

# Borges in Love

*Daniel Balderston*

for Donald Yates, in memoriam

In 1934,<sup>1</sup> Borges wrote three love poems in English for a woman whose identity he would shield later with a series of changes of initials. Two of those poems were published in 1943 in an edition of his *Poemas*, and many years later they were included in *El otro, el mismo* (1964), in quite a prominent position: the “Two English Poems” are the second text in that volume, which includes such important other poems as “Poema conjetural,” “La noche cíclica” and “El otro tigre.” The third poem was never published until just now: María Celeste Martín and I included it, by permission of Andrew Wylie Literary Agency, in the book just released by the Borges Center, *Poemas y prosas breves* (71-81). High resolution scans of all three manuscripts were made available to me in the course of my research into Borges manuscripts, which began in 2009. I did not study them as part of my book *How Borges Wrote*, released in April 2018 by the University

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1 The date 1936 appears in some editions but the 1934 date is more common and much more probable. If the trip to northern Uruguay mentioned in the third (unpublished) poem discussed below is an autobiographical detail, then 1934 is the correct date, since that is the year that Borges and Enrique Amorim took a long road trip through northern Uruguay near the Brazilian border.

of Virginia Press. Instead, I decided to postpone the study of these three poems, Borges's only writing in English (one of his two native languages, but one he chose never to write anything in except for a few dictated works later in his career), until I had time to take stock of a fairly complex manuscript record.

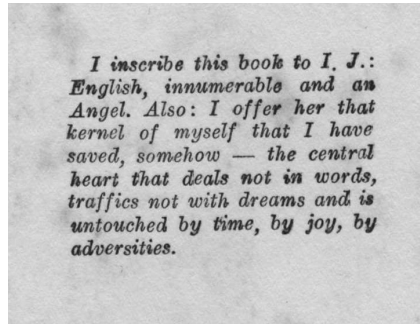
Several years ago I learned about John Bryant's program TextLab, a software program that he developed for the Melville Electronic Library (MEL) at Hofstra, and about which he published an article in the *Revista Iberoamericana* in 2014 in the genetic criticism issue that I edited with María Julia Rossi. At that time, however, I did not learn how to use TextLab myself. John has been singularly generous in guiding me through the many steps to use TextLab for the transcription and digital edition of these poems. For some time I have been interested in digital editing, particularly for genetic criticism of modern manuscripts like these, but this has been my first prolonged effort to use one of the available tools. As happens in the digital humanities, the time I have expended to do the digital edition of the poems, parts of which are included here, has been considerable, but I think the payback has also been significant, since I have been forced to consider the precise steps that Borges took as he set down these poems to paper, to gauge the changes he made in the manuscript pages in relation to the two published poems, and to undertake a hypothetical reconstruction or what I would term an edition of the third, unpublished poem.

The circumstances of the poems are as follows: Borges was probably in love with a married woman, Sara Diehl de Moreno Hueyo, known as Pipina.<sup>2</sup> The poems were written, apparently soon after Diehl had been widowed; there may even have been wedding plans (Costa Picazo 515). Perhaps out of respect for her, when Borges published the poems in 1943 he called them "Prose Poems for I. J."

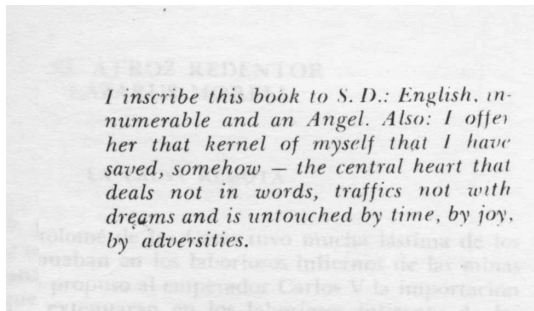
PROSE POEMS FOR I. J.

2 Sara Diehl de Moreno Hueyo is mentioned frequently in Bioy's diary *Borges*. See for instance pages 130, 138, 224, 427, 457, 460, 634, 657, 770, 966, 1036, 1298, 1438, 1485 and 1522.

These are the same initials he had used in his initial dedication of *Historia universal de la infamia*, which reads: “I inscribe this book to I. J.: English, innumerable and an Angel. Also: I offer her that kernel of myself that I have saved, somehow—the central heart that deals not in words, traffics not with dreams and is untouched by time, by joy, by adversities.”



The latter part of this dedication, “I offer her that kernel of myself,” is part of the second English poem, though this poem would not be published until eight years later. In the 1954 edition of *Historia universal de la infamia* Borges changes the initials to S. D., alluding in all probability to the real object of his love in the 1930s.



The poems, however, he rededicates (first one in 1954, then both by 1974) to Beatriz Bibiloni Webster de Bullrich, a woman with a ridiculous name about whom juicy, absurd anecdotes are recounted in the almost one thousand seven hundred pages of Adolfo Bioy Casares’s diary *Borges* in which, for instance, Borges is said to have quoted Bibiloni as saying “Yo no soy una mujer frívola: a mí lo único que me interesa es el dinero” [I am

not a frivolous woman; all that interests me is money] (Borges 134).<sup>3</sup> Here is the footnote to this poem in the 1954 edition of *Poemas*

<sup>1</sup> El primero fué escrito para Beatriz Bibiloni Webster de Bullrich.

) 143 (

And here is the dedication as it appears in the 1974 *Obras completas*:

134

TWO ENGLISH POEMS

To Beatriz Bibiloni Webster de Bullrich

Whatever the precise circumstances, it is clear from the poems that Borges was deeply in love with someone who was an English speaker, and that the relationship with the object of that love was troubled, even bizarre.

But before I get there perhaps it is worth noting that Borges's rhetoric in the various texts he writes when in love is quite odd. In the mid-1940s he was deeply in love with the writer Estela Canto, yet when he dedicates the story "El Aleph" to her in 1945 he includes in it a meditation on the grave of the woman he calls "Beatriz Viterbo" (a code name used by them, according to Canto in her memoir *Borges a contraluz*), includes the information that Beatriz had engaged in incest with her first cousin Carlos Argentino Daneri (as Canto is said to have boasted of incestuous relations with her brother Patricio Canto), and reveals her to be a frivolous society lady. In real life, outside of literature, if we can make that distinction in Borges, he writes her postcards that include declarations like "te pienso continuamente, pero siempre de espaldas o de perfil" (123) [I think constantly about you, but always with your back to me or in profile] or "Vagamente he visto unas casas, bruscamente anuladas por casi intolerables memorias de un ángulo de tu sonrisa, de la inflexión de tu voz diciendo *Georgie*, de una esquina de Lomas o de La Plata, de los avisos de un bar en Constitución, de mi reloj en tu cartera, de tus dedos rasgando papel" (125) [Distractedly I have seen some houses, suddenly annihilated by almost

<sup>3</sup> There are many other delicious anecdotes about Bibiloni de Webster in the Bioy diary. See for instance pages 62, 65, 67, 79-80, 84, 127, 210, 280-81, 283, 383, 378, 387, 395, 400, 463, 826, 1134

intolerable memories of an angle of your smile, of the tone of your voice saying ‘Georgie,’ of a corner in Lomas de Zamora or in La Plata, of the advertisements in a bar in Constitución, of my watch in your purse, of your fingers tearing paper]. The English poems were written ten or so years earlier but they include similar displacements of the loved one onto things in the world, houses, features of a landscape, and as we shall see their rhetoric makes quite radical use of these displacements. Borges’s rhetoric in his declarations of love often includes memories of shared experiences but also of experiences that he has in isolation: in the case of the English poems, things seen and heard in the empty streets of Buenos Aires or in the Uruguayan countryside while removed from the beloved, perhaps even when irremediably cut off from her.

The first English poem can be found easily in editions of Borges, including for instance the 1974 *Obras completas*. It begins: “The useless dawn finds me in a deserted streetcorner. I have outlived the night. / Nights are proud waves: darkblue topheavy waves laden with all hues of deep spoil, laden with things unlikely and desirable” (861). The compound words—“topheavy,” “streetcorner,” “darkblue”—reveal Borges’s readings at the time (and his translations) of the poetry of e. e. cummings, and perhaps also of Gerard Manley Hopkins; the manuscript reveals no hesitation around these words that are not in the dictionary in these forms (and that Microsoft Word insistently marks as errors). The half page manuscript also shows considerable rewriting, though the sequence of lines is the same as in the published version.



of composition, what John Bryant calls in his writings a “revision narrative.” In this case, this looks like this (omitting a fourth column in which the editor comments on each individual change, for instance the strike through of “new”):

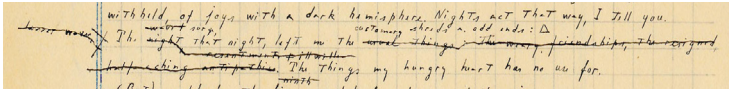
0	Initial	Words, any words, new laughter; you were unwillingly and incessantly beautiful, we We talked and you have forgotten the words.
1	1-0047	Words, any words, <del>new</del> laughter; you were unwillingly and incessantly beautiful, we We talked and you have forgotten the words.
2	1-0048	Words, any words, <del>new your</del> laughter; you were unwillingly and incessantly beautiful, we We talked and you have forgotten the words.
3	1-0144	Words, any words, <del>new your</del> laughter; you were unwillingly and incessantly beautiful, we We talked and you have forgotten the words.
4	1-0062	Words, any words, <del>new your</del> laughter; <del>you were</del> and you so unwillingly and incessantly beautiful, we We talked and you have forgotten the words.
5	1-0063	Words, any words, <del>new your</del> laughter; <del>you were</del> and you so <del>unwillingly and incessantly</del> beautiful, we We talked and you have forgotten the words.
6	1-0061	Words, any words, <del>new your</del> laughter; <del>you were</del> and you so <del>unwillingly and incessantly</del> beautiful, <del>incessantly and forgetfully</del> b. We lovely + perfect we We talked and you have forgotten the words.
7	1-0068	Words, any words, <del>new your</del> laughter; <del>you were</del> and you so <del>unwillingly and incessantly</del> beautiful, <del>incessantly and forgetfully</del> b. We lovely + perfect <del>unwillingly and unceasingly</del> perfect we We talked and you have forgotten the words.
8	1-0118	Words, any words, <del>new your</del> laughter; <del>you were</del> and you so <del>unwillingly and incessantly</del> beautiful, <del>incessantly and forgetfully</del> b. We lovely + perfect <del>unwillingly and unceasingly</del> perfect lazily a. incessantly we We talked and you have forgotten the words.

TextLab will also produce both a “preview” of the final text, which in this case looks like this: “Words, any words, your laughter; you were and you so beautiful, unwillingly a. unceasingly perfect. We talked and you have forgotten the words” and a diplomatic transcription, which in this case looks like this:

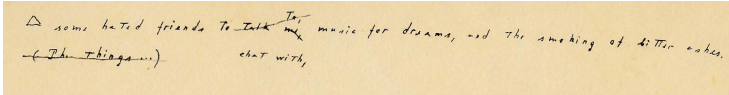
Words, any words, new your laughter; you were and you so unwillingly and incessantly b. We lovely + perfect unwillingly and incessantly beautiful, we unwillingly a. unceasingly perfect. incessantly and forgetfully We talked and you have forgotten the words.

It is obvious that some subsequent rearrangement resulted, for instance, in the phrase “and you so lazily and incessantly beautiful,” but it is also clear that there are other parts of this line, particularly its opening and its closing, that are fundamentally the same from the beginning to the end of the process. The exercise makes clear how painstaking Borges is in his search for a precise formulation of the idea, which results in the sequence of two adverbs (ultimately “lazily and incessantly”) occupying parts of four lines of the manuscripts and two more lines in the left margin: the process is anything but lazy, as he is interested in characterizing precisely what he thinks about the beloved’s beauty.

The most complex revision in this poem is in the fourth line, which looks like this:



The triangle (Borges frequently uses geometric symbols to mark insertions) takes us to a passage at the top of the page marked with the same symbol:



Here the diplomatic transcription gives us:

The night wave, surge, [illegible] wave, resentment + ill will that night, left me the usual things: the weary friendships, the resigned half-aching antipathies. customary shreds a. odd ends: [ ] some hated friends to talk me, to, chat with, music for dreams, and the smoking of bitter ashes.

(The things . . .) a bitter ashen taste in my mouth The things my hungry heart has no use for.



The preview version reads: “The surge, that night, left me the customary shreds a[nd] odd ends: some hated friends to chat with, music for dreams, and the smoking of bitter ashes. The things my hungry heart has no use for,” the same as the published version except for the abbreviation of “and” as “a.”

The second English poem is a bit longer than the first, and the manuscript situation is much more complex. The poem begins: “What can I hold you with?” and continues with eight lines that begin “I offer you” (streets, sunsets, the moon, bitterness, my ancestors, books, loyalty, memories, explanations) before concluding: “I can give you my loneliness, my darkness, the hunger of my heart; I am trying to bribe you with uncertainty, with danger, with defeat” (861-62).

As in the previous poem, there are insertions, one set in line 7—“and is untouched”—marked with a number sign, and another marked with a psi—“authentic and surprising news of yourself.” A significant feature of this second manuscript is the numbering of the verses in the left margin, including a long squiggle below the number 7 to show that that verse—the one that becomes the dedication to *Historia universal de la infamia*—is a single verse, but one that will need to be recomposed from elements that are scattered on the page (this is where “and is untouched” from the top margin is to be inserted).

The manuscript looks like this:

and is untouched by ~~wisdom~~ <sup>time</sup> ~~by~~ <sup>not by</sup>  
~~circumstances~~ <sup>Time, by days, by</sup>  
~~adversities~~ <sup>of</sup> authentic and <sup>joy, by</sup>  
 1 What can I hold you with? <sup>surprising news of yourself</sup>  
 2 I offer you quiet streets, desperate sunsets, The red moon of <sup>ragged + jagged</sup>  
 the suburbs. <sup>moor of the jagged</sup>  
 3 I offer you <sup>can give you</sup> the bitterness <sup>suburbs</sup>  
 of a man who has seen far too many <sup>downer?</sup>  
 4 I offer you <sup>can give you</sup> the bitterness <sup>at</sup> of a man who has looked long and  
 long <sup>an</sup> the lonely moon. <sup>loneliness</sup>  
 4 I offer you my ancestors, my dead men, The ghosts that <sup>living</sup> other men  
 → have honoured in marble: my father's father <sup>killed in</sup> ~~leading to death in~~  
 The province of Buenos Aires, two bullets through his lungs, bearded  
 and dead, wrapped by his soldiers in the hide of a cow; my  
 mother's grand father - just <sup>Twenty-four -</sup> ~~leading a~~ <sup>handing a</sup> ~~cow~~ <sup>charge</sup>  
 of three hundred men in Peru, now (ghosts + apostles) on <sup>vanished</sup> phantom horses.  
 5 I offer you whatever <sup>wisdom + insight</sup> beauty my books may hold, whatever <sup>maintains</sup> dignity  
 or humour my life.  
 6 I offer you <sup>or</sup> my intimacy with <sup>words</sup> a man who <sup>but</sup> ~~knows~~  
 the loyalty of a man who has never been loyal. <sup>I have saved, somehow:</sup>  
 7 I offer you <sup>the central heart that</sup> that inner core of <sup>my</sup> soul that <sup>somehow</sup> I have saved:  
 that heart of me that deals not <sup>in</sup> with words, traffics not  
 with hopes, <sup>is</sup> leaves when I am <sup>hopeless</sup> <sup>is</sup> always <sup>central</sup>  
 dark, unassailable <sup>memoranda</sup> <sup>you were born.</sup>  
 I offer you the memory of a yellow rope reep at <sup>sunset</sup> your dawn, years before  
 10 "I offer you my loneliness, my darkness, The hunger of my heart;  
 I am trying to bribe you with uncertainty, with folly, with <sup>trouble</sup> <sup>with</sup>  
 defeat. <sup>Lyonsville</sup>  
 9 I offer you explanations of yourself, Theories about yourself, <sup>holding of</sup>

When I worked with TextLab on this poem, John Bryant's program turned out to anticipate a (hidden) maximum of revision sequences in a single line, and line 7 turns out to consist of 28 steps, so that in order to do the secondary editing of it I had to divide it into three segments. The other feature of this poem that caused great travail in the secondary editing is the fact that the lines numbered 3 and 8—ultimately the third line of the poem—include a series of variants that go back and forth in a dizzying way: “I offer you” becomes “I can give you” becomes “I offer you” becomes “I can give you,” while “weariness” becomes “bitterness” becomes “bitterness” and then returns to “weariness.” In the final poem a strong anaphoric structure is established—eight out of the ten lines begin “I offer you,” while the tenth and last one chooses the other form, “I can give you.” Also of note is the fact that the line numbered 10, the next-to-last on the manuscript, will become the last line of the poem, indicated by the renumbering of 9 and 10; note also the two variants of line 6, marked 6<sup>1</sup> and 6<sup>2</sup>, by the mathematically minded Borges.

The strangest parts of this poem are precisely the line about “that kernel of myself” (the one that forms part of the epigraph of *Historia universal de la infamia*) and the last two lines of the poem, the ones in which the speaker proposes “explanations of yourself, theories about yourself, authentic and surprising news of yourself,” and offers to win her over with “my loneliness, my darkness, the hunger of my heart” and with “uncertainty, with danger, with defeat.” I suppose there are other love poems where the loneliness and insecurity of the speaker are mustered as part of the words of entreaty, but I cannot think of others in which the speaker offers explanations, theories and news of the other as a way of winning him or her over. The speaker also defines himself as a writer— “I offer you whatever beauty <sup>wisdom</sup> <sup>insight</sup> my books may hold”—and musters things of his world—bits of family history, the streets of the city, memories (of a yellow rose before she was born). On the manuscript page, it is notable that some revision sequences—“quiet” changed to “mean” and then to “lean,” “ragged” replaced by “jagged,”—including alternatives that are semantically very different but that have similar orthography, like the replacement of “tilt” with “lilt” in the previous poem.

mean + lean  
quiet streets,

surprising news of yourself  
ragged + jagged  
red moon of

Another oddity of this poem is the speaker's knowledge of the beloved's selfhood, said to be superior to her own. He writes: "I offer you explanations of yourself, theories about yourself, tidings of yourself" and then adds "authentic and surprising news of yourself."

defeat.  
1 I offer you explanation of yourself, Theories about yourself, Tidings of

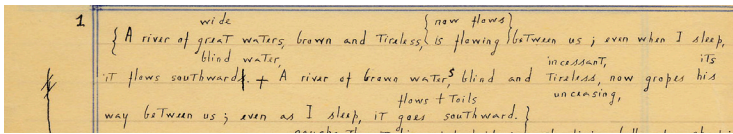
authentic and | 104, 64 |  
surprising news of yourself  
ragged + jagged

This was to be the last line of the poem, but was later moved to the next-to-last position with the renumbering of this as line 9 and the previous verse as line 10. In any case, the excessively intellectual approach to love—the promise of the speaker's books, his knowledge of the beloved's inner self—may account for some of the poem's celebrity, since Borges's often cerebral approach to emotional life is perhaps nowhere more strongly expressed than here.

These two poems have caught a lot of critical attention but perhaps more smoke than light. They have been translated numerous times into Spanish, and there has been a fair amount of speculation about the identity of the beloved. The study of these two manuscripts provide important insight into their process of composition, insight that proves very useful, as it turns out, when dealing with the third, unpublished poem. This one is explicitly located in a place, near Saucedo in northern Uruguay, making

it fairly easy to date also, since Borges went with the Uruguayan writer Enrique Amorim, the husband of his first cousin Esther Haedo, to this area in 1934. It is longer than either of the others, stretching over a page and a half of manuscript, with a notable number of variants and only a single deletion, making it hard to edit into a final version, except I think with the tools provided by TEI markup and a program like TextLab that causes one to focus closely on revision sequences. In *Poemas y prosas breves* I propose an edition of this poem, and reproduce the two page manuscript (with a “typographical transcription” by María Celeste Martín). I refer interested readers to that edition.

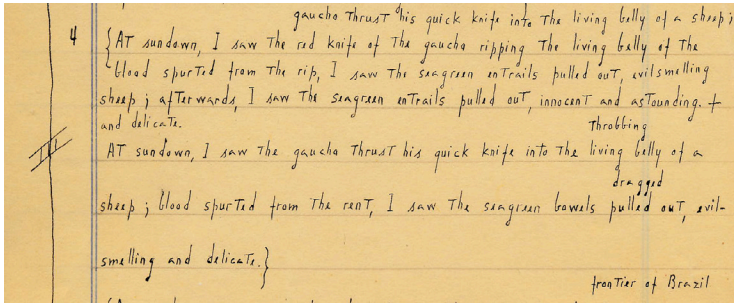
The poem begins with a description of a river of “great” or “wide” or “blind” water, soon to become “A river of brown waters, blind and tireless” or “incessant” or “unceasing”:



{A river of great <sup>wide</sup> waters, <sup>blind water,</sup> brown and tireless, is flowing <sup>{now flows}</sup> between us; even when I sleep, it flows southward. + A river of brown water<sup>s</sup>, blind and tireless, <sup>incessant,</sup> <sup>unceasing,</sup> now gropes his its way between us; even as I sleep, it goes <sup>flows + toils</sup> southward.}

The first line, numbered 1 in a first sequence of numbering in Roman numerals (then crossed out in a single vertical stroke down the whole of the first page) and also 1 in Arabic numerals, is written out once, then Borges inserts a plus sign (a frequent sign he uses to indicate manuscript alternatives), then copies the verse again, then inserts brackets around the whole of the two alternatives. The evocation of the wide, brown, blind river—the River Plate, the wide estuary that separates Uruguay from Argentina—serves to mark the speaker’s distance from the beloved (the river “gropes its way between us,” like an intruder in their relationship).

The next line in the manuscript version (though ultimately it was to become the fourth line according to the renumbering scheme in the left margin) contains one of the strangest elements in a love poem:

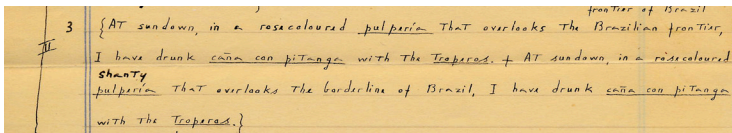


{At sundown, I saw the red knife of the gaucho ripping the living belly of the sheep; afterwards, I saw the seagreen entrails pulled out, innocent and astounding. + gaucho thrust his quick knife into the living belly of a sheep; blood spurted from the rib, I saw the seagreen entrails pulled out, evilsmelling and delicate.

At sundown, I saw the gaucho thrust his quick knife into the living throbbing belly of a sheep; blood spurted from the rent, I saw the seagreen bowels pulled dragged out, evilsmelling and delicate.}

Again, Borges writes two successive versions of this line, then numbers it Roman numeral III, then Arabic numeral 4. Rhetorically it serves to situate him emphatically in a rural setting, and one that is marked by an atavistic or primitive human society. What was perhaps a matter-of-fact part of rural life in nineteenth-century Argentina and Uruguay (and one could think, for example, of the scene that Borges's English grandmother is said to have witnessed in the later story "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva," in which Fanny Haslam sees an English captive among the Indians bend down and drink the spurt of blood from the throat of a sheep) here is rendered as an event that is at once repugnant and fascinating, brutal and delicate.

The next line of the poem (later renumbered Roman numeral II and Arabic numeral 3) reads:



{At sundown, in a rosecoloured pulpería that overlooks the Brazilian frontier, frontier of Brazil, I have drunk caña con pitanga with the troperos. + At sundown, in a rosecoloured pulpería<sup>shanty</sup> that overlooks the borderline of Brazil, I have drunk caña con pitanga with the troperos.}

The insistent underlining of words in a poem in English again emphasizes the otherness of the scene, in this case a linguistically complex otherness since most of the words underlined (*caña*, *con*, *troperos*, *pulpería*) are Spanish but *pitanga* is an indigenous word used in both Spanish and Portuguese, confirming that this line evokes life on the border region between southern Brazil and northern Uruguay: an area that Borges will later evoke on numerous occasions as a region that he associates with shifting identities, criminality and contraband. The insertion (in a darker ink) of “shanty” above *pulpería* is of particular interest, since that change reduces the cultural specificity of the general store and bar of the River Plate region to a more generic English term for a modest house. In the first version, “a rosecoloured pulpería,” Borges evokes the setting of the story he wrote about the same time, “Hombre de la esquina rosada,” though the latter takes place in Buenos Aires, not in the countryside. In any case, “rosecoloured pulperías” are associated frequently in Borges with violence and illicit love; this poem, then, is inscribed in the series of texts that Borges wrote about gauchos and compadritos that are set in places like this.

The next line of the poem concerns Borges’s reading of a Chinese novel, which would seem by the brief description to be Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, translated into English in 1925 as a whole (after some partial translations earlier). We know that Borges read the “four classical Chinese novels,” and refers most frequently to the *Dream of the Red Chamber* or *Story of a Stone* and to *Monkey* or *Journey to the West*. The *Three Kingdoms* would fit better the brief description given here, since it concerns men who fight and love, or love and fight, or die and love. The line reads:

5 {In the lang evenings, within sight of dark men on horseback, I have read a  
 novel concerning men who love and fight in China. + In lazy evenings, within  
 sight of dark men on horseback, I have read a novel concerning men who love  
 and love and fight in China.}

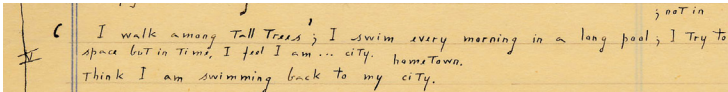
Annotations: "fight and love" is written above "love and fight"; "read through a certain novel..." is written above "read a novel"; "die" is written above "love"; "foranoens," is written above "read through a certain novel...".



{In the long <sup>cool</sup> evenings, within sight of dark men on horseback, I have read a novel concerning men who love and fight <sup>fight and love</sup> in China. + In lazy evenings, <sup>forenoons,</sup> within sight of dark men on horseback, I have read a novel concerning men <sup>read through a certain novel...</sup> who love die and fight <sup>die and love</sup> in China.}

Again, two alternatives are given, both stressing the sharp contrast between distant “dark men on horseback,” the gauchos of the previous verses, and the Chinese warriors in the novel that Borges is reading. This verse was renumbered IV, then 5, in the successive rearrangements of the poem.

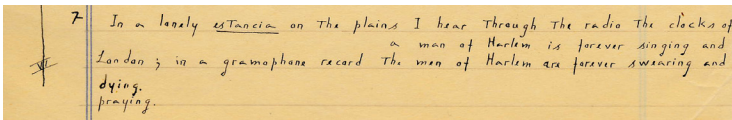
The next line again gives two main alternatives:



I walk among tall trees; I swim every morning in a long pool; I try to <sup>:not in</sup>  
think I am swimming back to my city. <sup>hometown.</sup> <sup>space but in time, I feel I am ... city.</sup>

There are eight steps involved in this revision, an important line in that it is the first time that Borges refers to a desire to return to the beloved, even in a fantasy of swimming down the river (presumably the Uruguay River, which forms the boundary between Uruguay and Argentina and then flows into the River Plate). This epic swim is thought to happen “not in space but in time.”

The final line on the first page of the manuscript, numbered 7 in both sequences, reads:



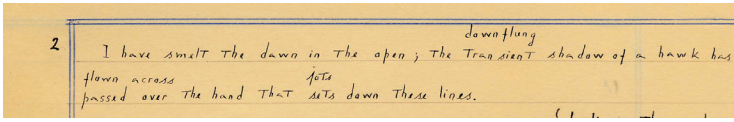
In a lonely estancia on the plains I hear through the radio the clocks of London; in a gramophone record the men of Harlem are forever swearing and <sup>a man of Harlem is forever singing and</sup> praying. <sup>dying.</sup>

Here the alternatives are fewer than in the previous verses, revolving around whether the voice on the record is singular or plural. Once again, though, as with the reading of the Chinese novel, there is an element of dissonance between the speaker’s cultural frame and the local culture



around him: he is listening to BBC on the radio and to spirituals from Harlem, his mind elsewhere, or at least partly elsewhere.

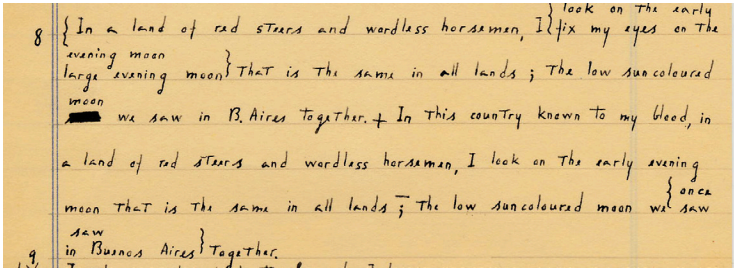
The first line on the next page reads:



I have smelt the dawn in the open; the transient <sup>downflung</sup> shadow of a hawk has passed over <sup>flow across</sup> the hand that sets <sup>sets</sup> down these lines.

Here again, in the alternative “downflung” to “transient,” there is a touch of the influence of Cummings or Hopkins, though surely here more Hopkins (“The Windhover”) than Cummings. This line is numbered 2 in the left margin, the most radical rearrangement in the poem. It is a verse that establishes his presence in the natural scene: he is “in the open,” the hawk’s shadow passes over his hand, the hand that writes (jots or sets down).

The next line reads:



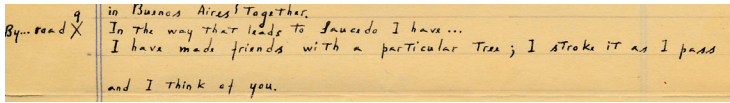
{In a land of red steers and wordless horsemen, I {fix my eyes on the <sup>look on</sup> the <sup>early</sup> large evening moon <sup>evening moon</sup>} that is the same in all lands; the low suncoloured XXXXXX<sup>4</sup> <sup>moon</sup> we saw in B. Aires together. + In this country known to my blood, in a land of red steers and wordless horsemen, I look on the early evening moon that is the same in all lands; — the low suncoloured moon we saw {<sup>once</sup> in Buenos Aires <sup>saw</sup>} together.

Again, as with the first verses of the poem, two long alternatives are set out in series; this will be the eighth verse of the poem. The fact that the

4 It looks like Borges has started to write “sun” here, getting confused with the previous word “suncoloured.”

speaker remembers—from the very different space where he is now—a moment of shared experience with the beloved, back in Buenos Aires, is significant for establishing the yearning that, as he suggested a few lines before, is not just in space but in time.

The verse that is numbered 9, the next-to-last one in the poem, is a bit chaotic on the page, with “By . . . road” in the left margin, then the two alternatives “I have made friends with a particular tree; I stroke it as I pass and I think of you” and the fragmentary “In the way that leads to Saucedo I have . . .”



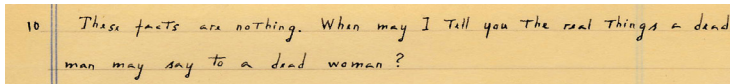
By . . . road x

9 In the way that leads to Saucedo I have . . .

I have made friends with a particular tree; I stroke it as I pass and I think of you.

The presence of ellipses in both the second alternative and the marginal reference signifies a process of composition that loops around itself. At the same time, the obvious sexual connotation of “I stroke it” situates the speaker’s yearning as one that suggests not just “friends[hip] with a particular tree” but something more, the “surge” that he described in the first of the English poems.

The tenth and final verse is written once and for all, but the writer’s certainty about it only serves to confirm the fundamental strangeness of his relation to his love:



These facts are nothing. When may I tell you the real things a dead man may say to a dead woman?

The poem was to remain unpublished, and there is no way of knowing whether Sara Diehl (or whoever was the object of this strange devotion) would have thought of this particular, and peculiar, tribute. The “facts” that are said to be insignificant are the things described in the whole rest

of the poem, the things of the world that surround the speaker but also his reading, what he is listening to, the yearning he feels, his memories. In pronouncing both himself and the beloved dead he obliterates the possibility of a relation: what indeed could a dead man say to a dead woman?

This poem differs from the previous two not only in the fact of its never having been published but also in that there are very few strikethroughs in it: the variants are posited on a fairly equal basis except in those cases where a verse is repeated (usually after a plus sign) in a version that incorporates one of the alternatives entertained earlier. A careful examination of Borges's practices here, in tandem with the knowledge of how the drafts of the other two poems relate to the published versions, makes it possible to propose a version of the third English poem, something like this:

1 A river of brown waters, blind and unceasing, now gropes its way between us; even as I sleep, it toils southward.

2 I have smelt the dawn in the open; the downflung shadow of a hawk has flown across the hand that jots down these lines.

3 At sundown, in a rosecoloured shanty that overlooks the borderline of Brazil, I have drunk caña con pitanga with the troperos. }

4 At sundown, I saw the gaucho thrust his quick knife into the throbbing belly of a sheep; blood spurted from the rent, I saw the seagreen bowels dragged out, evilsmelling and delicate.

5 In lazy forenoons, within sight of dark men on horseback, I have read through a certain novel concerning men who die and love in China.

6 I walk among tall trees, I swim every morning in a long pool; not in space but in time, I feel I am swimming back to my city.

7 In a lonely estancia on the plains I hear through the radio the clocks of London; in a gramophone record a man of Harlem is forever singing and dying.

8 In this country known to my blood, in a land of red steers and wordless horsemen, I look on the early evening moon that is the same in all lands—the low suncoloured moon we once saw in Buenos Aires together.

9 By the road that leads to Saucedo I have made friends with a particular tree; I stroke it as I pass and I think of you.

10 These facts are nothing. When may I tell you the real things a dead man  
may say to a dead woman?

But this is not Borges's poem: it is one that is constructed by the critic out of the many alternatives. All that is certain about this process is that Borges wrote a love poem that ends in an impossibility, a situation emblematic of his difficulties in love. His final English composition remains unpublished, I think, because it could not be shared with the beloved, and therefore could not be published. Sara Diehl, if she was the object of his devotion, would live until 1976, and become the president of Proarte, an arts association in Buenos Aires. Her name erased by shifting initials, she—or whoever was the one that Borges yearned for in the poems—was, perhaps, “English, innumerable and an Angel.” “Innumerable,” the negative adjective that is crucial here, occurs elsewhere in Borges, always in relation to something that is beyond reach, beyond expression. The rhetoric of love in these poems hinges on that idea of the impossibility of the relation and of its expression; the haunting nature of these poems bespeaks Borges's strange ways of being in love. The question that opens the second English poem—“What can I hold you with?”—is a question that turns back on the subject itself: love for Borges is to be evoked through the things of the world, but would seem to be nothing in itself, the desire for a relation between two subjects that are themselves inexpressible.

*Daniel Balderston*  
University of Pittsburgh

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