

**SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE  
DISTINGUISHED LECTURE SERIES**

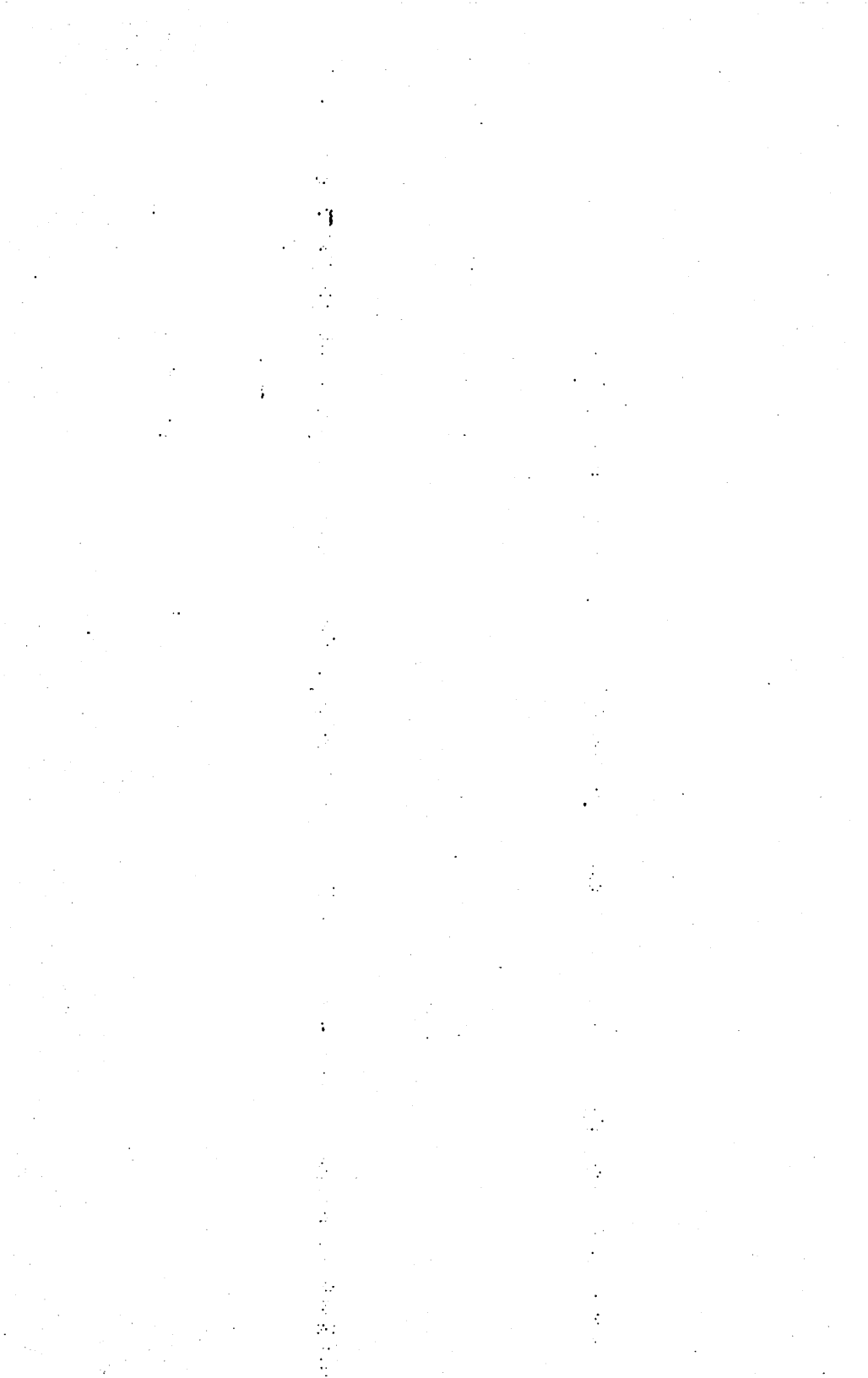
**Selected Texts**

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On Borges' Death:  
Some Reflections

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**ISSUES 3-4  
FALL 1987**

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## ON BORGES' DEATH: SOME REFLECTIONS

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On June 14th of last year, at about 4:30 in the afternoon, I was working on a long essay on Borges for the Charles Scribner *Latin American Encyclopedia* in my home in Sarria, Barcelona, where I spent this past year teaching at the Universidad Autónoma. The telephone rang. It was María Kodama. Her voice sounded faint but firm: "It's over. Borges is dead." I thought of a dozen replies, but none reached my mouth. I mumbled a few broken sentences, trivia, but I couldn't bring myself to ask her about funeral or burial arrangements. Borges was too much of a living presence to be thought of as a dead body. Besides, how do you go about sending into the grave a man whose *life* had been a figment of his own literature, the letter of his own spirit? I hung up more confused than disturbed. One of those situations in which you don't know what it is that events expect from you, how you fit into the scheme of things. And then, of course, the regrets for not having found out the technical details about his burial. While I was pondering these and other questions, I found myself calling the Sants Railroad Station in Barcelona to get information about the first train leaving for Geneva. There was one at 7:00 p.m. that Saturday. I had barely two hours to pack a few clothes and head for the Station. By 7:15 I was installed in my couchette on my way to Geneva. Induced by the drumming of the train wheels rolling on the tracks, I let my mind wander.

I had been with Borges only three weeks earlier. I knew he was in Geneva because María Kodama had sent me a New Year card to Boston then forwarded to Barcelona, and which I finally received by the end of January. I answered her and eventually we established telephone communication, but it was not until May 24th when we agreed on the timeliness of my visit. That Saturday I was returning to Barcelona from Mannheim and made a stop in Geneva. By 10:30 in the morning I was in the Hotel L'Arbalète, located in a very quiet corner of Geneva, knocking at the door of Borges' room. María opened. Borges was sitting on a chair, meticulously dressed, tie and suit, facing the door. I sat next to him, very close to his right side. His voice sounded husky and punctured with muffled blanks. It was very hard to follow his speech. At times, he had to repeat the same sentence a couple of times before I was able to understand. More disquieting still was the shape his head had taken. Last time I had seen Borges was at Dickinson College in April of 1983. During the sessions of that Symposium, he appeared lively and energetic, vigor-

ous and tireless. The Borges I was sitting next to in Geneva, three years later, was a shadow of the other, a physical ruin. His head was deformed, as if the frontal bone had grown beyond proportion and was threatening to tear the skin through. It was not so much the ravages of time as the onslaught of disease, as if his mind kept growing while his body decayed. Publicly, Borges was suffering from a pulmonary emphysema. The cancer of the liver that eventually killed him was a secret known only to himself, his doctor, and María Kodama. Borges and María left Buenos Aires in November of 1985 after a biopsy revealed the terminal nature of his illness. They spent a short period in Italy and then settled in Geneva. When I visited them, three weeks before the final collapse, María told me that Borges was adamant about not returning to Argentina. Friends and relatives were pressing for his return, and María became the target of slanderous accusations. Borges' answer was his marriage by proxy in Paraguay to María Kodama.

After greeting him — I had met Borges for the first time back in 1968, in Norman, Oklahoma —, he received me kindly and with a warning: "No politics, please." "Borges," I replied, "I came to see you and wish you well." From then on the conversation was smooth, and at times intimate. Of that exchange, I only have the records of my memory, somewhat eroded by the moving circumstances of the encounter. I remember isolated phrases: "Argentine history is a work of fiction, that is, the official version of it." "The military have turned the country into a financial private business." "I am not loved in Argentina." "My nephews have robbed me and my friends have forsaken me." Then he added some details about his break with his closest friend and collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares, about his refusal to return to Argentina, about the French edition of his complete works in the series "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade" of Gallimard (Cervantes and García Lorca being the only two Spanish authors included in that series). We reminisced about previous encounters in Oklahoma, San Diego, Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, Maine, Chicago, Pennsylvania, and Harvard, where he received an honorary degree in 1981. It was a rambling conversation, digressing from personal comments into literary matters, from food into the ways of the Swiss. But then, that has always been Borges' favorite way of chatting: going wherever the branching and winding corridors of his formidable memory would take him.

By noontime, a nurse showed up to bathe him, help him with daily physical exercises, and feed him lunch. Since Borges needed an afternoon nap, María suggested we go out for lunch, and so we did. The Hotel was near the old city of Geneva, and as we strolled the meandering streets of that charming part of town, she showed me the exterior of a beautiful building nearby a magnificent church

and with a stone fountain in a corner. Its falling water was the only sound breaking the deep and ancient silence of the area. She said that she was about to sign a lease on one of the apartments in that building. They had been living in that comfortable Hotel since they arrived in Geneva close to six months ago, and they were eager to move to a homier place. She was very excited and filled with expectations about the move. Borges and María did move into that exquisite apartment, but only three days before his death.

We walked through town and headed to the John Calvin *collège* where Borges had attended school between 1914 and 1919 while his family was living in Geneva. In that yard where we were standing, and under those same arches and galleries, Borges spent a good chunk of his life learning Latin, German and French, and actually laying the foundations of his legendary erudition. "The city," he would say later of Geneva, "where I read all the great books, from Verlaine to Virgil."<sup>1</sup> Of those adolescent years, Borges wrote: "The first fall of 1914 I started school at the College of Geneva founded by John Calvin. It was a day school. In my class there were some forty of us; a good half were foreigners. The chief subject was Latin, and I soon found out that one could let other studies slide a bit as long as one's Latin was good . . . We lived in a flat on the southern, or old, side of town."<sup>2</sup> María and I were walking around that part of town, and she pointed to a new building on 17 Ferdinand Hodler Street that had been erected after the old one, where Borges and his family had lived, was demolished. But the memory of those years in Geneva, far from having been demolished by time or oblivion, was kept very much alive in Borges' mind and even grew to become the affectionate territory of a second country. In his "Autobiographical Essay," back in 1970, he wrote: "I still know Geneva far better than I know Buenos Aires, which is easily explained by the fact that in Geneva no two street corners are alike and one quickly learns the differences. Every day, I walked along that green and icy river, the Rhône, which runs through the very heart of the city, spanned by seven quite different-looking bridges."<sup>3</sup> Borges chose to die in Geneva. In his last book published — *Los conjurados* (*The Conjurors*), a 1985 collection of poems — he called Geneva one of his motherlands, and in its book-title composition he defines Switzerland as "a tower of reason and solid faith."<sup>4</sup> Borges came to Geneva searching for a country which, through the years, had become very much his own. Argentina, his own country — he felt — had been lost to him, and Switzerland offered him a peace he could not find in his native land.

Argentina was, for Borges, a handful of friends, a few national and family myths, the Spanish language, intimate corners and wistful streets of Buenos Aires. But Argentina was far more than that: a nation that since Perón in the 1940's went through a period of pro-

found changes in its social and political make-up. Borges refused to acknowledge and come to terms with those changes. Like Leopoldo Lugones in the 1920's, a leading Argentine writer who encouraged the military to intervene in the nation's political life and seize power by force so that the country could finally be run as an army barracks, so did Borges. He identified the generals with the fathers of Argentine Independence and believed that the military were "the only gentlemen left capable of saving the country." Those gentlemen are now behind bars, tried by civilian courts and sentenced by Argentine laws. Borges could not find solace, let alone national recognition, in that tormented and soul-searching country. So he came to die in the country of his adolescence, in that "tower of reason" where life is as private as its aloof citizens and runs as serenely as the Rhône waters. That environment was much closer to his intellectual constructs and labyrinthine artifices. Perhaps Borges was mistakenly born in Buenos Aires. He wanted to believe—as he wrote—that "the Argentine tradition is all of Western culture." "And I also believe," he added, "we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have."<sup>5</sup> He assumed that right and lived in a country that was very far from being European as if it were. History proved him wrong. Argentina is by its past and present, by its problems and dilemmas, an integral part of the Third World. Its future, as that of the rest of Latin America, has been mortgaged to American banks. Its present is still entangled in the hindrances of the past.

Of course I could not discuss this with Borges. I did not come to Geneva for that. Besides, I had no business doing that. I came to renew an old acquaintanceship and to pay homage to the artist. And there I was, with María, back from our stroll, standing by his side, taking photographs: Borges hugging María, clinging to her like a child, holding her as in a permanent farewell. The most vivid and moving impression of that last visit happened at the time of saying goodbye. Borges pressed my hand very hard, with a strength most unusual for him. For a person who has been so diffident, so distant and impersonal, this display of physical warmth and intimacy was an excess, or perhaps a tacit farewell, but I did not know it at the time.

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Although back in 1980, in a poem entitled "Cuál será del caminante fatigado . . .", he wrote: "In which one of the various cities will I die? In Geneva, where I received the revelation, not of Calvin, certainly, but that of Virgil and Tacitus?"<sup>6</sup> Borges had repeatedly stated that for him life was a burden and that he saw death as a welcome liberation. In a late interview, he said: "My existence is summed up by two illnesses: blindness and longevity," and in a prose poem of

1981 he explained: "What is longevity? It is the horror of being in a human body whose faculties are declining, it is a several decades long insomnia . . . It is not being able to ignore that I am condemned to wanting to sink in death without being able to sink in death, and therefore condemned to be and keep being."<sup>7</sup> In spite of this relentless call for death, most readers of Borges grew accustomed to his longevity, and to the assumption that if he had a mother who lived 99 years, and an aunt who was a hundred when she died, he was going to follow suit and become a centenarian.

In a 1978 interview he said again: "If I was told that I would be dying tonight, I think I would feel very happy."<sup>8</sup> And now he was dying. Was he happy? I don't know, and I don't think anybody will ever know, simply because death is the most sealed of all human unknowns. Borges died with the same resignation with which he lived. In his sonnet "Remorse," published back in 1976, he wrote: "I have committed the worst sin / That a man can commit. I have not been happy . . ."<sup>9</sup> Even during the peak of his literary success, in 1964, he wrote: "I shall not be happy. Perhaps it doesn't matter / . . . I am left only with the pleasure of being sad."<sup>10</sup> Between this first declaration about his unhappiness in 1964 up to the culmination of the motif in the sonnet "Remorse" of 1976, the topic lingers through this segment of his poetry written between those years. In a TV interview given to William Buckley in the 1970's, Borges said point blank: "I will welcome death, since I am very tired, since life has few pleasures left for me." His biggest pleasure was, of course, writing, and particularly writing poetry, but even the act of writing was viewed by him as a histrionic performance: "I like," he wrote memorably in "Borges and I", "hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee, and Stevenson's prose. The other one shares these preferences with me, but in a vain way that converts them into the attributes of an actor . . . I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges may contrive his literature and that literature justifies my existence."<sup>11</sup>

The act of writing appears here, if not as a duty, as something like a mission. In an earlier essay, I tried to show the epic overtones underlying his latest poetry.<sup>12</sup> There are two lines which encapsulate this perception. In one he says: "I am the one who amidst the night counts the syllables," and in the other he defines himself as "A man who weaves hendecasyllabics."<sup>13</sup> Poetry — and literature for the case — are thus understood not so much as means of expressing experience, but as crafted artifacts. I will elaborate on this before returning to Borges the man.

Speaking about his father's unfulfilled literary aspirations, Borges wrote in his "Autobiographical Essay": "From the time I was a boy,



when blindness came to my father, it was tacitly understood that I had to fulfill the literary destiny that circumstances had denied my father. This was something that was taken for granted. I was expected to be a writer."<sup>14</sup> In a later interview, he further commented on this assigned destiny:

I thought I had been born a writer, but now I see that this was not the case. Today I know for sure that this vocation was fostered in me by my father because he himself wanted to be a writer but fate lead him into a different direction: he became a lawyer and a psychology teacher . . . That is why I believe that this vocation of mine responds to a happy paternal *imposition*.

The son will carry out the frustrated aspirations of the father. But can literature—an endeavour intended to shape the inner perception of its creator—be passed over from father to son? Was the son's aspiration the same as the father's? And by carrying out the father's aspiration, isn't the son blocking his own? These questions sound futile, since we are dealing with a giant of modern letters, but they could shed some light on the subject of Borges' unhappiness as well as on the ultimate question of Borges' contribution to Hispanic and world literatures.

I recently ran across a psychology book in which I underlined the following remark: "Parents rob their children of their own identity when they demand that their children fulfill their own frustrated ambitions."<sup>15</sup> Even if the ambition was not "demanded" from or forced on Borges the child, it is clear, however, that the decision to become a writer was not Borges' own, but his father's. Furthermore, as "happy" as the decision was—in Borges' words—it was *imposed* upon him. I am not suggesting that Borges wrote just in order to please his father. In addition to sounding preposterous, that will be a gross oversimplification of a very complex problem. But I am trying to understand his notion of literature as "a syntactic fact" ("La literatura es fundamentalmente un hecho sintáctico"<sup>16</sup>), and his widely quoted belief that "unreality is the necessary condition of art,"<sup>17</sup> coupled with his acknowledgment of unhappiness. I am also trying to understand his unbending refusal to deal with reality.

In an early essay of 1939, Borges charted already the course that his fiction was eventually to follow: "Let us admit," he says, "what all idealists admit: the hallucinatory nature of the world. Let us do what no idealist has done: seek unrealities which confirm that nature. We shall find them, I believe, in the antinomies of Kant and the dialectic of Zeno."<sup>18</sup> Many of his short stories do precisely that: they present unrealities (a man who dreams a man and inserts him into reality, a library of unreadable books, a year contained in a

minute) in which the reader recognizes the conceptualizations of metaphysics and the hypostases of theology. Yet they are stories, plots in whose sets of events and interplays of characters a resemblance of life as we know it from daily living has been conveyed. But it is only a resemblance, since the typical Borgesian story aims not so much — like conventional fiction — at capturing “a slice of life” as at advancing an *argumentum theologicum* or *philosophus*.

This strategy evolved from the conviction that “the inventions of philosophy are no less fantastic than those of art,”<sup>19</sup> and from a definite abhorrence of literary realism often equated with the trite, with the predictable and even with the fastidious sides of life.<sup>20</sup> It also evolved from Borges' perception of his own life as lacking any drama worth recording or commenting on, at least for the purposes of fiction. As early as 1932 he wrote in the preface of his second most important volume of essays, *Discusión* (1932), this lapidary statement: “My life is devoid of life and death. From this poverty stems my laborious love for these minutiae.”<sup>21</sup> Many years later, in his “Autobiographical Essay” of 1970, he reiterated his loyalty to the planet Tlön, that is, to the world of books: “If I were asked to name the chief event of my life, I should say my Father's library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library.”<sup>22</sup>

His story “The House of Asterion” can be read, without overinterpreting it, as Borges' own metaphor. In it, the Minotaur *chooses* to stay in the labyrinth where he has been imprisoned: “One afternoon,” he confesses, “I did step into the street; if I returned before night, I did so because of the fear that faces of the common people inspired in me.”<sup>23</sup> Confronted with the chaos of the world, Asterion the Minotaur chooses the orderly space he has found in a human construction, Daedalus' labyrinth. Borges has made a similar choice: confronted with the chaos of the world, he has chosen the order of the library, the safety of a decipherable labyrinth. His books grew out of other books. He wrote fiction based on theologies and philosophies, literature founded in literature. He knew that the hard face of reality lurks in every corner of life, but he renounced the world because, he said, of its impenetrable nature. Instead, he anchored his writings in the order of the intellect, in the chartable waters of the library. What he wrote about Paul Valéry is applicable to himself: “In a century that adores idols of blood, earth, and passion, he always preferred the lucid pleasures of thought and the secret adventures of order.”<sup>24</sup> Any form of knowledge that challenged his skeptical understanding of the world met with his strong disapproval and even condemnation. In the same essay on Valéry, he wrote: “The meritorious mission that Valéry performed (and continues to perform) is that he proposed lucidity to men in a basely romantic age, in the melancholy age of . . . dialectical materialism, the age of the augurs of Freud's

doctrine and traffickers in *surréalisme* . . ."25 Borges indicts and harshly condemns literary movements (romanticism and surrealism) and forms of thought (Marxism and psychoanalysis) that deal not so much with sheer abstract reasoning (although *in* a highly abstract fashion) but with questions concerning life: distrust of and revolt against the abuses of rational order, class order, and ego order. Life as a subliminal realm, as chance, struggle or desire, seems to horrify him, and any effort addressed to exploring the depths of those waters has been met with resistance and frowns. Borges was an intellectual animal, a solipsist locked—like the Minotaur of his story—in a labyrinth of his own construction.

Because he saw writing as rewriting, and because he showed—in theory as well as in praxis—that “one literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read,”26 he fascinated structuralists as well as semioticians. Because he concluded in “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” that “Cervantes’ text and Menard’s (version) are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer,”27 he dazzled the followers of inter-textuality. When he wrote, back in 1953, that since Homer all metaphor had been recorded, to further add: “this does not mean, of course, that the number of metaphors has been exhausted; the ways of stating or hinting at the terms of a given metaphor are, in fact, endless,”28 he advanced a fundamental tenet in the theory of the Russian formalists, and prompted John Barth to write his by now famous essay “The Literature of Exhaustion.” Finally, because of his invisible and rigorous style, he became—as Carlos Fuentes put it—a sort of father figure of the contemporary Spanish American novel.

Yet his literary work is only the recasting of previous work. I recently unearthed an uncollected speech he gave back in 1945 to thank the Argentine Society of Writers for the Honorary Prize he was awarded as an apology for not having received the National Prize for Literature the year he published *Ficciones*. In that speech, he described the core of his creative laboratory. He said:

For many years, I believed I had been raised in a suburb of Buenos Aires. The truth is that I was raised in a garden, behind a long iron fence, and in a library of endless English books. The Palermo of the knife-fights and of the guitar was roaming (I am told) about the streetcorners, but those who peopled my mornings and brought enjoyable horror to my nights were R.L. Stevenson’s blind buccaneer, agonizing under the hoofs of the horses, and the traitor who abandoned his friend in the moon, and the time traveler who brought from the future a withered flower, and the genie

locked up in Solomon's jug for many centuries, and the Veiled Prophet from Khurasan who concealed his leprosy with a veil of white silk embossed with precious stones. Thirty years have gone by. The house where those fictions had been revealed to me was demolished. I have traveled through a number of European cities. I have forgotten thousands of pages and thousands of irreplaceable human faces, but I am inclined to think that, essentially, I have never stepped out from that library and from that garden. What I did since then, and what I will continue to do, is simply to weave and unweave stories derived from those early ones.<sup>29</sup>

In the poetry volume *The Gold of the Tigers* of 1972, he wrote an updated version of that early poetics. In the brief prose "The Four Cycles" he reviews four stories; one about a city sieged and defended by brave men (the Troy of the Homeric poems); another, the story of a return (Ulysses comes back to Ithaca); the third, a variation of the last, is about a search (Jason and the Golden Fleece, the thirty birds and the Simurg, Ahab and the whale, the heroes of James and Kafka); and the last one about a sacrifice of a god (Attis, Odin, Christ). Borges then concludes: "Four are the stories. During the time left to us we will continue telling them, transformed."<sup>30</sup>

I have shown elsewhere that his *modus operandi* is verifiable throughout most of his fiction. The narrative text becomes a reflecting mirror that either inverts or reverts a previous text.<sup>31</sup> Borges was not jesting when he posited the task of literature as that of rewriting old metaphors. What John Updike has said about Borges' essays is applicable to his fiction: "They are structured like mazes and, like mirrors, they reflect back and forth on one another . . . From his immense reading he has distilled a fervent narrowness. The same parables, the same quotations recur."<sup>32</sup>

Where does then Borges' originality lie? Does it amount—as John Barth has suggested—to his having written "original works of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature?"<sup>33</sup> I believe that it was Paul de Man who, more than any other critic, came closer to an answer. De Man dismisses the philosophical component of his fiction as the possible explanation for his originality. "Borges," he writes, "should be read with expectations closer to those one brings to Voltaire's *conte philosophique* than to the nineteenth-century novel." And then he adds: "He differs, however, from his eighteenth-century antecedents in that the subject of the stories is the creation of style itself . . . His stories are about the style in which they are written."<sup>34</sup>

Other critics have attested Borges' marriage not with the world of actual experience but with that of intellectual propositions. Alfred Kazin underscores the solipsistic nature of his writings. "Borges," he says, "has built his work, and I suspect his life itself, out of the same effort to make himself a home in his own mind . . . He certainly does not put us in close touch with his own country. His Argentina remains a place of dreams. Borges' mind is the realest thing in it."<sup>35</sup>

George Steiner, likewise, reminds us that "Borges is a curator at heart. He has built an *anti-world*, a perfect and coherent space in which his mind can conjure at will . . . His inventions move away from the active disarray of life."<sup>36</sup> And Patricia Merivale, who has compared Borges' work with Nabokov's, concludes with the following distinction: "While Nabokov usually dismisses his actors 'into thin air' and returns us to the real world, Borges takes the argument to its conclusion and perpetually reminds us that both, author and reader, 'are such stuff as dreams are made on'."<sup>37</sup> The conclusion is inescapable: Borges is a magician with words and a master of artifice. Such is Updike's stance: "Ironic and blasphemous as Borges' hidden message may seem," he writes, "the texture and method of his creations, though strictly inimitable, answer to a deep need in contemporary fiction — the need to confess the fact of artifice."<sup>38</sup>

Latin American writers such as García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Ernesto Sábato, Vargas Llosa and others have acknowledged their debt to Borges in terms of a language Spanish literature did not have before him. Julio Cortázar best summarized the extent of that debt: "The great lesson Borges taught us," he said, "was neither a lesson in themes nor in contents or techniques. It was a lesson in writing, an attitude. The attitude of a man who, when writing a sentence, has very carefully thought not which adjective to add, but which one to suppress. Later on he fell into the trap of using, in a displayful way, a single adjective in order to dazzle the reader, turning sometimes the effective device into a defect. But originally, Borges' attitude towards the written page was the attitude of a Mallarmé, of extreme rigor and precision."<sup>39</sup>

Did Borges know that his legacy was going to be exactness and rigor in language, that is, a code rather than a message, a style rather than substance, aesthetic artifacts cut off from the world of experience? He not only knew it, he was inflexible in defending that view. In a 1968 interview, he put it squarely: "The 'Parable of the Palace' is a parable about art existing in its own place, but not being given to deal with reality. As far as I can recall it, if the poem is perfect then there's no need for the palace. I mean if art is perfect, then the world is superfluous. Besides, I think that the poet can never cope with reality. So I think of art and nature, well, nature as the

world, as being two different worlds."<sup>40</sup> Alfred Kazin was right: the most real thing in Borges' work is his mind. And Borges knew it. Back in 1960, he closed his miscellaneous volume *Dreamtigers* with an epilogue in which he tersely confessed: "Few things have happened to me, and I have read a great many. Or rather, few things have happened to me more worth remembering than Schopenhauer's thought or the music of England's words."<sup>41</sup>

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When I arrived in Geneva at seven-thirty in the morning of June 15th, the day after Borges died, it was too early to look for María Kodama. I walked from the Railroad Station to the Hotel L'Arbalète at a slow pace. It was Sunday and the city was deserted. I eventually found an open coffee shop and had breakfast. Only then I crossed one of the seven bridges that span the Rhône and headed for the Hotel. María was up, but she was swarmed by journalists and photographers and flooded with telegrams and phone calls from all over. When I finally got to talk to her I learned that there was no date for the funeral. Arrangements were being made to bury him in Plainpalais, the cemetery reserved for the Swiss notables, but that was not an easy undertaking. When at last the Swiss authorities approved the burial in Plainpalais, the funeral was scheduled for Wednesday, June 18th. I had almost four days to kill in Geneva. Most of that time was spent with María, journalists and publishers. We formed a small circle of close friends determined to protect María from cameramen, photographers, and intruders. Since there was no family present, we became her family surrogate. In addition to María and myself, the other people in the group included Carmen Criado, an editor from Alianza and a good friend of Borges and María, Jean Pierre Vernet, a French scholar who worked closely with Borges in the preparation of "La Pléiade" French edition of his complete works for Gallimard, and Héctor Bianchiotti, an Argentine writer living in Paris and working for Gallimard. One day we went together to Plainpalais to help María choose the plot for Borges' grave. We were shown the few sites available in different areas of the small cemetery. María hesitated until she saw the last one under a mature and beautiful yew-tree, which in French is called *if*, and only a few yards from a very modest grave that turned out to be John Calvin's. The tree, evoking Kipling's famous poem (Borges was a loyal admirer of Kipling), the closeness to Calvin's shadow, and the soothing peacefulness of that particular corner made the decision for María. Two days later Borges was buried in that spot, where he rests now.

The day of the funeral lastly arrived. The religious services were conducted at the Saint Pierre Cathedral, a majestic church located in the highest and oldest part of town. There were two eulogies: one

delivered by a Catholic priest and the other by a Protestant minister. The press rapidly explained that this was so because Borges' mother was a staunch Catholic, whereas his paternal grandmother was Protestant. What the press failed to explain, though, was that Borges had been, throughout his life, a committed agnostic. Furthermore, the Catholic priest disclosed in his oration that he had assisted Borges the night before his death, heard his confession and granted him absolution. Borges' agnosticism surfaced as another piece of fiction.

I come now to the gist of my presentation. Borges' work is a prodigious artifice, an iridescent language, a self-contained form severed from historic reality. It was forged within the boundaries of that library he never, in his own words, ventured out of. The American poet John Ashbery has defined Borges' art as "the work of a metaphysical Fabergé," and in comparing him with Kafka, he added: "We read Kafka from something like necessity; we read Borges for enjoyment, our own indifference taking pleasure in the frightful but robust spectacle of a disinherited cosmos."<sup>42</sup> As Borges the man was being dispossessed of the world, the world was merciless in restating the terms of that old divorce, he so much believed in, between him, as the artist, and the world. With the exception of María Kodama—his old student and friend, his daughter figure and wife—, Borges died in the most absolute solitude. One may say that he chose to die that way, but then the choice was the result of a slow and gradual losing of the world. First, by confining himself into the walls of the Library. Then, he lost the Argentine people by siding with the torturers and assassins of his own nation. This led to the loss of his native country. Eventually, for very complicated reasons and due to bitter feuds, he also lost the remaining part of his family. Finally, he lost his best friends, for obscure and controversial motives. All this was somewhat reflected in his funeral. All of Borges' most important publishers were there: Diego Hidalgo from Alianza Editorial, Claude Gallimard, who escorted María, Franco María Ricci, for whom Borges directed the series "The Library of Babel." There were a couple of official delegations from Spain and Argentina, a few local academicians, a handful of Argentine residents, and dozens of journalists, photographers, and cameramen preying on the piece of news. The most visible presence was the total absence of family, of personal friends, and of fellow writers. Loneliness at its best.

John Updike closes his essay "The Author as Librarian" with the following rumination: "We move, with Borges, beyond psychology, beyond the human, and confront, in his work, the world atomized and vacant. Perhaps not since Lucretius has a poet so definitely felt men as incidents in space."<sup>43</sup> His funeral at the Saint Pierre Cathedral and his death in Geneva were metaphors for that solipsistic exis-

tence: Borges' residence was not the world in constant disarray, but the tidy chambers of the Library.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969* (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Los conjurados* (Madrid: Alianza Tres, 1985), p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by D.A. Yates & J.E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 184.

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *La cifra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981), p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> Borges, *La cifra*, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Joaquín Soler Serrano, *Escritores a fondo* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1986), p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "El remordimiento," in *La moneda de hierro* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1976), p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "1964," in *Obra Poética* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1966), p. 260.

<sup>11</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers* (Austin: University of Texas, 1964), p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> See my essay "Borges o el difícil oficio de la intimidad: reflexiones sobre su poesía más reciente," *Revista Iberoamericana* (julio-dic. de 1977), pp. 449-63.

<sup>13</sup> Borges, *La moneda de hierro*, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Willard Gaylin, *Rediscovering Love* (1986).

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Elementos de perceptiva," *Sur*, Año III, No. 7 (abril de 1933), pp. 158-61.

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "El milagro secreto," in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1956), p. 162.

<sup>18</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Avalares de la tortuga," in *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1964), p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Magias parciales del Quijote," in *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1960), p. 68.



<sup>20</sup> See Borges' review of José Bianco's *Las ratas* in which he refers sardonically to realism in the Argentine novel. Published in *Sur*, No. 111 (enero de 1944), p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> Borges, *Discusión*, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, tr. by Ruth L.C. Simms (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>27</sup> Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Historia de la eternidad* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1953), p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> See *Sur*, No. 129 (julio de 1945), pp. 120-21.

<sup>30</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *El oro de los tigres* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1972), p. 130.

<sup>31</sup> See my *Versiones, inversiones, reversiones; el espejo como modelo estructural del relato en los cuentos de Borges* (Madrid: Gredos, 1977).

<sup>32</sup> John Updike, "The Author As Librarian," on *Critical Essays on J.L. Borges*, ed. by Jaime Alazraki (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987), p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *Critical Essays . . .*, p. 87.

<sup>34</sup> Paul de Man, "A Modern Master," in *Critical Essays . . .*, p. 57.

<sup>35</sup> Alfred Kazin, "Meeting Borges," in *Critical Essays . . .*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>36</sup> George Steiner, "Tigers in the Mirror," in *Critical Essays . . .*, p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> Patricia Merivale, "The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges," in *Critical Essays . . .*, p. 151.

<sup>38</sup> John Updike, in *Critical Essays . . .*, p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> Ernesto González Bermejo, *Conversaciones con Cortázar* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 1978), p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 80.

<sup>41</sup> Borges, *Dreamtigers*, p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> John Ashbery, "A Game with Shifting Mirrors," in *Critical Essays . . .*, p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 76.