

In Borges' Shadow

The Lesson of the Master

By Norman Thomas Di Giovanni

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Review by Kimberly Brown

The "Master" referenced in the title of this book of eight essays is the Argentinean writer, Jorge Luis Borges, as remembered by his translator and literary collaborator, Norman Thomas Di Giovanni. In 1967, Di Giovanni, after meeting Borges briefly at Harvard, traveled to Buenos Aires to assist Borges in translating his stories into English. There he remained for the next five years, working side-by-side with Borges at his office in the National Library, of which Borges was the titular head. At sixty-one years old and nearly blind, Borges was decades older than his new employee; however, Di Giovanni quickly proved to be much more than a mere translator. Together, he and Borges developed a method of collaboration that allowed them to "recreate" Borges' stories from their original language into English, and during the period of their partnership, Borges' fame spread widely throughout the English-speaking world. So influential did Borges' regard Di Giovanni to his work, that he and Borges split the royalties from translations equally.

Reading these essays, one is puzzled that Di Giovanni finds it necessary to prove his influence on and intimacy with Borges. He criticizes other translations and translators and pointedly defends his importance to Borges' later works. Readers who know nothing of Di Giovanni's relationship with the Borges Estate will find this sensibility difficult to understand and perhaps a bit ridiculous. The controversy began after Borges' death, when his second wife, Maria Kodama (who he married eight weeks before he died) became his heir. Since Di Giovanni's fifty per cent agreement with Borges meant less income to the estate, Maria sold the English translation rights of all of Borges' work to a publisher, the terms of which state that she and the estate retain the copyright and all of the royalties of the new translations. As a result, much of Di Giovanni's and Borges' collaborative translations are no longer in print.

Perhaps the most engaging essay in this book is "Borges at Play: The Self and Selves." Readers of Borges' are familiar with his fascination with the

nature of identity; in his famous short essay, "Borges and Myself," Borges the Narrator attempts to explain that there are two men within him; one, publicly known as the author and writer of stories, and another, a private and personal self. The Narrator's dilemma is discerning which of them is the real, authentic Borges and which is the imposter, yet paradoxically must finally admit, "Which of us is writing this page I don't know" (Borges, 1962). Di Giovanni explains that Borges felt keenly "the quandary of self and identity" (p.70) and was all his life torn between the bookish and intellectual man he was and the brave and adventurous man of action he wished he were.

Not surprisingly, Borges was also concerned about the very nature of reality ("Reality is not always probable, or likely," he said) and particularly "Interested in the feeling I get every morning when I awake and find that I am Borges. Before awakening, I was nobody, or perhaps everyone and everything" (p. 80). This blurring of the boundaries between internal and external reality is at the very heart of each of Borges' stories, and, as Di Giovanni suggests, at the very heart of Borges himself. Borges was at home in "Two dimensions of reality. One was the cramped, mortal, and conditional physical world . . . the other was an unconfined, timeless and unconditional spiritual 'world'" (p. 86), and it is by juxtaposing each with the other, Di Giovanni believes, that Borges is able, through his work, to touch his own concept of eternity.

Di Giovanni writes with great affection and admiration for his "Master," but limits his recollections of Borges to commentary on his writing and the collaborative process between them. The few personal anecdotes mentioned are awkward and surprisingly lacking in insight; Di Giovanni assumes the reader is familiar with everyone in Borges' circle and every aspect of Borges' life. As a result, the reader is often confused and perplexed. The incident of Borges' separation and divorce from his first wife is mysteriously alluded to and forgotten with the sentence, "Most of what he [Borges] told me, I already knew. He poured it out; I listened" (p. 39). Di Giovanni tells us that he also acted as Borges' coach because Borges suffered from a dreadful lack of confidence, but never offers an explanation as to why such a talented and renowned writer might require trite exhortations such as "Just remember your Dickens" (p. 36) and "Eight pages. You can do it" (p. 29). Worse yet, Di Giovanni's literary talent is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Borges'; where Borges' is lyrical, Di Giovanni is dissonant; where Borges' is masterful, Di Giovanni is amateur. Jorge Luis Borges remains one of the most enigmatic figures in literature, a man who was happiest living in the

fictional world of novels and stories, and who is perhaps best understood by reading his work closely rather than reading the remembrances of others.

References

Borges, J. (1962). *Labyrinths* (J. Irby, Trans). New York: New Directions.