

The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986

Jorge Luis Borges

translated from the Spanish

Penguin 1999

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2006 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

The Total Library contains some hundred and fifty of Jorge Luis Borges' non-fiction pieces, most of them literary criticism of one form or another — prologues, book reviews, biographies, and critical essays — ranging across language, writing, philosophy, poetry, politics, religion, translation, and more. These are grouped in seven roughly chronological sections, ranging from some early (disowned) juvenilia to pieces written in the year of his death.

Many of the pieces are less than a page in length. The three longest pieces, each over fifteen pages, are "A New Refutation of Time", "A History of Eternity" (on Plotinus, Augustine and Irenaeus) and a history of translations (and translators) of the *Arabian Nights*. There are some thematic clusters, notably a number of political pieces written before and during World War II, where Borges' Anglophilia and realisation of the evils of Nazism seem almost prescient, and a group of essays on Dante. Some outliers include film reviews, notes on the Argentinean character, and a history of the tango.

Borges writes about a vast range of people: Edward Gibbon, Paul Valéry, Lord Dunsany, Layamon, G.K. Chesterton, Emanuel Swedenborg, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Friedrich Nietzsche, and scores more. I found something new even in the very brief capsule biographies of well-known figures.

These translations convey something of Borges' skill with language, which is used in the service of exposition and insight, not just in well-turned phrases and clever conceits. And his fearsome erudition is never used to intimidate. As Weinberger's brief introductory note explains, Borges wrote hundreds of articles for the women's magazine *El Hogar*, and his approach to even esoteric subjects is accessible, with no reliance on theory.

The Total Library is an entrancing collection, which fans of Borges' short stories shouldn't pass over: with Borges, fiction and non-fiction seem remarkably close. I found the most natural way to approach it was by semi-random sampling over a period of several months, with the result that I have certainly read some pieces twice, I may have read some three or more times, and I may have missed some completely. Which makes *The Total Library* a kind of infinite library. It is a volume I will want to return to, chock-full of memorable ideas, so the inclusion of a full index is invaluable.

Note: this collection is published in the United States as *Selected Non-Fictions*.

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