Selected Poems Study Guide

Selected Poems by Jorge Luis Borges

BOOKRAGS

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Fevor de Buenos Aires

Fevor de Buenos Aires Summary

Jorge Luis Borges, one of the leading writers of the twentieth century in any language, wrote in Spanish. He published his first volume of poetry, Fevor de Buenos Aires, when he twenty-four, a decade before he began publishing the fiction that would make him famous in the United States. In Selected Poems, thirteen translators present almost two hundred poems Borges wrote from his first volume in 1923 to his last one, published in 1985, the year before his death. Several tropes that would become hallmarks of the author's poetry appear in this first book. In "The Streets," he extols the streets of Buenos Aires, but not the crowded ones. Instead, he concentrates on quiet, neighborhood streets filled with austere little houses. In "Recoleta Cemetery," Borges ponders the incomprehensible miracle that life ends. "The South" is the first of numerous poems featuring gardens and patios. In this one, he simply looks at the stars from a patio, smells the flowers, and listens to dripping water from a well, which he thinks perhaps are themselves the poem. In "Unknown Street," he comes upon a drab street that seems suffused with tenderness in the silver evening, and only later reflects that the street belongs to others, not to him. "Truco" likens life to a popular card game, with all its bids and deceptions, introduced to Buenos Aires citizens by their forebears. "Patio" extols the dark friendliness of a covered entrance way, arbor, and wellhead. "Sepulchral Inscription" is about the poet's great-grandfather, Isídoro Suárez, who died in battle at Junin, Peru, in 1824. "Empty Drawing Room" describes daylight entering a roomful of portraits of ancestors, snuffing out their faint voices.

"Year's End" reflects on the enigma of Time and suggests that perhaps something within each of us endures, never moving. "Remorse for Any Death" posits that a dead body is not somebody, it is death. "Inscription on Any Tomb" suggests that ancestors and descendants confirm each other's immortality on earth. In "Break of Day," sunlight roaming the streets brings everything back to existence, which might otherwise have been just a dream. "Benares" is likewise about sunlight entering the Indian city, one the poet has never seen but has imagined. Borges marvels that even as he imagines Benares, the real city persists in a precise place. In "Simplicity," the poet opens a garden gate to enter a gathering of familiar people, and he reflects that perhaps the highest gift is simply to be accepted as part of reality, like stones and trees. "Parting" concerns the sadness of lost love. In "Lines That Could Have Been Written and Lost Round About 1922," the poet enumerates many of the themes and symbols in the other poems, and asks if he is these things, or if there are "secret keys and difficult algebras" of which we know nothing.

Fevor de Buenos Aires Analysis

This initial volume of poetry by Borges is remarkable for the power of the language from such a young person. In his early twenties, he might be expected to write with

wonderment at the world around him, and that certainly is the case, but he also brings wistfulness and an appreciation of his ancestry that are much more rare in young writers. This ability to project outward, to go beyond one's own ego and see oneself as part of a continuum, is more often found in middle-aged or old writers than in young people with relatively little experience of life. Borges suggests in the prologue to this book, written decades after the original text, that he tried to do too much. He says he moderated some of this work done in the early 1920s for its re-publication, which mostly consisted of eliminating youthful excesses and polishing rough spots. The implication is that he was full of emotions and ideas that he did not focus or constrain as effectively as in later writings, but to the reader, the wonder is that such a young person could even marshal and communicate these feelings so effectively. He never seems to describe a place or an event in isolation; it always seems to be connected to deeper meanings or suggestions of unknown things. At the outset of his career as a poet, Borges has identified mysteries that will preoccupy him for the rest of his life, and he already has begun to develop an array of symbols to help him describe and probe these mysteries.

Moon Across the Way and San Martin Copybook

Moon Across the Way and San Martin Copybook Summary

In the book Moon Across the Way, "Street with a Pink Corner Store" portrays the poet coming upon a street unknown to him at dawn after he has been walking all night in Buenos Aires. In the rosy light, he reflects that he has seen little of the world, and that the light on a street such as this is the only music his life has understood. In "Anticipation of Love," the poet imagines his loved one asleep, enfolded in his arms, which he believes would be a gift more mysterious than any other she could give him, because he might see her free of time, of love, and of him. "General Quiroga Rides to His Death in a Carriage" depicts the assassination of the general by agents of the governor of the province of Buenos Aires in 1835. In "Boast of Quietness" the poet compares his holistic view of the world to that of the wealthy, who speak in platitudes about homeland and humanity. "Manuscript Found in a Book of Joseph Conrad" describes a hot, bright country whose nights are "bottomless, like a jar of brimming water." On the river, a man in a canoe smokes a cigar, whose smoke blurs the constellations, shedding the past. The river is the original river, and the man is the first man. In "My Whole Life," the poet reflects on a girl he loved, places he has been, words he has relished, and things he will neither see nor accomplish. He believes that the poverty and riches of his life are equal to those of God and of all men. "Sunset over Villa Ortúzar" describes a street at evening light that makes the terrains of country, sky, and city outskirts seem as if they are being discarded as useless by the day, after which the poet must sink back into his poverty.

In the volume, San Martin Copybook, "The Mythical Founding of Buenos Aires" re-imagines the city's founding by Europeans. They come across seas infested with mermaids and sea serpents to set up a city block identical to that in which Borges was raised, in the neighborhood of Palermo. He imagines a pink general store, campaign posters from the 1930s, and a cigar store. The only problem is the street has only one side, and the poet confesses he cannot imagine that Buenos Aires ever had a beginning. "The Flow of Memories" is a tribute to the garden at the house of the poet's childhood. He recalls a palm tree, a red mill, a cane break, and suggests that its narrow spaces became a whole geography. In "Deathwatch on the Southside," the poet attends a funeral for a peer of his parents at a house he doesn't know. He is struck by the privilege and the power of this vigil over the man's death, and then he walks home, freed from the ordeal by weariness and by everyday reality. "Northern Suburb" laments the loss of much meaning to him of a suburb that he once identified with the friendships and loves of youth, but which now seem lost in a few objects that remain, leaving only the loyalty implicit in the word, "suburb."

Moon Across the Way and San Martin Copybook Analysis

Moon Across the Way is a more cerebral volume than its predecessor, and less intimate. It deals with large ideas through symbols that are more universal than personal. It is not so much that the poet is not present in the poems, or that the interests he expresses are not his, but that this presence and these interests reflect larger concerns about humanity or history. In this book, Borges uses his inner life as a window to the wider world, about which he attempts to make a few sweeping observations. In the prologue, Borges says he imposed the obligation on himself to be "modern," but eventually realized there is no book that does not belong to its time. He later considered Moon Across the Way to be rather ostentatiously public. He still liked some of the poems, but he came to feel that the book was no longer his.

The volume San Martin Copybook continues in this vein, turning the discovery by Europeans of South America into the immediate construction of Borges' own neighborhood, or making the death of an acquaintance into cause for lamenting the weariness inflicted by everyday reality. Borges wrote in the prologue that this book aspires to intellectualism, as if poetry were more an activity of the mind than a sudden gift of the spirit, although he later understood that both elements coexist in the best poetry. Even so, he wrote in the prologue that aside from "Simplicity" in his first book, he felt that "Deathwatch on the Southside" in this book was perhaps his first authentic poem.

The Maker, pages 67-113

The Maker, pages 67-113 Summary

"For Leopoldo Lugones" is a prose poem that commemorates Lugones, an influential poet and novelist is Borges' formative years. In a library, Borges dreams that Lugones liked something the younger poet wrote, although Borges knows that never happened in real life. Another poem about words is "Moon," in which the poet imagines a book of everything that lacks only the moon, which Borges suggests is the essence of everything. "The Maker" is about a man who realizes he is going blind. He recalls being given a dagger by his father to avenge an insult he received, and his first sexual experience with a woman. These memories of war and love make him realize he is destined to write the Odyssey and the Iliad, and the reader understands the man is Homer. "A Yellow Rose" describes how a writer near his death realized that his words could allude to things but not give them expression, just as Dante and Homer knew. "Parable of Cervantes and Don Quixote" notes that the fictional Don Quixote died in 1614 and his creator, Cervantes, briefly outlived him. The story of both was a clash of the fictional and the everyday world. "Paradiso XXXI, 108" tries but fails to imagine the face of Jesus. "Parable of the Palace" tells of a poet who recited a poem that swept away a palace, but this was only a story, because the poet was the Emperor's slave, and his poem fell into deserved obscurity. "Everything and Nothing" is about a playwright and actor who eventually tires of imitating others. When he is near death, God says that the man, Shakespeare, is everything and nothing, like God.

In "Dreamtigers" the poet discusses his love of tigers as a child, but confesses he was never able to dream of one that was anything but enfeebled. Another dream poem is "Ragnarök," about young people meeting the gods, who have been so marginalized that they have forgotten how to talk, so the people shoot them. "Chess" likens the game and its players the world and God, and wonders if worlds and Gods exist beyond them. "The Hourglass" compares the sand falling in the glass to the workings of time, and imagines God holding the hourglass in one hand, a scythe in the other. "Borges and I" is about the public and the private Borges, "Poem of the Gifts" compares Borges to an earlier Argentine man of letters, Paul Groussac, who also was blind. "Mirrors" explores duality by comparing mirrors and their images to dreams and reality. "The Moon" tells about a poet who wanted to embrace the universe in one book but he left out one essential thing, the moon. Borges mentions the moons of literature that have influenced him but concludes that the moon or the letters of its name were created to underscore human strangeness until at last we write its name the one true way.

The Maker, pages 67-113 Analysis

Borges describes this collection in an epilogue as having an underlying sameness, although the poems are diverse in their geography and themes. He adds that it is the most personal book he has written to date, even though it is an "unruly jumble,"

because it is rich in reflections. Indeed, the poet deals with many of his favorite topics even in the first half of the book, ranging from fellow poets to fictional and mythical characters, death, Christianity, other gods, obscurity, tigers, blindness, and mirrors. All these topics recur repeatedly in his poetry throughout his life, demonstrating a fascination with big questions and the symbols of enduring mysteries. In these poems, Borges repeatedly attempts to break through the surface of everyday life to the next level, whatever it may be, but he must settle for the revealing impression of connectivity between all things of this world.

The Maker, pages 114-143

The Maker, pages 114-143 Summary

"Rain" likens the falling of rain to the past, bringing back the voice of the poet's father, who he feels has never been dead. "Androgué" is another poem about the past, in which Borges remembers in detail a summer house his family visited for years. "Ars Poetica" compares words and writing to the passing of time and dreams, concluding that art is a river with no end. "The Other Tiger" describes the poet's efforts to conjure a tiger in words that does justice to the real animal. The poem ends with a search for a third tiger, neither flesh and bone nor made of words, but alive in the poet's dreams. "Ariosto and the Arabs" also deals in words and dreams. Discussing the sixteenth century Italian writer, Ludovico Ariosto, the poet suggests that Ariosto's epic poem, Orlando Furioso, has been reduced by Islamic arts to trivia but that it still joins life and another dream, which is that of Borges. In "Embarking on the Study of Anglo-Saxon Grammar," the poet praises the cause and effect revealed by comparing early and later versions of English words. "The Borges" concerns the poet's Portugese forbears, about whom he knows little, and whom he likens to a lost king who those at home swear is not dead. "Luke XXIII" describes the moment that the thief on the cross next to Jesus asked for forgiveness and was promised Paradise, a request that the poet thinks came from the same innocence that drove the man to repeatedly commit bloody crimes.

A section in the book called "Museum" has a number of poems that contain various reflections on death. The first, however, "On Scientific Rigor," is a prose poem about an empire in which cartography reaches such a degree of perfection that the map of a single province takes up the space of the entire city. Each new map becomes larger, until a map of the empire takes up the entire empire, matching it point by point, which becomes irrelevant to later generations, who allow it to decay until only remnants inhabited by animals and beggars in the desert remain. "Quatrain" depicts an Arab poet wondering if he, too, must die as the roses and Aristotle have died. "Boundaries" imagines a poet lamenting the poems, streets, mirrors, doors, and books that he will never again visit, as death relentlessly uses him up. In "The Poet Proclaims His Renown," an Arab poet declares that the span of the heavens measures his glory, but that the tools with which he works are pain and humiliation, and wishes he had been born dead. "The Generous Friend" describes a note received by a twelfth century warrior, Magnus Barfod, the night before he died. The note, from the king of Dublin, wishes Barfod victory in their battle the next morning, because by nightfall, Barfod will be defeated and dead. "Le Regret D'Heraclite" imagines the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, lamenting that although he had been so many things to so many men, he had never been the one in whose embrace a woman named Mathilde Urbach swooned.

The Maker, pages 114-143 Analysis

Continuing to make art of his interest in writers, history, his forebears, physical things, nature, and death, Borges finds new ways to marvel at the mysteries of life. In this book, he often does so by writing about what he has read, not so much to describe the reading, but to comment on the meanings he has taken from it. Sometimes it is unclear whether he is drawing on an actual work when he discusses a poem or an event involving an historical figure, or whether he is simply creating a situation inspired by something he read. The existence in fact of a given event is not particularly relevant, anyway, because what Borges thinks and feels about the situation he describes is always the crux of his poem. Sometimes he states his point explicitly, and at other times, he lets the reader intuit what he means. Cumulatively, the effect is as if he were trying to portray the world through a series of interweaving lines which, as he mentions in the epilogue to this book, form a labyrinth that he finally realizes is a drawing of his own face.

The Self and the Other, pages 144-207

The Self and the Other, pages 144-207 Summary

In "The Cyclical Night," the poet muses that the pupils of Pythagorus knew that everything revolves in a cycle, and everything will return in minute detail, which the poet experiences in the daily rounds of night in Buenos Aires, and his plan for an endless poem that begins just as this poem begins. "Of Heaven and Hell" considers what might be revealed on Judgment Day, which the poet does not think will be a fire or a secret garden, but a sleeping face, perhaps of a loved one or one's own, which will be that person's inferno or paradise. "Conjectural Poem" speaks in the voice of Francisco Laprida, who was assassinated by revolutionaries in 1829, as he waits for the riders with their lances and knives. "Poem of the Fourth Element" is in praise of water, the source of Earth's nourishment, which the poet hopes will be present to his lips at his last moment of life. "To a Minor Poet of the Greek Anthology" suggests that an unheralded poet is luckier than a famous one, because he never experiences the shriveling of glory. "A Page to Commemorate Colonel Suárez, Victor at Junín" is about the poet's great-grandfather, who won a major battle in Uruguay. It imagines Suárez saying the victory does not matter if it is only a glorious memory, but the battle against repression that it represents is important. In "Matthew XXV; 30," the poet is at a railroad station when he hears an internal voice that chronicles many things he has seen and experienced, and asks why he still has not written the poem. "The Dagger" is about a dagger in a desk drawer, an impassive instrument of death that sometimes moves the poet to pity, because it lies useless. The theme of "Compass" is that every thing becomes a word throughout time, extending as far as the far seas. "A Poet of the Thirteenth Century" describes a sonnet being written during which the poet stops and thinks that perhaps Apollo has made an archetype within him sing. "A Soldier of Urbina" is about Cervantes serving in the Spanish Army in Italy, dreaming up the idea of Don Quixote. "Limits" observes that there are limits to all things, each of which will be experienced for a last time before the poet dies.

"Balthazar Gracián" is about a seventeenth century Jesuit philosopher who Borges thinks was a cold trickster with language, and wonders if Gracián finally realized this when he reached heaven, or was still lost in his trivia. "A Saxon" imagines a bringer of early English during the Norse invasion of what would become the land of Shakespeare's harmonies. "The Golem" posits a single word that could contain God, but when it is spoken by a rabbi, only a sorry simulacrum of God appears, raising the question of what God must have felt as He looked down on the man. "A Rose and Milton" tries to save from oblivion through poetry one yellow rose held by Milton. "Readers" suggests that Don Quixote never left his library on any of his adventures, which were dreamed by him and not by Cervantes. "John I:14" says the Christian God was like an oriental king who went secretly through the slums, but soon the blood of martyrdom and death came to him. In "Waking Up," the poet returns from dreams in waking and wishes that death would free him of his memory and name, and that morning would mean oblivion. "To One No Longer Young" finds the poet wondering why

he bothers to construct poems about war when he can see the grave that awaits him. "Alexander Selkirk" tells about the difficulty of readjusting to everyday life of a once-marooned sailor who was the model for Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. In "Odyssey, Book Twenty-three," Ulysses returns home and wonders where now is the wild dog he used to be. "To a Minor Poet of 1899" is about an imagined poet trying to compose a description of his dying hours. "Texas" observes that the state's endless plain and alphabet of stars is another life never understood. "Poem Written in a Copy of Beowulf" shows the poet wondering why he struggles through endless studies of early English and concluding his soul must know that it can accomplish anything, because it is as inexhaustible as the universe.

The Self and the Other, pages 144-207 Analysis

War, adventure, and oblivion occupy Borges' mind in many of these poems. No longer young, he seems to be reflecting on a life of contemplation and reading with mixed emotions, as if part of him yearns for danger and excitement. The connection he frequently makes between art and oblivion has a relationship to his fascination with battle, in that both art and war and ways to achieve glory, yet Borges is painfully aware that no matter how one might come by fame, it is of little use in the face of death. Only identification with the timeliness of existence seems helpful to Borges in his constant considerations of the mysteries of life and death. The moment of death also interests him, perhaps because he hopes that something will be revealed either then or just after dying that will answer his questions. Far from fearing death, Borges often seems ready to embrace it, even anxious to do so, because of its potential to bring him closer into contact with the infinite. To him, all the physical objects and events of the world are interrelated in some way he does not quite understand, but that he feels is a vast continuum.

The Self and the Other, pages 208-245

The Self and the Other, pages 208-245 Summary

In "To a Sword at York Minster," the poet sees in an ancient battle sword that the warrior and the man who now looks upon the sword are instant ashes, and only what is past is real. "Emanuel Swendenborg" praises the Swedish scientist and philosopher, who knew that one day in time was a mirror of eternity. "Jonathan Edwards" is about the American preacher who believed the world was an everlasting instrument of the wrath of God, who is depicted as a spider tangled in its center. "Emerson" shows the American writer reflecting that he has read and written great books but has not lived, and wishes he were someone else. "Camden, 1892" depicts a poet reading about the publication of allegorical poems by a colleague and reflecting that he himself is old but his poems will remain, for he was once Walt Whitman. "Paris, 1856" shows the German writer, Heinrich Heine, thinking that his words, the instruments of time and its vagaries, won't save him. In "The Enigmas," the poet contemplates the afterlife, and concludes he wants to be forever in oblivion, but never to have been. "The Instant" counsels that the fleeting day is frail and eternal, and no other heaven or hell should be expected. In "1964," the poet copes with the pain of lost love by reminding himself that everything must turn to nothing. "The Stranger" is a man walking through the dream of the poet, who himself has been a stranger under other stars, gathering images made for forgetting. "To Whoever is Reading Me" advises readers that they, too, will enter awaiting darkness and, in a sense, they are already dead. "The alchemist" tells of a young man who dreams of finding gold in fire that will put an end to dying, even as God transforms him to dust.

"Someone" is about a man worn down by time who humbly accepts a mysterious happiness, which perhaps is a glimmer of forever. "Everness" attests that oblivion is the one thing alone that does not exist, because everything is part of that mirroring memory, the universe. "Oedipus and the Enigma" depicts Oedipus terrified at seeing his own decline in the image of the sphinx, which could happen to us, except that God grants us forgetfulness. "Spinoza" portrays the Dutch philosopher without need of fame or women, free to polish a lens, which is the map of God. In "Elegy," Borges speaks to himself, naming places he has visited and things he has studied, but he has seen almost nothing except the face of a young girl in Buenos Aires who does not want to be remembered. In "Adam Cast Forth," Adam reflects that it means much to have laid his hand on the living Garden, even for one day. In "To a Coin," the poet tosses a coin from a ship into the sea, and later reflects that it exists, as we do, but without knowing it. "Ode Written in 1966" declares that no one is a homeland, because it is a continuous act, as the world is, which is all of us. "Dream" wonders why, when we wake up suddenly, we feel as if something has been stolen from us. "The Sea" notes that only the day following the poet's last agony shall say who is the sea, and who the poet is. "A Morning of 1649" depicts King Charles going serenely to his execution. "To a Saxon Poet" laments that Borges will never know how life must have been for a forgotten

Northumbrian poet. "To the Son" declares that the father did not beget the son, but rather dead forebears going back to Adam, because eternity is present in all things.

The Self and the Other, pages 208-245 Analysis

Borges writes in prologue to this book that it is the one he prefers out of all the ones he has written. He feels that all his habits are displayed here, including Buenos Aires, the cult of his ancestors, the study of German, the contradiction between the passing of time and the enduring ego, and his astonishment that time, which he sees as our substance, can be shared with others. He thinks that some of the moods, words, and perhaps even lines, are repeated here, not only because the book is a compilation of individual poems not originally intended for one volume, but also because he does often rewrite a theme in a second way. Borges thinks of words at their root as irrational and of a magical nature, by which he means that the original purpose of a word is often lost in time. Through poetry, he tries to return to that ancient magic. That is one reason why the poems in this volume often dwell on memory and forgetting, and on people coexisting through time, or of people who exist alongside things that are unaware of this coexistence. Borges uses relatively simple language to approach such phenomena, but his poetry is not simple. Instead, it achieves a kind of modesty through which he tries to suggest the secrets of complexity.

For Six Strings and In Praise of Darkness

For Six Strings and In Praise of Darkness Summary

In For Six Strings, "Where Have They Gone" rues the loss of heroes and spirit to death and time, but ends with the solace that they remain in memory. "Milonga of Manuel Flores" is a song to a man doomed to die by gunfire, who wonders what he will see when he is judged by Jesus. "A Blade in the Northside" describes a knife in a box in the barrio that belonged to a man now dead who killed others with it, and the poet sees the blade's readiness. "Milonga of Don Nicanor Paredes" is a song to a powerful man in Palermo, where Borges grew up. It describes his dagger, clothes, long hair, and gold ring, and the poet asks what Paredes will do in heaven, where there is no debt or score to settle. "Milonga of Albornoz" describes a man in a black hat, whistling, renowned for his knife fights and gambling, now stabbed to death, but he probably would be pleased to be remembered in song.

In Praise of Darkness begins with "Cambridge," in which the poet visits New England and cannot tell what day of the week it is, because he is in the realm of memory, "that pile of broken mirrors." In "New England, 1967," the poet in Cambridge walks in memory through the streets of Buenos Aires. In "James Joyce," the poet states that all days are in one day, and he asks God for the courage to scale the summit of this day. "The Labyrinth" describes walls closing in on Borges, who wishes this were the final day of waiting. "Things" names numerous things that will persist beyond our deaths and will not know that we are gone. In "Rubíyát," the poet wants Persian meter in his verse, because today is yesterday, and you are the dead. "June, 1968" describes a blind man arranging books who realizes that they will never help him write the book to justify his life in others' eyes, but he still feels the happiness that comes from old things. "The Guardian of the Books" describes rites, laws, and mystical things in books on high shelves in a tower guarded by a man who cannot read. In "Invocation to Joyce," the poet praises the arduous labyrinths of the Irish writer's books, and says Joyce did not know him but continues to save him. "Fragments from an Apocryphal Gospel" enumerates those who are wretched, happy, and blessed, concluding, "Happy are the happy." In "His End and His Beginning," someone dying alone cannot remember shapes, sounds, or colors, and realizes he is dead and must put the world behind him to achieve grace, because he is in heaven. "In Praise of Darkness" is about how old age can be the time of greatest bliss, when the poet can forget everything, reach his center, and soon know who he is.

For Six Strings and In Praise of Darkness Analysis

The poems selected from the volume titled For Six Strings are principally about legacy. Several are in the meter of "milongas," or street songs from the Argentine barrio, and

they concern someone who died violently, often a petty criminal. Borges is not interested in the crimes of the person, so much as in the individual's local notoriety, contrasting the impression he made in life to the uncertainty of what happens after death. Each of these people would most likely be forgotten by posterity, but in writing poems about them, Borges gives them a kind of immortality. Again, this is not because they deserve it for what they did in life, but because each person is a part of time and memory, and even the misdeeds of antiheroes belong to what the poet sees as the interconnected fabric of the universe.

The volume In Praise of Darkness is, as the title suggests, mostly about death and the afterlife, and it is also about the related theme of memory and forgetting. Borges seems to believe that through the approach to death, those who have lived with awareness might come to understand themselves in ways that were closed to them when they were younger or healthier. He finds significance in physical objects as talismans or merely as aids to memory. They embody experience, and their coexistence alongside humans has mystical significance to Borges. Books, in particular, are almost sacred objects to him, because of the worlds they contain. In his prologue to this collection, Borges writes that his publisher wanted him to express his aesthetic view of writing, but he says he has none. He uses a few devices, such avoiding surprising words and putting slight uncertainties in his work, because reality is precise but memory is not, but he belongs to no school or movement of writing. Much of this volume, he writes, is about old age and ethics, which are new additions to his old themes of mirrors, mazes, and swords.

The Gold of the Tigers

The Gold of the Tigers Summary

In "Tankas," the poet thinks of moonlight, a garden, a woman, a sword, and rain, and is wistful not to have been cut down in battle but to be a counter of syllables. "Susan Bomba" describes a tall woman in a garden, but also in an ancient temple or in England, and behind the myths and masks, her soul is always alone. "The Blind Man," divested of the diverse world, must create his own universe, yet only shades of yellow stay with him and he can see only to look on nightmares. In "The Search," the poet returns to a house of his ancestors, with whom he is fused as one, he in a dream, they in death. "1971" asks how words can describe the unforgettable day that two men walked on the moon, concluding that the moon itself will be their monument. "Things" chronicles things that are and that cannot be, which no one sees, except God. In "A Bust of Janus Speaks," the two-faced statue explains that it sees the past and penetrates the future, but its faces are powerless to glance each other's way.

In "Poem of Quantity," the poet regards the night sky and considers that every ant could be an important part of God's regulated universe, and the poet, who mixes up many things, would not dare to judge the lepers or the notorious emperor, Caligula. In "The Watcher," the poet addresses another part of himself and notes that theologians say those who commit suicide will find themselves in the other kingdom, waiting for themselves. "To the German Language: recalls the poet's long studies of German, a language that over the years has gone out of his reach. "1891" describes a man in a suit with a dagger walking through Buenos Aires to collect a debt and, perhaps, to meet his death. "The Dream of Pedro Henríquez Ureña" is about a man who has a conversation with Borges about death and then is told in a dream that he will die on a train but will not remember the dream, because forgetting it is necessary to the fulfillment of these events. "The Palace" tells about a gigantic but not infinite palace, concluding that we are already dead when nothing touches us, and the poet knows he is not dead. "Hengist Wants Men (A.D. 449)" is about a mercenary who seeks men to subdue an island not yet called England, which he does not know will found the greatest of empires, so that the poet may form these letters. "To a Cat" describes the remoteness and solitude of the animal that lives in a world as closed and separate as a dream. In "The Gold of the Tigers," the poet considers a Bengal tiger at sunset in the zoo, and tigers of literature and myth, but of all the gold in light, it is the gold of a woman's hair that he longs to touch.

The Gold of the Tigers Analysis

About seventy years old when he wrote these poems, Borges has long settled into the themes that occupy his mind. In this collection, he has them on full display, particularly such symbols as moonlight, gardens, and daggers that represent mystery, fertility, and death. He writes about his ancestors, his dreams, the writings of people who have made

a mark on his intellect and spirit, the love of women, and the strange world of animals, especially cats. All such symbols and preoccupations revolve around aspects of life and death that are too large, too complex, and too secret to be fully understood. The poetry of Borges celebrates and tries to describe the essence of such mysteries, although he often makes clear that comprehending them is beyond the capacities of humankind. In the prologue to this book, he writes that at his age, all one can do is continue to ply familiar skills, yet every moment of existence for a true poet should be poetic. He also notes a philosophical preoccupation in some of these poems, which he says has been with him since childhood. This collection is stylistically miscellaneous, he writes, but a language is a tradition and a way of grasping reality, not an arbitrary assemblage of symbols.

The Unending Rose

The Unending Rose Summary

In "I," the poet affirms that he is flesh, blood, and memory, but says it is even stranger that he is the man who interlaces such words in some room in a house. "The Dream" is about the poet going beyond the reach of human memory, returning with fragments, and being the other one he is without knowing it, the one who has looked resigned and smiling on the other dream, the poet's waking life. "Browning Resolves to Be a Poet" tells about the Scottish poet deciding to use ordinary words to say eternal things as he becomes many characters through time and, at some point, will be Robert Browning. "The Suicide" proclaims that the weight of the intolerable universe will die with him, he will erase the past, and bequeath nothingness to no one. "To the Nightingale" is a tribute to the bird that has been given shimmering names by people across the earth and that is being exalted again this poem. "I Am" declares that the poet is the one who knows there is no other pardon or revenge than oblivion and who, despite his wanderings, is no one and nothing. "A Blind Man" is about one who does not know what face looks back at him in the mirror but who has lost only the inconsequential skin of things, yet thinks if he could see his features, he would know who he is.

"1972" begins with a former fear that the future would be a corridor of useless and vague mirrors, but the gods sent the blind man his violated country, and he assembles the great rumble of the epic battle. In "Elegy," three ancient faces stay with the poet: the Ocean, the North, and Death, that other name for passing time. He thinks of his own perfect death, without an urn or a tear. "The Exile (1977)" considers a happy man who walks in Ithaca and has forgotten his king while the poet, Ulysses, has descended into hell and wishes he could be someone else, happy or not, walking the streets of Chile. "Talismans" lists a number of possessions such as books, a sword, and photos, noting that they are talismans, but useless against the dark that must not be named. In "The Unending Rose," a blind Persian king holds a rose in the garden as the palace is about to be invaded, saying that the rose is endless, without limit, and will be shown by the Lord to the king's dead eyes.

The Unending Rose Analysis

In this collection, Borges shows a preoccupation with his worsening blindness, although he mentions in the prologue that it is not an entirely mournful condition for him, because in a sense it liberates him to a solitude that helps to create poetry. He also displays his usual interest in duality, and even in plurality, by depicting the many personalities the poet assumes during the composition of his art. A third theme familiar to the readers of Borges that he explores in this book is that material things are evocative and might even carry some spiritual value, but they are useless in the face of whatever might happen after death. Ultimately, much of his poetry throughout his life was about that which cannot be expressed in words. He knew that words were inadequate to describe that

which could not even be understood, much less envisaged, but this impossibility was not enough to prevent him from trying to express the ephemeral circumstances of a supposed "reality." All he could hope to do, as he wrote in the prologue, was to communicate a precise instance and try to touch the reader physically.

The Iron Coin

The Iron Coin Summary

"Nightmare" is about an ancient king from the north who doesn't look at the poet but judges him in his dreams. "Mexico" lists several things that are alike, different, and eternal, ending with the man on his deathbed who awaits the end and wants all of it. "To Manuel Mujica Lainez," addressed to the Argentine novelist, suggests that both Borges and Lainez once embraced a fatherland that they have misplaced. "Herman Melville" attests that the sea was always Melville's and he possessed it on that other ocean, which is writing. Borges calls the story of the Pequod's captain (Moby Dick) the great book, the blue Proteus. "The Moon" is not the moon Adam saw, the poem declares, because she is filled with the ancient lament of human vigils, and is your mirror. In "To Johannes Brahms," the poet admits that he tried to honor the composer in words but has given up, because the music is not a symbol or a mirror but a river that flows and endures.

"To My Father" commemorates Borges' father, also blind, who died with a serenely calm spirit, expecting nothing on the other side. In "Remorse," the poet confesses he has committed the worst sin of all, which is to not be happy, and by devoting himself to the symmetric stubbornness of art, he let down his parents by having been a brooding man. "Baruch Spinoza" describes a Jew building God in a dark cup, using the word and granted the prodigious love that has no hope of being loved. "For a Version of I Ching" asserts that the imminent is as immutable as yesterday, that nothing dismisses us and nothing leaves, but do not give up, because God is watching in the narrowest light. "You Are Not the Others" asserts that your writing won't save you, and neither will Jesus, Socrates, or Siddhartha, who accepted death, because your matter is time passing and you are each solitary second. "The Iron Coin" asks the two opposing faces of a coin why a man requires a woman to desire him. The answer is that within the other's shadow we pursue our shadow, and within the other's mirror, our reciprocal mirror.

The Iron Coin Analysis

Borges wrote this volume while he was living for a time in Michigan, and it occasionally reveals a sense of displacement or otherness. The poems also carry a note of melancholy, mixed with determination to persevere, and continued wonderment at the mysteries of life. Again, he invokes other artists whose life and works have inspired him, and he mentions here that his father was blind, indicating that Borges learned something about serenity of spirit from his father's example. Generally, the tone of the volume seems to be resigned but not defeated, as if the poet were trying to accept that which he cannot explain or change, while retaining his awe at its majesty.

The History of the Night

The History of the Night Summary

"Alexandria, A.D. 641" is about the library of the ancient Egyptian city, whose volumes outnumber the stars or grains of sand, and are the great memory of the centuries. If all the books were to burn, man would beget them again, each page, says Omar the Muslim conqueror, who orders his soldiers to burn the library in the name of God and Muhammad. "Alhambra" lists such pleasing things as the water's voice, the cupped hand, the column's marble curve, and the sorrowing king's foreshadowing knowledge that the afternoon he witnesses will be his last. In "Music Box," the poet feels he is in the music, and wants to be. "I Am Not Even Dust" is about a man who wants to be a hero and who asks his father, Cervantes, his God and his dreamer, to keep on dreaming him. "Iceland" is in praise of that country of silent snow and fervent water, of the sword and the rune, and of the memory that knows no longing for the past. "Gunnar Thorgilsson (1816-1879)" reflects that the memory of time is full of the dust of empires, but the poet wants to recall the kiss bestowed upon him in Iceland.

In "Things That Might Have Been," the poet enumerates things that might have been but never were, including the absence of certain great works of art, leaders, and empires, ending with the child he never had. "The Mirror" describes the poet's childhood fear that the mirror might reveal something horrible, but now he fears it will show the face of his soul unvarnished, the face God sees, and perhaps men, too. "A Saturday" describes a blind man moving about his house alone, lying on the bed and, sensing that an enigmatic god conducts him, he writes this poem. "The Causes" lists multiple events and experiences through time, ending with the declaration that all those things were made perfectly clear, "so our hands could meet." In "Adam is Your Ashes," the poet states that all things are their own prophecy of dust and now, on this long day that doesn't end, he feels irrevocable and alone. "History of the Night" contends that down through the generations men built the night, and examples are given of how they described night. Nowadays, the poet comments, time has charged night with eternity, and to think it would not exist but for those tenuous instruments, the eyes.

The History of the Night Analysis

Longing seems to predominate in this volume. The poet longs for lost opportunities and loves, even for alternative histories that never were, and for companionship that will never again be. His personal view increasingly expands outward, reflected in events both historical and imagined, in contemporary time and in the past, and he always seems to have an eye on the unknown future. He continues to console himself that all the uncertainties of life have beauty in their mystery, and that perhaps an unseen deity is overlooking and directing the inhabitants of this world. Certainly, the poet would like to believe this is true, but all he knows for certain is what he can perceive, and that is more

than enough to strike him wonderment that never abates, even as he proceeds into old age.

The Limit

The Limit Summary

In "Descartes," the poet declares he is the only man on earth, but perhaps a god is deceiving him and there is neither man nor earth, so he shall go on dreaming of Descartes and the faith of his fathers. "The Two Cathedrals" is about the ambition of a poet to portray the cathedral at Chartres in verse, but now that this poet is dead, he must see that the poem and the cathedral are temporal copies of an unimagined archetype. "Beppo" is about a white cat surveying itself in a mirror, reminding the poet that we all are broken mirror-images of timeless archetypes. "On Acquiring an Encyclopedia" describes a new encyclopedia and topics in it, as the poet reflects on the mysterious love of things unaware of themselves and of us. "That Man" details activities in the life of a man, the last of which is to settle on these lines. "Two Forms of Insomnia" defines insomnia in various ways, including as the dubious daybreak, and then defines longevity in various ways, ending with, "It's being and continuing to be." In "The Cloisters," which is a place in Manhattan built of stones and stained glass from a French kingdom, the poet gets a touch of vertigo, because he is not used to eternity. "Note for a Fantastic Story" imagines boys playing at the Civil War who somehow manage to undo time, making the South win, and the poet names other events through history that change, going back to Pythagoras. "Epilogue" declares that you and I, two boys who searched for the secret Buenos Aires, have died, and the poet wishes we could spend this afternoon perfecting the lines of a poem. "Happiness" asserts that the man who embraces a woman is Adam and she is Eve, and everything happens for the first time, but in a way that is eternal.

In "The Maker," the poet says we are the river of time and he names many things carried along by it, from which he must craft incorruptible lines to save himself. In "Yesterdays," the poet tells of influences and places that have made him, concluding he is a mirror, an echo, the epitaph. "Nostalgia for the Present" depicts a man wishing to be at a woman's side in Ireland and, in that instant, he is there. "Poem" contains a stanza subtitled, "Observe" that tells of a man waking a woman, and a stanza titled, "Reverse" that says to wake someone from sleep is to desecrate the waters of Lethe (the mythological river of forgetfulness). In "Inferno V, 129," two lovers drop a book when they see that they are the people in it, and on earth, another book will see to it that men also will dream the dreams of these two. "Fame" lists events in the life of the poet, noting that none of them is exceptional, yet their coexistence brings him a fame he is yet to understand. "The Just" enumerates good acts and suggests that these people, unaware, are saving the world. "The Accomplice" describes a man crucified, who turns out not to be Jesus, but the poet. "Shinto" attests that humble windfalls of mindfulness or memory can save us for a moment from sorrow, and that eight million Shinto deities travel secretly through the earth, touching us and moving on. "The Limit" is about the first time a man saw the moon, which he will never find again, because he has reached his limit, so take a good look. It could be the last.

The Limit Analysis

By now, the life of Borges must have been mostly confined to moving about his home, thinking, and writing. Many of the poems in this volume are either about the act of writing and its meaning, or about how people find meaning from what they do in the world. Borges seems to question his choice of becoming poet, but he also appears to provide the answer that the choice was legitimate. Love, writing, happiness, and sacrifice all seem to be conjoined in his self-image. He seems content with what he has done and who he is, he is honestly modest about his achievements, able to accept the sorrows of life, and grateful for its joys. This is a book by a wise old man who tells us what he has learned and does not attempt to offer more than what he knows.

Atlas and Los Conjurados

Atlas and Los Conjurados Summary

Only one prose poem, "My Last Tiger," is extracted from the volume Atlas. In it, Borges affirms that tigers always have been in his life, and he cannot remember whether the first one was from a book or in the zoo. He discusses the many tigers he has observed in poetry and art, and says the last one, of flesh and blood, was in a zoo without bars called Animal World. It licked his face, for which he offers thanks. In the volume titled Los Conjurados, "Christ on the Cross" depicts the feet of Jesus touching the earth, the beard on his severe, Jewish face grazing his chest. Christ thinks about God, humans, religion, his own death, and he whimpers and dies. The poet asks of what use it is to him that this man suffered, if he is suffering now. "The Afternoon" proclaims that all afternoons, past and present, are one, inconceivably, and this afternoon encircles the house, which is yesterday's, today's, the one that is always there. "Elegy for a Park" affirms that a labyrinth, trees, birds, a fountain, and many other aspects of a park have vanished, and are things of the past, but if we are living what the past will become, we are part of time, which makes us all of these vanished things.

"Clouds (I)" declares there is not a single thing that is not a cloud, because we are the ones who leave, and the dissolving cloudbank draws images of us, and you are the one whom you've lost, now very far. "Clouds (II)" discusses the strange shapes of clouds, and how we ask if they are an architecture of chance, maybe no less fixed than someone looking at them in the morning. "The Leaves of the Cypress" is a prose poem in which the poet says he has only one enemy, who somehow got into his apartment one night in 1977 and ordered him to get up and dress, because his death had been decided upon. Surprised but not afraid, the poet obeyed, taking a volume of Emerson with him as they went outside to a cypress tree, where the poet saw the flash of a blade and then awakened from his nightmare. Later, the poet saw that his book had been left in the dream, and he heard that his enemy had left town and never returned, trapped like the book in the poet's dream. "The Web" finds the poet wondering in which of the cities where he has lived he will die, and what time of day it will be. He realizes these questions are digressions, not from fear but from impatient hope, "part of the fatal web of cause and effect that no man can foresee, nor any god."

Atlas and Los Conjurados Analysis

When Borges pens these last two books of his poetry, he is well over eighty years old. He is tired, but still able to marvel at the many beautiful moments life offers. The one poem taken from Atlas, "My Last Tiger," is mostly about his memories of tigers, whose fierceness and remoteness from human understanding always captivated him. Many of the poems from Los Conjurados are about dreams, both waking and sleeping. Memory is tied to them all, and inexplicable experiences, and forgetting. All the ways we have perceiving the world around us, other people, the past, and phenomena that are not

fully open to our senses, continue to occupy the poet's mind, because these are the portals to our imperfect understanding of ourselves and the universe. By the time Borges wrote these books, it he seems he was ready and perhaps even impatient to move on to whatever might await after death, and yet it does not seem in these poems that he has lost his love of life. It is simply time, and he is not afraid.

Characters

Jorge Luis Borgesappears in all books in the volume

The author, Jorge Luis Borges, is the main character in these books of poetry. He often writes of his own thoughts, experiences, and emotions. Sometimes he uses "I," at other times he writes, "the poet," and occasionally he refers to himself as "Borges." Everything in all the books from which these poems were selected is a reflection of the one man, in a much more personal and immediate sense than the philosophical notion that whatever anyone writes is autobiographical because it comes from that person's mind. Taken together, these poems comprise a portrait of the most profound aspects of Borges as a human being. They are the best way he knows to convey everything most important to him in his life. The poems are deeply personal and bravely confessional. Time and again, Borges revisits the ideas, hopes, and disappointments that preoccupy him. He does so with a clear conviction that what he reveals of himself is, in essence if not in every detail, true of everyone. In telling his own story, he is telling ours as well. Borges appears to regard himself as unique and at the same time as everyman. In that sense, each of us is the star of his poetry.

Leopold Lugonesappears in The Maker, In Praise of Darkness, the Unending Rose

Leopold Lugones, an Argentine poet and novelist who lived from 1874-1938, was a dominant figure in letters during Borges' formative years. Borges refers to him in his poems as frequently as he does any person in contemporary history. Lugones apparently was not a fan of Borges' writing, but the younger poet does not seem to take offense at this indifference. Lugones appears to be a role model for him, although not one whose poetry he necessarily would emulate. The position of Lugones as an eminent writer of his time and as an elder carries much weight with Borges, who has a powerful affinity to predecessors. Borges also indicates admiration for the loyalty Lugones holds toward his own predecessor in Argentine poetry, Rubén Darío. It is this connectivity to tradition and culture that Borges seems to value most in his relationship with Lugones, which in the poetry does not appear to have been a close friendship.

Heraclitusappears in Fervor de Buenos Aires, The Maker, the Self and the Other, T

Heraclitus is one of the most frequently invoked names from ancient times in Borges' poetry. The ancient Greek philosopher interests Borges principally because of his famous idea that time is a river, ever-changing, which means no one can step twice into the same river. Borges finds great meaning in this idea, because the river remains the same and yet it is different and, for him, time is the substance of our lives. He seems to

feel that Heraclitus understood the nature of time and change, and perhaps taught Borges about it through his ancient writings. In any case, Borges feels a strong intellectual kinship with Heraclitus.

Isidoro Suárezappears in Fervor de Buenos Aires, The Maker, For Six Strings

Isidoro Suárez, the poet's great-grandfather, symbolizes bravery in battle and adventure, which Borges seems to admire not only their manliness but because they are so utterly different from his own quiet life. Suárez, who led a Hussar regiment against Royalist forces at the Battle of Junín in Peru in 1824, was specially commended for bravery. Borges reached such heights of intense living only through contemplation, never through physical risk-taking.

Miguel de Cervantesappears in The Maker, the Self and the Other, The Limit

Miguel de Cervantes, the Spanish writer famed for his windmill-charging fictional creation, Don Quixote, appears a number of times in these poems. Cervantes served in the Spanish army and Borges imagines him dreaming up Don Quixote while on duty. Borges seems to admire Cervantes for being both a poet and a man of action. In his poetry, Borges even goes so far as to give Don Quixote a life as real as that of Cervantes, as if both were flesh and blood, in a tribute to how fully the fictional creation of Cervantes must have been a part of his real self.

Janusappears in The Self and the Other, The Gold of the Tigers, The Maker

Janus is the two-headed, ancient Roman god of doorways, beginnings, and endings, one of whose faces was supposed to look into the past and the other into the future. Borges likes using Janus in his poems as a symbol of the duality of nature and man, and of the past and future. He likes the idea that the two faces of Janus, looking away from each other, are powerless to glance each other's way.

Ulyssesappears in The Self and the Other, The Unending Rose

Ulysses, the hero of Homer's ancient Greek epic poem, The Odyssey, is another man of action Borges extols in his poetry. Ulysses traveled the world, saw amazing sights and had perilous adventures. Borges, who led a relatively quiet life, identified strongly, and perhaps vicariously, with the hero.

Walt Whitmanappears in The Self and the Other, The Unending Rose

Walt Whitman is perhaps the most prominent of many poets throughout history that Borges mentions in his poems. Borges suggests that Robert Browning and William Blake were even more attuned than Whitman to the mystical aspects of life, but he still names Whitman more often in his poems, indicating that he considers the nineteenth century Englishman to be a close fellow traveler.

Ralph Waldo Emersonappears in The Self and the Other, The Gold of the Tigers

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famed nineteenth century American author, is perhaps the non-ancient prose writer most often invoked in the poetry of Borges. He appreciates the American's reverence for nature and his sense that everything in existence is interconnected.

Proteusappears in The Self and the Other, The Unending Rose, The Iron Coin

Proteus is the herdsman of Neptune, the ancient Roman god of the sea. An old man and a prophet, Proteus is famed for his ability to change shapes at will, which explains Borges' fascination with him. He often uses Proteus as a symbol or a metaphor for the changeability of things that nevertheless remain the same, like the effects of time, memory, and forgetting.

Objects/Places

Buenos Airesappears in the entire book

Buenos Aires is the Argentine city in which Borges spent much of his life. It features in a great many of his poems.

Palermoappears in San Martin Copybook, For Six Strings

Palermo is a neighborhood in Buenos Aires where Borges grew up and had many elemental experiences described in his poems.

Genevaappears in The History of the Night, Los Conjurados

Geneva is the city in Switzerland where Borges spent a good deal of time, and where he died.

Texasappears in The Self and the Other, The Iron Coin, Los Conjurados

Texas is mentioned fairly often in the poetry of Borges. He first visited there in the 1960s and seems to regard the state as quintessentially North American.

Rome and Carthageappears in The Self and the Other, In Praise of Darkness, the Limit

Rome and Carthage, the ancient cities, are usually mentioned together in Borges' poetry, often in connection with destruction of the great Carthaginian civilization by the Romans.

Junínappears in The Self and the Other, For Six Strings

Junín, in the Peruvian highlands, was the site of a nineteenth century battle in which Borges' great-grandfather fought with distinction. He mentions it several times in his poems.

Mirrorsappears in all books in the volume

Mirrors appear perhaps more frequently than any one symbol in the poetry of Borges. They show the duality of people and of nature, particularly how reality and representation of it can coexist in layers, indicating there could be other realities behind the ones we perceive.

Dreamsappears in all books in the volume

Dreams of all kinds fill the writing of Borges. Good dreams, nightmares, and daydreams all are conduits to other realities in the world of his poetry.

Swordsappears in all books in the volume

Swords, lances, and daggers repeatedly appear in these poems. They represent not only instruments of death but also tools of battle, glory, and of criminality.

Labyrinthsappears in all books in the volume

Labyrinths and mazes are among Borges' favorite symbols. They stand for complexity, confusion, uncertainty, and sometimes for the excitement of unknowing.

The Moonappears in all books in the volume

The moon is frequently present in the poems. It variously represents mystery, continuity reflectivity, and the universe.

Patios and Gardensappears in all books in the volume

Patios and gardens make regular appears in the poems, as symbols of fecundity, beauty, peace, and regeneration.

Streetsappears in all books in the volume

Streets, especially those of Buenos Aires, are important to Borges as symbols of coexistence, and of the complexity of people living in close proximity to one another.

Themes

Death and Dying

Death and dying are preoccupations of Borges in poems written throughout his lifetime. He approaches the theme from many angles. Often, he sees death as mysteriously beautiful, moving, and worthy of our reverence. He regards the dead as voyagers into the unknown, as representations of the past, to which we remain connected in the present, and as phenomena. To him, dying seems to be a step that holds so much potential for new insight and awareness that those who have taken it ahead of him are invested with a new power he cannot yet claim. It is as if they have joined a stream of life into which he may not yet enter, which gives them capabilities he cannot even fathom, which he envies and desires to have. As Borges grows older, he increasingly communes in his imagination with the dead. Sometimes, he conjures his ancestors, marveling at their deeds, and often he celebrates the lives of great writers and thinkers who preceded him, focusing on their attitudes toward death and the afterlife.

Borges does not directly proclaim faith in any particular religious view of what will happen after death, although he sometimes wonders how a character in his poem will react on Judgment Day or when finally facing God. In his poetry, his interest in death is not so much about what reward or punishment might await a given person as it is about the process as part of a continuum of life on earth. He often imagines and hopes for a revelation, at the moment of death or just after it, which will finally answer questions that have preoccupied him most of his life. He believes all things and people are interconnected across space and through time, and he yearns for confirmation of this belief in a flood of insight that he hopes death will bring. In his poems, death is a portal, the dying pass through it, and to be dead is to discover and grasp at last the great fusion that lies beyond this life.

Memory and Forgetting

Memory and forgetting are ways that Borges approaches the big questions in his life. His fascination with how we exist in the moment and yet belong, in a sense, to the past is best addressed in his poetry through dredging his memory. For him, memory is not just the act of thinking back. It is also a re-imagining of reality, but an imperfect one that can provide only an approximation of what happened. On top of that, Borges recognizes that his memory includes outright fabrications, mixing fact and fiction so adeptly that it sometimes seems that they become indistinguishable. Borges seems to believe that such mixing of "real" and "unreal" memories is good, because it gets him closer to a truth about existence that mere recollection of actual events could never approach. He frequently invents memories for historical figures in his poems, using the device of memory to show how they, too, are composed of the past and affect the present. Into this mixture he may inject his own memories, causing a further conjoining of fact, fiction, the past, and the present.

Forgetting is likewise a tool in this effort to stitch together the effects of time flowing both backward and forward. If memory anchors us to the effects of the past, showing us how we become who we are, and what we are likely to become, then forgetting, is a selective raising of that anchor along the course of our lives. To forget is a gift and an absolution, Borges contends. It makes the burden of memory possible to bear. It's a dam that keeps the flood from overwhelming us. Through memory, we work to find meaning in life. Forgetting provides a filtering effect that not only makes possible the efficient working of memory, but that also has the humane and practical effect of protecting us from the overwhelming anguish of the hardest memories.

Duality

Nothing is simple in the world of Borges. No object is merely what it appears to be, and no person can be judged by his or her surface. No place is just a place, and no time exists alone, at that instant. There is always another side, often unseen, and perceivable only through the work of imagination, memory, or intuition. This duality is one of the central mysteries of Borges' poetry. He approaches it symbolically. For example, the mirrors in his poems show reflections that seem exactly like reality on the surface, yet do not have the substance of what they mirror. To Borges, this duality suggests that a thing can exists and not exist at the same time, or that it exists on more than one plane of experience, or in some universe parallel to ours, or beyond it. From that idea, he proceeds in his poems to the notion that this parallel universe could be one of archetypes that exist perhaps only in the consciousness of the creator, or on some other level unapproachable to us except perhaps after death.

Time itself is dual in nature, going backwards and forwards simultaneously. Borges' key symbol in his poems for this duality is Janus, the two-headed figure of Roman mythology whose one face looks into the past and the other into the future, but whose faces cannot turn to glance at each other. Similarly, the philosophy of the ancient Greek, Heraclitus, attracts Borges because of the idea that nobody can step twice into the same river. With each entry, the river has already changed, just as time never stands still. The apparent coexistence of past and present, which also are different, is a central paradox in the poetry of Borges. He regards himself as a duality: on the one hand, he is a public figure, and on the other, a private man made up of memory, learning, experience, and the influences of ancestry and history. Sometimes, the two parts of him combine in ways that make it difficult even for him to know which is which. Duality is a puzzle in his poems that he never entirely solves, but which fascinates him endlessly.

Style

Point of View

Borges uses third person in much of his poetry to impart information, tell stories, and make observations about events, people, and the human condition. The use of third person also creates a kind of oracular distance form his topics, as if he had long pondered questions and decided what he thought before committing his conclusions to paper. To a degree, that is probably true, although Borges admits that writers never know exactly what they think, or how a piece of writing will turn out before they write it. Even so, the reader is there to discover what the poet has to say, and in that regard, Borges uses the distance of third person to great effect. He also writes in first person, often after he is well into a poem. The interjection of "I" into the narrative creates a sudden intimacy that can be disarming and powerful. Without warning, the removal of the poet from the poem is shattered, and he is close, telling secrets. Yet another point-of-view device he uses is to name himself as Borges in the poem. The poet then becomes an observer of the man, as if the two were separate. The reader and Borges realize this is not the case, and yet, in a way it is, because the Borges on paper is a construct of the Borges holding the pen. He also sometimes refers to himself as "the poet," differentiating that figure from the man, which indicates a recognition that the public and private personas coexist separately and, paradoxically, as one.

Setting

The principal setting in the poems is Buenos Aires. The poet's home city is so frequently invoked and described that it takes on the prominence of a character in these writings. Borges invests the town with almost mythological significance that goes back to its earliest days and the lives of those who inhabited it then. His own past is inextricable from his memories of the streets and rooms of Buenos Aires. As involved as the poet is with the objects, people, and the natural world of his surroundings, Buenos Aires is clearly an important part of him. He also shows attachment to other places he has lived or visited in his life. Foremost among these alternate universes are Geneva and Texas. He does not make many explicit statements about Geneva in his poetry, but he mentions it a lot. Borges died in this city, and it obviously was important to him, but based on the evidence in his poetry, one might conclude that much of Geneva's value to him was in it not being Buenos Aires. The otherness of the place may have attracted him to it. Texas, on the other hand, seems to be his representative or symbol of the United States, a country for which he expressed admiration. The physical largeness and openness of Texas also appeals to him, and he mentions in poetry a sense of affinity between Argentina and Texas. Another place he visits fairly often in his writing is Iceland. Apparently, he loved someone there once, and he goes back in memory to her in Iceland, wishing he could relive those moments.

Language and Meaning

For Borges, language is a tradition and way of grasping reality that is often best-used through the ordering of things in the universe. This is why he employs so many symbols, such as lances and daggers, mirrors, mazes, gardens, moonlight, streets, and tigers, among others. Through these symbols, he tries not only to fix reality in place, but to indicate the layers of reality below and beyond what we perceive in everyday life. A symbol, a word that stands for itself and indicates other meanings, can be a conduit to the past, and an intimation of whatever mysteries might await us after death. He does something similar with the naming or listing of physical objects, experiences, and places. For example, by assembling chronicles in his poems of things that have happened to him or to others through time, he tries to create a sense of the impact that the past exerts on the present, and of how the past will affect the future. By describing objects such as books, cups, or photos, he suggests that they hold power, because of the memories they contain, but also that they are like lifeboats in this reality, keeping us afloat in the swiftly moving currents of time. The language of Borges is generally straightforward and unpretentious, yet the meanings it contains are deep. Through words, he tries to attain what he calls a modest, secret complexity, and he often succeeds at constructing an unprepossessing world that nevertheless seems to contain worlds.

Structure

This volume contains selections from fourteen books of poetry written throughout the life of Borges. A Table of Contents lists the titles of each book of poetry and the specific poems which were extracted from it. The extracts are arranged in chronological order, beginning with Borges' first book, published in 1923, when he was twenty-four years old, and ending with his last volume, which appeared in 1985, the year before his death. The selections from each volume begin with a title page that gives the date of first publication of that book. Often the title page is followed by a prologue, and in one case by an epilogue, in which the poet offers observation on the collection, along with general opinions about writing poetry. All the approximately 200 poems in this book were originally written in Spanish, and those versions appear on the left-hand pages, next to the English versions on the right-hand pages. Thirteen translators are listed on a page at the front of the book, and the initials of the relevant translator appear at the end of each poem's English version. A page at the end lists acknowledgments of permission to re-publish translations of poems that had previously appeared elsewhere.

Quotes

"The patio is the slope
down which the sky flows into the house."
Fevor de Buenos Aires, "The Patio," p. 15

"Free of memory and hope,
unlimited, abstract, almost future,
the dead body is not somebody: It is death."
Fervor de Buenos Aires, "Remorse for Any Death," p. 21

"Three hundred nights like three hundred walls
must rise between my love and me
and the sea will be a black art between us."
Fervor de Buenos Aires, "Parting," p. 29

"Big long-suffering street,
you are the only music my life has understood."
Moon Across the Way, "Street with a Pink Corner Store," p. 37

"I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away he doesn't expect to arrive."
Moon Across the Way, "Boast of Quietness," p. 43

"I am touched by the frail wisdoms
lost in every man's death—
his habit of books, of a key, of one body among the others."
San Martin Copybook, "Deathwatch on the Southside," p. 61

"Some feature of the crucified face may lurk in every mirror. Maybe the face died and faded away so that God could be everyman."
The Maker, "Paradiso XXI, 108," p. 81

"Strange, that there are dreams, that there are mirrors.
Strange that the ordinary, worn-out ways
of everyday encompass the imagined
and endless universe woven by reflections."
The Maker, "Mirrors," p. 107

"Falling or fallen. Rain itself is something
undoubtedly which happens in the past."
The Maker, "Rain," p. 115

"But the days are a web of small troubles,
and is there a greater blessing

than to be the ash of which oblivion is made?"
The Self and the Other, "To a Minor Poet of the Greek Anthology," p. 167

"The pettiest will be generous
And the most craven will be brave:
Nothing improves a reputation
Like confinement to a grave."
For Six Strings, "Where Can They Have Gone?" p. 249

"Now I can forget them. I reach my center,
my algebra and my key,
my mirror.
Soon I will know who I am."
In Praise of Darkness, "In Praise of Darkness," p. 301

"Your matter is time, its unchecked and unreckoned
Passing. You are each solitary second."
The Iron Coin, "You Are Not the Others," p. 385

"Perhaps there is no yesterday, perhaps I was never born.
I may be dreaming of having dreamed."
The Limit, "Descartes," p. 417

Topics for Discussion

Borges often imagines what figures in history or in literature are thinking and doing, especially at some point just prior to their death. Why do you think such imaginings occupy him? What does he hope to learn or portray through these ruminations?

Borges lived a quiet life, but his poems often celebrate the deeds in war of his ancestors. Why do you think he is so fascinated with the dangers and glories of battle?

These poems frequently consider the moment of death, or the moment just after it. Borges obviously hoped that those moments would reveal something to him about the nature of life on earth and of the universe. Describe what you think he hoped to discover.

In his poems, Borges often declares that he would love to embrace oblivion, that wishes he could be someone else, and even that he wishes he had never been. Even so, his poetry is not depressive or defeatist at its core. How is it that he attempts to celebrate life through such apparently negative images and ideas?

Why does it matter so much to Borges that nothing seems to exist solely of itself, but always has another side, or even more than one side, that we cannot easily see? What value does this duality hold for him?

Explain the importance of physical objects in the poetry of Borges. They are more significant than merely ways to set the reader in a place or time. What other meanings do they hold for him?

What is the connection between reality and unreality in the poetry of Borges? How does one inform the other, and what is his attitude toward making a distinction between them?