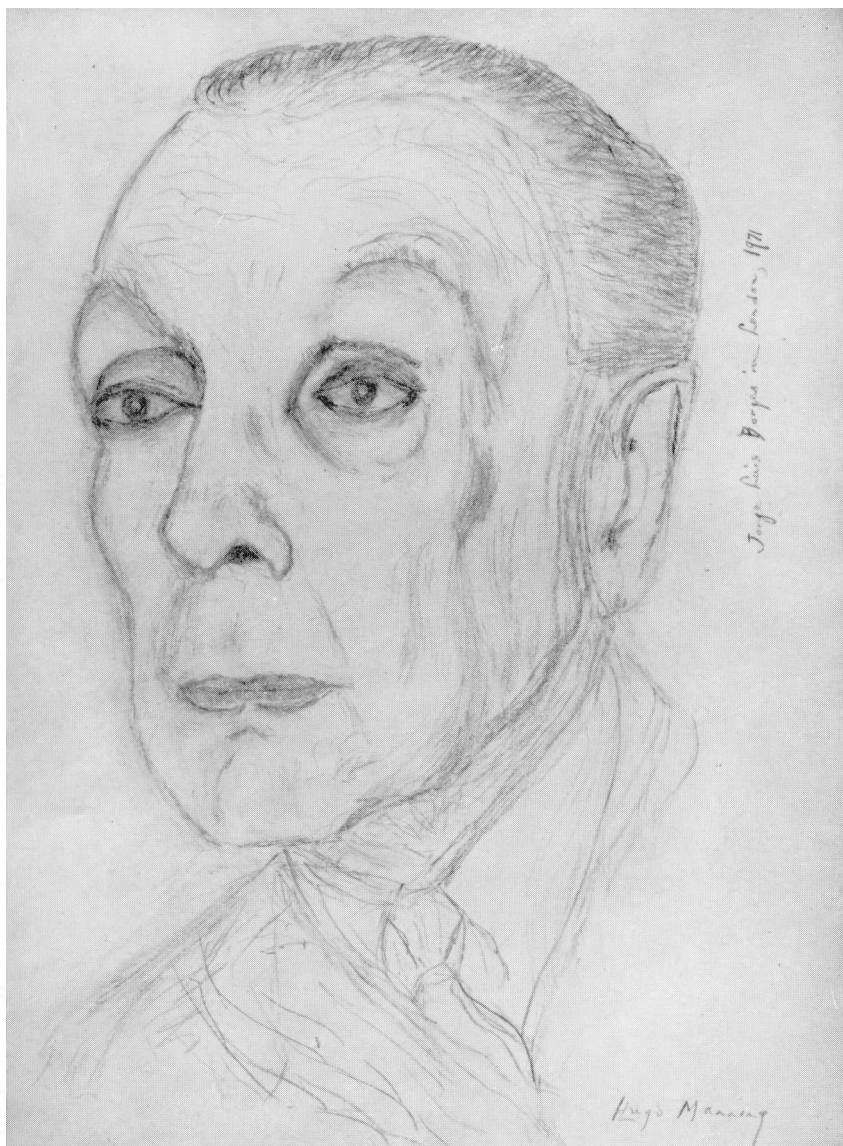


THE CONGRESS



Jorge Luis Borges in London, 1971

Hugo Manning

The Congress

by

Jorge Luis Borges

*Translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni
in collaboration with the author*

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. . . ils s'acheminèrent vers un château immense, au frontispice duquel on lisait: 'Je n'appartiens à personne et j'appartiens à tout le monde. Vous y étiez avant que d'y entrer, et vous y serez encore quand vous en sortirez.'

—From *Jacques le Fataliste et son Maître* (1796), by Diderot.

BUENOS AIRES, 1955

Alejandro Ferri is my name. Martial echoes may be heard in it, but neither the metals of glory nor the great shadow of the Macedonian—the words belong to the poet of *The Marble Pillars*, who honored me with his friendship—has any kinship with the nearly anonymous man who strings together these lines on the upper floor of a hotel on Santiago del Estero Street, on the south side of town, which is no longer the old Southside. Any day now, I'll turn seventy-one or seventy-two; I am still teaching English to a handful of students. Out of indecision or carelessness, or for some other reason, I never married, and now I live alone. Loneliness does not worry me; life is difficult enough, putting up with yourself and with your own habits. I realize I am getting on in years. An unmistakable symptom of this is the fact that novelties—maybe because I feel they hold nothing essentially new and are really no more than timid variations—neither interest nor distract me. When I was a young man, I was fond of sunsets, the city's sprawling slums, and of unhappiness; now I prefer mornings and downtown and peace. I no longer play at being Hamlet. I have become a member of the Conservative Party and of a chess club, which I usually attend as an onlooker—sometimes an absentminded onlooker. Anyone who is curious may dig up from some out-of-the-way nook of the National Library, on Mexico Street, a copy of my *Short Study of John Wilkins' Analytical Language*, a work that sadly stands in need of a new edition, if only to correct or to lessen its many mistakes. The library's new direc-

tor, I am told, is a literary man who dedicates himself to the study of ancient languages (as if modern ones were not sufficiently rudimentary) and to the demagogic exaltation of an imaginary Buenos Aires of knife fighters. I have never cared to meet him. I came to this city in 1899, and only once did chance bring me face to face with a knife fighter or with an individual who had a reputation as such. Further on, should the occasion present itself, I shall relate the episode.

I have already said that I live alone. Several days ago, a fellow-roomer, who had heard me speak of Fermín Eguren, told me that he had died in Punta del Este.

The death of this man, who was certainly never a friend of mine, has unaccountably saddened me. I know that I am alone; I know that in the whole world I am the only keeper of that secret event—the Congress—whose memory I can no longer share. I am now the last member of that Congress. It is undeniable that all men are members of that Congress—that there is not a single being of earth who is not—but I know I am a member in a very different way. I *know* that I am, and that's what sets me apart from my numberless colleagues, present and future. It is undeniable that on the seventh of February, 1904, we swore by what is most holy (is there anything holy on earth, or anything that is not?) never to reveal the history of the Congress, but it is no less undeniable that my now committing perjury is also part of the Congress. This last statement is sufficiently dim, but it may whet the curiosity of my eventual readers.

At any rate, the task I have taken upon myself is not an easy one. I have never before attempted the art of narration—not even in its epistolary form—and, what is doubtless even more important, the story itself is unbelievable. The pen of José Fernández Irala, the undeservedly forgotten author of *The Marble Pillars*, was the one destined for this work, but now it is too late. I shall not deliberately falsify the real facts, although I foresee that laziness and incompetence will more than once lead me into error.

Exact dates are of no account. Let it be recalled that I came from Santa Fe, my native province, in 1899. I have never gone back. I have

grown accustomed to Buenos Aires, a city I am not fond of, in the same way that a man grows accustomed to his own body or to an old ailment. Without much caring, I am aware that I am going to die soon; I must, consequently, control my digressive tendencies and get on with my story.

The years do not change our essential selves—if one has an essential self. The impulse that would one night lead me to the Congress of the World was the same that first brought me to the staff of *Ultima Hora*. To a poor boy from the provinces, becoming a newspaperman was a romantic fate, just as to a poor city boy the life of a gaucho or a farm-hand is romantic. I feel no shame at having once wanted to be a journalist, an occupation that now seems trivial to me. I remember having heard my colleague Fernández Irala say that newspapermen wrote for oblivion but that his ambition was to write for time and for memory. He had already chiselled (the verb was then in common use) some of those perfect sonnets that were later to reappear, with one or two minor touches, in the pages of *The Marble Pillars*.

I cannot quite recall the first time I heard the Congress spoken of. Maybe it was on that same evening the cashier paid me my first month's salary and, to celebrate this proof that Buenos Aires had taken me to its bosom, I suggested to Irala that we dine together. He excused himself, saying he could not miss the Congress. I understood at once that he was not referring to the rather pompous, domed building at the foot of an avenue peopled by Spaniards but to something more secret and far more important. People spoke of the Congress, some with open scorn, others with lowered voices, still others with alarm or curiosity—all, I believe, without knowing anything about it. A few Saturdays later, Irala invited me to go along with him.

It must have been nine or ten o'clock at night. On our way, in a streetcar, he told me these preliminary meetings took place every Saturday and that don Alejandro Glencoe, the president of the Congress, perhaps struck by my name, had already signed his approval of my attendance. We went to the Gas-Lamp Coffee House. Some fifteen or twenty members of the Congress sat around a long table; I don't know if there was a dais or if memory adds it. I immediately recognized the president, whom I had never seen before. Don Alejandro was

a gentleman, already well along in years, with a high forehead and thinning hair, gray eyes, and a graying reddish beard. I always saw him dressed in a dark frock coat, and he usually held his hands locked together over the head of his cane. He was portly and tall. To his left sat a much younger man, also with red hair. Its violent color suggested fire, while the color of Mr. Glencoe's beard suggested autumn leaves. To his right was a long-faced young man with an unusually low forehead and dressed like a dandy. Everyone had ordered coffee, and several, absinthe. What first caught my attention was the presence of a woman—the only woman among so many men. At the other end of the table sat a boy of about ten, dressed in a sailor suit, who was not long in falling asleep. There were also a Protestant minister, two unmistakable Jews, and a Negro, who, with a white silk handkerchief around his neck and very tight-fitting clothes, was dressed like a street-corner hoodlum. In front of the Negro and the boy were cups of chocolate. I do not remember any of the other people except for a Mr. Marcelo del Mazo, a man of great politeness and fine conversation, whom I never saw again. (I still have a faded, poorly done photograph of one of the gatherings, but I shall not publish it, since the dress, the long hair, and the mustaches of that period would make the whole thing look burlesque and even shabby.)

All groups tend to create their own dialects and rites; the Congress, which always had something dreamlike about it, seemed to want its members to discover—at leisure and for themselves—its real aim and even the names and surnames of its members. I was not long in realizing that I was duty-bound not to ask questions, and I refrained even from asking any of Fernández Irala, who never told me a thing. I did not miss a single Saturday, but a good month or two went by before I reached this understanding. From the second meeting on, my neighbor was Donald Wren, an engineer on the Southern Railways, who was to give me English lessons.

Don Alejandro spoke very little. The rest did not address themselves directly to him, but I felt that their words were meant for him and that everyone was after his approval. One gesture of his slow hand was enough to change the topic of discussion. I came to find out, little by little, that the red-haired man to his left bore the strange name of

Twirl. I remember that fragile look of his, which, as though their stature made them dizzy and forced them to hunch forward, is characteristic of some very tall people. His hands, I recall, often played with a copper compass case, which from time to time he set on the table. At the end of 1914, he was killed as an infantryman in an Irish regiment. The person who always sat to the right, the young man with the low forehead, was Fermín Eguren, the president's nephew.

Putting no faith in the methods of realism (a most artificial school if there ever was one), I shall declare right off what I learned only little by little. Beforehand, I want to remind the reader of my situation at the time. I was a poor boy from Casilda, a farmer's son, who had come to the capital and suddenly found himself—this was the way I felt—in the intimate heart of Buenos Aires and perhaps (who knows?) of the whole world. After half a century, I still feel those first dazzling moments, which certainly were not to be the last.

Here are the facts. I shall tell them as briefly as I can. Don Alejandro Glencoe, the president, was an Uruguayan rancher and owner of a large spread of land bordering on Brazil. His father, a native off Aberdeen, had established himself on this continent around the middle of the last century. He brought with him some hundred books—the only books, I venture to say, that don Alejandro read in the course of his life. (I speak of these assorted books, which I have had in my hands, because in one of them lies the root of my story.) The elder Mr. Glencoe, on dying, left a daughter and a son. The son was later to become our president; the daughter married an Eguren and was Fermín's mother. Don Alejandro at one time aspired to the Uruguayan National Congress, but the political bosses barred his way. Rankled, he decided to found another Congress and on a vaster scale. He remembered having read in the volcanic pages of Carlyle the fate of Anacharsis Clootz, that worshipper of the goddess Reason who, at the bead of thirty-six foreigners, addressed a Paris assembly as 'mankind's spokesman.' Moved by this example, don Alejandro conceived the idea of calling together a Congress of the World that would represent all men of all nations. The center for the preliminary meetings was the Gas-Lamp Coffee House; the formal act of inauguration, which would take place within some four years, would be held at don Alejandro's ranch.

Like so many Uruguayans, don Alejandro—who was no lover of Uruguay's now national hero, Artigas—was fond of Buenos Aires, but he nonetheless decided that the Congress must eventually meet in his own country. Oddly enough, the four-year planning period was carried out with a precision that was almost magical.

In the beginning, we were paid a considerable sum as a per diem, but the zeal that enflamed us prompted Fernández Irala—who was as poor as I was—to renounce his, and all the rest of us followed suit. This measure was healthy, since it served to separate the wheat from the chaff; the number of members was reduced, and only the faithful remained. The one paid position was that of the secretary, Nora Erfjord, who lacked other means of support and whose work at the same time was staggering. To set up a worldwide organization is no trifling enterprise. Letters came and went, and so did cables and telegrams. Potential delegates wrote from Peru, Denmark, and India. A Bolivian wrote that his country's lack of access to the sea should be a matter of prime consideration in our first meetings. Twirl, who had a farseeing mind, remarked that the Congress involved a problem of a philosophical nature. Planning an assembly to represent all men was like fixing the exact number of Platonic types—a puzzle that had taxed the imagination of thinkers for centuries. Twirl suggested that, without going farther afield, 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. Nora Erfjord was Norwegian. Would she represent secretaries, Norwegian womanhood, or—more obviously—all beautiful women? Would a single engineer be enough to represent all engineers—including those of New Zealand?

It was then, I believe, that Fermín broke in. 'Ferri represents the gringos,' he said in a flood of laughter.

Don Alejandro looked at him severely and, in an even voice, said, 'Mr. Ferri is representative of the immigrants whose labor is building up this country.'

Fermín Eguren never could bear the sight of me. He took pride in

an assortment of things: in being Uruguayan; in coming from old stock; in attracting women; in having chosen an expensive tailor; and, God knows why, in his Basque origin—a people who throughout history have done little else than milk cows.

An incident of the most trivial sort sealed our enmity. After one of the meetings, Eguren suggested that we pay a visit to one of the Junín Street brothels. The plan did not attract me, but, in order not to make myself the butt of his jokes, I accepted. We went with Fernández Irala. On leaving the establishment, we ran into a huge specimen of a man. Eguren, who may have been a bit drunk, gave him a shove. The stranger quickly barred our way and told us, ‘Whoever wants to leave is going to have to pass by this knife.’

I remember the glint of the blade in the darkness of the long entranceway. Eguren drew back, visibly afraid. I wasn’t too sure of myself, but my hatred got the best of my fright. I reached into my armpit, as if to draw out a weapon, and said in a firm voice, ‘We’ll settle this out on the street.’

The stranger answered—with another voice now, ‘That’s the kind of man I like. I wanted to test you, friend.’ Then he began to laugh in a cordial way.

‘As to “friend,” ’ I answered him, ‘that’s what you think.’ The three of us made our way past him.

The man with the knife entered the brothel. I heard later that his name was Tapia, or Paredes, or something of the kind, and that he had a reputation for brawling. Out on the sidewalk, Irala, who had kept cool, slapped me on the back and said, impressively, ‘Among us three, we had a musketeer. Hail, d’Artagnan!’

Fermín Eguren never forgave me for having witnessed his backing down.

I feel that now, and only now, my story begins. The preceding pages have set down no more than the conditions that chance or fate required so that the unbelievable event—perhaps the single event of my whole life—might take place. Don Alejandro Glencoe was always at the center of the Congress, but over a period of time we felt, not with-

out misgiving, that the real president was Twirl. This singular character, with the flaming mustache, fawned on Glencoe and even on Fermín Eguren—but in such an exaggerated way that those present would think he was actually mocking the two. By so doing, he never once compromised his integrity. Glencoe labored under the pride of his vast fortune; Twirl discovered that in order to get anything done it was enough to suggest that its cost might prove beyond the president's means. It is my suspicion that at the outset the Congress had been nothing more than a haphazard sort of name. Twirl was continually proposing new areas of expansion, and don Alejandro always accepted. It was like being at the middle of a spreading circle, which grows ever larger and always farther away. Twirl said, for example, that the Congress could not get along without a reference library, and Nierenstein, who worked in a bookshop, went about ordering us the atlases of Justus Perthes and several extensive encyclopedias—all the way from Pliny's *Natural History* and Beauvais's *Speculum* down to the pleasant mazes (I reread these words with Fernández Irala's voice) of the illustrious French Encyclopedists, of the Britannica, of Pierre Larousse, of Brockhaus, of Larsen, and of Montaner y Simón. I recall how I reverently fondled the silky volumes of a certain Chinese encyclopedia whose finely brushed characters seemed to me more mysterious than the spots on a leopard's skin. As yet, I will say nothing of what lay in store for them and which certainly I do not regret.

Don Alejandro, maybe because we were the only ones who did not try to flatter him, had grown quite fond of Fernández Irala and me. He invited us to spend a few days at his ranch, La Caledonia, where he had a crew of stonemasons already at work.

At the end of a long trip upriver by steamer and a ferry crossing on a raft, we set foot one morning on the Uruguay shore. We then had to spend successive nights in run-down country saloons, while opening and shutting dozens of gateways all day along back roads in the Cuchilla Negra. We made our way in a light carriage; the countryside seemed wider and lonelier to me than the small farm where I was born.

I still hold my two images of the ranch—the one I brought with me

and the one my eyes finally saw. Absurdly, I had imagined, as in a dream, an impossible combination of the flat plains of Santa Fe and of the rather gaudy Victorian Buenos Aires Waterworks. La Caledonia was a long adobe building with a thatched saddle roof and a brick-paved gallery. It appeared to be built for hardship and endurance. The rough walls were nearly a yard thick and the doors were narrow. Nobody had ever thought of planting a tree. The sun's first and last rays beat down on the place. The corrals were of stone; the cattle were many, scrawny and long-horned; the horses' switching tails reached the ground. For the first time in my life, I knew the taste of freshly slaughtered meat. Some sacks of sea biscuit were brought out; a few days later, the foreman told me he had never eaten bread in his life. Irala asked where the bathroom was, and, with a sweeping gesture, don Alejandro indicated the entire continent. It was a moonlit night; I went out to stretch my legs, and I surprised Irala being watched by an ostrich.

The heat, which the night had not dispelled, was unbearable, and everyone praised the coolness. The rooms were low-ceilinged and many, and seemed to me barely furnished; we were given one, facing south, in which there were two cots and a dresser with a silver wash-basin and pitcher. The floor was dirt.

The second day, I came across the library and the volumes of Carlyle, and I found the pages dedicated to mankind's spokesman, Anarcharis Cloutz, who had led me to that morning and to that loneliness. After breakfast, which was identical with dinner, don Alejandro showed us the building under construction. We rode three or four miles on horseback out in the wide open. Irala, whose horsemanship was shaky, had an accident; unsmiling, the foreman remarked, 'You Argentines really know how to dismount.'

From way off, we could see the construction site. Some twenty men were at work building a kind of tumbledown amphitheatre. I recall a series of stages and ladders and stone tiers with stretches of sky showing between.

More than once, I tried to speak with the gauchos, but my efforts failed. In some way, they knew they were different. Among themselves, they used a spare, guttural Brazilianized Spanish. It was obvious that

both Indian and Negro blood ran in their veins. They were short and strong; at La Caledonia, I became a tall man—something that had never happened to me until then.

Almost all of them dressed with their legs wrapped in the *chiripá*, and a few wore the wide, baggy *bombachas*. They had little or nothing in common with the complaining heroes found in the books of Hernández or of Rafael! Obligado. Under the stimulus of Saturday-night alcohol, they were easily moved to violence. There wasn't a single woman around, and I never once heard a guitar.

I was more interested in the change that had come over don Alejandro than I was in these border-country men. In Buenos Aires, he was a pleasant, reserved gentleman; at La Caledonia, like his fathers before him, he became the stern chief of a clan. Sunday mornings, he read Holy Scripture to the hands, who did not understand a single word. One night, the foreman, a youngish man who had inherited the job from his father, reported to us that one of the day laborers and one of the regular help were having it out with knives. Don Alejandro got up, unruffled. When he came to the circle of onlookers, he drew out the weapon he always carried, handed it to the foreman (who appeared to me to cringe), and stepped between the knives. At once, I heard the order, 'Drop those knives, boys.' With the same calm voice, he added, 'Now shake hands and behave yourselves. I don't want any brawling around here.'

The two men obeyed. The next day, I learned that don Alejandro had fired the foreman.

I felt the loneliness ringing me in, and I began fearing I'd never get back to Buenos Aires. I wonder whether Fernández Irala shared that fear. We talked a lot about Argentina and what we'd do when we returned. I missed the stone lions of a certain gateway on Jujuy Street, near the Plaza del Once, and the light of a particular old bar in some dim part of town, but not my familiar haunts. Always a good rider, I fell into the habit of going out on horseback and riding long distances. I still remember the particular piebald I used to saddle up myself. On some afternoon or on some night or other, I probably was in Brazil, since the border was nothing but a line traced out by widely spaced markers. Then, at the close of a day exactly like all the rest, don Ale-

jandro told us, 'We'll turn in early. Tomorrow we'll be off while it's still cool.'

Once down the river, I felt so happy that I was even able to think back to La Caledonia with affection.

We took up our Saturday meetings again. At the first one, Twirl asked for the floor. He said, with his usual flowers of rhetoric, that the library of the Congress of the World could not be limited to reference books alone, and that the classical works of all nations and all languages were a veritable storehouse that we could not safely afford to ignore. The suggestion was approved on the spot; Fernández Irala and Dr. Ignacio Cruz, who was a teacher of Latin, accepted the job of selecting the appropriate texts. Twirl had already talked things over with Nierenstein.

In those days, there wasn't a single Argentine whose utopia was not Paris. Perhaps the most enthusiastic of us was Fermín Eguren; next, for quite different reasons, came Fernández Irala. To the poet of *The Marble Pillars*, Paris was Verlaine and Leconte de Lisle, while to Eguren it was an improved version of Junín Street. I suspect that he had come to some understanding with Twirl. At a subsequent meeting, Twirl brought up the question of what language the members of the Congress would use, arguing the feasibility of sending delegates to London and Paris to gather information. Feigning impartiality, he first put up my name, and then, as an apparent afterthought, that of his friend Eguren. As always, don Alejandro agreed.

I think I have written that, in exchange for some lessons in Italian, Wren had initiated me into the study of the inexhaustible English language. As far as possible, we did away with grammar and with those exercises concocted for the beginner, and we found our way directly into poetry, whose forms demand brevity. My first contact with the language that was to fill out my life was Stevenson's brave 'Requiem.' Then came the ballads that Percy revealed to the dignified eighteenth century. A short while before leaving for London, I was dazzled by Swinburne—an experience that made me begin to doubt (and to feel guilty about it) the eminence of Irala's Alexandrines.

I reached London early in January, 1902; I remember the soft touch of falling snow, which I had never before seen and for which I was grateful. Luckily, Eguren and I had travelled separately. I roomed at a modest boarding house behind the British Museum, where mornings and afternoons I studied in the library in search of a language worthy of the Congress of the World. I did not overlook universal languages, investigating both Esperanto—which Lugones qualifies as ‘impartial, simple, and economical’—and Volapük, which, declining verbs and conjugating nouns, attempts to work out all linguistic possibilities. I also weighed the arguments in favor of and against the revival of Latin, a nostalgia for which has endured down through the centuries. I even dwelled on an examination of John Wilkins’ analytical language, in which the definition of each word is to be found in the letters that spell it out. It was beneath the high dome of the reading room that I first met Beatrice.

This is meant to be a general history of the Congress of the World, not of Alejandro Ferri, but the former takes in the latter, just as it takes in all other histories. Beatrice was tall, trim, with fine features and a head of red hair that might have reminded me—but never did—of the shady Twirl. She was not yet quite twenty. She had come down from one of the northern counties to study literature at the university. Her background, like mine, was humble. At that time, to be of Italian stock in Buenos Aires was still to be looked down on, but in London I found out that being Italian was to many people a romantic attribute. Within a few evenings, we were lovers; I asked her to marry me, but Beatrice Frost, like Nora Erfjord, was a follower of the faith preached by Ibsen, and she did not want to tie herself down to anyone. From her lips came the word I never dared speak. O nights, O darkness warm and shared, O love that flows in shadows like some secret river, O that instant of ecstasy when each is both, O that ecstasy’s purity and innocence, O the coupling in which we became lost so as then to lose ourselves in sleep, O the first light of dawn, and I watching her.

On the rough Brazil border, I had been plagued by homesickness; not so in London’s red labyrinth, which gave me so many things. Despite the pretexts I dreamed up to delay my departure, I had to return home at the end of the year. Beatrice and I celebrated Christmas together. I

assured her that don Alejandro would invite her to join the Congress; she answered, in an offhand way, that she had always wanted to visit the Southern Hemisphere, and that a cousin of hers, a dentist, had settled in Tasmania.

Beatrice did not want to come to the boat. Goodbyes, to her way of thinking, were too dramatic, were a senseless feast of unhappiness, and she detested dramatics. We parted in the library, where we had met the winter before. As a man, I'm a coward; to avoid the anguish of waiting for letters, I did not leave her my address.

Return trips are shorter, I have always noticed, but that crossing of the Atlantic, heavy with memories and anxieties, seemed unusually long. Nothing hurt me as much as thinking that, in a parallel with my life, Beatrice would go on living hers, minute by minute and night by night. I wrote a lengthy letter, destroying it as we left Montevideo. When I reached Argentina—it was on a Thursday—Irala was waiting for me at the dock. I went back to my old place on Chile Street; that day and the next he and I spent together talking and taking long walks. I wanted to recover Buenos Aires again. It was a relief to find out that Fermín Eguren was staying on in Paris; I knew the fact of my having come back before him would in some way make up for my long absence.

Irala was downcast. Fermín was squandering huge sums in Europe and had more than once disobeyed the order to return home. This was to have been foreseen. I was more disturbed by other news. Twirl, in spite of the opposition of Irala and Cruz, had invoked the Younger Pliny, according to whom there is no book so bad it does not contain some good, and had proposed the indiscriminate purchase of bound volumes of the daily press, of thirty-four hundred copies of *Don Quixote* in various editions, of the complete works of General Mitre, of Ph.D. theses, of old account books, of bulletins, and of theatre programs. Everything gives witness, he had said. Nierenstein backed him; don Alejandro, 'after three resounding Saturdays' (as Irala put it), approved the motion. Nora Erfjord had resigned her position as secretary; it was taken over by a new member, Karlinski, who was a tool of Twirl's. The bulky packages began piling up now, without files

or catalogues, in the back rooms and in the wine cellar of don Alejandro's rambling old town house. Early in July, Irala spent a week back at La Caledonia, where the masons had broken off their work. The foreman, upon questioning, explained that that was what the boss had ordered, and that there would always be time enough tomorrow.

In London, I had drafted a report that there is now no point in going into. That Friday, I went to pay a visit to don Alejandro and to deliver a copy of what I had written. Fernández Irala came with me. It was early evening, and the cold south wind blew into the house. At the front gate, on Alsina Street, a delivery wagon, pulled by three horses, stood waiting. I remember that the deliverymen were weighed down under the loads they went about piling up in the last patio. Twirl was imperious, giving them orders. Also present, indoors, as if they had had an inkling of something, were Nora Erfjord and Nierenstein and Cruz and Donald Wren and a few other members of the Congress. Nora threw her arms around me and kissed me, and that embrace and that kiss made me remember others. The Negro, brimming over with good nature and happiness, kissed my hand.

In one of the rooms, the square trapdoor to the cellar was wide open; some masonry steps plunged down into darkness. Suddenly we heard footsteps. Before laying eyes on him, I knew it was don Alejandro. He came almost on the run.

His voice was different. It was not the voice of the deliberate gentleman who presided over our Saturdays, nor that of the feudal landowner who had put a stop to a knife duel and who preached the word of God to his gauchos—but it seemed more like this latter.

Without looking at anyone, he ordered, 'Get everything out that's packed away down there. I don't want a single book left in that cellar.'

The work went on for nearly an hour. Outside, on the earth floor of the last patio, we made a pile that was taller than the tallest head. All of us marched back and forth; the only person who failed to move was don Alejandro.

Then came the order, 'Now set fire to that heap.'

Twirl went pale. Nierenstein blurted, 'How can the Congress of the World do without this valuable material I've collected with so much love?'

‘The Congress of the World?’ said don Alejandro. He laughed scornfully. I had never before heard him laugh.

There is a mysterious pleasure in destruction. The flames crackled brightly, and we all had to press back against the walls or move indoors. Darkness, ashes, and an odor of burning were left behind in the patio. I remember some undamaged pages lying white against the ground. Nora Erfjord, who felt for don Alejandro that love which young women often feel for older men, said, without really understanding, ‘Don Alejandro knows what he’s doing.’

Irala, always true to literature, attempted an epigram. ‘Every few centuries,’ he said, ‘the Library of Alexandria must be burned down.’

Then the revelation was made to us.

‘It has taken me four years to understand what I am about to say,’ don Alejandro began. ‘My friends, the undertaking we have set for ourselves is so vast that it embraces—I now see—the whole world. Our Congress cannot be a group of charlatans deafening each other in the sheds of an out-of-the-way ranch. The Congress of the World began with the first moment of the world and it will go on when we are dust. There’s no place on earth where it does not exist. The Congress is the books we’ve burned. 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.’

I could not hold myself back. ‘Don Alejandro,’ I broke in, ‘I, too, am to blame. I had finished my report, which I now hand you, but I stayed on and on in England, throwing your money away on a woman.’

Don Alejandro went on. ‘I had already guessed as much, Ferri. The Congress is my cattle. The Congress is the cattle I have sold and the miles of land that are no longer mine.’

A horror-stricken voice was raised—Twirl’s. ‘You don’t mean to say you’ve sold La Caledonia?’

‘Yes,’ don Alejandro said calmly, ‘I’ve sold it. I haven’t a square foot of land to my name, but I do not regret it, because now I see things as they are. Perhaps we shall never meet again, for the Congress stands in no need of us. But this last night we will all go out together to see the true Congress.’

Drunk with victory, he overwhelmed us with his resolution and faith. No one—not for a single second—thought he was mad.

In the square, we climbed into an open carriage. I squeezed myself onto the driver's seat beside the coachman, and don Alejandro ordered, 'Maestro, let's have a turn around the city. Take us anywhere you like.'

The Negro, perched on the running board, never stopped smiling. I'll never know whether or not he realized what was going on.

Words are symbols that assume a shared memory. The memory I now want to set down is mine alone; all those who share it have died. The mystics invoke a rose, a kiss, a bird that is all birds, a sun that is all the stars and the sun, a jug of wine, a garden, or the sexual act. Of these metaphors, none will serve me for that long, joyous night, which left us, tired out and happy, at the borders of dawn. We barely spoke while the wheels and the horses' hooves clattered over the cobblestones. Before daybreak, beside a dark, humble body of water that may have been the Maldonado or the Riachuelo, Nora Erfjord's high voice sang the ballad of Sir Patrick Spens, and don Alejandro, in a low voice and out of tune, chimed in with a few verses. The English words did not bring me Beatrice's image. At my back, Twirl muttered, 'I wanted to do evil and I have done good.'

Something of what we glimpsed lives on—the reddish wall of the Recoleta cemetery, the yellow wall of a jail, a couple of men dancing together at a right-angled street corner, a church courtyard with black and white tiles and a grilled iron fence, a railway gate crossing, my house, a marketplace, the damp unfathomable night—but none of these fleeting things, which may have been others, now matter. What really matters is having felt that our plan, which more than once we made a joke of, really and secretly existed and was the world and ourselves. Down through the years, without much hope, I have sought the taste of that night; a few times I thought I had recaptured it in music, in love, in untrustworthy memories, but it has never come back to me except once in a dream. When we swore not to say a word to anyone, it was already Saturday morning.

I never saw any of them again, outside of Irala. He and I never spoke about the Congress; anything we might have said would have been a desecration. In 1914, don Alejandro Glencoe died and was buried in Montevideo. Irala had already passed away the year before.

Once, I ran across Nierenstein on Lima Street, and we pretended not to see each other.

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