Algebra and Fire

‘A mixture of algebra and fire’
is how Borges described poetry, I’m told.
I have to wonder what he meant.
Now fire as metaphor isn’t so rare—in fact, it’s almost trite. But ‘trite’
doesn’t spring to mind
as adjective for Jorge Luis.
So ‘algebra’ must be
the spice in that combine.
He didn’t say ‘mathematics and fire’
or ‘geometry and fire’
as he might have done.
‘Mathematics’, perhaps, is too generic
and ‘geometry’, what?
too visual—too real—
for the magical, fantastic
fabrics that he wove?
But algebra for him, I suppose,
was clean, precise, abstract
unpredictable yet inevitable—
square root of minus 1?!
Imagine that! Fantastic!
For Borges, though, algebra alone
wasn’t poetry.
Perhaps he felt, like Tagore
that it needed some handle—
something to buffer
its keen, cutting edge.
Which to me, an algebraist
seems strange.
Algebra permits—requires—
devil-may-care flights of fancy.
The interplay of structures—
some ‘seen’, most only imagined—
has its own inner rhythm and form.
To work with another, to offer an idea
mold it together, can be a dance of joy—to joy—a ballet.
No other fire need be in play.

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