

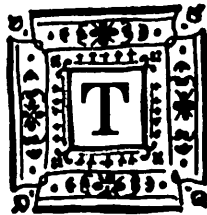
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Hispanic Review, 17, 3, Summer 1987



"EL CONGRESO" IN THE WORKS OF J. L. BORGES

Era inteligente, pero propendía a tomar en serio las cosas, incluso los congresos y el universo, que bien puede ser una broma cósmica.¹



THE above comment, which Borges makes ostensibly in relation to the academic conference, may nonetheless be taken as obliquely relevant to the most important of his recent prose pieces, "El Congreso," as I hope to prove in the following. First published separately in 1971 as a slim, indulgent, fifty-page volume, the story reappears in 1975, to occupy some twenty pages of *El libro de arena*.² If the information given in the first edition is to be trusted, the date of composition was much before, in 1955; furthermore, the final page of the El Archibrazo edition announces that the idea had a long period of gestation in Borges' mind: "[El] argumento lo acompañó durante largos años." As for Borges himself, there was talk for some time of a possible novel with this title; in fact we find that, though a long (by Borges' standards) story is the result, the subject matter is all-embracing. He writes in his Epilogue to *El libro de arena*, with characteristic understatement, that: "El Congreso' es quizá la más ambiciosa de las fábulas de este libro; su empresa es tan vasta que se confunde al fin con el cosmos y con la suma de los

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "El soborno," *El libro de arena* (Madrid: Alianza Emecé, 1977), p. 81.

² The first edition of *El libro de arena* was published by El Archibrazo, Buenos Aires, in 1971. The following quotation is from the final printed (and unnumbered) page of that edition.

días."³ The spatial and temporal sweep of it is indeed vast, though that comes as no surprise; as a result of this vastness, it is not hard to find antecedents in Borges' work for parts of "El Congreso" (for example, "El Gremialista," an amusing piece in *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq* and one which contains a reference to "El Congreso").⁴ But my contention is that the grand international and historical dimensions in "El Congreso" are countered by something which is very parochial, namely the persistent resurrection of known bourgeois characters, his persistent allusions to his own earlier works of fiction.

To define the Congress behind the title is not easy; Borges' first reference to it is as an "acontecimiento," the memory of which he cannot share since he is the last remaining member; paradoxically, the Congress is also atemporal and its membership limitless: he writes of all mankind belonging, whether past or present or future. The story thus confronts two irreconcilable notions: definition of the infinite. Borges' "betrayal" of secrecy is his public recognition of this paradox, of the impasse in man's attempt to represent the irreducible. The "perjury" is itself a part of the Congress, for the Congress is everything. Yet the human impulse is inevitably to abstract, to create signs and symbols: people must be held to represent constituencies of humanity, language to stand for thoughts and actions, whether in or out of the realm of fiction.

The process of elucidation of this paradox entails the constitution of a formal "Congreso del Mundo," fifteen to twenty people presided over by one Alejandro Glencoe and seated around a long table in the "Confitería del Gas," trying to arrive at an appropriate representative composition. Glencoe takes his lead from the revolutionary fanatic Anacharsis Cloots of whom he has read in the works of Thomas Carlyle. Jean Baptiste du Val de Grâce, Baron de Cloots (1775-1794), was a collaborator in the compilation of the *Encyclopédie*, which links him with Diderot, its founder, a writer who is quoted at the start of Borges' story. Cloots was also a member of the Jacobin club, officially the "Société des Amis de la Constitution," which held its meetings in a convent refectory and in turn arose from meetings in the Café Amaury of the contem-

³ *El libro de arena*, p. 102.

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1967), pp. 63-66, esp. p. 65.

porary "Sociétés de Pensée." Such clubs as the Jacobin (by 1790 there were some 150 of them in Paris) were possessed by a quasi-religious zeal. In 1790 Cloots, apostle of Reason, presented himself before the Constituent Assembly at the head of thirty-six foreigners, a group which held itself to be an "embassy of the human race," to make a declaration in favour of human rights, from which event he was to derive the title of "Orateur du Genre Humain" and to adopt the pseudonym by which we now read of him: Anacharsis Cloots. Later, having given money to the Republic to maintain a small army to defend mankind against tyranny, having advocated the death of Louis XVI in those terms, in 1792 he was elected to the Convention. Borges fails to add that Carlyle's portrayal of Cloots is excoriating:

headlong, trenchant, of free purse; in suitable costume; though what mortal ever more despised costumes? Under all costumes Anacharsis seeks the man . . . This is the faith of Anacharsis: that there is a Paradise discoverable; that all costumes ought to hold men. O Anacharsis, it is a headlong, swift-going faith. Mounted thereon, meseems, thou art bound hastily for the City of Nowhere; and wilt arrive! At best, we may say, arrive in *good attitude*; which is indeed something.⁵

Such a figure, emanating from the world of the encyclopaedists, was bound to appeal to Borges, whose attitude to Cloots, and thus Glencoe, is rather more ironic than critical. The explanation for this is that, as has so often been the case, Borges and his characters are not kept apart, indeed they are deliberately confused. Borges clearly lurks behind the narrative "I" of Alejandro Ferri: Ferri talks of his difficulty in living with himself, his teaching of English, his age (coincidental with that of Borges), his perception of events as "tímidas variaciones," his uncommitted membership of conservative and chess clubs ("como espectador"). Ferri has supposedly written a "Breve examen del idioma analítico de John Wilkins," an undertaking also ascribed to another *alter ego* of Borges, Pierre Menard, and a pointer to that same interest in signs and symbols of which I wrote above. That Ferri is said to have arrived at "esta ciudad" in 1899, the year of Borges' birth, presumably means that here "ciudad" stands for world. There is talk of editorial work on *Última Hora*, a (fictitious?) paper whose editor dispatches H. Bustos

⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1889), II, 19-20.

Domecq to Fray Bentos to investigate the writings of one Nierenstein (kidney-stone!);⁶ we know that the portmanteau name of Bustos Domecq is derived from the surnames of two of the great grandparents of Bioy Casares and Borges. But there is irony behind the Borges-Ferri association too; Ferri is said not to have wanted to meet the new director of the Biblioteca Nacional (Borges), "un literato que se ha consagrado al estudio de las lenguas antiguas" (p. 12), and Ferri claims "no he acometido nunca, ni siquiera en su especie epistolar, el género narrativo" (p. 14).⁷

A connexion between Ferri (Borges) and Glencoe is made through the shared name Alejandro and through thinly veiled references to war: Alejandro evokes Alexander the Great, Glencoe was scene of a Scottish clan battle, Junín that of one of Bolívar's victories in which an ancestor of Borges distinguished himself; significantly, both Glencoe and his left-hand man Twirl die in 1914. The "ecos marciales" extend to the iron of "Ferri" and on to Fermín Eguren, Fernández Irala, FERROCARRIL, (Martín FIERRO). Santa FE is introduced supposedly as the place of origin of the narrator (it was not in reality Borges' place of birth, but it is the one Borges and Bioy ascribe to H. Bustos Domecq); it gives us both the idea of religious faith and the chemical symbol for iron. Therefore the dualism of faith and strength can be read back through all the examples previously quoted; perhaps the name of Fermín Eguren ("quizá el más impaciente de nosotros" [p. 34]) says both at least twice. The Congress, then, is like a crusade. We shall return to this religious slant later.

Alejandro Glencoe (for all the apparent Scottishness, the initials suggest silver and thus Argentina) quietly assumes authority over a motley group of acolytes who set about establishing the "Congreso del Mundo que representaría a todos los hombres de todas las naciones" (pp. 21-22). The inspiration drawn from Carlyle (another link with Borges) is bolstered by Glencoe's bitterness at having been snubbed by the Congreso del Uruguay. At first, this seems like a dig by Borges at the inflated self-importance of one of the continent's smallest countries, but it is soon clear that the Glencoe vision of a far more wide-ranging body is also treated with amused

⁶ See *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq*, pp. 31-35. *Última Hora* is also mentioned in other "Crónicas," e.g., on p. 23.

⁷ Page references to "El Congreso" are to the El Archibrazo edition.

scepticism, a kind of parody of the United Nations. Why else does the Congress meet in the *Confitería del Gas* other than to suggest that they are creating a lot of hot air? Doesn't the joke about the poor Bolivian's predictable demand that his country's lack of a coastline be put high on the agenda somewhat detract from the grandeur of the enterprise? Isn't the fact that members are taxed about the representation of New Zealand engineers a little reminiscent of the withering account Borges once gave of Carlos Argentino's epic poem of the world in which he had managed to cover the Vera Cruz gasworks and some Turkish baths near Brighton? In a similar vein, when Fermín quips that Ferri is there to represent the "gringos," Glencoe's rejoinder (p. 24) is both too trite and too serious. And one notes that the negro, though a stereotype—"bonachón y feliz"—finds their antics amusing, while the boy in the sailor suit falls asleep, presumably out of boredom; both characters drink chocolate during the "performance."

Jokes are plentiful. When Ferri accompanies Glencoe to his *estancia*, Irala asks for the toilet: "Don Alejandro, con un vasto ademán, le mostró el continente" (p. 24). Whatever the serious implications of this, it is clearly a play on incontinence! A more fundamental pun is found in the title; it refers to sexual congress. When Ferri-Borges is sent to London to investigate a possible international language for the Congress he is side-tracked from the British Museum and high-minded study of the pros and cons of Bishop Wilkins by an affair with Beatriz Frost. Unlike Dante's Beatrice, unlike the Beatriz of "El Aleph," and despite the hint contained in her surname, this lady does not give him the cold shoulder. I have already noted the humour in the name of Nierenstein. Improbably, if for Ferri one reads Borges, Donald Wren is twice said to have given the protagonist English lessons; his name, too, must invite speculation: because of London one is reminded of Christopher Wren, of the wren as national symbol once reproduced on coins, but the name also looks suspiciously close to Donald Duck!

We are accustomed to Borges using contrived names to suggest associations, and further study of those of the two women characters, in particular, is fruitful for the analysis of the present story. The most transparent link was referred to *en passant* in the preceding paragraph. Ferri's Italianness links him with Dante's Beatrice, with the narrator of "El Aleph" adoring another Beatriz; indeed a great deal on that earlier story can be seen reflected in

"El Congreso." Frost links Beatriz with Nora ErfJORD; moreover there is a Scandinavian link for Beatriz is also a disciple of Ibsen. Nora(h) must hark back to Borges' sister, to whom he was so devoted.⁸ Far more productive, yet far less easy work can be done on Nora's surname. I find that *fjord*, English *ford*, and its German equivalent *Furt* all share the same root, and moreover in Old Norse. While Erfjord is Borges' creation, Erfurt is a city and a region, to the east of the city of Gotha, in the present day German Democratic Republic; it is known for the fact that in September of 1808 it saw the "Congress of Erfurt," in which Napoleon confronted the Russian Emperor (without success). Of the leadership of Napoleon one need say nothing; it only remains to point out that the Russian Tsar was another Alexander. If this were not enough, a second congress of international importance, "The Erfurt Union," was held in 1850, to discuss the constitution of a Germany to be dominated by Prussia. Doubtless Borges was quite aware of all this, as also of the fact that Anacharsis Cloots had Prussian origins! Beyond this, we find that Erfurt was established by Charlemagne as an outpost of the Frankish Empire (FEI); *Erz* in modern German is (iron) ore; and finally another claim to fame by Erfurt is the publishing house of Hermann Haack, formerly none other than Justus Perthes, specialists in maps and atlases. Recall that the German-named Nierenstein secures for the Congress, as a "libro de consulta," an atlas by Justus Perthes.

Other books in the Congress reference library are the oldest surviving encyclopaedia of classical times, Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, Beauvais' *Speculum Majus*, a mediaeval attempt to reflect all things at all times which drew on the Chinese models, as well as a handful of well-known modern encyclopaedias. On page twenty-seven Borges lists these and makes explicit reference to the French *encyclopédistes*.

There comes a time when Twirl persuades the Congress that reference books alone are insufficient to be representative, that they must gather classic works from all cultures and languages; but, under the influence of Pliny, for whom every book contained some virtue, the acquisitions become unlimited and indiscriminate. As the stocks fill the basement of Glencoe's house (another possible

⁸ See Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), pp. 35-36.

link with "El Aleph"), Nora Erfjord resigns to be replaced by Karlinski, jokingly described as "un instrumento de Twirl." Karlinski perhaps connects with Charlemagne, or on a more personal level with Borges' friend from Geneva days, Simon Jichlinski; it is certainly clear—Borges has said so himself⁹—that autobiographical strands are woven into this story. Similarly, in writing *Evaristo Carriego* Borges interviewed a friend of his father, Marcelo del Mazo; no doubt he saw the funny side of the contrast between the man's name and his fleeting description here in "El Congreso" as an "hombre de suma cortesía y de fino diálogo" (p. 18). Marcelo del Mazo and Jichlinski seem also to have come together previously in the character Marcelo Yarmolinsky ("La muerte y la brújula"). "Tapia o Paredes" (p. 25) is definitely Paredes, Nicolás Paredes, the gangster of the Palermo district of Buenos Aires, where Borges was brought up.¹⁰ In the present story, Paredes is the hoodlum who confronts Ferri with a knife and permits the latter to reveal his courage (and there is much insistence on walls in the story); in real life Borges merely interviewed a mild and dignified old man whose portrait he would also include in the *Evaristo Carriego*.¹¹

Courage and cowardice are, of course, old chestnuts which crop up in numerous borgesian narratives. Here, as elsewhere, they reveal themselves by chance, as if gratuitously inserted in the plot. At bottom they are an aspect of the potential of any one man to reveal all human qualities; of the theme that one man is all men. The twist in the portrayal of Twirl is relevant: Glencoe's hatchetman, with the red fire of youth, but also sinister in both original senses, he is thwarted when his vast collection of papers is burnt, when he realises that "He querido hacer el mal y hago el bien" (p. 46). Twirl's provocative name is difficult to unravel; possibly he is the spinner of the yarn, the magician weaving the convoluted plot:

Don Alejandro Glencoe era siempre el centro de la trama, pero gradualmente sentimos, no sin algún asombro y alarma, que el verdadero presidente era Twirl. Este singular personaje de bigote fulgente adulaba a Glencoe y aún a Fermín Eguren, pero de un modo tan exagerado que podía pasar por una burla y no comprometía su dignidad. (p. 26)

⁹ *El libro de arena*, Epilogue.

¹⁰ See Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges*, pp. 226, 254.

¹¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Evaristo Carriego* (Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1930), p. 41. Borges relates a similar knife incident to R. Christ in the latter's "The Art of Fiction xxxix," *Paris Review*, 40 (1967), 140.

More probably his name is another piece of calculated fatuousness: he is the moustache-twirling caricatured villain.

"El Congreso" is so complex that one hesitates to try to reduce it to a predominant theme; the point of it is precisely that one cannot reduce, and therefore all themes lead to others, subsume others or form part of others. The *congresales* come eventually to this realisation in the form of a revelation, already hinted at in the first visit to the *estancia*. The books are burned, the *congresales* disband or die off. The few pages which survive the conflagration I take not to be any apocryphal manuscript but Borges' own story. Irala pronounces that the library of Alexandria (burned first by Caesar's troops, again in the year 390, and again by the Calif Omar in 641) is destined to be burned every few centuries. Significantly, Borges refers to him as "fiel a la literatura" (p. 43) in saying this; so life is cyclic, history repeats itself, and since literature is part of both it follows that life will be seen to follow literature. But the phrase also has a more subtly ironic ring in this context.

As Bell-Villada says, Borges has been repeating himself.¹² However, I believe that this is not simply the mark of an old man who might as usefully have laid his pen to rest. There is plenty of evidence that Borges extends the concept of the comprehensiveness of the Congress to embrace his own literature as fully as he might: the story is thus a compendium of very deliberate cross-references to earlier stories and characters. Much of this has been noted in the previous pages of this article, in particular the numerous links with "El Aleph," one of his preferred stories.¹³ One such link not yet noted hangs on the association of Alexander with the poetic form of the alexandrine; the alexandrines of Fernández Irala come to be questioned by Ferri after the "deslumbramiento" of the latter's encounter with the poetry of the unconventional Swinburne. Irala's *magnum opus*, "Los Mármoles," recalls the quite ludicrous attempts of Carlos Argentino Daneri to capture the universe in his modestly entitled "La Tierra." Irala is another would-be reducer, for whom Paris, we are told, means the Symbolist poet Verlaine. Clearly, "Los Mármoles" connotes fixity of time as well

¹² Gene Bell-Villada, *Borges & his Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1981), pp. 255-58.

¹³ See his comments in M. E. Vázquez, *Borges: Imágenes, memorias, diálogos* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1977).

as representation through art; it is striking that Borges speaks of Irala having "chiseled out" (*cinclar*) a few sonnets, adding that "el verbo era de uso común" in order to draw attention to its curiousness (p. 15).

One remembers the fate of Ireneo Funes towards which the *congresales* seem at one point to be veering. The initials Fernández Irala, reversed, may not be fortuitous in their echo of Funes' name; in a setting similar to Funes' *rancho*, Irala suffers a riding accident (which, since Anacharsis is recalled by Borges at this point too, seems also to remind the reader of the revolutionary riding to the City of Nowhere). Borges-Ferri makes constant and meaningful references to memory in relation to Irala. José Fernández (Irala) is close to José Hernández; their experience of the gauchos is actually compared with the types portrayed in *Martín Fierro*.

Twirl, with his red hair and stoop, fingering his compass, bad-man turned good, reminds one in varying degrees, at different moments, of Red Scharlach, John Vincent Moon, Judas, of "Tema del traidor y el héroe"; frequent references to points of the compass and to red and grey figures summon "La muerte y la brújula"; the negro might be from "El fin"; numerous mentions of the south allude to the story of that name; "bastante esfuerzo es tolerarse a uno mismo y a sus manías" (p.11) calls to mind the preoccupations of "El otro" and "Borges y yo"; the encyclopaedias and the setting of the *estancia* recall the opening of "Tlön, Uqbar . . ."; the books recall "La biblioteca de Babel"; Nora Erfjord and Beatriz recall "Ulrica"; one has read before in Borges of amphitheatres, of geometric structures through which one glimpses the sky (pp. 30-31), and of the spots on a leopard's skin (p. 28).

Cruz, the Latin teacher who participates in the acquisition of the Library of (the) Congress, invites comparison with "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz"—a twirlesque character. Quite obviously, this name also supplies one of many religious associations in "El Congreso." Don Alejandro Glencoe's last-supper-like table, his quasi disciples and their reverence for him are further signs: "nos inundaron su firmeza y su fe" (p. 44). When the moment of revelation comes, we read, of Glencoe:

Su voz era distinta; no era la del pausado señor que presidía nuestros sábados ni la del estanciero feudal que prohibía un duelo a cuchillo y que predicaba a sus gauchos la palabra de Dios, pero se parecía más a la última. (p. 41)

The feudal Scottish laird is, with his ranch "La Caledonia," a typically deliberate anachronism; nor is this the first time that Borges has contrasted personal qualities and cultural styles using a Scot as his vehicle. Consider "El informe de Brodie" in which, for example, one finds the God "Estiércol"; something of that flavour is here in "El Congreso" in:

El Congreso del Mundo comenzó el primer instante del mundo y proseguirá cuando seamos polvo. No hay lugar en que no esté. El Congreso es los libros que hemos quemado. El Congreso es los caledonios que derrotaron a las legiones de los Césares. El Congreso es Job en el muladar y Cristo en la cruz. (p. 43)

Glencoe shares with that other man of Scottish origins, Gutre (Sc. "Guthrie"), the wish to evangelise the uncomprehending gauchos by reading them extracts of the Scriptures in a language which is not theirs.¹⁴ As for the vendor of Bibles in "El libro de arena," he is a native of the Orkneys.

The reiteration of letter *C* in the above quotation is remarkable; we saw Borges do the same with *B* in "Pierre Menard . . ." Here the device strengthens the association between the Congress and Christianity.¹⁵ Blind faith ("don Alejandro sabe lo que hace" says Nora in devotion on page 43), self-denial (the *congresales* renounce their *dietas*), a Revelation at a kind of revival meeting, an ecstatic Bunyanesque promenade through the town when the light dawns. I note, too, that as it happens Alexander the Great died, like Christ, at the age of thirty-three.

This brings us to the discussion of an interesting motif in "El Congreso," although again Borges has used it extensively before, in "La muerte y la brújula."¹⁶ It is the reiterated suggestion of three and four. In an almost perversely characteristic manner, Borges writes that the moment of inauguration of the congress

¹⁴ *Los Gutre* appear in "El evangelio según San Marcos," included in the collection *El informe de Brodie* (1970). In "El Congreso" (p. 32) we read: "Los domingos por la mañana les leía la Sagrada Escritura a los peones, que no entendían una sola palabra."

¹⁵ Since it was Caesar's troops who burned the library at Alexandria, the reference to Caesar's defeat at the hands of Alejandro Glencoe's ancestors, *los caledonios*, must also be with this association in mind.

¹⁶ See the comments of D. L. Shaw in *Ficciones* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1976), pp. 55-56.

lasted four years; one understands the point that the momentary and the durative are being put in question, but, if that were the only aim, any lengthy period would have sufficed. We find also that Borges ironically comments that: "Curiosamente, el plazo original se cumpliría con una precisión casi matemática" (p. 22).

By way of proof of the significance of four, we read of the "cuadrada trampa del sótano" (p. 41) and that Glencoe has taken four years to reach his understanding; there is the image of the cross with its four points, and the compass which conveys the same association. However, a careful study reveals that there are only three cardinal points specified in the story, and this ties in with numerous suggestions of three: "tres caballos" (p. 41), "tres sábados sonoros" (p. 40), the three musketeers (p. 26). The number of copies of *Don Quijote* acquired is 3,400.¹⁷

Three is the triumvirate of Glencoe, Twirl, and Eguren; it is the Trinity, the denials by Peter, it is Christ on the cross flanked by two thieves, aged thirty-three. But we must also register that the Congress meets on Saturdays, a piece of information Borges insists upon more than once: it is not only "tres" but "tres sábados." The *congresales* include a protestant minister and two Jews. Saturday is therefore the Sabbath, three suggests the star of David, its triangles. The ecstasy comes on a Friday (Good Friday?) and ends on a Saturday. The affinities between all this and "La muerte y la brújula" are very marked, very borgesian.

In the Epilogue to *El libro de arena* Borges states that: "el fin (de "El Congreso") quiere elevarse, sin duda en vano, a los éxtasis de Chesterton o de John Bunyan." The end draws together Anarcharis Cloots' Paradise Gained (compare Carlyle's portrait of him), his horse ride, Chesterton's FOUR "Horsemen of the Apocalypse." All the same, Borges cannot be serious, still less seriously evangelical or ecumenical. There is too much irony, too much tongue-in-cheek predictability, too little real awe. At the Revelation Ferris-Borges is moved to confess his sins: "seguía demorándome en Inglaterra y tirando su plata por el amor de una mujer" (p. 44). In doing so he makes no impression on Glencoe, reveals the poverty of his understanding, trivialises the Congress by this parody. We have seen some other pointers to Borges' ironic attitude to his

¹⁷ One is reminded of Georgie, Norah, and Esther's childhood secret society called "Tres Cruces."

subject already. Another is his mock-seriousness faced with the appearance of the *congresales* and their almost masonic rituals: he refers to a photo "que no publicaré, porque la indumentaria de la época, las melenas y los bigotes, le darían un aire burlesco y hasta menesteroso, que falsearía la escena" (p. 18). (At this same juncture he introduces Donald Wren.) His final, obliquely dismissive gesture, also typical, is to have Glencoe die in Montevideo; Glencoe is a mountain pass, "Montevideo" a joke born of the flatness of Uruguay. One surmises that Alejandro Glencoe has had a vision of a mountain where there is none. As Borges says, via Ferri: "el Congreso siempre tuvo para mí algo de sueño" (p. 18).

The purpose of the present article has not been to explain exhaustively all the ideas and allusions of "El Congreso"; it is one of Borges' most ambitious stories and only a rash man would hope to do so. I have instead tried to discover its principal sources and suggest something of its complex web of cross-references, to show that those cross-references operate within the narrative and extend beyond it to encompass Borges' previous work. Thus the usual themes are there: time, history, memory, faith and scepticism, courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal, action and contemplation, the futile but inevitable exercise of the mind, the languages of representation, one man as all men, and so on. So too are the usual narrative tricks: grey and red imagery, labyrinths, understatements, irony, false modesty, symbolic letters in Cabbalistic fashion, plays with numbers, plundering of encyclopaedias. Certain phrases seem to be lifted directly from earlier stories, together with certain events, certain characters. The encounter with the hoodlum is a nice example: Borges says that he will recount the details "si se presenta la ocasión" (p. 13), and naturally that amounts to a guarantee that he will find the opportunity to do so; indeed, in other stories he already has, more than once, and here there are, in fact, two knife incidents! The *congresales* look very much like a rag-bag of characters drawn from earlier stories or conflated from them: the "pastor protestante" is probably Brodie, for example.¹⁸ So "El Congreso" is not just a timid variation on a known theme, it emerges as a deliberate and none too serious compendium of borgesiana.¹⁹ The idea which Borges is exploring, of a

¹⁸ But note, too, that Erfurt has strong associations with Luther.

¹⁹ "Advierto que nada esencialmente nuevo hay en ellas [las novedades] y que no pasan de ser timidas variaciones" ("El Congreso," p. 12).

Congress which comes to mean everything at all times, co-terminous with that which it seeks to represent, a conclusion not so different from that of the cartographers in "Del rigor en la ciencia," will naturally embrace his own biographical details and his own fictions:

Si de todos mis textos tuviera que rescatar uno sólo, rescataría, creo, 'El Congreso,' que es a la vez el más autobiográfico (el que prodiga más los recuerdos) y el más fantástico.²⁰

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²⁰ *El libro de arena*, back cover.

