

The following are excerpts of the first part of *Borges: A Literary Biography* soon to be published by Dutton.

## Borges, the Reader

X THE ACT OF READING/ Borges learned to read English before Spanish. He even first read *Don Quixote* in an English translation. From the very beginning the English language was inseparably related to the act of reading. For Georgie (as he was called at home) it became a code giving him access to the world of books. That world came to be more infinite and more fabulous than the real world because it was limited only by the imagination. From that moment on reading to Georgie meant reading in English. Here one can find the origin of his personal myth and of his well-known predilection for British—and, by extension, North American—letters. At the same time, something much more important also originated here: the dual attitude of desire and guilt that will haunt the child and especially the writer. However, his familiarity with English and English letters did not make him an English writer. He never felt that English really belonged to him. Turning to the subject in his "Autobiographical Essay," and with a humility that sometimes seems excessive but that is undoubtedly authentic, he mentioned his conflict with a language "I am unworthy to handle, a language I often wish had been my birthright" (*The Aleph and Other Stories*. Edited and translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970; p. 258). The other side of that conflictive attitude of desire and guilt was his exasperation, and resignation, vis-à-vis the Spanish language, which did belong to him as his birthright.

For Georgie, the fact that he learned to read English before Spanish, which now can seem so strange, and, as it were, even artificial (he seemed to be the victim of a Baroque experiment, like Prince Segismundo in *Life Is a Dream*) was not at all artificial as a conscious experience. Linguistic duplicity was rooted in a basic fact of his home life. Living with his parents was his paternal grandmother, Frances Haslam, who had been born in England. Though she had come to Argentina as a young woman and, once there, had married an Argentine gentleman, Fanny continued to inhabit an English-speaking world. Like so many of her compatriots, she carried the imperial language with her. She taught English not only to her son but to her grandson as well. Even her daughter-in-law would eventually be colonized. The peculiar conditions which gave rise to the bilingualism of the Borges household explain why speaking and reading and, later, even writing in a

language which was not that of his native country, meant nothing unusual for Georgie. In his home (a closed, autarchical, confined world) English was, too, a natural language. Only when going to school did Georgie discover that this language, nevertheless, belonged to him a little less than the other did.

To understand better this process of discovery, desire and guilt, it will be necessary to turn to the time before he learned to read, when Georgie was still bilingual without knowing it. Since both English and Spanish were spoken at home, the child was unaware for some time that they were two different languages. Years later he would say to one of his interviewers, Rita Guibert: "When I was talking to my paternal grandmother I had to speak in a manner that I afterwards discovered was called English, and when I was talking to my mother or her parents I had to talk a language that afterwards turned out to be Spanish" (*Seven Voices*. Trans. Frances Partridge. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973; p. 81). It is obvious that in Georgie's experience, rather than being two different languages, English and Spanish more nearly resembled two systems of address, like the alternative of calling somebody by his surname instead of using the Christian name.

The conflict began to reach a critical stage when Georgie started reading in English. For it was precisely his paternal grandmother who took charge of this part of his education. Here is a scene evoked by Alicia Jurado, one of his biographers, who was undoubtedly relying on information confided to her by Borges or his mother: "Before he learned the alphabet, Fanny Haslam used to sit him on her lap and read to him from some children's magazines in English, bound in a very heavy volume he called the 'lectionary,' a word that united both the idea of a dictionary and a lecture" (*Genio y figura de Jorge Luis Borges*. Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1964; p. 26). Perhaps these bound volumes contained a collection of the popular Victorian magazine, *The Boy's Own Journal*, or the no less famous, *Tid-bits*, though perhaps the latter would have been too melodramatic for Fanny Haslam. The fact that the volumes were already bound suggests that the grandmother had used them also for the father's education. In any case, the coining of the word "lectionary" shows an early tendency in Georgie to manipulate language, inventing one of those *porte-manteaux* words whose structure would be dismantled by Borges much later in an article on *Finnegan's Wake* ("Joyce y los neologismos," *Sur*, No. 62, November 1939; pp. 59-61).

After a time the child passed from the stage of being read to and went on reading himself. His instruction was placed in the hands of an English governess, Miss Tink, who would also look after his

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sister Norah, two years younger. The reason the family gave for not sending the children to school, where instruction was naturally in Spanish, was its dread of contagious diseases. That is at least what Alicia Jurado reports (*Genio y figura*, p. 28). But the author is perhaps more candid in his "Autobiographical Essay": "I did not start school until I was nine. This was because my father, as an anarchist, distrusted all enterprises run by the State" (*The Aleph*, pp. 211-12). One must remember that when Borges says here that his father was an anarchist, he means it in a purely philosophical sense, since his father counted himself among the followers of Spencer, not Bakunin.

Perhaps there were religious motives as well to avoid the State schools. As religious instruction was regularly given in those schools, his father probably did not wish to have the children exposed at such an early age to dogmatic instruction. Besides, the English grandmother was a Protestant. At any rate, the immediate consequence of not attending school and of having instead an English governess was that Georgie would continue to develop even further his knowledge of English as the language of culture, while Spanish would be relegated to strictly family use. On the other hand, even if Georgie had gone to the State school at a younger age, his attitude toward the Spanish language as a literary code would probably not have been much different. English was too deeply rooted in him. Looking back over the span of years, Borges has spoken of his bilingualism in these bilingual terms: "I am used to thinking in English, and I also believe some English words are untranslatable, so I occasionally use them *for the sake of precision. I'm not showing off. Since I've done most of my reading in English*, it's natural that the first word that comes to mind is often an English one" (*Seven Voices*, p. 100; the italicized words are in English in the Spanish original of this interview, published in *Life en Español*, vol. 31, No. 5, March 11, 1968; p. 55).

The attitude of the Borgeses towards the State schools was not as unusual in Argentina at the turn of the century as one might think. In the upper classes there was at the time an ambivalent attitude toward everything Hispanic, which in a subtle way also affected the language insofar as it was called Spanish. Actually many cultivated Argentines preferred to call it *Idioma Nacional* (National Tongue) so as to avoid peninsular connotations. There was also an added consideration, which Borges underlines: "In Buenos Aires, Spaniards always held menial jobs—as domestic servants, waiters, and laborers—or were small tradesmen, and we Argentines never thought of ourselves as Spanish. We had, in fact, left off being Spaniards in 1816, when we declared our independence from Spain. When, as a boy, I read Prescott's *Conquest of Peru*, it amazed me to find that he portrayed the conquistadors in a romantic way. To me, descended from certain of these officials, they were an uninteresting lot" (*The Aleph*, pp. 218-19). Where Georgie's father did not hold to the tradition of the Argentine upper classes was in the question of which cultural model to follow. In Argentina, as in almost all of Latin America, that model was the French one. Well-to-do people sent their children to French schools. Many writers (especially women) preferred

that language as their means of expression. One of the most remarkable cases was that of Victoria Ocampo, who was later to be so influential in Borges' literary career. She was schooled by a French governess, was given diction lessons with Marguerite Moréno—an outstanding actress from the Comédie Française and the wife of the writer Marcel Schwob—and wrote her first books in French. For though her native language was Spanish, French was her literary language. In time Victoria Ocampo would learn to write directly in Spanish. But her case, while perhaps extreme, was not exceptional.

Argentina at the time (like the United States in the nineteenth century) was a land of immigrants still clinging to Old World traditions and languages. Of the immigrants who made up the varied spectrum in Argentina those most firmly attached to their language were the English, a category which would naturally include Scots, Welsh, and Irish. As if it were their only true heritage, the English preserved their language against all possible contamination. The oldest among them got along with an almost total ignorance of Spanish or with the barest vocabulary. The second generation (of which Borges' father was a good example) was perforce bilingual but did not abandon its attachment to the original language; rather it changed English into an instrument of culture, a tool of the spirit. No effort seemed excessive to them when it came to defending that umbilical cord that united them to the center of the Empire. They lived in Argentina as their compatriots did in India. It is not surprising then that Borges would feel such an admiration for the work of Rudyard Kipling.

Though the Borges family may not have been wealthy, they had a British governess to protect their children against all forms of contagion, and not just from childhood diseases. Added to these solid family reasons there was then rampant in Argentina a sort of pro-British snobbery which would increase and eventually dominate Buenos Aires society as the century advanced. French fashions were giving way little by little to English ones. This change had an economic base. For even though Argentina had been within a French-influenced cultural sphere since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the independence of the entire River Plate area was achieved from the economic standpoint under the aegis of British diplomacy and commerce. Until the Second World War Argentina belonged to the pound area and virtually was part of the Commonwealth. Even at the end of the war, when Perón seized power, English imperialism was to be one of his main targets. Some time later, in 1955, England would openly support the military revolt that overthrew him. Owing to these circumstances, it was not unusual for Argentine families without any English members whatsoever to send their children to local British schools or, in the case of wealthy families to have British governesses. What today seems very unusual was at that time a consequence of the colonial status of the economy and of Argentine culture. In Borges' case that cultural colonialism was even more justified because the unwitting colonizer was already permanently set up at home.

That paradoxical situation, normal in appearance to the child though in reality profoundly

anomalous, was only later to provoke a crisis. Even though Georgie was "naturally" bilingual, his bilingualism already contained the seeds of a fateful distinction between the two languages. The act of reading in English when he had still not learned to do it in Spanish established a radical and decisive difference between the two codes. English became the key to reading and writing. Imagination, dreams, and longings that were aroused or intensified by books would become known to Georgie in English. In English and only in English would they exist for him. In that language he would subsequently find a key with which to decipher invisible words. Spanish, by contrast, was not only the language of his mother's side of the family (less valid from a cultural point of view because the child could not read it), but the language of servants, those anonymous Galicians and Basques that kept coming to the River Plate area in search of an elusive Eldorado. Thus, until the child was well along in years, Spanish would not be a language of culture or, still less, a literary code.

As Georgie grew and became ever more aware of the world outside his home, the strangeness of his fate began to dawn on him. Like the Minotaur in his story, "The House of Asterion," Georgie had no idea of his uniqueness. But away from the confines of his home he found that in the outside world things happened in a different way, people spoke a single language, and their values were different. Inside there remained the restricted and bilingual world of home, where English and Spanish (in that order of cultural and even social importance) alternated smoothly. At the garden gate began the exclusive domain of Spanish, a powerful but undeniable common language. No wonder that from then on Georgie associated this language with a more primitive or elemental form of life at the same time that English (his father's and his grandmother's tongue, the language of books) afforded him access to a higher level of life, to a dream and desire tantalizingly controlled by words and books. Of the two linguistic codes that the boy learned in his childhood, his mother's would be the culturally inferior one. Herein lies the origin of a linguistic crisis which pervaded the entire experience of the writer and to which he would attempt to give a paradoxical reply with a work that, while written in that "inferior language," Spanish, is structured in accordance with the English tongue. On the literary as well as the biographical level, Georgie would become Borges. The child who had an early access to the English code of reading and writing and who theoretically could have become an English writer (George Borges) was to transform himself into an Hispanic writer (Jorge Luis Borges), reverting to the code originally taught by his mother. But though Borges might develop an awesome mastery of Spanish and become the language's foremost writer, he would always feel that he had lost total mastery of the other code.

The future struggle between English and Spanish on the level of writing and literary production appeared in an already defined form (though visible only at the subconscious level) in the basic act of reading. On the conscious level the child accepted and learned the two languages, went from one to the other with complete ease, and handled all the rules

without apparent effort. But on the subconscious level the linguistic conflict was implanted in the core of his experience and caused an inner split in Georgie before doing likewise to Borges. As soon as Georgie reached total awareness, through the basic act of reading, of those two languages that were his without his knowing it, duplicity took root in him. The two codes appeared facing each other, as in a mirror. On learning to read the child had had no way out other than accepting his bilingualism. Now he realized that the garden gate separated something more than home and the city. It was the dividing line between two linguistic systems. It was Alice's mirror. Gradually Georgie would learn to cross at will from one side to the other. The unconscious daily experience of bilingualism would become the conscious experience, accepted without argument and gone through without the effort of crossing "through the looking glass." It would be, in the end, trivial. But duplicity, once consciously discovered, would never leave him again.

**X** THE FAMILY MUSEUM/ Borges once said that he believed to have been brought up in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, "in a district full of adventurous streets and visible sunsets. But the truth is that I was brought up in a garden, behind a speared railing, and in a library of unlimited English books" (*Evaristo Carriego*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1955; p. 9). He was actually brought up in his father's library. Years later, he would simplify further his life (the writing of his life) by stating: "If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library. In fact, sometimes I think I have never strayed outside that library" (*The Aleph*, p. 209). Borges' imaginary life finds its roots in this library and, up to a point, it would be possible to write his literary biography without leaving that magic space of "unlimited English books." But the truth (what one can think the truth is) seems more complex: Borges lived, simultaneously, inside and outside his father's library; he was an inhabitant of the imaginary world created by the English books and of the real world of that Buenos Aires district with the inevitable Italian name, Palermo, where he actually spent his childhood. The first thing then to do in writing his biography would be to set the library in its context: a house with a garden in Palermo at the beginning of this century. Or, perhaps, it would even be better to move backwards a few years and land in the very moment and place in which Borges was born.

It happened in another part of Buenos Aires, closer to the downtown area: a house at 840 Tucumán Street. It was a "small, unassuming" house: "Like most of the houses of that day, it had a flat roof; a long, arched entranceway, called a *zaguán*; a cistern where we got our water; and two patios" (*The Aleph*, p. 203). This house which years later his sister, Norah, would recreate in her drawings and paintings, belonged to his mother's parents; it was the house where she had also been born in 1876. Both grandparents were still alive at the turn of the century, when Borges was born. There is a daguerreotype still preserved by the family that shows don Isidoro de Acevedo Laprida and his wife, doña Leo-

nor Suárez Haedo. They are standing very formally, arm in arm. He is taller and sports a thick dark beard; she also has very dark hair, parted in the middle. Both appeared to be dignified, responsible people in spite of their youth at the time the plate was made. In his younger years, don Isidoro had fought in the civil war against Rosas, the "tyrant" who ruled Argentina from 1835 to 1852. Later, don Isidoro retired for a long secluded life at home. Borges knew very little of him. In a poem, "Isidoro Acevedo," he admits he had only some dates and place names by which to remember him: "frauds and failing of the words" (*Selected Poems*. Trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni. New York: Delacorte Press, 1972; p. 53). But what he knew was enough. He knew that in dying in 1905, his grandfather had revived his faraway heroic days and died the death of a hero.

While a lung ailment ate away at him  
and hallucinatory fevers distorted the face of the day,  
he assembled the burning documents of his memory  
for the forging of his dream.

In the visionary defense of his country that his faith  
hungered for (and not that his fever imposed)  
he plundered his days  
and rounded up an army of Buenos Aires ghosts  
so as to get himself killed in the fighting.

That was how, in a bedroom that looked into the  
garden,  
he died out of devotion for his city.  
(*Selected Poems*, pp. 53-55)

The poem also documents Georgie's incredulity at the news of his grandfather's death, the first in his experience.

It was in the metaphor of a journey that I was told  
of his death, and I did not believe it.  
I was a boy, who knew nothing of dying; I was  
immortal,  
and afterwards for days I searched the sunless rooms  
for him.

(*Selected Poems*, pp. 53-55)

Many years later, Borges would base one of his fantastic stories, "The Other Death," on his grandfather's last dream of a heroic end. It was not in that sad household in the summer of 1905 that the child was born, but in the very happy home of his grandparents, some six years before, in the winter of 1899—the twenty-fourth of August, to be precise. It was usual then that young married couples lived with their relatives during the first years of marriage. It smoothed the transition and helped enormously in the event of births. Georgie was born prematurely, in the eighth month of his mother's pregnancy. As blindness was endemic in the Borges family, and the father had very weak eyes, the first thing he did was to examine his son's eyes. The baby had blue eyes, like his wife. "He is saved," he told her: "He has your eyes." But the father was wrong: Georgie would be affected, like him, with near blindness for the best part of his life: he would be the sixth generation of the Borges to be so afflicted.

For a while the family had no worries. A second child, a daughter, Norah, was born in 1901. She

was beautiful and had immense lovely eyes. In the extant photographs of the time, both their parents look splendid. It is easy to see that they conformed strictly to fashion: don Jorge (as he was called) wears stiff collars and a slightly Kaiserian mustache. The weak eyes, a bit dreamy, and the thin pointed jaw denied any martial air the mustache might have suggested. He really looks like a *jeune premier* in a French comedy. Doña Leonor, whom everybody to this day calls Leonorcita, was very slim and had beautiful blue eyes. She is seen wearing a straw hat that looks like a dish of flowers. Her eyes are dreamy, too, but stronger. *Une jeune fille bien rangée*, they probably said of her before her marriage. In the photograph, taken in 1904, she is already a young matron, poised, reserved, conventional.

Georgie will never address his parents with the familiar Mummy and Daddy that were so common already. He will always call them Mother and Father, in a traditional form that suggests the Victorian household. Both parents came from old traditional families, rooted in South America since the time of the Spanish conquest. Through her family, the mother was related to Francisco Narciso de Laprida who presided in 1816 over the Congress of Tucumán in which Argentine independence was declared. He died in 1829, in an early civil war. More than a century later, Borges will dedicate to him one of his most effective pieces, "Conjectural Poem," in which he presents Laprida evoking his own death at the hands of the rebellious gauchos and contrasts his destiny as a scholar with his savage end.

I who longed to be someone else, to weigh  
judgments, to read books, to hand down the law,  
will lie in the open put in these swamps;  
but a secret joy somehow swells my breast.  
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. At last I've discovered  
the mysterious key to all my years,  
the fate of Francisco de Laprida,  
the missing letter, the perfect pattern  
that was known to God from the beginning.  
In this night's mirror I can comprehend  
my unsuspected true face. The circle's  
about to close. I wait to let it come.

My feet tread the shadows of the lances  
that spar for the kill. The taunts of my death,  
the horses, the horsemen, the horse's manes,  
tighten the ring around me . . . Now for the first  
blow, the lance's hard steel ripping my chest,  
and across my throat the intimate knife.

(*Selected Poems*, pp. 83-85)

The mother's grandfather, Colonel Isidoro Suárez, had also fought in the war of independence and went into exile in Uruguay at the time of the Rosas dictatorship. He married into a Uruguayan family, the Haedos, which has been very active in political and artistic life up until now. Borges would later dedicate

<sup>1</sup> This anecdote was communicated to me by Mrs. Leonor Acevedo de Borges in Buenos Aires, August 1971.

a poem to him. Entitled, "A Page to Commemorate Colonel Suárez, Victor at Junín," the poem is, like the others devoted to the family pantheon of heroes, congealed in a single instant: the heroic deed at Junín which the old man is continuously reenacting. But there is a difference. At the very end of the poem, the distant past is suddenly made present by an allusion to the times in which his grandson is living. His ancestor's fight is made one with the fight against another unnamed Argentine dictator who was ruling Argentina in 1953:

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."

(Selected Poems, trans. Alastair Reed, p. 91)

Borges' family piety is undoubtedly rooted in his mother's attitude toward her ancestors. Georgie was born and brought up in a house that was, up to a point, a family museum, presided over from the beginning by the almost ghostly presence of grandfather Acevedo. The place of honor went to the swords that liberated South America in Junín and Cepeda, to the uniforms carefully preserved against the injury of moths, to the daguerreotypes severely framed in black velvet that paraded a theory of dark sad gentlemen, or reserved ladies, many of them widowed. Georgie was surrounded by the sacred objects of family history, delicately brainwashed by the cyclical repetition of the deeds of his heroic ancestors. These stories of courage and silent dignity in defeat, of poverty and pride, left a permanent scar on Georgie's memory. Many years later he was to acknowledge: "on both sides of my family, I have military forebears; this may account for my yearning after that epic destiny which my gods denied me, no doubt wisely" (*The Aleph*, p. 208).

The father belonged to an even older family: one that was already important at the time of the Spanish conquest. One of his ancestors, Jerónimo Luis de Córdoba, was the founder of Córdoba, the most traditional and Catholic of all Argentine cities, the one which occupies the place Boston has in the history of the United States. For the traditional *Cordobeses*, Buenos Aires will always be, like New York for Bostonians, the immigrant's city, mainly populated by poor foreigners, illiterate Spaniards and Italians not worthy to represent the European culture. But the father himself had not been born in Córdoba. The family had moved closer to the Buenos Aires area already in the nineteenth century. His own father had been born in Paraná, Entre Ríos, and at the time that Georgie's father was born, the grandfather was a colonel in the Santa Fe garrison, in the Pampas. Both provinces belonged to a more primitive and simple world: the frontier between the Argentine settlers and the still unruly Indians, the reservoir for the armies of the civil wars. From Entre Ríos came the *caudillo* (chieftain) Justo José de Urquiza, the

man who in 1852 will finally defeat Rosas in Pavón.

Borges' father was not so devoted to the memory of his heroic ancestors as his mother was. But he was very interested in the recent political story of Paraná, and in 1921 when he was already retired and living in Spain, he wrote a curiously anachronistic novel, *The Chieftain*, which recaptures the Romantic climate of violence, intrigue and passion that was the natural habitat of many Borges males during the civil wars. On his mother's side, the father encountered a completely different tradition. Frances Haslam had been born in 1845 in Straffordshire, of Northumbrian stock. Her arrival to Argentina has been told by her grandson in these words:

A rather unlikely set of circumstances brought her to South America. Fanny Haslam's elder sister married an Italian-Jewish engineer named Jorge Suárez, who brought the first horse-drawn tramcars to Argentina, where he and his wife settled and sent for Fanny. I remember an anecdote concerning this venture. Suárez was a guest at General Urquiza's 'palace' in Entre Ríos, and very providently won his first game of cards with the General, who was the stern dictator of that province and not above throat-cutting. When the game was over, Suárez was told by alarmed fellow guests that if he wanted the license to run his tramcars in the province, it was expected of him to lose a certain amount of gold coins each night. Urquiza was such a poor player that Suárez had a great deal of trouble losing the appointed sums.

It was in Paraná, the capital city of Entre Ríos, that Fanny Haslam met Colonel Francisco Borges. This was in 1870 or 1871, during the siege of the city by the *montoneros*, or gaucho militia of Ricardo López Jordán. Borges, riding at the head of his regiment, commanded the troops defending the city. Fanny Haslam saw him from the flat roof of her house; that very night a ball was given to celebrate the arrival of the government relief forces. Fanny and the Colonel met, danced, fell in love, and eventually married. (*The Aleph*, pp. 204-205)

A photograph of Fanny Haslam, taken in Paris, 1870, probably when she was visiting the city on her honeymoon, has been preserved. She is dressed in stiff, velvet clothes, her hair totally covered by a dark, elegant hat; her expression is a little too stern and sad. Another photograph of the same year shows her without a hat, the elaborately high hairdo elongating her slim face even more, and the eyes sadder than ever. Her husband, colonel Francisco Borges, was twelve years her senior. In one of his photographs, he is shown in uniform but without his kepi: the wide forehead dominates a rather stylish face in which the mustache and goatee suggest the Napoleon III model. But his eyes look aside as if avoiding the camera. Very little is known about the marriage except that they seemed happy and had two sons, the younger of whom was Georgie's father. Very soon, Fanny Haslam was left a widow. In 1874, Colonel Borges was killed by a Remington rifle in one of the endemic civil wars. He was barely forty-one. His grandson once underlined the irony of his death: "In the complicated circumstances surrounding his defeat at La Verde, he rode out slowly on horseback, wearing a white poncho and followed by ten or twelve of his men, toward the enemy lines, where he was struck by two Remington bullets. This was the first time Remington rifles were used in the Argentine, and it tickles my

fancy that the firm that shaves me every morning bears the same name as the one that killed by grandfather" (*The Aleph*, pp. 205-206).

Some of his grandmother's experiences while living with Colonel Borges in the frontier area were learned by Georgie at a very early date. They were to resurface many years later when Borges was writing one of his short tales, "Story of the Warrior and the Captive." The first half of the tale both summarized and expanded on a story taken from different European sources (Croce, Gibbon, Dante); the second is based on one of Fanny Haslam's frontier tales. It is the story of an English girl, taken by the Indians in one of their raids, forced to marry a warrior and converted to barbarism. Grandmother met her briefly at the Army post her husband commanded, and tried to persuade her to return to civilization. She failed and the girl went back to her man and two children. In the conclusion of the story, Borges explores one of the meanings of this symbolic confrontation between the two English exiles: "Perhaps the two women felt for an instant as sisters; they were far from their beloved island and in an incredible country"; "perhaps then my grandmother was able to perceive in this other woman, also held captive and transformed by the implacable continent, a monstrous mirror of her own destiny" (*Labyrinths*. Translated by James E. Irby. New York: New Directions, 1964; p. 130). In a sense, the story is right: Fanny Haslam was also a captive. Although she had married a colonel and a gentleman, and she had been able to keep her native tongue intact and even to transmit it to her sons and grandchildren, she still was a captive in a primitive, violent land, imprisoned for ever in a world dominated by what was for her an alien tongue. It will be this unique captive's lot to teach English to Georgie.

Her husband's death left Fanny Haslam very much on her own. She had two sons to care for and to bring up. Undaunted, she opened her home to paying guests, young American women who came to Argentina to teach under an educational program conceived by President Sarmiento when he visited the United States. This part of his grandmother's story is not told in Borges' "Autobiographical Essay" nor has it ever been mentioned in his interviews. He prefers to insist upon the less prosaic details of her life and emphasizes the quality of frontier life adventures of that period of her life. But it was not the picturesque setting but Fanny Haslam's solid Victorian nonsense which finally had the day. She managed to keep the family within the bounds of middle-class respectability and saw that both her sons had a position in life. The elder followed in his father's footsteps and became a naval officer; Georgie's father was to become a lawyer. Perhaps the fact that the latter inherited the Borges' blindness explains the selection of a civil career for him. The consequence of this decision was that he was to remain very much under his mother's influence—that is, under the British influence. This was, of course, decisive for his son's fate.

Although the father was very proud of his English ancestry and especially of English culture, he was not a fanatic. Borges has pointed out that "he used to joke about it, saying with feigned perplexity, 'After all, what are the English? Just a pack of German

agricultural laborers'" (*The Aleph*, p. 206). In talking about his father, Borges has many witty things to say:

My father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, worked as a lawyer. He was a philosophical anarchist—a disciple of Spencer's—and also a teacher of psychology at the Normal School for Modern Languages, where he gave his course in English, using as his text William James' shorter book of psychology. [...] My father was very intelligent and, like all intelligent men, very kind. Once, he told me that I should take a good look at soldiers, uniforms, barracks, flags, churches, priests, and butcher shops, since all these things were about to disappear, and I could tell my children that I had actually seen them. The prophecy has not yet come true, unfortunately. My father was such a modest man that he would have liked being invisible. [...] His idols were Shelley, Keats and Swinburne. As a reader, he had interests. First, books on metaphysics and psychology (Berkeley, Hume, Royce, and William James). Second, literature and books about the East (Lane, Burton, and Payne). It was he who revealed the power of poetry to me—the fact that words are not only a means of communication but also magic symbols and music. When I recite poetry in English now, my mother tells me I take on his very voice. He also, without my being aware of it, gave me my first lessons in philosophy. When I was still quite young, he showed me, with the aid of a chessboard, the paradoxes of Zeno—Achilles and the tortoise, the unmoving flight of the arrow, the impossibility of motion. Later, without mentioning Berkeley's name, he did his best to teach me the rudiments of idealism. (*The Aleph*, pp. 204-207)

By his ancestors, by the mixed blood and double cultural origins, the father at once confirmed and rectified the mother's familiar museum. He added more Colonial prototypes and more Army brass to the pantheon, more vivid memories of heroic deeds, but he also incorporated an element that was totally absent in the mother's piety: irony, the gift of a mind of the most elegant skepticism. Georgie will inherit this gift.

✕ THE PERSONAL MYTH/ How did the family museum, this private *pietas*, affect the child and, later the man and the writer? It is hard to say. Especially if one takes into consideration the fact that from his father's side the whole museum was seen through very ironic glasses. In a book-length interview with Jean de Milleret, Borges has explained his peculiar interpretation of the family tradition. While he readily admits that the Borges' origins can be traced back to the Spanish conquerors and founders of cities, his own pantheon does not go that far back: "I am so much an Argentine that I can't be interested at all in my far away ancestors, the ones that came before 1810. You know that I never talk about them"; "I am also very ignorant of their lives. Besides, they were people with very little intelligence, Spanish professional soldiers, and from Old Spain" (*Entretiens avec Jorge Louis Borges*. Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1967; p. 203). In contrast with his mother's attitude of family worship—the carefully preserved genealogical tree, the daguerreotypes, the sacred swords and uniforms—Borges' dismissal of all the family's colonial inheritance is permeated both by his father's sense of irony and subtle understatement. The conflict was at the root of Borges' bilingualism: it is the conflict between the Spanish and English



values, a conflict that had its historical culmination during the long wars between the mighty powers of England and Spain but did not even end there: in Latin America, and through a confrontation between the inheritors, it is still alive today.

Georgie lived that conflict in a very peculiar way: for the boy it must have been muted by affection, buried in the deepest and darkest layers of subconscious feelings. In the everyday experience of life at home, as in a childish charade, Georgie was confronted by the cultural abyss that separated his father's side of the family from his mother's. In recapitulating his life in the same long interview, Borges will describe some sixty years later his objections to his mother's family: "The Acevedos are incredibly ignorant. For instance, for them, descendants of the old Spanish settlers, to be a Protestant is synonymous with being a Jew, that is, an atheist, or a free-thinker, or a heretic; in short, they put everything in the same bag. There is no real difference between these words for them" (*Entretiens*, p. 39). It is obvious that Borges is here simplifying and exaggerating the Acevedo's prejudices which mirrored those of very ignorant Argentine Catholics. But it is precisely this irreverent colloquial tone which seems so significant. It makes explicit Georgie's subconscious reaction to the two sides of his family. In a later text, avoiding any parody, Borges has defined the traditional character of the Acevedos by stating that his mother "comes of old Argentine and Uruguayan stock"; "When I was growing up, religion belonged to women and children; most men in Buenos Aires were freethinkers—though, had they been asked, they might have called themselves Catholic" (*The Aleph*, p. 207). Although irony is absent here, and a most respectful tone is achieved, it is evident that Borges is subtly antagonistic to his mother's religious stand. In the same text, Borges will attempt to praise what he calls mother's "hospitable mind," and to give an example of that hospitality he will say: "From the time she learned English, through my father, she has done most of her reading in that language" (*The Aleph*, p. 207). English is once more presented as a certificate of culture, of an open and hospitable mind, to be opposed implicitly to the narrow, ignorant, Catholic mind of the Acevedos. It is true that Borges has also something to say about the limitations of a too literal cult of Englishness, and in the same text he will use irony against that target: "my fondness for such a Northern past has been resented by some of my countrymen, who dub me an Englishman, but I hardly need point out that many things English are utterly alien to me: tea, the Royal Family, 'manly' sports, the worship of every line written by the uncaring Shakespeare" (*The Aleph*, p. 252). Thus, in recollection at least, Borges seems equally distant to both the Spanish and the English sources of his family. But in retracing the origins of his personal myth it will be advisable not to follow too closely later interpretations. It is obvious that for Georgie, English was the language of culture, the code that held the key to literature and the inexhaustible world of books. In recreating in writing his origins in the "Autobiographical Essay," Borges has tried to be fair to both sides of the family. Fairness was not present at the origin of the personal myth.

Even more revealing of Borges' selective mem-

ory in the "Essay" is the absence of any mention of his Portuguese origins. His surname is undoubtedly Portuguese: Borges means a citizen of the *burgos*, or cities, a bourgeois. In a late poem called, "The Borges," he sings the unknown ancestors. "My Portuguese forebears. They were a ghostly race,/ Who still play in my body their mysterious/ Disciplines, habits and anxieties./ Shadowy, as if they had never been,/ And strangers to the processes of art,/ Indecipherably they form a part/ Of time, of earth, and of oblivion" (*Selected Poems*. Trans. Alastair Reed, p. 137). Only quite recently, in a 1970 interview for a Brazilian weekly, Borges dwelled extensively on these shadowy Portuguese ancestors, and on the possibility that through them he may be connected with the wandering tribes of Israel. In a passage of the interview he asks rather rhetorically:

I, Borges Ramalho, descendant of a Portuguese sailor and on top of that, having a mother called Acevedo: might I not be a Jew? [...] When I visited Lisbon many years ago, I tried to do some research on my origins. I looked into the phone book and got the scare of my life: all the people there were my relatives, because those who were not Borges were Ramalho or Acevedo! I didn't know I had such a family and just in Lisbon! [...] Whatever the case, I would be very proud of belonging to one of the most civilized races in the world, to a branch of humanity that had already invented Job's story and The Song of Songs while other countries were still submerged in the original barbarism. ("Entrevista: Jorge Luis Borges." *Veja*, No. 103, August 26, 1970; pp. 4-5)

The question of Borges' Jewish origins, lightly and humorously touched here, was a very sensitive one in Argentina, especially in the Fascist atmosphere of the thirties and forties when the Army was attracted to the Italian and German models, and the Church and the upper-classes were stolidly anti-semitic. In those days, a nationalistic magazine called *Crisol* (The Crucible) accused him of being a Jew. To annoy his adversaries he wrote a piece, "I, a Jew," which is a masterpiece of teasing. He began by stating that he had played more than once with the idea that he had some Jewish ancestors; he admits that Acevedo is a surname generally included in a list of those with Jewish origin compiled by an Argentine historian who was trying to prove that practically all the families in Rosas times had a "Jewish-Portuguese" origin. On the other hand, he indicated, research done by a member of his family had proved that the Acevedo branch of the family came not from Portugal but from Spain, and to be more precise, from Catalonia. He concluded then that it was a hopeless task to try to prove his Jewish ancestry. Apart from the ironic value of this "search," it is obvious that Borges was not taking the question very seriously. Not a word is said then about the obvious Portuguese origin of his surname, which could have helped to establish the missing Jewish link. But in ambiguously denying his ancestors (which he will recognize in 1970), Borges was aiming at destroying, polemically, the basis of the accusation. The end of the article is very comic and revealing. As he usually does, Borges abandons the above line of argumentation and resorts to parody:

Statistically speaking the Jews were very few. What would we think of someone in the year 4000 who will be

discovering everywhere descendants of the inhabitants of the San Juan province [one of the least populated in Argentina]? Our inquisitors are seeking Hebrews, never Phoenicians, Numidians, Scythians, Babylonians, Huns, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Ethiopians, Illyrians, Paphlagonians, Sarmatians, Medes, Ottomans, Berbers, Britons, Lybians, Cyclops, and Lapiths. The nights of Alexandria, Babylon, Carthage, Memphis have never succeeded in engendering one single grandfather: only the tribes of the bituminous Black Sea had that power." (*Megáfono*, No. 12, April 1934: p. 10)

In poking fun at the Fascist obsession to discover Jewish ancestors to prove some obscure blemish or original sin, Borges does not stop at anything: he even includes the mythological Centaurs and Lapiths among the old tribes who had failed to engender one grandfather. But his jokes do not distract from the main object of the article: to demythify the subject once and for all. If to be a Jew means that somewhere in the past a Jewish ancestor looms, then who can be sure in Spain and Portugal, in Latin America, of not having at least one great-grandfather of that origin? From that point of view to be a Jew has no meaning. Borges' witty text helps to dispose of that type of non-thinking forever. But the paradox behind all this "research" and irony must not be wasted. It is precisely the very Catholic and traditional branch of the Acevedos that seems the most likely carrier of the Jewish blood into Borges' ancestry. They who shared with the Nationalist and the Fascist in Argentina, the cult of the universal religion of Rome, believed that any free-thinker, any Protestant, any mason, was a Jew. Such ignorance turned Borges away from his mother's side of the family.

It is obvious that this aspect of the family conflict was not so self-evident to Georgie, at least in his infancy. The problem of the Portuguese and/or Jewish ancestors did not exist for the child. Although his father was an agnostic and his paternal grandmother a Protestant, he was probably brought up as a Catholic in a Catholic household. Religious instruction, if any, was in his mother's hands, and his father probably accepted it. But if the conflict was not evident at that stage, it nevertheless existed at the level of the personal myth Georgie was already developing. If English was the language of culture, Spanish was to become the language more easily associated with the deeds of arms and the gods of war. In encountering frequent reminders of the family past, in hearing once and again, the tales of bravery accomplished especially by the Suárezes and the Acevedos, Georgie began to be initiated into another religion: the worship of the family gods and of manly courage. In this religion, the differences between the paternal and maternal side were erased: all ancestors were united in the family cult. In his "Autobiographical Essay," Borges indicates very explicitly how Georgie reacted to this heroic ancestry: "I was always very nearsighted and wore glasses, and I was rather frail. As most of my people had been soldiers and I knew I would never be, I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish kind of person and not a man of action" (*The Aleph*, p. 208).

The two sides of the Borges household will represent, as in an allegorical tableau, the famous contrast between Arms and Letters, a topic to which Don Quixote had something to add. Although in

both sides of the family Georgie had professional soldiers, it was the Acevedo branch that at the time of his birth offered more vivid examples. The only grandfather he had the chance to meet was that Isidoro de Acevedo Laprida who fought so bravely and died in a dream of battles long forgotten. On his father's side it was not the image of Colonel Francisco Borges (who died twenty-five years before Georgie was born) but that of Fanny Haslam which prevailed: the English grandmother who held the key to the world of English and of English books, the world of culture. The father himself was a lawyer and a man of books, the owner of that infinite library. The personal myth of Borges begins here: it is, at the same time, a myth of despair for not having been a man of arms, and a myth of compensation. The reader and the writer found in books, in the desire and guilt aroused by books, what was lacking in their "real" life. Because Father had preceded him in this path—he was also a descendant of warriors who choose books and the law—Borges would have to find, many years later, a solution to the already latent pedipal conflict. In his case, parricide will assume a most unexpected disguise: total submission to his father's will.<sup>2</sup>

X THE TWO MOTHERS: THE TWO CODES/ There is obviously much more in Borges' relationship with his parents than has been indicated here. Some of his autobiographical texts talk freely about Mother but they hardly reveal anything relevant to his childhood years. He mentions the help he received from her after his father's death and when he was beginning to find it very difficult to read and write. About his father, on the contrary, he is always explicit and precise. Even when he is confronted with an interviewer, like Jean de Milleret, who is intent upon subjecting him to a bit of simplified Freudianism, Borges is adamant. Again and again he will dodge a question about his mother's supposedly dominant personality and will attribute everything to his father's strong will. When he is asked, rather directly, if he thinks that his was "an oppressive mother," he answers that it was his father who was a decisive influence in his life because it was through him he learned English and had access to a vast library. When pressed again to admit that Mother was a sort of tyrannical *Genitrix*, he refuses to accept it and wonders aloud who could have thought of that. He denies any mother fixation and predictably concludes: "It was my father who had an influence on her and not the reverse. My mother was a young woman of a good Argentine family and my father was a liberal and cultivated man; his mother was English and a Protestant; he had a good library at home. I must say that he lived, intellectually speaking, in a more complex world than my mother" (*Entretiens*, p. 213). It is obvious that Borges is here denying any attempt to "psychoanalyze" him, and his relationship with his

<sup>2</sup> In my article, "Borges: The Reader as Writer" (*Tri-Quarterly*, No. 25, Fall 1972; pp. 102-143), there is a detailed discussion of this problem.

waterproof — in writing of  
bated break



parents. His resistance to any type of analysis (and not only to the instant one attempted by Milleret) is well-known. In another interview, he even makes a joke about it: "I've rather forgotten the time I spent in my mother's womb—although, according to the Freudians, it must have been very important to me" ("Habla Jorge Luis Borges," *Triunfo*, No. 389, November 15, 1969, p. 36). More straightforward is an exchange recorded by Richard Burgin:

*Burgin:* I take it you don't think much of Freud, either.  
*Borges:* No, I always disliked him. But I've always been a great reader of Jung. I read Jung in the same way as let's say, I might read Pliny or Frazer's *Golden Bough*, I read it as kind of mythology, or as a kind of museum or encyclopedia of curious foresh.

*Burgin:* When you say that you dislike Freud, what do you mean?

*Borges:* I think of him as a kind of madman, so? A man laboring over a sexual obsession. Well, perhaps he didn't take it to heart. Perhaps he was just doing it as a kind of game. I tried to read him, and I thought of him either as a charlatan or as a madman, in a sense. After all, the world is far too complex to be boiled down to that all-too-simple scheme. But in Jung, well, of course, Jung I have read far more widely than Freud, but in Jung you feel a wide and hospitable mind. In the case of Freud, it all boils down to a few rather unpleasant facts. But, of course, that's merely my ignorance or my bias. (*Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969; p. 109)

~~Borges' resistance to Freud is revealing and, in a sense, as curious as the one Nabokov has shown. They even use the same kind of words. While Nabokov calls Freud a "crank," Borges suggests he is either a "charlatan" or a "madman." Borges is obviously over-reacting and it is this over-reaction that attracts attention.~~ At the root of his bilingualism is an unconscious conflict which he will never be able to recognize but whose symptoms and origins are clear. The fact that he was taught Spanish by his mother and English by his grandmother established from the very beginning of subconscious conflict between the two codes. The immediate manifestations of this conflict are well-known. He had some difficulty in learning to talk. According to his mother, "When he was very small, he had the most extraordinary way of talking; perhaps he didn't hear well? He disfigured completely many words" ("Propos de Mme. Leonor Acevedo de Borges," *L'Herne*, March, 1964; p. 10). Later on, he will develop a kind of stammer that will become more evident when he was in the company of strangers or when he had to talk in public. Not until he was forty-five did he manage to overcome his stammering.

The fact that it was his English grandmother who taught him the English code and who introduced him to the world of books added some confusion to the already confusing double language

he learned to use while a child. Georgie will have two "mothers" instead of one as he will have two languages. ~~At the level of the personal myth, the fact that the second mother is his father's mother only increased the father's sphere of influence. Father will become duplicated: he will be represented by a virile figure who runs everything at home, and by a maternal version who will be (implicitly) the mother's rival in teaching the boy how to speak. In view of that original configuration, it is easy to understand Borges' resistance to Milleret's line of questioning. At the conscious level, he always saw his mother under the influence of his father and there was not any doubt about that. It is possible to go one step further and assume that, for Georgie, his mother had a secondary role in her own household: she was also under Fanny Haslam's influence because the grandmother was the owner of the most powerful linguistic code: English. The mother was like the beautiful concubine in some of the *One Thousand and One Nights* tales which the father (and later Georgie) loved to read in Richard Burton's unexpurgated translation. She was somewhat like a slave who is tolerated because she is the heir's mother, but the real queen, the only legitimate wife, was the father's mother. This configuration explains the part that the mother plays in Borges' personal myth: she is always there, she is always courteously referred to, but she is always kept (in a very subtle way) in a subdued condition.~~

A purely psychoanalytical reading of this situation is impossible here. It has been attempted more than once with various results. The best analysis so far is one done by Didier Anzieu in a long essay called "Le corps et le code dans les récits de J. L. Borges" (*Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, July-August 1971; pp. 177-210). Although Anzieu did not have all the necessary biographical information and had less than complete bibliographical data, he was able to develop many interesting interpretations. He even attempted to explain the problem of the double linguistic code and the fact that the "other" code, English, was taught by the "other" mother. But he didn't develop the cultural problems that bilingualism had created and did not pursue its ramifications at the level of conscious literary production. Anzieu's study is decisive in relating Borges' relationship with his mother to its subconscious expression in the symbology of his tales. What is still to be done is to attempt to integrate that interpretation in the larger context of Borges' personal myth as it is presented both in the writing of his works and in the writing of his life—that is, in the writing of his literary (auto)biography.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>I would like to thank Suzanne Jill Levine and Eugene Moretta for their help in preparing the English version of this text.

fantastically complex — superficial use of a few psychoanalytic tips, & completely gratuitous tossing in of various Freudian terms — e.g. "code"