An Autobiographical Essay

Family and Childhood

I cannot tell whether my first memories go back to the eastern or to the western bank of the muddy, slow-moving Río de la Plata—to Montevideo, where we spent long, lazy holidays in the villa of my uncle Francisco Haedo, or to Buenos Aires. I was born there, in the very heart of that city, in 1899, on Tucumán Street, between Suipacha and Esmeralda, in a small, unassuming house belonging to my maternal grandparents. Like most of the houses of that day, it had a flat roof; a long, arched entranceway, called a *zaguán*; a cistern, where we got our water; and two patios. We must have moved out to the suburb of Palermo quite soon, because there I have my first memories of another house with two patios, a garden with a tall windmill pump, and, on the other side of the garden, an empty lot. Palermo at that time—the Palermo where we lived, Serrano and Guatemala—was on the shabby northern outskirts of town,

and many people, ashamed of saying they lived there, spoke in a dim way of living on the Northside. We lived in one of the few two-story homes on our street; the rest of the neighborhood was made up of low houses and vacant lots. I have often spoken of this area as a slum, but I do not quite mean that in the American sense of the word. In Palermo lived shabby, genteel people as well as more undesirable sorts. There was also a Palermo of hoodlums, called *compadritos*, famed for their knife fights, but this Palermo was only later to capture my imagination, since we did our best—our successful best—to ignore it. Unlike our neighbor Evaristo Carriego, however, who was the first Argentine poet to explore the literary possibilities that lay there at hand. As for myself, I was hardly aware of the existence of *compadritos*, since I lived essentially indoors.

My father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, worked as a lawyer. He was a philosophical anarchist—a disciple of Spencer—and also a teacher of psychology at the Normal School for Modern Languages, where he gave his course in English, using as his text William James's shorter book of psychology. My father's English came from the fact that his mother, Frances Haslam, was born in Staffordshire of Northumbrian stock. A rather unlikely set of circumstances brought her to South America. Fanny Haslam's elder sister married an Italian-Jewish engineer named Jorge Suárez, who brought the first horse-drawn tramcars to Argentina, where he and his wife settled and sent for Fanny. I remember an anecdote concerning this venture. Suárez was a guest at General Urquiza's "palace" in Entre Ríos, and very improvidently won his first game of cards with the General, who was the stern dictator of that province and not above throat-cutting. When the game was over, Suárez was told by alarmed fellow-guests that if he wanted the license to run his tramcars in the province, it was expected of him to lose a certain amount of gold coins each night. Urquiza was such a poor player that Suárez had a great deal of trouble losing the appointed sums.

It was in Paraná, the capital city of Entre Ríos, that

Fanny Haslam met Colonel Francisco Borges. This was in 1870 or 1871, during the siege of the city by the *montoneros*, or gaucho militia, of Ricardo López Jordán. Borges, riding at the head of his regiment, commanded the troops defending the city. Fanny Haslam saw him from the flat roof of her house; that very night a ball was given to celebrate the arrival of the government relief forces. Fanny and the Colonel met, danced, fell in love, and eventually married.

My father was the younger of two sons. He had been born in Entre Ríos and used to explain to my grandmother, a respectable English lady, that he wasn't really an Entrerriano, since "I was begotten on the pampa." My grandmother would say, with English reserve, "I'm sure I don't know what you mean." My father's words, of course, were true, since my grandfather was, in the early 1870's, Commander-in-Chief of the northern and western frontiers of the Province of Buenos Aires. As a child, I heard many stories from Fanny Haslam about frontier life in those days. One of these I set down in my "Story of the Warrior and the Captive." My grandmother had spoken with a number of Indian chieftains, whose rather uncouth names were, I think, Simón Coliqueo, Catriel, Pincén, and Namuncurá. In 1874, during one of our civil wars, my grandfather, Colonel Borges, met his death. He was forty-one at the time. In the complicated circumstances surrounding his defeat at the battle of La Verde, he rode out slowly on horseback, wearing a white poncho and followed by ten or twelve of his men, toward the enemy lines, where he was struck by two Remington bullets. This was the first time Remington rifles were used in the Argentine, and it tickles my fancy to think that the firm that shaves me every morning bears the same name as the one that killed my grandfather.

Fanny Haslam was a great reader. When she was over eighty, people used to say, in order to be nice to her, that nowadays there were no writers who could vie with Dickens and Thackeray. My grandmother would answer, "On the

whole, I rather prefer Arnold Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells." When she died, at the age of ninety, in 1935, she called us to her side and said, in English (her Spanish was fluent but poor), in her thin voice, "I am only an old woman dying very, very slowly. There is nothing remarkable or interesting about this." She could see no reason whatever why the whole household should be upset, and she apologized for taking so long to die.

My father was very intelligent and, like all intelligent men, very kind. Once, he told me that I should take a good look at soldiers, uniforms, barracks, flags, churches, priests, and butcher shops, since all these things were about to disappear, and I could tell my children that I had actually seen them. The prophecy has not yet come true, unfortunately. My father was such a modest man that he would have liked being invisible. Though he was very proud of his English ancestry, he used to joke about it, saying with feigned perplexity, "After all, what are the English? Just a pack of German agricultural laborers." His idols were Shelley, Keats, and Swinburne. As a reader, he had two interests. First, books on metaphysics and psychology (Berkeley, Hume, Royce, and William James). Second, literature and books about the East (Lane, Burton, and Payne). It was he who revealed the power of poetry to me—the fact that words are not only a means of communication but also magic symbols and music. When I recite poetry in English now, my mother tells me I take on his very voice. He also, without my being aware of it, gave me my first lessons in philosophy. When I was still quite young, he showed me, with the aid of a chessboard, the paradoxes of Zeno—Achilles and the tortoise, the unmoving flight of the arrow, the impossibility of motion. Later, without mentioning Berkeley's name, he did his best to teach me the rudiments of idealism.

My mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges, comes of old Argentine and Uruguayan stock, and at ninety-four is still hale and hearty and a good Catholic. When I was growing up, religion belonged to women and children; most men in

Buenos Aires were freethinkers—though, had they been asked, they might have called themselves Catholics. I think I inherited from my mother her quality of thinking the best of people and also her strong sense of friendship. My mother has always had a hospitable mind. From the time she learned English, through my father, she has done most of her reading in that language. After my father's death, finding that she was unable to keep her mind on the printed page, she tried her hand at translating William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* in order to compel herself to concentrate. The translation found its way into print, and she was honored for this by a society of Buenos Aires Armenians. Later on, she translated some of Hawthorne's stories and one of Herbert Read's books on art, and she also produced some of the translations of Melville, Virginia Woolf, and Faulkner that are considered mine. She has always been a companion to me—especially in later years, when I went blind—and an understanding and forgiving friend. For years, until recently, she handled all my secretarial work, answering letters, reading to me, taking down my dictation, and also traveling with me on many occasions both at home and abroad. It was she, though I never gave a thought to it at the time, who quietly and effectively fostered my literary career.

Her grandfather was Colonel Isidoro Suárez, who, in 1824, at the age of twenty-four, led a famous charge of Peruvian and Colombian cavalry, which turned the tide of the battle of Junín, in Peru. This was the next to last battle of the South American War of Independence. Although Suárez was a second cousin to Juan Manuel de Rosas, who ruled as dictator in Argentina from 1835 to 1852, he preferred exile and poverty in Montevideo to living under a tyranny in Buenos Aires. His lands were, of course, confiscated, and one of his brothers was executed. Another member of my mother's family was Francisco de Laprida, who, in 1816, in Tucumán, where he presided over the Congress, declared the independence of the Argentine Confederation, and was killed in 1829 in a civil war. My

mother's father, Isidoro Acevedo, though a civilian, took part in the fighting of yet other civil wars in the 1860's and 1880's. So, on both sides of my family, I have military forebears; this may account for my yearning after that epic destiny which my gods denied me, no doubt wisely.

I have already said that I spent a great deal of my boyhood indoors. Having no childhood friends, my sister and I invented two imaginary companions, named, for some reason or other, Quilos and The Windmill. (When they finally bored us, we told our mother that they had died.) I was always very nearsighted and wore glasses, and I was rather frail. As most of my people had been soldiers—even my father's brother had been a naval officer—and I knew I would never be, I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish kind of person and not a man of action. Throughout my boyhood, I thought that to be loved would have amounted to an injustice. I did not feel I deserved any particular love, and I remember my birthdays filled me with shame, because everyone heaped gifts on me when I thought that I had done nothing to deserve them—that I was a kind of fake. After the age of thirty or so, I got over the feeling.

At home, both English and Spanish were commonly used. If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library. I can still picture it. It was in a room of its own, with glass-fronted shelves, and must have contained several thousand volumes. Being so nearsighted, I have forgotten most of the faces of that time (perhaps even when I think of my grandfather Acevedo I am thinking of his photograph), and yet I vividly remember so many of the steel engravings in *Chambers's Encyclopædia* and in the *Britannica*. The first novel I ever read through was *Huckleberry Finn*. Next came *Roughing It* and *Flush Days in California*. I also read books by Captain Marryat, Wells's *First Men in the Moon*, Poe, a one-volume edition of Longfellow, *Treasure Island*, Dickens, *Don Quixote*, *Tom Brown's School Days*, Grimms' *Fairy*

Tales, Lewis Carroll, *The Adventures of Mr Verdant Green* (a now forgotten book), Burton's *A Thousand Nights and a Night*. The Burton, filled with what was then considered obscenity, was forbidden, and I had to read it in hiding up on the roof. But at the time, I was so carried away with the magic that I took no notice whatever of the objectionable parts, reading the tales unaware of any other significance. All the foregoing books I read in English. When later I read *Don Quixote* in the original, it sounded like a bad translation to me. I still remember those red volumes with the gold lettering of the Garnier edition. At some point, my father's library was broken up, and when I read the *Quixote* in another edition I had the feeling that it wasn't the real *Quixote*. Later, I had a friend get me the Gamier, with the same steel engravings, the same footnotes, and also the same errata. All those things form part of the book for me; this I consider the real *Quixote*.

In Spanish, I also read many of the books by Eduardo Gutiérrez about Argentine outlaws and desperadoes—*Juan Moreira* foremost among them—as well as his *Siluetas militares*, which contains a forceful account of Colonel Borges' death. My mother forbade the reading of *Martín Fierro*, since that was a book fit only for hoodlums and schoolboys and, besides, was not about real gauchos at all. This too I read on the sly. Her feelings were based on the fact that Hernández had been an upholder of Rosas and therefore an enemy to our Unitarian ancestors, I read also Sarmiento's *Facundo*, many books on Greek mythology, and later Norse. Poetry came to me through English—Shelley, Keats, FitzGerald, and Swinburne, those great favorites of my father, who could quote them voluminously, and often did.

A tradition of literature ran through my father's family. His great-unde Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur was one of the first Argentine poets, and he wrote an ode on the death of his friend General Manuel Belgrano, in 1820. One of my father's cousins, Álvaro Melián Lafinur, whom I knew from childhood, was a leading minor poet and later found his way into the Argentine Academy of Letters. My father's

maternal grandfather, Edward Young Haslam, edited one of the first English papers in Argentina, the *Southern Cross*, and was a Doctor of Philosophy or Letters, I'm not sure which, of the University of Heidelberg. Haslam could not afford Oxford or Cambridge, so he made his way to Germany, where he got his degree, going through the whole course in Latin. Eventually, he died in Paraná. My father wrote a novel, which he published in Majorca in 1921, about the history of Entre Ríos. It was called *The Caudillo*. He also wrote (and destroyed) a book of essays, and published a translation of FitzGerald's Omar Khayyám in the same meter as the original. He destroyed a book of Oriental stories—in the manner of the Arabian Nights—and a drama, *Hacia la nada* (Toward Nothingness), about a man's disappointment in his son. He published some fine sonnets after the style of the Argentine poet Enrique Banchs. From the time I was a boy, when blindness came to him, it was tacitly understood that I had to fulfill the literary destiny that circumstances had denied my father. This was something that was taken for granted (and such things are far more important than things that are merely said). I was expected to be a writer.

I first started writing when I was six or seven. I tried to imitate classic writers of Spanish—Miguel de Cervantes, for example. I had set down in quite bad English a kind of handbook on Greek mythology, no doubt cribbed from Lemprière. This may have been my first literary venture. My first story was a rather nonsensical piece after the manner of Cervantes, an old-fashioned romance called "La visera fatal" (The Fatal Helmet). I very neatly wrote these things into copybooks. My father never interfered. He wanted me to commit all my own mistakes, and once said, "Children educate their parents, not the other way around." When I was nine or so, I translated Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" into Spanish, and it was published in one of the Buenos Aires dailies, *El País*. Since it was signed merely "Jorge Borges," people naturally assumed the translation was my father's.

I take no pleasure whatever in recalling my early schooldays. To begin with, I did not start school until I was nine. This was because my father, as an anarchist, distrusted all enterprises run by the State. As I wore spectacles and dressed in an Eton collar and tie, I was jeered at and bullied by most of my schoolmates, who were amateur hooligans. I cannot remember the name of the school but recall that it was on Thames Street. My father used to say that Argentine history had taken the place of the catechism, so we were expected to worship all things Argentine. We were taught Argentine history, for example, before we were allowed any knowledge of the many lands and many centuries that went into its making. As far as Spanish composition goes, I was taught to write in a flowery way: *Aquellos que lucharon por una patria libre, independiente, gloriosa* . . . (Those who struggled for a free, independent, and glorious nation . . .). Later on, in Geneva, I was to be told that such writing was meaningless and that I must see things through my own eyes. My sister Norah, who was born in 1901, of course attended a girls' school.

During all these years, we usually spent our summers out in Adrogué, some ten or fifteen miles to the south of Buenos Aires, where we had a place of our own—a large one-story house with grounds, two summerhouses, a windmill, and a shaggy brown sheepdog. Adrogué then was a lost and undisturbed maze of summer homes surrounded by iron fences with masonry planters on the gateposts, of parks, of streets that radiated out of the many plazas, and of the ubiquitous smell of eucalyptus trees. We continued to visit Adrogué for decades.

My first real experience of the pampa came around 1909, on a trip we took to a place belonging to relatives near San Nicolás, to the northwest of Buenos Aires. I remember that the nearest house was a kind of blur on the horizon. This endless distance, I found out, was called the pampa, and when I learned that the farmhands were gauchos, like the characters in Eduardo Gutiérrez, that gave them a certain glamor. I have always come to things after coming to books.

Once, I was allowed to accompany them on horseback, taking cattle to the river early one morning. The men were small and darkish and wore *bombachas*, a kind of wide, baggy trousers. When I asked them if they knew how to swim, they replied, "Water is meant for cattle." My mother gave a doll, in a large cardboard box, to the foreman's daughter. The next year, we went back and asked after the little girl. "What a delight the doll has been to her!" they told us. And we were shown it, still in its box, nailed to the wall like an image. Of course, the girl was allowed only to look at it, not to touch it, for it might have been soiled or broken. There it was, high up out of harm's way, worshiped from afar. Lugones has written that in Córdoba, before magazines came in, he had many times seen a playing card used as a picture and nailed to the wall in gauchos' shacks. The four of *copas*, with its small lion and two towers, was particularly coveted. I think I began writing a poem about gauchos, probably under the influence of the poet Ascasubi, before I went to Geneva. I recall trying to work in as many gaucho words as I could, but the technical difficulties were beyond me. I never got past a few stanzas.

Europe

In 1914, we moved to Europe. My father's eyesight had begun to fail and I remember his saying, "How on earth can I sign my name to legal papers when I am unable to read them?" Forced into early retirement, he planned our trip in exactly ten days. The world was unsuspicious then; there were no passports or other red tape. We first spent some weeks in Paris, a city that neither then nor since has particularly charmed me, as it does every other good Argentine. Perhaps, without knowing it, I was always a bit of a Britisher; in fact, I always think of Waterloo as a victory. The idea of the trip was for my sister and me to go to school in Geneva; we were to live with my maternal grandmother, who traveled with us and eventually died there,

while my parents toured the Continent. At the same time, my father was to be treated by a famous Genevan eye doctor. Europe in those days was cheaper than Buenos Aires, and Argentine money then stood for something. We were so ignorant of history, however, that we had no idea that the First World War would break out in August. My mother and father were in Germany when it happened, but managed to get back to us in Geneva. A year or so later, despite the war, we were able to journey across the Alps into northern Italy. I have vivid memories of Verona and Venice. In the vast and empty amphitheater of Verona I recited, loud and bold, several gaucho verses from Ascasubi.

That first fall—1914—I started school at the College of Geneva, founded by John Calvin. It was a day school. In my class there were some forty of us; a good half were foreigners. The chief subject was Latin, and I soon found out that one could let other studies slide a bit as long as one's Latin was good. All these other courses, however—algebra, chemistry, physics, mineralogy, botany, zoology—were studied in French. That year, I passed all my exams successfully, except for French itself. Without a word to me, my fellow-schoolmates sent a petition around to the headmaster, which they had all signed. They pointed out that I had had to study all of the different subjects in French, a language I also had to learn. They asked the headmaster to take this into account, and he very kindly did so. At first, I had not even understood when a teacher was calling on me, because my name was pronounced in the French manner, in a single syllable (rhyming roughly with "forge"), while we pronounce it with two syllables, the "g" sounding like a strong Scottish "h." Every time I had to answer, my schoolmates would nudge me.

We lived in a flat on the southern, or old, side of town. I still know Geneva far better than I know Buenos Aires, which is easily explained by the fact that in Geneva no two streetcorners are alike and one quickly learns the differences. Every day, I walked along that green and icy river,

the Rhone, which runs through the very heart of the city, spanned by seven quite different-looking bridges. The Swiss are rather proud and standoffish. My two bosom friends were of Polish-Jewish origin—Simon Jichlinski and Maurice Abramowicz. One became a lawyer and the other a physician. I taught them to play *truco*, and they learned so well and fast that at the end of our first game they left me without a cent. I became a good Latin scholar, while I did most of my private reading in English. At home, we spoke Spanish, but my sister's French soon became so good she even dreamed in it. I remember my mother's coming home one day and finding Norah hidden behind a red plush curtain, crying out in fear, "*Une mouche, une mouche!*" It seems she had adopted the French notion that flies are dangerous. "You come out of there," my mother told her, somewhat unpatriotically. "You were born and bred among flies!" As a result of the war—apart from the Italian trip and journeys inside Switzerland—we did no traveling. Later on, braving German submarines and in the company of only four or five other passengers, my English grandmother joined us.

On my own, outside of school, I took up the study of German. I was sent on this adventure by Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (The Tailor Retailored), which dazzled and also bewildered me. The hero, Diogenes Devil'sdung, is a German professor of idealism. In German literature I was looking for something Germanic, akin to Tacitus, but I was only later to find this in Old English and in Old Norse. German literature turned out to be romantic and sickly. At first, I tried Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* but was defeated by it, as most people—including most Germans—are. Then I thought verse would be easier, because of its brevity. So I got hold of a copy of Heine's early poems, the *Lyrisches Intermezzo*, and a German-English dictionary. Little by little, owing to Heine's simple vocabulary, I found I could do without the dictionary. Soon I had worked my way into the loveliness of the language. I also managed to read Meyrink's novel *Der Golem*. (In 1969, when I was in

Israel, I talked over the Bohemian legend of the Golem with Gershom Scholem, a leading scholar of Jewish mysticism, whose name I had twice used as the only possible rhyming word in a poem of my own on the Golem.) I tried to be interested in Jean-Paul Richter, for Carlyle's and De Quincey's sake—this was around 1917—but I soon discovered that I was very bored by the reading. Richter, in spite of his two British champions, seemed to me very long-winded and perhaps a passionless writer. I became, however, very interested in German expressionism and still think of it as beyond other contemporary schools, such as imagism, cubism, futurism, surrealism, and so on. A few years later, in Madrid, I was to attempt some of the first, and perhaps the only, translations of a number of expressionist poets into Spanish.

At some point while in Switzerland, I began reading Schopenhauer. Today, were I to choose a single philosopher, I would choose him. If the riddle of the universe can be stated in words, I think these words would be in his writings. I have read him many times over, both in German and, with my father and his close friend Macedonio Fernández, in translation. I still think of German as being a beautiful language—perhaps more beautiful than the literature it has produced. French, rather paradoxically, has a fine literature despite its fondness for schools and movements, but the language itself is, I think, rather ugly. Things tend to sound trivial when they are said in French. In fact, I even think of Spanish as being the better of the two languages, though Spanish words are far too long and cumbersome. As an Argentine writer, I have to cope with Spanish and so am only too aware of its shortcomings. I remember that Goethe wrote that he had to deal with the worst language in the world—German. I suppose most writers think along these lines concerning the language they have to struggle with. As for Italian, I have read and reread *The Divine Comedy* in more than a dozen different editions. I've also read Ariosto, Tasso, Croce, and Gentile, but

I am quite unable to speak Italian or to follow an Italian play or film.

It was also in Geneva that I first met Walt Whitman, through a German translation by Johannes Schlaf ("*Als ich in Alabama meinen Morgengang machte*"—"As I have walk'd in Alabama my morning walk"). Of course, I was struck by the absurdity of reading an American poet in German, so I ordered a copy of *Leaves of Grass* from London. I remember it still—bound in green. For a time, I thought of Whitman not only as a great poet but as the only poet. In fact, I thought that all poets the world over had been merely leading up to Whitman until 1855, and that not to imitate him was a proof of ignorance. This feeling had already come over me with Carlyle's prose, which is now unbearable to me, and with the poetry of Swinburne. These were phases I went through. Later on, I was to go through similar experiences of being overwhelmed by some particular writer.

We remained in Switzerland until 1919. After three or four years in Geneva, we spent a year in Lugano. I had my bachelor's degree by then, and it was now understood that I should devote myself to writing. I wanted to show my manuscripts to my father, but he told me he didn't believe in advice and that I must work my way all by myself through trial and error. I had been writing sonnets in English and in French. The English sonnets were poor imitations of Wordsworth, and the French, in their own watery way, were imitative of symbolist poetry. I still recall one line of my French experiments: "*Petite boîte noire pour le violon casse.*" The whole piece was titled "Poeme pour être recité avec un accent russe." As I knew I wrote a foreigner's French, I thought a Russian accent better than an Argentine one. In my English experiments, I affected some eighteenth-century mannerisms, such as "o'er" instead of "over" and, for the sake of metrical ease, "doth sing" instead of "sings." I knew, however, that Spanish would be my unavoidable destiny.

We decided to go home, but to spend a year or so in

Spain first. Spain at that time was slowly being discovered by Argentines. Until then, even eminent writers like Leopoldo Lugones and Ricardo Güiraldes deliberately left Spain out of their European travels. This was no whim. In Buenos Aires, Spaniards always held menial jobs—as domestic servants, waiters, and laborers—or were small tradesmen, and we Argentines never thought of ourselves as Spanish. We had, in fact, left off being Spaniards in 1816, when we declared our independence from Spain. When, as a boy, I read Prescott's *Conquest of Peru*, it amazed me to find that he portrayed the conquistadors in a romantic way. To me, descended from certain of these officials, they were an uninteresting lot. Through French eyes, however, Latin Americans saw the Spaniards as picturesque, thinking of them in terms of the stock in trade of García Lorca—gypsies, bullfights, and Moorish architecture. But though Spanish was our language and we came mostly of Spanish and Portuguese blood, my own family never thought of our trip in terms of going back to Spain after an absence of some three centuries.

We went to Majorca because it was cheap, beautiful, and had hardly any tourists but ourselves. We lived there nearly a whole year, in Palma and in Valldemosa, a village high up in the hills. I went on studying Latin, this time under the tutelage of a priest, who told me that since the innate was sufficient to his needs, he had never attempted reading a novel. We went over Virgil, of whom I still think highly. I remember I astonished the natives by my fine swimming, for I had learned in swift rivers, such as the Uruguay and the Rhone, while Majorcans were used only to a quiet, tideless sea. My father was writing his novel, which harked back to old times during the civil war of the 1870's in his native Entre Ríos. I recall giving him some quite bad metaphors, borrowed from the German expressionists, which he accepted out of resignation. He had some five hundred copies of the book printed, and brought them back to Buenos Aires, where he gave them away to friends. Every time the word "Paraná"—his home town—had come up

in the manuscript, the printers changed it to "Panamá," thinking they were correcting a mistake. Not to give them trouble, and also seeing it was funnier that way, my father let this pass. Now I repent my youthful intrusions into his book. Seventeen years later, before he died, he told me that he would very much like me to rewrite the novel in a straightforward way, with all the fine writing and purple patches left out. I myself in those days wrote a story about a werewolf and sent it to a popular magazine in Madrid, *La Esfera*, whose editors very wisely turned it down.

The winter of 1919-20 we spent in Seville, where I saw my first poem into print. It was titled "Hymn to the Sea" and appeared in the magazine *Grecia*, in its issue of December 31, 1919. In the poem, I tried my hardest to be Walt Whitman:

> O sea! O myth! O sun! O wide resting place!
> I know why I love you. I know that we are both very old,
> that we have known each other for centuries. . . .
> O Protean, I have been born of you—
> both of us chained and wandering,
> both of us hungering for stars,
> both of us with hopes and disappointments. . . !

Today, I hardly think of the sea, or even of myself, as hungering for stars. Years after, when I came across Arnold Bennett's phrase "the third-rate grandiose," I understood at once what he meant. And yet when I arrived in Madrid a few months later, as this was the only poem I had ever printed, people there thought of me as a singer of the sea.

In Seville, I fell in with the literary group formed around *Grecia*. This group, who called themselves ultraists, had set out to renew literature, a branch of the arts of which they knew nothing whatever. One of them once told me his whole reading had been the Bible, Cervantes, Darío, and one or two of the books of the Master, Rafael Cansinos-Assens. It baffled my Argentine mind to learn that they had no French and no inkling at all that such a thing as

English literature existed. I was even introduced to a local worthy popularly known as "the Humanist" and was not long in discovering that his Latin was far smaller than mine. As for *Grecia* itself, the editor, Isaac del Vando Villar, had the whole corpus of his poetry written for him by one or another of his assistants. I remember one of them telling me one day, "I'm very busy—Isaac is writing a poem."

Next, we went to Madrid, and there the great event to me was my friendship with Rafael Cansinos-Assens. I still like to think of myself as his disciple. He had come from Seville, where he had studied for the priesthood, but, having found the name Cansinos in the archives of the Inquisition, he decided he was a Jew. This led him to the study of Hebrew, and later on he even had himself circumcised. Literary friends from Andalusia took me to meet him. I timidly congratulated him on a poem *he* had written about the sea. "Yes," he said, "and how I'd like to see it before I die." He was a tall man with the Andalusian contempt for all things Castilian. The most remarkable fact about Cansinos was that he lived completely for literature, without regard for money or fame. He was a fine poet and wrote a book of psalms—chiefly erotic—called *El candelabro de los siete brazos*, which was published in 1914. He also wrote novels, stories, and essays, and, when I knew him, presided over a literary circle.

Every Saturday I would go to the Café Colonial, where we met at midnight, and the conversation lasted until daybreak. Sometimes there were as many as twenty or thirty of us. The group despised all Spanish local color—*cante jongo* and bullfights. They admired American jazz, and were more interested in being Europeans than Spaniards. Cansinos would propose a subject—The Metaphor, Free Verse, The Traditional Forms of Poetry, Narrative Poetry, The Adjective, The Verb. In his own quiet way, he was a dictator, allowing no unfriendly allusions to contemporary writers and trying to keep the talk on a high plane.

Cansinos was a wide reader. He had translated De Quincey's *Opium-Eater*, the *Meditations of Marcus Aureli-*

us from the Greek, novels of Barbusse, and Schwob's *Vies imaginaires*. Later, he was to undertake complete translations of Goethe and Dostoevski. He also made the first Spanish version of the Arabian Nights, which is very free compared to Burton's or Lane's, but which makes, I think, for more pleasurable reading. Once, I went to see him and he took me into his library. Or, rather, I should say his whole house was a library. It was like making your way through a woods. He was too poor to have shelves, and the books were piled one on top of the other from floor to ceiling, forcing you to thread your way among the vertical columns. Cansinos seemed to me as if he were all the past of that Europe I was leaving behind—something like the symbol of all culture, Western and Eastern. But he had a perversity that made him fail to get on with his leading contemporaries. It lay in writing books that lavishly praised second- or third-rate writers. At the time, Ortega y Gasset was at the height of his fame, but Cansinos thought of him as a bad philosopher and a bad writer. What I got from him, chiefly, was the pleasure of literary conversation. Also, I was stimulated by him to far-flung reading. In writing, I began aping him. He wrote long and flowing sentences with an un-Spanish and strongly Hebrew flavor to them.

Oddly, it was Cansinos who, in 1919, invented the term "ultraism." He thought Spanish literature had always been behind the times. Under the pen name of Juan Las, he wrote some short, laconic ultraist pieces. The whole thing—I see now—was done in a spirit of mockery. But we youngsters took it very seriously. Another of the earnest followers was Guillermo de Torre, whom I met in Madrid that spring and who married my sister Norah nine years later.

In Madrid at this time, there was another group gathered around Ramón Gómez de la Serna. I went there once and didn't like the way they behaved. They had a buffoon who wore a bracelet with a rattle attached. He would be made to shake hands with people and the rattle would rattle and Gómez de la Serna would invariably say, "Where's the snake?" That was supposed to be funny. Once, he turned to

me proudly and remarked, "You've never seen this kind of thing in Buenos Aires, have you?" I owned, thank God, that I hadn't.

In Spain, I wrote two books. One was a series of essays called, I now wonder why, *Los naipes del tahur* (The Sharper's Cards). They were literary and political essays (I was still an anarchist and a freethinker and in favor of pacifism), written under the influence of Pío Baroja. Their aim was to be bitter and relentless, but they were, as a matter of fact, quite tame. I went in for using such words as "fools," "harlots," "liars." Failing to find a publisher, I destroyed the manuscript on my return to Buenos Aires. The second book was titled either *The Red Psalms* or *The Red Rhythms*. It was a collection of poems—perhaps some twenty in all—in free verse and in praise of the Russian Revolution, the brotherhood of man, and pacifism. Three or four of them found their way into magazines—"Bolshevik Epic," "Trenches," "Russia." This book I destroyed in Spain on the eve of our departure. I was then ready to go home.

Buenos Aires

We returned to Buenos Aires on the *Reina Victoria Eugenia* toward the end of March, 1921. It came to me as a surprise, after living in so many European cities—after so many memories of Geneva, Zurich, Nîmes, Córdoba, and Lisbon—to find that my native town had grown, and that it was now a very large, sprawling, and almost endless city of low buildings with flat roofs, stretching west toward what geographers and literary hands call the pampa. It was more than a homecoming; it was a rediscovery. I was able to see Buenos Aires keenly and eagerly because I had been away from it for a long time. Had I never gone abroad, I wonder whether I would ever have seen it with the peculiar shock and glow that it now gave me. The city—not the whole city, of course, but a few places in it that became emotionally

significant to me—inspired the poems of my first published book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*.

I wrote these poems in 1921 and 1922, and the volume came out early in 1923. The book was actually printed in five days; the printing had to be rushed, because it was necessary for us to return to Europe. (My father wanted to consult his Genevan doctor about his sight.) I had bargained for sixty-four pages, but the manuscript ran too long and at the last minute five poems had to be left out—mercifully. I can't remember a single thing about them. The book was produced in a somewhat boyish spirit. No proofreading was done, no table of contents was provided, and the pages were unnumbered. My sister made a woodcut for the cover, and three hundred copies were printed. In those days, publishing a book was something of a private venture. I never thought of sending copies to the booksellers or out for review. Most of them I just gave away. I recall one of my methods of distribution. Having noticed that many people who went to the offices of *Nosotros*—one of the older, more solid literary magazines of the time—left their overcoats hanging in the cloak room, I brought fifty or a hundred copies to Alfredo Bianchi, one of the editors. Bianchi stared at me in amazement and said, "Do you expect me to sell these books for you?"

"No," I answered. "Although I've written them, I'm not altogether a lunatic. I thought I might ask you to slip some of these books into the pockets of those coats hanging out there." He generously did so. When I came back after a year's absence, I found that some of the inhabitants of the overcoats had read my poems, and a few had even written about them. As a matter of fact, in this way I got myself a small reputation as a poet.

The book was essentially romantic, though it was written in a rather lean style and abounded in laconic metaphors. It celebrated sunsets, solitary places, and unfamiliar corners; it ventured into Berkeleyan metaphysics and family history; it recorded early loves. At the same time, I also

mimicked the Spanish seventeenth century and cited Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* in my preface. I'm afraid the book was a plum pudding—there was just too much in it. And yet, looking back on it now, I think I have never strayed beyond that book. I feel that all my subsequent writing has only developed themes first taken up there; I feel that all during my lifetime I have been rewriting that one book.

Were the poems in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* ultraist poetry? When I came back from Europe in 1921, I came bearing the banners of ultraism. I am still known to literary historians as "the father of Argentine ultraism." When I talked things over at the time with fellow-poets Eduardo González Lanuza, Norah Lange, Francisco Piñero, my cousin Guillermo Juan (Borges), and Roberto Ortelli, we came to the conclusion that Spanish ultraism was overburdened—after the manner of futurism—with modernity and gadgets. We were unimpressed by railway trains, by propellers, by airplanes, and by electric fans. While in our manifestos we still upheld the primacy of the metaphor and the elimination of transitions and decorative adjectives, what we wanted to write was essential poetry—poems beyond the here and now, free of local color and contemporary circumstances. I think the poem "Plainness" sufficiently illustrates what I personally was after:

> The garden's grillwork gate
> opens with the ease of a page
> in a much thumbed book,
> and, once inside, our eyes
> have no need to dwell on objects
> already fixed and exact in memory.
> Here habits and minds and the private language
> all families invent
> are everyday things to me.
> What necessity is there to speak
> or pretend to be someone else?

The whole house knows me,
they're aware of my worries and weakness.
This is the best that can happen—
what Heaven perhaps will grant us:
not to be wondered at or required to succeed
but simply to be let in
as part of an undeniable Reality,
like stones of the road, like trees.

I think this is a far cry from the timid extravagances of my earlier Spanish ultraist exercises, when I saw a trolley car as a man shouldering a gun, or the sunrise as a shout, or the setting sun as being crucified in the west. A sane friend to whom I later recited such absurdities remarked, "Ah, I see you held the view that poetry's chief aim is to startle." As to whether the poems in *Fervor* are ultraist or not, the answer—for me—was given by my friend and French translator Néstor Ibarra, who said, "Borges left off being an ultraist poet with the first ultraist poem he wrote." I can now only regret my early ultraist excesses. After nearly a half century, I find myself still striving to live down that awkward period of my life.

Perhaps the major event of my return was Macedonio Fernández. Of all the people I have met in my life—and I have met some quite remarkable men—no one has ever made so deep and so lasting an impression on me as Macedonio. A tiny figure in a black bowler hat, he was waiting for us on the Dársena Norte when we landed, and I came to inherit his friendship from my father. Both men had been born in 1874. Paradoxically, Macedonio was an outstanding conversationalist and at the same time a man of long silences and few words. We met on Saturday evening at a café—the Perla, in the Plaza del Once. There we would talk till daybreak, Macedonio presiding. As in Madrid Cansinos had stood for all learning, Macedonio now stood for pure thinking. At the time, I was a great reader and went out very seldom (almost every night after dinner, I used to go to bed and read), but my whole week was lit

up with the expectation that on Saturday I'd be seeing and hearing Macedonio. He lived quite near us and I could have seen him whenever I wanted, but I somehow felt that I had no right to that privilege and that in order to give Macedonio's Saturday its full value I had to forgo him throughout the week. At these meetings, Macedonio would speak perhaps three or four times, risking only a few quiet observations, which were addressed—seemingly—to his neighbor alone. These remarks were never affirmative. Macedonio was very courteous and soft-spoken and would say, for example, "Well, I suppose you've noticed . . ." And thereupon he would let loose some striking, highly original thought. But, invariably, he attributed his remark to the hearer.

He was a frail, gray man with the kind of ash-colored hair and moustache that made him look like Mark Twain. The resemblance pleased him, but when he was reminded that he also looked like Paul Valéry, he resented it, since he had little use for Frenchmen. He always wore that black bowler, and for all I know may even have slept in it. He never undressed to go to bed, and at night, to fend off drafts that he thought might cause him toothache, he draped a towel around his head. This made him look like an Arab. Among his other eccentricities were his nationalism (he admired one Argentine president after another for the sufficient reason that the Argentine electorate could not be wrong), his fear of dentistry (this led him to tugging at his teeth, in public, behind a hand, so as to stave off the dentist's pliers), and a habit of falling sentimentally in love with streetwalkers.

As a writer, Macedonio published several rather unusual volumes, and papers of his are still being collected close to twenty years after his death. His first book, published in 1928, was called *No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos* (We're Not Always Awake When Our Eyes Are Open). It was an extended essay on idealism, written in a deliberately tangled and crabbed style, in order, I suppose, to match the tangledness of reality. The next year, a miscellany of his

writings appeared—*Papeles de Recienvenido* (Newcomer's Papers)—in which I myself took a hand, collecting and ordering the chapters. This was a sort of miscellany of jokes within jokes. Macedonio also wrote novels and poems, all of them startling but hardly readable. One novel of twenty chapters is prefaced by fifty-six different forewords. For all his brilliance, I don't think Macedonio is to be found in his writings at all. The real Macedonio was in his conversation.

Macedonio lived modestly in boardinghouses, which he seemed to change with frequency. This was because he was always skipping out on the rent. Every time he would move, he'd leave behind piles and piles of manuscripts. Once, his friends scolded him about this, telling him it was a shame all that work should be lost. He said to us, "Do you really think I'm rich enough to lose anything?"

Readers of Hume and Schopenhauer may find little that is new in Macedonio, but the remarkable thing about him is that he arrived at his conclusions by himself. Later on, he actually read Hume, Schopenhauer, Berkeley, and William James, but I suspect he had not done much other reading, and he always quoted the same authors. He considered Sir Walter Scott the greatest of novelists, maybe just out of loyalty to a boyhood enthusiasm. He had once exchanged letters with William James, whom he had written in a medley of English, German, and French, explaining that it was because "I knew so little in any one of these languages that I had constantly to shift tongues." I think of Macedonio as reading a page or so and then being spurred into thought. He not only argued that we are such stuff as dreams are made on, but he really believed that we are all living in a dream world. Macedonio doubted whether truth was communicable. He thought that certain philosophers had discovered it but that they had failed to communicate it completely. However, he also believed that the discovery of truth was quite easy. He once told me that if he could lie out on the pampa, forgetting the world, himself, and his quest, truth might suddenly reveal itself to him. He added

that, of course, it might be impossible to put that sudden wisdom into words.

Macedonio was fond of compiling small oral catalogs of people of genius, and in one of them I was amazed to find the name of a very lovable lady of our acquaintance, Quica González Acha de Tomkinson Alvear. I stared at him open-mouthed. I somehow did not think Quica ranked with Hume and Schopenhauer. But Macedonio said, "Philosophers have had to try and explain the universe, while Quica simply feels and understands it" He would turn to her and ask, "Quica, what is Being?" Quica would answer, "I don't know what you mean, Macedonio." "You see," he would say to me, "she understands so perfectly that she cannot even grasp the fact that we are puzzled." This was his proof of Quica's being a woman of genius. When I later told him he might say the same of a child or a cat, Macedonio took it angrily.

Before Macedonio, I had always been a credulous reader. His chief gift to me was to make me read skeptically. At the outset, I plagiarized him devotedly, picking up certain stylistic mannerisms of his that I later came to regret. I look back on him now, however, as an Adam bewildered by the Garden of Eden. His genius survives in but a few of his pages; his influence was of a Socratic nature. I truly loved the man, on this side idolatry, as much as any.

This period, from 1921 to 1930, was one of great activity, but much of it was perhaps reckless and even pointless. I wrote and published no less than seven books—four of them essays and three of them verse. I also founded three magazines and contributed with fair frequency to nearly a dozen other periodicals, among them *La Prensa*, *Nosostros*, *Inicial*, *Criterio*, and *Síntesis*. This productivity now amazes me as much as the fact that I feel only the remotest kinship with the work of these years. Three of the four essay collections—whose names are best forgotten—I have never allowed to be reprinted. In fact, when in 1953 my present publisher—Emecé—proposed to bring out my "complete writings," the only reason I accepted was that it

would allow me to keep those preposterous volumes suppressed. This reminds me of Mark Twain's suggestion that a fine library could be started by leaving out the works of Jane Austen, and that even if that library contained no other books it would still be a fine library, since her books were left out.

In the first of these reckless compilations, there was a quite bad essay on Sir Thomas Browne, which may have been the first ever attempted on him in the Spanish language. There was another essay that set out to classify metaphors as though other poetic elements, such as rhythm and music, could be safely ignored. There was a longish essay on the nonexistence of the ego, cribbed from Bradley or the Buddha or Macedonio Fernández. When I wrote these pieces, I was trying to play the sedulous ape to two Spanish baroque seventeenth-century writers, Quevedo and Saavedra Fajardo, who stood in their own stiff, arid, Spanish way for the same kind of writing as Sir Thomas Browne in "Urne-Buriall." I was doing my best to write Latin in Spanish, and the book collapses under the sheer weight of its involutions and sententious judgments. The next of these failures was a kind of reaction. I went to the other extreme—I tried to be as Argentine as I could. I got hold of Segovia's dictionary of Argentinisms and worked in so many local words that many of my countrymen could hardly understand it. Since I have mislaid the dictionary, I'm not sure I would any longer understand the book myself, and so have given it up as utterly hopeless. The third of these unmentionables stands for a kind of partial redemption. I was creeping out of the second book's style and slowly going back to sanity, to writing with some attempt at logic and at making things easy for the reader rather than dazzling him with purple passages. One such experiment, of dubious value, was "Hombres pelearon" (Men Fought), my first venture into the mythology of the old Northside of Buenos Aires. In it, I was trying to tell a purely Argentine story in an Argentine way. This story is one I have been retelling, with small varia-

tions, ever since. It is the tale of the motiveless, or disinterested, duel—of courage for its own sake. I insisted when I wrote it that in our sense of the language we Argentines were different from the Spaniards. Now, instead, I think we should try to stress our linguistic affinities. I was still writing, but in a milder way, so that Spaniards would not understand me—writing, it might be said, to be ununderstood. The Gnostics claimed that the only way to avoid a sin was to commit it and be rid of it. In my books of these years, I seem to have committed most of the major literary sins, some of them under the influence of a great writer, Leopoldo Lugones, whom I still cannot help admiring. These sins were fine writing, local color, a quest for the unexpected, and a seventeenth-century style. Today, I no longer feel guilty over these excesses; those books were written by somebody else. Until a few years ago, if the price were not too stiff, I would buy up copies and burn them.

Of the poems of this time, I should perhaps have also suppressed my second collection, *Luna de enfrente* (Moon Across the Way). It was published in 1925 and is a kind of riot of sham local color. Among its tomfooleries were the spelling of my first name in the nineteenth-century Chilean fashion as "Jorje" (it was a halfhearted attempt at phonetic spelling); the spelling of the Spanish for "and" as "*i*" instead of "*y*" (our greatest writer, Sarmiento, had done the same, trying to be as un-Spanish as he could); and the omission of the final "d" in words like "*autoridá*" and "*ciudá*" In later editions, I dropped the worst poems, pruned the eccentricities, and, successively—through several reprintings—revised and toned down the verses. The third collection of the time, *Cuaderno San Martín* (the title has nothing to do with the national hero; it was merely the brand name of the out-of-fashion copybook into which I wrote the poems), includes some quite legitimate pieces, such as "La noche que en el Sur lo velaron," whose title has been strikingly translated by Robert Fitzgerald as "Death-watch on the Southside," and "Muertes de Buenos Aires"

(Deaths of Buenos Aires), about the two chief graveyards of the Argentine capital. One poem in the book (no favorite of mine) has somehow become a minor Argentine classic: "The Mythical Founding of Buenos Aires." This book, too, has been improved, or purified, by cuts and revisions down through the years.

In 1929, that third book of essays won the Second Municipal Prize of three thousand pesos, which in those days was a lordly sum of money. I was, for one thing, to acquire with it a secondhand set of the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. For another, I was insured a year's leisure and decided I would write a longish book on a wholly Argentine subject. My mother wanted me to write about any of three really worthwhile poets—Ascasubi, Almafuerte, or Lugones. I now wish I had. Instead, I chose to write about a nearly invisible popular poet, Evaristo Carriego. My mother and father pointed out that his poems were not good. "But he was a friend and neighbor of ours," I said. "Well, if you think that qualifies him as the subject for a book, go ahead," they said. Carriego was the man who discovered the literary possibilities of the run-down and ragged outskirts of the city—the Palermo of my boyhood. His career followed the same evolution as the tango—rollicking, daring, courageous at first, then turning sentimental. In 1912, at the age of twenty-nine, he died of tuberculosis, leaving behind a single volume of his work. I remember that a copy of it, inscribed to my father, was one of several Argentine books we had taken to Geneva and that I read and reread there. Around 1909, Carriego had dedicated a poem to my mother. Actually, he had written it in her album. In it, he spoke of me: "And may your son . . . go forth, led by the trusting wing of inspiration, to carry out the vintage of a new annunciation, which from lofty grapes will yield the wine of Song." But when I began writing my book the same thing happened to me that happened to Carlyle as he wrote his *Frederick the Great*. The more I wrote, the less I cared about my hero. I had started out to do a straight biography, but on the way I

became more and more interested in old-time Buenos Aires. Readers, of course, were not slow in finding out that the book hardly lived up to its title, *Evaristo Carriego*, and so it fell flat. When the second edition appeared twenty-five years later, in 1955, as the fourth volume of my "complete" works, I enlarged the book with several new chapters, one a "History of the Tango." As a consequence of these additions, I feel *Evaristo Carriego* has been rounded out for the better.

Prisma (Prism), founded in 1921 and lasting two numbers, was the earliest of the magazines I edited. Our small ultraist group was eager to have a magazine of its own, but a real magazine was beyond our means. I had noticed billboard ads, and the thought came to me that we might similarly print a "mural magazine" and paste it up ourselves on the walls of buildings in different parts of town. Each issue was a large single sheet and contained a manifesto and some six or eight short, laconic poems, printed with plenty of white space around them, and a woodcut by my sister. We sallied forth at night—González Lanuza, Piñero, my cousin, and I—armed with pastepots and brushes provided by my mother, and, walking miles on end, slapped them up along Santa Fe, Callao, Entre Ríos, and Mexico Streets. Most of our handiwork was torn down by baffled readers almost at once, but luckily for us Alfredo Bianchi, of *Nosotros*, saw one of them and invited us to publish an ultraist anthology among the pages of his solid magazine. After *Prisma*, we went in for a six-page magazine, which was really just a single sheet printed on both sides and folded twice. This was the first *Proa* (Prow), and three numbers of it were published. Two years later, in 1924, came the second *Proa*. One afternoon, Brandán Caraffa, a young poet from Córdoba, came to see me at the Garden Hotel, where we were living upon return from our second European trip. He told me that Ricardo Güiraldes and Pablo Rojas Paz had decided to found a magazine that would represent the new literary generation, and that everyone had said that if that were its goal I could not

possibly be left out. Naturally, I was flattered. That night, I went around to the Phoenix Hotel, where Güiraldes was staying. He greeted me with these words: "Brandán told me that the night before last all of you got together to found a magazine of young writers, and everyone said I couldn't be left out." At that moment, Rojas Paz came in and told us excitedly, "I'm quite flattered." I broke in and said, "The night before last, the three of us got together and decided that in a magazine of new writers you couldn't be left out." Thanks to this innocent stratagem, *Proa* was born. Each one of us put in fifty pesos, which paid for an edition of three to five hundred copies with no misprints and on fine paper. But a year and a half and fifteen issues later, for lack of subscriptions and ads, we had to give it up.

These years were quite happy ones because they stood for many friendships. There were those of Norah Lange, Macedonio, Piñero, and my father. Behind our work was a sincerity; we felt we were renewing both prose and poetry. Of course, like all young men, I tried to be as unhappy as I could—a kind of Hamlet and Raskolnikov rolled into one. What we achieved was quite bad, but our comradeships endured.

In 1924, I found my way into two different literary sets. One, whose memory I still enjoy, was that of Ricardo Güiraldes, who was yet to write *Don Segundo Sombra*. Güiraldes was very generous to me. I would give him a quite clumsy poem and he would read between the lines and divine what I had been trying to say but what my literary incapacity had prevented me from saying. He would then speak of the poem to other people, who were baffled not to find these things in the text. The other set, which I rather regret, was that of the magazine *Martín Fierro.* I disliked what *Martín Fierro* stood for, which was the French idea that literature is being continually renewed—that Adam is reborn every morning, and also for the idea that, since Paris had literary cliques that wallowed

in publicity and bickering, we should be up to date and do the same. One result of this was that a sham literary feud was cooked up in Buenos Aires—that between Florida and Boedo. Florida represented downtown and Boedo the proletariat. I'd have preferred to be in the Boedo group, since I was writing about the old Northside and slums, sadness, and sunsets. But I was informed by one of the two conspirators—they were Ernesto Palacio, of Florida, and Roberto Mariani, of Boedo—that I was already one of the Florida warriors and that it was too late for me to change. The whole thing was just a put-up job. Some writers belonged to both groups—Roberto Arlt and Nicolás Olivari, for example. This sham is now taken into serious consideration by "credulous universities." But it was partly publicity, partly a boyish prank.

Linked to this time are the names of Silvina and Victoria Ocampo, of the poet Carlos Mastronardi, of Eduardo Mallea, and, not least, of Alejandro Xul-Solar. In a rough-and-ready way, it may be said that Xul, who was a mystic, a poet, and a painter, is our William Blake. I remember asking him on one particularly sultry afternoon about what he had done that stifling day. His answer was "Nothing whatever, except for founding twelve religions after lunch." Xul was also a philologist and the inventor of two languages. One was a philosophical language after the manner of John Wilkins and the other a reformation of Spanish with many English, German, and Greek words thrown in. He came of Baltic and Italian stock. "Xul" was his version of "Schulz" and "Solar" of "Solari." At this time, I also met Alfonso Reyes. He was the Mexican ambassador to Argentina, and used to invite me to dinner every Sunday at the embassy. I think of Reyes as the finest Spanish prose stylist of this century, and in my writing I learned a great deal about simplicity and directness from him.

Summing up this span of my life, I find myself completely out of sympathy with the priggish and rather dogmatic young man I then was. Those friends, however, are still

very living and very close to me. In fact, they form a precious part of me. Friendship is, I think, the one redeeming Argentine passion.

Maturity

In the course of a lifetime devoted chiefly to books, I have read but few novels, and, in most cases, only a sense of duty has enabled me to find my way to their last page. At the same time, I have always been a reader and rereader of short stories. Stevenson, Kipling, James, Conrad, Poe, Chesterton, the tales of Lane's Arabian Nights, and certain stories by Hawthorne have been habits of mine since I can remember. The feeling that great novels like *Don Quixote* and *Huckleberry Finn* are virtually shapeless served to reinforce my taste for the short-story form, whose indispensable elements are economy and a clearly stated beginning, middle, and end. As a writer, however, I thought for years that the short story was beyond my powers, and it was only after a long and roundabout series of timid experiments in narration that I sat down to write real stories.

It took me some six years, from 1927 to 1933, to go from that all too self-conscious sketch "Hombres pelearon" to my first outright short story, "Hombre de la esquina rosada" (Streetcorner Man). A friend of mine, don Nicolás Paredes, a former political boss and professional gambler of the Northside, had died, and I wanted to record something of his voice, his anecdotes, and his particular way of telling them. I slaved over my every page, sounding out each sentence and striving to phrase it in his exact tones. We were living out in Adrogué at the time and, because I knew my mother would heartily disapprove of the subject matter, I composed in secret over a period of several months. Originally titled "Hombres de las orillas" (Men from the Edge of Town), the story appeared in the Saturday supplement, which I was editing, of a yellow-press daily called *Crítica*. But out of shyness, and perhaps a

feeling that the story was a bit beneath me, I signed it with a pen name—the name of one of my great-great grandfathers, Francisco Bustos. Although the story became popular to the point of embarrassment (today I only find it stagy and mannered and the characters bogus), I never regarded it as a starting point. It simply stands there as a kind of freak.

The real beginning of my career as a story writer starts with the series of sketches entitled *Historia universal de la infamia* (A Universal History of Infamy), which I contributed to the columns of *Crítica* in 1933 and 1934. The irony of this is that "Streetcorner Man" really was a story but that these sketches and several of the fictional pieces which followed them, and which very slowly led me to legitimate stories, were in the nature of hoaxes and pseudo-essays. In my *Universal History*, I did not want to repeat what Marcel Schwob had done in his *Imaginary Lives*. He had invented biographies of real men about whom little or nothing is recorded. I, instead, read up on the lives of known persons and then deliberately varied and distorted them according to my own whims. For example, after reading Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of New York*, I set down my free version of Monk Eastman, the Jewish gunman, in flagrant contradiction of my chosen authority. I did the same for Billy the Kid, for John Murrel (whom I rechristened Lazarus Morell), for the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan, for the Tichborne Claimant, and for several others. I never thought of book publication. The pieces were meant for popular consumption in *Crítica* and were pointedly picturesque. I suppose now the secret value of those sketches—apart from the sheer pleasure the writing gave me—lay in the fact that they were narrative exercises. Since the general plots or circumstances were all given me, I had only to embroider sets of vivid variations.

My next story, "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim," written in 1935, is both a hoax *and* a pseudo-essay. It purports to be a review of a book published originally in Bombay three years earlier. I endowed its fake second edition with a real

publisher, Victor Gollancz, and a preface by a real writer, Dorothy L. Sayers. But the author and the book are entirely my own invention. I gave the plot and details of some chapters—borrowing from Kipling and working in the twelfth-century Persian mystic Farid ud-Din Attar—and then carefully pointed out its shortcomings. The story appeared the next year in a volume of my essays, *Historia de la eternidad* (A History of Eternity), buried at the back of the book together with an article on the "Art of Insult." Those who read "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim" took it at face value, and one of my friends even ordered a copy from London. It was not until 1942 that I openly published it as a short story in my first story collection, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (The Garden of Branching Paths). Perhaps I have been unfair to this story; it now seems to me to foreshadow and even to set the pattern for those tales that were somehow awaiting me, and upon which my reputation as a storyteller was to be based.

Along about 1937, I took my first regular full-time job. I had previously worked at small editing tasks. There was the *Crítica* supplement, which was a heavily and even gaudily illustrated entertainment sheet. There was *El Hogar*, a popular society weekly, to which, twice a month, I contributed a couple of literary pages on foreign books and authors. I had also written newsreel texts and had been editor of a pseudo-scientific magazine called *Urbe*, which was really a promotional organ of a privately owned Buenos Aires subway system. These had all been small-paying jobs, and I was long past the age when I should have begun contributing to our household upkeep. Now, through friends, I was given a very minor position as First Assistant in the Miguel Cané branch of the Municipal Library, out in a drab and dreary part of town to the southwest. While there were Second and Third Assistants below me, there were also a Director and First, Second, and Third Officials above me. I was paid two hundred and ten pesos a month and later went up to two hundred and forty. These were

sums roughly equivalent to seventy or eighty American dollars.

At the library, we did very little work. There were some fifty of us doing what fifteen could easily have done. My particular job, shared with fifteen or twenty colleagues, was classifying and cataloging the library's holdings, which until that time were uncatalogued. The collection, however, was so small that we knew where to find the books without the system, so the system, though laboriously carried out, was never needed or used. The first day, I worked honestly. On the next, some of my fellows took me aside to say that I couldn't do this sort of thing because it showed them up. "Besides," they argued, "as this cataloging has been planned to give us some semblance of work, you'll put us out of our jobs." I told them I had classified four hundred titles instead of their one hundred. "Well, if you keep that up," they said, "the boss will be angry and won't know what to do with us." For the sake of realism, I was told that from then on I should do eighty-three books one day, ninety another, and one hundred and four the third.

I stuck out the library for about nine years. They were nine years of solid unhappiness. At work, the other men were interested in nothing but horse racing, soccer matches, and smutty stories. Once, a woman, one of the readers, was raped on her way to the ladies' room. Everybody said such things were bound to happen, since the men's and ladies' rooms were adjoining. One day, two rather posh and well-meaning friends—society ladies—came to see me at work. They phoned me a day or two later to say, "You may think it amusing to work in a place like that, but promise us you will find at least a nine-hundred-peso job before the month is out." I gave them my word that I would. Ironically, at the time I was a fairly well-known writer—except at the library. I remember a fellow employee's once noting in an encyclopedia the name of a certain Jorge Luis Borges—a fact that set him wondering at the coincidence of our identical names and birth dates. Now and then during these years, we municipal workers were rewarded with gifts of a two-

pound package of maté to take home. Sometimes in the evening, as I walked the ten blocks to the tramline, my eyes would be filled with tears. These small gifts from above always underlined my menial and dismal existence.

A couple of hours each day, riding back and forth on the tram, I made my way through *The Divine Comedy*, helped as far as "Purgatory" by John Aitken Carlyle's prose translation and then ascending the rest of the way on my own. I would do all my library work in the first hour and then steal away to the basement and pass the other five hours in reading or writing. I remember in this way rereading the six volumes of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the many volumes of Vicente Fidel López' *History of the Argentine Republic*. I read Léon Bloy, Claudel, Groussac, and Bernard Shaw. On holidays, I translated Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. At some point, I was moved up to the dizzying height of Third Official. One morning, my mother rang me up and I asked for leave to go home, arriving just in time to see my father die. He had undergone a long agony and was very impatient for his death.

It was on Christmas Eve of 1938—the same year my father died—that I had a severe accident. I was running up a stairway and suddenly felt something brush my scalp. I had grazed a freshly painted open casement window. In spite of first-aid treatment, the wound became poisoned, and for a period of a week or so I lay sleepless every night and had hallucinations and high fever. One evening, I lost the power of speech and had to be rushed to the hospital for an immediate operation. Septicemia had set in, and for a month I hovered, all unknowingly, between life and death. (Much later, I was to write about this in my story "The South.") When I began to recover, I feared for my mental integrity. I remember that my mother wanted to read to me from a book I had just ordered, C. S. Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, but for two or three nights I kept putting her off. At last, she prevailed, and after hearing a page or two I fell to crying. My mother asked me why the tears. "I'm crying because I understand," I said. A bit

later, I wondered whether I could ever write again. I had previously written quite a few poems and dozens of short reviews. I thought that if I tried to write a review now and failed, I'd be all through intellectually but that if I tried something I had never really done before and failed at that it wouldn't be so bad and might even prepare me for the final revelation. I decided I would try to write a story. The result was "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*."

"Pierre Menard," like its forerunner "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim," was still a halfway house between the essay and the true tale. But the achievement spurred me on. I next tried something more ambitious—"TIön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," about the discovery of a new world that finally replaces our present world. Both were published in Victoria Ocampo's magazine *Sur*. I kept up my writing at the library. Though my colleagues thought of me as a traitor for not sharing their boisterous fun, I went on with work of my own in the basement, or, when the weather was warm, up on the flat roof. My Kafkian story "The Library of Babel" was meant as a nightmare version or magnification of that municipal library, and certain details in the text have no particular meaning. The numbers of books and shelves that I recorded in the story were literally what I had at my elbow. Clever critics have worried over those ciphers, and generously endowed them with mystic significance. "The Lottery in Babylon," "Death and the Compass," and "The Circular Ruins" were also written, in whole or part, while I played truant. These tales and others were to become *The Garden of Branching Paths*, a book expanded and retitled *Ficciones* in 1944. *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* (1949 and 1952), my second story collection, are, I suppose, my two major books.

In 1946, a president whose name I do not want to remember came into power. One day soon after, I was honored with the news that I had been "promoted" out of the library to the inspectorship of poultry and rabbits in the public markets. I went to the City Hall to find out what it was all about. "Look here," I said. "It's rather strange

that among so many others at the library I should be singled out as worthy of this new position." "Well," the clerk answered, "you were on the side of the Allies—what do you expect?" His statement was unanswerable; the next day, I sent in my resignation. My friends rallied round me at once and offered me a public dinner. I prepared a speech for the occasion but, knowing I was too shy to read it myself, I asked my friend Pedro Henríquez Ureña to read it for me.

I was now out of a job. Several months before, an old English lady had read my tea leaves and had foretold that I was soon to travel, to lecture, and to make vast sums of money thereby. When I told my mother about it, we both laughed, for public speaking was far beyond me. At this juncture, a friend came to the rescue, and I was made a teacher of English literature at the Asociación Argentina de Cultura Inglesa. I was also asked at the same time to lecture on classic American literature at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores. Since this pair of offers was made three months before classes opened, I accepted, feeling quite safe. As the time grew near, however, I grew sicker and sicker. My series of lectures was to be on Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Whitman, Twain, Henry James, and Veblen. I wrote the first one down. But I had no time to write out the second one. Besides, thinking of the first lecture as Doomsday, I felt that only eternity could come after. The first one went off well enough—miraculously. Two nights before the second lecture, I took my mother for a long walk around Adrogué and had her time me as I rehearsed my talk. She said she thought it was overlong. "In that case," I said, "I'm safe." My fear had been of running dry. So, at forty-seven, I found a new and exciting life opening up for me. I traveled up and down Argentina and Uruguay, lecturing on Swedenborg, Blake, the Persian and Chinese mystics, Buddhism, gauchesco poetry, Martin Buber, the Kabbalah, the Arabian Nights, T. E. Lawrence, medieval Germanic poetry, the Icelandic sagas, Heine, Dante, expressionism, and Cervantes. I went

from town to town, staying overnight in hotels I'd never see again. Sometimes my mother or a friend accompanied me. Not only did I end up making far more money than at the library but I enjoyed the work and felt that it justified me.

One of the chief events of these years—and of my life—was the beginning of my friendship with Adolfo Bioy-Casares. We met in 1930 or 1931, when he was about seventeen and I was just past thirty. It is always taken for granted in these cases that the older man is the master and the younger his disciple. This may have been true at the outset, but several years later, when we began to work together, Bioy was really and secretly the master. He and I attempted many different literary ventures. We compiled anthologies of Argentine poetry, tales of the fantastic, and detective stories; we wrote articles and forewords; we annotated Sir Thomas Browne and Gracián; we translated short stories by writers like Beerbohm, Kipling, Wells, and Lord Dunsany; we founded a magazine, *Destiempo*, which lasted three issues; we wrote film scripts, which were invariably rejected. Opposing my taste for the pathetic, the sententious, and the baroque, Bioy made me feel that quietness and restraint are more desirable. If I may be allowed a sweeping statement, Bioy led me gradually toward classicism.

It was at some point in the early forties that we began writing in collaboration—a feat that up to that time I had thought impossible. I had invented what we thought was a quite good plot for a detective story. One rainy morning, he told me we ought to give it a try. I reluctantly agreed, and a little later that same morning the thing happened. A third man, Honorio Bustos Domecq, emerged and took over. In the long run, he ruled us with a rod of iron and to our amusement, and later to our dismay, he became utterly unlike ourselves, with his own whims, his own puns, and his own very elaborate style of writing. Domecq was the name of a great-grandfather of Bioy's and Bustos of a great-grandfather of mine from Córdoba. Bustos Domecq's first book was *Six Problems for don Isidro Parodi* (1942),

and during the writing of that volume he never got out of hand. Max Carrados had attempted a blind detective; Bioy and I went one step further and confined our detective to a jail cell. The book was at the same time a satire on the Argentine. For many years, the dual identity of Bustos Domecq was never revealed. When finally it was, people thought that, as Bustos was a joke, his writing could hardly be taken seriously.

Our next collaboration was another detective novel, *A Model for Death*. This one was so personal and so full of private jokes that we published it only in an edition that was not for sale. The author of this book we named B. Suárez Lynch. The "B." stood, I think, for Bioy and Borges, "Suárez" for another great-grandfather of mine, and Lynch for another great-grandfather of Bioy's. Bustos Domecq reappeared in 1946 in another private edition, this time of two stories, entitled *Two Memorable Fantasies*. After a long eclipse, Bustos took up his pen again, and in 1967 brought out his *Chronicles*. These are articles written on imaginary, extravagantly modern artists—architects, sculptors, painters, chefs, poets, novelists, couturiers—by a devotedly modern critic. But both the author and his subjects are fools, and it is hard to tell who is taking in whom. The book is inscribed, "To those three forgotten greats—Picasso, Joyce, Le Corbusier." The style is itself a parody. Bustos writes a literary journalese, abounding in neologisms, a Latinate vocabulary, clichés, mixed metaphors, non sequiturs, and bombast.

I have often been asked how collaboration is possible. I think it requires a joint abandoning of the ego, of vanity, and maybe of common politeness. The collaborators should forget themselves and think only in terms of the work. In fact, when somebody wants to know whether such-and-such a joke or epithet came from my side of the table or Bioy's, I honestly cannot tell him. I have tried to collaborate with other friends—some of them very close ones—but their inability to be blunt on the one hand or thick-skinned on the other has made the scheme impossible. As to the *Chronicles*

of Bustos Domecq, I think they are better than anything I have published under my own name and nearly as good as anything Bioy has written on his own.

In 1950, I was elected President of the Sociedad Argentina de Escritores (Argentine Society of Writers). The Argentine Republic, then as now, is a soft country, and the S.A.D.E. was one of the few strongholds against the dictatorship. This was so evident that many distinguished men of letters did not dare set foot inside its doors until after the revolution. One curious trait of the dictatorship was that even its professed upholders made it clear that they did not really take the government seriously but were acting out of self-interest. This was understood and forgiven, since most of my countrymen have an intellectual, if not a moral, conscience. Nearly all the smutty jokes made up about Perón and his wife were the invention of Peronistas themselves, trying to save face. The S.A.D.E. was eventually closed. I remember the last lecture I was allowed to give there. The audience, quite a small one, included a very puzzled policeman who did his clumsy best to set down a few of my remarks on Persian Sufism. During this drab and hopeless period, my mother—then in her seventies—was under house arrest. My sister and one of my nephews spent a month in jail. I myself had a detective on my heels, whom I first took on long, aimless walks and at last made friends with. He admitted that he too hated Perón, but said that he was obeying orders. Ernesto Palacio once offered to introduce me to the Unspeakable, but I did not want to meet him. How could I be introduced to a man whose hand I would not shake?

The long-hoped-for revolution came in September, 1955. After a sleepless, anxious night, nearly the whole population came out into the streets, cheering the revolution and shouting the name of Córdoba, where most of the fighting had taken place. We were so carried away that for some time we were quite unaware of the rain that was soaking us to the bone. We were so happy that not a single word was even uttered against the fallen dictator. Perón

went into hiding, and was later allowed to leave the country. No one knows how much money he got away with.

Two very dear friends of mine, Esther Zemborain de Torres and Victoria Ocampo, dreamed up the possibility of my being appointed Director of the National Library. I thought the scheme a wild one, and hoped at most to be given the directorship of some small-town library, preferably to the south of the city. Within the space of a day, a petition was signed by the magazine *Sur* (read Victoria Ocampo), by the reopened S.A.D.E. (read Carlos Alberto Erro), by the Sociedad Argentina de Cultura Inglesa (read Carlos del Campillo), and by the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores (read Luis Reissig). This was placed on the desk of the Minister of Education, and eventually I was appointed to the directorship by General Eduardo Lonardi, who was Acting President. A few days earlier, my mother and I had walked to the Library one night to take a look at the building, but, feeling superstitious, I refused to go in. "Not until I get the job," I said. That same week, I was called to come to the Library to take over. My family was present, and I made a speech to the employees, telling them I was actually the Director—the incredible Director. At the same time, José Edmundo Clemente, who a few years before had managed to persuade Emecé to bring out an edition of my works, became the Assistant Director. Of course, I felt very important, but we got no pay for the next three months. I don't think my predecessor, who was a Peronista, was ever officially fired. He just never came around to the Library again. They named me to the job but did not take the trouble to unseat him.

Another pleasure came to me the very next year, when I was named to the professorship of English and American Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. Other candidates had sent in painstaking lists of their translations, papers, lectures, and other achievements. I limited myself to the following statement: "Quite unwittingly, I have been qualifying myself for this position throughout my life." My

plain approach gained the day. I was hired, and spent ten or twelve happy years at the University.

My blindness had been coming on gradually since childhood. It was a slow, summer twilight. There was nothing particularly pathetic or dramatic about it. Beginning in 1927, I underwent eight eye operations, but since the late 1950's, when I wrote my "Poem of the Gifts," for reading and writing purposes I have been blind. Blindness ran in my family; a description of the operation performed on the eyes of my great-grandfather, Edward Young Haslam, appeared in the pages of the London medical journal, the Lancet. Blindness also seems to run among the Directors of the National Library. Two of my eminent forerunners, José Mármol and Paul Groussac, suffered the same fate. In my poem, I speak of God's splendid irony in granting me at one time 800,000 books and darkness.

One salient consequence of my blindness was my gradual abandonment of free verse in favor of classical metrics. In fact, blindness made me take up the writing of poetry again. Since rough drafts were denied me, I had to fall back on memory. It is obviously easier to remember verse than prose, and to remember regular verse forms rather than free ones. Regular verse is, so to speak, portable. One can walk down the street or be riding the subway while composing and polishing a sonnet, for rhyme and meter have mnemonic virtues. In these years, I wrote dozens of sonnets and longer poems consisting of eleven-syllable quatrains. I thought I had taken Lugones as my master, but when the verses were written my friends told me that, regrettably, they were quite unlike him. In my later poetry, a narrative thread is always to be found. As a matter of fact, I even think of plots for poems. Perhaps the main difference between Lugones and me is that he held French literature as his model and lived intellectually in a French world, whereas I look to English literature. In this new poetic activity, I never thought of building a sequence of poems, as I always formerly did, but was chiefly interested in each piece for its own sake. In this way, I wrote poems on such different

subjects as Emerson and wine, Snorri Sturluson and the hourglass, my grandfather's death and the beheading of Charles I. I also went in for summing up my literary heroes: Poe, Swedenborg, Whitman, Heine, Camões, Jonathan Edwards, and Cervantes. Due tribute, of course, was also paid to mirrors, the Minotaur, and knives.

I had always been attracted to the metaphor, and this leaning led me to the study of the simple Saxon kennings and overelaborate Norse ones. As far back as 1932, I had even written an essay about them. The quaint notion of using, as far as it could be done, metaphors instead of straightforward nouns, and of these metaphors' being at once traditional and arbitrary, puzzled and appealed to me. I was later to surmise that the purpose of these figures lay not only in the pleasure given by the pomp and circumstance of compounding words but also in the demands of alliteration. Taken by themselves, the kennings are not especially witty, and calling a ship "a sea-stallion" and the open sea "the whale's-road" is no great feat. The Norse skalds went a step further, calling the sea "the sea-stallion's-road," so that what originally was an image became a laborious equation. In turn, my investigation of kennings led me to the study of Old English and Old Norse. Another factor that impelled me in this direction was my ancestry. It may be no more than a romantic superstition of mine, but the fact that the Haslams lived in Northumbria and Mercia—or, as they are today called, Northumberland and the Midlands—links me with a Saxon and perhaps a Danish past. (My fondness for such a northern past has been resented by some of my more nationalistic countrymen, who dub me an Englishman, but I hardly need point out that many things English are utterly alien to me: tea, the Royal Family, "manly" sports, the worship of every line written by the uncaring Shakespeare.)

At the end of one of my University courses, several of my students came to see me at the Library. We had just polished off all English literature from Beowulf to Bernard

Shaw in the span of four months, and I thought we might now do something in earnest. I proposed that we begin at the beginning, and they agreed. I knew that at home, on a certain top shelf, I had copies of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. When the students came the next Saturday morning, we began reading these two books. We skipped grammar as much as we could and pronounced the words like German. All at once, we fell in love with a sentence in which Rome (Romeburh) was mentioned. We got drunk on these words and rushed down Peru Street shouting them at the top of our voices. And so we had set out on a long adventure. I had always thought of English literature as the richest in the world; the discovery now of a secret chamber at the very threshold of that literature came to me as an additional gift. Personally, I knew that the adventure would be an endless one, and that I could go on studying Old English for the rest of my days. The pleasure of studying, not the vanity of mastering, has been my chief aim, and I have not been disappointed these past twelve years. As for my recent interest in Old Norse, this is only a logical step, since the two languages are closely linked and since of all medieval Germanic literature Old Norse is the crown. My excursions into Old English have been wholly personal and, therefore, have made their way into a number of my poems. A fellow-academician once took me aside and said in alarm, "What do you mean by publishing a poem entitled 'Embarking on the Study of Anglo-Saxon Grammar'?" I tried to make him understand that Anglo-Saxon was as intimate an experience to me as looking at a sunset or falling in love.

Around 1954, I began writing short prose pieces—sketches and parables. One day, my friend Carlos Frías, of Emecé, told me he needed a new book for the series of my so-called complete works. I said I had none to give him, but Frías persisted, saying, "Every writer has a book if he only looks for it." Going through drawers at home one idle Sunday, I began ferreting out uncollected poems and prose pieces, some of the latter going back to my days on *Crítica*.

These odds and ends, sorted out and ordered and published in 1960, became *El hacedor* (The Maker). Remarkably, this book, which I accumulated rather than wrote, seems to me my most personal work and, to my taste, maybe my best. The explanation is only too easy: the pages of *El hacedor* contain no padding. Each piece was written for its own sake and out of an inner necessity. By the time it was undertaken, I had come to realize that fine writing is a mistake, and a mistake born out of vanity. Good writing, I firmly believe, should be done in an unobtrusive way.

On the closing page of that book, I told of a man who sets out to make a picture of the universe. After many years, he has covered a blank wall with images of ships, towers, horses, weapons, and men, only to find out at the moment of his death that he has drawn a likeness of his own face. This may be the case of all books; it is certainly the case of this particular book.

Crowded Years

Fame, like my blindness, had been coming gradually to me. I had never expected it, I had never sought it. Néstor Ibarra and Roger Caillois, who in the early 1950's daringly translated me into French, were my first benefactors. I suspect that their pioneer work paved the way for my sharing with Samuel Beckett the Formentor Prize in 1961, for until I appeared in French I was practically invisible—not only abroad but at home in Buenos Aires. As a consequence of that prize, my books mushroomed overnight throughout the western world.

This same year, under the auspices of Edward Larocque Tinker, I was invited as Visiting Professor to the University of Texas. It was my first physical encounter with America. In a sense, because of my reading, I had always been there, and yet how strange it seemed when in Austin I heard ditch diggers who worked on campus speaking in English, a

language I had until then always thought of as being denied that class of people. America, in fact, had taken on such mythic proportions in my mind that I was sincerely amazed to find there such commonplace things as weeds, mud, puddles, dirt roads, flies, and stray dogs. Though at times we fell into homesickness, I know now that my mother—who accompanied me—and I grew to love Texas. She, who always loathed football, even rejoiced over *our* victory when the Longhorns defeated the neighboring Bears. At the University, when I finished one class I was giving in Argentine literature, I would sit in on another as a student of Saxon verse under Dr. Rudolph Willard. My days were full. I found American students, unlike the run of students in the Argentine, far more interested in their subjects than in their grades. I tried to interest people in Ascasubi and Lugones, but they stubbornly questioned and interviewed me about my own output. I spent as much time as I could with Ramón Martínez López, who, as a philologist, shared my passion for etymologies and taught me many things. During those six months in the States, we traveled widely, and I lectured at universities from coast to coast. I saw New Mexico, San Francisco, New York, New England, Washington. I found America the friendliest, most forgiving, and most generous nation I had ever visited. We South Americans tend to think in terms of convenience, whereas people in the United States approach things ethically. This—amateur Protestant that I am—I admired above all. It even helped me overlook skyscrapers, paper bags, television, plastics, and the unholy jungle of gadgets.

My second American trip came in 1967, when I held the Charles Eliot Norton Chair of Poetry at Harvard, and lectured to well-wishing audiences on "This Craft of Verse." I spent seven months in Cambridge, also teaching a course on Argentine writers and traveling all over New England, where most things American, including the West, seem to have been invented. I made numerous literary pilgrimages—to Hawthorne's haunts in Salem, to Emerson's in Concord, to Melville's in New Bedford, to Emily Dick-

inson's in Amherst, and to Longfellow's around the corner from where I lived. Friends seemed to multiply in Cambridge: Jorge Guillén, John Murchison, Juan Marichal, Raimundo Lida, Héctor Ingrao, and a Persian physicist who had worked out a theory of spherical time that I do not quite understand but hope someday to plagiarize—Farid Hushfar. I also met writers like Robert Fitzgerald, John Updike, and the late Dudley Fitts. I availed myself of chances to see new parts of the continent: Iowa, where I found my native pampa awaiting me; Chicago, recalling Carl Sandburg; Missouri; Maryland; Virginia. At the end of my stay, I was greatly honored to have my poems read at the Y.M.H.A. Poetry Center in New York, with several of my translators reading and a number of poets in the audience. I owe a third trip to the United States, in November of 1969, to my two benefactors at the University of Oklahoma, Lowell Dunham and Ivar Ivask, who invited me to give talks there and called together a group of scholars to comment on, and enrich, my work. Ivask made me a gift of a fish-shaped Finnish dagger—rather alien to the tradition of the old Palermo of my boyhood.

Looking back on this past decade, I seem to have been quite a wanderer. In 1963, thanks to Neil MacKay of the British Council in Buenos Aires, I was able to visit England and Scotland. There, too, again in my mother's company, I made my pilgrimages: to London, so teeming with literary memories; to Lichfield and Dr. Johnson; to Manchester and De Quincey; to Rye and Henry James; to the Lake Country; to Edinburgh. I visited my grandmother's birthplace in Hanley, one of the Five Towns—Arnold Bennett country. Scotland and Yorkshire I think of as among the loveliest places on earth. Somewhere in the Scottish hills and glens I recaptured a strange sense of loneliness and bleakness that I had known before; it took me some time to trace this feeling back to the far-flung wastes of Patagonia. A few years later, this time in the company of María Esther Vázquez, I made another European trip. In England, we stayed with the late Herbert Read in his fine rambling

house out on the moors. He took us to Yorkminster, where he showed us some ancient Danish swords in the Viking Yorkshire room of the museum. I later wrote a sonnet to one of the swords, and just before his death Sir Herbert corrected and bettered my original title, suggesting, instead of "To a Sword in York," "To a Sword in Yorkminster." We later went to Stockholm, invited by my Swedish publisher, Bonnier, and by the Argentine ambassador. Stockholm and Copenhagen I count among the most unforgettable cities I have seen, like San Francisco, New York, Edinburgh, Santiago de Compostela, and Geneva.

Early in 1969, invited by the Israeli government, I spent ten very exciting days in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. I brought home with me the conviction of having been in the oldest and the youngest of nations, of having come from a very living, vigilant land back to a half-asleep nook of the world. Since my Genevan days, I had always been interested in Jewish culture, thinking of it as an integral element of our so-called Western civilization, and during the Israeli-Arab war of a few years back I found myself taking immediate sides. While the outcome was still uncertain, I wrote a poem on the battle. A week after, I wrote another on the victory. Israel was, of course, still an armed camp at the time of my visit. There, along the shores of Galilee, I kept recalling these lines from Shakespeare:

> Over whose acres walk'd those blessed feet,
> Which, fourteen hundred years ago, were nail'd,
> For our advantage, on the bitter cross.

Now, despite my years, I still think of the many stones I have left unturned, and of others I would like to turn again. I hope yet to see Mormon Utah, to which I was introduced as a boy by Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and by the first book of the Sherlock Holmes saga, *A Study in Scarlet*. Another daydream of mine is a pilgrimage to Iceland, and another still to return again to Texas and to Scotland.

At seventy-one, I am still hard at work and brimming with plans. Last year I wrote a new book of poems, *Elogio de la sombra* (In Praise of Darkness). It was my first entirely new volume since 1960, and these were also my first poems since 1929 written with a book in mind. My main concern in this work, running through several of its pieces, is of an ethical nature, irrespective of any religious or antireligious bias. "Darkness" in the title stands for both blindness and death. To finish *Elogio*, I worked every morning, dictating at the National Library. By the time I ended, I had set up a comfortable routine—so comfortable that I kept it up and began writing tales. These, my first stories since 1953, I published this year. The collection is called *El informe de Brodie* (Doctor Brodie's Report). It is a set of modest experiments in straightforward storytelling, and is the book I have often spoken about in the past five years. Recently, I completed the script of a film to be called *Los otros* (The Others). Its plot is my own; the writing was done together with Adolfo Bioy-Casares and the young Argentine director Hugo Santiago. My afternoons now are usually given over to a long-range and cherished project: for nearly the past three years, I have been lucky to have my own translator at my side, and together we are bringing out some ten or twelve volumes of my work in English, a language I am unworthy to handle, a language I often wish had been my birthright.

I intend now to begin a new book, a series of personal—not scholarly—essays on Dante, Ariosto, and medieval northern subjects. I want also to set down a book of informal, outspoken opinions, whims, reflections, and private heresies. After that, who knows? I still have a number of stories, heard or invented, that I want to tell. At present, I am finishing a long tale called "The Congress." Despite its Kafkian title, I hope it will turn out more in the line of Chesterton. The setting is Argentine and Uruguayan. For twenty years, I have been boring my friends with the raw plot. Finally, I came to see that no further elaboration was needed. I have another project that has been pending for

an even longer period of time—that of revising and perhaps rewriting my father's novel *The Caudillo*, as he asked me to years ago. We had gone as far as discussing many of the problems; I like to think of the undertaking as a continued dialogue and a very real collaboration.

People have been unaccountably good to me. I have no enemies, and if certain persons have masqueraded as such, they've been far too good-natured to have ever pained me. Anytime I read something written against me, I not only share the sentiment but feel I could do the job far better myself. Perhaps I should advise would-be enemies to send me their grievances beforehand, with full assurance that they will receive my every aid and support. I have even secretly longed to write, under a pen name, a merciless tirade against myself. Ah, the unvarnished truths I harbor!

At my age, one should be aware of one's limits, and this knowledge may make for happiness. When I was young, I thought of literature as a game of skillful and surprising variations; now that I have found my own voice, I feel that tinkering and tampering neither greatly improve nor greatly spoil my drafts. This, of course, is a sin against one of the main tendencies of letters in this century—the vanity of overwriting—which led a man like Joyce into publishing expensive fragments, showily entitled "Work in Progress." I suppose my best work is over. This gives me a certain quiet satisfaction and ease. And yet I do not feel I have written myself out. In a way, youthfulness seems closer to me today than when I was a young man. I no longer regard happiness as unattainable; once, long ago, I did. Now I know that it may occur at any moment but that it should never be sought after. As to failure or fame, they are quite irrelevant and I never bother about them. What I'm out for now is peace, the enjoyment of thinking and of friendship, and, though it may be too ambitious, a sense of loving and of being loved.