



What's in a name?

A Collection of Articles,
Reminiscences, Poetry and Prose
that Defines the Life of a Man,
Donald A. Yates



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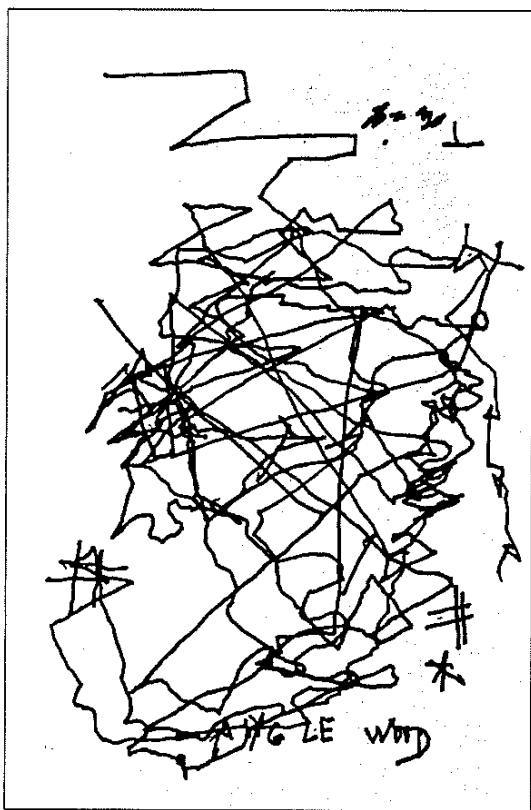
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For Don's family, friends and colleagues
with profound gratitude.



Don accompanied Borges to New York's Strand bookstore where Burt Britton asked Borges to draw a self-portrait. Published in Britton's book, *Self-Portrait: Book People Picture Themselves* (1976), the drawing has been posted on the internet numerous times, often upside down. His signature is at the top (it) with the characteristic cross he added after his name. Evidently Borges turned the paper several times while following his left-hand index finger with a pen in his right hand, perhaps confusing people as to the self-portrait's orientation. —Ed.

Borges, Portrait of an Unexpected Artist

Daniel Balderston



for Don, in fond memory

Borges was surrounded by visual artists: his sister Norah, his friends Silvio Ocampo and Xul Solar, the artists for whom he wrote prefaces for catalogues, Pedro Figari and Attilio Rossi, and the many artists who were his contemporaries including Spilimbergo, Butler, Castagnino and Berni. The magazines he wrote for or co-edited often had a visual component, and his books were often illustrated by eminent artists. In turn, many more recent artists have been inspired by Borges: he has done works that pay homage to him, including Sol LeWitt, Guillermo Kuitca and Mirta Kupfermich: on this see, for instance, the recent book by Jorge Gracia, *Paint Borges*, based on a traveling exhibition, which includes images by Kupfermich, Le Ferrari and some twenty others. This article is based on something else, though: an unexpected discovery, in the course of writing *How Borges Wrote*, which included looking at more than 180 manuscripts and numerous letters, and drawings by Borges, some of them startlingly good. A few of these had been published before they circulated on the web, but most of what I will describe here has never been collected before, and shows an unexpected, even moving, dimension of a writer whom most of us think of as an old blind man, but who from 1919 to 1955 not only wrote a great amount but also often drew.

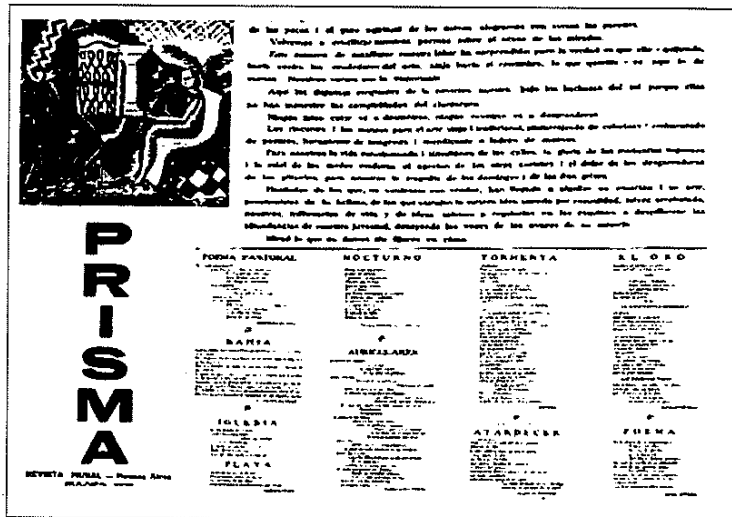
But first it is worth setting the stage a bit, by remembering the strong connections between poetry and the visual arts in the avant garde movements of the 1920s, including Ultraísmo, the movement with which Borges was closely associated from 1920 to 1922. The magazine *Ultra*, 24 issues of which were published in Madrid between January 1921 and March 1922, included covers by Norah Borges, the Polish artist Wladyslaw Jahl, and the Uruguayan painter Rafael Barradas. A c



er with a woodcut by Norah Borges is this one from the second issue (*Revista Ultra* no. 2).

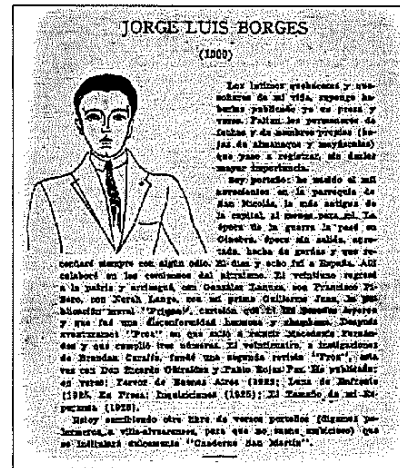
Ultra was printed on a large sheet that was then folded twice, and the resulting six pages (three on one side and three on the other) often included an interesting use of blank space, poetry and black and white drawings or woodcuts. The same design was used in various other avant garde magazines of the period that are in the Gómez de la Serna Collection at the University of Pittsburgh library.

Another magazine that mixed poetry and the visual arts was the "revista mural" *Prisma* (1921-1922), printed as a large poster to be glued onto walls in the street. Only two issues were printed, one of which looks like this:



The first series of *Proa* (1922) similarly mixed poetry and images:

The *Revista Martín Fierro* (1924-1927) also had a strong visual component, with many illustrations by Xul Solar. An image from the period is a sketch of Borges that accompanied a well-known (if less than truthful) biographical sketch of him in the *Exposición de la actual poesía argentina*, edited by Pedro-Juan Vignale and César Tiempo (1927):



The biographical sketch famc ly equivocates the birth year, putt 1900 instead of 1899, and he ta responsibility for the lie himself: "del novecientos," he says, express a desire to be modern at that po The drawing by Norah depicts



brother as a bit of a dandy, however, with the late Victorian and Edwardian connotations of that term.

In 1933-1934 Borges and Ulises Petit de Murat edited the *Revista Multicolor los Sábados*, a Saturday supplement to the mass-circulation daily newspaper *Crif* founded in 1913 by Natalio Botana. The first issue had a cover illustration by no than David Alfaro Siqueiros, who was in the River Plate area (in the company v the Uruguayan declamadora Blanca Luz Brum, who was responsible for recruit him to the Communist Party) and who did a mural for the estancia of Botana:

his fascinating writer wife, Salvadora Medina Onrubia. That mural has now been restored and is the centerpiece of the Museo de la Aduana just below the Casa Rosada in Buenos Aires. Siqueiros's cover for the first issue of the *Revista Multicolor* looks like this at right.

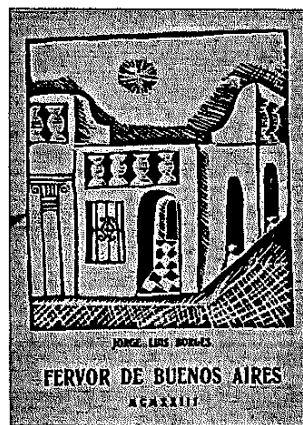


A typical page from the *Revista Multicolor* included full-color illustrations (an innovation at the time, thanks to the advances in photogravure). Here is the page that shows the original publication of Borges's story "El incivil maestro de ceremonias Kotsuké no Suké," later included in the 1935 collection *Historia universal de la infamia*.



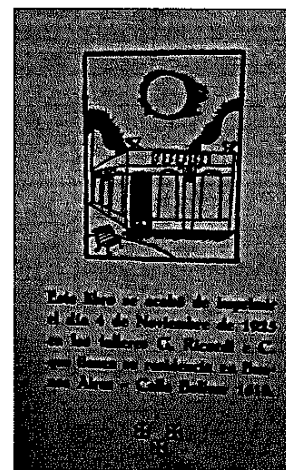
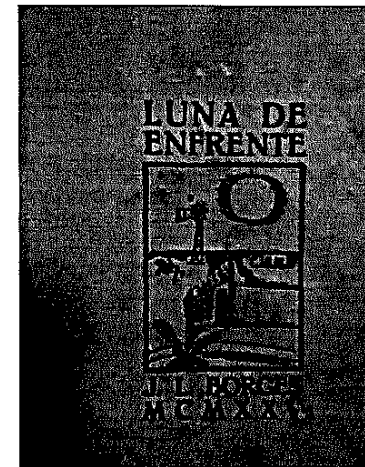
Finally, *Anales de Buenos Aires*, the magazine that Borges edited from 1946 to 1948, often included illustrations, some by his sister Norah and some by other important artists of the time, including Guillermo Butler and Juan Carlos Castagnino.

Norah Borges and Xul Solar were among the various artists who contributed covers and illustrations to Borges's books, including



Norah's cover for her brother's first book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* in 1923.

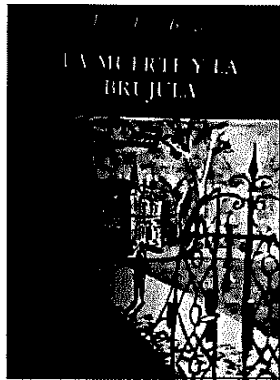
Borges's second book of poems, *Luna enfrente*, was in a much larger format, with gorgeous cover design by Norah and several illustrations by her:



Silvina Ocampo did a drawing of Borges for *Cuaderno San Martín* in 1929:



And what I think is the most beautiful cover of a Borges book is the F. Schonbach cover for *La muerte y la brújula*, a 1951 anthology of short stories from *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*.

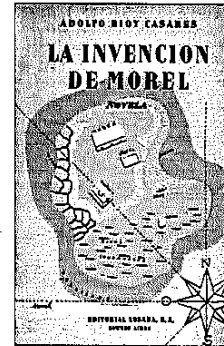


To shift gears a bit, Borges wrote two prefaces to artists' catalogues, one in 1927 for Pedro Figari and one in 1951 for Attilio Rossi. The Figari preface is particularly important. Several paragraphs of it were later included in the first preface to *Evaristo Carriego* (a reflection on the density of time in a rapidly changing place like Buenos Aires, as contrasted to the slower pace of places like Granada), but of particular interest is his formulation of a "new man" who is part of a transformation of society, an idea that strangely anticipates the formulation made famous by Ernesto "Che" Guevara several decades later. Borges writes:

...esta casa de América los hombres de las naciones del mundo se han conjurado para desaparecer en el hombre nuevo, que no es ninguno de nosotros aún y que precedimos argentino, para irnos acercando así a la esperanza. Es una conjuración de estilo no usado: pródiga aventura de estirpes, no para perdurar sino para que las ignoren al fin: sangres que buscan noche. El criollo es de los conjurados. El criollo que formó la entera nación, ha preferido ser uno de muchos, ahora. (11)

Similarly, his preface to Attilio Rossi (1909-1994), an Italian artist who spent many years in Buenos Aires and did drawings that were collected in *Buenos Aires en tinta china* (1951) celebrates the ways in which Rossi expresses his images of Buenos Aires. In both prefaces Borges claims to be ignorant of the visual arts, but this is his usual false modesty.

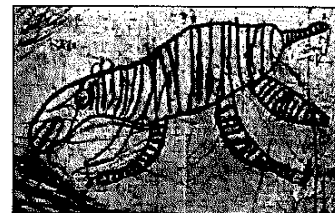
Another important factor to take into account is the fact that Norah Borges and Xul Solar were well known as book illustrators. Norah Borges designed the cover for the first edition of Adolfo Bioy Casares's 1940 novel *La invención de Morel*, a novel with a famous preface by her brother. She also illustrated several books by



Silvina Ocampo, including the books of poems *Amarillo celeste* (1972) and *Breve santoral* (1985). And to the right is a drawing by Norah of her future husband, Guillermo de Torre.

In this context, then, let's look at what can be reconstructed of Borges's secret career as an artist. The earliest drawings that are attributed to him are of tigers.

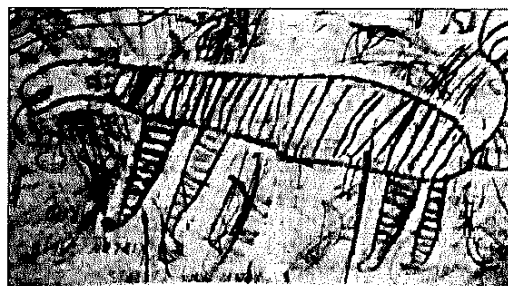
I am afraid that I am skeptical about this attribution. Not that I have any idea what Borges's drawings were like at age four or five, but if you look closely at these drawings,



they often have the word "Par" sometimes even "Rincón Pardo," which the name of the estancia in the south part of the province of Buenos Aires that belonged to Adolfo Bioy and Marta Casares,

the parents of Adolfo Bioy Casares. One of the drawings is published in Alan Pauls and Nicolás Helft's book *El factor Borges*, with the legend "Primer libro de lectura de Borges, regalo de su abuela inglesa Fanny" (38):





But if we turn upside down the child's handwriting that is under the tiger, it says pretty clearly, Adolfo

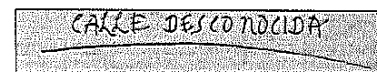


Bioy Casares. Since Borges and Bioy didn't meet until the early 1930s, it seems to me much more likely that the various tigers are by young Bioy than by young Borges.

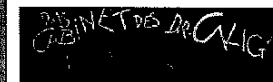
What I take to be the first authentic drawing by Borges the artist is in a 1919 manuscript of the poem "Calle desconocida," later included in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* in 1923. María Celeste Martín and I have published and transcribed this manuscript in our recent *Poemas y prosas breves* (2018), with an extensive commentary (15-22). Here is Borges's drawing:



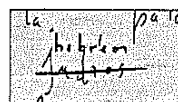
Now for a couple of details. As I discuss in my book, Borges in the late 1910s and the early 1920s uses an affected handwriting influenced by the posters titles of German expressionist films:



By way of comparison, here are some expressionist film posters:



In this particular case, the unusual handwriting can be correlated with earliest of the four dates that are given at the end of the poem, on the drawing accompanies it and is to the left. The poem is dated 1919 (crossed out), then 1922 (crossed out), which must have been the version used in *Fervor* in 1923, then 1943, which is the version used in *Poemas 1922-1943*. The same manuscript retouched several times, and dated each time; it is also signed twice, once with large signature full of flourishes of 1919-1920, then with the much smaller handwriting that will be typical of Borges from 1923 to 1955. To contrast a couple of det

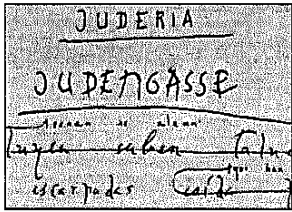


"Judíos" and "corazón anhelante" are in the expressionist influenced larger handwriting, "hebreos" and "vano corazón" Borges's later, tiny handwriting.



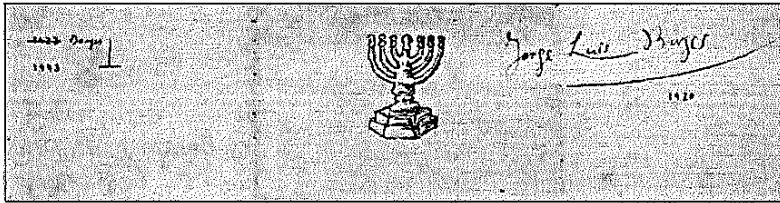
Returning to the drawing of the known street" at the bottom of second page, it clearly was part of original page design of the 1919-

manuscript and shows that Borges in Spain is thinking intensely about Buenos Aires. To give another example from the same period, the poem "Judería" is originally dated 1920, and it is included in *Fervor* in 1923. In 1942 it is retitled "Judengasse

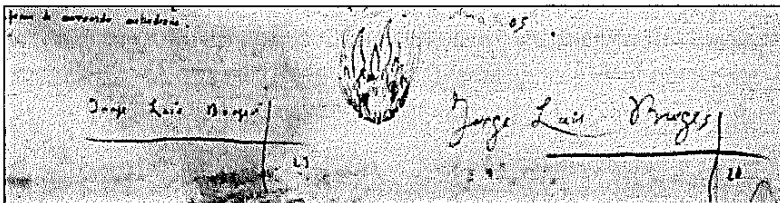
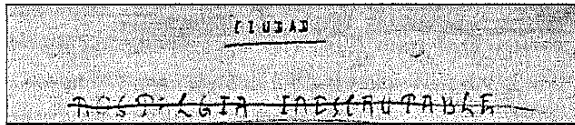


doubt because of Borges's concern for the fate of the Jews under Nazism.

The bottom of the manuscript page resembles "Calle desconocida" in the placement of the drawing, the two signatures and the two dates.



And here is another example, this one from the poem "Ciudad" (included in *Fervor* in 1923) but originally entitled "Nostalgia inescrutable" in 1920. The signatures and dates are from 1920 and 1923, with a drawing of a fire.

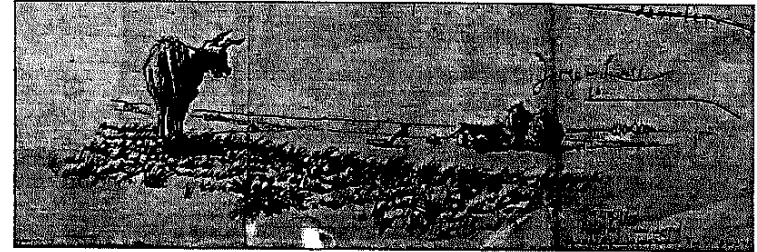


The illustration draws from the last three lines of the poem:

y es tu recuerdo como un ascua viva
que nunca suelto
aunque me quema las manos

The drawings of the fire and the Buenos Aires street scene turn out to have to do, then, not with the intense feelings of re-encounter with the native city on the family's return to Buenos Aires in 1921, but with nostalgia for Buenos Aires in Spain in

1919-1920. Borges's drawings—the street scene and the fire that burns his hand—are visual clues to the intensity of that nostalgia.



A manuscript with important drawings is "Música patria," a poem written in Spain in 1920 and included in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* in 1923 (but subsequently dropped from editions of Borges's poetry). The two drawings are of a bull at pasture (which may refer to Spanish landscapes, since part of the poem has to do with "limpidos prados andaluces") and then a drawing of gaucho life: two gauchos playing a guitar and a gaucho and "china" dancing. The latter drawing refers to music of the gauchos "[d]esmelena por la pampa, / trasegada de guitarra cr en guitarra."



From the same period is what was evidently intended to be the cover of a collection of prose poems. Four survive from this period (though not in manuscript): "Paréntesis pasional," two "Parábolas," "La lucha" and "Liberación" in *Textos recobrados* 1919-1929, and "Llamarada" in *Fervor*. All show the powerful influence from Borges's early readings (in 1917-1918, according to one of his manuscripts) of Franz Kafka. The cover again transports us to the iconography of German expressionism:



Only two of Borges's drawings (other than the possibly spurious tigers) have circulated widely. One is this image of a couple dancing tango, in the River Plate collection of the University of Notre Dame. The text here reads: "El tango es pendenciero. De ello no tengo dudas. Pero la certeza no me acompaña si se trata de ubicar la cuna del mismo." This is followed by two "coplas:"



Barracas al Sur
Barracas al Norte
a mí me gusta
bailar con corte

Mañana por la mañana
me voy a las Cinco Esquinas
a tomarme un mate amargo
de la mano de mi china

And then below he continues, as if writing an essay on the tango: "Para Ernesto Poncio, es la recova del Retiro, claro está en los prostíbulos, los del *Sur* creen es en la calle

Chile, y los del Norte sostienen . . ." Poncio (1885-1934), best known for the tangos "Don Juan" and "Gran Hotel Victoria," is a friend that Borges remembers having told him that he had often been to prison but always for manslaughter. The essay that he is writing here is related to "Historia del tango," added to the second edition

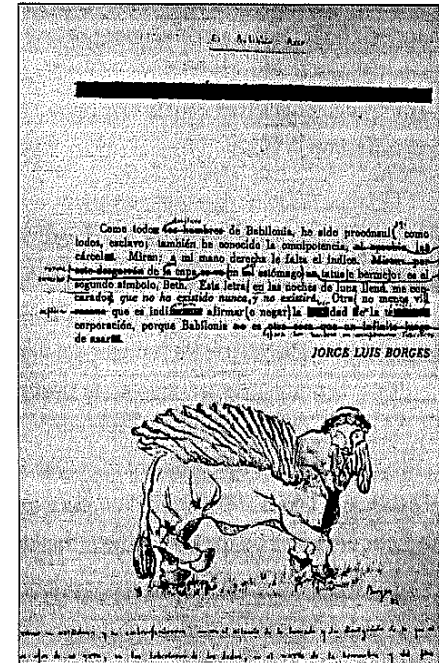
of *Evaristo Carriego* in 1955, but I suspect that this page was written much earlier. The drawing at right of the couple is notable.

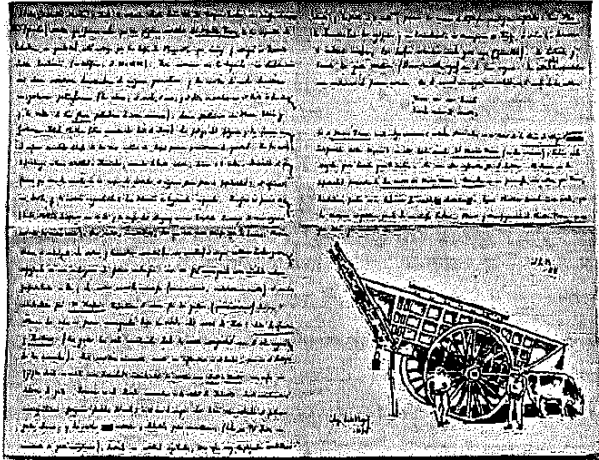
"La lotería en Babilonia" was published in *Sur* in 1941, included in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* at the end of that same year, then in *Ficciones* in 1944. In 1942 Borges took a copy of the first publication of the story in *Sur* and made extensive changes, including a change of title to "El babilónico azar" and hundreds of changes of wording, but strangely none of these changes was incorporated in the version in *Ficciones* in 1944 or in the editions of the *Obras completas* from the separate volumes of the 1950s to the one-volume edition of 1974. At right is the first of the three pages that Laura Rosato and mán Álvarez discovered in the marked copy of *Sur*.



At the bottom of the third page Borges dated and signed his new work, and included a Babylonian-looking imaginary being.

The next drawing, this time from the period just before he went blind, is an elaborate drawing of two gauchos and a huge oxcart in a letter sent from an estancia in the province of Buenos Aires, where he was visiting friends in the summer of 1954. It is reproduced in part in Víctor Aizenman's catalogue of Borges manuscripts and editions.





The letter, sent to "la señorita Martha Sánchez Terrero" from the Estancia Santa Inés near Mar del Plata, property of "Dr. Enrique Sandro, un amigo de aquellos (grandes) criollos que parecen andar por las páginas del *Martín Fierro* de la imprenta de Columba," starts off talking about life in the countryside, then suddenly swerves to politics, which of course was quite topsy-turvy in the period after the death of Eva Perón in 1952:

La fatiga del jolgorio y la jarana anuncian el reposo comedido debajo de los tres ombúes de hojas frescas y amistosas de quietud. Por la noche, el fandango retoma vitalidad. Bernárdez, rechoncho de tanta achura, duerme a lo indio. Distráido al jinetejar, pienso que tras la muerte de la mujer del dictador el régimen parece flaco de popularidad: el ejército se divide y la marina agradecida. La liberación es largamente esperada.

It then swerves again to a discussion of the esoteric symbolism related to cats in the Kabbalah, ancient Egypt and Sanskrit literature, which seems to have something to do with Evita, who may be the person he is thinking of as,

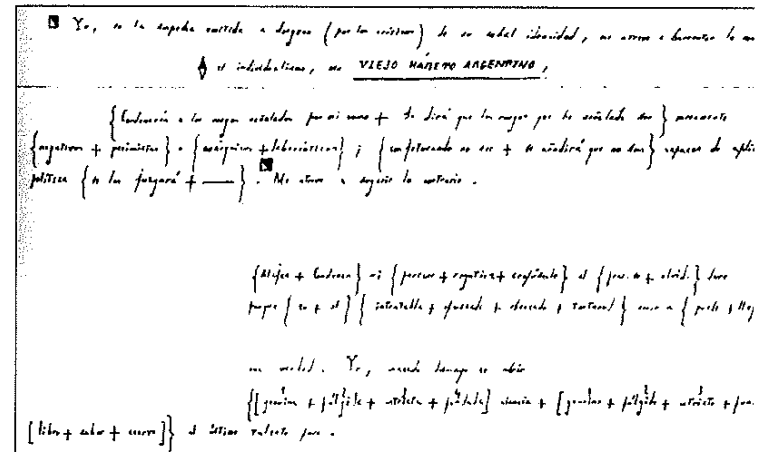
una mujer con cabeza de gato. Primacia en el Panteón conservaban en la ciudad de Bubastir, donde anualmente, con-

sagrábanse peregrinos perdidos del mundo, en el mes de mayo. Los lutos eran salvados al fallecer gatos divinos, y los restos [ilegible] remitidos a Bubartir para su entierro.

And then the end of the letter concerns the political circumstances of the con-
sition of the *Martín Fierro* in 1872:

...estaba Hernández en el hotel de la Plaza de Mayo oculto [ilegible] conspirando contra Urquiza: es allí donde escribe *El Martín Fierro* (en dos semanas); había sido elegido para hacerlo y no lo sabía. Es una obra impuesta por el destino.

After this there is a brief couple of sentences of praise for Martínez Estrada's *Mi y transfiguración de Martín Fierro*, "un gran libro que recomiendo con entusias-
and then the drawing of the oxcart and the gauchos. It is hard to make out connections, but there seems to be a strong association between thinking al
poesía gauchesca and local politics, what Sarmiento (and later Ángel Rama) ca-
"gauchi-políticos rioplatenses." The oxcart, so important in nineteenth-centur-
gentine literature (and even in that late example, Jorge Guillermo Borges's *El
dillo* from 1922), is (with the gauchos) an emblem of the national past, but Bo
seems to want to associate it with moments of political discontent: Hernánde
1872 and himself in 1954.



The most important of Borges's drawings appears in the manuscript "Viejo hábito argentino," later published as "Nuestro pobre individualismo" (1946). The part above the drawing reads:

Yo, en la sospecha omitida a largazo?? (por los críticos) de su cabal idoneidad, me atrevo a barruntar lo contrario: el individualismo, ese VIEJO HÁBITO ARGENTINO,

{Condenarán a los rasgos señalado por mí como + Se dirá que los rasgos que he señalado son} meramente {negativos + pesimistas} o {anárquicos + laberínticos}; {conjeturando no ser + se añadirá que no son} capaces de aplicación política {se los juzgará + _____}. Me atrevo a sugerir lo contrario.

{Alejen + Condenen} mí {parecer + rogativa + crepúsculo} el {fracaso + olvido} duro porque {su + el} }intractable + ofuscado + obcecado + testarudo} error no {puede + llega a} una verdad. Yo, cansado desmayo (?) de abrir (?) {[genuina + fúlgida + estricta + fundada] ciencia + [genuino + fúlgido + estricto + fundado] [libro + saber + acervo]} el último talento puro.

{La repugnante hida [creciente + populosa] + El más urgente de los problemas} de nuestra época {es el Estado (ya denunciado con profética lucidez por el [casi + nunca] olvidado [(— +), por los menos] Spencer)} {[— +] es la gradual intromisión del Estado} {[+ —], réproba enquistada (?) en

Then, below the drawing, he continues:

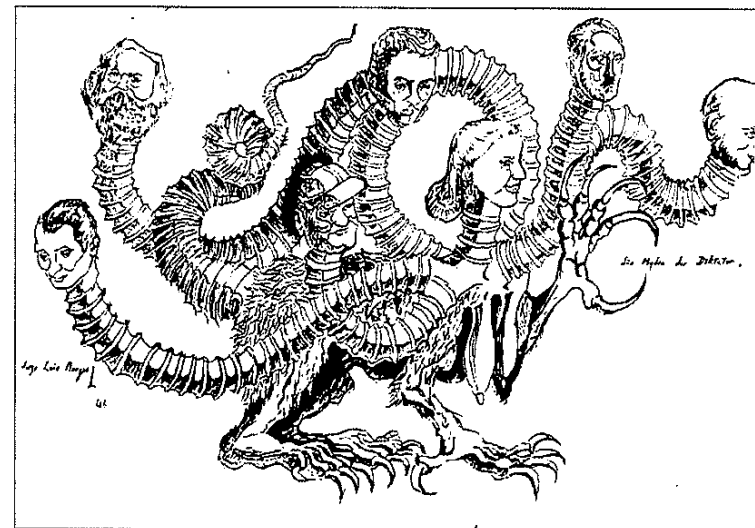
{La repugnante hida [creciente + populosa] + El más urgente de los problemas} de nuestra época {es el Estado (ya denunciado con profética lucidez por el [casi + nunca] olvidado [(— +), por los menos] Spencer)} {[— +] es la gradual intromisión del Estado} {[+ —], réproba enquistada (?) en

Here the page ends and with it the manuscript, which obviously must have continued. I should clarify before going on that the plethora of alternatives, and the complicated punctuation system that keeps them all floating as equal possibilities at

the draft stage, are typical of Borges first drafts: he believed firmly in putting down as many alternatives as possible on the page and then choosing his way through them later. This is obviously a first draft of a paragraph from near the end of an important political essay, first published in *Sur* in July 1946 and then included in *Cinco inquisiciones* in 1952, which reads:

Se dirá que los rasgos que he señalado son meramente negativos o anárquicos; se añadirá que no son capaces de explicación política. Me atrevo a sugerir lo contrario. El más urgente de los problemas de nuestra época (ya denunciado con profética lucidez por el casi olvidado Spencer) es la gradual intromisión del Estado en los actos del individuo: en la lucha con ese mal, cuyos nombres son comunismo y nazismo, el individualismo argentino, acaso inútil o prejudicial hasta ahora, encontrará justificación y deberes. (658)

He goes on—in July 1946!—: "Sin esperanza y con nostalgia, pienso en la abstracción de un partido que tuviera alguna afinidad con los argentinos; un partido que nos prometiera (digamos) un severo mínimo de gobierno" (658). In the context of this essay, the drawing makes a sharp point:



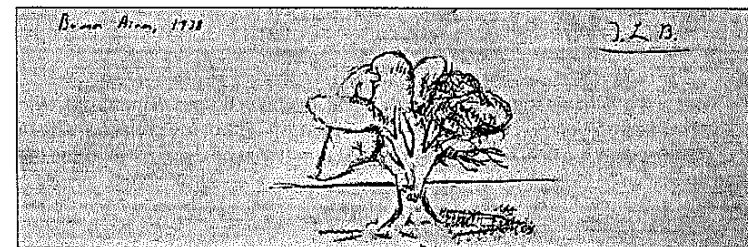
At the left, the signature and rubric "Jorge Luis Borges" and the date "46"; at the right, "die Hydra der Diktator." The faces on the hydra are Primo de Rivera, Marx, Rosas, Perón, Eva Perón, Hitler and Mussolini; of these, of course, Marx, Hitler and Mussolini were dead, but Juan Domingo and Eva Perón were very much alive.



Borges's argument here about the equivalence between "comunismo y nazismo" echoes a similar statement at the end of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" about "el materialismo dialéctico, el antisemitismo, el nazismo" (442). The image is no doubt atrocious, and the hanging breasts of Eva Perón extremely sexist; what is of interest is that Borges would develop in such detail a pictorial equivalent to his argument in the essay, not for publication but purely to express his strong feelings; the hydra heads intertwine, suggesting that the several varieties of totalitarianism are equivalent. Primo de Rivera is off to the left by himself staring down, uninvolved, though his neck leaves the body next to Eva's head; Eva is central to the composition, next to the threatening, lifted claw and close to Hitler and Mussolini.

Borges's talents as an artist would have never given him the fame that he acquired as a writer, and no doubt he had no desire to compete with his sister; his drawings are secret, solely for his own amusement or for those of the friends who were the recipients of his letters or manuscripts. A final example of just how private

this exercise was: when his father died in 1938 Borges wrote a poem, "A mi padre" It is atrocious and was never published. "A mi padre" shows a sentimental side of the writer that I have also found in early versions of the 1928 poem "A Francisco López Merino," a poem that was intensely rewritten in four versions between 1928, when López Merino committed suicide, and October of that year when the poem was published; the final product is a distanced, almost abstract expression of grief, one from which personality has been erased. This did not happen with "A mi padre," which was written just once, apparently, and ends with a drawing of a



Borges would depict his father obliquely in 1940, just two years later, in "Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in the double figure of someone who is explicitly his father and in the father's reserved English friend Herbert Ashe:

Algún recuerdo limitado y menguante de Herbert Ashe, ingeniero de los ferrocarriles del Sur, persiste en el hotel de Adrogué, entre las efusivas madreselvas y en el fondo ilusorio de los espejos. En vida padeció de irrealidad, como tantos ingleses; muerto, no es siquiera el fantasma que ya era entonces. Era alto y desganado y su cansada barba rectangular había sido roja. Entiendo que era viudo, sin hijos. Cada tantos años iba a Inglaterra: a visitar (juzgo por unas fotografías que nos mostró) un reloj de sol y unos robles. Mi padre había estrechado con él (el verbo es excesivo) una de esas amistades inglesas que empiezan por excluir la confianza y que muy pronto omiten el diálogo. Solían ejercer un intercambio de libros y de periódicos; solían batirse el ajedrez, taciturnamente. . . (433)

I take it that the oak tree in the drawing is what Borges is remembering and what is standing in for that rather taciturn father, severe and rather uncompromising.

Borges's drawings are an intensely personal private exercise, showing depth of emotion that he often seeks to curb in his writing. In the drawings in Spain he expresses his "inscrutable nostalgia" for Buenos Aires, a double-faced demonic figure haunts the prose poems, gauchos and oxcarts stand in for strong political feelings, while the atrocious hydra of the dictators signifies his feeling of helplessness in the Argentina of July 1946.

Notes

¹ Donald Yates was a valuable source of Borges lore and images of Borges manuscripts, over the decade I worked on *How Borges Wrote*. He was enthusiastic about the project, and read several drafts including the final one. It is my deepest regret that he did not live to see the published book.

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