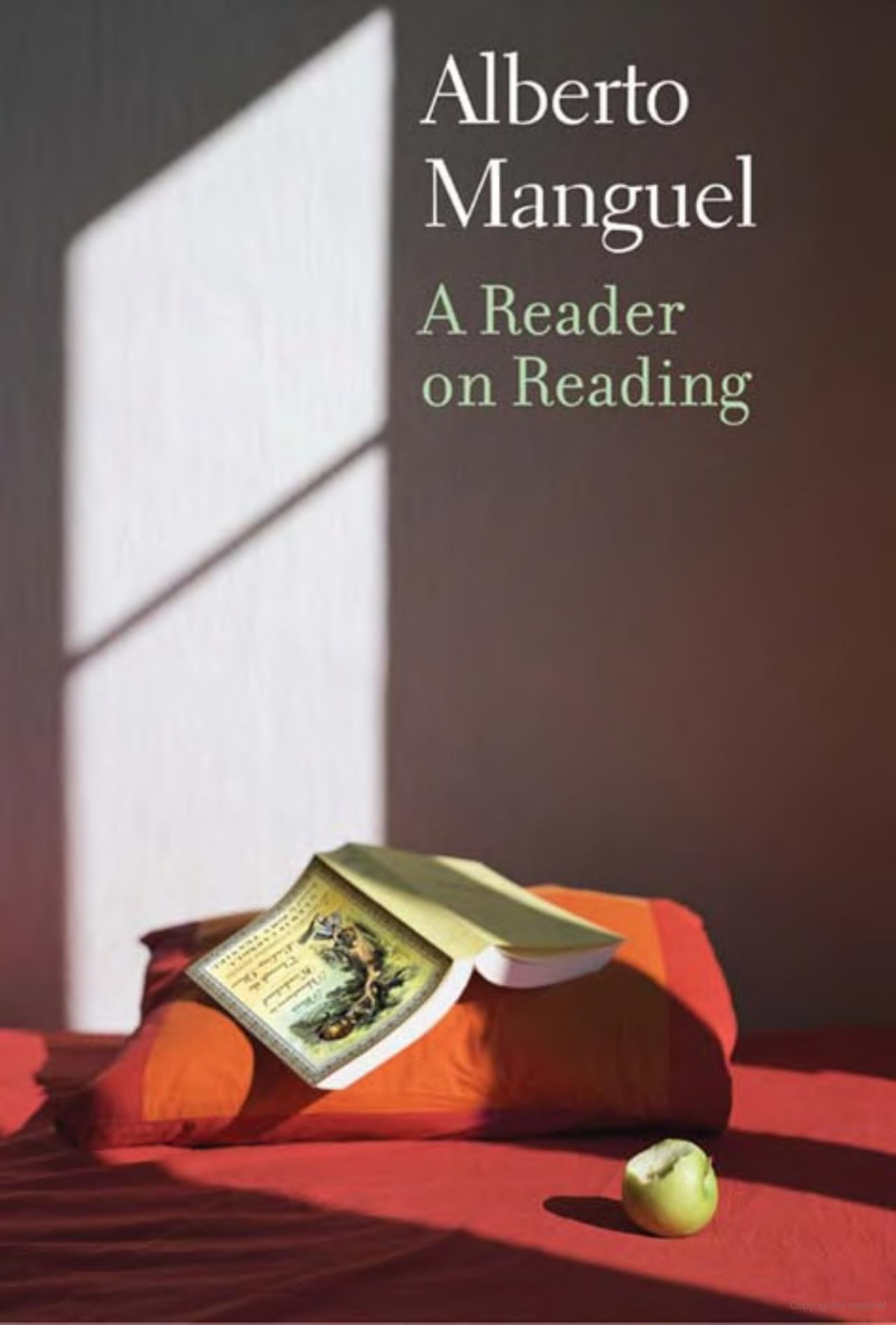
Alberto Manguel

A Reader on Reading



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Preface

"You ought to return thanks in a neat speech," the Red Queen said, frowning at Alice as she spoke.

Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 9

THE SUBJECT OF THIS BOOK, as of almost all my other books, is reading, that most human of creative activities. I believe that we are, at the core, reading animals and that the art of reading, in its broadest sense, defines our species. We come into the world intent on finding narrative in everything: in the landscape, in the skies, in the faces of others, and, of course, in the images and words that our species creates. We read our own lives and those of others, we read the societies we live in and those that lie beyond our borders, we read pictures and buildings, we read that which lies between the covers of a book.

This last is of the essence. For me, words on a page give the world coherence. When the inhabitants of Macondo were afflicted with an amnesia-like sickness which came to them one day during their hundred years of solitude, they realized that their knowledge of the world was quickly disappearing and that they might forget what a cow was, what a tree was, what a house was. The antidote, they discovered, lay in words. To remember what their world meant to them, they wrote out labels and hung them from beasts and objects: "This is a tree," "This is a house," "This is

a cow, and from it you get milk, which mixed with coffee gives you café con leche." Words tell us what we, as a society, believe the world to be.

"Believe to be": therein lies the challenge. Pairing words with experience and experience with words, we, readers, sift through stories that echo or prepare us for an experience, or tell us of experiences that will never be ours, as we know all too well, except on the burning page. Accordingly, what we believe a book to be reshapes itself with every reading. Over the years, my experience, my tastes, my prejudices have changed: as the days go by, my memory keeps reshelving, cataloguing, discarding the volumes in my library; my words and my world — except for a few constant landmarks — are never one and the same. Heraclitus's bon mot about time applies equally well to my reading: "You never dip into the same book twice."

What remains invariable is the pleasure of reading, of holding a book in my hands and suddenly feeling that peculiar sense of wonder, recognition, chill, or warmth that for no discernible reason a certain string of words sometimes evokes. Reviewing books, translating books, editing anthologies are activities that have provided me with some justification for this guilty pleasure (as if pleasure required justification!) and sometimes even allowed me to make a living. "It is a fine world and I wish I knew how to make £200 a year in it," wrote the poet Edward Thomas to his friend Gordon Bottomley. Reviewing, translating, and editing have sometimes allowed me to make those two hundred pounds.

Henry James coined the phrase "the figure in the carpet" for the recurrent theme that runs through a writer's work like a secret signature. In many of the pieces I have written (as reviews or memoirs or introductions) I think I can see that elusive figure: it has something to do with how this art I love so much, the craft of reading, relates to the place in which I do it, to Thomas's "fine world." I believe there is an ethic of reading, a responsibility in how we read, a commitment that is both political and private in the act of turning the pages and following the lines. And I believe that sometimes, beyond the author's intentions and beyond the reader's hopes, a book can make us better and wiser.

In the "neat speech" returning thanks, I want to acknowledge the generous reading of Ileene Smith and Susan Laity, the careful proofreading of Dan Heaton, and the meticulous indexing of Marilyn Flaig. Also the splendid cover design of Sonia Shannon.

Craig Stephenson, who for the past twenty years has been the first reader of everything I've written, suggested the structure, order, and selection for

this book (as he did earlier for *Into the Looking-Glass Wood*, the 1998 volume from which a few of the essays here included were taken, as well as a few of the lines in this preface). He curbed my inclination to keep occasional pieces to which I was attached for sentimental reasons, reminded me of others that I had forgotten but insisted that I revise certain paragraphs or examples that now seemed dated, and spent far more time reflecting on the appropriateness of each piece than I myself, in my impatience, would have done. For this, and for more things than he would ever be willing to acknowledge, my loving thanks.

PART ONE

Who Am I?

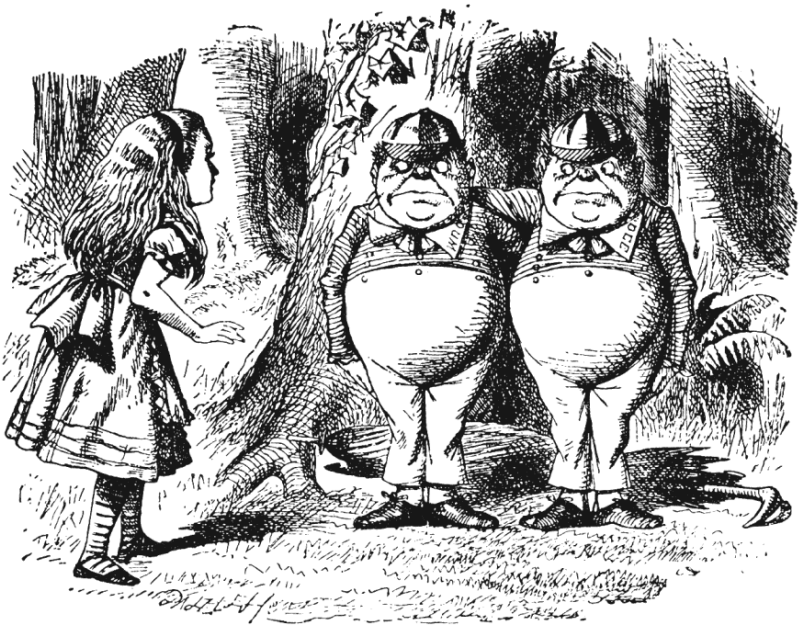
"I *am* real!" said Alice, and began to cry.

"You won't make yourself a bit realer by crying," Tweedledee remarked: "there's nothing to cry about."

"If I wasn't real," Alice said — half-laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous — "I shouldn't be able to cry."

"I hope you don't suppose those are real tears?" Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.

Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 4



A Reader in the Looking-Glass Wood

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 6

WHEN I WAS EIGHT OR NINE, in a house that no longer stands, someone gave me a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*. Like so many other readers, I have always felt that the edition in which I read a book for the first time remains, for the rest of my life, the original one. Mine, thank the stars, was enriched by John Tenniel's illustrations and was printed on thick, creamy paper that reeked mysteriously of burnt wood.

There was much I didn't understand in my first reading of Alice, but that didn't seem to matter. I learned at a very early age that unless you are reading for some purpose other than pleasure (as we all sometimes must for our sins), you can safely skim over difficult quagmires, cut your way through tangled jungles, skip the solemn and boring lowlands, and simply let yourself be carried by the vigorous stream of the tale.

As far as I can remember, my first impression of the adventures was that of a physical journey on which I myself became poor Alice's companion. The fall down the rabbit hole and the crossing through the looking-glass were merely starting points, as trivial and as wonderful as boarding a bus. But the journey! When I was eight or nine, my disbelief was not so much suspended as yet unborn, and fiction felt at times more real than everyday fact. It was not that I thought that a place such as Wonderland actually existed, but that I knew

it was made of the same stuff as my house and my street and the red bricks that were my school.

A book becomes a different book every time we read it. That first childhood *Alice* was a journey, like the *Odyssey* or *Pinocchio*, and I have always felt myself a better Alice than a Ulysses or a wooden puppet. Then came the adolescent Alice, and I knew exactly what she had to put up with when the March Hare offered her wine when there was no wine at the table, or when the Caterpillar wanted her to tell him exactly who she was and what was meant by that. Tweedledee and Tweedledum's warning that Alice was nothing but the Red King's dream haunted my sleep, and my waking hours were tortured by exams in which Red Queen teachers asked me questions like "Take a bone from a dog: what remains?" Later, in my twenties, I found the trial of the Knave of Hearts collected in André Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, and it became obvious that Alice was a sister of the surrealists; after a conversation with the Cuban writer Severo Sarduy in Paris, I was startled to discover that Humpty Dumpty owed much to the structuralist doctrines of *Change* and *Tel Quel*. And later still, when I made my home in Canada, how could I fail to recognize that the White Knight ("But I was thinking of a plan / To dye one's whiskers green, / And always use so large a fan / That they could not be seen") had found a job as one of the numerous bureaucrats that scurry through the corridors of every public building in my country?

In all the years during which I've read and reread Alice, I have come across many other different and interesting readings of her books, but I can't say that any of these have become, in any deep sense, my own. The readings of others influence, of course, my personal reading, offer new points of view or color certain passages, but mostly they are like the comments of the Gnat who keeps naggingly whispering in Alice's ear, "You might make a joke on that." I refuse; I'm a jealous reader and will not allow others a *jus primae noctis* with the books that I read. The intimate sense of kinship established so many years ago with my first *Alice* has not weakened; every time I reread her, the bonds strengthen in very private and unexpected ways. I know other bits by heart. My children (my eldest daughter is, of course, called Alice) tell me to shut up when I burst, yet again, into the mournful strains of "The Walrus and the Carpenter." And for almost every new experience, I find a premonitory or nostalgic echo in her pages, telling me once again, "This is what lies ahead of you" or "You have been here before."

One adventure among many does not describe for me any particular ex-

perience I have had or may one day have but rather seems to address something vaster, an experience or (if the term is not too grand) a philosophy of life. It takes place at the end of chapter 3 of *Through the Looking-Glass*. After passing through her reflection and making her way across the chessboard country that lies behind it, Alice reaches a dark wood where (she has been told) things have no names. "Well, at any rate it's a great comfort," she says bravely, "after being so hot, to get into the—into the—into *what?*" Astonished at not being able to think of the word, Alice tries to remember. "'I mean to get under the—under the—under *this*, you know!' putting her hand on the trunk of a tree. 'What *does* it call itself, I wonder? I do believe it's got no name—why, to be sure it hasn't.'" Trying to recall the word for the place she is in, accustomed to putting into words her experience of reality, Alice suddenly discovers that nothing actually *has* a name: that until she herself can name something, that thing will remain nameless, present but silent, intangible as a ghost. Must she remember these forgotten names? Or must she make them up, brand new? Hers is an ancient conundrum.

After creating Adam "out of the dust of the ground" and placing him in a garden east of Eden (as the second chapter of Genesis tells us), God went on to create every beast of the field and every fowl of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever Adam called every living creature, "that was the name thereof." For centuries, scholars have puzzled over this curious exchange. Was Adam in a place (like the Looking-Glass Wood) where everything was nameless, and was he supposed to invent names for the things and creatures he saw? Or did the beasts and the fowl that God created indeed have names, which Adam was meant to know, and which he was to pronounce like a child seeing a dog or the moon for the first time?

And what do we mean by a "name"? The question, or a form of the question, is asked in *Through the Looking-Glass*. A few chapters after crossing the nameless wood, Alice meets the doleful figure of the White Knight, who, in the authoritarian manner of adults, tells her that he will sing a song to "comfort" her. "The name of the song," says the Knight, "is called '*Haddocks' Eyes*'":

> "Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?" Alice said, trying to feel interested.
>
> "No, you don't understand," the Knight said, looking a little vexed. "That's what the name is *called*. The name really is '*The Aged Aged Man*.'"

sics, of literary history, of censored or recommended reading, of library catalogues) may, by chance, throw up a useful name, as long as we bear in mind the motives behind the lists. But the best guides, I believe, are the reader's whims — trust in pleasure and faith in haphazardness — which sometimes lead us into a makeshift state of grace, allowing us to spin gold out of flax.

Gold out of flax: in the summer of 1935 the poet Osip Mandelstam was granted by Stalin, supposedly as a favor, identity papers valid for three months, accompanied by a residence permit. According to his wife, Nadezhda Mandelstam, this little document made their lives much easier. It happened that a friend of the Mandelstams, the actor and essayist Vladimir Yakhontov, chanced to come through their city. In Moscow he and Mandelstam had amused themselves by reading from ration books, in an effort to name paradise lost. Now the two men did the same thing with their identity papers. The scene is described in Nadezhda's memoir *Hope Against Hope:* "It must be said that the effect was even more depressing. In the ration book they read off the coupons solo and in chorus: 'Milk, milk, milk . . . cheese, meat . . .' When Yakhontov read from the identity papers, he managed to put ominous and menacing inflections in his voice: 'Basis on which issued . . . issued . . . by whom issued . . . special entries . . . permit to reside, permit to reside, permit to re-side . . .'"

All true readings are subversive, against the grain, as Alice, a sane reader, discovered in the Looking-Glass world of mad name givers. The Duchess calls mustard "a mineral"; the Cheshire Cat purrs and calls it "growling"; a Canadian prime minister tears up the railway and calls it "progress"; a Swiss businessman traffics in loot and calls it "commerce"; an Argentinean president shelters murderers and calls it "amnesty." Against such misnomers readers can open the pages of their books. In such cases of willful madness, reading helps us maintain coherence in the chaos. Not to eliminate it, not to enclose experience within conventional verbal structures, but to allow chaos to progress creatively on its own vertiginous way. Not to trust the glittering surface of words but to burrow into the darkness.

The impoverished mythology of our time seems afraid to go beneath the surface. We distrust profundity, we make fun of dilatory reflection. Images of horror flick across our screens, big or small, but we don't want them slowed down by commentary: we want to watch Gloucester's eyes plucked out but not to have to sit through the rest of *Lear*. One night, some time ago, I was watching television in a hotel room, zapping from channel to channel. Perhaps by chance, every image that held the screen for a few seconds showed someone

being killed or beaten, a face contorted in anguish, a car or a building exploding. Suddenly I realized that one of the scenes I had flicked past did not belong to a drama series but to a newscast on war in the Balkans. Among the other images which cumulatively diluted the horror of violence, I had watched, unmoved, a real person being hit by a real bullet.

George Steiner suggested that the Holocaust translated the horrors of our imagined hells into a reality of charred flesh and bone; it may be that this translation marked the beginning of our modern inability to imagine another person's pain. In the Middle Ages, for instance, the horrible torments of martyrs depicted in countless paintings were never viewed simply as images of horror: they were illumined by the theology (however dogmatic, however catechistic) that bred and defined them, and their representation was meant to help the viewer reflect on the world's ongoing suffering. Not every viewer would necessarily see beyond the mere prurience of the scene, but the possibility for deeper reflection was always present. After all, an image or a text can only *offer* the choice of reading further or more profoundly; this choice the reader or viewer can reject since in themselves text and image are nothing but dabs on paper, stains on wood or canvas.

The images I watched that night were, I believe, nothing but surface; like pornographic texts (political slogans, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, advertising pap), they offered nothing but what the senses could apprehend immediately, all at once, fleetingly, without space or time for reflection.

Alice's Looking-Glass Wood is not made up of such images: it has depth, it requires thought, even if (for the time of its passing) it offers no vocabulary to name its proper elements. True experience and true art (however uncomfortable the adjective has become) have this in common: they are always greater than our comprehension, even than our capabilities of comprehension. Their outer limit is always a little past our reach, as the Argentinean poet Alejandra Pizarnik once described:

> And if the soul were to ask, Is it still far? you must answer:
> On the other side of the river, not this one, the one just beyond.

To come even this far, I have had many and marvelous guides. Some overwhelming, others more intimate, many vastly entertaining, a few illuminating more than I could hope to see. Their writing keeps changing in the library of my memory, where circumstances of all sorts—age and impatience, different

skies and different voices, new and old commentaries—keep shifting the volumes, crossing out passages, adding notes in the margins, switching jackets, inventing titles. The furtive activity of such anarchic librarians expands my limited library almost to infinity: I can now reread a book as if I were reading one I had never read before.

In Bush, his house in Concord, the seventy-year-old Ralph Waldo Emerson began suffering from what was probably Alzheimer's disease. According to his biographer Carlos Baker: "Bush became a palace of forgetting. . . . [But] reading, he said, was still an 'unbroken pleasure.' More and more the study at Bush became his retreat. He clung to the comforting routine of solitude, reading in his study till noon and returning again in the afternoon until it was time for his walk. Gradually he lost his recollection of his own writings, and was delighted at rediscovering his own essays: 'Why, these things are really very good,' he told his daughter."

Something like Emerson's rediscovery happens now when I take down *The Man Who Was Thursday* or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and meet them like Adam greeting his first giraffe.

Is this all?

Sometimes it seems enough. In the midst of uncertainty and many kinds of fear, threatened by loss, change, and the welling of pain within and without for which one can offer no comfort, readers know that at least there are, here and there, a few safe places, as real as paper and as bracing as ink, to grant us roof and board in our passage through the dark and nameless wood.

Room for the Shadow

"That's very important," the King said, turning to the jury. They were just beginning to write this down on their slates, when the White Rabbit interrupted: "*Un*important, your Majesty means of course," he said, in a very respectful tone, but frowning and making faces at him as he spoke.

"*Un*important, of course, I meant," the King hastily said, and went on to himself in an undertone, "important—unimportant—unimportant—important—" as if he were trying which word sounded best.

Some of the jury wrote down "important," and some "unimportant." Alice could see this, as she was near enough to look over their slates; "but it doesn't matter a bit," she thought to herself.
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 12

For Connie Rooke

I WASN'T GOING TO WRITE. For years the temptation kept itself at bay, invisible. Books had the solid presence of the real world and filled my every possible need, whether read out loud to me at first, or later read silently on my own, but always repeating their assurance that what they told me would not change, unlike the rooms in which I slept and the voices heard outside the door. We traveled much, my nurse and I, because my father was in the Argentinean diplomatic service, and the various hotel rooms, and even the embassy house in Tel Aviv, lacked the familiarity of certain pages into which I slipped night after night.

After I learned to read, this story-land homecoming no longer depended on my nurse's availability, weariness, or mood, but on my own whim alone, and I would return to the books I knew by heart whenever the fancy or the urge took me, following on the page the words recited in my head. In the morning, under one of four palm trees set in a square in the walled embassy garden; during the car drive to the large wild park where wild tortoises crept along the dunes planted with oleander bushes; especially at night, while my nurse, thinking I was asleep, sat at her electric knitting machine and, suffering from mysterious stomach pains that kept her agonizingly awake, worked until well past midnight, I read. To the metronomic rasp of her machine, as she rolled the handle back and forth, in the dim yellow light that she kept on to work by, I would turn to the wall with my open book and follow an Aladdin-like hero called Kleine Muck, the adventurous dog Crusoe, the robber bridegroom who drugged his victims with three-colored wine, the ill-fated Kay and Gerda, and the wicked Snow Queen.

It never occurred to me that I might add something of my own to the books on my shelf. Everything I wanted was already there, at arm's reach, and I knew that if I wished for a new story, the bookshop only a short walk from the house had countless more to add to my stock. To invent a story, impossible as the task then seemed to me, would have felt like trying to create another palm tree for the garden or model another tortoise to struggle across the sand. What hope of success? Above all, what need?

We returned to Buenos Aires when I was seven, to a large, dark, cool house on a cobblestoned street, where I was given my own room perched on the back terrace, separate from the rest of the family. Until then, I had spoken only English and German. I learned to speak Spanish, and, gradually, Spanish books were added to my shelves. And still nothing prompted me to write.

Homework, of course, did not count. "Compositions," as they were called, required one to fill a couple of pages on a given subject, keeping always closer to reportage than to fiction. Imagination was not called for. "Portrait of Someone in Your Family," "What I Did on Sunday," "My Best Friend" elicited a sugary, polite prose, illustrated in colored pencils with an equally cordial depiction of the person or event concerned, the whole to be scrutinized by the teacher for accuracy and spelling mistakes. Only once did I diverge from the imposed subject. The title given to us was "A Sea Battle," the teacher no doubt imagining that his students, all boys, had the same enthusiasm for war games that he had. I had never read the books on airmen and soldiers that several of

and did desultory freelance work for a number of publishers. The pay was abysmal, and I seldom had enough money for more than a few meals a week. One day, I heard that an Argentinean paper was offering a five hundred dollar prize for the best short stories. I decided to apply. I quickly wrote, in Spanish, four stories that were readable, formally correct, but lifeless. I asked Severo Sarduy, whom I had met in Paris and who wrote in a rich, exuberant, baroque Spanish that resonated with literary allusions, to read them over for me. He told me they were awful. "You use words like an accountant," he said. "You don't ask words to perform for you. Here you have a character who falls and loses one of his contact lenses. You say that he lifts himself 'half blind' from the floor. Think harder. The word you want is 'Cyclops.'" I obediently wrote *Cyclops* in the story and sent the lot off. A few months later, I heard that I had won. I felt more embarrassed than proud, but was able to eat properly for a couple of months.

Still I would not write. I scribbled a few essays, a few poems, all forgettable. My heart wasn't in it. Like someone who loves music and tries his hand at the piano, I undertook the experience less out of passion than out of curiosity, to see how it was done. Then I stopped. I worked for publishers, I selected manuscripts and saw them through the press, I imagined titles for other people's books and put together anthologies of different kinds. Everything I did was always in my capacity as reader. "David was talented and knew how to compose psalms. And I? What am I capable of?" asked Rabbi Ouri in the eighteenth century. His answer was: "I can recite them."

I published my first book in 1980. *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* was the result of a collaboration with Gianni Guadalupi, an inspired editor whom I had met when we were both working for the same Italian publisher. The idea for the book was Gianni's: a serious guide to fictional countries, for which we read more than two thousand books, with an energy that one only possesses when one is young. Writing the *Dictionary* was not what I would today call writing: it was more like glossing the books we read, detailing the geography, customs, history, flora, and fauna of places such as Oz, Ruritania, Christianopolis. Gianni would send me his notes in Italian, I would write my own and translate his into English and then recast the lot into dictionary entries, always sticking to our preestablished Baedeker style. Because we use words for a vast number of things, writing is easily confused with other activities: recounting (as in our *Dictionary*), scribbling, instructing, reporting, informing, chatting, dogmatizing, reviewing, sweet-talking, making pronouncements, advertising,

proselytizing, preaching, cataloguing, informing, describing, briefing, taking notes. We perform these tasks with the help of words, but none of these, I am certain, constitutes writing.

Two years later, in 1982, I arrived in Canada. On the strength of the *Dictionary*, I was asked to review books for newspapers, talk about books on the radio, translate books into English, and adapt books into plays. I was perfectly content. Discussing books that had been familiar to my friends when I was young but were new to the Canadian reader, or reading for the first time Canadian classics that mysteriously mirrored others from my past, I found the library that I had begun when I was four or five kept growing nightly, ambitiously, relentlessly. Books had always grown around me. Now, in my house in Toronto, they covered every wall, they crowded every room. They kept growing. I had no intention of adding my own to their proliferation.

Instead, I practiced different forms of reading. The possibilities offered by books are legion. The solitary relationship of a reader with his or her books breaks into dozens of further relationships: with friends upon whom we urge the books we like, with booksellers (the few who have survived in the Age of Supermarkets) who suggest new titles, with strangers for whom we might compile an anthology. As we read and reread over the years, these activities multiply and echo one another. A book we loved in our youth is suddenly recalled by someone to whom it was long ago recommended, the reissue of a book we thought forgotten makes it again new to our eyes, a story read in one context becomes a different story under a different cover. Books enjoy this modest kind of immortality.

Then, by chance, because of an unanswered question, my attitude towards writing changed. (I've told the story in another essay included here, "In Memoriam.") A friend who had gone into exile during the military dictatorship in Argentina revealed to me that one of my high school teachers, someone who had been essential in fostering my love of literature, had willingly denounced his students to the military police, knowing that they would be taken and tortured and sometimes killed. This was the teacher who had spoken to us of Kafka, of Ray Bradbury, of the murder of Polyxena (I can still hear his voice when I read the lines) in the medieval Spanish romance that begins

A la qu'el sol se ponía
en una playa desierta,
yo que salía de Troya

por una sangrienta puerta,
delante los pies de Pirro
vide a Polyxena muerta . . .

After the revelation, I was left with the impossibility of deciding whether to deny the worth of his teaching or close my eyes to the evil of his actions, or (this seemed impossible) to grasp the monstrous combination of both, alive in the same person. To give a shape to my question I wrote a novel, *News from a Foreign Country Came*.

From what I've heard, most writers know from a very early age that they will write. Something of themselves reflected in the outside world, in the way others see them or the way they see themselves lending words to daily objects, tells them they are writers, like something tells their friends that they are veterinarians or pilots. Something convinces them that they are chosen for this particular task and that when they grow up their name will be stamped on the cover of a book, like a pilgrim's badge. I think something told me I was to be a reader. The encounter with my exiled friend happened in 1988; it was therefore not till I turned forty that the notion of becoming a writer appeared to me as firmly possible. Forty is a time of change, of retrieving from ancient cupboards whatever we have left behind, packed away in the dark, and of facing its latent forces.

My intention was clear. That the result wasn't successful doesn't change the nature of my purpose. Now, at last, I wanted to write. I wanted to write a novel. I wanted to write a novel that would put into words—literary words, words like the ones that made up the books on my shelves, incandescent words—what seemed to me impossible to be spoken. I tried. In between my bread-and-butter jobs, early in the morning or late at night, in hotel rooms and in cafés when an assignment forced me to travel, I cobbled together the story of a man of two natures, or of a single divided nature. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, read during one terrified night when I was thirteen, was never far from my thoughts. I felt desperate for a long chunk of time to work continuously on my novel, so as not to lose the pace, the sequence, the logic, and, above all, the rhythm. I convinced myself that I could recapture the thread after days or weeks of interruption. I pretended that the lack of concentration didn't matter and that I'd be able to pick up where I'd left off, just as I'd pick up a story I was reading at the place where I'd left my bookmark. I was wrong, but lack of uninterrupted time was not the only reason for my failure. The lessons from

the masters during my adolescence seemed to be now almost useless. A few scenes worked. The novel didn't.

There was a lack of craft. Readers can tell when a sentence works or doesn't, when it breathes and rises and falls to the beat of its own sense, or when it lies stiff as if embalmed. Readers who turn to writing can recognize this too, but they can never explain it. The most writers can do is learn the rules of grammar and spelling, and the art of reading. Beyond this, whatever excellence they may achieve will be the result of simply doing what they are trying to learn, learning to write by writing, in a beautiful vicious circle that illuminates itself at each new turn. "There are three rules for writing a good book," said Somerset Maugham. "Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

Experience of life everyone has; the knack for transforming it into *literary* experience is what most of us lack. And even if one were granted that alchemical talent, what experience is a writer allowed to use in trying to tell a story? The death of her mother, like the narrator in Alice Munro's "Material"? His guilty desire, as in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*? The blood of a loved one, like the master who sees his disciple beheaded and thinks how beautiful the scarlet color is on the green floor, in Marguerite Yourcenar's "How Wang Fo Was Saved"? Is he entitled to use even the intimate secrets of his family, his friends, of those who trusted in him and might be horrified to find themselves speaking private words in front of a reading public? When the novelist Marian Engel, in the company of other authors, heard of something that appealed to her, however confidential, she would shout out, "Called it!" claiming for her writing the juicy tidbit. Apparently in the realm of writing there are no moral restrictions on hunting and gathering.

I, too, tried to work from experience, seeking moments and events to furnish the thing I was calling up from the shadows. I chose for my main character the face of a man I had once seen in the paper, a gentle, knowledgeable, kindly face which I later discovered belonged to Klaus Barbie. That misleading face suited my character perfectly, as did the name, Berence, a name I borrowed from a strange gentleman I met on the ship from Buenos Aires to Europe, a writer who was in the habit of traveling back and forth across the Atlantic, never spending time in the port of destination, and who one night, when I was suffering from a bad cold and a high fever, told me the story of Lafcadio, who commits the gratuitous act of pushing the unworldly Amédée off a moving train in Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican*. I depicted Algiers according to my memories of Buenos Aires (another pseudo-French city on the sea),

and northern Quebec according to my memories of a visit to Percé. In order to bring the story to its close, I needed to describe the workings of a torturer, but not the torture itself. I imagined someone applying the brutal methods not to a person but to something inert, lifeless. My unattended fridge contained an old celery stalk. I imagined what it would be like to torture it. The scene, mysteriously, turned out to be exactly right. But I still had to give words to the torturer's self-justification. I didn't know how to do it. "You have to bring yourself to think like him," my friend, the novelist Susan Swan, advised. I didn't think I was capable. Humiliatingly, I realized that I could think the torturer's thoughts.

But in spite of a few successful moments, the writing hesitated, stumbled, fell flat. Attempting to say that a man enters a room, or that the light in the garden has changed, or that the child felt that she was being threatened, or any simple, precise thing that we communicate (or believe we communicate) every moment of every day, is, I discovered, one of the most difficult of literary endeavors. We believe the task is easy because our listener, our reader, carries the epistemological weight and is supposed to intuit our message, to "know what we mean." But in fact, the signs that stand for the sounds that spark the thoughts that conjure up the memory that dredges up the experience that calls upon the emotion crumble under the weight of all they must carry and barely, hardly ever, serve the purpose for which they were designed. When they do, the reader knows the writer has succeeded and is grateful for the miracle.

G. K. Chesterton observes in one of his essays that "somewhere embedded in every ordinary book are the five or six words for which really all the rest will be written." I think every reader can find them in the books he or she truly loves; I am not certain that every writer can. As to my novel, I have a vague notion of what those words might be, and now (so many years after the fact) I feel that they would have sufficed if they had come to me then, at the beginning of the process.

The book I finished was not what I had imagined, but now I too was a writer. Now I too was in the hands (in a very literal sense) of readers who had no proof of my existence except my book, and who judged me, cared for me, or, more likely, dismissed me without any consideration for anything else I could offer beyond the strict limits of the page. Who I was, who I had been, what my opinions were, what my intentions, how deep my knowledge of the subject, how heartfelt my concern for its central question were to them immaterial excuses. Like a hovering and persistent ghost, the writer wishes to tell

On Being Jewish

"Well, now that we *have* seen each other," said the Unicorn,
"if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?"
Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 7

I SELDOM READ BOOKS WITH titles such as *The French Identity*, *An Essay on Masculinity*, or *What It Means to Be a Woman*. It was therefore with some considerable hesitation that, a few years ago, I picked up a copy of Alain Finkielkraut's cautionary essay *The Imaginary Jew*. Through one of those curious autobiographical associations that a book sometimes conjures up, I suddenly recalled an event I had forgotten from far away and long ago. One afternoon when I was seven, on the bus back from the Buenos Aires English high school that I had started to attend, a boy whose name I never knew called out at me from the back seat, "Hey, Jew! So your father likes money?" I remember being so bewildered by the question that I didn't know what to answer. I didn't think my father was particularly fond of money, but there was an implied insult in the boy's tone that I couldn't understand. Above all, I was surprised at being called "Jew." My grandmother went to the synagogue, but my parents were not religious, and I had never thought of myself in terms of a word I believed was reserved for the old people of my grandmother's generation. But since the epithets applied to us imply a definition, in that moment (though I didn't know it then) I was forced into a choice: to accept this vast, difficult identity or to deny it. Finkielkraut in his book tells of a similar moment and acknowledges the universality of such an experience, but his subject is not the inheritance of hatred. "I myself," writes Finkielkraut, "would like to address and meditate upon the opposite case: the case of a child, an adolescent who is not only proud but happy to be Jewish and who came to question, bit by bit, if there were not some bad faith in living jubilantly as an exception and an exile." These individuals of assumed identity, the inheritors of a suffering to which they have

not been personally subjected, Finkielkraut, with a flair for the mot juste, calls "imaginary" or "armchair" Jews.

I am struck by how useful this notion is to address a question that troubles me: How does the perception of who I am affect my perception of the world around me? How important is it for Alice to know who she is (the Victorian child that the world perceives her to be) when wandering through the Looking-Glass Wood? Apparently, very important, since this knowledge determines her relationship to the other creatures she encounters. For instance, having forgotten who she is, Alice can become friends with a fawn who has forgotten it is a fawn. "So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they came out into another open field, and here the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arm. 'I'm a Fawn!' it cried out in a voice of delight. 'And, dear me! you're a human child!' A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed."

Around this notion of constructed identity, Finkielkraut has assiduously elaborated a sequence of questions about what it means to be Jewish (or, I would add, to be Alice or a fawn), and, since every definition is a limitation, he has refused to give these questions definitive answers. Central to Finkielkraut's interrogation is the seemingly trite statement that the Jews *exist*, that whatever their identity may be, individually or as a group, they have a presence that not even the Nazi machinery was able to erase. This existence is not easily borne, let alone categorized. "Listen, Doctor," wrote Heinrich Heine, "don't even talk to me about Judaism, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Slurs and shame: that's all that comes of it. It's not a religion, it's a misfortune." The cry "Why me?" uttered by every persecuted Jew, the imaginary Jew picks up with a sigh of ennui. Using himself as an example, Finkielkraut confesses that on the one hand he broadcasts his wish to be a Jew while on the other he de-Judaizes himself, transforming himself into the "other" and becoming a messenger of his gentile companions: in this I vividly recognize myself. When his parents refer to the Holocaust, he responds with Vietnam; when they mention antisemitism, he points out that there are no Jewish garbage collectors in France. "Why me?" has become "Why am I not someone else?"

In this Looking-Glass Wood, the imaginary Jew has lost all sense of belonging; for this Jew there is no possible Jewish "we." The conventions of prejudice understand this "we" to mean a secret society of infamous plots and

world domination; the imaginary Jew's response has been to deny solidarity, to declare, "There is no 'we,' for Judaism is a private affair" — even though today it once again widely recognizes itself as a community. But why, Finkielkraut asks pointedly, must collective expression "always remain the exclusive province of politics? Why would anything that is not 'I' necessarily be a question of power or of state?" Why can the Jew not be "I" without either going into hiding or making claims to belonging to the slaughtered millions of the past?

These are dangerous waters. Perhaps it is not the necessity to remember the ancestral persecution that is called into question, but the illusion of heroism it so often entails. Those who profess contempt for their fellows living "in the forgetfulness of history," forget in turn that their own precarious identity rests on "the phantasm of history." On the vaporous webbing of such a past, a past that blesses all Jews with a multitudinous family far in time and vast in space, younger Jews sometimes feel they are nothing but spectators. Watching my grandmother light the Shabbat candles, say the ritual prayers as her hands drew opposing circles over the startled light, I felt no connection to the dark, ancient places of wood and winter mist and ancient languages from which she had come. She was my grandmother, but her existence started and ended in my present; she rarely spoke of other ancestors or of the place where she was born, so that in my mythology her brief, piecemeal stories had far less bearing on my life than the landscapes of Grimm and Alice.

If Judaism has a central injunction, Finkielkraut argues, it should be not "a matter of identity, but of memory: not to mimic persecution or make theater of the Holocaust, but to honor its victims," to keep the Holocaust from becoming banal, so that the Jews are not condemned to a double death: by murder and by oblivion. Even here, my connection to those horrors was vicarious: to my knowledge, we lost no immediate family to the Nazis; both my mother's and my father's parents had immigrated long before World War I to one of the colonies set up by Baron Hirsch for Jewish exiles in the north of Argentina, where gauchos with names like Izaak and Abraham called out to their cattle in Yiddish. I did not learn about the Holocaust until well into my adolescence, and then only by reading André Schwarz-Bart and Anne Frank. Was this horror then part of my history too, mine beyond the call of a shared humanity? Did the epithet hurled at me insultingly on that remote school bus grant me citizenship in that ancient, beleaguered, questioning, stubborn, wise people? Was I — am I — part of Them? Am I a Jew? Who am I?

Alice, a human child, and the fawn, one of the hunted, echo this last question, and like me are tempted to answer it not with words born from what they know themselves to be but with words coined by those who stand outside and point. Every group that is the object of prejudice has this to say: we are the language in which we are spoken, we are the images in which we are recognized, we are the history we are condemned to remember because we have been barred from an active role in the present. But we are also the language in which we question these assumptions, the images with which we invalidate the stereotypes. And we are also the time in which we are living, a time from which we cannot be absent. We have an existence of our own, and we are no longer willing to remain imaginary.

Meanwhile, in Another Part of the Forest

"The Seventh Square is all forest — however, one of the Knights will show you the way."
Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 2

IN THE DAYS WHEN I WAS an avid reader of comic books, the line that thrilled me most, because it promised to reveal something that had been taking place beyond the more obvious bits of the plot, was "Meanwhile, in another part of the forest . . ." — usually inked in capital letters in the top left-hand corner of the box. To me (who like any devoted reader wished for an infinite story) this line promised something close to that infinity: the possibility of knowing what had happened on that other fork of the road, the one not taken, the one less in evidence, the mysterious and equally important path that led to another part of the adventurous forest.

Mapping the Forest

Damn braces. Bless relaxes.
William Blake

In the middle of the third century B.C., the Cyrene poet Callimachus undertook the task of cataloguing the half-million volumes housed in the famous Library of Alexandria. The task was prodigious, not only because of the number of books to be inspected, dusted, and shelved, but because it entailed the conception of a literary order that was supposed somehow to reflect the vaster order of the universe. In attributing a certain book to a certain shelf — Homer to "Poetry" or Herodotus to "History," for example — Callimachus had first

and (as is the case in many spurious explanations of Shakespeare's homoerotic sonnets) to a bigoted interpretation, while prose can be less easily subverted for the sake of social decorum. Thomas Hardy suggested that a writer could "get away with things in verse that would have a hundred Mrs. Grundys on your back if said in prose."

A chronological list of gay fiction in English might begin with obscure novels such as Bayard Taylor's *Joseph and His Friend* (1871) or Theodore Winthrop's *Cecil Dreme* (1876), or with better-known works such as Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." (a short story written circa 1890); it might continue with Henry James's almost too subtle depiction of a gay infatuation, "The Pupil" (1891), E. M. Forster's posthumously published *Maurice* (finished in 1914), D. H. Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer" (also 1914), and Ronald Firbank's *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926), up to Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar,* one of the earliest mainstream fictional accounts of gay life, published in 1948 — the year that also saw the publication of two other gay classics: Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Tennessee Williams's collection *One Arm and Other Stories.* Similar lists could be made in the literature of other languages.

By 1950, two main trends in English-language gay literature had been established: one apologetically addressing a "straight" audience, trying to justify and atone for the fact of being gay; the other unabashedly celebrating another, equally vital sexuality and speaking mainly to an enlightened reader. *The City and the Pillar,* which follows both trends to some degree, is the first novel to make use of an important device (suggested perhaps by André Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt* of 1926) evident in almost all the gay fiction that follows it: the autobiographical voice. Edmund White, himself the author of one of the most influential gay autobiographical fictions in North America, *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), has remarked that "since no one is brought up to be gay, the moment [a boy] recognizes the difference he must account for it." Nongays learn about their sexual mores (mostly from conservative, sexist sources) in hundreds of different places: home, school, workplace, television, film, print. Gays are, by and large, deprived of any such geography. They grow up feeling invisible and must go through the apprenticeship of adolescence almost invariably alone. Gay fiction — especially autobiographical gay fiction — therefore serves as a guide that both reflects and allows comparison with the reader's own experience.

Much of this factual prose is illuminating and encouraging (something

much needed in the age of AIDS) and allows the reader to admit the fact of being gay as part of everyday life. Camille Paglia has commented that most gays, unlike other minority groups, do not reproduce themselves, and therefore, like artists everywhere, "their only continuity is through culture, which they have been instrumental in building." Authors such as Christopher Isherwood (*A Single Man*), David Leavitt (*The Lost Language of Cranes*), and Armistead Maupin (in his soap-opera saga *Tales of the City*) make this "continuity through culture" explicit: they place their gay characters in the midst of a multifaceted society, so that their reality is not "other" but "another," part of a historical cultural whole, with no reigning central entity determining what is normal according to his own image.

Because of the instructional use to which gay literature can be put, gay stories that bow to prejudice, implicitly accepting the patriarchal verdict about the wages of sin, commit literary terrorism and deserve to be housed on the same shelf as moralistic Victorian fables. A number of good writers fall into this category: Dennis Cooper, for instance, whose fiction depicts necro-homoerotic longings and explores the aesthetics of sickness and decay, with death as the inevitable end; and at times the timorous Gide, who believed that homosexuality was "an error of biology," and whose heroes are so terribly ridden by Catholic angst.

Because it needs to instruct, because it needs to bear witness, because it needs to affirm the right to exist of a group that the power-holding majority of society wishes to ignore or eliminate, most gay literature has been staunchly realistic. Lagging behind the rights demanded and partly achieved by other oppressed groups, gay men are depicted in a literature that is still largely at an informative or documentary stage. Women's literature can produce fantasies, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, black literature can invent ghost stories, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved;* with one or two superb exceptions (Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* come immediately to mind) gay literature has no fantastic stories, no imaginary worlds. Instead, its strength lies in the subversive possibilities of its language.

Appropriating everyday language, undermining the bureaucratic use of common words, using the guerrilla tactics of the surrealists to fill the commonplace with a sense of danger—these are the things gay literature, like any literature of the oppressed, can do best. Jean Genet, the French poet, playwright, and novelist who died in 1985, created, better than any other gay writer in any

language, a literary voice to explore the gay experience. Genet understood that no concession should be made to the oppressor. In a hypocritical society that condemns gay sexuality but condones the exploitation of women, arrests pickpockets but rewards robber barons, hangs murderers but decorates torturers, Genet became a male prostitute and a thief, and then proceeded to describe the outcast's vision of our world as a sensual hallucination. This vision was so unsettling that when Jean Cocteau showed Paul Valéry the manuscript of Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Valéry's response was "Burn it." In English, Oscar Wilde, Joe Orton, William Burroughs—all forced or voluntary outsiders of society—set social language against its overlords.

Perhaps the literature of all segregated groups goes through similar stages: apologetic, self-descriptive, and instructive; political and testimonial; iconoclastic and outrageous. If that is the case, then the next stage, which I think can be recognized in certain novels by Alan Gurganus or Alan Hollinghurst, introduces characters who *happen to be gay* but whose circumstances are defined well beyond their sexuality, which is once again seen as part of a complex and omnivorous world.

Marking the Trees

Years hence, perhaps, may dawn an age,
More fortunate, alas! than we,
Which without hardness will be sage,
And gay without frivolity.
Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse"

Naked except for a fur-trimmed gauze negligee and waddling about in bare feet, Cary Grant announced to an enquiring May Robson that he was thus attired because he had gone "gay." With this pronouncement in the 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby* the word *gay*, meaning "male homosexual," publicly entered the English language of North America.

It was not an auspicious beginning. Grant's usage reflected a stereotype: that being gay somehow involves dressing up in women's clothing, wishing to be the other sex, and consequently becoming an involuntary parody of a woman. Certainly some gay men dress up in drag, but all transvestites are not homosexual, and all homosexuals are certainly not transvestites. Society, for the majority of Grant's audience, appeared to be an immutable reality in

which men and women fulfilled certain specific roles, dressed in specific ways, and reacted in a specific manner, and the questioning of the necessity of these roles and styles was seen as deviant—and therefore wrong. Today, some of these perceptions have changed, but the changes have been mostly superficial. Beneath the apparently tolerant manners of Grant's new audiences, the same traditional standards continue to rule and the same old discomfort continues to be felt.

The historical origins of this meaning of the word *gay* are somewhat dubious. *Gai savoir* meant "poetry" in thirteenth-century Provençal, and as some troubadour poems were explicitly homosexual, it is possible that the word came to designate this particular aspect of their repertoire. Other inquisitive etymologists have traced its origins to Old English, where one of the meanings of the word *gal* was "lustful," as in modern German *geil*. Whatever the sources, by the early twentieth century *gay* was commonly used in English homosexual subculture as a password or code, and quickly *gay* or *gai* became the usual term for "male homosexual" in French, Dutch, Danish, Japanese, Swedish, and Catalan.

Gay is usually reserved for male homosexuality. Female homosexuality—lesbianism, to use the term still ignored in the 1971 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*—has a vocabulary and career of its own. In spite of the prejudice that views all unconventional sexualities as part of the same herd of sinners, and in spite of the common political force that results from being the object of such a prejudice, male and female homosexualities differ in their public image, their vocabularies, and their histories. Lesbianism, for instance, is empowered by its association with feminism—gay males have no such support from any equivalent male group—and lesbian acts are ignored in certain heterosexual codes of law; Britain's notorious anti-homosexual laws of the past century were designed exclusively for males, as Queen Victoria (tradition has it) refused to believe "that women did such things." In most countries, female couples are considered "respectable" while male couples are unthinkable except as an abomination, perhaps because in the heterosexual male imagination that dominates most societies, two women living together do so only because they haven't been able to acquire a man and are either to be pitied for this shortcoming or praised for undertaking on their own tasks that are normally a man's responsibility. Similarly, lesbian images are accepted—in fact, encouraged—in heterosexual male pornography, the fantasy being that

these women are making love among themselves in expectation of the male to come. The heterosexual male code of honor is thereby preserved.

A person not complying with these preset codes seemingly threatens the received identity of the individuals who uphold them in their society. In order to dismiss the transgressor with greater ease, it is best to caricature him (as the success of such pap as *La Cage aux Folles* seems to prove), thereby creating the myth of the Good Homosexual. The Good Homosexual, as in Harvey Fierstein's *Torchsong Trilogy*, is the man who deep down inside wants to be like his mother—have a husband, have a child, putter around the house—and is prevented from doing these things by a quirk of nature. Underlying the myth of the Good Homosexual is the conviction (upheld by the American Psychological Association until 1973) that a homosexual is a heterosexual gone wrong: that with an extra gene or so, a little more testosterone, a dash of tea and sympathy, the homosexual will be cured, become "normal." And if this cannot be achieved (because in some cases the malady is too far advanced), then the best thing for the creature to do is assume the other, lesser role designed by society in its binary plan, that of an ersatz woman. I remember a psychological test set for my all-boys class by a school counselor concerned with "particular friendships." A previous class had warned us that if we drew a female figure, the counselor would assume that our fantasy was to be a woman; if we drew a male figure, that we were attracted to a man. In either case we would be lectured on the terrors of deviancy. Deviants, the counselor had told the other class, always ended up murdered by sailors on the dockside. When my turn came, I drew the figure of a monkey.

The Forest in History

And warming his hands to the fire exclaimed, "Now where would we be without fagots?"
Sir Walter Scott, *Kenilworth*

Homosexuality is not always socially condemned. In other societies human sexuality was known to cover a larger spectrum. In ancient Greece and Rome, no moral distinction was made between homosexual and heterosexual love; in Japan, gay relationships were formally accepted among the samurai; in China, the emperor himself was known to have male lovers. Among the native people

reader or of the writer, is an inadmissible form of censorship that degrades everyone's humanity. The groups ostracized by prejudice may be, and usually are, cut off, but not forever. Injustice, as we should have learned by now, has a curious effect on people's voices. It lends them potency and clarity and resourcefulness and originality, which are all good things to have if one is to create a literature.

The Further off from England

"What matters it how far we go?" his scaly friend replied.
"There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.
The further off from England the nearer is to France—
Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance."
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 10

BETWEEN THE END OF HIGH school in Buenos Aires and the beginnings of a full-time publishing career in Europe, I spent a splendid decade in Paris and London reading in an almost perfectly haphazard way, dipping into books that were too expensive for me to buy, skimming over others that incautious friends had lent me, borrowing a few from public libraries for company rather than for instruction's sake, and hardly ever finishing anything. No method, erudite order, sense of duty, or rigorous curiosity ruled my reading. In body as in mind, I drifted.

The year of the Beatles' last LP I left Paris, where I had been living happily for a year or so, and settled for a few months in London, sharing a house with three other guys and paying five pounds a week. My Argentinean passport made it impossible for me to get a work permit in Europe, so I made a living selling painted leather belts, which I hawked on Carnaby Street and later in a store called Mr. Fish. My hour of glory came when Mick Jagger Himself bought one of my belts and wore it onstage during a concert. Life was never that magnanimous again.

But we trifle with Fortune. On the spur of the moment, I accompanied a friend back to Paris and spent a few days nursing a coffee at the Café de Flore and wondering why I had ever left this most rousing of cities; then, having visions of irate clients storming beltless up and down Piccadilly, I decided it was time to get back to London. This was in the prehistoric days before the

Eurostar, and the train fare was fairly inexpensive. I bought my ticket and set off for Calais in the late afternoon.

The caramel-colored coach of the express Garde-du-Nord–Calais, with cracked leatherette seats and curiously encrusted window frames, was not the most welcoming of places. I tried to read but felt distracted, uneasy. As we left the gray neighborhoods and started crossing the ugly districts of the northern *banlieues,* the entire coach seemed to be momentarily possessed by a mood of collective melancholy: the woman in the corner seat stopped humming, the baby stifled its crying, the rowdy group of adolescents talked no more, and in eerie silence we entered the flat countryside of Normandy under cover of darkness. We sped through Arras, a town I never visited, and which in my imagination carried the copyright of Saint-Exupéry. Then the air became musty and salty, and the signs along the platform announced that we had reached Calais.

Crossing what the British like to call the English Channel is, as everyone knows, a sickening experience, unrelieved by the sight of the white cliffs of Dover, which, in the pale moonlight, greet the nauseated traveler like huge piles of slightly off cottage cheese. I walked unsteadily up the gangplank and waited in line for passport control.

French ticket controllers are strict but just. One imagines them writing sonnets in the evening and tending to their fruit trees on weekends, rigorous in the application of both rhyme and aphid poison. Immigration officials are different. Whether French or British (especially in those days before the now quasi-borderless European Community), these clerks are ruled not by the Spirit of Justice but by the Phantom of Power, and they delight, like butchers, in holding in their cold hands your identity papers as if it were your liver or your shank. The officer behind the passport desk looked very much like Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*. He cast pale blue eyes on my passport, raised them to look at me, looked back at the passport, and once again at me. What he saw seemed to make him immensely sad.

I was dressed in the style appropriate to Carnaby Street at the time, in clothing found at the Marché aux Puces of Clignancourt. My sandals and flowing white cotton shirt were Indian, my cerise-colored trousers had bell bottoms, I was wearing a belt of my own design on which I had painted *Leda and the Swan* in the exact style (if I say it myself) of Poussin. My hair curled coquettishly over my shoulders.

"What is the purpose of your visit?" asked Peter in a low, pained voice.

Suddenly I realized that, just as if I'd been confronted by his namesake in Heaven above, I had to give Peter a good reason to let me into his kingdom. My brain made a quick deduction. This man was a bureaucrat. Bureaucrats are impressed by officialdom. My father had been, fifteen years earlier, the Argentinean ambassador. There are few people more official than ambassadors. In my best pseudo-Argentinean accent, I told him that I had come to meet my father, the ex-Argentinean ambassador.

Peter's eyebrows arched ever so slightly.

"And where are you to meet the . . . ehm . . . ambassador?"

Again, my brain desperately scrambled for an answer. Once I had stayed at a Salvation Army hostel in London, just across from (what seemed to me at the time) a very chic hotel. I remembered the name.

"Hotel St James,'" I said.

(Years later I found out that the St James is what the French call a *hôtel de passe*, lodging an inordinate number of Mr. and Mrs. Smiths.)

"Have you got a reservation at the . . . ehm . . . St James?" asked Peter.

"I think . . . father made reservation."

"Let us phone then, shall we?" said Peter.

By now the other passengers had drifted past and were boarding the ferry. I had no idea how I'd get across the Channel and on to London. I had ten francs and two pounds in my pocket. Hitchhiking in England didn't have a good reputation.

Peter put the phone down.

"At the St James they have no reservation for . . . ehm . . . Ambassador Manguel."

Another officer joined us. The hint of a smile appeared on Peter's face, dispelling some of the sadness.

"This gentleman says his father is an Argentinean ambassador and that he is to meet him in London, at the St James."

"At the St James?"

The other officer's eyes rolled up and down.

"I see."

"But they have no reservation under the name of Manguel. Perhaps we should call the Argentinean embassy."

I argued that there would be no one at this hour. It was shortly before midnight.

"We'll try, shall we?" said the other officer.

He tried and someone answered who obviously only spoke Spanish. The other officer handed me the phone.

"Ask him whether he knows your father and will vouch for you."

I asked, in Spanish, whom was I speaking to.

"This is José," said the voice.

"José," I said. "Whoever you are, will you please tell the officer that you know my father, ex-ambassador Manguel?"

"Sure," said José.

I silently blessed the Argentinean sense of camaraderie and passed the phone back to the other officer.

"He'll tell you," I said.

The other officer listened to Jose's declaration in Spanish.

"I don't understand what you're saying. Can you try repeating it in English? Aha. Yes. And what is your position at the embassy, sir? I see. Thank you."

He put down the phone.

"I'm afraid that the janitor's vouching for you isn't sufficient," he said.

In the meantime, Peter was going through my rucksack with keen interest. He opened my tube of toothpaste, squeezed some out, and tasted it. He flicked through my copy of *Siddhartha*. He sniffed at my joss sticks. Finally he found my address book. He disappeared with it inside the office. When he reemerged, he had a smile on his face, like that of Lawrence after the capture of Khartoum.

"It seems that you failed to tell us you were sharing a house in London. One of your friends there told me that you work selling knickknacks on Carnaby Street. I assume you haven't got a work permit? Now why would the ambassador's son do that?"

I was taken to a small white room with a cot and told that I'd have to wait there until the first train back to Paris. All night long I thought about what I was about to lose: my room, the books I had collected, my artistic career, which had received the blessing of Mick Jagger. Ever since I had started to read, London had been in my mind a sort of Garden of Eden. The stories I liked best took place there; Chesterton and Dickens had made it familiar to me; it was what to others are the North Pole or Samarkand. And now, because of two pesky, prissy officials, it had become just as remote and unattainable. Bureaucracy, unfair immigration laws, power given to blue-eyed employees

her place. Instead of despairing, she decides to wait until someone looks down to call her, saying: "Come up again, dear!" And then she'll ask: "Who am I, then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else."

The many faces (all our own) that await our inquisitorial eye in dreams and in books and in everyday life end up, alas, becoming real. At first their appearances may amuse us or befuddle us; after a time they cling like masks of flesh to our skin and bones. Proteus could change his shape but only until someone grabbed him and held him secure: then the god would allow himself to be seen as he really was, as a blending of all his metamorphoses. So it is with our myriad identities. They change and dissolve in our eye and the eyes of others, until the moment when we are suddenly able to pronounce the word *I*. Then they cease to be illusions, hallucinations, guesswork and become, with astonishing conviction, an epiphany.

PART TWO

The Lesson of the Master

"Come back!" the Caterpillar called after her.

"I've something important to say!"

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 5

Borges in Love

"'Tis so," said the Duchess: "and the moral of that is—
'Oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!'"

"Somebody said," Alice whispered, "that it's done by everybody minding their own business!"

"Ah, well! It means much the same thing," said the Duchess.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 9

ONE AFTERNOON IN 1966, in Buenos Aires, I was asked to dinner at the flat of the writer Estela Canto. A woman of about fifty, a little deaf, with wonderful, artificially red hair and large, intensely myopic eyes (she coquettishly refused to wear glasses in public), she stumbled through the small, grimy kitchen putting together a meal of tinned peas and sausages, shouting bits of Keats and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. To her, Borges had dedicated one of his finest short stories, "The Aleph," and she would let no one forget it. Borges, however, did not reciprocate the memory. At least when I mentioned her name and told him I would be seeing her, he said nothing: someone told me later that for Borges, silence was a form of courtesy.

By the time I met Canto, her books were no longer considered part of the Argentinean literary scene. In the wake of the so-called Latin American boom that had launched Manuel Puig's generation, editors no longer wanted to publish her, and her novels now sold at remainder prices in stores as dusty as her kitchen. Long ago, in the forties, she had written essays in the style of William Hazlitt (whom she admired) for several of the literary periodicals of the time, from the *Anales de Buenos Aires,* which Borges edited for a while, to *Sur.* Her realistic stories, which echoed (she thought) Leonid Andreyev's, had been published in the literary supplements of the newspapers *La Nación* and

reading a bilingual edition of Dante's *Commedia*. "I started Hell in English; by the time I had left Purgatory I was able to follow him in the original," he once said. When he wasn't with Canto, he wrote to her, incessantly, and his correspondence, which she later included in *Borges a contraluz*, is quietly moving. One undated letter, apologizing for having left town without letting her know, "out of fear or courtesy, through the sad conviction that I was for you, essentially, nothing but an inconvenience or a duty," goes on to confess: "Fate takes on shapes that keep repeating themselves, there are circling patterns; now this one appears again: again I'm in Mar del Plata, longing for you."

In the summer of 1945 he told her that he wanted to write a story about a place that would be "all places in the world," and that he wanted to dedicate the story to her. Two or three days later he brought to her house a small package which, he said, contained the Aleph. Canto opened it. Inside was a small kaleidoscope, which the maid's four-year-old son immediately broke.

The story of the Aleph progressed along with Borges's infatuation with Canto. He wrote to her, on a postcard, in English:

> Thursday, about five.
>
> I am in Buenos Aires. I shall see you tonight, I shall see you tomorrow, I know we shall be happy together (happy and drifting and sometimes speechless and most gloriously silly), and already I feel the bodily pang of being separated from you, torn asunder from you, by rivers, by cities, by tufts of grass, by circumstances, by days and nights.
>
> These are, I promise, the last lines I shall allow myself in this strain; I shall abound no longer in self-pity. Dear love, I love you; I wish you all the happiness; a vast and complex and closewoven future of happiness lies ahead of us. I am writing like some horrible prose poet; I don't dare to reread this regrettable postcard. Estela, Estela Canto, when you read this I shall be finishing the story I promised you, the first of a long series.
>
> Yours,
> Georgie

"The story of the place that is all places" (as Borges calls it in another postcard) begins with the summer of the death of the beautiful Buenos

Aires aristocrat Beatriz Viterbo, with whom Borges, the narrator, is in love. Beatriz's cousin, the pedantic and bombastic poet Carlos Argentine Daneri (it was rumored that Borges based the character on his brother-in-law, the writer Guillermo de Torre, who faithfully subscribed to the vocabulary recommended by the Royal Spanish Academy of Letters), is composing a huge epic poem that will include everything on earth and in Heaven; his source of inspiration is the Aleph, a place in which all existence has been assembled. This place, Daneri tells Borges, is under the nineteenth step down to Beatriz's basement, and one must lie on the floor in a certain position in order to see it. Borges complies, and the Aleph is revealed to him. "The diameter of the Aleph would not have been more than two or three centimeters, but the entire cosmic space was there, undiminished in volume." Everything appears before his astonished eyes in a Whitmanesque enumeration: "I saw the populous sea, I saw the dawn and the evening, I saw the crowds of America, a silvery spider's web in the center of a black pyramid, I saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), I saw eyes very close to me, unending, observing their own reflection in me as if in a mirror . . ." The list continues for another page. Among the visions, Borges impossibly sees his own face and the faces of his readers—our faces—and "the atrocious remains of that which had deliciously been Beatriz Viterbo." Also, to his mortification, he sees a number of "obscene, incredible, precise letters" that the unattainable Beatriz had written to Daneri. "I was dazed and I wept," he concludes, "because my eyes had seen that secret and conjectural object whose name men usurp but that no man has ever seen: the inconceivable universe."

Once the story was finished, Borges published it in *Sur*, in the issue of September 1945. Shortly afterward, he and Estela Canto had dinner at the Hotel Las Delicias in Adrogué, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. This was a place of great importance to Borges. Here, as a young man, he had spent a few happy summers with his family, reading; here, a desperately unhappy thirty-five-year-old man, he attempted suicide on 25 August 1934 (an attempt he commemorated in 1978, in a story set in the future called "25 August 1983"); here he set his metaphysical detective story, "Death and the Compass," transforming Las Delicias into the beautifully named villa Triste-le-Roy. In the evening he and Canto walked through the darkened streets, and Borges recited, in Italian, Beatrice's lines to Virgil, begging him to accompany Dante on his voyage through Hell. This is Dorothy L. Sayers's translation:

O courteous Mantuan soul, whose skill in song
Keeps green on earth a fame that shall not end
While motion rolls the turning sphere along!
A friend of mine, who is not Fortune's friend,
Is hard beset upon the shadowy coast.

Canto recalled the lines and told me that Borges had made fun of the flattery Beatrice used to get what she wanted. "Then Borges turned to me," Canto said, "though he could barely make me out under the misty street lamp, and asked if I would marry him."

Half amused, half serious, she told him that she might. "But Georgie, don't forget that I'm a disciple of Bernard Shaw. We can't get married unless we go to bed first." To me, across the dinner table, she added, "I knew he'd never dare."

Their relationship, such as it was, continued halfheartedly for another year. According to Canto, their breakup came about through Borges's mother, who, as her son's constant chaperone, had little regard for his women friends. Later, in 1967, after his mother had apparently consented to his marriage to Elsa Astete de Millán ("I think it will be all right for you to marry Elsa, because she's a widow and she knows about life"), Canto commented, "She's found him a replacement." The marriage was, however, a disaster. Elsa, jealous of anyone for whom Borges felt affection, forbade him to visit his mother and never invited her to their flat. Elsa shared none of Borges's literary interests. She read very little. Borges enjoyed telling his dreams every morning over coffee and toast; Elsa didn't dream, or said she didn't dream, which Borges found inconceivable. Instead she cared for the trappings that fame had brought Borges and which he so emphatically despised: medals, cocktails, meetings with celebrities. At Harvard, where Borges had been invited to lecture, she insisted that he be paid a higher fee and that they be given more luxurious accommodations. One night, one of the professors found Borges outside the residence, in slippers and pajamas. "My wife locked me out," he explained, deeply embarrassed. The professor took Borges in for the night and the next morning confronted Elsa. "You're not the one who has to see him under the sheets," she answered. Another time, in their flat in Buenos Aires, where I had gone to visit him, Borges waited for Elsa to leave the room and then asked me, in a whisper: "Tell me, is Beppo here?" Beppo was Borges's large white tomcat. I told him that he was, asleep in one of the armchairs. "Thank God," Borges

said, in a scene straight out of Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark*. "She told me he'd run away. But I could hear him and I thought I was losing my mind."

Borges's escape from Elsa was decidedly inglorious. Since divorce did not exist in Argentina, his only recourse was a legal separation. On 7 July 1970, his American translator, Norman Thomas di Giovanni, picked him up in a taxi at the National Library (where Borges had his office) and secretly accompanied him to the airport, where they caught a plane for Córdoba. In the meantime, instructed by Borges under di Giovanni's guidance, a lawyer and three removal men rang the doorbell at Elsa's flat with a legal writ and the order to take away Borges's books. The marriage had lasted just under four years.

Once again, Borges felt that it was not his destiny to be happy. Literature provided consolation, but never quite enough, since it also brought back memories of each loss or failure, as he knew when he wrote the last lines of the first sonnet in the diptych "1964":

> No one loses (you repeat in vain)
> Except that which he doesn't have and never
> Had, but it isn't enough to be brave
> To learn the art of oblivion.
> A symbol, a rose tears you apart
> And a guitar can kill you.

Throughout his almost centenary life, Borges fell in love with patient regularity, and with patient regularity his hopes came to nothing. He envied the literary alliances we encountered in our readings: the British soldier John Holden and Ameera, his Indian wife, in Kipling's "Without Benefit of Clergy" ("Since when hast thou been a slave, my queen?"), the chaste Sigurd and Brynhild from the *Völsunga Saga* (two lines of which are now engraved on his tombstone in Geneva), Stevenson and Fanny (whom Borges imagined happy), G. K. Chesterton and his wife (whom he imagined content). The long list of names of Borges's beloveds can be culled from the dedications to his stories and poems: Estela Canto, Haydée Lange, María Esther Vázquez, Ulrike von Kuhlmann, Silvina Bullrich, Beatriz Bibiloni Webster de Bullrich, Sara Diehl de Moreno Hueyo, Margot Guerrero, Cecilia Ingenieros — "all unique," as Bioy said, "and all irreplaceable."

One evening, over the usual colorless pasta at the restaurant of the Hotel Dora, he told me that he believed, with literary faith, in what he called "the

mystery of women and the heroic destiny of men." He felt unable to re-create that mystery on the page: the few women in his short stories are cogs in the plot, not characters in their own right, except perhaps the avenging Emma Zunz, whose argument was given to him by a woman, Cecilia Ingenieros. The two rival women artists in "The Duel" (a story that properly acknowledges its debt to Henry James) are sexless except in name, and so is the old woman in "The Elderly Lady." The shared woman in "The Intruder" is little more than a thing the rival brothers have to kill in order to remain faithful to each other. The strangest of Borges's fictional women, Ulrica, in the eponymous story, is less a woman than a phantom: she, a young Norwegian student, gives herself to the elderly Colombian professor Javier Otarola, whom she calls Sigurd and who in turn calls her Brynhild. First she appears willing, then cold, and Otarola says to her, "Brynhild, you walk as if you wished a sword between the two of us." The story ends: "There was no sword between us. Time drifted away like sand. Love flowed, secular in the shadows, and I possessed for the first and last time the image of Ulrica."

Borges's men, on the other hand, fulfill their heroic destinies with stoic determination, hardly ever knowing whether they have achieved anything, a few times aware that they have failed. The dreaming magus of "The Circular Ruins," who realizes that he too is someone's dream; the laborious novelist Herbert Quain, who admits that his work belongs "not to art, but to the mere history of art"; the metaphysical detective Erik Lönrrot, who goes willingly to his own death; the bull-faced prisoner in the labyrinth waiting patiently for his redeemer to slay him; the playwright Jaromir Hladík, for whom God performs a secret miracle to allow him to complete a play before dying; the sedentary Juan Dahlmann, who, in "The South," is suddenly offered an epic death to crown his quiet life—all these were the men whose fate Borges felt he somehow shared. "Plato, who like all men, was unhappy . . ." began one of his lectures at the University of Buenos Aires. I think Borges felt this to be the inescapable truth.

Borges had wished for a simple, uncomplicated union; fate allotted him entanglements that seemed plotted by Henry James, whose arguments, though he much admired their invention, he found at times too psychologically convoluted. His last attempt at marriage, to María Kodama, apparently took place on 26 April 1986, less than two months before his death, through a license issued in absentia by the mayor of a small Paraguayan town. I say "apparently" because the procedures were shrouded in confusing secrecy, and

time: "Every man is not only himself; there hath been many Diogenes, and as many Timons, though but few of that name: men are liv'd over again, the world is now as it was in Ages past; there was none then, but there hath been some one since that parallels him, and is, as it were, his revived self." Borges rejoiced in the paragraph and asked me to read it to him several times. He approved of Browne's seemingly naive "though but few of that name," which "makes him dear to us, eh?" and chuckled without really expecting an answer. One of the earliest of these "revived selves" is Tom Castro, the unlikely impostor from *A Universal History of Infamy*, who, though a semi-idiot, tries to pass himself off as the aristocratic Tichborne heir, following the dictum that one man is in fact all men. Other versions of this protean character are the unforgetting and unforgettable Funes (in "Funes the Memorious"), whose memory is a rubbish heap of everything seen throughout his short life; the Arab philosopher Averroës (in "The Search of Averroës"), who tries, across the centuries, to understand Aristotle, much like Borges himself in search of Averroës and the reader in search of Borges; the man who has been Homer (in "The Immortal") and who has also been a sampling of all men throughout our history and who created a man called Ulysses who calls himself Nobody: Pierre Menard who becomes Cervantes in order to write, once again but in our time, *Don Quixote*. In "Everything and Nothing" Shakespeare begs God to let him, who has been so many men, be one and himself. God confesses to Shakespeare that He too is nothing: "I dreamed the world [says God] as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms of my dream are you who like Myself is many and no one." In "The Lottery of Babylon" every man has been a proconsul, every man has been a slave: that is to say, every man has been every man. My list also includes this note, with which Borges ends his review of Victor Fleming's film *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde:* "Beyond Stevenson's dualist parable and close to the *Assembly of the Birds* composed in the twelfth century of our era by Farid ud-din Attar, we can imagine a pantheistic film whose many characters, in the end, resolve themselves into One, which is everlasting." The idea became a script written with Bioy (*The Others*) and then a film directed by Hugo Santiago. Even in Borges's everyday talk, the theme of all-in-one was constantly present. When I saw him, briefly, after the Malvinas War had been declared, we talked, as usual, about literature and touched on the theme of the double. Borges said to me sadly, "Why do you think no one's noticed that General Galtieri and Mrs. Thatcher are one and the same person?"

But this multiplicity of beings and places, this invention of an eternal being and an eternal place, is not enough for happiness, which Borges considered a moral imperative. Four years before his death Borges published one more book, *Nine Essays on Dante*, composed of pieces written in the forties and fifties and revised much later. In the first paragraph of his introduction, Borges imagines an old engraving found in a fictional oriental library, in which everything in the world is arduously depicted. Borges suggests that Dante's poem is like that all-encompassing engraving, the *Commedia* as the Aleph.

The essays are written in Borges's slow, precise, asthmatic voice; as I turn the pages, I can hear his deliberate hesitations, the ironic questioning tone with which he liked to end his most original remarks, the solemn recitativo in which he would quote long passages from memory. His ninth essay on Dante, "Beatrice's Last Smile," begins with a statement that he would have made in conversation with disarming simplicity: "My purpose is to comment on the most moving verses ever achieved in literature. They are included in the thirty-first canto of *Paradiso* and, although they are famous, no one appears to have noticed the sorrow hidden in them, no one has heard them fully. It is true that the tragic substance they hold belongs less to the book than to the author of the book, less to Dante the protagonist than to Dante the writer or inventor."

Borges then goes on to tell the story. High on the peak of Mount Purgatory, Dante loses sight of Virgil. Led by Beatrice, whose beauty increases as they cross each new heaven, he reaches the Empyrean. In this infinite region, things far removed are no less clearly visible than those close by ("as in a Pre-Raphaelite canvas," Borges notes). Dante sees, high above, a river of light, flocks of angels, and the Rose made from the souls of the just, arranged in orderly rows. Dante turns to hear Beatrice speak of what he has seen, but his Lady has vanished. In her place, he sees the figure of a venerable old man. "And she? Where is she?" Dante cries. The old man instructs Dante to lift his eyes and there, crowned in glory, he sees her high above him, in one of the circles of the Rose, and offers her his prayer of thanks. The text then reads (in Barbara Reynolds's translation):

> Such was my prayer and she, so distant fled,
> It seemed, did smile and look on me once more,
> Then to the eternal fountain turned her head.

Borges (always the craftsman) noted that "seemed" refers to the faraway distance but horribly contaminates Beatrice's smile as well.

How can we explain these verses, Borges asks. The allegorical annotators have seen Reason or the Intellect (Virgil) as an instrument for reaching faith, and Faith or Theology (Beatrice) as an instrument for reaching the divinity. Both disappear once the goal is reached. "This explanation," Borges adds, "as the reader will have noticed, is no less irreproachable than it is frigid; these verses were never born from such a miserable equation."

The critic Guido Vitali (whom Borges had read) suggested that Dante, creating Paradise, was moved by a desire to found a kingdom for his Lady. "But I'd go further," Borges says. "I suspect that Dante constructed literature's best book in order to insert a few meetings with the unrecapturable Beatrice. Or rather, the circles of punishment and the southern Purgatory and the nine concentric circles and Francesca and the Siren and the Gryphon and Bertrand de Born are inserts; a smile and a voice, which he knows are lost, are what is essential."

Then Borges allows us the ghost of a confession: "That an unhappy man should imagine happiness is in no way extraordinary; all of us do so every single day. Dante too does it as we do, but something, always, allows us to glimpse the horror behind these happy fictions." He continues, "The old man points to one of the circles of the lofty Rose. There, in a halo, is Beatrice; Beatrice whose eyes used to fill him with unbearable beatitude, Beatrice who used to dress in red gowns, Beatrice of whom he had thought so much that he was astonished to learn that certain pilgrims, whom he saw one morning in Florence, had never even heard of her, Beatrice who once cut him cold, Beatrice who died at the age of twenty-four, Beatrice de Folco Portinari who had married Bardi." Dante sees her and prays to her as he would pray to God, but also as he would pray to a desired woman.

O thou in whom my hopes securely dwell,
And who, to bring my soul to Paradise,
Didst leave the imprint of thy steps in Hell.

Beatrice then casts her eyes on him for a single moment and smiles, and then turns forever towards the eternal fountain of light.

And Borges concludes, "Let us retain one indisputable fact, a single and

humble fact: that this scene was imagined by Dante. For us, it is very real; for him, it was less so. (Reality, for him, was the fact that first life and then death had snatched Beatrice away). Absent for ever from Beatrice, alone and perhaps humiliated, he imagined the scene in order to imagine himself with her. Unfortunately for him, fortunately for the centuries that would read him, his knowledge that the encounter was imaginary deformed the vision. That is why the atrocious circumstances take place — so much more infernal, of course, because they take place in the highest heaven, the Empyrean: Beatrice's disappearance, the old man who takes her place, her sudden elevation to the Rose, the fleeting smile and glance, the everlasting turning away."

I am wary of seeing in one man's reading, however brilliant that reading might be, a reflection of his own self; as Borges would no doubt argue, in his defense of the reader's freedom to choose and to reject, not every book serves as a mirror for every one of its readers. But in the case of the *Nine Essays* I think the inference is justified, and Borges's reading of Dante's destiny helps me read that of Borges. In a short essay published in *La Prensa* in 1926, Borges himself had stated: "I've always said that the lasting aim of literature is to display our destinies."

Borges suggested that Dante wrote the *Commedia* in order to be, for a moment, with Beatrice. It is not impossible that in some way, in order to be with a woman, any woman of the many he desired, to be privy to her mystery, to be more than just a wordsmith, to be or to try to be a lover and be loved for his own sake and not for that of his inventions, Borges created the Aleph, again and again, throughout his work. In that imaginary all-encompassing place where everything possible and impossible is happening, or in the arms of the man who is all men, she, the unattainable, might be his, or if she still would not be his, she would at least not be his under circumstances less painful to bear because he himself had invented them.

But as Borges the master craftsman knew very well, the laws of invention won't bend any more easily than those of the world called real. Teodelina Villar in "The Zahir," Beatriz Viterbo in "The Aleph," do not love the intellectual narrator, Borges, who loves them. For the sake of the story, these women are unworthy Beatrices — Teodelina is a snob, a slave to fashion, "less preoccupied with beauty than with perfection"; Beatriz is a society belle obscenely infatuated with her obnoxious cousin — because, for the fiction to work, the miracle (the revelation of the Aleph, or of the memorable zahir) must take place among blind and unworthy mortals, the narrator included.

Borges once remarked that the destiny of the modern hero is not to reach Ithaca or obtain the Holy Grail. Perhaps his sorrow, in the end, came from realizing that instead of granting him the much longed-for and sublime erotic encounter, his craft demanded that he fail: Beatriz was not to be Beatrice, he was not to be Dante, he was to be only Borges, a fumbling dream-lover, still unable, even in his own imagination, to conjure up the one fulfilling and almost perfect woman of his waking dreams.

merely a hater of England. He is also an antisemite: that is to say, he wants to expel from Argentina the Slavo-Germanic community whose members boast names of German origin (Rosenblatt, Grünberg, Nierenstein) and speak a German dialect, Yiddish.

But beyond mockery, Borges thought that Jewish culture carried, metaphysically, a symbolic weight. He felt that Hitler was engaged in a purpose that was ultimately impossible — the annihilation of Jewish culture — because Jewish culture (Borges believed) stood essentially for the culture of humanity; if that were so, then Hitler's wish to eliminate the Jews was merely part of a cosmic machinery set up to prove *in aeternum* the Jews' survival. "Nazism suffers from unreality," he wrote in "A Comment of August 23, 1944," the day of the liberation of Paris. "It is uninhabitable; men can only die for it, lie for it, kill and wound for it. No one, in the intimate depths of his being, can wish it to triumph. I shall hazard this conjecture: Hitler wants to be defeated." Two years later, in the short story "Deutsches Requiem" (a sort of precursor to Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillants*), a Nazi officer attempts to explain himself and his deeds: "The world was dying of its Judaism and of that sickness of Judaism which is the faith of Jesus; we taught it violence and the faith of the sword. That sword will now kill us, and we are comparable to the sorcerer who weaves a maze in which he is forced to roam until the end of his days, or to David who pronounces judgment on a stranger and condemns him to death, and then hears the revelation: *You are that man*." At that point, the Nazi officer utters these powerful words of his own damnation: "If victory and injustice and happiness be not for Germany, let them be for other nations. Let Heaven exist, even if our place be Hell."

"Like the Druzes, like the moon, like death, like next week, the distant past forms part of those things that can be enriched by ignorance," Borges had written in "I, a Jew." In such a state, in which good and evil are swept away with the same indifference, the events of the past will be reinvented and a false memory will be set up as truth. This is what happens in one of his later stories, "Utopia of a Man Who Is Tired." Here Borges describes a nightmare set in the future, in which he is led by a guide who helpfully explains to him the brave new world. At one point Borges sees a domed tower. "That is the crematorium," his guide points out. "Inside is the lethal chamber. They say it was invented by a philanthropist whose name, I believe, was Adolf Hitler."

A dignified, self-effacing, intellectually honest man, Borges wished not to be remembered; he hoped that a few of his writings would survive, but to his

own fame he was indifferent. He longed for personal oblivion ("to be forever but not to have been," he says in a poem) and yet feared the capricious memory of History, or, rather, the capriciousness with which we tend to rewrite the facts of History to suit our meanest, basest impulses. That is why he despised politics ("the vilest of all human activities") and believed in the truth of fiction and in our ability to tell true stories.

Faking It

"Please your Majesty," said the Knave. "I didn't write it, and they can't prove that I did: there's no name signed at the end."

"If you didn't sign it," said the King, "that only makes the matter worse. You *must* have meant some mischief, or else you'd have signed your name like an honest man."

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 12

ON 29 OCTOBER 1932, THE Buenos Aires newspaper *Crítica* printed the following announcement in the abominable style to which its readers were accustomed:

"*Crítica* will publish the most thrilling detective novel. Its plot is based on events that took place in Buenos Aires. From a real-life occurrence that some time ago deeply shook the public of this city, the author has constructed a moving story in which the mystery becomes denser and denser with every page of *El enigma de la calle Arcos* [The Riddle of Arcos Street]. Who killed the wife of Galván, the chess player? Or was it a strange form of suicide? How did the criminal vanish after committing the deed? How did the criminal leave the victim's room without forcing a single lock? The pilgrimage of a chestful of jewelry. Beginning tomorrow, Sunday, in all our editions."

The success of the serial, which appeared under the impossible name of Sauli Lostal, led to its publication in book form a year later. On 4 November 1933, an advertisement in the same paper announced that *El enigma de la calle Arcos* was now available for sale. "The first great Argentinean detective novel. It stands apart completely from the old models of the genre, grisly and lacking verisimilitude. Full of emotion and realism, of spine-tingling and interest, it is a true accomplishment. A thick volume with illustrations. And only 95 cents." The book, published by the Am-Bass press, numbered 245 pages. The illustra-

tor was Pedro Rojas, whose style, to judge from the cover, matched that of the writing.

It is very difficult to give an English-speaking reader a sense of the atrocious style. Let me try:

> Moments later in the chamber adjacent to the guards' office, Oscar Lara and Suárez Lerma — the latter enjoying still a few sips of *mate* — were conversing about the motive that had led there, on such an unsettled night, the journalist. It did not take long for the assistant to convey to him the facts that the other was jotting down with special care. They had just finished this task when the tinkle of the telephone bell was heard. The assistant Lara approached the instrument, unhooked the receiver, pressed it against his ear and between the police official and the person who had called there commenced the following dialogue, later reconstructed by the speakers themselves.

Thirty years after the appearance of the novel, in the magazine *Filología*, the critic Enrique Anderson Imbert published an article titled "A New Contribution to the Study of Borges's Sources." In it, Anderson Imbert suggested that Borges had used *El enigma de la calle Arcos* as the model for his "El acercamiento a Almotásim" (The Approach to al-Mu'tasim"), a fiction that purports to be the review of a detective novel of that name, written by the Indian lawyer Mir Bahadur Ali. According to Borges, the illustrated original was published in Bombay in 1932 and reprinted by Victor Gollancz in London two years later, with an introduction by Dorothy L. Sayers and the omission ("perhaps charitable" says Borges) of the illustrations.

Borges's "El acercamiento a Almotásim" appeared for the first time not in a periodical (as did most of his pieces) but in a collection of essays, *Historia de la eternidad* (History of Eternity, 1936). The fact that it was published in a volume of nonfiction, in an appendix that carried the sober title "Two Notes" (the second "note" being an essay on "the art of insulting"), suggested to its first readers that Mir Bahadur Ali was a real person and that his book (under the respectable imprint of Gollancz) was available for purchase. Intrigued by Borges's enthusiastic review, his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares ordered a copy from London. Unsuccessfully.

Borges's text was to undergo at least two more incarnations. In 1941, he included "El acercamiento a Almotásim," this time obviously as a fiction, in

his collection of short stories *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (The Garden of Forking Paths). Three years later he included the whole of *El jardín* as the first section of what is perhaps his most famous volume, *Ficciones;* the second was called "Artificios" and comprised half a dozen new stories. Just to complicate things, in recent editions of Borges's books (the Alianza edition, for instance), "El acercamiento a Almotásim" was excised from *Ficciones* and returned to its place in *Historia de la eternidad.*

On 13 July 1997, in an article published in the literary section of *La Nación* of Buenos Aires, the Argentinean short-story writer Juan Jacobo Bajarlía attempted to better Anderson Imbert's guesswork and suggested that not only was *El enigma de la calle Arcos* known to Borges but that the master himself had written it. According to Bajarlía, the writer Ulises Petit de Murat (a friend of Borges's in his youth) had revealed to him, in confidence, that Borges was the author of that forgotten detective novel, which, Murat told Bajarlía, Borges "had composed directly on the typewriter, allotting to it a couple of hours a day."

One month later (17 August), the novelist Fernando Sorrentino published, also in *La Nación,* an answer to Bajarlía. Courteously, implacably, definitively, Sorrentino demonstrates the impossibility of such authorship. Offering factual, mechanical, ethical, and stylistic reasons, Sorrentino demolishes Bajarlía's arguments. First, Borges never learned to type. Second, Borges never wrote a novel, a genre he many times dismissed, at least as far as his own talents were concerned. ("To imagine the plot of a novel is delectable," he once said. "To actually write it out is an exaggeration.") Third (and this is perhaps Sorrentino's strongest point), the novel's turgid style and infamous use of the Spanish language is so far removed from Borges's careful prose styles (whether the intricate voice of his baroque period in the twenties and thirties or the sparer voice of later years) that it is impossible to imagine one man capable of both. "I believe that no one can write utterly in a style that is not his own," Sorrentino reasonably argues. "Even someone proposing the most outrageous parody will end up, sooner or later, showing his own style between the paragraphs he concocts." And he reminds us that, even on those rare occasions when Borges introduces an alien voice in his writing (as when he attributes an atrocious poem to his rival in the short story "The Aleph"), Borges's own intelligence, humor, and subtle vocabulary shine through the execrable verses. For Sorrentino, there is no such thing as the perfect literary disguise.

Here we could add that Borges had an uncanny ear for ugly prose, and he

And I'd play with more children, if I had another life in front of me.
But I'm 85 years old and I know I'm dying.

Three years later, a new translation of these verses, by Alastair Reid, who had previously made excellent translations of several pieces by Borges, appeared in the *Queen's Quarterly*. No one objected.

Then, on 9 May 1999, the critic Francisco Peregil published in the newspaper *El País* of Madrid the following revelation: "The real author of the apocryphal poem is an unknown American writer called Nadine Stair who published it in 1978, eight years before Borges died in Geneva, when she was 86." The text (as a piece of turgid poetic prose) appeared in the periodical *Family Circus* of Louisville, Kentucky, on 27 March 1978 and has since appeared, in a number of different versions, in all sorts of different places, from the *Reader's Digest* to printed T-shirts.

No doubt since the beginnings of literature, all manner of writings have been attributed to famous writers for a variety of reasons: as an honest intent to restore the paternity of a text, as a dishonest intent to lend it prestige, as a sly device to lend fame to the text's attributor. Borges himself, in one of his most celebrated stories, "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*," adds (ironically, of course) a further possibility to this list of intentions: to lend new life to a text, that is to say, a fresh reading, by considering it in a different and unexpected context. "To attribute *The Imitation of Christ* to Louis-Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce," Borges asks at the conclusion of the story, "is that not enough of a renewal for these tenuous spiritual admonitions?"

I am not certain that this is what the false attributors had in mind when they decided to blame Borges for *El enigma de la calle Arcos* or Nadine Stair's poem. In any case, whatever his accusers' intentions, Borges's suggestion merits exploration, since it may lend to the notion of "fake" a positive connotation that we usually deny it.

On Christmas Eve 1938, Borges left his house to fetch his friend Emma Risso Platero. He had invited her to dinner and was bringing her a present, no doubt a book. Since the elevator was not working, he ran up the stairs, not noticing that one of the freshly painted casement windows had been left open. He felt something graze his forehead, but didn't stop to investigate. When Rissa Platero opened the door, Borges realized, because of the look of horror on her face, that something was seriously wrong. He touched his

forehead: it was bathed in blood. In spite of first-aid treatment, the wound became infected, and for a week he lay in bed, suffering from hallucinations and high fever. One night, he found he wasn't able to speak: he was rushed to the hospital for an immediate operation, but septicemia had set in. For a month, the doctors thought that he might die. In his autobiography, dictated in English, Borges himself described the events, which later served as the basis for a short story, "The South." He writes: "When I began to recover, I feared for my mental integrity. I remember that my mother wanted to read to me from a book that 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 write a story. The result was "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*."

"Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*" appeared in the issue of the magazine *Sur* of September 1939. In this story, which appeared in the guise of a memoir contributed to a Pierre Menard Festschrift of sorts, Borges describes the apocryphal Menard's attempt to write *Don Quixote* again: not to copy it, not to effect a pastiche. "His admirable ambition," Borges writes, "was to produce a few pages that would coincide — word by word and line by line — with those of Miguel de Cervantes." The story was hugely successful. One literary gentleman friend congratulated him but remarked that the effort was somewhat useless, since any truly cultivated reader would know all those facts about Menard.

Borges's strategy is double-edged. On the one hand, he suggests (playfully, no doubt) that authorship is a casual, haphazard thing and that, given the right time and place, any writer might be the author of any text. The epigraph of his first book of poems, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, written when he was not quite twenty-four years old, already announces: "If the pages of this book deign to consent one happy verse, may the reader forgive me the discourtesy of having been the first to claim it. Our nothings barely differ; it is a trivial and fortuitous circumstance that you are the reader of these exercises, and I their writer."

On the other hand, Borges suggests, it is the reader who determines the nature of a text through, among other things, attribution. The same text read as penned by one writer changes when read as penned by another. *Don Quixote* written by Cervantes (cultured seventeenth-century scholar) is not that same *Don Quixote* written by Menard (contemporary of William James). *El enigma de la calle Arcos* attributed to Sauli Lostal is not *El enigma de la calle Arcos* attributed to Borges. No book is entirely innocent of connotations, and every reader reads not only the words on the page but the endless contextual waves that accompany his or her very existence. From such a point of view there are no "fakes," merely different books which happen to share an identical text.

Borges's own writings are full of such redemptive fakes. Among them, there are:

- Writers such as the already mentioned Mir Bahadur Ali and Pierre Menard, and others, such as the English eccentric Herbert Quain, author of infinite fictional variations of one ur-novel.

- Adulterated versions of scholarly sources, as in the "translations" collected in various volumes under Borges's name. Here it may be useful to note that Borges's first attempts at fiction were imitations of Marcel Schwob's *Imaginary Lives*, brief biographies which he wrote for the *Revista multicolor de los sábados* from 1933 on, and then collected two years later as *A Universal History of Infamy*. In these short texts, both sources and quotations used by Borges were transformed by him through interpretation and in translation. When the unspeakable Andrew Hurley translated *A Universal History of Infamy* in the abominable Viking edition of 1998, he attempted to "restore" the texts with ridiculous results. "I have used the English of the original source," says Hurley. "Thus, the New York gangsters in 'Monk Eastman'" (one of the stories) "speak as Asbury quotes them, not as I might have translated Borges' Spanish into English had I been translating in the usual sense of the word; back-translating Borges' translation did not seem to make much sense." Thus runs Hurley's confession of ineptitude. Hurley obviously ignores that Borges called these stories "exercises in narrative prose."

- Imaginary books carefully annotated, as in various sources given in his stories and essays, or quoted from, such as the unforget-

> table Chinese encyclopedia which imperturbably divides animals into "(a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) those that are domesticated, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous beasts, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a vase, (n) those that from a distance look like flies." And, of course, such mythical fake creations as the parallel universe of Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, and the Library of Babel.

And yet, all these fictions are never gratuitous: they are necessary inventions, filling in gaps that the history of literature neglected to fill. The Chinese encyclopedia quotation provided Michel Foucault with the starting point for *Les Mots et les choses*. "The Library of Babel" (and Borges himself, under the name Juan de Burgos) needed to exist before Umberto Eco was able to write *The Name of the Rose*. Herbert Quain is the required precedent for OULIPO. Menard is the obvious link between Laurence Sterne and James Joyce, and it is not Borges's fault that France forgot to give him birth. We should be thankful to Borges for remedying such acts of carelessness.

Fake, then, in Borges's universe, is not a sin against creation. It is implied in the act of creation itself and, whether openly recognized or adroitly concealed, it takes place every time a suspension of disbelief is demanded. "In the beginning was the Word" asks us to believe not only that "the Word was with God" but that "the Word was God," that *Don Quixote* is not only the words read by Menard, but that he is also their author.

Life, which so many times provides us with fake representations, provided Borges himself with a perfect simulacrum of a Borgesian fictional device in which the reader imbues a certain text with the required perfection of an all-encompassing answer.

In April 1976, the second world convention of Shakespearean scholars met in Washington, D.C. The high point of the congress was to be a lecture on Shakespeare by Jorge Luis Borges entitled "The Riddle of Shakespeare," and thousands of scholars fought like rock-band groupies for the privilege of occupying one of the seats in the largest hall available at the Hilton Hotel. Among the attendants was the theater director Jan Kott, who, like the others, struggled to get a seat from which to hear the master reveal the answer to the riddle. Two men helped Borges to the podium and positioned him in front of the microphone. Kott describes the scene in *The Essence of Theatre:*

> Everyone in the hall stood up, the ovation lasted many minutes. Borges did not move. Finally the clapping stopped. Borges started moving his lips. Only a vague humming noise was heard from the speakers. From this monotonous humming one could distinguish only with the greatest pains a single word which kept returning like a repeated cry from a faraway ship, drowned out by the sea: "Shakespeare, Shakespeare, Shakespeare . . ." The microphone was placed too high. But no one in the room had the courage to walk up and lower the microphone in front of the old blind writer. Borges spoke for an hour, and for an hour only this one repeated word — Shakespeare — would reach the listeners. During this hour no one got up or left the room. After Borges finished, everyone got up and it seemed that this final ovation would never end.

No doubt Kott, like the other listeners, lent the inaudible text his own reading and heard in the repeated word — "Shakespeare, Shakespeare, Shakespeare" — the answer to the riddle. Perhaps there was nothing else to say. With a little help from ailing technology, the master faker had achieved his purpose. He had turned his own text into a resonant fake composed by an audience full of Pierre Menards.

The Death of Che Guevara

"Supposing it couldn't find any?" she suggested.

"Then it would die, of course."

"But that must happen very often," Alice remarked thoughtfully.

"It always happens," said the Gnat.

Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 3

CAN WE READ POLITICS AS literature? Perhaps, sometimes, in certain cases. For example: on 8 October 1967, a small battalion of Bolivian army rangers trapped a group of guerrilleros in a scrubby gully in the wilderness east of Sucre, near the village of La Higuera. Two were captured alive: a Bolivian fighter, known simply as Willy, and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, hero of the Cuban Revolution, leader of what Bolivia's president, General René Barrientos, called "the foreign invasion of agents of Castro-Communism." Lieutenant Colonel Andrés Selich, hearing the news, scrambled into a helicopter and flew to La Higuera. In the ramshackle schoolhouse, Selich held a forty-five-minute dialogue with his captive. Until the late 1990s, little was known of Che's last hours; after a silence of twenty-nine years, Selich's widow finally allowed the American journalist Jon Lee Anderson to consult Selich's notes of that extraordinary conversation. Beyond their importance as a historical document, there is something poignant about the fact that a man's last words were respectfully recorded by his enemy.

"Comandante, I find you somewhat depressed," Selich said. "Can you explain the reasons why I get this impression?"

"I've failed," Che replied. "It's all over, and that's the reason why you see me in this state."

"Are you Cuban or Argentinean?" asked Selich.

"I am Cuban, Argentinean, Bolivian, Peruvian, Ecuadorian, etc. . . . You understand."

"What made you decide to operate in our country?"

"Can't you see the state in which the peasants live?" asked Che. "They are almost like savages, living in a state of poverty that depresses the heart, having only one room in which to sleep and cook and no clothing to wear, abandoned like animals . . ."

"But the same thing happens in Cuba," retorted Selich.

"No, that's not true" Che fired back. "I don't deny that in Cuba poverty exists, but [at least] the peasants there have an illusion of progress, whereas the Bolivian lives without hope. Just as he is born, he dies, without ever seeing improvements in his human condition."

The CIA wanted Che alive, but perhaps their orders never reached the Cuban-born CIA agent Félix Rodríguez, in charge of supervising the operation. Che was executed the next day. To make it appear that their captive had been killed in battle, the executioner fired at his arms and legs. Then, as Che was writhing on the ground, "apparently biting one of his wrists in an effort to avoid crying out," one last bullet entered his chest and filled his lungs with blood. Che's body was flown to Vallegrande, where it lay on view for a couple of days, observed by officials, journalists, and townspeople. Selich and other officers stood at the head, posing for the photographer, before having the corpse "disappear" into a secret grave near the Vallegrande airstrip. The photographs of the dead Che, with their inevitable echo of the dead Christ (the half-naked lean body, the bearded, suffering face), became one of the essential icons of my generation, a generation that was barely ten years old when the Cuban Revolution took place in 1959.

The news of the death of Che Guevara reached me towards the end of my first and only year of university in Buenos Aires. It was a warm October (summer had started early in 1967), and my friends and I were making plans to travel south and camp in the Patagonian Andes. It was an area we knew well. We had trekked in Patagonia most summers throughout high school, led by enthusiastic left-wing monitors whose political credos ran from conservatist Stalinism to free-thinking anarchism, from melancholic Trotskyism to the Argentinean-style socialism of Alfredo Palacios, and whose book bags, which we rifled as we sat around the campfire, included the poems of Mao Tse-tung (in the old-fashioned spelling), of Blas de Otero and Pablo Neruda, the stories of Saki and Juan Rulfo, the novels of Alejo Carpentier and Robert Louis Stevenson. A story by Julio Cortázar that had as its epigraph a line

from Che's diaries led us to discuss the ideals of the Cuban Revolution. We sang songs from the Spanish Civil War and the Italian Resistance, the rousing "Dirge of the Volga Boatmen" and the scabrous rumba "My Puchunguita Has Ample Thighs," various tangos, and numerous Argentinean zambas. We were nothing if not eclectic.

Camping down south was not just an exercise in tourism. Our Patagonia was not Bruce Chatwin's. With youthful fervor, our monitors wanted to show us the hidden side of Argentinean society — a side that we, from our comfortable Buenos Aires homes, never got to see. We had a vague idea of the slums that surrounded our prosperous neighborhoods — *villas miseria* as we called them, or "misery villages" — but we knew nothing of the slavelike conditions, such as those described by Che to Selich, that still existed for many of the peasants on our country's vast estates, nor of the systematic genocide of the native people that had been officially conducted by the military until well into the thirties. With more or less earnest intentions, our monitors wanted us to see "the real Argentina."

One afternoon, near the town of Esquel, our monitors led us into a high and rocky canyon. We walked in single file, wondering where this dusty, unappealing stone corridor would lead us, when up in the canyon's walls we began to see openings, like the entrances to caves, and in the openings the gaunt, sickly faces of men, women, and children. The monitors walked us through the canyon and back, never saying a word, but when we set up camp for the night they told us something of the lives of the people we had seen, who made their home in the rocks like animals, eking out a living as occasional farmhands, and whose children rarely lived beyond the age of seven. Next morning, two of my classmates asked their monitor how they could join the Communist Party. Others took a less sedate path. Several became fighters in the seventies war against the military dictatorship; one, Mario Firmenich, became the bloodthirsty capo of the Montoneros guerrilla movement and for years held the dubious celebrity of heading the military's most-wanted list.

The news of Che's death felt colossal and yet almost expected. For my generation, Che had incarnated the heroic social being most of us knew we could never become. The curious mix of resoluteness and recklessness that appealed so strongly to my generation, and even to the one that followed, found in Che the perfect incarnation. In our eyes he was in life already a legendary figure, whose heroism we were certain would somehow survive beyond the

grave. It did not surprise us to learn that after Che's death, Rodríguez, the treacherous CIA agent, suddenly began to suffer from asthma, as if he had inherited the dead man's malady.

Che had seen what we had seen, he had felt, as we had felt, outrage at the fundamental injustices of "the human condition," but unlike us, he had done something about it. That his methods were dubious, his political philosophy superficial, his morality ruthless, his ultimate success impossible seemed (perhaps still seems) less important than the fact that he had taken upon himself to fight against what he believed was wrong even though he was never quite certain what in its stead would be right.

Ernesto Guevara de la Serna (to give him his full name before fame reduced it to a simple "Che") was born in the city of Rosario, in Argentina, on 14 May 1928, though the birth certificate stated "June" to hide the reason for his parents' hasty marriage. His father, whose ancestors first arrived in Argentina with the conquistadores, owned a plantation in the subtropical province of Misiones. Because of Ernesto's asthma, which plagued him throughout his life, the family moved to the more salubrious climate of Córdoba and later, in 1947, to Buenos Aires. There Ernesto studied at the faculty of medicine and, armed with a doctor's title, set off to explore the Latin American continent "in all its terrible wonder." He was enthralled by what he saw and found it hard to give up the wandering life: from Ecuador he wrote to his mother announcing that he had become "a 100 percent adventurer."

Among the many people he met on this Grand Tour, one in particular seemed to haunt him: an old Marxist refugee from Stalin's pogroms whom Ernesto came across in Guatemala. "You will die with the fist clenched and the jaw tense," said this far-flung Tiresias, "in perfect demonstration of hate and of combat, because you are not a symbol, you are an authentic member of a society that is crumbling: the spirit of the beehive speaks through your mouth and moves in your actions; you are as useful as I, but you don't know the usefulness of the help you give to the society that sacrifices you." Ernesto could not have known that the old man had given him his epitaph.

In Guatemala, Ernesto became acutely aware of political strife and identified for the first time with the revolutionary cause. There, and in Mexico soon afterward, he became acquainted with the Cuban émigrés who were leading the struggle against the dictator Fulgencio Batista, whose corrupt regime had so fascinated and repelled Ernest Hemingway and Graham Greene. With a canny nose for troublemakers, the CIA agent David Atlee Phillips, appointed

stubborn determination, the role of the romantic fighter-hero and became the figure whom my generation required in order to ease our conscience.

Thoreau declared that "action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine." Che (who, like all Argentinean intellectuals of his time, must have read "Civil Disobedience") would have agreed with this paraphrase of Matthew 10:34–35.

The Blind Bookkeeper

I told them once, I told them twice:

They would not listen to advice.

Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 6

SOMETIME IN THE SPRING OF 1943, Northrop Frye wrote a paper which, a holograph note on the typescript tells us, was intended for an Emmanuel College publication "that never came off." Its title is "The Present Condition of the World" and its thrust the problem of steering "a middle course between platitude and paradox," between "Olympian detachment and Bacchic outcries" when discussing this condition, which, Frye reminds us, is one of universal warfare. With his habitual clarity, Frye warns us against judging that war reaps any benefits. "A corrupt tree can only bring forth corrupt fruit, and the notion that some good may be salvaged from this evil and monstrous horror is, however pathetic and wistful, a pernicious illusion." And Frye concludes: "And that such benefits will be 'worth' the blood and misery and destruction of the war is nonsense, unless posterity are insanely cynical bookkeepers."

Much of Frye's paper is concerned with the deistic society whose goal, he reminds us, is war. This is a truth very much worth recalling in our third millennium. It is of the essence, and we can only lament that Frye left his paper incomplete. But like all of Frye's writings, it is rich with tempting asides. One in particular, that of a certain actor in this warmongering society, may prove useful to explore. I refer to the bookkeeper, the person in charge of tallying the sum of our follies.

Bookkeeping is an excellent word. Its present meaning is fully justified. In the brightest of our mornings, when writing was invented, the first human to scratch a readable sign on a piece of clay was not a poet but an accountant. The earliest examples of writing we have, now probably destroyed in the looting of the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad, are two small tablets that record a

certain number of goats or sheep: the receipts, in fact, for a commercial transaction. Our first books were ledgers, and it should not surprise us that poets later retained the two essential characteristics of their accountant elders: the delight in making lists and the responsibility of keeping records.

Two of our founding books, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, excel in both. Their author agreed with Frye on the sterility of war and would never have suggested that the fruit of war is peace. Homer loathed war. "Atrocious," "scourge of men," "lying, two-faced," are the terms he uses to describe it. In Homer's poems, pity and mourning are never far from the battlefields, and it is not by chance that pleas for compassion begin and end the *Iliad*. The debits and credits in Homer's books are not those of our politicians. Homer the bookkeeper is never insanely cynical.

Who then are these sane and merciful bookkeepers who, like Homer, set our accounts in order? What characteristics must they have, or, rather, what characteristics do we imagine them to have so that they can perform their work efficiently? Why have we brought into being a Homer to father our two primordial stories?

The history of writing, of which the history of reading is its first and last chapter, has among its many fantastical creations one that seems to me peculiar among all: that of the authorless text for which an author must be invented. Anonymity has its attraction, and Anonymous is one of the major figures of every one of our literatures. But sometimes, perhaps when the depth and reverberations of a text seem almost too universal to belong on an individual reader's bookshelf, we have tried to imagine for that text a poet of flesh and blood, capable of being Everyman. It is as if, in recognizing in a work the expression in words of a private, wordless experience hidden deep within us, we wished to satisfy ourselves in the belief that this too was the creation of human hands and a human mind, that a man or woman like us was once able to tell for us that which we, younger siblings, merely glimpse or intuit. In order to achieve this, the critical sciences come to our aid and do their detective work to rescue from discretion the nebulous author behind the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or *La Vie devant soi*, but their labors are merely confirmation. In the minds of their readers, the secret authors have already acquired a congenial familiarity, an almost physical presence, lacking nothing except a name.

Homer begins long after the composition of his poems, a parent adopted, as it were, by his children. Long centuries of literary criticism lent him features both concrete and emblematic, first through apocryphal biographies, later as

an allegory, an idea, as the identity of a nation, and even as the embodiment of poetry itself. In every case, however, it was the readers who had first to conceive of an author for the poem to be conceivable.

This history of conceived authorship is, in some sense, a parallel history of literature. For the Greeks he was the beginning of all things Greek, of Greek civilization and history. For Virgil he was a Roman in all but birth. For the poets of Byzantium, he was a historian whose knowledge of humanity was great but whose knowledge of history was shaky. For Dante, a famous but retired craftsman. Thomas de Quincey, towards 1850, asked whether Homer (a name absent otherwise in Greek literature) might not be a deformation of the Semitic "Omar" and imagined him as a brother of the *Arabian Nights*' storytellers. The much-derided Heinrich Schliemann, following the divagations of the historian Karl Blind, suggested that Homer, like his Trojans, was Aryan, blue-eyed, red-haired, martial, musically gifted and philosophical. Alexander Pope likened Homer to an English gentleman. Goethe saw in Homer a self-portrait: perhaps for that reason in 1805 he chose to listen to the famous Homeric lectures of Friedrich August Wolf hidden behind a curtain, embarrassed at the description of a poet whose German reincarnation he felt himself to be. Samuel Butler argued, ironically, that Homer was a woman. For Rudyard Kipling, for Ezra Pound, for James Joyce, for Derek Walcott, and for Jorge Luis Borges, Homer was everyone and no one. The linguists Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord twinned Homer with the *guẓlars,* the epic Serbian singers who still chant their verses from village to village. In 2008, the German poet Raoul Schrott argued that Homer was inspired by the archaic songs of Sumer and suggested that he was a transplanted Middle Eastern poet who had learned his craft in Babylon or Ur. This Babylonian influence does not seem incongruous: the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has indeed an atmosphere not unlike that of the *Odyssey,* and the adventures of two men, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, whom the reader feels as one, are similar to those of a single man who calls himself Nobody and whom the reader sees as many.

A diversity of occupations, a diversity of influences, a diversity of ethnicities mark the long history of the man we call Homer. What no one, neither Aristotle nor Joyce, appeared to have doubted was that the main physical feature of Homer, real or imagined, singular or plural, must have been his blindness. Already the *Hymn to Apollo,* from about the seventh century B.C., tells the maidens of Delos that when a stranger asks them, "Who is the sweetest man of all the singers who comes here to you," they should answer, "The blind

man who lives in rocky Chios; all his songs will be the best, now and in the time to come."

But what reason might there be for always depicting our bookkeeper as blind? Homer's blindness is an unvarying trait in the numerous "Lives" of Homer that were produced from the fifth century B.C. on. The best known of these is a *Life of Homer* written in the fourth or fifth century B.C. and once attributed to Herodotus, in which it is stated that Homer was not born blind but contracted an eye illness while visiting Ithaca, the city where he also learned the story of Odysseus, which he would one day immortalize in his verse. The citizens of Ithaca were pleased with the synchronicity: the moment and place in which the poet was given his story were also those in which he was given his blindness, as if illumination within required the lack of light without.

But Ithaca's presumption did not go unchallenged. Where exactly Homer became blind held such obvious importance for his readers that the pseudo-Herodotus (whom we know to have been Ionian) went on to deny Ithaca's claim and argued instead that it was in Ionian Colophon that blindness had struck him. "All Colophonians agree with me on this," he added with assurance in his book. Other places could boast of having lent Homer family roots or a deathbed, and seven cities disputed his birthplace, but the site in which blindness overtook him was, in literary terms, of the essence.

Always, according to the pseudo-Herodotus, it was the poet's blindness that gave him the name by which we know him today. As a child, the future author of the *Odyssey* was given the name Melesigenes, after the river Meles; he acquired the name Homer much later, in Cimmeris, where the wandering poet had proposed to the local senate that in exchange for bed and board, he might make the town famous with his songs. The senators (in the tradition of most government bodies) refused, arguing that if they set this dangerous precedent, Cimmeris would soon be overrun with blind beggars (*homers* in Cimmerian) in search of handouts. To shame them, the poet adopted the name Homer.

Emblematically, blindness has a double and contradictory meaning. It is said to be vision-inspiring, supposed to open the inner eye, but it is also the reverse of sight, and stands for the quality of misguided judgment personified by the goddess Ate, the deity who causes mortals to make wrong decisions and become victims of undiscriminating Nemesis. The double quality of blindness is apparent in Homer's poems: at King Alcinous's court, where Odysseus is received incognito, the blind bard Demodocus perceives in his