

## IN THE LABYRINTH OF LANGUAGE



*Donald A. Yates*

Preface to his forthcoming book  
*Magical Journey: a Biography of Jorge Luis Borges*

---

Jorge Luis Borges made a singular contribution to twentieth-century literature and exerted an influence on the writers and writing of his time that has extended to many parts of the world. That a poet and author who spent most of his life in Argentina, a country so far removed from the crossroads of western culture, could have produced a body of work that unquestionably placed him among the major literary figures of his time is explained perhaps by the unique circumstances of his preparation for a career in letters.

He was born in Buenos Aires into an Anglo-Argentine family and spoke English with his father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, and paternal grandmother, Fanny Haslam de Borges. With almost everyone else he spoke Spanish. He learned to read English before Spanish and did most of his reading as a child in the former language. He received tutoring in English at home and did not attend public school until the age of nine. His father might well then have placed him in an English private school but instead enrolled him in a neighborhood state school where instruction was given in Spanish. Encouraged as a boy to write, he produced youthful texts in both English and Spanish.

By the time that the Borges family left for Europe in 1914, the greater part of the boy's reading had been done in his father's extensive and varied library of books in English. Eventually, the Borgeses

settled in Geneva, Switzerland, where they were obliged to remain until the end of the war in 1918. Here, the languages of the school that young Borges attended were French and Latin, two more languages that Georgie (as he was called by family members) mastered in time. German was also one of the principal subjects taught at the Collège de Calvin and he learned it as well and undertook ambitious readings (Goethe, Kant, and Schopenhauer) in that language.

During his residence in Geneva, he was writing in Spanish, English and French and began translating from English, French and German into Spanish. It would seem that at this stage of his literary career, he could have confidently written in any of the three languages that he had most firmly acquired—Spanish, English, or French. The first important text of his that reached print, in late 1919, was, in fact, an essay-review written in French and dealing with three books then recently published in Spain.

By that year, the Borges family had left Geneva and had traveled to Spain by way of Dijon and the south of France. In view of what England had to offer to Jorge Guillermo Borges and young Georgie, the father's determination to visit Spain for an indefinite period before returning to Argentina seems odd. Georgie's maternal grandmother, Leonor Suárez de Acevedo, who spoke only Spanish, had accompanied the family on the journey to Europe. But she had died in Geneva in 1918. Moreover, Georgie's paternal grandmother, Fanny Haslam de Borges, who had been absent from her native Northumberland for more than half a century, had left Buenos Aires in the midst of the hostilities and had joined the family in Geneva. She was now part of the Borges ménage, but it was to Barcelona, Seville, Mallorca and Madrid their travels now took them, not to England.\*

---

\* In an ironic instance of misinformation in an otherwise brilliant essay dealing with Borges and his work, Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann insert into their "Jorge Luis Borges, or the Consolation by Philosophy" the following statement: "In Geneva, he taught himself German, reading Heine with a dictionary, whereupon he became engrossed in German translations of Chinese literature. After the war he perfected his English at Cambridge." See Harss and Dohmann, eds., *Into the Mainstream; Conversations with Latin-American Writers*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 110.

This move would seem to have been fundamental in the determination of which language Georgie would choose once and for all as his literary instrument. In Spain he soon fell in with a group of young poets, critics and writers and settled down to writing exclusively in Spanish. Things might well have turned out otherwise had he found himself—poised at the outset of his career—in England instead of Spain. While he retained throughout his life his abilities in the other languages he had acquired, in Spain the practicality of writing and, of course, publishing in Spanish decided the matter. With the exception of a few desperate love poems that he wrote in the mid-thirties to an Anglo-Argentine woman in Buenos Aires, he published nothing on his own in the English language that he so thoroughly dominated.

His father may also have contributed—directly or indirectly—to Georgie's decision. All of Jorge Guillermo Borges's schooling, up to and including the law degree he received in 1897, was in Spanish. Yet the classes he taught in psychology at *Lenguas Vivas* in Buenos Aires were conducted in English. What is notable is that the limited number of poems, translations and essays that he published in his lifetime (as well as an unpublished collection of philosophical meditations) were all written in Spanish. As was the novel, *El caudillo* (The Chieftain), that he composed in Spain and published in Palma de Mallorca in 1921, shortly before the family returned to Argentina. The unlikelihood of his historical account of romance and violence set during the period of Argentina's civil wars during the late nineteenth century finding an English-speaking audience may well have been the deciding factor. In the long view, for these and other considerations, it would appear that the father was largely responsible for his son's choice of the language in which he would write.

Whatever the underlying reason or reasons might have been for young Georgie's decision to limit himself to writing in Spanish, it is clear that when he embarked on his literary career he was destined, because of his extraordinary background, to cultivate in the chosen Spanish language a style unlike anything seen before. Such a destiny was indeed fulfilled. In the pages that follow, I propose to show—as I understand it—how this happened.

*Donald A. Yates*