others, but his influence extends beyond Latin America, from Donald Barthelme to Umberto Eco to the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun. He has contributed not only to the way literature is written, but also to the way it is read, especially because of his story “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,” which introduces the idea that the mind-set of the

reader influences the significance of the text. Even the sternest critics who reproach his works for being intellectual games do not quibble at their quality, and most critics see Borges's works as employing aesthetic and intellectual devices to create authentic illuminations of a dark and dubious reality as it is discerned by a befuddled humanity.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Fervor de Buenos Aires* [*Passion for Buenos Aires*] (poetry) 1923
- Inquisiciones* [*Inquisitions*] (essays) 1925
- Luna de Enfrente* [*Moon across the Way*] (poetry) 1925
- El tamaño de mi esperanza* [*The Measure of My Hope*] (essays) 1927
- El idioma de los argentinos* [*The Language of the Argentines*] (essays) 1928
- Cuaderno San Martín* [*San Martín Copybook*] (poetry) 1929
- Evaristo Carriego* [*Evaristo Carriego: A Book About Old-Time Buenos Aires*] (biography) 1930
- Discusión* (essays) 1932; revised edition, 1976
- Historia universal de la infamia* [*A Universal History of Infamy*] (short stories) 1935
- Historia de la eternidad* (essays) 1936; revised and enlarged edition, 1953
- El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (short stories) 1941
- Seis problemas para Isidro parodi* [with Adolfo Bioy Casares, under joint pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq] (short stories) 1942
- Poemas 1923-1943* (poetry) 1943; also published as *Poemas, 1923-1953* [revised and enlarged edition], 1954; also published as *Poemas, 1923-1958* [revised and enlarged edition], 1958
- Ficciones, 1935-1944* (short stories) 1944
- El compardito, su destino, sus barrios, su música* (nonfiction) 1945; enlarged edition, 1968
- Dos fantasías memorables* [with Bioy Casares, under joint pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq] (short stories) 1946
- Un modelo para la muerte* [with Adolfo Bioy Casares, as H. Bustos Domecq] (short stories) 1946
- El Aleph* [*The Aleph, and Other Stories, 1933-1969*] (short stories) 1949
- Otras inquisiciones* [*Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*] (essays) 1952
- Obras completas*. 10 vols. (essays, short stories, and poetry) 1953-1967
- Días de odio* [with Leopoldo Torre Nilsson] (screenplay) 1954
- Manual de zoología fantástica* [with Margarita Guerrero; *The Imaginary Zoo*] (fiction) 1957; also published as *El libro de los seres imaginarios* [revised edition; *The Book of Imaginary Beings*] 1967
- El Hacedor* [*Dreamtigers*] (poetry and prose) 1960
- Antología personal* [*A Personal Anthology*] (poetry, short stories, and essays) 1961
- Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (short stories and essays) 1962

- Obra poética, 1923-1964*, [Selected Poems, 1923-1967] (poetry) 1964; also published as *Obra poética, 1923-1967*, 1967; *Obra poética, 1923-1969*, 1972; *Obra poética, 1923-1976*, 1977
- Introducción a la literatura inglesa* [with María Esther Vázquez; *An Introduction to English Literature*] (criticism) 1965
- Introducción a la literatura norteamericana* [with Esther Zemborain de Torres; *An Introduction to American Literature*] (criticism) 1965
- Crónicas de Bustos Domecq* [with Adolfo Bioy Casares; *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*] (short stories) 1967
- Nueva antología personal* (poetry, short stories, and essays) 1968
- Elogio de la sombra* [*In Praise of Darkness*] (poetry, short stories, and essays) 1969
- Invasión* [with Hugo Santiago] (screenplay) 1969
- El informe de Brodie* [*Doctor Brodie's Report*] (short stories) 1970
- El oro de los tigres* [*The Gold of Tigers*] (poetry) 1972
- Borges on Writing* (interviews) 1973
- El libro de arena* [*The Book of Sand*] (short stories) 1975
- La rosa profunda* [*The Unending Rose*] (poetry) 1975
- Historia de la noche* [*History of Night*] (poetry) 1977
- Obras Completas* (poetry, short stories, and essays) 1977
- Obras Completas en colaboración* [with Adolfo Bioy Casares, Betina Edelberg, Margarita Guerrero, Alicia Jurado, María Kodama, María Esther Vázquez] (short stories, essays, and criticism) 1979
- Borges en/y/sobre cine* [*Borges In/And/On Film*] (criticism) 1980
- Prosa completa* 2 vols. (short stories, essays, and criticism) 1980
- Siete noches* [*Seven Nights*] (lectures) 1980
- Antología poética, 1923-1977* (poetry) 1981
- Borges: A Reader* (poetry, short stories, criticism, and essays) 1981
- Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges: Including a Selection of Poems* (interviews and poetry) 1984
- Nuevos ensayos dantescos* [*New Dante Essays*] (essays) 1982
- Veinticinco agosto 1983 y otros cuentos de Jorge Luis Borges* (short stories) 1983
- Atlas* [with María Kodama] (prose and poetry) 1985
- Los conjurados* [*The Conspirators*] (poetry) 1985
- Selected Non-Fiction: Jorge Luis Borges* (essays) 1999
- Selected Poems: Jorge Luis Borges* (poetry) 1999
- Collected Fictions: Jorge Luis Borges* (short stories) 1999

CRITICISM

Willis Barnstone (essay date 1986)

SOURCE: "Borges, Poet of Ecstasy," in *Borges the Poet*, edited by Carlos Cortinez, The University of Arkansas Press, 1986, pp. 134-41.

[In the following essay, Barnstone examines the transitory nature of Borges's identity.]

The author of a very famous Spanish novel, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, was born in Buenos Aires in the year 1899. His name appears to be Jorge Luis Borges, although this is questionable since he has largely dropped his Christian names and is, in his own words, merely and "unfortunately . . . Borges." But here too the Argentine author of the *Quijote* eludes us and even puts in doubt the American authorship of the Spanish masterpiece by signing the work with the name of an intermediary, an invented Borges, who calls himself Pierre Menard.

Now there are some Spanish nationalists who would claim that the work was actually invented much earlier by a man from Alcalá de Henares named Cervantes. But this is immediately countered by Islamic nationalists who further predate the work, assigning it to the pen of an obscure Arab historian, Cide Hamete Benengeli. But Borges does not mind this receding mirror of Plotinian illusions, nor does it even matter when an outrageous upstart, Avelaneda, attempts to steal the show and to rewrite the Borges masterpiece as his own.

In these multiple creations of creations, we find the essential dilemma in Borges: Borges is a character created by Borges who will always escape into a new creation; but no sooner will he become the other, *el otro*, the *yo* of Borges y *yo*, no sooner does that shy man Borges wielding a mighty club of modesty shift into the writer Borges and into a text and into a reader's vague memory and (according to Borges' own hope) into a few anonymous phrases that have entered the Spanish language, than we outsiders, like the old counters of Catullus's infinite kisses, lose track so that Borges can return once more to that original Borges, whoever he is, and start again.

From all this I wish to propose that Borges is a very unstable compound, a mysterious compound, who searches relentlessly to find a stable single condition, a label or formula or key to his essence, but is one fated to eternal metamorphosis. Like space abhorring a vacuum, Borges abhors a condition of *stasis*. For this reason he moves from *enstasis* (being in himself) to *ekstasis*, (being elsewhere). As a poet of ecstasy, he is fated to follow the voyage of the seeker, not the finder, to wander, following the original Greek usage of the word *ekstasis*, "outside himself." If we need any further proof of Borgesian mutability, we can find it by looking again at Borges' favorite creation, the *Quijote*, where we see that the main character himself, Alonso Quijano, cannot be quiet and moves, as one moves in dream and oblivion, into the figure of a lanky, helmeted knight, who some very uninformed amateurs of art claim originated in an etching by a more recent Spaniard, living in France, under the name of Picasso.

The Greek word *ekstasis* signifies "being or standing elsewhere," that is, a displacement from a condition of *stasis*. The early classical meaning is bewilderment, insanity, sei-

zure, anger, terror, reflecting a movement from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from a normal to an "altered state," from being self-contained and standing in oneself (*enstasis*) to standing elsewhere (*ekstasis*). To be "beside oneself" or "out of mind" follows the etymological meaning. But in late Greek the word received another application. The Oxford English Dictionary refers to "withdrawal of the soul from the body" and "mystic trance." So for Neoplatonic and Christian mystics ecstasy occurs when the mind is emptied of all sensory-intellectual phenomena and then is filled with ineffable rapture in anticipation of divine union. Plotinus uses the word to mean a returning movement outward and upward to the emanation from the One. For Longinus ecstasy is transport and elevation, related to his principal idea of the *hypsos*, the sublime, which he finds eminently in Sappho's "concourse of passions" (*pathon te synodos*). In Borges this Neoplatonic ecstasy of ineffable rapture is most pertinent. Later, I will refer to two specific mystical experiences which Borges speaks of in an interview. This is the Borges of ecstatic contemplation, of mystical ecstasy.

But the more common ecstasy in Borges is not mystical, secular or religious. His is the ecstasy of otherness, a movement from Borges to the *yo* in "**Borges y yo**," from public man to private dreamer. He shifts slyly from street-corner knifer to Persian mystic to Chuang-tzu's Chinese butterfly, dreaming it is Chuang-tzu. The protean Borges cannot be formulated and pinned against a wall of reality or illusion. While his quest is self-knowledge, that anagnorisis and elation comes tantalizingly only at the instant of extinction (as at the end of the "**Poema conjetural**") where none can report the ultimate gnosis. In reading Borges, we are at least prepared to witness the transformation of the spirit or, more modestly, to be alerted to the possibility of ultimate transcendence. But Borges will tell us no ultimate truths. He will not fall into the easy prevaricating trap of prophetic truth and revelation.

Borges' central obsession is Borges: how to get away from that "coward and pedant" he knows too well, whom he must wake to each morning, whose books he won't let in the house. To be free of the old man, he turns his identity into a dream or a simulacrum, and sees the image reflected endlessly in a mirror until "el otro que lo observa / es apenas un sueño del espejo?" ("**Beppo**").¹ When the other, *el otro*, finally escapes his master Borges, he may become, as in the poem "**Beppo**" a Plotinian archetype, a shadow. And what we think is our true identity is merely an image in a broken mirror, going back to an Adam before Paradise or to an indecipherable divinity. To become a god, to know the secrets and have the power of that divinity, would be ideal. But Borges knows that that divinity will always be indecipherable and, moreover, unattainable. *El otro* will always be *el otro*, immeasurably remote, as Borges will always be Borges. Yet this is all to the good, for the other, whom Borges would become, offers the foreign port, the Ithaca to use Homer's goal. Or to use Constantine Cavafy's redeeming notion of Ithaca, it promises even more: it offers the voyage. En route Borges will search for algebras,