

CARTER WHEELER
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Modern Critical Views

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Borges' New Prose

In 1966, some ten years after "God's magnificent irony" had given him "books the night," apparently ending his career as a writer of prose fiction, Jorge Borges published a short story, "The Intruder." His devotees sat up with rest, but many leaned back again because the new story—devoid of brain-ting sophistry and erudite allusions—was not like the old Borges, whose dozen gripping "fictions" published up to 1953 had made him the most important living writer in the Spanish language. Since "The Intruder," Borges has written more than a dozen new narratives, most of them collected under the title of one in the series, *Doctor Brodie's Report*. Two of them, along with several other short prose pieces, are interspersed with the poetry of *Elogio de la Oscuridad* [*In Praise of Darkness*] (1969). A long story, "The Congress," was published separately in 1971.

This new prose has yet to be fully appraised. My effort here can be only a superficial beginning, and we must start by remembering the old Borges.

THE FORMER BORGES

Toward the end of the 1930's Borges turned from poetizing Buenos Aires and fictionalizing the hoodlums of the city's outlying slums (as in "Streetcorner Stories," 1933) and took to playing literary games with time, infinity, destiny, and the nature of reality. He was well equipped for it, being multilingual and having spent most of his forty years as an eclectic reader, absorbing everything from Burns's *The Saga of Billy the Kid* to Berkeley and the Panchatantra. His

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life, he has said, has been devoted less to living than to reading. In the following ten or so years he produced three small collections of compact fiction (the first two are now combined as *Ficciones* [1944; enlarged 1956]; the third is *The Aleph* [1949; enlarged 1952]). These stories, suggestive of highbrow detective fiction and of Symbolist poetic theory applied to prose, are utterly lacking in social consciousness or moral implication; unemotional, sexless, and uncontemporary, they wave no banners and press no points. They allude to everything and recommend nothing.

For the most part, these highly intellectual creations of the 1940's are clinical, cosmic tales peopled with almost faceless characters who are not really people but archetypal miniatures that move about in a purely cerebral universe. They often act like mythical beings in primitive cosmologies, or like dream figures: two men can be one, they can be dead but alive, and they can be only half real; they can pass in and out of mortal life ("The Immortal"), stare at magic coins until they go mad ("The Zahir"), behold the universe under the cellar stairs ("The Aleph"), live a year in a moment ("The Secret Miracle"), or dream other people into being ("The Circular Ruins"). Borges' people live in ignorance of the secret laws, or the secret will, which guide their destinies, and their actions are not finally their own. Borges surrounds them with the dicta of metaphysical philosophers who make all things logical, and their behavior is told in deftly ambiguous language. The reader finds himself acclaiming with emotion what he doesn't quite grasp and perhaps doesn't believe. He is floated into a kind of esthetic hysteria, feeling spoofed but also sublimated. Although Borges insists that he does not push a philosophical viewpoint (or any other), his underlying skepticism, or idealism, comes through.

Far from being verbose in proportion to their intricacy, these earlier stories are written in a wondrously frugal and exact style—richly suggestive, poetic, and full of ironic humor, baroque artifice, and rhetorical sleight of hand. Prominent symbols—mirrors, labyrinths, tigers, towers, knives—are repeated with unabashed regularity (Borges calls himself monotonous), and the repetition of other images or secondary symbols suggests an esoteric pattern with a meaning: circles, coins, pyramids, horses, swamps, cards.

But again, no messianism intrudes into Borges' work. The ideas of men are arbitrary formulations with infinite alternatives. Certitude is intellectual death; therefore, for Borges, even his basic philosophy is a conjecture. Speculation is the law of intellectual life. Out of this view come the irony and humor of Borges' prose. He mocks knowledge by displaying it lavishly, finally turning it against itself. But his jibes are gentle, because he relishes all ideas for their esthetic value.

Every strange figment of thought implies a whole new structure of reality.

realm in which the errant idea would not be strange at all. By piling up these pieces of heretical "fact," Borges overpowers us with the illusion that we almost understand that realm and that if we did we would know everything. The creation of this illusion of near-understanding seems, on the surface, to be the whole esthetic motive of Borges' older fiction. By attacking our conception of reality and implying another—a secret order in our chaos—he stalks the "esthetic occurrence" in an Olympian arena. In a short essay, "The Wall and the Books" (*Other Inquisitions*, [1952]), he tentatively defined the esthetic event or fact (*el hecho estético*) as "the imminence of a revelation, which never comes." But to say that Borges fabricates esthetic situations is a fundamental error; for he has not believed, apparently since the early 1920's when he split with Ultraism, that the esthetic is man-made.

Much light is thrown on Borges' fiction by his essays, his short prose thoughts, and his poems, where he often centers his attention on literature and philosophy, but where he just as often focuses upon a natural, historical, or literary event that strikes the sensitive intellect as marvelous because of what it implies (that is, what it does not reveal) of time, destiny, or reality. For example, a gaucho murdered by his son does not know that perhaps he died only to repeat Caesar's death along with the words "And thou, my son"; or when a man dies, an infinite number of things in his memory die with him and leave the world poorer, as when the last man died who had seen Woden's rites or the living Christ. These are not intellectual fabrications of an esthetic illusion but simple wonder at the mystery and suggestiveness of real facts. When Borges adds metaphysical half-explanations, the little miracle he is pointing to is only heightened. When he marvels at the strange spiritual likeness between Omar and FitzGerald, there are inevitable overtones of circular time, reincarnation, and Platonic form or of the primordial metonymy that makes two men one if they share merely a characteristic. When Borges writes that Shakespeare is nobody because he so long pretended on the stage to be other men, he conjures the old theological platitude that God, being everything, is not any one thing, therefore is no thing—nothing. Such logic is a trick of language—both intellectually palliative and spiritually cathartic. Such deliberate speciousness is rare in fiction, and its proliferation in Borges' prose has moved critics to treat it as an esthetic principle. Most readers of the old Borges, if pressed for a quick characterization of his typical stories, would call them dramatizations of intellectual propositions. This makes Borges a coiner of abstruse parables or fables, an allegorist; he is frequently defined as a writer who allegorizes heretical ideas, and more often than not there is the implication that he is some kind of truthseeker who uses literature as a megaphone for his anxieties or his agnostic faith. Borges knows this. In his new fiction he seems to be

telling us that his strange literature of the past is not an intellectual destruction of reality but an esthetic affirmation of it.

THE NEW BORGES

The excellence of "The Intruder" appears to have been somewhat overlooked because many were disappointed that Borges' first story in many years was not of the old vintage. Borges punctured any hope that he would return to the "type" by telling an interviewer in 1967 that he was fed up with "labyrinths and mirrors and tigers and all that." In the future he would write "straight-forward" stories, somewhat after the manner of Kipling's early tales, with "little vocabulary" and "without tricks." What caused this change? Anyone who reads such recent stories as "Doctor Brodie's Report," "Guayaquil," or "The Gospel According to Mark" soon realizes that near-blindness has hardly impaired Borges' ability to produce organized intricacy in precise and frugal language. No, the real cause was visible as early as 1962, when James Irby noted that Borges regarded his older fictions as baroque and vain. Even before taking up fiction, Borges had abandoned (with Ultraism) the idea that literature can show us the essences of things or that art is any kind of key to metaphysical knowledge. He had abandoned faith in the reality of the "revelations" that can come out of new metaphors, contrived paradoxes, or juxtaposed antinomies. Now he has abandoned Ultraism's essentially baroque style; but he continues to espouse the idea that literature should "show us our own face," by which he means that it should show us *its* face, for to him the world and literature are the same thing: "If art is perfect, the world is superfluous." The "imminence of a revelation" is perhaps the ultimate knowable reality, and men do not create it. They comprise it, behold it, and try to transmute it into language. This idea precludes any esthetic theory—that is, any rule or formula for producing an imminent revelation.

Borges writes in the preface to *In Praise of Darkness* that he is not the possessor of an esthetic; and in the preface to *Doctor Brodie's Report* he seems to disclaim the attribution to him, by others, of an "esthetic of the intelligence":

The art of writing is mysterious; the opinions we hold are ephemeral, and I prefer the Platonic idea of the Muse to that of Poe, who reasoned, or feigned to reason, that the writing of a poem is an act of the intelligence.

In the same preface, in answer to those critics who have deplored his lack of artistic concern for national and social issues, he says:

I want to make it quite clear that I am not, nor have I ever been, what used to be called a preacher of parables or a fabulist and is now known as a committed writer. I do not aspire to be Aesop. My stories, like those of the Thousand and One Nights, try to be entertaining or moving but not persuasive.

This may also be understood as Borges' justification for deserting those metaphysical fictions which have been taken as essentially allegorical, for Borges is well aware of the bad connotations of "allegory." He has called allegory "an error," although he admits to allegorizing. (In the foreword to the second part of *Ficciones* he calls "The Sect of the Phoenix" an allegory.) Apparently he does not mind being called an allegorist if only the implication of didacticism is removed. Stripped of its moralism, allegory becomes a valid and powerful esthetic device, a long metaphor rich in suggestion. In a recent interview Borges characterized himself as a former parabolist turned storyteller; speaking of the new stories he would write (those of *Doctor Brodie's Report*), he said: "They will not be like my former work, parables or pretexts for writing essays. I want to be a storyteller, a narrator of real stories, without tricks."

In "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim" (*Ficciones*), Borges says of the fictitious novel he is "reviewing" that the version of 1932 was somewhat symbolic, but that the 1934 version "declines into allegory." In the foreword to Robert Lima's translation of Ana María Barrenechea's work on Borges (*Borges the Labyrinth Maker*), Borges acknowledges his occasional recourse to allegory: "My best writings are of things that were striving to come to life through me, and not simply allegories where the thought comes before the sign." In other words, Borges strives for a true symbolism but thinks that he, too, may occasionally "decline into allegory."

NEW NARRATIVES

Borges' new manner is indeed more straightforward. Much of the stylistic complexity has disappeared, leaving his themes and plots more conspicuous. In these narratives the plots—the *fabulae*, tales as tales—are in my opinion superior to those of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, not because they are less fantastic but because truth itself is fantastic and these new tales, for the most part, are closer to it than are the stories about the equivocal verities of our mental life. In the eleven stories of *Doctor Brodie's Report* we do not get lost in limitless libraries or go wandering around inside the mind of the Minotaur. We go back, mainly, to the straggling outskirts, or *arrabales*, of Buenos Aires and to the pampa. These are the suburbs and plains as they were, or could have been,

at the close of the nineteenth century or the early years of the twentieth, when *compadritos* (Argentine hoodlums, or gang toughs, with a lot of the classical gaucho in them) would hang around the saloons deciding who was the toughest, often by fighting with knives. Thus Borges continues to show his lifelong fascination with the cult of physical courage, which is present in "The Intruder" and commands at least five other *Brodie* stories.

These narratives about blustering *compadres* are among the eight in *Brodie* that are based on some type of interpersonal rivalry. Of the ruffians of the *arrabal* the most conspicuous is Rosendo Juárez ("Rosendo's Tale")—not because he is the toughest but because he is the same Rosendo Juárez who turned coward (apparently) in "Streetcorner Man," a story Borges wrote as far back as 1933. In the new story, Rosendo explains to Borges that his refusal to fight when challenged was due to disillusionment and disgust with his style of life. The most pathetic of the duelers are the gauchos Manuel Cardoso and Carmen Silveira of "The End of the Duel." These are two longtime rivals who have often faced each other knife in hand but have avoided killing each other because their rivalry gives meaning to their "poor and monotonous lives." Drafted into the army, they fight side by side, without speaking, until they are finally captured by the enemy. A sadistic captain, knowing their rivalry, orders that they die in competition. Their throats cut, they run a race to see who can go farthest before collapsing.

Borges plays many variations on the rivalry theme. "The Intruder" gives us a rivalry caused by a woman and transcended by a murderous brotherly love. The Nilsen brothers, a pair of illiterate Saturday-night brawlers, pick up and share a country wench, sell her to a brothel to quiet their growing jealousy, and later retrieve her when each of them begins going to the brothel on the sly. Unable to save their comradeship and affection with the girl between them, the older brother kills her. When the younger is told, the two embrace, almost in tears.

In "Juan Muraña" the personal conflict is more fanciful; it is hardly a rivalry, but it involves a tough whose knife was feared. Muraña, long dead, is a bloody legend, and his widow, sister, and nephew are about to be dispossessed by their landlord Luchessi. Muraña's widow, Aunt Florentina, is a bit daft; she keeps assuring the others that her beloved husband will not let the gringo throw them out. Luchessi is butchered one night in his doorway by an unknown knifer. Later, Aunt Florentina shows her nephew her beloved husband—the notorious knife of Juan Muraña.

In "Juan Muraña" the fanciful equation of a man with his knife is explicable as Florentina's mental aberration or as a symbol of Muraña's continuing influence. But in "The Meeting," Borges goes straight to the fantastic—to a

mystical, metonymical equation of men with their instruments. Two men—not *compadres* but civilized upper-class Argentines—get tipsy at a stag party and quarrel over a card game. As if driven by something beyond themselves, they do the unthinkable. They go to a display cabinet, take out two knives made famous by a pair of rivals long dead, and fight. Neither knows anything about knife fighting, but they fight like experts. One is killed; the other is incredulous and ashamed. In a kind of postscript, Borges suggests that it was not the men who fought, but the knives; the men were instruments of an ancient enmity inherent in the weapons.

But of all these tales of the mythic outskirts of the city, "The Unworthy Friend" is perhaps the most ambiguous and intriguing. Don Santiago Fischbein (whose real name is Jacobo) tells his story to Borges. He was a Jewish boy and a confessed coward in a neighborhood where the physical courage of the *compadre* was admired. He was terribly eager to be accepted thereabouts, but also to be accepted as an Argentine and a good citizen. He fell in with a gang of hooligans headed by one Francisco Ferrari, not because he had what it took to run with that crowd but because he adulated the leader, who lured him in. Ferrari planned to break into a textile factory one night and assigned Fischbein to keep watch outside. But before the time came, Fischbein went to the police and told all, causing Ferrari's death.

After reading "The Unworthy Friend," one does not know who betrayed whom, who is really judged unworthy, and unworthy of what. In one way this story reverses the plot of "The South" (*Ficciones*), whose nameless old gaucho appears to correspond to the old man of "The Unworthy Friend," Eliseo Amaro, the only gang member who is named. Fischbein's betrayal of Ferrari is prefigured in his verbal denial, at one point, that he knows Ferrari (he feels unworthy of knowing him); this vaguely suggests Peter's denial of Jesus. (Borges' interest in Christ's betrayal is shown in "Three Versions of Judas" [*Ficciones*] and other places, and in his new fiction it is most prominent in "The Gospel According to Mark.")

The possible reasons why Fischbein betrayed Ferrari are numerous. He wanted to prove himself a good Argentine; his hero had tried to corrupt and use him; he lost respect for his idol when he saw him pushed around by the police; he saw him as a punk, the way Rosendo Juárez saw himself; he had to justify his own cowardice by causing his hero's courage to destroy him. The ostensible reason is psychological; men often betray those of whom they feel unworthy. The most probable explanation of the treachery is purely Borgesian: the inscrutable cosmos somehow required it; it repeated the Great Betrayal. Ferrari is a subverted Christ figure. Adored by his followers and persecuted by the authorities, he is first denied, then sold out, then killed.

Why is Peter suggested, however remotely, along with Christ's real betrayer, Judas? I think it is because the betrayal has somehow saved the traitor. The key to this lies in the reasoning of the strange Gutre, or Guthrie, family of "The Gospel According to Mark." Father, son, and daughter, all illiterate, work on a ranch being visited by the protagonist, a medical student named Baltasar Espinosa. Isolated with this rather stupid trio when the ranch is surrounded by floodwaters, Espinosa passes the time in the evenings by reading them the Gospel of St. Mark. Ordinarily unresponsive to the student, they listen with deep interest; when he treats their pet lamb for an injury, he wins their devotion. The rains destroy part of the roof of the tool shed attached to the house, and, according to the Gutres, this accounts for the hammering that goes on while Espinosa sleeps and dreams of the building of the Ark. One night the girl, a virgin, comes to his room naked and has intercourse with him without embracing or kissing him. The next day the father asks him whether even those who crucified Jesus were saved from hell, and Espinosa, whose theology is vague, says yes. After lunch Espinosa leaves his room to find the Gutres kneeling and asking his blessing; then they curse him and spit on him and push him to the door of the wrecked tool shed, from the timbers of which they have built a cross.

The transference of identity from Christ to Espinosa (whose name suggests Baruch Spinoza and also the word "thorny," like a crown of thorns) is plausible, given the superstitious mentalities of the Gutres. But the matter lies deeper. The idea of being saved by killing one's redeemer is a reversal of the idea of being killed *by* him, Job-like, as in "The House of Asterion" (*El Aleph*), where the Minotaur is "redeemed" by Theseus. While Borges equates salvation with death in that case, he makes it equivalent to life in this one, where the Gutres appropriate the virtues of their sacrificial victim through the symbolic ritual of cannibalism. Fischbein's cowardice, likewise, is somehow mitigated by the death of his superior, his "redeemer." In the story of the Gutres there are suggestions of correspondences between the death of Christ and the human sacrifices of primitive peoples. Just as the Gutre girl gave herself to Espinosa without the enthusiasm of love, as if in obeisance, the Aztecs (for example) chose sacrificial victims whom they coddled for a time, giving them luxury and women, before killing them. In a higher sense of the word, Jesus was "coddled" for a while, as during the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The Gutres petted Espinosa, who, like Jesus, was thirty-three years old, a healer, bearded, and noted for oratory and goodness.

The cannibalism in these two stories is finally of an abstruse and philosophical kind, echoing the interplay of order and chaos that characterizes much of Borges' older work. Let me illustrate. The Gutres, who remind me

of the oxlike Troglodytes of "The Immortal" (*El Aleph*), are of part-Scotch ancestry and are a mixture, Borges tells us, of Calvinist fanaticism and the superstition of the pampa Indian. Let us say they have a fixed and limited world-view. In words that paraphrase a reference in his confessional essay "The Maker" (*Dreamtigers*) and that allude to the Odyssey of Homer, Borges compares the Gutres to a lost ship searching the seas for a beloved island. The Odyssey and the Crucifixion are called the two histories which men, down through the ages, have repeated. On the symbolic level they are contrasted: the voyage of men lost in chaos, seeking a center, versus the exaltation through death (dissolution) of a supreme centrality on Golgotha. The medical student's mentality is contrasted with that of the Gutres; he is a freethinker who has no overriding or centered viewpoint, and no need for one. He likes to gamble, but not to win or to argue; he has "an open intelligence" and an "almost unlimited goodness." Unlike the world-view of the Gutres, then, his fluid and easy outlook seems magnanimous and noble. The Gutres, the lost ship, are searching for a secure idea, but Espinosa is not looking for anything. The Gutres see the Gospel as a conveyor of terribly important truth, but Espinosa reads it for its esthetic value. The Gutres seek order and meaning, but Espinosa is happy with a kind of agnostic equivocality, and, paradoxically, he is more ordered, more saved, than they. The narrow and fanatical Gutres believe that the sacrifice of their new pet, this other lamb, will redeem them.

How will it redeem them? We have to look back at Borges' older "system." Borges has made both salvation and hell equivalent to intellectual obsession (the inability to forget), as in "The Zahir" (*El Aleph*) where the narrator cannot forget a coin and goes happily, painlessly mad; or as in "Deutsches Requiem" (*El Aleph*) where the poet David Jerusalem is driven insane by an unnamed obsession inculcated by his tormentor, Otto zur Linde, who observes that any common thing, if not forgettable, is the germ of a possible hell; or as in "The House of Asterion" (*El Aleph*), where the Minotaur, bewildered by a house-universe that has too many galleries and doors, is "saved" by the world-simplifying sword that takes his life. In the story of the Gutres, as in Christian dogma, the death of the "Christ" is the vicarious death (redemption) of lost men; "Christ" becomes for the Gutres the holy obsession, the beloved island. Paradoxically, he represents not a limited, obsessive world-view, but its erasure.

"The Gospel According to Mark" is not one of the stories of rivalry. I want to go back to that type in order to mention "The Duel" and "Guayaquil." The first is a kind of parallel story to "The End of the Duel," mentioned earlier; the rivalry depicted is one that enriches the lives of the competitors. Two society women, Clara Glencairn and Marta Pizarro, compete in a friendly way in the field of painting. Painting is here analogous to literature, and I think we can

infer that Borges is contrasting his own work—imaginative, ambiguous—both with the almost unintelligible literature of the vanguardist and with the clear-cut, rational literature of the *engagé* writer who tries to mirror the world and push a message. The story is humorous and satirical; in the artist Clara Glencairn we can perhaps see a caricature of Borges himself as he is seen, or thinks he is seen, by some Argentine men of letters who, on the one hand, have criticized his work for its universalism and aloof unconcern with national issues and, on the other hand, do not include him among the really “far out.” Clara tried to be an abstract artist—a vanguardist—but that school rejected her work. She smiled and went on. Eventually she won a prize because some judges could not decide between two other artists, one of them too conventional and the other too “modern.” Her friend and rival was the “straight” artist Marta Pizarro, a painter of portraits and patios with a nineteenth-century look. The two women painted against and for each other, and when Clara died, Marta’s life lost its meaning. She painted Clara’s portrait and laid her brushes aside for good. In that delicate duel, says Borges, there were neither defeats nor victories.

“Guayaquil” consists largely in the dialogue of two historians who are thrust into momentary rivalry. The narrator is a scholar whose specialty is the Independence movement and the life of the Argentine hero General San Martín. His adversary is a German Jew from Prague who has fled Hitler’s tyranny, one Eduardo Zimmerman. Zimmerman is not a specialist in South American history but has proven himself adept at cleansing the biased histories of others (he has written on the Carthaginian Jews, who formerly were known only through the accounts of their enemies, the Romans). The two men are contending for the privilege of being officially chosen to go to another country to copy, appraise, and publish a newly discovered letter presumably written by Bolívar, which could clear up a famous historical mystery: what was said between San Martín and Bolívar, when they met in Guayaquil, which caused the former to retire from revolutionary activity and leave the destiny of the continent in Bolívar’s hands. By conventional standards the narrator is better qualified to appraise the letter (a specialist, he is also the proud scion of revolutionary heroes), but he surrenders the privilege to Zimmerman after the two scholars converse. On leaving, Zimmerman divines that the narrator has conceded the honor because he intimately willed to do so. Still showing his penchant for alluding to philosophers, Borges weaves into the story a mention of Schopenhauer’s “law” that no human action is involuntary; this serves a central purpose in the structure of the tale, which is about will and implies that volition—commitment—causes bad literature. I will comment on this story later in connection with Borges’ esthetic ideas.

“The Elder Lady” shows Borges’ ability to write in a charming and delicate

way, with nostalgia for the glories of Argentine history and with both sympathy and satire of the *criollo* sensibility. The story is about the hundredth birthday of the last person who can claim to be the daughter of a revolutionary hero. The bustle and excitement of her anniversary celebration, which her countrymen turn into a celebration of national history and which she probably does not comprehend because she lives in the distracted world of the senile, hastens her end. She has long partaken of the glory of her famous father, hero of the battle of Cerro Alto; now she is somehow the last victim of that battle, for its celebration brings on her death.

Among the more ingenious of Borges' earlier stories are those in which he enumerates the irrational characteristics of some fantastic thing, apparently allegorizing an unnamed common reality. In "The Lottery in Babylon" (*Ficciones*), for example, he describes a "vertiginous country" where citizens are governed by pure chance, taking part in a lottery that awards them fame or ignominy, riches or poverty, life or death, on a day-to-day basis. Interpretation is up to the reader, and in this case the story seems to suggest the fortuitous and unstable nature of what men call reality. In "The Sect of the Phoenix" (*Ficciones*) Borges rounds up the random characteristics of a secret rite which is never identified but could be any number of things. In the new fiction, the title story of *Doctor Brodie's Report* is of this enigmatic type. It is an outrageous description of an incredible tribe called the Mlch, or Yahoos (the latter is the name of the degenerate humans in *Gulliver's Travels*). As a narrative device, Borges lays before us the incomplete manuscript of a Scottish Protestant missionary, David Brodie, who lived among the Yahoos. It reminds us of many things: Gulliver, a story by H. G. Wells, Pío Baroja's *Paradox Rey*, and other accounts of bizarre peoples. But mostly it reminds us of the old Borges, particularly of his description of the mind of Ireneo Funes ("Funes the Memorious," *Ficciones*), who could not forget details and was unable to form abstractions, "to think Platonically"; or it suggests the imaginary planet Tlön ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," *Ficciones*), which is made of purely ideal—i.e., mental—elements. The Yahoos suffer the opposite of Funes' affliction; they have a language of pure abstractions and cannot remember details. They cannot combine phenomena except of a homogeneous, Platonic type. Unlike the people of Tlön, who can concoct anything at will, the Yahoos cannot fabricate at all. In the story of Tlön, the imaginary planet begins to concretize—to impose itself materially on the planet Earth; in the Yahoos of "Doctor Brodie's Report" we may see the grotesque end-result of that imposition. The Yahoos cannot count above four, can hardly speak, and appear to have no discrimination of time. In a limited way, they can predict the events of the immediate future (these appear to be only extrapolations). They remember almost nothing, and if they do remember an

event they cannot say whether it happened to them or their fathers, or whether they dreamed it. They live in the present, they eat in secret or close their eyes while eating, they execute their fellows for fun, and if one of them is a poet (if he puts a few words together unintelligibly, but with moving effect) he is considered a god and anyone may kill him. Their king is blinded, mutilated, gelded, and kept in a cavern, except in war, when he is taken to the battle front and waved like a banner. Instead of declining into allegory, Borges' prose now tends to sharpen into satire, or even to move toward the intensive case of the modern novel, where the parable intersects with cultural anthropology, and whose characters obscure and overwhelm the symbols they encounter.

THE UNCHANGING BORGES

Borges' characters are still chessmen, however, and both character and action are subservient to situations of a chessboard kind. His settings are still indifferent; the *compadritos* could almost as easily be Chicago gangsters or western gunmen. Despite his return to the *arrabales*, Borges is not a portrayer of local color and customs; as somebody must have said before, his Buenos Aires is a situation, not a city. Many of his themes are still highbrow, esthetic, "irrelevant." References to systems of ideas, famous and arcane, are no longer profuse, but they have not vanished; we still find Spinoza, Euclid, Schopenhauer, the Kabbalah, Carlyle, Lugones, Carriego, Henry James, Hudson, and others. Still, these allusions seem to serve less purpose than formerly and to be more often literary than philosophical. Familiar Borgesian language crops up only here and there; in "The Intruder" we find "contentious alcohol" (*alcohol pendenciero*), a phrase he has used since the 1930's. Missing now are those very frequent words with which Borges used to point to the vast or infinite, such as "dizzying" (*vertiginoso*; this word used to do double duty, suggesting also the rise to an esthetic moment). Borges seldom plays with time and infinity, and instead turns to destiny, cosmic irony, and chance. Regrettably, we find no rich poetic images that suggest impossible intuitions like the plight of man before the chaotic universe: veiled men uttering blasphemous conjectures in the twilight ("The Lottery in Babylon") or old men hiding themselves in the latrines, with some metal disks in a prohibited dicebox, weakly imitating the divine disorder ("The Library of Babel," *Ficciones*).

Borges' language is still superbly laconic. It is less connotative, and conceits and etymological uses of words are no longer plentiful. Fantastic ideas still appeal to him, as we see in "The Meeting" and in "Juan Muraña," but they are no longer intended to rattle or astonish us; instead, they appeal to our esthetic sensibilities. There appears to be no significance, beyond Borges' personal whim,

to the fact that the new stories are laden with Scotsmen (Brodie, Clara Glencairn, Glencoe, the Gutres), Germans (Zimmerman), and other North Europeans (the Nelsons or Nilsens of "The Intruder"). The prominence of red hair is consistent with all of these nationalities; all red things have symbolic meaning, I think, in Borges' work, and there may be a hidden significance here.

As before, Borges continues to throw in generalizations that are external to the narrative: "Carlyle says that men need heroes to worship" ("The Unworthy Friend"). Their effect is to give intellectual justification to a character's action, obviating a realistic or contextual explanation. This economy is fundamental to Borges' narration. He often inserts his own opinions; he tells us that the aged protagonist of "The Elder Lady" was gradually "growing dimmer and dimmer," and he justifies the metaphor by adding, "Common metaphors are the best because they are the only true ones"; and to explain Clara Glencairn's reason for taking up abstract instead of traditional art, he generalizes that "all esthetic revolutions put forth a temptation toward the irresponsible and the far too easy". These asides almost always have the value of esthetic commentary. In "Guayaquil," for example, Borges remarks: "The successiveness of language . . . tends to exaggerate what we are saying." This is given as a warning to the reader the Zimmerman's enumerated traits are "visual trivia," apparently not as important as the conclusion that he had lived an arduous life.

Borges has tallied, in the preface to *In Praise of Darkness*, a handful of his "astucias"—his stylistic and structural devices. The tabulation omits the majority of the subtleties that scholars have abstracted from his older works, and is obviously a declaration of present, not necessarily former, practice. Time, he says, has taught him to avoid synonyms, Hispanisms, Argentinisms, archaisms, and neologisms; to prefer habitual to astonishing words; to insert circumstantial details, "which the reader now demands"; to feign small uncertainties; to tell things as if he did not fully understand them; and to remember that former norms are not obligations. In the preface to *Doctor Brodie's Report* he says he has renounced "the surprises inherent in a baroque style." He does not call his new, "straightforward" stories simple: "I do not dare state that they are simple; there isn't anywhere on earth a single page or single word that is, since each thing implies the universe, whose most obvious trait is complexity."

Two of the devices he mentions are conspicuous because they preserve in Borges' new fiction an essential property of the old: namely, feigning small uncertainties and telling a story as if he did not fully understand it. Borges' chessmen—his people "seen through the wrong end of a telescope" (James Irby)—are not so much characters as props. Their faces are wiped off by Borges' aloof posture. He masks the activity of writing under the pretense of listening: "People

say (but this is unlikely) that the story was first told by Eduardo" ("The Intruder"; "Carlos Reyles . . . told me the story . . . out in Adrogué" ("The End of the Duel"; "here is the story, with all the inevitable variations brought about by time" ("The Meeting"). An occasional disclaimer, like "probably," keeps this objectivity in front of the reader: "she was unable to keep hidden a certain preference, probably for the younger man" ("The Intruder"). The only new story in which he does not keep his distance is "Guayaquil," where he writes as the protagonist; but it is also in this story that he speaks of the necessity of objectifying and states the principle clearly: "I shall with all probity recount what happened, and this may enable me to understand it. Furthermore, to confess to a thing is to leave off being an actor in it and to become an onlooker—to become somebody who has seen it and tells it and is no longer the doer." In contrast to the narrator of "Guayaquil," who is so involved that he purports to understand only dimly what has happened, his rival historian, Zimmerman, is noteworthy for his objective detachment from events and opinions; we feel that Zimmerman understands everything—even the things he cannot express but can only allude to.

THE ESTHETIC PHENOMENON

Borges' objectivity, his blurring of faces, is directly related to his esthetic. I have suggested that in his older fiction Borges carries his reader to a mythic awareness, an esthetic moment of near-revelation, and at the same time alludes to that moment symbolically through images of dizziness: vertigo, fever, alcohol, inebriation, exaltation, delirium. These images are part of a whole system of secondary symbolism (i.e., below the level of such overt symbols as mirrors and labyrinths) through which Borges used to create, in each narrative, a background drama—a play of allusions in which the overt action of the story is duplicated by symbolic forms as if these were the enlarged shadows of the characters. In Borges' system there are symbols of order and being (blood, tower, light, coin, tree, tiger, sword), symbols of chaos or nonbeing (circles, ashes, mud, dust, swamps, plains, night, water, wall), and symbols of purely ideal being and of world dissolution, made largely of combinations and interplays of the images of order and chaos. They comprise an archetypal, almost Olympian representation of the activity of the human consciousness as it creates, destroys, and re-creates reality. In this shadowy undulation there is a moment between the chaos of nonbeing (mere perception of meaningless things) and the lucidity of full being (complete, meaningful abstraction) when the consciousness hovers on the brink of a higher revelation. That revelation never comes; instead, what occurs is a kind of short-circuit resulting in "language," the abstraction of a

bathetic reality small enough to be expressed. But that hovering instant when some kind of supernal truth seems imminent is the "vertiginous" moment to which Borges refers as the esthetic event.

We find far less evidence of this background drama of symbols in Borges' new fiction. Avowing his disbelief in esthetic *theories*, which he says are only occasional stimuli or instruments, Borges speaks continually of the esthetic *occurrence* or *fact*, "the imminence of a revelation." He built it allusively or allegorically into the fabric of such stories as "The End" (*Ficciones*); now it stares at us ingenuously from many of his new ones, and the forewords to the books he has published since 1960 are conspicuously concerned with the central point—the esthetic fact is not a collection of words on paper, but an experience: "A volume in itself is not an esthetic reality, but a physical object among others; the esthetic event can occur only when it is written or when it is read" (preface to *In Praise of Darkness*; translation mine).

Borges has shown that he is willing to judge literature good or bad using the *hecho estético* as a criterion. In the preface to his *Personal Anthology* (1961) he points to Croce's pronouncement that art is expression. To that idea, or to its deformation, he says, we owe some of the worst literature. He quotes verses from Valéry about a fruit whose form perishes in the mouth, giving delight by perishing, and other lines from Tennyson in which a boat fades into the distance and "vanishes into light." He doubts that anyone will finally include such verses among the best, saying that they represent a "mental process." We should infer that they carry an image or idea to its completion and that this is esthetically wrong. Borges adds: "At times, I too have sought expression; I know now that my gods grant me no more than allusion or mention" (translation mine). His comments do not finally cohere unless we understand that his "gods" are his ideas about how literature should be made. By opposing expression to suggestion he contrasts a finished mental process with one that is open-ended and indefinite, hovering over an unformulated idea. He seems to believe that allusion is not at all intellectual, hence the emphasis on event, on fact.

Borges likes the fruit image from Valéry. In another preface (to his *Obras poéticas* [*Poetic Works*; 1964]), he says he applies to poetry what Berkeley applied to reality: "The taste of the apple . . . lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself . . . What is essential is the esthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading." The bad writer, for Borges, is the one who *eats the fruit for us*, finishing the idea before we can savor its insinuations—or worse, letting his foregone conclusion shape the composition. Croce's "expression" is the complete verbal capture of a clear idea or feeling—the short-circuit that evaporates the pregnant myth. Borges points

out in an essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne (*Other Inquisitions*) that Hawthorne's moralisms do not usually ruin his work, if only because they come in the last paragraph and because he did not fashion his characters to prove his conclusions. An "expressive" writer, an Aesop, builds a narrative that yields a simile between two realities (with the intention of giving one the color of the other), or between his fictitious events and the moral point or social theory he is trying to illustrate, while Borges himself wants only to distract his reader. Some quality held in common between two or more things links them secretly, and this is not something contrived by Borges but perceived by him. That perception, imparted to us, brings the momentary illusion that the chaotic world is somehow simplified or illuminated, and we are lifted toward a new insight or comprehension—which never solidifies.

Borges' esthetic idea is worked into his new fiction in at least two ways. In some stories he presents esthetically loaded situations, a "missing apex" type of suggestion which leaves the mystery incomplete. Usually this involves irony or paradox, and inevitably it raises the question of the character of God or of Destiny: an ironic competition between two dying rivals who had refused to kill each other in life; the redemptive crucifixion of an unbelieving, unsuspecting, unwilling "Christ"; a brother love that is no less admirable in itself (and perhaps is even more so) for having expressed itself in murder. The second way is that of the abstruse "allegory" (I now use the term inexactly, for lack of another) in which the esthetic event is pointed to by allusion as an objective idea. Only one of Borges' new stories is clearly of this kind, although others may be more subtly so; before turning to "Guayaquil," it will be helpful to look first at obvious allusions to the *becho estético* in the short prose of *In Praise of Darkness*.

Borges uses, more often now, stories he has heard. Long ago he heard the one called "Pedro Salvadores," which is not really a story but a historical episode to which Borges adds his comments and shows his own esthetic reaction. Salvadores was an Argentine who, as an opponent of the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas (deposed in 1852), was forced to hide in his cellar for nine years. This, plus the details, is his whole story. In the same way that Camus wondered, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, what Sisyphus thought as he carried his eternal rock, Borges wonders at those nine years of dark isolation. (Internal elements lift the episode to a universal plane, and there is reason to suspect a parallel with Borges' blindness and his intellectual history). He conjectures about Salvadores' feelings, actions, thoughts, and very being—with no possibility of corroborating his intuitions. "As with so many things, the fate of Pedro Salvadores," he concludes, "strikes us as a symbol of something we are about to understand, but never quite do."

Very like that episode is the one called "The Anthropologist." Borges says he heard the story in Texas and he gives it to us without comment. Fred Murdock, a student of indigenous languages, goes into the desert to live with an Indian tribe and to discover the secrets behind its esoteric rites. After a long time he returns to the university and informs his disappointed professor that he has learned the secret but cannot tell it—not because of a vow or the deficiencies of language; in fact, he could enunciate it a hundred ways. But the secret is less valuable than the steps that lead to it, and "Those steps have to be taken, not told."

"The Anthropologist" is brief and deceptively simple; it is not a story about an anthropologist but about a young man in chaos, uncommitted, who tried to reduce the world to a facet of itself, hoping to find in it the centripetal vortex of vision that would explain or justify the whole. It is the same story as "The Library of Babel" (*Ficciones*) in which the inmates of the library go blind looking for the compendious book. It is the story of a frustration, like "Averroes' Search" (*El Aleph*), where Averroes is compared to the frustrated god "mentioned by Burton . . . [who] tried to create a bull and created a buffalo instead." It is the story told in Borges' poem "The Golem," where a rabbi tries to create a man and can only create a clumsy doll. Here we see vestiges of an allusive imagery that is much more evident in Borges' older work; it is not mere coincidence that the student dreamed of mustangs (in the Spanish, it is bison). He went into the desert to find a revelation and found only language. As he implies, the search was more valuable than the result, and the search has to be experienced, not told. The esthetic experience is in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the digestion of it.

Borges believes—I think it is clear—that the tales men tell and retell, the ones that comprise our myths, are all of the open kind. They respect and embody an esthetic of the unconsummated, rehearsing the cosmic mystery. All our science, philosophy, and explanations of the universe are buffaloes.

In a tiny poetic essay, "The Unending Gift," an artist promises Borges a painting but dies without sending it. If it had come, it would be a thing among things; but now it is limitless and unceasing, capable of any form or color. It somehow exists and will live and grow like music. "In a promise," Borges concludes, "there is something that does not die."

"GUAYAQUIL" AND *EL HECHO ESTÉTICO*

"Guayaquil," which I summarized earlier, is the story of a scholar who renounces intellectual fulfillment in order to preserve esthetic life. He sees more value in a myth than in an explanation, more virtue in an unformulated idea

than in the language that purports to convey truth. The narrator of the story and his rival historian, Dr. Zimmerman, are contending for the privilege of appraising the newly found letter of Bolívar which will give Bolívar's answer to the renowned question of what happened in the interview with San Martín. We must remember that San Martín, after talking with Bolívar, withdrew from the revolutionary struggle; we might say that he, too, quit before his drama was done. Bolívar led his country's fortunes until his death, leaving his indelible stamp on the revolution and its aftermath. Transferred from the historical plane to the literary, San Martín's story is unconsummated and esthetic; but Bolívar's finished career (a completed "mental process") makes bad "literature." The conversation of the revolutionary heroes is somehow duplicated in that of the historians, who observe that it was no doubt Bolívar's will, not words, that determined the outcome at Guayaquil. The narrator finally concedes to Zimmerman the honor of publishing the letter in order not to repeat the action—the will—of Bolívar. To repeat Bolívar's error would be to turn an esthetically attractive historical event—a living myth—into mere short-circuiting language. The reason is this: there is mystery in the San Martín incident, and Zimmerman believes the letter cannot really clear it up because it gives only Bolívar's version, perhaps written in self-justification. If Zimmerman interprets the letter for the public, he will preserve the mythic ambiguity by weighing Bolívar's words in the proper perspective. But the biased narrator feels that if he publishes a commentary, the effect will be deadly; he is the descendant of revolutionists, very much involved in history and partial to San Martín, and his conjectural position on the matter is well known (although we are not told what it is). The public will link him with the letter, and the myth (the suggestive indeterminacy) will be destroyed by some miserable "explanation" which the public will suppose has been made by his conclusions on the subject. "The public at large," Zimmerman remarks, "will never bother to look into these subtleties." If the narrator imposes his will, he will act, as Borges expressed a similar urge in *Dreamtigers*, from "no other law than fulfillment," and the result will be "the immediate indifference that ensues" ("The Maker").

To show Zimmerman that he has understood, the narrator recites two parables in which we can see a tension between simple correspondence and the esthetic fact. In the first parable, two kings play chess on a hilltop while their armies clash. One loses the game and his army loses the battle; the chess game was a mere duplication of the larger reality. In the second, two famous bards have a contest of song. The first sings from dawn until dusk and hands the harp to the other. The latter merely lays it aside and stands up, and the first confesses his defeat. We can take the second parable to mean that the best song remains unsung—limitless, unending, like a promise. The narrator

makes statements at the beginning and end of "Guayaquil" which can be understood to mean that he will not destroy the esthetic indefiniteness surrounding San Martín's talk with the Liberator. At the beginning: "Now I shall not journey to the Estado Occidental [Western State]; now I shall not set eyes on snow-capped Higuerota mirrored in the water of the Golfo Plácido; now I shall not decipher Bolívar's manuscripts." At the end the narrator, a man whose life has been dedicated to nailing down the definitive truths that explain history, seems to confess his conversion to an esthetic of the indefinite: "I have the feeling that I shall give up any future writing." Borges fashioned the opening lines of this story from Conrad's *Nostramo*.

In the original Spanish, "manuscripts" is *letra*, which means handwriting or letter. *Letra* is one of Borges' old symbols for clear conception, visible reality, or abstraction, as in "The Secret Miracle" (*Ficciones*), where God is a tiny letter on a map. Among other symbols of ordered or abstract reality in Borges' older stories are mountains and other kinds of upward projections. The things the narrator of "Guayaquil" says he will not do are all symbolic, it seems, of the production of intelligible reality through expressive language; he will not see a mountain duplicated, behold a "letter," or write his definitive conclusions. As for the "western country," it seems enough to say that "western" is the opposite of "eastern" with its implication of mystery. This, too, is consistent with Borges' old symbolism, in which all things eastern and yellow suggest the chaotic, mythic, and esthetic.

Borges is still building into his fiction the occasional guide-images or omens that facilitate interpretations but certainly do not corroborate them. For example, when Zimmerman enters the narrator's house, he pauses to look at a patio tiled in black and white (an old image in Borges' work), prefiguring the parable of the chess game and perhaps suggesting that the events to follow will be a kind of duplication. Indeed, during the conversation it seemed to the two scholars "that we were already two other people"; their encounter occurs at twilight, which in Borges' familiar work is a frequent symbol of change or suspension of reality. When the first bard sings, he sings from morning twilight to evening; his song is a daylight song, a finished and patent thing, superseded by the unsung music that belongs to the dreaming hours as day recedes. And at one point Zimmerman remarks: "Everything is strange in Prague, or, if you prefer, nothing is strange. Anything may happen there. In London, on certain evenings, I have had the same feeling." Zimmerman is from Prague, the native city of Kafka, and of the ambitious rabbi of "The Golem," who tried to create a man but produced only a monster. Also in "Guayaquil" is a reference to *Der Golem*, a novel by Gustav Meyrink of Prague. In conversation Borges has said that the creation of the golem is "a parable of the nature of art."

One other important symbol deserves mention: blood. In Borges' older work, it is associated with fullness of being—with completeness, domination, victory, or will. The will in question in "Guayaquil" is not Zimmerman's, imposed upon the narrator; it is, rather, the narrator's, suppressed for a cause. Zimmerman observes that the narrator carries Argentine history in his blood, implying that he would treat Bolívar's letter with willful prejudice. The narrator tells us that Zimmerman's words were "the expression of a will that made of the future something as irrevocable as the past," but we must understand that Zimmerman's "expression" delineated the undesirable willfulness of the narrator, which the latter willfully subdued.

This interpretation of "Guayaquil" suggests taking another look at such stories as "The Gospel According to Mark"; instead of comparing the mentalities of Espinosa and the Gutres in terms of order and chaos—or, to use a term from Borges, order and *adventure* ("The Duel")—we might infer a contrast between the open, uncommitted, mythic-minded writer (Espinosa) and the closed-minded, compromised, or committed writers (the Gutres) who are guided by their determination (their "Calvinist fanaticism") to get a point across, to find their "beloved island." The work of such writers is predetermined; its meaning is as irrevocable as the preconceptions of the authors.

If we can judge by "The Maker," even his blindness is to Borges analogous to the abandonment of Aesopism, somewhere in his past, and to his espousal of the idea that literature should be written "blind"—for its own sake, not for an intellectual or practical purpose. Most of his stories are punctiliously contrived allusions to the idea of art for art's sake; in that sense they comprise art about art.

ETHICS

With the appearance of *In Praise of Darkness* (as Borges notes in the preface) two new themes are added to his work: old age and ethics. What he calls ethics goes beyond and embraces much of his philosophy and its esthetic foundations.

"Fragments of an Apocryphal Gospel" could be called poetry or prose; it is a collection of numbered apothegms and injunctions modeled in part on the Beatitudes. They alter many of the sayings of Jesus and other moral or theological axioms, often contradicting them or seeming to. They reflect a point of view which denies heaven and hell, reduces men to predestined beings who are ignorant of their destiny, rejects the idea of morality for the sake of reward, believes in pursuing justice for its own sake, and looks with kindly, humanistic eyes at the human species. These dicta strongly imply a pessimism overcome by courage—not stoicism, which suggests a dogged refusal to be affected, but blind, Tillichian faith, which has only rigor to justify it. Borges' ethic, as he

seems to declare in "A Prayer" (discussed below), consists in a devotion to lucid reason and just action.

In his "Fragments" Borges is satirical, warm, wise, heretical, moralistic, sly, and often majestic. "Blessed are they who know," he says, "that suffering is not a crown of glory," and "Wretched are they that mourn, for they have fallen into the craven habit of tears." He has no use for the poor in spirit, who expect heaven to be better than earth, nor for those who comfort themselves with feelings of guilt; and the actions of men, he says, deserve neither heaven nor hell. You can't judge a tree by its fruit nor a man by his works; they can both be better or worse than they look. "Give that which is holy unto the dogs, cast your pearls before swine: for what matters is giving." To one who strikes you on the cheek you may turn the other, provided you are not moved by fear. To do good for your enemy is to give him justice; but to love him is a task for angels, not men. Happy are the lovers and the loved, and those who can do without love, and those who forgive others and themselves, and "Happy are the happy."

The latter pronouncement has an esthetic motive, expressed in "The Unworthy Friend": "The only thing without mystery is happiness, because happiness is an end in itself." And there are other esthetic admonitions: "Swear not, for an oath may be only an emphasis." The moral and the esthetic are combined in: "Forgetting is the only vengeance and the only forgiveness." This idea is the theme of another new prose piece, "Legend," in which Cain asks Abel to forgive him. But Abel has forgotten who killed whom. Cain sees that Abel has truly forgiven, and says he will try to forget too. "Yes," Abel agrees, "as long as there's remorse, there's guilt." This idea is expressed also in "The Unworthy Friend."

"A Prayer" is perhaps the frankest and most intimate thing Borges has ever written and in my opinion the most magnificent. He begins by acknowledging that a personal prayer demands an almost superhuman sincerity. It is obvious, he says, that he cannot ask for anything. To ask that he not go blind (he is not entirely sightless) would be to ask for the suspension of cause and effect, and "Nobody is worthy of such a miracle." Neither can he ask pardon for his errors; forgiveness is an act of others, which purifies the offended, not the offender, and only Borges can save Borges. He can only give what he himself does not have: courage, hope, the urge to learn. He wants to be remembered less as a poet than as a friend; let someone recite a line from Dunbar or Frost and remember that he first heard it from Borges' lips. Faithful to his "gods" to the end, he combines the esthetic and the moral in a final observation: "The laws of the universe are unknown to us, but we are somehow sure that to reason clearly and to act righteously is to help those laws, which will never

be revealed to us." When he dies, he wants to die wholly, "with this companion, my body."

The uncertain darkness of death and of blindness is the theme of *In Praise of Darkness*. In a piece called "His End and His Beginning," the two are united in superb metaphorical prose that subsumes all forms of transition into the unknown. Having died, and suffering the agony of being dead, Borges accepts death and it becomes heaven; blind, he accepts blindness and it becomes the beginning of an adventurous life in a new world. He praises his darkness, and in that praise there is a victory, as limitless as a promise, over all men's darkness. And somehow Borges extols the darkness of his own skepticism, his agnostic unknowingness, which is his philosophy; he translates it positively into an esthetic of conjectural expectancy. Borges' mind ranges over reality as the Vikings ranged over the world, plundering not for plunder but for adventure.

Reading this book, we are convinced of the sincerity of his apocryphal fragments, one of which says: "Let a candle be lighted though no man see it; God will see it."

"THE CONGRESS"

Not every story written by Borges in his heyday was a good one; "The Shape of the Sword" (*Ficciones*) has something fake about it. His story "The Congress," finished late in 1970 and published in 1971, does not "come off" on the first reading. Borges has said that he toyed with the plot for twenty years. Because of its long gestation alone, it is extremely important to the study of Borges' work. One gets the feeling that if it could be caught from the right angle and given a good shake, it would fall into the right pattern, shedding light on all Borges' major fiction. To be appreciated, I think, this long story has to be accepted as allegory and as exemplary technique, and even as Borges' deliberate circumvention of his own esthetic. In this story, the esthetic event, the sacred *hecho estético* which Borges upholds as the superior alternative to intellectual effort and "expressive" language, is itself, by implication, as meaningless as those other fruitless approaches to reality: philosophy and history.

The name of the story derives from the effort of one Alejandro Glencoe, a rich Uruguayan rancher living in Buenos Aires, to call together a "Congress of the World which would represent all men of all nations." This body would convene four years after the start of preparations. "Planning an assembly to represent all men was like fixing the exact number of Platonic types—a puzzle which had taxed the imagination of thinkers for centuries." One of the fifteen or twenty planners suggests that "don Alejandro Glencoe might represent not only cattlemen but also Uruguayans, and also humanity's great forerunners,

and also men with red beards, and also those who are seated in armchairs." Glencoe finances the project, which consists largely in collecting books—at first encyclopedias, then the great books of the centuries, then random account books and Ph.D. theses. The narrator, Alejandro Ferri, visits Glencoe's ranch and sees him transformed into "the stern chief of a clan" of gauchos; later, Ferri is sent to London to find a suitable language for the Congress to use, and in that city he has a love affair with a girl named Beatrice, while Glencoe's nephew, Fermín Eguren, on the same mission in Paris, plays with prostitutes. Ferri goes back to Buenos Aires, where Glencoe, precisely at the end of the four-year period of preparation, has concluded that the Congress is impossible, for it embraces an irreducible world: "The Congress of the World began with the first moment of the world and it will go on when we are dust. . . . The Congress is Job on the ash heap and Christ on the Cross. The Congress is that worthless boy who squanders my substance on whores." At his order the group burns the collected books, and one member remarks: "Every few centuries, the Library of Alexandria must be burned down." Then, acting as if they had been cleansed of an evil and were on a somewhat languid holiday, the members of the Congress anticlimactically tour the city to "see the Congress."

The effort to classify all the world's men under a few abstract headings suggests the search for a syncretic philosophy, or for a literature that reduces chaotic reality to a recurring set of relations. One feels that if the Congress convened someplace, the world would be vacated. The members are relieved to discover that their efforts are futile, and as the books burn one remarks, "I wanted to do evil and I have done good." The story implies the spiritual or esthetic benefit of liberating men periodically from their structured certitude and restoring to them a perception of reality as an anarchy of things-in-themselves. Philosophically, this is a return to myth, to rebirth, to orgy; literarily, it suggests a return to uncontrived, straightforward storytelling about things as they are, unstructured and unmoralized. The book burning is reminiscent of the fire that swept the circular ruins in the story of that name (*Ficciones*) and the one that destroyed the dogmatists of "The Theologians" (*El Aleph*).

"The Congress" is complex, laden with familiar Borgesian images, symbolic names, and suggestions of identities: two Alejandros and an Alexandrian library. Again there is an allusion to the esthetic event: Ferri's amorous sojourn in London (like Prague, a dizzying sort of place, here called a red labyrinth) with a girl named Beatrice, like Dante's esthetic ideal finally unattainable (she refuses to marry Ferri). This episode comes just before what we may call the esthetic frustration or the loss of the impending revelation—in this case the end of hope for the fulfillment of the Congressional dream.

In all the episodes of "The Congress" the nearness of revelation, intellectual,

linguistic, and esthetic, always leads to the same disillusion—a final return to reality as a mythic disorder incapable of being organized or interpreted with finality. The intellectual attempt to order the universe is the Congress itself; truth-in-art, by analogy, is not found in the classicist's attempt to reduce the world to abstract forms. The engaged writer's pursuit of art through direct, expressive language, used for a mission and therefore subordinate in its own right, is satirized in Eguren's visits to prostitutes; he "enjoys and forgets" like the protagonist of "The Maker," who acts from "no other law than fulfillment," with "the immediate indifference that ensues." Borges treats Fermin Eguren, whose first name suggests vermin and who has a very low forehead, with humorous disdain. (He is also of Basque ancestry, which Borges derides. A low forehead and Basque origin are qualities also assigned to Benjamín Otálora of "The Dead Man.") Ferri shows his superiority over Eguren in one episode; confronted by a ruffian with a knife, Eguren quails, but Ferri reaches inside his coat, as if to draw a knife, and faces the hoodlum down. Ferri and Eguren are in the company of a writer much admired by Ferri; he is the author of a fine work whose title, *The Marble Pillars*, strongly suggests the classical. The author, Fernández Irala, also symbolizes the Congress; he is perhaps its staunchest member. Considering the satirical nature of the whole story, there is possibly an intentional correspondence between Borges' literature of suggestion (his unproduced revelation) and Ferri's bluster with a hidden knife that is not really there.

Why does "The Congress" give the impression that it is not one of Borges' better stories? Its failure, if I can call it that, may be owing precisely to its accomplishment. It seems deliberately, successfully compendious, reflecting all the facets of a background idea which, I believe, has inspired the major part of Borges' fictional literature about literature. It closes the book. Though it is not a plain-language story with a clear meaning, it represents what Borges despises: a completed "mental process." Instead of symbolic allusion, it constitutes symbolic expression. There is a finished progression, by three implied routes, from chaos to near-order and back to chaos. Although this progression is depicted incidentally in some of his other stories, in "The Congress" it seems to be the whole purpose. The satirical denial of the esthetic event prevents the sacred event from seeming to be diffused into the structure of the story, embodied as a reality behind the symbols. For this reason I suggest that Borges is aware of the story's "failure."

It is hard to believe, moreover, that Borges, the supreme literary technician, could be ignorant of having violated his own techniques by overdoing them. In the episodes at the ranch, in London, and on the street where the hoodlum appears, as well as in the description of the Congress members, there is too

much realistic detail to be consistent with an essentially fantastic plot. There is too much half-esoteric commentary of an autobiographical type, which yields clues to Borges' literary theories only after study and speculation. I venture to say that the story is not intended to be read but to be studied. Not only is "The Congress" heavy with hints and allusions and loaded with symbolic attributes (names, red beards, places), but it is slowed by superfluous actions (two knife episodes, the overlong love affair), and weighted with seemingly irrelevant descriptions (of the gauchos at the ranch, for example), so that it becomes ponderous. I said earlier that Borges' stories are floating tales; this one is too dense to float. I also suspect that "The Congress," being satirical, is full of intended humor that is too private, at least for an English-speaking reader.

This story is an overexpression which, purposely or not, stultifies its own inner insinuation that the esthetic phenomenon is a meaningless illusion. Borges' satire of himself and his esthetic is not convincing because it begs to be refuted. At the end, the Congressmen are not really joyful, as they appear; they are only disillusioned and released from struggle. The story seems to deny the value of that struggle—man's pursuit of the impossible. It denies the positive element in Borges' skepticism. The members of the disbanded Congress, who do not want to speak to each other again, cannot help reminding us of the disillusioned, bored and speechless Troglodytes of "The Immortal" (*El Aleph*).

The former Borges would have ended the story with an insinuation of positive conviction that the book burning was inevitable and right; but here he leaves us with the feeling that it is inescapably wrong. In "The House of Asterion" (*El Aleph*), where the miserable Minotaur is happy when Theseus comes to kill him, we are somehow happy for him because his bewilderment is dissolved in fatal meaning. But with the destruction of the books and the end of the Congress, Theseus has in some way faltered, and the Minotaur goes wandering on toward a meaningless end somewhere in his confusing labyrinth—a labyrinth whose anarchical variability no longer offers possibility and adventure. Again, this may be exactly what Borges has intended; at the beginning of the story Ferri explains that he is going on seventy-one (Borges' age); he came to Buenos Aires in 1899 (Borges' birth year), and a symptom of his age is that adventure no longer appeals to him: "novelties—maybe because I feel they hold nothing essentially new, and are really no more than timid variations—neither interest nor distract me." None of the infinite attributes of the universe, therefore, is a possible essence; no fortuitous position of the kaleidoscope can reveal anything; in the vast Library of Clementinum there is no tiny letter that is God, and we must not seek it in art, or philosophy, or language.

Perhaps the return to the nominalistic heterogeneity of things-in-themselves is only the symbol for Borges' decision to tell simple stories for their own sake. There is reason to wonder if he can do it consistently.

BORGES' TRANSLATIONS

Borges' new inclination toward the simple and straightforward has been carried into English, not only in the translations of his new fiction but also in the recasting of stories written years ago. This is undoubtedly better than trying to produce in English the complicated linguistic effects of the Spanish originals. For example, as Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Borges' collaborator in translation, has noted, the special effect produced by writing Spanish while thinking in English, using English word order, cannot be duplicated in English even by reversing the process. But it would be absurd not to admit that something is lost, as it always is in translation. Judging from what I have seen (which does not include translations of some of the most cryptic and ambiguous of the old stories), I would say that di Giovanni's and Borges' translations are by far the best yet, particularly from the standpoint of their enjoyability to the average reader. Scholars will find them in some respects problematical.

By undertaking to translate Borges' works, Borges and di Giovanni have created a situation as ambiguous and subtle as one of Borges' tales. The case is reminiscent of "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (*Ficciones*), where Menard sets out to write *Don Quixote* in the exact language of Cervantes' original, by being the kind of man who would write, in the present century, what another man wrote centuries ago under different circumstances. With regard at least to Borges' older work, we cannot escape the fact that the translations are being made twenty years or more after the stories were composed, with all that this implies: slips of memory, changes in theory, the urge to improve the story, the influence of intervening criticism and the public's reactions, and the hand of a recent co-translator. Critics who are given to integrating an author's life and opinions with his work will lean heavily on the belief that Borges remains Borges across the years, and on his and di Giovanni's insistence upon being faithful to what Borges intended when he wrote. Others, who consider that a work is a work, to be isolated and beheld in itself—*res ipsa loquitur*—are likely to see the English versions as a body of fresh literature which neither affects nor depends upon the Spanish originals.

The independence of the English versions (I am still speaking of the old stories) will be strengthened to the degree with which critics judge them to be unfaithful to the originals, or even discrepant with more literal translations. The old fiction is full of involutions and nuances heavily dependent on a

particular vocabulary, often shockingly ill-fitting, ambiguous, or otherwise strange. This puzzling prose has been in the public's hands for many years; Borges' fame is largely built on it, and much criticism has been based on its implications. According to Borges' own theory (very like Valéry's), he is now only one of his readers, and any clarification of strange language that he and di Giovanni might make must constitute in some degree a re-creation or an interpretation. In numerous interviews Borges has said—despite his incredible memory—that he has forgotten why he included an incident in a story, used a color, or wrote a certain word, and some of these forgotten things are of critical importance. Di Giovanni has been diligent in ferreting out the original reasons for the use of unusual language and equally diligent in making it rational. Borges wrote his early stories for a limited, somewhat erudite, and very Argentine readership, at a time when he was little known or appreciated; he and di Giovanni translate under the spur of fame and for a much larger and less intellectual readership that is largely ignorant of the context and tradition of Argentine literature.

In view of these special factors, I am not disturbed over the loss of such celebrated phrases as "unanimous night" (*unánime noche*), which has been rationalized into "encompassing night" in "The Circular Ruins." The change smacks of decoding poetry, and there is a loss of flavor; but it also points, without doubt, to what Borges now calls baroque trickery and indicates what in his opinion is not essential in his earlier work. A more radical deviation occurs when "enormous hallucination" (*enorme alucinación*) is changed to "populous vision." This phrase, also from "The Circular Ruins," refers to the college of imaginary students from which the magician tried to abstract one in order to insert him into reality. The antecedent of "enormous hallucination" is unclear in the original but can be inferred; the epithet suggests not that the students were numerous and imaginary (we already know that) but that the magician's very method was wrong. "Populous vision" makes the antecedent clear but loses all other implications, along with the insinuation of a second level of meaning.

Some of Borges' most conspicuous trademarks, such as his repetitious use of words like "notorious" and "attribute," seem to be suppressed in the translations. In the preface to *Doctor Brodie's Report* we find the words "most notorious attribute" (*más notorio atributo*) interpreted "most obvious trait." Given the frequent implication of evil that attaches to Borges' use of "notorio," particularly when it refers to the universe, "most obvious trait" loses or ignores the valuative tenor of the original phrase. Again, in "The Dead Man," the phrase which tells us that *Bandeira's* horse, saddle, and mistress are his "*atributos o adjetivos*" (a significant evocation of a substance-attribute or noun-adjective simile)

is weakened to "attributes or trappings." The possibly metaphysical intention of the original is far less apparent in the English.

As another random example of the apparent decision of the translators not to carry certain insinuations into English, the name of the knife-wielding hoodlum of "The Congress" can be cited. This character's name is utterly unimportant to the story, but in his typical way Borges takes the trouble to give it: "Tapia or Paredes or something of the kind." The reader who does not know Spanish is unaware that both *tapia* and *pared* mean "wall," an image common enough in Borges' older fiction to raise an immediate question about its possible symbolism here.

One thing is obvious. The author-made translations now being published are most readable. They are smoother, in general, than the Spanish version; this diminishes the cerebral, deliberate quality conveyed by the more abrupt Spanish narrations, in which the uneven stops and starts give each word and phrase an intentionality and a singular authority. Conjunctions now smooth the path and relax the reader where semicolons used to jar him; transitions are made where there were only juxtaposed ideas. While such changes in the fluidity of language and idea can be attributed to di Giovanni's sense of clarity and polish, they also testify to Borges' abandonment of what he calls, in the preface to *Doctor Brodie's Report*, "the surprises inherent in a baroque style."