

Seven Nights

J.L.Borges

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I must have read the book before, but I do not seem to remember anything beyond the suggestion that 'Thousand' stands for infinity, and thus the title of 'Thousand and One Night' refers to one beyond infinity, in other words an example of an infinite ordinal, although I doubt that Borges thought in those terms, at least not consciously.

The book consists of seven lectures translated into English. They are quite interesting, so I do not understand why they seem not to have made an impression on me at the time. Borges is above all a reader. Reading is his passion. Writing (and talking) is an inevitable consequence. Thus his writing is in the nature of notes in the margin, which I guess mostly are wide enough to allow him to express himself. For a passionate reader there are books of love to whom they return over and over again, always finding new things to ponder. A real book is not something you read through once and then discard. This is not a book. A book is something of a mystery. A life in miniature. A secret garden, containing an infinite number of delights, only a few visible at each encounter. One such book in the case of Borges is *Divina Commedia*, which he first read in a bilingual edition, part English, part original Italian, going back and forth. In this way he soon learned Italian, or at least written Italian. To him a language is for reading, not to talk and write in, for that his mother tongue is more than adequate. Anyway it must not have been too hard for him to pick up Italian, already being a Native of Spanish. What is truly remarkable about the *Divina Commedia*, Borges argues, is the way Dante puts himself into the book. He is not just the 'I' of a narrator, he is an actor. One may wonder whether this is not almost always the case with any story told in the first person, but it is part of the delight of Borges, to be able to make the commonplace remarkable. The book, the joy of which to read, is one which nobody should deny themselves, is strikingly simple and accessible, as long as you ignore all the commentaries it has engendered. Borges dwells at length at the parallels with the story of Ulysses, with whom Dante obviously identifies. There is a tragedy to this comedy, namely that the people of the past, the ancients, are denied entrance to the paradise, no matter how good they have been, because they were born and died before the revelation of Christ.

As to dreams, much can be said by that, but Borges limits himself to the nightmare, which holds a special fascination to him. As a reader in many languages, he has a special affinity for etymology, and thus rattles off half-a-dozen different words for Nightmare in European languages. Some are better and more appropriate than others. The Spanish *pesadilla* for one thing, is far too cheerful. What matters when there is a nightmare is not the representation, but the feeling. The feeling of dread and fear, is not caused by the dream, but instead causes the dream. The fear predates the image, the image does not scare you by itself, it is only the embodiment of a fear. Thus nightmares tend to be recurrent. The fear is the same, and the image tends to be conveniently recycled. But to Borges nothing exists unless it is to be read in a book. Thus the most vivid nightmare

is not necessarily one of his own experience, but one which he has read about. And he records a dream by Wordsworth, involving Don Quixote and the Elements of Euclid, set in a desert with camels as well as in a cave by the sea. There is a stone and there is a shell, and Borges finds this one of the most beautiful creations to a nightmare to be found in the literature.

And then of course the magic nights, the book, or rather the succession of books, that more than anything else has defined the nature of the Orient to the Occidental reader. The Koran is a Bible of verses, why not think of the Arabian Nights as a Bible of the stories. Spirit versus Flesh. Or so I think, if not Borges.

His long story on Buddhism, may be the most interesting in the collection. Buddhism is a religion without a god. In that sense it may be thought of as the most advanced of all religions, at least the most abstract. In the name of the other world religions wars have been thought, never in the case of Buddhism, the most tolerant of all doctrines. Borges retells the story of Siddharta, later to become the Buddha, the enlightened one. He grew up in comfort and ease, his sensual desires well taken care of by a young beautiful wife and a huge harem as an erotic chorus. Maybe only when you have tasted the world to its hilt are you ready to renounce it. But one should not fall into common traps as to the nature of Buddhism. It is not necessarily a religion of renouncement and ascetism. In fact ascetism is a kind of inverted sensuality, following the same furrows, only in the other direction, thus relying on the pleasure of sensual satisfaction, even when it appears as pain. The most abstract and elegant formulation of BUddhism is that of Zen, and Borges dwells on it. Buddhism fosters monks, whose purpose it is to study. A peculiar study, directed inward to achieve the universal. The obstruction to find truth lies in our clinging to the notion of individual identity, the supremacy of the 'I', through which we peak at the world. What is at stake is not so much the renouncement of worldly pleasures, as the rebounciation of the subject of them all. The feeling of 'self'. The goal is to free yourself of this illusion, but of course this is a very tall order to achieve. And as to Nirvana, that is not the same thing as extinction, as many people seem to think. Not extinction of being anyway, only extinction of worry and care. It is hard though, to conceive of being without the latter I think, but I guess this is what makes it worth achieving.

The lecture on poetry may be the less interesting of them all. A large part of it is taken up by examples of poetry in Spanish, that you do not understand, and of course when translated it is the poetry, more or less by definition, which gets left out, and thus leaves you cold. Poetry should be felt, Borges points out, people who teach poetry by adding lots of commentary to it, usually do not understand poetry at all, least they do not have this immediate feel for it, which, according to Borges, exactly what makes it worthwhile.

His thoughts on the Kabbalah may be the most interesting. He makes a clear distinction between a sacred text and a classic cult book. The former is perfect, the latter is not. The former is perfect down to the level of characters. As we all know all kinds of numerical patterns have been studied and discovered in the Bible. This is a new kind of reading, to which a classics does not lend itself, but for sacred text, this is supposed to have some obscure meaning, whose revelation constitutes the purpose of such exercises. In particular the text of a sacred book existed before man, before word, before meaning. It

was not something that evolved, but always was there. This is turning on the head the usual view of things, that first words were spoken, only later were they codified into a written script. The Kabbalah is concerned about creation, in particular by the problem whether something can create something higher and more complex than itself. It cannot, and in fact the God we know, is just a lowly creation of something that was infinitely bigger, and came before. We belong to a world of degradation. This is pretty mystical. But that is what the Kabbalah is all about. The mystic.

Homer was blind, or at least the Greek wanted us so to believe, the idea being that poetry should be heard not seen. The writer should not be a visual being. Be that as it may, and Borges is skeptical, but he is also blind, and may feel a certain sympathy with the fate of the blind bards of the past. In fact the final lecture is about his own blindness, the advantages and disadvantages it confers, and the fact that he simply has to accept them as part of his fate.

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