

## BACKGROUND

The following narrative, "Borges and I," was written in 1960 by Jorge Luis Borges, the most famous and notorious Argentine writer.<sup>1</sup> In his day, the author was easily recognized on the streets of his native Buenos Aires. Borges is credited, along with a few other writers, of unleashing a major advance not only in Latin American literature but in Western literature. One of the pillars of this stylistic innovation is a serious enquiry into the borders between reality and fiction. You might know the later development of this trend as Magical Realism.

Today you are invited to write about whether Borges' text is autobiography. Given its long-standing associations with individualism and humanistic values, autobiography is seen as foundational to the Western tradition, yet it is often overlooked as a literary genre, as if it were too factual or real to qualify as "imaginative writing" ("imaginative writing" being the point of departure for many handbook definitions of literature). However, there are plenty of views to the contrary, including, for example, Paul de Man's famous pronouncement that autobiography, more than anything else, is a figure for reading, namely, *prosopopeia* (a kind of personification).

## QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ANSWER IN A COHERENT ESSAY

As best you can in the limited time, write a coherent, strongly argued essay with a thesis and supporting reasons. Your essay should answer the two bold-faced questions below.

- 1.) **Is Borges' story autobiography, fiction, something else?** (You might consider thinking about the relationship between author, narrator, and protagonist).
- 2.) **Name and define the genre, and, in doing so, discuss the relationship of truth and fiction.** (You might consider asking yourself, what is Borges' point? His method? His tone?).

You may refer to other texts and theories, of course, but please give a fair treatment (including close reading or textual analysis) of Borges' text. In your answer, as you define the genre of this text, feel free to give some sense of the at least one Western literary canon as you discuss genre, truth, and fiction.

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Borges and I<sup>2</sup>

It's Borges, the other one, that things happen to. I walk through Buenos Aires and I pause—mechanically now, perhaps—to gaze at the arch of an entryway and its inner door; news of Borges reaches me by mail, or I see his name on a list of academics or in some biographical dictionary. My taste runs to hourglasses, maps, seventeenth-century typefaces, etymologies, the taste of coffee, and the prose of Robert Louis Stevenson; Borges shares those preferences, but in a vain sort of way that turns them into the accoutrements of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that our relationship is hostile—I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature, and that literature is my justification. I willingly admit that he has written a number of sound pages, but those pages will not save *me*, perhaps because the good in them no longer belongs to any individual, not even to that other man, but rather to language itself, or to tradition. Beyond that, I am doomed—utterly and inevitably—to oblivion, and fleeting moments will be all

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in Spanish in: Jorge Luis Borges. *El hacedor*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> This translation taken from: Jorge Luis Borges. *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. Penguin, 1998. 161.

of me that survives in that other man. Little by little, I have been turning everything over to him, though I know the perverse way he has of distorting and magnifying everything. Spinoza believed that all things wish to go on being what they are—stone wishes eternally to be stone, and tiger, to be tiger. I shall endure in Borges, not in myself (if, indeed, I am anybody at all), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others', or in the tedious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him, and I moved on from the mythologies of the slums and outskirts of the city to games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now, and I shall have to think up other things. So my life is a point-counterpoint, a kind of fugue, and a falling away—and everything winds up being lost to me, and everything falls into oblivion, or into the hands of the other man. I am not sure which of us it is that's writing this page.

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