

JORGE LUIS BORGES

THE MAKER

PROSE PIECES 1934–1960

A TRANSLATION BY
**NORMAN
THOMAS
DI GIOVANNI**

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Introduction

Borges often expressed the hope that his work might live on after him in perhaps half a dozen pages. I suspect that he thought those pages would be found in this little miscellany of short prose pieces first collected in 1960 under the title *El hacedor*.

For some time now the succinct final paragraph of the Afterword has been widely cited as a summing up of Borges's life work. A distinguished American Shakespeare scholar once told me that he recommended 'Everything and Nothing' to his students as a perfect encapsulation of the Bard's career. Certainly the piece on Homer, the title story 'The Maker', and 'Borges and Myself', dealing with the dichotomy between the public and private Borges—a theme that obsessed him—must rank among the book's best pages.

But also impressive is the aptness of two other tales—'The Effigy' and 'A Conversation between Dead Men'—which are meditations on Argentine history. It is significant that these parables, first published in 1957, were written at the same time. They too deal with Borgesian obsessions—the dictatorships of Perón and of Rosas. Let them also remind us that for all his fame as a world writer, a universal writer, Borges was an Argentine and his work is firmly rooted in his country's history.

Two final observations. If brevity is a hallmark of Borges's style, *The Maker* is surely the pinnacle of his creativity. This should come as no surprise. The pieces are the culmination of his mature years as a storyteller. Of

the twenty-seven collected here, no fewer than twenty date from the years 1954 through 1960. This was the period after he had completed the major stories of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* and after the final onset of his blindness. At the time they were written—and this adds to their poignancy—he probably considered them among the last things he would ever commit to paper. Remarkably, the shortest of these narratives runs to fewer than 130 words; the longest, to 834. They are certainly the capstone of his early career.

For the current presentation, I have arranged the writings so that they appear—perhaps for the first time anywhere—in the chronological order of their earliest publication. To read the book in this way, I believe, enhances Borges's achievement. Finally, it should be pointed out that a number of these English versions were made in direct collaboration with the author.

– *N T di G*

Foreword

To Leopoldo Lugones

Leaving behind the sounds of the plaza, I enter the library. At once, in an almost physical way, I feel the gravitation of the books, the quiet atmosphere of ordered things, the past rescued and magically restored. To left and right, rapt in lucid dream, the momentary profiles of the readers' faces are outlined—as in Milton's hypallage—by the light of their studious lamps. I recall having recalled this figure before, in this same place, and then that other epithet also defined by its surroundings, 'the arid camel' of your *Lunario sentimental*, and afterwards that hexameter from Virgil which employs the same device and goes beyond it:

Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram.

These reminiscences lead me to the door of your office. I enter. We exchange a few cordial, conventional words, and I hand you this book. If I am not mistaken, you were rather fond of me, Lugones, and it would have pleased you to be pleased by some work of mine. That never happened, but this time you turn the pages and read approvingly some line or other, maybe because you recognize your own voice in it, maybe because my faulty execution means less to you than the soundness of my aims.

At this point my dream dissolves—like water in water. The vast library all around me is in Mexico Street, not in

Rodríguez Peña, and you, Lugones, committed suicide towards the beginning of 1938. My vanity and wistfulness have set an impossible scene. So be it, I tell myself, for tomorrow I too will be dead and our times will become one, and chronology will be lost in a world of meaningless symbols, and in some way it may be true to say that I once handed you this book and that you accepted it.

J.L.B.

Buenos Aires, 9 August 1960

Dreamtigers

As a boy I had a burning passion for tigers—not the spotted tiger, or jaguar, of the tangled Amazon and the river Paraná’s flotillas of water hyacinths, but the striped royal Bengal tiger, which warriors can only confront from a castle on the back of an elephant. I used to loiter for hours by one of the cages at the zoo; I judged vast encyclopedias and natural history books by the splendour of their tigers. (I still remember those plates—I who can barely remember a woman’s face or smile.) My boyhood passed, tigers and their passion faded, but still they inhabit my dreams. In this random, buried stratum they still reign. It happens in this way: in my sleep, some dream entices me, and at once I know it’s a dream. Then I begin to think, This is a dream, amusement pure and willed, and, possessed now with limitless power, I’m going to create a tiger.

But I bungle it! My dreams never quite engender the hoped-for beast. The tiger appears, to be sure, but he’s stuffed and limp, or grossly deformed, or the wrong size, or he’s a fleeting shadow, or he looks more like a dog or a bird.

[1934]

Toenails

By day soft socks pamper them and hobnailed boots lend them support, but my toes don't care about this. Their only concern is growing nails—semi-transparent, horny, resilient sheaths to protect them. From what? Wary brutes that they are, never for a second do they stop producing their puny armour. They reject the world and all its delights and go on endlessly manufacturing useless claws, which are snipped time and again by a pair of Solingen scissors. It took my toes some ninety twilit days of prenatal imprisonment to set this one industry in motion. When I'm laid to rest in the Recoleta, in an ash-grey house bedecked with dried flowers and talismans, my toenails will persist in their stubborn toil until corruption curbs them. Them, and the beard on my face.

[1934]

Shrouded Mirrors

Islam holds that on the Day of Judgement, against which there is no appeal, anyone who has perpetrated the image of a living thing will rise again with his works and will be commanded to bring them to life. He will fail and with his image he will be delivered into the flames of hell. As a boy, when looking into large mirrors, I felt the same horror of ghostly duplication or multiplication of the real world. The unceasing, infallible activity of mirrors, the way they dogged all my actions, their cosmic mimicry—until it grew dark—were supernatural. One of my persistent pleas to God and my guardian angel was not to let me dream of mirrors. I know I kept an uneasy eye on them, sometimes fearing they might begin to diverge from reality, sometimes fearing I'd see my face disfigured by an odd affliction. I have just learned that this hideous fear is once again abroad in the land. The story is simple and rather unpleasant.

In about 1927, I met a moody girl—first over the telephone (for Julia began as a nameless, faceless voice) and then, late one afternoon, on a street corner. She had disconcertingly large eyes, straight black hair, and a stiff bearing. She was the grandchild and great-grandchild of Federalists, as I was of Unitarians, and that old blood feud was a link, a shared possession of our country. She lived with her family in a big, run-down, high-ceilinged house in the resentful dullness of genteel poverty. In the evenings—or occasionally at night—we would go for walks in the streets of her neighbourhood, Balvanera. We'd skirt

the high wall alongside the railway; following Sarmiento Street we once walked all the way to the wide-open spaces of Parque Centenario. Between us there was no love or pretence of love. Julia gave off an intensity that was quite the opposite of eroticism, and I was afraid of her. The usual way of making up to women is to tell them stories, true or invented, of one's boyhood; I must once have mentioned my problem with mirrors, thereby, in 1928, prompting a hallucination that was to reach full flower in 1931. I've just found out that Julia has lost her mind and that her bedroom mirrors have been covered over, for in them she sees my reflection supplanting hers. She trembles and falls silent and then claims I'm pursuing her by magic.

An unfortunate thralldom to my face this—to one of my ancestral faces. If my features are destined to be hated, I must be hated too. But I no longer care.

[1934]

Conversation about a Conversation

A: Absorbed in puzzling out immortality, we'd let the dusk gather without lighting a lamp. We could no longer see each other's face. With a casual gentleness more convincing than any vehemence, Macedonio Fernández's voice reiterated that the soul is immortal. He assured me that the death of the body is of no significance and that dying must be the most meaningless incident that can befall a man. I was toying with Macedonio's old-fashioned razor; I opened and shut the blade. A nearby accordion kept pumping out 'La Cumparsita', that appalling piece of inanity which so many people delight in because they are told wrongly that it's old. I suggested to Macedonio that we commit suicide so we could go on talking in peace.

Z (*scoffing*): But in the end I suspect you didn't.

A (*with a detached air*): That night? Frankly, I can't remember.

[1936]

Of Exactitude in Science

...In that Empire, the craft of Cartography attained such perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that matched it point for point. Less attentive to the Study of Cartography, succeeding Generations came to judge a map of such Magnitude cumbersome, and, not without Irreverence, they abandoned it to the Rigours of sun and Rain. In the western Deserts, tattered Fragments of the Map are still to be found, Sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar; in the whole Nation, no other relic is left of the Discipline of Geography.

From TRAVELS OF PRAISEWORTHY MEN (1658)
by J.A. Suárez Miranda

[1946]

Argumentum Ornithologicum

I shut my eyes and glimpse a flock of birds. The image lasts for a second or even less; I don't know how many birds I saw. Was the number finite or infinite? The problem concerns the existence of God. If He exists, the number is finite, because He knows how many birds I saw. If God does not exist, the number is infinite, because no one could keep tally. In my case, let us say I saw fewer than ten birds and more than one but did not see nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, or two birds. I saw a number between ten and one, which is not nine, eight, seven, six, five, etc. This integer is inconceivable; therefore, God exists.

[1952]

Delia Elena San Marco

We said goodbye at one of the corners of Plaza Once. From the opposite pavement, I looked back; you had turned to wave. It was five o'clock in the afternoon. A river of traffic and people ran between us. How could I have known that that river was the sad Acheron, from which there is no return?

We did not see each other again, and a year later you were dead. Calling up that memory now, I look at it and think it was false. Behind our inconsequential parting was eternal separation.

After dinner last night I did not go out but, in an effort to understand these things, I reread Plato's last teaching, which he put into his master's mouth. When the flesh dies, I read, the soul escapes. Now I no longer know whether the truth lies in Plato's dismal view or in our innocent farewell. Because if souls do not die, it's quite right that goodbyes should not be overstated.

To say farewell is to deny separation. It is to say, 'Today we played at separating but tomorrow we'll see each other again.' Men have invented farewells because they know they are in some way immortal, even if they think themselves incidental and ephemeral.

Delia, one day—beside what river?—we shall resume this indeterminate conversation and ask each other if once, in a city that was lost on a plain, we were Borges and Delia.

[1954]

Transformations

A long a corridor I saw an arrow pointing the way. This inoffensive symbol was once a thing of iron, it occurred to me, a relentless, deadly missile that pierced the flesh of men and lions, blotted out the sun at Thermopylae, and gave six feet of English soil to Harald Sigurdarson for ever.

Days later, someone showed me a photograph of a Magyar horseman; a coiled rope hung round the neck of his mount. That rope, which once hissed through the air to lasso grazing bulls, I knew was no more than a brash piece of Sunday riding regalia.

In the Chacarita cemetery I saw a Celtic cross, carved in red marble; its curved arms widened out and were linked by a ring. This tight, constricted cross took its form from another, the cross with free arms, which in turn took its form from the cross on which a god suffered, the 'vile machine' denounced by Lucian of Samosata.

Arrow, coiled rope, and cross, our age-old implements, now reduced or elevated to symbols; why I wonder at them I don't know, when there is nothing on earth oblivion will not erase or memory alter, and when no man knows into what images the future will transform him.

[1954]

The Dagger

To Margarita Bunge

A dagger rests in a drawer. It was forged in Toledo at the end of the last century. Luis Melián Lafinur gave it to my father, who brought it from Uruguay. Evaristo Carriego once held it in his hand.

Whoever lays eyes on it has to pick up the dagger and toy with it, as if he had always been on the lookout for it. The hand is quick to grip the waiting hilt, and the powerful obeying blade slides in and out of the sheath with a click.

This is not what the dagger wants.

It is more than a structure of metal; men conceived it and shaped it with a single end in mind. It is, in some eternal way, the dagger that last night knifed a man in Tacuarembó and the daggers that rained on Caesar. It wants to kill, it wants to shed sudden blood.

In a drawer of my writing table, among draft pages and old letters, the dagger dreams over and over its simple tiger's dream. On wielding it the hand comes alive because the metal comes alive, sensing itself, each time handled, in touch with the killer for whom it was forged.

At times I am sorry for it. Such power and single-mindedness, so impassive or innocent its pride, and the years slip by, unheeding.

[1954]

Paradise, XXXI: 108

Diodorus Siculus relates the story of a god who is torn to pieces and scattered abroad. Which of us, out for an evening stroll and trying to recall an event from our past, has not at times felt the loss of something infinite?

Mankind has lost a face, an irrecoverable face, and everyone would like to be that pilgrim—dreamed in the highest heaven, secretly—who in Rome looks on Veronica's handkerchief and murmurs, believing, 'Christ Jesus, my lord, very God, was this then your likeness?'

Along a road in Jaén is a stone face bearing an inscription that reads, 'The True Portrait of the Holy Face of God'. If we really knew what that face was like we would have a key to the parables and would know whether the carpenter's son was also the Son of God.

Paul saw the face as a light that struck him down; John, as the sun in all its splendour; Theresa of the Child Jesus, often saw it bathed in a soft glow, and she could never tell for sure the colour of the eyes.

We have lost those features, just as a magic number made up of ordinary figures can be lost; just as an image in a kaleidoscope is lost for ever. We may come across the features and not know them. The profile of a Jew on an underground train may be that of Christ; the hands that give us our change over a counter may echo those that some soldiers once nailed to the cross.

Perhaps some feature of the crucified face lurks in every mirror; perhaps the face died and was erased so that God

could be everyone. Perhaps tonight we shall see it in the
labyrinths of sleep and tomorrow not recognize it.

[1954]

A Parable of Cervantes and Don Quixote

Tired of his Spanish homeland, an old soldier of the king sought diversion in Ariosto's far-flung journeys, in the valley of the moon where the time wasted in dreams is assembled, and in the golden idol of Mohammed, which the lord of Montalbano stole.

In gentle self-mockery, he dreamed up a gullible man who, stirred by his reading of fanciful tales, set off on a quest for adventure and glamour in prosaic places called El Toboso and Montiel. Defeated by the real world, by Spain, Don Quixote died in his native village in about 1614. Miguel de Cervantes briefly survived him. For both of them, the dreamer and the dreamed, at the heart of all this was the clash of two worlds—the unreal world of chivalric tales and the common, everyday world of the seventeenth century.

They had no inkling that in time the years would temper the conflict, they had no inkling that La Mancha and Montiel and the lean figure of the knight would one day be as poetic as the exploits of Sinbad or Ariosto's far-flung journeys. For at the beginning of literature, as well as at the end, is myth.

Devoto Hospital, January 1955

Hell, I: 32

At the close of the thirteenth century, from the twilight of day to the twilight of night, a leopard gazed at wooden planks, vertical iron bars, men and women coming and going, a wall, and perhaps a stone gutter choked with dead leaves. The creature did not know, could not know, that it yearned for love and cruelty and the hot pleasure of tearing into flesh and the scent of deer on the wind, but something in it smouldered and rebelled, and in a dream God spoke to the animal, saying, ‘You live and will die in this prison so that a man I know of may look on you a prescribed number of times and not forget you and put you and what you represent into a poem, which has its exact place in the tapestry of the universe. You suffer captivity but you will have given the poem a word.’

In the dream, God enlightened the animal’s savage state, and the leopard understood the reasoning and accepted this destiny, but when it awoke it felt only dark resignation, dauntless ignorance, because the mechanism of the world is somewhat complex for the simple nature of a wild beast.

Years later, Dante lay dying in Ravenna, as unjustified and alone as any other man. In a dream, God explained to him the secret purpose of his life and labours; Dante, awestruck, knew at last who he was and what he was, and he blessed his bitter fate. The story goes that, on waking, he felt he had gained and lost something infinite, something he would never recover or glimpse again, because

the mechanism of the world is somewhat complex for the simple nature of a man.

[1955]

A Yellow Rose

When on that afternoon or the next the renowned Giambattista Marino died—he whom the unanimous mouths of Fame (to use an image dear to him) proclaimed the new Homer and new Dante—the still, silent event that was essentially the last in his life had already taken place. Burdened with years and glory, the man lay dying in a wide Spanish bed with tall carved corner posts. It is easy to picture a quiet balcony a few steps away, facing the sunset, and, down below, marble statuary and laurel trees and a garden whose terraces are reflected in a rectangular pool. A woman has placed a yellow rose in a vase; the man murmurs the inevitable verses of which he himself, to be honest, is rather weary:

*Crown of the garden, pride of the lawn,
Springtime's jewel, fair April's eye...*

Then came the revelation. Marino saw the rose as Adam first saw it in Paradise, and he felt that it lived in an eternity of its own and not in his words; he felt that we may mention or allude to a thing but not express it, and that the tall proud volumes casting a golden haze there in a corner of the room were not (as his vanity dreamed) a mirror of the world but only one thing more added to the world.

This illumination came to Marino on the eve of his death, as perhaps it had to Homer and Dante as well.

[1956]

Parable of the Palace

On that day, the Yellow Emperor showed off his palace to the poet. Behind them, in a long descent, they had just left the first western terraces, which—like the tiers of an almost unimaginable amphitheatre—slope down to a paradise, or garden, whose metal mirrors and interwoven juniper hedges gave a hint of the labyrinth. Lightheartedly, the two men lost themselves in it—at first as if they were entering into a game but later with a touch of unease, for the straight avenues of the maze suffered a slight but continuous curve and secretly were circles. At about midnight, observation of the planets and the timely sacrifice of a tortoise allowed them to extricate themselves from that whole sector, which seemed enchanted, but not from the feeling of being lost, which stayed with them to the end. After that, they passed through antechambers and courtyards and libraries and a hexagonal hall with a water clock, and one morning they saw from a tower a stone man that was later lost to them for ever. In sandalwood boats, they crossed a number of glinting rivers or a single river many times over. As the imperial retinue went by, people prostrated themselves, but one day the procession reached an island where someone failed to bow down, since he had never before laid eyes on the Son of Heaven, and the executioner was obliged to behead him. Indifferently, their eyes passed over black tresses and black dances and bizarre golden masks; reality merged with dream or, rather, reality became one of the forms of dream. It seemed impossible that the earth could be anything but gardens, watercourses, architectural

structures, and resplendent shapes. Every hundred paces a tower soared into the air; to the eye, each was the same colour, but so long was the series and so subtle were the hues that the first of them was yellow and the last scarlet.

At the foot of the second last tower the poet, who seemed detached from all these spectacles—marvels to everyone else—recited the short work that today we link inseparably with his name and that, according to the most elegant historians, bestowed immortality and death on him. The text is lost. Some believe that it consisted of a single line of verse; others, of a single word. What is certain, what is incredible, is that in the poem was the whole enormous palace down to the last detail, with each illustrious porcelain piece and each drawing on each piece and the shadows and lights of every dawn and dusk and each moment, whether happy or unhappy, of the glorious dynasties of mortals, gods, and dragons that had dwelt in the place from time immemorial. Everyone fell silent, but the Emperor cried, ‘You have taken my palace from me!’, and the executioner’s iron sword cut short the poet’s life.

Others tell the story in a different way. In this world there cannot be two identical things; it was enough, we are told, for the poet merely to utter the poem for the palace to disappear, as if struck and razed to the ground by the last syllable. Clearly, such legends are no more than literary fiction. The poet was the emperor’s slave and died as such; his composition fell into oblivion because it deserved oblivion, and his descendants are still searching for—but will never find—the word for the universe.

[1956]

Borges and Myself

It's to the other man, to Borges, that things happen. I walk along the streets of Buenos Aires, stopping now and then—perhaps out of habit—to look at the arch of an old entranceway or a grillwork gate; of Borges I get news through the mail and glimpse his name among a committee of professors or in a dictionary of biography. I have a taste for hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the roots of words, the smell of coffee, and Stevenson's prose; the other man shares these likes, but in a showy way that turns them into stagy mannerisms. It would be an exaggeration to say that we are on bad terms; I live, I let myself live, so that Borges can weave his tales and poems, and those tales and poems are my justification. It is not hard for me to admit that he has managed to write a few worthwhile pages, but these pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good no longer belongs to anyone—not even the other man—but rather to speech or tradition. In any case, I am fated to become lost once and for all, and only some moment of myself will survive in the other man. Little by little, I have been surrendering everything to him, even though I have evidence of his stubborn habit of falsification and exaggerating. Spinoza held that all things try to keep on being themselves; a stone wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is so that I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in those of others or than in the laborious tuning of a guitar. Years ago, I tried ridding myself of him, and I went from myths of the outlying slums of the city

to games with time and infinity, but those games are now part of Borges, and I will have to turn to other things. And so my life is a running away, and I lose everything and everything is left to oblivion or to the other man.

Which of us is writing this page I don't know.

[1957]

The Captive

This story is told out in one of the old frontier towns—either Junín or Tapalquén. A boy was missing after an Indian raid; it was said that the marauders had carried him off. The boy's parents searched for him in vain; years later, a soldier just back from Indian territory told them about a blue-eyed savage who might be their son. At long last they traced him (the circumstances of the search have not come down to us, and I do not want to invent what I don't know) and they thought they recognized their child. Marked by the wilderness and primitive living, the man no longer understood his mother tongue but, meek and incurious, he let himself be led to his old home. There he stopped—maybe because the others stopped. He stared at the door as though not understanding what it was. All of a sudden, ducking his head, he let out a cry, darted through the entranceway and the two long patios, and burst into the kitchen. Without a second's hesitation, he plunged an arm up behind the soot-blackened mantelpiece and drew out a small knife with a horn handle that he had hidden there as a boy. His eyes lit up with joy, and his parents wept because they had found their lost son.

Maybe other memories followed upon this one, but the Indian could not live indoors and one day he left to go back to his open spaces. I would like to know what he felt in that first bewildering moment, when past and present merged; I would like to know whether in that dizzying instant the lost son was born again and died, or whether—like a child or a dog—he managed to recognize his people and his home.

[1957]

The Effigy

One day in July, 1952, a man dressed in mourning appeared in a small town in the Chaco. Tall and thin, he was of Indian blood and his face had the stolid look of a fool or a mask; the townspeople treated him with respect, not for himself but for what he represented or now was. He chose a hut by the river, and, with the help of a few neighbours, set up a trestle table and on it placed a cardboard box containing a blonde doll. He and his helpers also lit four candles in tall candlesticks and laid flowers around them. A crowd quickly gathered. Inconsolable old women, wide-eyed children, and farmhands, who reverently took off their cork sun-hats, filed past the box, each saying, 'My sincerest condolences, General.' In great sorrow, the man sat at the head of the table, his fingers interlaced over his belly like a pregnant woman. Reaching out to shake the hands offered to him, he replied with fortitude and resignation, 'It was fate. Everything humanly possible was done.' A money tin received the two-peso fee, and many people felt the need to come more than once.

What sort of man, I wonder, could have dreamed up and carried out this lugubrious farce? A fanatic, a sad wretch, someone deluded, or an imposter and a cynic? Did he believe he was Perón when he played out the macabre role of the grieving widower? The story is scarcely credible but it did take place and perhaps not once but many times over, with different actors and in different places. Perfectly epitomising an unreal period, the tale is like the mirror-image of a dream or the play within the play that

appears in Hamlet. The man in mourning was not Perón, and the blonde doll was not his wife Eva Duarte, but neither was Perón Perón nor Eva Eva. Rather, they were two obscure, anonymous people (whose secret names and real faces we do not know) who, to gain the gullible love of the shanty-towns, fashioned a crass mythology.

[1957]

A Conversation between Dead Men

The man arrived from the south of England early one morning in the winter of 1877. Ruddy, athletic, corpulent, he was inevitably taken by almost everyone for an Englishman, and it is true that he bore a close resemblance to the archetypal John Bull. He wore a tall-crowned felt hat and a curious woollen cape with a slit in the middle. A group of men, women, and children nervously awaited him; the throats of many of them were scarred by a red slash, others were headless and groped about, fearful and hesitant, like people blundering in the dark. They moved towards the newcomer, and one or two at the rear shouted curses, but an old dread held them back and they dared go no farther. Out from the throng stepped a soldier with sallow skin and eyes like firebrands; his unkempt hair and lowering beard seemed to eat away at his face. A dozen or so mortal wounds furrowed his body like the stripes on the skin of a tiger. Upon seeing him, the newcomer blanched, but then he advanced and extended a hand.

‘How it saddens me to see so illustrious a warrior cut down by the hand of treachery!’ he said in a ringing tone. ‘Yet how great is my satisfaction at having sent the assassins to purge their misdeeds on the scaffold in the Plaza de la Victoria!’

‘If you mean Santos Pérez and the Reinafé brothers, know that I have already thanked them,’ the bloodied man said gravely.

The other man looked at him as if suspecting mockery or a threat, but Quiroga went on.

‘You never understood me, Rosas,’ he said. ‘How could you have when our destinies were so different? Yours was to rule a city that looks to Europe and that will one day be among the most famous in the world; mine, to fight in the backlands of America, in a poor country of poor gauchos. My empire was of lances and war cries, of sandy wastes and barely known victories in remote parts. What claims are these on history? I live and shall go on living in people’s memory for years to come because I was murdered in a stagecoach, in a place called Barranca Yaco, by mounted men wielding sabres. I owe this gift of a bizarre death to you. At the time, I could not appreciate it, but succeeding generations have never forgotten. Of course, you know all about the garish lithographs and the interesting book by a certain worthy young man from San Juan.’

Recovering his aplomb, Rosas gazed with scorn at the other man. ‘You are a romantic,’ he announced. ‘The flattery of succeeding generations is worth no more than that of one’s contemporaries, which is worth nothing and can be bought for a handful of ribbons.’

‘I know how you think,’ replied Quiroga. ‘In 1852, fate, which is generous and wanted to plumb you to the depths, offered you a man’s death in combat. You showed yourself unworthy of that gift, for battle and bloodshed filled you with fear.’

‘Fear?’ echoed Rosas. ‘I who tamed horses in the south and later a whole country?’

For the first time, Quiroga smiled and, with slow deliberation, he said, ‘I know that, according to the impartial

testimony of your foremen and hands, you achieved great feats of horsemanship; but during those same years, all over this continent, other great feats of horsemanship were achieved—at Chacabuco and Junín, at Palma Redonda and Caseros.’

Rosas heard him out, unblinking, and then answered, ‘I had no need for courage. One of my feats, as you put it, was to see that men with more courage than I fought and died for me. Santos Pérez, for example, who dealt with you. Courage is all a question of endurance; some endure more, others less, but sooner or later everyone loses heart.’

‘That may be so,’ Quiroga said, ‘but I have lived and died and even now I don’t know what fear is. I am about to be obliterated, to be given another face and another destiny, for history has wearied of men of violence. I don’t know who this other person will be, or what will become of me, but I know the new man will be fearless.’

‘I am satisfied with who I am,’ said Rosas. ‘I don’t want to be anyone else.’

‘Stones, too, want to be stones for ever,’ said Quiroga, ‘and for centuries they are—until they crumble to dust. I thought as you did when I entered death, but I’ve learned many things here. Take heed, the two of us are already changing.’

But Rosas took no notice and said, as if thinking aloud, ‘Perhaps I was not made to be dead; this place and this conversation seem to me a dream, and not a dream dreamed by me but by another, one yet to be born.’

The pair spoke no more, for just then Someone beckoned.

[1957]

The Plot

To crown his horror, Caesar, when set upon at the foot of a statue by his friends' impatient knives, sees among the blades and the faces that of Marcus Junius Brutus, his protégé, perhaps even his son. Ceasing to defend himself, Caesar calls out, 'You, too, my son!' Both Shakespeare and Quevedo have drawn on this poignant cry.

Fate takes delight in repetitions, variants, symmetries; nineteen centuries later, in the south of the Province of Buenos Aires, a gaucho is attacked by other gauchos and, as he falls, he recognizes among them his godson. Mildly reproachful, in slow surprise, the man says—and the words must be heard, not read—'*Pero, che!*' He is killed, never knowing that he's died so that a scene may be re-enacted.

[1957]

A Problem

Let us imagine that a parchment written in Arabic is discovered in Toledo and that the experts on ancient script declare the hand to be that of a certain Cide Hamete Benengeli, the man on whom Cervantes based Don Quixote. In the text, we read that the hero—who, as everyone knows, travelled the length and breadth of Spain armed with sword and lance, challenging anyone on any grounds whatsoever—finds, after one of his many battles, that he has killed someone. The fragment ends here; the problem is to guess, or conjecture, how Don Quixote reacts.

As I see it, there are three possible answers. The first is somewhat negative; nothing special takes place, since in Don Quixote's deluded world death is as common as magic, and to have killed a man should not disturb someone who battles, or believes he battles, with monsters and wizards. The second is touching. Don Quixote never forgot that he was a figment of the imagination of Alonso Quijano, a reader of fabulous tales; to see death, to understand that a dream has brought him Cain's guilt, wakens him perhaps for ever from his willing madness. The third answer is perhaps the most likely. With a man dead, Don Quixote cannot bring himself to admit that his appalling deed is an act of madness; the reality of the effect makes him ascribe an equal reality to the cause, and Don Quixote will never emerge from his madness.

There is yet another conjecture, one alien to Spain and even to the Western world, which requires a more ancient, complex, and languorous setting. Don Quixote—who is

no longer Don Quixote but a king out of one of India's Sanskrit epics—facing his enemy's corpse, intuits that to kill and to procreate are divine or magical acts that clearly transcend the human condition. He knows that the dead man is an illusion, as are the bloodstained sword he hefts and he himself and his whole past life and the prodigious gods and the universe.

[1957]

The Witness

In a stable nearly in the shadow of the new stone church, a grey-eyed, grey-bearded cowherd lies amid the stench of cattle and quietly seeks death the way a man seeks sleep. Obedient to vast secret laws, the day's shifting light and gloom play on the rough walls of the hovel. Close by are tilled fields and a dry ditch clogged with dead leaves, and in the black soil at the edge of the forest the tracks of a wolf. The man sleeps and dreams, forgotten. The bells for evening prayer awaken him. By now the sound of bells is one of evening's customs in the kingdoms of England, but as a child the man had known the face of Woden, the holy awe and loud exultation of his worship, the clumsy wooden idol laden with Roman coins and coarse vestments, and the sacrifice of horses, dogs, and prisoners. Before daybreak he will die, and with him will die—never to come back again—the final first-hand images of heathen rites. When this Saxon is gone, the world will be a little poorer.

Events that fill up space and reach their end when someone dies may cause us wonder, but some thing—or an endless number of things—dies with each man's last breath, unless, as theology conjectures, the world has a memory. In the past, there was a day when the last eyes to have seen Christ were closed; the battle of Junín and Helen's face each died with the death of some one man. What will die with me when I die, what poignant or worthless memory will be lost to the world? The voice of Macedonio Fernández, the image of a brown horse grazing in an empty lot at the corner of Serrano and Charcas, a sulphur candle in the drawer of a mahogany desk?

[1957]

Martín Fierro

From this city armies went forth that seemed great and afterwards were great as their glory was magnified. Years later, a few of the soldiers returned and, with a northern lilt, recounted tales of what had befallen them in places with names like Ituzaingó and Ayacucho. Today it's as if none of these things had ever happened.

We Argentines have suffered two tyrannies. During the first, a couple of men seated on the driver's box of an oxcart coming from the Plata market, were hawking white and yellow peaches; a boy, lifting a corner of the canvas that covered the fruit, saw Unitarian heads with blood-stained beards. The second tyranny, for many, meant imprisonment and death; for all of us it was a time of unease, a grinding humiliation, which gave everyday acts a taste of shame. Today it's as if none of these things had ever happened.

A man who knew all the words studied the plants and birds of this land and, with painstaking love, described them perhaps for ever, setting down in enduring metaphors the vast chronicle of tumultuous sunsets and the phases of the moon. Today it's as if none of these things had ever happened.

Here, too, generations have known those common and in some way eternal vicissitudes that are the fabric of art. Today it's as if none of these things had ever happened, but in a hotel room at a certain point in the 1860s a man dreamed a fight. A gaucho wielding a knife lifts a black off his feet, throws him down like a bag of bones, watches

him suffer and die, crouches to wipe the blade, unties his horse, and mounts slowly so that no one will think he's running away. This, which happened once, keeps happening again and again; the armies themselves have gone but that humble knife fight remains. One man's dream is part of all men's memory.

[1957]

Everything and Nothing

In him was no one. Behind his face (which even in the poor paintings of the period is unlike any other) and his words (which were swarming, fanciful, and excited), was only a touch of coldness, a dream undreamed by anyone. At first he thought everyone was like him, but, when he had tried to explain this inner emptiness, the blank look of a schoolmate showed him his mistake and made him realize from then on that an individual had best not differ from his species. From time to time he thought books might cure this strange ailment, and this was why he learned the small Latin and less Greek of which a contemporary was to remark. Later on he considered that in the practice of one of humanity's age-old habits he might actually find what he was looking for, and during the course of a long, hazy June afternoon he let himself be initiated by Anne Hathaway.

In his twenties he went to London. By instinct, so as to cover up the fact that he was nobody, he had grown skilled in the trick of making believe he was somebody. There in London he came to the profession to which he was destined—that of the actor, who plays at being someone else on a stage before an audience which plays at taking him for that other person. Stagecraft brought him singular happiness, perhaps the first he had ever known, but once the last line was spoken and the last corpse carted off, a hateful taste of the unreal came down on him. He was no longer Ferrex or Tamburlaine but went back to being nobody. So driven, he began to imagine other heroes and other

tragic tales. And while in the bawdyhouses and taverns of London his flesh fulfilled its destiny as flesh, the spirit that inhabited him was Caesar, ignoring the soothsayer's prophecy, or Juliet, hating the lark, or Macbeth, speaking on the heath to the witches, who are also the Fates. No one was ever so many men as this man, who, like the Egyptian Proteus, could run through all of life's guises. Occasionally, he left a confession in some nook of his work, sure it would never be deciphered; Richard II says that in one person he plays many people, and with strange words Iago says, 'I am not what I am.' The underlying sameness of existing, dreaming, and acting inspired him to famous pages.

For twenty years he persisted in his wilful hallucination, but one day he was overcome by the surfeit and the horror of being so many kings who die by the sword and so many star-crossed lovers who meet and part and at last melodiously die. That same day he decided to sell his theatre. Before a week was over, he had gone back to the country town of his birth, where again he discovered the trees and the river of his childhood, never linking them to those other trees and rivers—made illustrious by mythological allusions and Latin words—which his muse had celebrated. He had to be someone; he became a retired theatre owner who has made his fortune and to whom loans, lawsuits, and petty usury are amusements. In this personage, he dictated the dry testament that has come down to us, in which he deliberately avoided any trace of the emotional or the literary. Friends from London used to visit him in his retreat, and for their sake he again took up the role of poet.

The tale runs that before or after death, when he stood face to face with God, he said to Him, 'I, who in vain have

been so many men, want to be one man—myself.’ The voice of the Lord answered him out of the whirlwind, ‘I too have no self; I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the shapes of my dream are you, who, like me, are many men and no one.’

[1958]

The Maker

Until then, he had never dwelt on the pleasures of memory. Impressions had always washed over him, fleeting and vivid. A potter's design in vermilion; the vault of heaven clustered with stars that were also gods; the moon, from which a lion had fallen; the smoothness of marble under lingering fingertips; the taste of wild boar, which he liked to strip with quick flashing bites; a Phoenician word; the black shadow cast by a spear on yellow sand; the nearness of the sea or of women; a heavy wine whose roughness he cut with honey—any of these could wholly encompass the range of his mind. He was acquainted with fear as well as with anger and courage, and once he was the first to scale an enemy wall. Eager, curious, unquestioning, following no other law than to enjoy things and forget them, he wandered over many lands and, on this or that shore, gazed on the cities and palaces of men. In bustling marketplaces or at the foot of a mountain whose hidden peak may have sheltered satyrs, he had heard tangled stories, which he accepted as he accepted reality, without attempting to find out whether they were true or imaginary.

Little by little, the beautiful world began to leave him; a persistent mist erased the lines of his hand, the night lost its multitude of stars, the ground beneath his step became uncertain. Everything grew distant and blurred. When he knew he was going blind, he cried out; stoic fortitude had not yet been invented, and Hector could flee from Achilles without dishonour. I shall no longer look upon the sky

and its mythological dread, he felt, nor this face which the years will transform. Days and nights passed over his bodily despair, but one morning he awoke, looked (without astonishment now) at the dim things around him, and felt inexplicably—as one recognizes a tune or a voice—that all this had already happened to him and that he had faced it with fear but also with joy, hope, and curiosity. Then he went deep into his past, which seemed to him bottomless, and managed to draw out of that dizzying descent a lost memory that now shone like a coin in the rain, perhaps because he had never recalled it before except in some dream.

This was the memory. Another boy had wronged him and he had gone to his father and told him the story. Letting his son speak, but seeming not to listen or not to understand, his father took down from the wall a bronze dagger, a beautiful thing charged with power, which in secret the boy had coveted. Now he held it in his hands, and the suddenness of possession wiped out the injury he had suffered, but his father's voice was telling him, 'Let them know you're a man', and in that voice was a command. Night blinded the paths. Clasp the dagger, in which he felt a magical force, he scrambled down the steep hillside that surrounded the house and ran to the edge of the sea, thinking himself Ajax and Perseus and peopling the dark salt air with wounds and battles. The exact taste of that moment was what he now sought. The rest mattered little—the insults leading to the challenge, the clumsy fight, the way home with the dripping blade.

Another memory, also involving night and an expectation of adventure, sprang out of that one. A woman, the first to be given him by the gods, had waited for him in

the shadow of a crypt while he sought her through galleries that were like stone networks and down slopes that sank into darkness. Why did these memories come back to him and why without bitterness, as if to foretell what was now happening?

With slow amazement he understood. In this nighttime of his mortal eyes into which he was now descending, love and danger also awaited him. Ares and Aphrodite, because he already divined (was already ringed in by) a rumour of hexameters and glory, a rumour of men defending a shrine that the gods would not save and of black ships roaming the seas in search of a beloved island, the rumour of the Odysseys and the Iliads it was his destiny to sing and to leave resounding for ever in mankind's hollow memory. These things we know, but not what he felt when he went down into his final darkness.

[1958]

Ragnarök

In dreams, wrote Coleridge, images embody the feelings we think they cause; we do not feel fear because a sphinx is threatening us, we dream a sphinx to explain a fear we are feeling. If this is so, how can a mere chronicling of such images transmit the bewilderment, the awe, the terror, the menace, and the jubilation which wove that night's dream? None the less, I shall attempt just such a chronicle; the fact that my dream was made up of a single scene may remove or lessen the intrinsic difficulty.

The setting was the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters; the time, late afternoon. Everything, as is normal in dreams, was somewhat different; a slight magnification changed the details. We were choosing officials; I was speaking to Pedro Henríquez Ureña, who in real life had died many years earlier. Suddenly the uproar of a demonstration or a carnival parade deafened us. From the direction of the port came human and animal cries. A voice shouted, 'They're coming!' and then, 'The gods! The gods!' Four or five of them broke from the mob and took up places on a platform in the Great Hall. We all applauded, weeping; they were the gods, returning from centuries of exile. Made taller by the dais, heads held high and chests out, they proudly received our homage. One clutched a branch, which of course was in keeping with the simple botany of dreams; another, in a broad gesture, extended a hand that was a claw; one of Janus's faces looked askance at Thoth's curved beak. Excited by our cheers, perhaps, one—I no longer know which—broke

out into a triumphant, unbelievably sour cackle, a kind of whistling gargle. From that moment on, things changed.

It all started with a perhaps unfounded suspicion that the gods could not speak. Centuries of fugitive, half-wild life had atrophied their human faculties; the moon of Islam and the cross of Rome had been ruthless to these wanderers. Low foreheads, yellowish teeth, the sparse beards of half-breeds or of Chinese, and bestial snouts proclaimed the degeneration of this Olympian race. Their garments spoke not of genteel poverty but of the vulgar opulence of dockside gambling dens and brothels. In a buttonhole, a carnation bled; in a tight-fitting jacket you almost made out the bulk of a dagger. Suddenly we felt that they were playing their last card, that they were cunning, ignorant, and cruel, like aged beasts of prey, and that if through pity or fear they let us win they would end up destroying us.

We took out our heavy revolvers (in the dream suddenly there were revolvers) and cheerfully we slew the gods.

[1959]

Afterword

God willing, the intrinsic sameness of this miscellany—which has been compiled not by me but by time and includes early pieces that I have not dared tinker with, since they came out of a different view of writing—will prove less obvious than the historical and geographical range of its themes. Of all my published books, none I believe is so personal as this ragtag, random assortment, for the very reason that it is rich in reflection and in literary interpolation. Little has taken place in my life, but I have read a great deal. Or, rather, little has taken place more worthy of memory than Schopenhauer's thinking or the word music of England.

A man sets himself the task of depicting the world. Year after year, he fills a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Just before he dies, he discovers that out of this patient labyrinth of lines emerge the features of his own face.

J.L.B.

Buenos Aires, 31 October 1960

