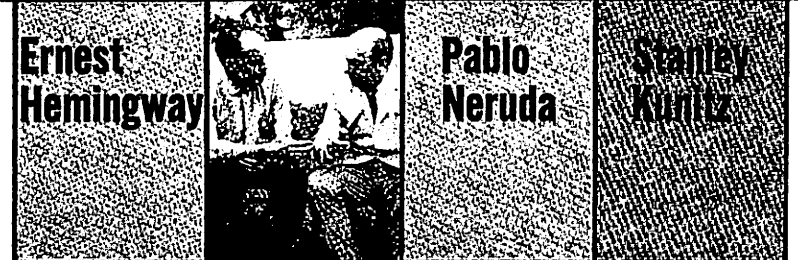


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Selden Rodman

Conversations with



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Tongues of Fallen Angels



Upper left: Jorge Luis Borges in the Argentine National Library, Buenos Aires, 1969. Upper right: With Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Buenos Aires, 1972. "Borges seized him by the elbow . . . 'Norman! . . . Avoid veracity!'" Lower left: Borges's mother at ninety-five, Buenos Aires, 1972. Except for a two-year marriage hiatus in 1969, the poet has always lived with his mother. Lower right: Borges in 1972. "No wonder he looks just a little mad! The pupil of the right eye is so enlarged it almost fills the iris. The pupil of the left eye is very small and a little off center."

Chapter One

JORGE LUIS BORGES

"I was quite old when it occurred to me that poetry could be written in a language other than English."

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The first time I saw Borges he was seated at a large conference table in Buenos Aires's National Library staring into space. He looks at first more like a harassed, tired executive than Argentina's great poet who, in middle age, had received world-wide renown for his "metaphysical" fables of circular time, and now almost blind in his seventies was beginning to write poems again. It was only when he got up to lean on his cane, grasped me just above the elbow, and started to pour over me (at very close range) his passion for literature and his distaste for most things contemporary, that I caught a gleam in those piercing blue eyes under their drooping lids, and a sense of the dedicated, almost Gothic bony structure of that long, slightly pouchy aristocratic face under sparse gray hairs and unruly eyebrows. He talks fluently in English but with an accent, almost a Scottish burr. And it's not easy to stop him once he starts, because he has a disconcerting way of looking you straight in the eye, holding you close to him, and occasionally laughing at his own sallies with a flash of white teeth; you can never rid yourself of the notion that he really sees you.

When he heard that I'd been with Pablo Neruda recently, he started to say something about his great Chilean antagonist, but then broke off to approach the subject more indirectly.

"You've come from Chile by way of Brazil," he said. "What difference strikes you most entering Argentina?"

"Not seeing a single black on the streets of Buenos Aires," I said. "I can't get used to it. Weren't there any slaves here? Didn't they have children?"

"I can't explain it either," he said. "In my childhood one saw them everywhere. All our servants and laborers were Negroes. Maybe this was one reason we began to think of ourselves as close to you. This was white man's country, not a country of Indians and half-breeds like Peru or Bolivia—or Brazil, which is just an extension of Africa, no?"

"Hardly," I said, "though the blacks provide the most vital element in that unique culture. You know their literature, I suppose."

"They have a literature?"

"A rich one, classics included. You must have read Machado de Assis."

"No."

"Euclides da Cunha?"

"Yes. His book is a kind of sociological curiosity, isn't it? I was impressed until I read Cunningham-Graham's version of the same episode and saw how a real writer could handle it."

He hadn't heard of the distinguished modern poets like Cabral de Melo or Vinícius either but had been "once familiar" with some poems of Carlos Drummond de Andrade. I mentioned that Drummond, at least during the Thirties when he was a member of the Communist party, had been quite close to Neruda. "But Neruda," I added, "when I expressed admiration for your writing, made a remark that I know won't surprise you. 'Literature,' he said, 'is like a good beefsteak and can't be put together out of other literatures.'"

He smiled. "There are several answers to that remark." He paused.

"While you're selecting the best one," I said, "tell me what that ancient tome lying in front of you is."

"It's Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary*," he said. "The preface—made up of many literatures—is a great piece of prose. This copy was sent to me by a man from Sing Sing."

"The prison?"

"No. The town."

"But there is no town by that name any more. They renamed it Ossining. It must have been a prisoner who sent it to you, Borges!"

He liked the idea. "Yes. A prisoner of the eighteenth century. What a good place to be imprisoned. With all those Latinisms!"

"Can I ask you a Johnsonian question?"

"Like: What would I do if locked up in a tower with a baby?"

"Exactly. I'm writing a travel book, you know. What does Argentina need most?"

He pondered. "More curious minds, perhaps—like yours. You saw that girl at the desk when you came in? Can you believe it? Her mother burned her books one day. She said to her: 'We're simple folk. We don't need books.' That's what we're up against."

"You were saying about Neruda—?"

"He's a fine poet, of course. Some of his early poems are very good. But then he wrote a book denouncing the South American dictators—and left out Juan Perón."

"Why?"

"Perón was then in power. It seems that Neruda had a lawsuit pending with his publisher in Buenos Aires. That publisher, as you probably know, has always been his principal source of income."

I questioned the accuracy of this observation, its implications at any rate; perhaps only outsiders can have ambivalent feelings about the aging dictator who had so radically undercut the old landed oligarchy at the behest of his militant mistress, the late Evita Duarte. And I thought, too, of Borges's little essay about the mourning general who set up a tiny shrine in the Chaco one day in 1952 and accepted contributions, candles, and flowers from the poor who came to worship the blond doll inside:

What kind of a man, I ask myself, conceived and executed that funeral farce? a fanatic, a pitiful wretch, or an imposter and cynic? Did he believe he was Perón as he played his suffering role as the macabre widower? The story is incredible but it happened, and perhaps not once but many times, with different actors in different locales. It contains the perfect cipher of an unreal epoch, it is like the reflection of a dream or like that drama-within-drama we see in *Hamlet*. The mourner was not

Perón and the blond doll was not the woman Eva Duarte, but neither was Perón, Perón, nor was Eva, Eva. They were, rather, unknown individuals—or anonymous ones whose secret names and true faces we do not know—who acted out, for the credulous love of the lower middle classes, a crass mythology.¹

I asked Borges if the tale was true. He said it was; he had had it from two men in the Chaco who didn't know each other. He gave me a long account he had had from a friend of torture by electric wires in one of Perón's prisons. He described the various parts of the body shocked, almost clinically. He told with relish several stories making fun of Evita Perón as an ex-prostitute who had put on airs. He spoke lightly of the constitutional presidents who had bumbled in the wake of Perón, but with respect of the current military strong man, General Onganía. "He is a gentleman. He does not raise his voice or strike poses . . ."

Borges's conservatism is moral. He is offended by Perón's morality—his lack of morals. There are overtones of snobism in the description of the religious Peronista—the use of the words "the woman" and "credulous." He is not interested in the social welfare, labor benefits, and public works of the first Perón period. He is concerned only about the means—which is a tenable philosophical position, of course.

We went to pay a call on Borges's mother who lives nearby and who is astonishingly alert at ninety-three. She moves, in fact, more nimbly than her son. Borges's sister Norah, who paints, was leaving as we entered the eighth-floor apartment. Señora Borges told us that she was reading English again—"lest I forget." ("Mother often calls me a quadroon," Borges confided behind his hand, "for being a fourth part English.") He had always lived with his mother, until two years ago his marriage to a widowed boyhood sweetheart in her fifties surprised his friends.

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Sham," in *Dreamtigers*, translated by Mildred Boyer. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968; available also as a paperback, New York, Dutton, 1970.

I asked Borges on the way down in the crowded elevator if my favorite among his stories, "El Sur" ("The South"), was autobiographical. Did it reflect a physical accident that had turned him from poetry to prose? "Yes, yes! of course, and it is one of my favorites too, because it is on so many levels—the autobiographical, the man who kills the thing he loves, the—"

The elevator came to a jerking stop, and we were spilled out into the lobby without my finding out what the other levels were.

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Fame came to Borges as a young poet in Argentina. Years later it was his "metaphysical" tales that aroused awe and admiration throughout the world. Today the *avant-garde*, paradoxically, is making a culture hero of the archconservative. But there is another Borges who deserves to be at least as well known: Borges, the wit; Borges, the nonconformist who delights in poking fun at Latin America's fetishes; Borges, conversationalist extraordinary.

My talks with Borges were spread out over three week-long visits to Buenos Aires in 1969, 1970, and 1972. No doubt they would read well enough as unadorned dialogue. But to present them that way, divorced from the Victorian *décor* and courtly ballet that make Borges, Borges, and without introducing Norman Thomas di Giovanni who made the encounters possible and at whose home Borges sometimes held forth while I was guest, would be awkward and ungracious.

Though my first visit to Buenos Aires was to "research" a travel book, on which I was then working with Bill Negron as illustrator, my goal from the start had been to meet the poet-fabulist and try to convey Argentina's essence through his eyes. I had loved the stories for years. But behind the intricacy of their plots, behind their philosophical implications—that time is circular, that everything that happens

has happened before and will happen again—I sensed a human warmth transcending Borges's passion for literature, an affection for Argentina transcending (if indeed it wasn't dictated by) the writer's despair over his country's tawdry politics and its capital's decay.

Though we bore no introductions, Negrón and I had taken a taxi directly to the National Library. There we were informed that Borges was "being taped" by some French T.V. crew but that his aide would speak to us. A stocky young man with thick black hair and eyebrows and burning eyes came out, and when I had introduced myself he said: "You wouldn't remember it, but I visited your house in New Jersey ten years ago with Mark Strand and Rico Lebrun. But long before that your *100 Modern Poems*² changed my life. I doubt whether I'd be here in Argentina were it not for that anthology. Borges will be happy to see you, I know; but while he's tied up in there let's go out and have a drink."

Over *chopps* the story of Norman Thomas di Giovanni began to unfold. It threw a good deal of light on Borges's personality and on Argentina. In New Hampshire where he had been working on a novel, Norman had heard that Borges was lecturing at Harvard and had gone to see him. Soon after Borges left he decided to chuck everything and fly to Buenos Aires. He had majored in Spanish at school, he loved Borges's work, and he saw no reason why the poems, on which Borges's early fame in Argentina rested, shouldn't receive as much recognition in the English-speaking world as the stories. He would try to convince Borges of this, and then he would organize poet-translators from all over the world to prepare a book, under his and Borges's supervision.

He succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. Borges was delighted with the idea. So delighted, in fact, that he soon began concentrating on writing poems again. The result was Borges's first new book in nine years, *In Praise of Darkness*. Translators began sending in their versions which Borges and Norman would scrutinize, mailing them back for im-

² New York, Pelligrini & Cudahy, 1949.

provement whenever necessary. Happily for both men, the younger quickly became indispensable to the older, as go-between with the increasingly unwieldy flow of visitors, promoters, lecture-agents, and publishers; and as friend, for the Argentine writer has always felt closer in spirit to the Anglo-American literary world than to the French-oriented one traditional in Argentina.

But Norman's sudden eminence baffled the intellectual community of Buenos Aires. Who was this upstart—from North America of all places—attached to their great man? It made them feel better about it to invent all kinds of academic credentials for Norman. He began to be referred to in the press as "Dr. di Giovanni" or as "the well-known scholar from Harvard." And Norman, with a typically American contempt for titles, would have none of it, though Borges said, "Can't you see it makes them happy to call you Doctor, Norman? Go along with them. Play their little game." One day when they were sitting next to each other at a T.V. panel interview, Norman had lunged forward to protest his Harvard identification; Borges seized him by the elbow and whispered in his ear: "Norman! . . . Avoid veracity!"

A friend in Chile, Nena Ossa, had already told me something about Borges's humility. She had met him in Santiago and taken him to a television studio where he was to be interviewed. "I was trying to guide him across the streets, but he insisted on guiding me. I was with him when the girl was putting pancake make-up on his face. 'I'll never forget the way he apologized to her for 'this indignity—having to touch this old and ugly visage.' The girl, thrilled by the privilege of so intimate a contact with such a great man, was speechless."

Norman confirmed the genuineness of Borges's reaction by telling us of the time he had accompanied Borges and his wife on a speaking engagement to a town in the south of Argentina that involved an exhausting six-hour journey by rail. They arrived only to discover that a mistake had been made in the invitation: the lecture was to have taken

place the day before. The college officials were furious. "We'll get to the bottom of this unforgivable insult, Dr. Borges. The secretary responsible for the error will be fired!" Borges turned to them open-mouthed. "But why?" he said. "Can't you understand that I'm delighted? I won't have to lecture now!" But their outrage—and Señora Borges's—persisted. "At least the offender must be exposed—" "Please, no, no," Borges insisted. "Can't you see that I'm grateful to her? She's my benefactor. If you punish her, I'll never come back."

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Walking to the Library, we re-entered the gloomy structure that was once the National Lottery, its brass balustrades on the grand staircase having as their motif the spherical baskets in which the tickets are shuffled. The Director's office, with twenty-foot ceilings and ornately carved wainscoting, has a curved desk designed for Paul Groussac, Borges's predecessor, who was also blind. (Was there something symbolic, I wondered, about these blind librarians in a Latin American institution devoted more to reverence than to use?)

The restaurant to which Borges invited us to dine with him is a homely establishment called the Caserio. On the way to it, he never stopped talking. Bill and Norman would get a block ahead of us and then stop to let us catch up. Borges tugged at my elbow so hard it was difficult to avoid lampposts and keep out of the gutter. (Norman told me that he had a sore arm for a week after arriving in Buenos Aires and that he still walks like a crab.) Once we were agreeing that Goethe was overrated as a poet, and I delighted him by quoting the passage from *Faust*, Part II, beginning *Wenn im unendlichen dasselbe* to prove that Goethe was best in philosophical nuggets like that, he pulled me off the curb and with taxis barreling by intoned a dozen lines from *Beowulf* to indicate the bridge between the Teuton and English tongues. At an intersection he stopped me in the

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middle of the street to quote José Hernández—the idea being that *Martin Fierro* was somewhat cheapened by its propaganda content—"The poem was written, you know, to stop the killing of the Indians by the Gauchos. Hernández's Gaucho complains too much. Real Gauchos are not so self-pitying."

"Is the Gaucho in *The Purple Land* more real?" I asked.

"No. Less so. Hudson was a first-rate naturalist but not a first-rate novelist. His memory of the Banda Oriental played him tricks. I could give you a dozen instances of inaccuracy. He romanticized the Uruguayan back country hopelessly, all those silly loves, and so on."

By the time we were seated for dinner we were quoting and counterquoting. He'd quote Tennyson; I'd quote "a better poet of the same time, Hopkins." He'd quote a war poem by Browning; I'd quote "a better poet, Owen." He'd cite Kipling or Chesterton or Stevenson; I'd cite Stephen Crane. I asked him whether he admired César Vallejo's poetry. "Vallejo? Never heard of him." I couldn't believe my ears. "García Márquez's fiction?" I ventured. "Never heard of him either." I retreated to safer ground. "Leopoldo Lugones?"

"Of course. Lugones was our greatest poet. But very limited, very Paris-oriented, by way of Rubén Darío who worked for years in Buenos Aires as a journalist. Lugones showed his basic insecurity by frequently prefacing a sententious remark with 'As Rubén Darío, my master and friend, and I agree. . . .' Ah, he was a very distasteful person, Lugones, very negative. His mouth seemed shaped by nature to pronounce the word 'No.' Later on he would invent reasons to justify this word that his soul and facial muscles so automatically shaped."

Borges had to admit that he had read some Cortázar but he didn't like the expatriate Argentine novelist. "He is trying so hard on every page to be original that it becomes a tiresome battle of wits, no?"

When discussing English or American literature, Borges's

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whole personality changes. He beams, he expands, he glows. "You know I was brought up on English in my father's library. I was quite old when it occurred to me that poetry could be written in a language other than English."

He ordered a plate of rice, butter, and cheese, while our mouths watered at the thought of the Argentine steaks we'd soon be served. "I hate steaks," Borges said. "They are so common in this country. I can't eat more than one or two a year."

Norman said: "Borges, I heard you mention Eliot a while back—"

"Eliot is a little dry, don't you think?" Borges said. "I prefer Frost. You like Frost, Rodman?" He was glad that I preferred Frost to Eliot. He asked me how Frost looked and talked. Did I think that Frost's reserved Americanism had any kinship with Whitman's boisterous brand?

"I think Frost was a direct descendant of Emerson," I said.

"And Whitman was influenced by Emerson more than by anyone! That essay about the ideal American democrat, pioneer, truth-teller, yea-sayer—with a bit of Asiatic-Indian philosophy thrown in—"

"I greet you at the beginning of a great career," I quoted.

"—And how distressed Emerson was that Whitman made big publicity out of that letter!" Borges said. "Yet why not? If Emerson didn't expect it, why did he write it? Whitman was right . . . but don't you think Whitman *tries* too hard, that he's really a quite unspontaneous writer?"

"Not in 'Song of Myself,'" I said. "That's the most spontaneous poem in the language. Even some of the lines in the later poems are pure magic, impossible to will."

"For instance?"

"I repose by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors."

Borges said it over several times. "I don't get it. What's so wonderful about it?"

"You've revealed to me at last that English is only your adopted language," I said.

He laughed. "They didn't find me out at Harvard, or at

Texas either." The lectures he had delivered at Austin had been a great experience, he added. "Every South American should visit the United States to see how perverted by lying Communist propaganda the local image of America is. The students, compared with ours, are so alert. I'll not forget the one who pointed out in class that my story 'The Golem' was a reworking of 'The Circular Ruins.' I was amazed! 'My God,' I said, 'you're right! I've never thought of it, but it's true. Well, I only wrote it—once. You've probably read both stories many times.'"

He leaned toward Bill to answer a question, and Norman said to me: "He says things like that all the time. He really means them. He thinks his present fame is a matter of luck, not necessarily deserved, and that any day the bubble may pop and he'll be forgotten, or relegated to a very minor role. Of course he's enjoying it while it lasts, rather astonished by the adulation, the translators all over the world haggling over the meaning of this or that arcane phrase—but not at all taken in by it, or spoiled, as you can see."

"Here," said Borges turning back to me, "examinations are like lottery tickets. In Texas a student wanted me to give a course all over again, unsure that he'd profited by it thoroughly, unconcerned about quick credits . . . That could never happen here."

We had been to Borges's apartment on Belgrano several times, but one day the maid, who always rushed to the door and then looked as though she'd been interrupted at an embalming, said that only Señora Borges was in. Never having met her, we said we'd be pleased to have that privilege. She could not be disturbed but we could wait in the parlor. Bill escaped and I settled down, making a *catalogue raisonné* of the premises to pass the time: two potted rubber palms, two green-cushioned Morris chairs, a

spindly dining room set, two glass-enclosed bookcases, two etchings in the style of Whistler, two eighteenth-century engravings (Arch of Titus, Pyramid of Caius Cestius), a Dürer etching, a painting of angels by Borges's sister, a student exercise by Silvana Ocampo of a woman's back from the waist up, a cabinet containing Borges's medals and other literary awards, a wall rack with brandy decanters and glasses of red glass in brass holders, a Harvard shield, a glass coffee table containing an ash tray, Joyce's *Ulysses* (Borges thinks Joyce should have filled it with character studies rather than catalogues), Apollinaire in Spanish (*El Heresiarca y Cia*), and the complete works of Dürer in folio.

Presently Borges came in and I made a date to meet him here at four in the afternoon and then go to the Library for drawings and photos. I told him I'd like to meet his wife. He went through one of the closed doors and came back, closing it after him.

"She excuses herself. She just had a bath."

"I'm beginning to think you don't have a wife, Borges."

He smiled wryly. "Maybe it's better if we keep up the mystery."

He took me to the elevator and I had trouble closing the accordion gate which has to be shut before any Argentine elevator will start. "Is this some diabolical Argentine invention?" I said.

"Heavens no," he said, as my head began to disappear below floor level, "the Argentines could never invent something as complicated as an elevator—or for that matter anything at all."

At four o'clock I picked up Bill and drove back to Belgrano. This time La Señora emerged and greeted us. She is a buxom, rather handsome woman in her fifties. She surrendered her husband to his guests unceremoniously. To get Borges across the street to a taxi was, as always, a tug of war. This time he was talking about his story "Funes the Memorious" and about what a terrible thing it was to have insomnia.

At the Library we rang the bell but no one answered. Borges had no key. Finally a man came up to us from across the street, concerned to see the old man with a cane standing hatless under the fierce sun, and asked us if we'd like to have a whisky or a Coke. Borges said we'd like to have a Coke but that was the last we saw of our presumptive benefactor. Borges, by now engaged in quoting Longfellow's translation of an Old English poem, "The Grave," showed very little interest when the watchman, who should have been on duty, finally arrived with the key. To get the natural light for photography and drawing, we took three chairs out on to the narrow balcony that runs around the top of the huge, glass-domed main reading room.

I asked Borges how important in shaping Argentina's history was the fact that the Argentine was a dependency of Peru from 1563 to 1776.

"Not at all," he said. "Communications were much too difficult in those days to give Argentina much sense of inferiority. We were pretty much on our own, with Spain giving us most of the trouble. In the War of the Pacific in 1879, everybody here sided with Peru against Chile. But the city of Buenos Aires has always been democratic compared with aristocratic Lima . . . Argentina has always been far too large, I've always thought. Our northwestern provinces, with their surviving Indians, would be better off as parts of Indian Paraguay or Bolivia."

I asked him whether he thought the nineteenth-century domination of Argentina, by the British economically and the French culturally, had had a schizophrenic effect on his country.

"I don't think so," he said. "Both influences were accepted quite naturally, in my family at least. But we were not devoted to Spain. We thought of Spaniards as servants. I recall someone coming back from meeting the Infanta and reporting scornfully 'She talks like a *gallego*'—the equivalent of saying that a British princess talks like a limey."

He went on to say that Paris had had a bad influence on

intellectuals and poets—"Like your Ezra Pound, for instance, who adopted his ridiculous pose there. Or was it in London that he first affected cowboy dress and talk? . . . Even Victor Hugo felt he had to strike an attitude, though he was a serious poet and a great one."

I reminded him of André Gide's famous remark—"Victor Hugo, alas"—when asked who he thought was France's greatest poet. "Do you think Baudelaire and Rimbaud were better poets?" I asked.

"Of course not," he said. "Baudelaire is overrated, and Rimbaud was a mere freak . . . Do you know Hugo's splendid poem 'Boaz Endormi'?" I didn't and he quoted it all, with its ending:

. . . L'herbe était noire;
C'était l'heure tranquille quand les lions vont boire . . .

I told Borges that I was haunted by his story "El Aleph," especially by the passage describing the magical appearance on the cellar step of the small iridescent sphere "whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere." I asked him about the connection between the first part of the story and the last. "It's not clear to me." And I explained why.

"Now that you mention it, it's not clear to me either," he said. "I think I'll change it and put in a much clearer relation between the buyer of the house and the seller, a hint at the very beginning that someone is going to buy the house. And I will put your name in it too, if you have no objection, as a tribute to you for improving it."

I laughed. Was he pulling my leg, mildly making fun of me—which he had every right to do? He told me about a reporter in Madrid who had come to him and asked him seriously whether the Aleph existed in fact. "Later on I wished I had encouraged him in this tomfoolery, but at the time I said, 'Of course not,' and he left quite crestfallen, and even disgusted with me for making such a deception! Tomfoolery should always be encouraged, don't you agree? But I let the poor man down and he felt disconsolate." He added

that the poet satirized at the beginning of the story was drawn from life and that his mother had begged him not to make it so obvious. "But I said to her: 'He'll never recognize himself—and he didn't!'" I asked him where he found the title. "I took it from Bertrand Russell's Introduction to his *Philosophy of Mathematics*, where it is used as the symbol for transfinite numbers."

"Why is the house in which the Aleph appears destroyed in the end?" I asked.

"It had to be destroyed," he said, "because you can't leave things like an Aleph lying around in this day and age, the way Aladdin left his lamp lying around. Not any more. The premises have to be tidied up, the supernatural suitably disposed of, the reader's mind set at rest."

Which, of course, is exactly what Borges doesn't do. For part of his genius is to leave the mysteries suspended, very disquietingly suspended, in these "real" settings which make the metaphysical content so alarmingly believable. Untypical in this respect is "La Intrusa," which I'd just read after being told that Borges regarded it as his best story. I told him that I liked it less than the earlier stories, and he asked me why.

"The woman's reactions to what the two brothers are doing to her are never hinted at," I said, "with the result that I can't feel any involvement in her fate. I'm stunned by the conclusion, but emotionally indifferent to what happens to the woman. Why would it detract from the story if you presented her as a human being rather than as the animal they feel she is?"

"The more we are made to think of the woman as a kind of thing," Borges replied, "the easier it is for the reader to feel about her as the brothers did—and to understand that the essential subject of this story is friendship, not brutality. I wonder if you noticed, by the way, that the older brother is the only one whose words we are allowed to hear? It is he who dominates the story, finds the woman, invents the scheme of sharing her with his brother, sells her to the brothel, buys her back, and in the end knifes or strangles her."

While he was saying this, I had a close look at Borges's eyes.

No wonder he looks just a little mad! The pupil of the right eye is so enlarged it almost fills the iris. The pupil of the left eye is very small and a little off center.

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Borges asked me where I'd been the past week when I came to his apartment to say good-by. I'd been to Bariloche in the Andes and to Montevideo.

"What has Bariloche to do with Argentina?" he said. "In my childhood it didn't even exist. It is an invention of the Swiss and is populated with tourists and those who live off them. Of course it has mountains. But I spent the most impressionable years of my boyhood in Geneva where there are mountains just as good and a civilized society as well.

"Uruguay is something else again," he continued. "It is a very small and poor country, so things like poetry and football are taken overseriously. They say—as they never would here, or with you—'I want you to meet my friend the poet so-and-so.' You can't joke about the Gauchos or their national heroes, either. But it's like that all over South America, isn't it? In Peru they asked me seriously: 'Are you on the side of Pizarro or Atahualpa?' We don't think of such ethnic absurdities here. My best friend, the poet Carlos Mastronardi, comes of Italian stock on both sides. I'm all mixed up racially myself. It doesn't matter. We're all Argentinians. So we never think of it. In Berlin Miguel Angel Asturias made a speech beginning, 'I want to tell you I'm an Indian.' He'd be laughed off the stage if he said that here. I'd say to him: 'Then why do you speak Spanish and wear Western clothes? Why do you publish books and not *quipos*?' In Colombia, though there's an enormous gap between the rich and the poor—and that terrible *violencia*—they're more sensible. They say: 'The only hope for us is the American Marines.'" He smiled mischievously. "—And the only hope for South America as a whole is that you can conquer it. Nowadays you fight only small wars which you're not very good at, and which

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you wage halfheartedly, with a sense of guilt—like the British in South Africa when they almost lost to the Boers. You both win the big wars, of course; and if you were to conquer South America in the same spirit, without any misgivings, you'd be universally admired for it, you can be sure!"

"You've got to be kidding, Borges," I said.

"Not so much as you might think," he said with a smile.

I showed him a copy of a book by Fernando Guiberts called *Compadrito*, which I'd picked up in San Carlos de Bariloche, asking him whether the following description of the hoodlum of the Buenos Aires outskirts was accurate:

... his betrayal and oblivion of the pampas, where this with-out-a-horse man was born . . . this dismounted peasant no longer riding his destiny . . . his mother out for hire by day, dragging her tasks along; the father only a forsaken portrait in the bureau drawer . . . his passion servile and sticky, a craving to be the man he will never become . . . attending to the drama of his own vital impotence . . .

I had seen enough of the deracinated slum-dweller in Lima, Mexico City, and Santiago to be sure that there was some truth in this description, but I knew Borges well enough by this time to know that he wouldn't recognize it as his truth. He said he had lived in those neighborhoods "in the time the writer pretends to describe," and that it was not like that. He had me read another bit, about knife fights. He went out and came back with two wicked-looking silver-handled poniards. He demonstrated that instead of holding the point down as Guiberts indicates, it should be held up—"to get up under the shield of the poncho wrapped around the left forearm. Of course there are instances of all these attitudes he describes, but to harp on them only produces caricature."

The knives reminded me anew of the fatal encounter at the end of his story "El Sur."

"What were the other levels," I asked Borges, "on which that story was written—the levels you were starting to tell me about the other day?"

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"Well," he said, "one is that it was all perhaps a dream. You remember there's a circumstance hinted at in the beginning—that the protagonist may have died under the surgeon's knife. Then, at the inn, the protagonist has the *Arabian Nights* with him again, and the storekeeper is like the intern at the hospital, and the store reminds him of an engraving. So couldn't it all be a dream at the moment of dying? . . . The autobiographical level is in the thinking of the violent death of his grandfather—as I did so often of mine. A student once asked me in Texas: 'When did the protagonist die?' I answered: 'You pays your money and you takes your choicel . . . ' Still another level is the protagonist's love for the South—and its symbolic knife. He loves it, and it kills him."

I thought of the exaltation of courage in Borges's poems, not the physical courage he may have lacked, or thought he lacked as a young man—as some have conjectured—but courage as a spiritual legacy, as in the poem about his great-grandfather, who turned the tide during the Battle of Junín:

. . . His great-grandson is writing these lines,
and a silent voice comes to him out of the past,
out of the blood:

"What does my battle at Junín matter if it is only
a glorious memory, or a date learned by rote
for an examination, or a place in the atlas?
The battle is everlasting and can do without
the pomp of actual armies and of trumpets.
Junín is two civilians cursing a tyrant
on a street corner,
or an unknown man somewhere dying in prison."³

Or the poem about the dying thoughts of Doctor Francisco Laprida, set upon and killed September 22, 1829, by a band of Gaucho militia, which Norman had translated from the same book:

³ Jorge Luis Borges, "A Page to Commemorate Colonel Suárez, Victor at Junín," in *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, edited by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, translated by Alastair Reid, New York, Delacorte, 1970.

. . . I who longed to be someone else, to weigh
judgments, to read books, to hand down the law,
will lie in the open out in these swamps;
I see at last that I am face to face
with my South American destiny.
I was carried to this ruinous hour
by the intricate labyrinth of steps
woven by my days from a day that goes
back to my birth . . .

We told him we must leave, but he wanted us to stay and have tea. We declined, thinking we'd stayed too long already and were tiring him. As we edged our way toward the elevator, I asked him whether he'd like to have a copy of the biography of Byron's sister which I had ordered for Neruda.

"Some poets, like Byron," he said, "are so much more interesting than their poetry, aren't they?"

"Hemingway, for instance," I said.

"Yes," he said. "A very uninteresting writer, really."

"It was a great pleasure meeting you, Borges," I said lamely as we stepped into the cage and pulled the accordion doors shut.

"It was a pleasure and great honor meeting you," he replied graciously.

"We'll always remember it," said Bill in a louder voice as we started down.

"If you do forget," we heard his laughing voice say as we plunged out of sight, "write it down and remember the spelling—B-O-R-G-E-S—Borges!"

On the plane to Lima, quite possibly directly over Junín, I translated the last four lines from one of his poems:

I seem to hear a stirring in the dawn
of multitudes departing; I perceive
the loves and memories that now are gone;
space, time, and Borges take their leave.

When I returned to Buenos Aires two years later, Borges hadn't changed but the circumstances of his life had. He was back with his mother, and he was not contesting his wife's demands for exorbitant alimony. I asked di Giovanni why.

"He's been living in constant fear that he *won't* have to pay alimony! He feels guilty as hell. He thinks he alone is responsible for the failure of the marriage and should pay for it. Also, don't forget that while Borges is kind, generous, humble, imaginative, and noble, courage isn't part of his character. When his wife cursed him loudly at the airport once, with people all about listening in, he just stood there next to me with head bowed taking it without a word of rejoinder. He'll do anything to avoid facing up to a situation and asserting himself."

"Does his religion have anything to do with this self-abnegation?" I asked.

"Not really," Norman replied. "But his religion is one of the things that makes Borges so different from other Latin American intellectuals. Though his mother is a devout Catholic and his father was an atheist, Borges is a Protestant at heart. 'What Protestant church do you think I should join?' he once asked me only half jokingly. Ethics and belief in the value of *work* are central with Borges. When we were working on the autobiography last year, I wrote the phrase 'Amateur Protestant that I am . . .,' and he exclaimed with delight: 'That's it! That's exactly it!'"

The moment Borges arrived for dinner, we started arguing. I'd just come back from Mar del Plata with Norman and his wife, Heather, and remarked about Buenos Aires's clammy heat.

"In my childhood we were not aware of such changes in the weather," Borges said. "At least it was not the custom to mention them. My father wore a thick coat with a high collar and a neckerchief at all times. Maybe it was cooler that way."

"Take your coat off and relax, Borges," I said, mopping my forehead.

"I'll take my coat off, but not my tie," he said. "Don't move me ahead too fast! Where have you been besides Mar del Plata? And what's new in poetry?"

I read him a poem by Stanley Kunitz, "After Pastor Bonhoeffer," and I told him I'd had a talk with García Márquez. "I know you won't read *Cien Años de Soledad*," I said, "in view of what Bioy Cáseres has told you about it—a bad novel, incompetently written—but he's wrong. It's a great novel, comparable to *Don Quixote*. García Márquez, by the way, is a great admirer of yours."

He looked pleased. "How can we judge the work of others when we can't even judge our own? Cervantes thought that his only good book was a dull, obscure work entitled *Trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda: un novela septentrional*. I've been rereading Sinclair Lewis recently. Did you ever know him?"

I told him about the time I was an undergraduate at Yale and accompanied Lewis to the library to present (unsuccessfully) his Nobel medal.

"He's not a great writer," Borges said, "but he's a good one. The best thing about him is that he makes you sympathize with even the characters he ridicules, like Babbitt. He must have been a kind man."

"When he wasn't drunk," Norman said.

"Do you know why I don't drink?" Borges said. "Because when I was a young man I used to drink a lot of whisky Saturday nights, and one day I heard myself referred to as 'that drunkard, Borges.' Naturally I didn't want to go through life being considered a drunkard, so I stopped drinking."

"Lewis wasn't a drunkard but he certainly was drunk that day at Yale. But now let me ask you one. Did you ever meet Stevenson? And how can you consider him a major writer? For me he's minor—compared to you, for instance!"

"Thank you very much," he said, with a courtly smile in my direction. "I'm grateful, and sorry for you at the same time!—As I was when you referred to Neruda as a major poet. I think Neruda was a poet of some talent, derivative of Whitman, who gave up writing poems for political tracts. To me a 'major' poem is any very good poem, so a man who writes even

one good poem, like George Meredith, for example, may be classified major. No?"

"Emphatically no," I said. "The distinction has to do with the whole body of a poet's work. If it changes poetry, the times, the race, it's major. Whitman and Neruda are major, no matter how many bad poems they wrote—and they wrote a lot, though Neruda has written some of his best in this decade, unlike Whitman who wrote very few after 'Song of Myself.' Poe, on the other hand, is minor—except perhaps to the French."

"Yes, I agree with that. Only his stories survive," Borges said.

"And a very few poems, like 'Sonnet to Science,' with magical lines—"

"Like that one of Whitman I didn't get? How did it go?"

"I repose by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors." Norman said. "Not bad as an epitaph for an elevator operator!"

"The line the French consider their greatest—'*La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë*'—doesn't even sound like a good epitaph for Racine's heroine," I said. "But would any French poet be stunned by Milton's 'Smoothing the raven down of darkness till it smiled?'"

"I am," Borges said, "that's major!"

"Thanks for putting that word back in circulation, Borges," I said. "You consider *Don Segundo Sombra* a major novel?"

"Certainly not," Borges said, "though a quite interesting one. But it came out of *Kim*, a better book, just as *Kim* came out of *Huckleberry Finn*, a still better one. It was based on an actual character, you know. Don Segundo Ramirez Sombra actually existed. Maybe that is why the character is not larger than life. The book is an elegy for a vanished time. Daydreaming, wishful thinking by a conservative about the *criollo* past. Guiraldes died in 1927 of cancer, the year after this best of his books came out here."

"You knew him?"

"He came to our house in Montevideo once on his way to

Europe. He was very sad to be leaving and asked if he could leave his guitar on our sofa as a kind of symbolic pledge that he would return. He was a gentleman, never saying an unkind word about anyone."

"Speaking of gentlemen," I said, "I remember that that was the word you used to describe Juan Onganía two years ago. You regard the present strong man as highly?"

"I had an audience with President Levingston some weeks ago," Borges replied, "hoping to get him to raise the salaries of the Library employees who get an average \$65 a month. You know what came of it? He raised *my* salary of \$200 a month, which was perfectly adequate, and none of the others . . . No, it's a big step backward. They don't have any ideas for spending that make any sense. Like this repaving of Calle Florida, which only causes confusion. My chain of command used to go from me to the Minister of Education and then to the President. Now it's an organigram. There are seven links—seven dead bodies I must step over, and all receiving big salaries for doing nothing."

"Well," I said, "Chile has finally gotten Allende. Argentina's turn may be next."

"They've gotten what they wanted by way of free elections," Borges said, "—the fetish that brought us Perón, twice! We'll go to the dogs, if we go, via free elections. . . . But my philosophy is that some day we will deserve *not* to have governments."

"You really turn him on," Norman said, after we'd taken Borges back to his mother's apartment. "I haven't seen him so animated in months. Here they fawn on him and bore the hell out of him. He loves being told he's all wet once in a while, being introduced to new things. I wish I could accompany you to the Library to say good-by to him."

Borges was standing up, talking to Bioy Cáseres on the phone, when I entered his office. When he'd finished he

apologized and sat down with me at the long table. "How did you come up?" he asked.

"On foot," I said, "the elevator wasn't working."

He chuckled. "Why don't you say 'lift'? It's so much shorter. But Americans, though always in a hurry, use the four-syllable 'elevator.' You use 'garbage can' too, though there's a shorter word for that. But maybe you don't use it at all, it's such a disagreeable word!"

I assured him we had plenty of short words—"like 'can' for *escusado*, 'balls' for *cojones*, 'lab' for 'laboratory,' and so on. But we have lots of words that are much too long, I agree; like 'explicate' for what a professor does to a poem he can't get through his senses—"

"'Explicate?'" he said, "not just 'explain'? That's fantastic!"

"What are you working on now, Borges?"

"An article on Keats."

"Saying—?"

"I don't know. I'll find out when I start writing it."

"I'm relieved to hear you say what I've said so often. To publishers especially."

"They think a book starts with an outline."

"Instead of a feeling."

"You like Keats?" Borges asked.

"Tremendously. The letters, which reveal the man, are the best in the language. The longer poems, well—"

"They're not very good, are they? Not many long poems are—"

"But the shorter ones, beginning with 'Chapman's Homer'—"

"Even that one is a little dated, isn't it? 'Much have I travelled in the realms of gold' has an artificial ring, hasn't it?"

"Perhaps deliberately," I said, "but the sestet is superb, with one unforgettable line—"

"'Looked at each other with a wild surmise?'"

"Yes. The syllables trip over each other to convey the excitement. Just as the line from Blake I quoted to you last week—"The lost traveller's dream under the hill"—has the

opposite effect, interminably stretched out to suggest death. I'm more moved by Blake at this point in my life."

"He got all that from Swedenborg, didn't he?" Borges said.

"Only what he found usable, what echoed his own philosophy. Swedenborg didn't see those 'dark Satanic mills' as the obverse side of the 'garden of love' . . . By the way, I've never heard you mention Emily Dickinson."

"I like her, of course," Borges said, "but not as much as Emerson, a happier spirit."

"Were you pulling my leg two years ago when you said you'd never heard of Vallejo?"

"No!" he looked deliberately startled. "Not at all. Who is he?"

"Come on, Borges, you must have at least *heard* of the most famous South American poet after Neruda."

He laughed. "What the hell do I have to do with South America?"

"But he is a great poet, Borges, and not at all a public, declamatory one like Neruda. You might even like him!"

"Great poets are overrated. Whom would you consider the great Spanish poets?"

"Quevedo? Góngora?—"

"Very overrated, both. Góngora is famous for his influence on the Elizabethan poets of England. Quevedo is not interesting. I much prefer Fray Luis de León—"

"Who?"

"You see! Never heard of him?"

"Never. What is his poetry like?"

"Full of serenity. Unobtrusive rhymes . . . Beauty is very common actually. In the future maybe everyone will be a poet . . . But to come back to Keats, do you know Kipling's story 'Wireless'? It's about Keats and Fanny Brawne. You must read it. Come. I'll show you."

We went into a dark corridor and I guided him through two closed doors to a book-lined chamber. He went to a shelf containing a thirty-volume set of Kipling in red. "Which volume, Borges?"

"No idea. Let's start with the first."

"I'll miss my plane to Rio!" I read him the table of contents of the first three volumes while he stopped to give me the plots of several favorites. Fortunately 'Wireless' was in the fourth volume. I skimmed through it. We walked down into the lobby and he accompanied me to the revolving door.

"I hate to put you in this," I said.

"It's like a whirlpool. I may be scrambled."

"You may come out changed."

"I hope so."

8

The talks I had with Borges during my third and last visit to Buenos Aires, in 1972, revolved about the book of new stories he'd just published,⁴ and an anthology of English poets I was then working on and which he asked me to read him.

When I arrived at the Library about nine in the evening he'd just finished a session with Maria Kodama with whom he was studying Norse and Old English. We took a taxi to a restaurant. The street was torn up, and as we stumbled over potholes to the entrance he said: "This country is going to the dogs, isn't it? First we gave up being Spanish. Then we became amateur Frenchmen. Then came the English stage, followed by the Hollywood one. Now—mere ignorance! . . . Of course," he added, as we selected a table, "no one admires commercial empires, and that's the only side of the United States most Argentines ever see. Besides, you're a Protestant country. Catholics don't think in terms of right and wrong."

As he settled down to his frugal repast of honeydew melon draped with thin slices of ham, I asked him for his version of Neruda's Paris-bound transit of Buenos Aires some months ago. "Ask him," Norman had said, after telling me with considerable outrage of Borges's failure to respond to the generous telegram the Nobel laureate had dispatched from

⁴ *Doctor Brodie's Report* by Jorge Luis Borges, translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author, New York, Dutton, 1972.

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Santiago requesting an audience with "Argentina's greatest poet."

"Of course I couldn't see the ambassador of a Communist government," Borges said; and then, perhaps recalling my friendship with Neruda, he added: "To be sure, he's a fine writer. We did meet forty years ago. At that time we were both influenced by Whitman and I said, jokingly in part, 'I don't think anything can be done in Spanish, do you?' Neruda agreed, but we decided it was too late for us to write our verse in English. We'd have to make the best of a second-rate literature."

"It's that poor, Spanish?" I said.

"Of course. For one thing, the words are too long. English has the short Saxon words. Then a Milton comes along and mixes them with the long Latin ones. Or take Shakespeare's 'seas incarnadine.' Speaking of which," he added, "Pound inverts words so badly in his version of that great poem, 'The Seafarer': 'May I for myself songs truth reckon . . .'"

I thought of Borges's *mot*, "writers invent their own fore-runners," when he next proceeded to tell me that a Southern soldier in our Civil War, Henry Timrod, "is one of the fine American poets."

"I finished *Doctor Brodie's Report* on the plane from Rio, Borges," I said. "I couldn't help wondering how you reconcile such overwhelming pessimism with such a hopeful statement as 'Some day we will deserve not to have governments.'"

"It's inconsistent, I admit," he said. "My father was an anarchist. I prefer to think that about future governments rather than abandon myself to the more probable fate of the Yahoos."

"You say in one of the stories, 'lost, as some day all things will be lost.' You believe that?"

"I *hope* all things will be lost?"

"Then why do you write?"

"What else have I got to do? Wasn't it Carlyle who said: 'Any human achievement is worthless, but the achieving is worthwhile?'"

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"Shakespeare seemed convinced he would survive through his poems."

"*Aere monumenta?* That was a hoary literary convention. He stopped writing when he'd made enough money to retire, and he surely didn't expect that the 1623 Folio would ever be published. Writing was not taken too seriously then, and I don't take it too seriously."

"I was thinking as I drove over this afternoon—did you ever consider writing a story about one of these underground Nazis in B.A.? One who had finally become a decent human being, for instance, only to discover that society wouldn't let him?"

"No, I don't like the Germans," he said. "I went there six or seven years ago and found them so cringing, so wallowing in self-pity. I never heard one say a bad word about the German character—or even about Hitler."

"Your new stories are full of knife fights. Did you ever see one?"

"No. But I did see a man shot in a senseless vendetta once, in Uruguay."

My next question was triggered by a talk I had had the day before with Alastair Reid, about the lack of "motivation" in the characters of these new stories. "North Americans," Reid said, "have been brought up in a psychoanalytic world where everything must have an explanation—a rational one. Life, however, is what happens, not what can be explained. These are Borges's greatest stories because they are purified of motivational or metaphysical props. Borges likes to call Kipling's *Plain Tales from the Hills* the ultimate stories because they are the simplest. Latin American literature—whether Borges, García Márquez, Neruda—is written from the posture of humanity, and against theories of any kind which are death."

"Why does the protagonist of 'An Unworthy Friend' turn on his friend?" I asked Borges. "It seems an inexplicable act."

"The story is confessional," Borges replied. "When I was a student in Switzerland during the First War, a boy wanted to

be my friend and I rebuffed him—feeling that I was unworthy. So in the story I made myself a Jew boy, to dramatize it, and went further than rebuffing, to actual betrayal. But it's still a confession!"

"In 'The Gospel According to St. Mark'—"

"I think I should rewrite that one," Borges said. "The climax [when the boy who's been reading the account of the Crucifixion to the credulous peasant family is led to the cross on which they will re-enact the drama] is too abrupt and tricky. There are hints, but I think I should make it clear that he suspects what will happen, and then bamboozles himself into believing that he's safe."

"It's a great story as it is," I said. "Why cushion the reader's shock?"

"You think so? Then I won't tamper with it."

"It may be your best."

"I think 'The Intruder' is better. It's my most economical story. We aren't told about the way the woman is killed. That's better than melodrama, don't you think? You've noticed the older brother is the only one who speaks? It's always 'they talked' but 'he says.' So the reader is made aware that the decisions are his; the others have no authority. But people read into it such absurdities! Someone actually said to me 'Those two brothers were in love with each other.' Some people have to find homosexuality or incest or hidden meanings in everything. They can't accept a good story as a good story."

"What touched off 'La Intrusa'?"

"I'd just read Kipling's 'Beyond the Pale,' impressed by its terseness. I said to Vlady who happened to be with me, 'Now I'll write something . . .'"

"And 'Guayaquil'?"

"The point of that story is that the two of them *become* Bolívar and San Martín, and as it happened historically, the better man won. I was also taking a dig at the Argentine nationalists for their hero-worship of General San Martín. Why did his alter ego yield? He was a pompous fool from the start.

The story would have broken down if their conversation had been longer."

I took him home in a taxi about eleven. The driver dropped us quite a way from his door. He said he'd walk by himself, but I wouldn't let him. "How do you know we're even on the right street, Borges?"

"I know."

"You could see me, at the restaurant—in outline?"

"Only your hands."

"If I lie down on this doorstep you may see my face."

"Don't do it," he said, as his key slipped into the lock, "what you'd see would be even more ugly than what you see now!"

9

At the Library the next afternoon I read Borges the contents of my new British anthology and then those poems which he remembered or asked to hear. It was hard to wrench him beyond *Beowulf*. He liked my version of *Piers Ploughman*, and he said that Dunbar was an old favorite of his. He wanted to hear the one Shakespearean song he didn't know ("The master, the swabber, the boatswain and I . . ."). He approved my choice among the several versions of "Tom O'Bedlam." He quoted almost flawlessly Milton's "Sonnet on His Blindness." He speculated about the inferiority of *Paradise Regained*, quoting from memory,

. . . He, unobserved,
Home to his mother's house private returned.

"How could he? How could he! After the splendid conclusion to *Paradise Lost*! Surely it wasn't his blindness, for he was blind writing both poems."

Of Grey's "Elegy" he remarked: "Valéry's 'Cimetière Marin,' an inferior poem, is based on it, don't you think?"

There really are no first-rate French poets—Hugo included."

"You almost convinced me of the contrary three years ago," I said. "Do you approve my large selection of Burns?"

"Burns was only a great song writer, and popular songs can't be judged any longer as poetry. For instance 'Drink to me only with thine eyes,' which may once have been thrilling."

I read him the bawdy 'Is there for honest poverty . . .' to see whether he'd be as shocked by the four-letter words as Norman said he would be, but he made no comment. When I came to Blake, he urged me to include the passage from 'Uthune' ('Uriel?'), intoning

. . . But nets of steel and traps of adamant
. . . Girls of mild silver or of furious gold
. . . I'll lie beside thee on a bank
in lovely copulation, bliss on bliss. . .

—repeating the last line over and over, with evident relish.

(I recalled that when a daring student in Oklahoma had once asked Borges, "Why is there so little sex in your stories?" Borges had replied, "Perhaps because I am thinking about it too much." And I remembered Norman telling me that Borges called this ditty which he'd found in a Buenos Aires men's room—

La mierda no la pintura,
El dedo no lo pincel;
No sea hijo de puta,
Limpieza con papel—

"excellent didactic verse" and that he'd suggested to Norman that he write it on the wall of an American college lavatory "as a gesture of cultural exchange," which Norman gladly did.)

Among the poets of this century Borges, not surprisingly, showed little interest in Owen, Hardy, or Lawrence, but be-

rated me for not having included Kipling's "best poem" ("Harp Song of the Dane Women") or anything of G. K. Chesterton at all.

As I was getting up to go I remembered what we'd been talking about yesterday. "I think you're of two minds about immortality, Borges," I said.

"Can you prove it?"

"In 'Delia Elena San Marco,' which I read last night for the first time, you say, 'Man invents farewells because he knows he's immortal,' and in another of your poems, 'The Saxon Poet,' aren't you positing a kind of immortality when you say, 'Today you are *my* voice,' and then ask that 'some verse of mine survive on a night favorable to memory'?"

"Well," he said, after some thought, "I suppose *that* kind of immortality I do believe in. It's not personal. I won't be aware of it. And I certainly won't get a kick out of it!"

"I wrote a poem yesterday," he confided, as we walked toward the door, "with a deliberately flat beginning. My idea is to work up to ecstasy at the end. The first part was very easy!"

10

"I spent a good part of last night in bed thinking about your anthology," Borges said when Norman and I met him in the park the following morning for some pictures. "Instead of poems that seem 'modern' I would have adopted the reverse principle. I mean I would have selected poems that seem completely *un-modern*: about old virtues like loyalty, and so on. We shouldn't be reminded of what we are—I mean like that stanza from Byron's *Don Juan* about the blacks, or Shelley's description of the London slums—but of what we were."

"But were we ever?" I said. "I'm more interested in the similarities. The constant is our common perversity and humanity. And the discovery of those ties will draw the reader from the new to the old, through what never changes."

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"Well, maybe," he said dubiously, "but it wouldn't be my touchstone."

"It surely wouldn't," said Norman as we crossed the square, with Borges tapping his way ahead of us with his cane. "When Borges makes an anthology his criticism is narrower: he selects only what reminds him of himself."

"That Burns poem you read me," Borges said as we caught up with him, "is really nonsensical, isn't it?"

"Didn't I tell you," Norman whispered, "that he'd never accept those dirty words! It took him a whole day to come out and tell you!"

"Those figures you were giving me on the phone, Norman," Borges said. "It can't be possible—46,000 copies of our new book before publication?"

"Before any are even *bought*, Borges."

"Before anybody even *reads* them," I added.

"When they do, they'll throw the book away," said Borges, smiling.

"But it will be too late!" I said.

"Yes," he chuckled, "they won't be able to get their money back, will they?"

37