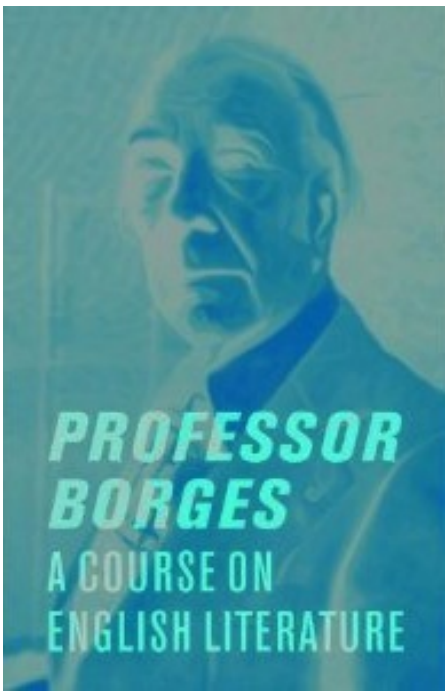

Professor Borges: A Course on English Literature

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In English at last, Borges's erudite and entertaining lectures on English literature from Beowulf to Oscar Wilde

Writing for *Harper's Magazine*, Edgardo Krebs describes *Professor Borges*: "A compilation of the twenty-five lectures Borges gave in 1966 at the University of Buenos Aires, where he taught English literature. Starting with the Vikings' kennings and Beowulf and ending with Stevenson and Oscar Wilde, the book traverses a landscape of 'precursors,' cross-cultural borrowings, and genres of expression, all connected by Borges into a vast interpretive web. This is the most surprising and useful of Borges's works to have appeared posthumously."

Borges takes us on a startling, idiosyncratic, fresh, and highly opinionated tour of English literature, weaving together countless cultural traditions of the last three thousand years. Borges's lectures — delivered extempore by a man of extraordinary erudition — bring the canon to remarkably vivid life. Now translated into English for the first time, these lectures are accompanied by extensive and informative notes by the Borges scholars Martín Arias and Martín Hadis.

Professor Borges: A Course on English Literature Details

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From Reader Review Professor Borges: A Course on English Literature for online ebook

Christian says

Este libro compila las clases que dio Borges en la UBA sobre literatura inglesa. Son, básicamente, las desgrabaciones, con abundantes notas complementarias. Una joya. Borges, en vez de tratar de cubrir todas las tendencias y los autores, se concentra en sus favoritos, en los que mejor conoce, en los autores (y en los textos específicos) que lo apasionan, o sea: literatura anglosajona medieval, Browning, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Stevenson, Blake. Todo es fascinante (nunca entendí esa fama de complicado que tiene Borges). Eso sí, algunos autores y secciones del libro son más interesantes que otras (contrariamente a lo que pensé, cuanto más antiguo lo que Borges reseña, más accesible lo hace). Lástima que el libro esté virtualmente agotado (aunque se puede leer, cuesta arriba, una versión online, en un formato horrendo). Ojalá lo reediten, porque esto está a la altura de los mejores ensayos de Borges, aunque tiene una perspectiva distinta (es, al fin y al cabo, una clase).

Philipp says

A Borges bootleg! Transcripts of recordings of a few lectures on English literature Borges gave in the 1960s in Buenos Aires, before he was internationally famous, which is why the recordings of these lectures don't exist anymore.

Interestingly, it's very conversational in tone, there's very little university related talking going on (of course, there is a possibility that the editors cut this) - Borges talks only once about tests, never again about anything but Anglo-Saxon/English literature; he seems to be more concerned about recommending books students should read instead of drilling tidbits of knowledge into them for tests. That's another amazing thing about these lectures; Borges was already mostly blind, everything he quotes (for some reason in Spanish) is from memory, all years and all facts are from his head, which is why he so often gets students to read longer poems to the class for him.

But, if you're looking for Borges as a builder of mysterious worlds, you won't find him here; these are introductory lectures, there's very little interpretation, more often than not Borges is more concerned with how fun the story is and how beautiful the language sounds than he bothers with explaining, as an example, the political background of why a certain writer wrote this poem.

Sometimes it's strange in that he gets a student to read a poem in English, then summarizes the story in the middle of the poem (remember, the students are young and probably didn't know much English yet), then lets the student read the rest of the poem, and at that point you would have expected Borges to talk some more about what they just read, focus on single elements and interpret them, but he just has the student read the next poem. Another curious thing is the choice of authors by Borges - there's only a single page on Shakespeare, but an entire lecture on Stevenson.

Recommended for: People who are looking for an introduction to English literature, or those who need more books on their to-read shelf

Not recommended for: People who want to see a blind man construct a library containing every possible

book

Al Bità says

During the period 14 October–14 December 1966 inclusive, the Professor of English Literature at the University of Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges, gave a series of 25 lectures on English Literature to a small group of students. Borges was blind by this time, so the lectures were purely oral. The lectures were taped, and quick transcriptions made by the students for their study, and for those students not able to attend. The tapes are no longer extant, but the transcriptions have been recovered, and they are presented here for our information and edification.

The editors are to be commended for their work in bringing these lectures to the English-speaking world: they have tried to minimise any possible editorial interference, and present the work in such a way that the reader can easily imagine being physically present at the lectures. Borges' idiosyncratic phrases, personal commentaries and often startling cross-references are presented with minimal editorialising, thus giving the words the kind of immediacy one would normally experience in a live lecture. To this end, the work of the translator from the Spanish (Katherine Silver) in maintaining this aura is also to be commended.

English literature begins once the western Roman Empire collapsed in the 5th-c CE, and the Anglo-Saxon Old English begins to flourish. Borges is concerned to emphasise the early Germanic influences in this literature, feeling that this aspect of the language, which he considers to be a major thread, tends to be forgotten. Essentially he begins with *Beowulf*, and then examines several other related themes — and he is off on his take of what he loves about English literature.

Often centuries are skipped and then specific authors and works are selected to which Borges is partial. In his own way, he links these works together, and in the process, urges his students to engage with these writings and fall as much in love with them as he is. The ride is fast, exciting, and covers subjects more often covered in the more esoteric areas of the discipline but without becoming too difficult for an ordinary reader. The course finishes with his comments regarding works of Robert Louis Stevenson.

I can't help but feel that this is a rare, special treat, resurrected from the thoughts and feelings of an Argentinian aficionado of English literature with a passionate love of his subject, which would otherwise have been lost forever. In that sense it becomes a unique kind of specialised treasure that all readers of English Literature will relish.

Michael Hingston says

"Borges is happy to follow his nose, canon be damned. Who else would give 19th-century poet and textile designer William Morris (three full lectures) more space than Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare (zero, zero and zero, respectively) combined?"

I got to review this for the Globe and Mail a couple weeks back. Read the whole thing here: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/b...

Zachary Littrell says

We should all be lucky enough to be loved by someone -- as much as that old, blind Argentinian loved English literature. I feel pretty darn jealous of Borges's students at the University of Buenos Aires (while also feeling a little bit of pity for them, too), because he was clearly a wonderful, enthusiastic, funny, and frustrating professor.

It sure doesn't resemble any literature survey I've sat through, and that's probably for the best. Borges gleefully chucks canon to curb and walks his class through a very idiosyncratic collection of writers. I had never even heard of Dante Rossetti before, but I painfully wish I was in the classroom that day while Borges rattled off Rossetti's sad life from memory and then sang him praises. Full of bias and affection for these writers, you feel like every obscure line of poetry that Borges recites must be the most important line in history.

Admittedly, Borges can be a little...circuitous. He's the living embodiment of the phrase "He's forgotten more than I'll ever know." Consequently, he'll rattle off fact after fact (most of them even true!), and it can be hard to see how it all connects. He interrupts his discussion of Samuel Taylor Coleridge to explain the plot of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and I still haven't the foggiest what on earth was the point of all that. But, it's hard to be mad at Borges, as he chuckles at his own digressions and mistakes, and carefully shepherds his students on to the next fascinating class.

(Small note: the translation is mostly brilliant and flawlessly captures Borges's voice. But the translator keeps using the word 'pathetic' in the sense of compassion or sympathy, and that is really jarring given its negative connotation. It took me a while to realize Borges wasn't ragging on every book each time he called it pathetic)

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aconeyisland says

Coleridge 1/ conferenze Le conversazioni di Coleridge erano molto curiose. Dice De Quincey, che fu suo discepolo e grande ammiratore, che ogni volta che Coleridge conversava era come se tracciasse un circolo nell'aria. Ovvero, si allontanava dal tema iniziale e poi vi ritornava, ma molto lentamente. La conversazione di Coleridge poteva durare due o tre ore. Alla fine si scopriva che, descrivendo un circolo, era tornato al punto di partenza. Ma generalmente gli interlocutori se n'erano già andati. Di modo che l'impressione che ne traevano era di una serie di digressioni inspiegabili.
I suoi amici pensarono che uno sbocco adeguato per la genialità di Coleridge potesse essere tenere delle conferenze. Effettivamente, non appena veniva annunciato un ciclo di conferenze, molta gente vi si iscriveva, ma di solito quando arrivava la data prevista Coleridge non si faceva vedere, e quando arrivava parlava di qualsiasi cosa meno dell'argomento promesso. In certe occasioni parlò anche del tema della conferenza, ma queste occasioni furono molto poche. / p.158

Coleridge 2/ delicatezza Coleridge si sposò piuttosto giovane. Si racconta che frequentava una casa in cui vivevano tre sorelle. Lui era innamorato della seconda, ma a sentire quel che disse a De Quincey, pensò che se la seconda si fosse sposata prima della maggiore avrebbe ferito l'orgoglio della sorella. Allora, per delicatezza, si sposò con la maggiore, della quale non era innamorato. Non sorprende troppo che questo matrimonio sia stato un fallimento. Coleridge si disinteressò della moglie e dei figli, e andò a vivere a casa

dei suoi amici, che si sentivano onorati delle sue visite. All'inizio si supponeva che la visita sarebbe durata una settimana, ma poi durava mesi, e a volte arrivava a durare anni. Coleridge accettava questa ospitalità con... non possiamo dire ingratitudine, ma con una certa indifferenza sì, distrattamente, perché Coleridge è stato anche l'uomo più distratto che sia mai esistito. / p.158

Coleridge 3/ il mare Coleridge fece un viaggio in Germania, e si rese conto che non aveva mai visto il mare, nonostante lo avesse descritto in modo ammirevole, indimenticabile, nel suo poema *The Ancient Mariner*. Ma il mare non gli fece alcuna impressione. Il mare della sua immaginazione era molto più vasto del mare reale. Un'altra peculiarità di Coleridge era quella di annunciare opere ambiziose: *Storia della filosofia*, *Storia della letteratura inglese*, *Storia della letteratura tedesca*. Scriveva ai suoi amici - che sapevano benissimo che stava mentendo, e lui sapeva che loro sapevano - che la tal opera era a buon punto. E invece non aveva scritto nemmeno una riga. / p.159

Morris e Rossetti / parenti improbabili Credo che oggi un viaggio in Islanda non sia nulla di eroico, poiché è uno dei paesi toccati dal turismo. Ma allora non era così, e Morris dovette viaggiare a cavallo per le montagne. Morris faceva il tè con l'acqua dei geyser, dei getti di acqua termale che scaturiscono dal suolo. Morris visitò il luogo in cui si era rifugiato il profugo Grettir e tutti i luoghi celebrati nelle saghe storiche islandesi. Morris tradusse anche il *Beowulf*, e Andrew Lang scrisse che la traduzione meritava l'attenzione del lettore, poiché usava un inglese leggermente più arcaico dell'anglosassone dell'VIII secolo. Morris ha scritto un poema, *Sigurd the Volsung*, nel quale riprende il tema della *Völsunga Saga*, che anche Wagner riprenderà per comporre *L'anello dei Nibelunghi*.
Rossetti, a cui non interessavano affatto i temi germanici e scandinavi, diceva che non poteva interessarsi alla storia di un uomo che è fratello di un drago, e si rifiutò di leggere il libro. Questo non impedì a Morris di continuare a essere suo amico. / p.279

Tyler Jones says

Borges was the best kind of professor; one that cared less about imparting specific bits of knowledge than he did about sparking passion. He clearly loved English literature, and his excitement is infectious. I love this book.

John Pistelli says

This recent volume (published by New Directions, translated by Katherine Silver, and edited and annotated by Martín Hadis and Martín Arias) is derived from student recordings and transcriptions of a lecture course on the history of English literature that Borges gave in 1966 at the University of Buenos Aires (where he had been hired on the strength of his literary reputation, despite not having an advanced degree, about a decade earlier). Irrespective of the Borgesian contents, it is a good book all around—attractively designed, durably bound, and possessed of an excellent scholarly apparatus.

As for Borges's actual course: if you've read any other review of this book, you already know of the Argentine writer's eccentric choice of texts. The first seven (of 25) classes are devoted to the Anglo-Saxon period, encompassing such texts as *Beowulf*, "The Wanderer," *The Battle of Maldon*, and others. Then Borges leaps forward hundreds of years—over Chaucer, Marlowe, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton—to arrive at the eighteenth century, where he focuses for several classes on Samuel Johnson before

beginning the Romantic movement with the semi-fraudulent *Wanderings of Ossian*; from there, he plots a more conventional course through Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Dickens, and Browning, before getting weird again as he devotes a mind-numbing number of pages to the inspection (or sometimes just recitation) of some (to my mind) minor verse by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris. Finally, he concludes with a long, lovely appreciation of Stevenson, including asides on Wilde and Chesterton.

There is a method to this madness, though. A critical commonplace about Borges is that he was torn between his cosmopolitan modernist vision (associated with his fiction's emphasis on the infinitude of literature) and his longings toward masculine violence and the raw authentic gaucho life of the Pampas. I would ague that Borges here projects this inner conflict onto English literature: he begins with England's own primal scene—the masculine contest of competing ethnicities (Angle, Saxon, Jute, Dane, Celt, Geat, etc.) and ideologies (pagan vs. Christian) over the island after the fall of Rome. Borges indulges his taste for this literature of the violent frontier in examining these texts, but he does not go in for fantasies of primordial authenticity: for instance, he is at pains to emphasize the learned quality of *Beowulf*, its Virgilian Latinity.

By rushing forth from the Anglo-Saxon period to the Age of Reason, Borges positions Johnson, with his melancholy and chastened Christian wisdom in competition with his combative nationalism, as the fulcrum of his canon (though why Shakespeare, who haunts the book, could not have played that role is unclear). After Johnson comes Ossian and medievalism and the whole panoply of Romantic nationalism—in other words, the ideological hallucinations of the moderns over the pre-modern reality Borges has spent seven earlier classes meticulously describing in admiring but de-idealizing tones.

From the introduction of Johnson onward, Borges essentially charts the distance or proximity of each writer under his gaze to this Romantic nationalist mood of trying to recreate the putative wholeness or vitality of pre-industrial or pre-Norman (or even pre-Christian) English culture, which Borges has shown not have been much of a whole, to which lack it owed its vitality. And while he admires the quixotic efforts of a William Morris toward the resuscitation of a Teutonic sensibility to English letters, I think it is safe to say he admires more the advanced techniques of a Dickens, Browning, or Stevenson—seeing them as more in line with the advanced techniques of the Virgil-reading *Beowulf* bard.

Borges's lectures do not look terribly impressive—they consist of biography, context, and redescription of the text under discussion, with little in the way of twentieth-century hermeneutics—but taken as a whole, they may amount to an attempt to discredit the very idea of "culture" (in the sense of the organic expression of ethnic identity) in favor of "literature." What, to Borges, is literature? What is it if not the spontaneous effusion of blood and soil?

One theme throughout the course is the idea of inspiration: early on, Borges discusses the earliest English poem, Caedmon's hymn, a poem dictated to a monk in a vision. He traces this Caedmon theme, then, through the dream that led Coleridge to write "Kubla Khan" and the dream that led Stevenson to write *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Some of the best literature, in other words, descends upon the poet from well above the cultural realm—from some invisible world. After that, it is up to the poet's mastery of form to make literature of his vision.

These weighty themes just about make up for the course's oddness of design, but still, I want to quibble with what seem like arbitrary choices. I will even grant Borges his *donnée* of skipping most of the medieval period and the entire Renaissance, especially since Shakespeare is present throughout the book, like Banquo's ghost at Macbeth's feast. But why go on at such extraordinary length about Rossetti and Morris while hardly mentioning Tennyson, probably the best poet qua poet to go the medievalizing route? Why such neglect of the modern novel (only Dickens is treated at any length)? The absence of women writers is

perhaps to be expected given the author and the time of his formative years (there is an appreciative mention of Woolf and a neutral-to-patronizing one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning), and I grasp why a man of Borges's sensibility would have no interest in the kind of ethical realism perfected by Jane Austen or George Eliot; but does the fabulist who warns us of the demiurgic temptation have nothing whatever to say about the author of *Frankenstein*, and does the creator of a fantastical bestiary have no words for the poet of "Goblin Market"? And I would certainly have liked to hear more about Wilde (whom Borges once pronounced correct about everything).

Quibbles aside, this book is more complex than it looks, and would be fun to read—for Borges's asides on verse, on history, on his tastes, and on his life—even if it were not so complex. In an afterword, he inveighs against reading for obligation instead of pleasure (this is no doubt his apologia for not including so many of the expected authors), and *Professor Borges* can be read for pleasure without a doubt.

L.E. says

This book, its purpose, is like sticking one’s hand into a sack of various, intermixed seeds, seeds which are all related to each other somehow, even if the fist you pull back out does not contain all the variants in the sack. Now, you may choose to plant these seeds and further discover for yourself how the leaves or flowers or fruits of their offspring are similar and different in their ways, or you may decide you prefer to just look at the seeds every now and then, and so you lock them in a case and place them in a drawer somewhere.

What remains of anything Borges said in his classes are most basic glimpses of his knowledgeable working mind... but it is not everything. The wonderful thing about this book is that there are enough seeds here to fill a terrarium, an arboretum, or a forest, if one should choose to.

Robert Giambo says

Lectures from the 60's by Borges based on student transcripts, the topics covered by the lectures are quite quirky. An okay book. Read Borges short stories - those are five stars.

Theut says

Peccato non aver ascoltato quelle lezioni di persona: si vede la passione di Borges per la letturatura, il suo sconfinato amore per le lettere e la sua incredibile erudizione al servizio dell'insegnamento.

Graychin says

Available for the first time in English translation, *Professor Borges* collects a term's worth of lectures delivered by Jorge Luis Borges in 1966 on the history of English literature. It’s a remarkable book, I think, for two quite different reasons.

It's remarkable first of all in offering a survey of its subject that will be almost unrecognizable to most

students of English literature. Fully a quarter of the course is spent on the Anglo-Saxon era of *Beowulf* and Co. Almost no mention at all is made of Chaucer and, in fact, seven hundred years of literary history are glibly ignored when Borges leaps directly from the Norman invasion to Samuel Johnson. Milton and Shakespeare are mentioned only in passing. After a couple lectures each for Wordsworth and Coleridge, we're introduced to a long line of Victorians. Borges really spends a perverse amount of time on Thomas Carlyle, William Morris, Robert Browning, and (of all people) Dante Gabriel Rossetti. He concludes with Robert Louis Stevenson. Modernism he leaves tucked in the womb circa 1895.

Second, the book is remarkable because Borges's style of presentation is no less idiosyncratic than his selection of texts. But there's nothing to complain about here. It's a style born of unabashed personal enthusiasm. Literary theory goes out the window (and good riddance) or, rather, it doesn't so much go out the window as fail to obtain entrance to the room in the first place. Questions about the nature and function and politics of texts don't seem to interest Borges. Rather, stories interest him. The old, blind Argentine gets up in front of his students every day and he simply tells stories. He tells whole plots of numerous works. He quotes at length from memory. He tells about the authors' lives, their absurd notions, unpleasant habits, and frequent misfortunes. Again and again he digresses into alleyways that are sometimes more surprising and more scenic than the view from the broad highway.

The epilogue of *Professor Borges* excerpts an interview which neatly sums up Borges's personal philosophy of reading. "I believe that the phrase 'obligatory reading' is a contradiction in terms," he says. "Reading should not be obligatory. Should we ever speak of 'obligatory pleasure'? What for? Pleasure is not obligatory, pleasure is something we seek… If a book bores you, leave it; don't read it because it is famous, don't read it because it is modern, don't read a book because it is old. If a book is tedious to you, leave it, even if that book is *Paradise Lost* – which is not tedious to me – or *Don Quixote* – which also is not tedious to me. But if a book is tedious to you, don't read it; that book was not written for you. Reading should be a form of happiness…"

Never tedious itself, *Professor Borges* is unrecommendable as an introduction to English literature. It is, however, a wonderful introduction to Borges as a teacher, and it offers a fascinatingly oblique view of its subject for those who already have a more orthodox understanding of it.

Frederick Gault says

Unlike any English class I've ever taken! The depth of Borghes' knowledge is incredible, his interests all over the place and his love of the music in English poetry and prose was profound.

Jim says

I judge this work not as a scholarly treatise on English literature. Consider how it was put together: One or more students at the University of Buenos Aires taped the entire series of 25 lectures in 1966 and then transcribed the result for use as notes. The tapes themselves are now missing and were probably re-used, according to the editors, for other classes.

This was not intended to be a detailed survey of English literature: Jorge Luis Borges devotes seven lectures

to Anglo-Saxon literature, and then skips forward to the 18th century and Dr. Samuel Johnson (leaving out Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Pope, and a few hundred other major figures), followed in quick order by the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite poets, with a quick detour on Charles Dickens. And the 20th century? Nope.

Of what value, then, is Professor Borges: A Course on English Literature? If you want a thorough survey of English literature, this is not the book for you. If, on the other hand, you want to look inside a great poet's mind to see what makes him tick, this is a fascinating volume.

Professor Borges is a much more useful book than the author's comparable An Introduction to American Literature, in which he shows no real understanding of an author such as William Faulkner:

> Faulkner's hallucinatory tendencies are not unworthy of Shakespeare, but one fundamental reproach must be made of him. It may be said that Faulkner believes his labyrinthine world requires a no less labyrinthine technique. Except in *Sanctuary* (1931) his story, always a frightful one, is never told to us directly; we must decipher it and deduce it through tortuous, inward monologues, just as we do in the difficult final chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

But then many of my friends feel the same way about Faulkner, and I suspect that Borges has difficulties with the combination of Southern dialect and the King James Bible.

Please excuse the digression. It is a fact that many of my favorite poets and novelists despise other of my favorite poets and novelists. If they didn't, they wouldn't be who they are: They would be me.

Bill Bangham says

Worth the read for insights into the workings of a great mind. Beyond that, a delight for anyone enamored with English literature and writing in general.
