In *Borges’ Classics*, Laura Jansen reads the oeuvre of the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges as a radically globalized model for reimagining our relationship with the classical past. This major study reveals how Borges constructs a new ‘physics of reading’ the classics, which privileges a paradoxical vision of the canon as universal yet centreless, and eschews fixed ideas about the cultural history of the West. Borges’ unique approach transforms classical antiquity into a simultaneously familiar and remote world, whose legacy is both urgent and unstable. In the process, Borges repositions the classical tradition at the intersection of the traditional Western canon and modernist literature of the peripheral West. Jansen’s study traces Borges’ encounters with the classics through appeal to themes central to Borges’ thought, such as history and fiction, memory and forgetfulness, the data of the senses, and the vectors that connect cultures and countries.

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Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges at the ruins of the temple at Selinunte, 1984.
Photo: Ferdinando Scianna / Magnum Images Ltd.
BORGES’ CLASSICS

*Global Encounters with the Graeco-Roman Past*

LAURA JANSEN

*University of Bristol*
To my sister, Perla
Primera cuestión: la lectura es un arte de la microscopía, del espacio (no sólo los pintores se ocupan de esas cosas). Segunda cuestión: la lectura es un asunto de óptica, de luz, una dimensión de la física.

First point: reading is a microscopic art, an art of space (not only painters are concerned with these things). Second point: reading is a matter of optics, of light, a dimension of physics.

Ricardo Piglia, *El último lector*, 2005 [on Borges as a reader]

Escribir sobre un escritor puede ser una manera extraordinaria de leerlo.

To write about a writer can be a remarkable way to read one.

Alan Pauls, *Interview with Rodrigo Fresan* [on writing about Borges] Casa América, 2011
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Preface

Jorge Luis Borges (1899, Buenos Aires – 1986, Geneva) is nothing less than a titanic figure in the history of literature and criticism. As one of the most significant and influential Latin American writers of the twentieth century and a colossus of global letters, he looms large in the literary imaginations of every language into which he has been translated, including English. His importance for Anglophone thought about books, libraries, poetry, the practice of reading and the art of writing was confirmed by his famous Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1967–68 (published in 2000 as This Craft of Verse); few scholars of such matters go very far without invoking him. It would be no exaggeration to say that Borges has shaped not only how we think about the humanities, but even how we dream about them.

Nevertheless, Borges remains somewhat underserved by English-language scholarship, and he lacks any major study of his relationship to Graeco-Roman antiquity, which remained throughout his career an Ariadne’s thread to his labyrinthine thought about the literatures and cultures of the entire world. With Borges’ Classics, Laura Jansen steps boldly into that scholarly breach. Her timely volume addresses a range of audiences: those interested in Borges in his own right; those similarly interested in Argentinian or Latin-American or Hispanophone literatures; scholars of comparative and world literatures; scholars of what has come to be called ‘global Classics’; other scholars of classical reception; and classicists looking for creative perspectives on classical literature itself. To read Jansen reading Borges reading Classics is nothing short of a rediscovery of what it means to read – with wit, imagination and humanity.

Jansen deftly conjures Borges as he negotiates his complex relationships to such major figures of the classical canon as Homer, Vergil and Lucretius. Not stopping there, however, she follows him through somewhat less celebrated terrain, like that of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, and farther still, into the broken bits and pieces that comprise much of what lingers,
often anonymously, from the ancient past. So too does she track his
engagement with his more immediate predecessors, like Franz Kafka, as
well as his influence on contemporaries and successors, including Italo
Calvino, Umberto Eco and Derek Walcott (each of these, of course, is
famous in his own right as a ‘receiver’ of the classical past). The resulting
portrait of literary influence is breathtaking in its sweep, with Jansen
attentive to both continuities and discontinuities – as Borges himself
was, ever-mindful of the lessons of Heraclitus (the subject of
Jansen’s second chapter). And one of the many things that this portrait
reveals is the truth of the lesson Borges derives from his reading of Kafka:
‘The fact is that each writer creates his precursors. His work modifies
our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.’ In other words, Borges
provides us not only with an especially complex and dynamic example of
tradition and reception at work; rather, he confounds the very temporal-
ities by which literary history is generally thought to play out, troubling,
in the end, our conceptual hold on time itself.

Arguably, the most remarkable achievement of Borges’ Classics is that, by
its conclusion, it has reduced its title subject to the status of a pleonasm.
That is to say, the reader comes away no longer able to imagine – indeed,
unable to remember having ever imagined – any ‘Classics’ that was not
always already ‘Borges’’. This, to be clear, is not the same as concluding
that Borges belongs, at least partly, to Classics. Laura Jansen does unfold,
by and by, a compelling argument to this effect. But she knows full well
that to limit herself to this would be to claim yet another extraterritorial
writer for an imperious (and imperial) West. Her more important argu-
ment is instead a converse one that unites the sharpest insights of classical
reception studies, global Classics and planetary modernisms. Adding
Borges’ supra-Western, cosmic conception of classical antiquity to the
bookshelf of the classical tradition brushes centuries of dust off the tomes
already sitting there. Making the classics strange and wonderful again,
Borges frees even the most familiar works to address us in almost forgotten
ways, once again opening vast and thrilling vistas onto human experience
and its place in the cosmos.

SHANE BUTLER
EMILY GREENWOOD
ALASTAIR BLANSHARD
I cannot recall with precision when the idea of this book came to me because I have been reading Borges and the classics for so long. Yet the first tangible memory takes me to the island of Sifnos in July a few years ago. I spent that happy summer rereading a bilingual edition of *The Book of Sand* in Greek and Spanish that reinvigorated my passion for Borges’ oeuvre in more ways than I could then imagine. Thank you, Nikolas, for filling my bookshelves with Borges and countless other authors for so many years. This book also has a beginning in Bristol, in late 2014, when I co-organized “Two Nights with Borges” with Shane Butler, then Director of Bristol’s Institute for Greece, Rome and the Classical Tradition (IGRCT). I am grateful to Shane for his genuine support, and for encouraging me to write on Borges and the classical past. Warmest thanks also to the editors of *Classics After Antiquity*, Alastair Blanshard, Shane Butler and Emily Greenwood for their enthusiasm about this book and their careful feedback, to Michael Sharp, who offered constant guidance and support, and to Richard Hallas for his terrific work during copy-editing. The anonymous readers were outstanding. I am fortunate to have benefitted from their vast knowledge and expertise.

I would not have been able to complete this book without the generous financial support of a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship during 2015–16 and three awards from Bristol’s Faculty of Arts’ Research Fund in 2014, 2015 and 2016. The project was also greatly enhanced by a Visiting Fellowship at Princeton University in 2015–16, a Scholar Grant at the Centre of Hellenic Studies, Harvard in 2016, a long stay in Paris consulting the National Library of France and numerous visits to the wonderful Fondation Hardt in Geneva, a city much beloved by Borges. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about Borges and classical antiquity at Bristol, Brown, Cambridge, Johns Hopkins, Princeton, Reading, the Boghossian Foundation, Brussels, The Virgil Society, London, the Society of Classical Studies at San Francisco and Yale. I feel privileged to have been able to...
discuss my work with such prestigious audiences. Throughout the entire project, I travelled widely to undertake research in the UK, continental Europe, the United States and my own Buenos Aires. This has given me the unique opportunity to meet and exchange communications with writers, translators, biographers, photographers and expert readers of Borges, who either knew him or have extraordinary knowledge of him. Amongst them, I would like to mention Alberto Manguel, Ricardo Piglia (†), Celia Milstein, Fernando Scianza, Daniel Balderston, Evelyn Fishburn, Francisco García Jurado, Edwin Williamson, Jason Wilson and James Woodall.

I would like to express my gratitude to Andrew Laird, who supported this project from its early beginnings, when it was no more than a vague paragraph, to its full expression. Throughout this process, we discussed a lot of Borges in Oxford, Princeton and Brown, while co-translation several pieces from Spanish and French into English for the book. Evi Fishburn, Charles Martindale and James Porter read the entire book and improved it with incisive and erudite comments. Warm thanks for their intellectual generosity, encouragement and time. I am also grateful to Richard Cole for proofreading different parts of the book, and to my dear friend Vasileia Kouliouri for her help with the bibliography.

Amongst numerous friends, colleagues and postgraduate students who have shown enthusiasm for this project, I would like to acknowledge (in alphabetical order): Rosa Andújar; Francisco Barrenechea; Pablo de León; Al Duncan; Andrew Feldherr; Tristan Franklinos; Moira Fradinger; Bob Fowler; Bruce Gibson; Roy Gibson; Lorna Hardwick; Brooke Holmes; Kathi Iuanyi; George Kazantzidis; Duncan Kennedy; Dimitris Kousouri; Marina Kousouri; Lisa Kraege; Vassilis Lambropoulos; Miriam Leonard; Justine McConnell; Pantelis Michelakis; Irini Michali; Neville Morley; Ellen O’Gorman; Alex Purves; Ed Richardson; Connie and Ron Stroud; Polina Tambakaki; James Uden; Georgios Vassilides; and Phiroze Vasunia. My undergraduate students at Bristol took up the challenge of rereading Lucretius’ De rerum natura alongside Borges’ Fictions and Calvino’s Invisible Cities. I learned a lot from our class discussions, their stunning essays (even exam responses!), as well as their exercises in creative writing and performance. A similarly wonderful experience was IGRCT’s Borges Postgraduate Reading Group, which offered me the chance to think about material for this book with a group of brilliant and imaginative postgraduates.

Luke Roman read the entire manuscript and improved it with rare intelligence and vision. I owe him many observations made in this book,
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Chronology of Borges’ Life and Works

[Adapted from Williamson, E. (2013)]

1899  Born on August 24 in Calle Tucumán 840, in the centre of Buenos Aires, to Jorge Guillermo Borges, a half-English lawyer and aspiring writer, and Leónor Acevedo Suárez.

1900  Family moves to Palermo, then a poor district bordering the pampas, inhabited by immigrants and once notorious for knife-fighters and brothels.

1914  Family goes to Europe and settles in Geneva until end of World War I. Attends secondary school, and learns French, Latin and German.

1919–21  Family spends time in Majorca, Seville and Madrid. Joins an avant-garde group of poets known as the Ultra.

1921  Returns to Buenos Aires. Forms a group of ultraístas and introduces avant-garde ideas through “mural magazine” Prisma and little review Proa (Prow).

1923  Fervor de Buenos Aires (poems).

1923–24  Second visit to Europe. Becomes disillusioned with Spanish ultraísmo. On return to Buenos Aires, relaunches Proa with a group of young writers and develops a left-of-centre cultural nationalism called criollismo.

1925  Moon Across the Way (Luna de enfrente) (poems) and Inquisitions (essays). Frequent clashes between Borges’ criollista group around Proa and an avant-garde group associated with the “cosmopolitan” review Martín Fierro.

1926  The Extent of My Hope (El tamaño de mi esperanza) (essays, many on criollismo).

1927  Creates a “Committee of Young Intellectuals” with a group of criollistas to campaign for the re-election to the presidency.
of the Radical party candidate, the populist Hipólito Yrigoyen. Increasingly opposed by right-wing nationalists.

1928

*The Language of the Argentines* (essays). Yrigoyen elected president.

1929

*San Martín Copybook* (*Cuaderno San Martín*) (poems). Meets Nicolás Paredes, a former Palermo gang boss, who will inspire his first story, ‘Man on Pink Corner’.

1930

*Evaristo Carriego* (biography of a Palermo poet, plus essays on folk themes). President Yrigoyen overthrown in military coup d’état by right-wing nationalists. Disillusioned, Borges abandons *criollismo*.

1931

Invited by Victoria Ocampo to join board of new cultural journal *Sur*.

1932

*Discusión* (essays). Contributes to various literary magazines.

1933

Co-editor of the Saturday colour supplement of mass daily newspaper *Crítica*, where he publishes stories, essays, reviews and sketches until 1934. Becomes a leading opponent of right-wing Argentine nationalism and repeatedly denounces fascism and Nazism in Europe.

1935

*A Universal History of Iniquity* (fictionalized biographical sketches).

1936

*A History of Eternity* (essays). Edits fortnightly books section of popular weekly magazine *El Hogar* (*The Home*), for which he writes reviews and capsule biographies of writers.

1938

Employed as library assistant in a municipal library, his first full-time job. Father dies. Accident on Christmas Eve leads to life-threatening septicaemia.

1939

Writes ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’ while recuperating. Loses job at *El Hogar*. Publicly supports the Allies in World War II, and will condemn Nazism and its many sympathizers amongst Argentine nationalists throughout the conflict. Joins *Unión Democrática*, a coalition of Radicals, socialists and communists opposing the pro-Axis nationalists.

1940

Begins collaboration with Adolfo Bioy Casares, which will produce stories, film scripts and translations over the years. They compile, together with Silvina Ocampo, an *Anthology of Fantasy Literature* and an *Anthology of Argentine Poetry*. Begins contributing regularly to *Sur*, where he will first publish many of his famous texts.
Chronology

1941 The Garden of Forking Paths (fiction).
1942 Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi (detective stories), with Bioy Casares under common pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq.
1943 Poemas (1922–43). First edition of his collected poems, but the three collections of the 1920s considerably revised, a process continued until tenth edition in 1978. Military coup by nationalistic officers sympathetic to Mussolini, including Colonel Juan Domingo Perón.
1944 Fictions (Ficciones), consisting of The Garden of Forking Paths (above), and Artifices, comprising six new stories.
1946 Perón elected president of Argentina. Borges resigns post as library assistant when offered dubious promotion by Peronist authorities. Becomes an implacable opponent of the Peronist regime. Earns living by giving lectures on literature. Editor of Los Anales de Buenos Aires but resigns in 1947.
1948 Mother and sister arrested and latter briefly imprisoned for demonstrating against Perón.
1949 The Aleph (fiction).
1950 Elected president of SADE, the Society of Argentine Writers, a focus of opposition to Perón.
1951 French edition of Fictions, first book to be translated into a foreign language.
1952 Other Inquisitions (essays). Death of Perón’s wife, Eva. SADE closed down after Borges refuses to comply with official mourning decreed by Peronist authorities. In Paris, Roger Caillois publishes Labyrinthes, an anthology.
1954 Accident damages his congenitally weak eyesight and can no longer read or write.
1955 Perón overthrown in a military coup and goes into exile. Borges strongly supports the new junta in its campaign to root out Peronism from public life. Appointed Director of the National Library. Elected to the Argentine Academy of Letters. Jean-Paul Sartre publishes eight essays by Borges in Les Temps modernes. La biblioteca di Babele, a collection of his ficciones, appears in Italian.
1956 Appointed to a professorship of English and American Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. Receives
honorary doctorate from the University of Cuyo, Mendoza, the first of many. Awarded the National Prize for Literature.  


1960 The Maker (El hacedor) (prose and poems).  

1961 Awarded International Publishers’ Prize, jointly with Samuel Beckett.  


1963 First lecture tour of Britain.  

1964 Obra poética 1923–64 (new title for collected poems). Includes new poems in a section called The Self and the Other (El otro el mismo), later published as separate volume in 1969.  

1965 For Six Strings (lyrics for milongas).  


1970 Legal separation from Elsa Astete.  


1972 The Gold of the Tigers (poems).  

1973–74 Resigns as Director of National Library after a Peronist wins the presidency. Borges calls those who voted for him ‘six million idiots’. In September Perón himself elected president but dies in office in July 1974 and succeeded by wife, María Estela. Guerrillas escalate violence in face of counter-terror by death squads.  


1975 The Book of Sand (fiction). The Unending Rose (La rosa profunda) (poems). Mother dies at the age of 99. Returns to Geneva for the first time since 1923, and visits frequently thereafter.
1976 The Iron Coin (poems). María Estela Perón’s government overthrown by military coup. Borges makes controversial statements in the media supporting the new Argentine junta as well as General Pinochet in Chile. Armed forces pursue a ‘Dirty War’ against the guerrillas through torture and ‘disappearances’ of opponents.

1977 The History of the Night (poems). New Stories by Bustos Domecq (fiction), with Biyo Casares.

1977–78 Borges criticizes Argentine military junta for nationalistic sabre-rattling against Chile over islands in the Beagle Channel.

1979 Borges oral (lectures given at the Universidad de Belgrano). Dispute with sister and a nephew over joint bank account. María Kodama named his sole heir in new will.

1980 Seven Nights (lectures at Teatro Coliseo, Buenos Aires). ‘Shakespeare’s Memory’ (story) published in Clarín newspaper; subsequently the title story of a collection incorporated in Obras Completas, 1989. Supports ‘Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo’ and calls on junta to provide information on the ‘disappeared’.

1981 The Limit (La cifra) (poems).

1982 Nine Dantesque Essays on Dante (five previously published in 1948, one in 1951). Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands/Malvinas. Publishes poems regretting the ensuing war with Britain. Calls himself a pacifist and an ‘inoffensive anarchist’.

1982–83 Fall of military junta. Denounces torture and ‘disappearances’. Calls for investigation into crimes by both sides during the “Dirty War” and for punishment of military officers. Writes the poem ‘Los conjurados’ (‘The Confederates’), praising Swiss Confederation for enabling citizens to ‘forget their differences and accentuate their affinities’, and claiming Geneva as ‘one of my patrias’.


1984 Atlas (travel pieces), with María Kodama.

1985 Los Conjurados (The Confederates), (poems and prose). In September diagnosed with cancer. In November secretly leaves Buenos Aires with María Kodama.
Chronology

1986
Receives medical treatment in Geneva. Dispute with nephews and housekeeper over property and remuneration, respectively. In April marries María Kodama in Geneva, after obtaining divorce from Elsa Astete and marriage license by proxy in Paraguay, as divorce illegal in Argentina. Dies June 14. Buried in the Plainpalais cemetery in Geneva.
Abbreviations

Authors and works are abbreviated following the practice of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edition, ed. S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth and E. Eidinow (Oxford 2012), and journals according to that of *L’Année philologique*. The following abbreviations are offered for the convenience of the reader.


