

With Borges

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This is a slight book, less than a hundred diminutive pages, all of which are nevertheless printed in regular sized font, with many pages devoted entirely to photographs. In toto definitely less than 90'000 bytes, shorter than many an essay. It fits snugly in your pocket and can be savoured during an extended subway ride. How fitting indeed to the subject of Borges, the voracious reader, who liked to distil his aroused imagination into short parables.

It is a book about reading. Superficially of the author himself as a teenage boy reading to the old sage. More significantly though about Borges, the gluttonous reader who has never ever forgotten anything he has ever read, and thus can identify himself with Funes, the magician of memory, who is unable to discard any scrap of remembrance, no matter how trivial. A serious reader is connected to a library, in the case of Borges this library turns out to be imaginary, the National one of which he was once the director, (let alone the one which is housed in his own cramped quarters), is too small and insignificant, only the library that contains all possible books would suffice. As a ravenous reader Borges is omnivorous, not discarding what others more finicky would turn up their noses at. This does not mean that he does not discriminate, what he does not like would make up a Canon by itself. For Borges, the world of books, is the only world that matters. What does it really matter that he is being, as was his father before him, ushered into the world of darkness, his lifeless eyes staring into the void. As long as he can hear he is fine. The world of literature is not visual it is oral, the cadence of speech strikes the ear directly, just as smell imposes itself on our olfactory systems. The visual image on the other hand is only suggested to the eye, to some admittedly more vividly than to others.

His imagination is strict and abstract. One of my friends once complained that with Borges it is all 'idea' but no 'gestalt'. As befits a reader of books it is an imagination of reference. In modern lingo one of links and codes. Keys to doors are provided, but it is up to the reader to open those doors himself, just as every reader is expected to open up a book and let its pages speak to him.

Borges the quintessentially bookish boy, forever dominated by his never dying mama, projects himself compensatorily onto the hero, the doer, the tough man. His favorite animal is the Tiger. Once when old and famous he is invited to savour a surprise. With another man it might have been a more sensual one of tender flesh to fondle and penetrate. With Borges, however, it entails two heavy paws on his shoulders, and the hot burning breath on his neck accompanied by the putrid stench of rotten meat. Only then does it strike him that the beast is after all a carnivore.

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