Alberto Manguel

A Reading Diary

CANONGATE
Edinburgh · London · New York · Melbourne

A year of books

JUNE	*The Invention of Morel* by Adolfo Bioy Casares
JULY	*The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H. G. Wells
AUGUST	*Kim* by Rudyard Kipling
SEPTEMBER	*Memoirs from Beyond the Grave* by François-René de Chateaubriand
OCTOBER	*The Sign of Four* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
NOVEMBER	Elective Affinities by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
DECEMBER	*The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame
JANUARY	*Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes
FEBRUARY	*The Tartar Steppe* by Dino Buzzati
MARCH	*The Pillow-Book* by Sei Shonagon
APRIL	Surfacing by Margaret Atwood
MAY	*The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis

Foreword

"... that we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valour and generosity we have."

THOREAU, *Walden*

"Like every person of good taste, Menard abominated such worthless pantomimes, only apt—he would say—to provoke the plebeian pleasure of anachronism or (what is worse) to enthrall us with the rudimentary notion that all ages are the same or that they are different."

JORGE LUIS BORGES, *Ficciones*

THERE ARE BOOKS that we skim over happily, forgetting one page as we turn to the next; others that we read reverently, without daring to agree or disagree; others that offer mere information and preclude our commentary; others still that, because we have loved them so long and so dearly, we can repeat, word by word, since we know them, in the truest sense, by heart.

Reading is a conversation. Lunatics engage in imaginary dialogues which they hear echoing somewhere in their minds; readers engage in a similar dialogue provoked silently by words on a page. Usually the reader's response is not recorded, but often a reader will feel the need to take up a pencil and answer back on the margins of a text. This comment, this gloss, this shadow that sometimes accompanies our favourite books extends and transports the text into another time and another experience; it

lends reality to the illusion that a book speaks to us and wills us (its readers) into being.

A couple of years ago, after my fifty-third birthday, I decided to reread a few of my favourite old books, and I was struck, once again, by how their many-layered and complex worlds of the past seemed to reflect the dismal chaos of the world I was living in. A passage in a novel would suddenly illuminate an article in the daily paper; a half-forgotten episode would be recalled by a certain scene; a single word would prompt a long reflection. I decided to keep a record of these moments.

It occurred to me then that, rereading a book a month, I might complete, in a year, something between a personal diary and a commonplace book: a volume of notes, reflections, impressions of travel, sketches of friends, of events public and private, all elicited by my reading. I made a list of what the chosen books would be. It seemed important, for the sake of balance, that there should be a little of everything. (Since I'm nothing if not an eclectic reader, this wasn't too difficult to accomplish.)

Reading is a comfortable, solitary, slow and sensuous task. Writing used to share some of these qualities. However, in recent times the profession of writer has acquired something of the ancient professions of travelling salesman and repertory actor, and writers are called upon to perform one-night stands in faraway places, extolling the virtues of their own books instead of toilet brushes or encyclopedia sets. Mainly because of these duties, throughout my reading year I found myself travelling to many different cities and yet wishing to be back home, in my house in a small village in France, where I keep my books and do my work.

Scientists have imagined that, before the universe came into being, it existed in a state of potentiality, time and space held in abeyance—"in a fog of possibility," as one commentator put it, until the Big Bang. This latent existence should surprise no reader, for whom every book exists in a dreamlike condition until the

hands that open it and the eyes that peruse it stir the words into awareness. The following pages are my attempt to record a few such awakenings.

ALBERTO MANGUEL

Part One

2002

June

The Invention of Morel

SATURDAY

We have been in our house in France for just over a year, and already I have to leave, to visit my family in Buenos Aires. I don't want to go. I want to enjoy the village in summer, the garden, the house kept cool by the thick, ancient walls. I want to start setting up the books on the shelves we have just had built. I want to sit in my room and work.

On the plane, I pull out a copy of Adolfo Bioy Casares's *The Invention of Morel*, the tale of a man stranded on an island that is apparently inhabited by ghosts, a book I read for the first time thirty, thirty-five years ago.

This is my first visit to Buenos Aires after the December crisis of 2001, which unhitched the peso from the dollar, saw the economy crash and left thousands of people ruined. Downtown, there are no visible signs of the disaster except that, just before nightfall, the streets fill with hordes of *cartoneros*, men, women and children who scrape a living by collecting recyclable rubbish off the sidewalks. Perhaps most crises are invisible: there are no attendant pathetic fallacies to help us see the devastation. Shops close, people look haggard, prices jump, but overall life carries on: the restaurants are full, the shops still stock expensive imports

(though I overhear one woman complaining, "I can't find *aceto balsámico* anywhere!"), the city bustles noisily long past midnight. A tourist in a city that was once my own, I don't see the growing slums, the hospitals lacking supplies, the bankruptcies, the middle class joining soup-kitchen queues.

My brother wants to buy me a new recording of Bach's *Magnificat*. He stops at five bank machines before one agrees to release a few bills. I ask, what will he do when he can't find an obliging machine? There will always be at least one, he says, with magical confidence.

The Invention of Morel begins with a phrase now famous in Argentine literature: "Today, on this island, a miracle happened." Miracles in Argentina appear to be quotidian. Bioy's narrator: "Here are neither hallucinations nor images: merely real men, at least as real as myself."

Picasso used to say that everything was a miracle, and that it was a miracle one didn't dissolve in one's bath.

LATER

I walk past Bioy's apartment, next to the cemetery of La Recoleta, where the blue-blooded families of Argentina lie buried in ornate mausoleums topped with weeping angels and broken columns. Bioy, whose novels (whether set on faraway islands or in other cities) chronicle the phantasmagoric atmosphere of the city where he always lived, disliked La Recoleta; he found it absurd that anyone should persist in being snobbish after death.

I find Buenos Aires a ghostly place now. Gombrowicz, who came to this city from Poland in the late 1930s and left twenty-four years later, wrote on the ship that was taking him away for ever, "Argentina! In my dreams, with half-shut eyes, I search for her

once again within myself—with all my strength. Argentina! It is so strange, and all I want to know is this: why did I never feel such passion for Argentina in Argentina itself? Why does it assault me now, when I am far away?" I understand his perplexity. Like an ancient ruined city, it haunts you from a distance. Here the past is present in layers, generation after generation of ghosts: the people of my childhood, my disappeared schoolmates, the battered survivors.

In the *Magnificat*, the choir overlaps countless repetitions of "*omnes, omnes generationes*," crowd after crowd of the dead rising to bear witness.

In Buenos Aires itself, people don't see the ghosts. People seem to live here in a state of mad optimism: "It can't get worse," "Something will come up."

Remy de Gourmont (to whom Bioy owed an unacknowledged debt): "We must be happy, even if it is only for the sake of our pride."

Silvia, my old schoolmate, tells me that in my school is a plaque to the students murdered by the military. She says I'll recognize several names.

SUNDAY

Argentinians have long bragged about their so-called *viveza criolla*, or endemic cunning. But this trickster mentality is a double-edged weapon. In literature its incarnation is Ulysses, who was for Homer a clever hero—saviour of the Greeks, scourge of Troy, victor over Polyphemus and the Sirens—and for Dante a liar and a cheat condemned to the eighth circle of Hell. Though lately Argentinians seem to have confirmed Dante's dictum, I wonder if it's still possible to revert to Homer's vision and use this dangerous gift in

order to vanquish prodigies and overcome obstacles. I'm not optimistic.

Last December, in an angry article in *Le Monde*, I ended by saying that now "Argentina is no longer and the bastards who destroyed it are still alive." An indignant Argentinian psychoanalyst compared my conclusion to that of the European and American bankers who rejected all guilt for the downfall of the country and saw in it some kind of just retribution for Argentinian arrogance. Such an inane comparison is perhaps due to the psychoanalyst's own inability (like that of most Argentinians) to accept the fact that, if anything is to change, the country must redefine itself and, above all, establish an unimpeachable justice system.

IN THE EVENING

The experience of everyday life negated by what we want it to be, negated in turn by what we hope it really is.

The unnamed narrator of Bioy's novel is on the run after committing an unspecified crime, always believing that even here on this distant island, lost somewhere in the Caribbean, "they" will come and catch him. And at the same time, he more or less expects miraculous events: salvation, food, falling in love. From within the character, flight and fancy are coherent; from without, it is like watching the unfolding of a mad double reality, two-headed and contradictory.

The physical reality of the island confirms the narrator's impressions of nightmare, except that these are filtered, of course, through that same narrator's eyes. I sit in a café. Coffee is served with packets of sugar bearing the faces of famous twentieth-century characters. I can choose between Chaplin and Mandela.

Someone has left an empty Che Guevara sugar packet in the ashtray. Afterwards, I walk by a fresh pasta shop called La Sonámbula, "The Sleepwalker." The window of a prêt-à-porter is empty except for a large sign: *Todo debe desaparecer*, "Everything must disappear." Outside a pharmacy, a woman with a doctor's prescription in her hand is asking those who enter to buy her the medicine she needs, because she has no money.

Bioy's narrator has been warned not to attempt to reach the island because of a mysterious disease that (rumour has it) infects all those who land there, killing "from outside inwards." The nails and hair fall out, the skin and the corneas die, and the body lives on for some eight to fifteen days. The surface dies before the inner core. The people he sees are, of course, only surface.

But why keep a diary? Why write down all these notes? The mysterious master of the island, Morel, explains his reasons for keeping a record of his memories: "To lend perpetual reality to my sentimental fantasy."

I miss my new garden in France, my new walls.

MONDAY

Bioy—aristocratic, intellectual, lady-killer Bioy—describes or foresees the world of the common victim: a literary victim, of course, pursued by literary misfortunes. A Cuban friend once told me that, in Cuba, Bioy is read as a political fabulist; his stories are seen as denunciations of those unjustly condemned, hunted down, all those who suffer the fate of exiles and refugees. "I'll show how the world, by perfecting the police, the use of identity papers, the press, wireless, customs, renders any judicial error irreparable, and is now one undivided hell for all those who are persecuted." The tone (the words are spoken by the narrator) was meant to be

self-pitying; today they have a documentary ring. I wonder what Bioy would have thought of this reading, he who considered the label *écrivain engagé* a damning insult.

In *The Invention of Morel*, everything is told hesitatingly. The old trick: verisimilitude in fiction is achieved through a pretended lack of certainty.

MIDDAY

I meet Silvia at La Puerto Rico, the café my friends and I used to go to when we were in high school. It hasn't changed: the wood-panelled walls, the round, grey stone tables, the hard chairs, the smell of roasted coffee, even perhaps the same waiters, agelessly old, in stained white smocks. Silvia describes the state of the country as an adolescence come once again. More ghosts, studying for exams at that table, waiting for a friend at that other one, making plans for summer camp at the one over there—all people now disappeared, dead, lost.

In Morel's villa, which he calls a museum, the library contains (with one exception) only works of fiction: novels, poetry, drama. Nothing "real."

The English-speaking reader has not yet discovered the works of Bioy. Though his books are published in the United States, they are not read, and the first (perhaps only) novel by Bioy published in England was *The Dream of the Heroes*, in 1986. The ignorance of the English-speaking reader never ceases to amaze me.

TUESDAY

The magazine stands are full of glossy publications that track the lives of the rich and famous in exultant banality. Life carries on. Alfred Döblin ends his exile journal back in Baden-Baden after the

war and remarks of his fellow Germans, "They have not yet experienced what it is they have experienced."

My sister, who is a psychoanalyst and one of the most intelligent people I know, tells me that almost all of her patients are undergoing a crisis. But there is also a resurgence of the creative impulse: dozens of new literary and political magazines have appeared, and theatre and film have acquired a new life. The country's downfall has mysteriously given birth to a palpable atmosphere of creativity, as if artists and writers had suddenly decided to conjure up from the dust that which has been stolen from them.

Morel reminds me of certain characters (Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* or the faithful daughter in Merchant–Ivory's *Autobiography of a Princess*) who spend their days watching the past come to life on a screen. The theme of the loved one recalled as a projected image appears for the first time, as far as I know, in an 1892 Jules Verne novel, *The Carpathian Castle* (which, according to Gavin Ewart, inspired Bram Stoker's *Dracula*). In Verne's version, the eccentric Baron Gortz brings back to life the beautiful opera singer Stilla, who has died in the middle of her farewell performance, and with whom the Baron has been long and obsessively in love. In the end, it is revealed that what the Baron has recreated is not her flesh and blood, but merely her image captured on a glass pane, and her voice in a recording.

(I now remember an earlier example: the shadows in Plato's cave.)

Bioy follows the precepts of the detective novel: hide nothing from the very beginning, reveal nothing until the last possible moment. (Although, in *The Invention of Morel*, the revelation appears almost exactly halfway through the novel.)

The projected images of characters from Morel's past repeat pre-recorded conversations. In one of these (overheard by the narrator), Morel proposes as a subject the theme of immortality. A false clue, since immortality is not merely persistence. I'm reminded of the clinical nomenclature of the inability to forget: "perseverance of memory."

Proust: "Everything must return, as it is written on the dome of Saint Mark's, and as it is proclaimed, while they drink from the marble and jasper urns on the Byzantine pillar capitals, by the birds that signify both death and the Resurrection."

I had a discussion with Stan Persky on immortality. He argues against the alarms of dystopians that scientific advances will lend us, if not eternal life, at least the possibility of a lengthy enjoyment of the present. I'm not sure; I don't know if I want to go on for a very long time, a time beyond eighty or ninety years (already a small eternity). As I begin to glimpse the certainty of an end, I enjoy all the more the things I've grown accustomed to—my favourite books, voices, presences, tastes, surroundings—partly because I know I won't be here forever. Stan says that, given a sound body and mind, he happily wants this life to continue.

In his journals, Bioy recounts the funeral of the novelist María Luisa Levinson. Her body was displayed in a covered coffin with a small window. Someone remarked that there seemed to be sheets of newsprint covering her face. Her daughter explained that they had put pages from several newspapers inside, "so that if, in the future, the coffin was opened, people would know by the obituaries who was there."

LATER

I find it difficult to understand how, living in the Buenos Aires of

my childhood, I saw nothing of what was to come later. Swedenborg says that the answers to our questions are all laid out for us, but that we don't recognize them as such because we have in mind other answers. We only see what we expect to see. What then was I expecting when I was eight, ten, thirteen?

I remember the long conversations in cafés, in someone's room after school, walking down so many streets. A peculiar humour permeated all that talking: irony tinged with sadness, absurdity with gravitas. The people of Buenos Aires seemed to possess the capability of enjoying the smallest casual offering, and feeling the most subtle moments of misery. They had a passionate sense of curiosity, a keen eye for the revealing notion and respect for the intelligent mind, for the generous act, for the enlightened observation. They knew who they were in the world and felt proud of that imagined identity. Most important, there was in all this the *possibility* of a blossoming, a ripening. Economic constraints and their attendant politics, imposed from abroad by foreign companies not yet multinational, dictated many of the codes of society, and yet the questioning spirit of Argentinians, their particular wit, their melancholic bravery, held for their society something greater and better, beyond what seemed like passing spells of fraudulent governments. If misfortune struck, as it does sometimes anywhere on earth, then (Argentinians believed) it wouldn't last long; our country was too rich, too strong, too full of promise to imagine an endlessly bleak future.

Leopoldo Lugones, writing in 1916: "Politics! That is the national scourge. Everything in this country that stands for regression, poverty, iniquity, either stems from it or is exploited by it."

Today, at breakfast, my brother tells me that "only" ten percent of the judiciary system is corrupt. "Of course," he adds, "excluding

the Supreme Court, where every single member is venal."

WEDNESDAY

Perhaps out of modesty, Bioy, ardently Argentinian, lends his hero a Venezuelan nationality. *The Invention of Morel* ends with a nostalgic recapitulation of what his homeland means to the narrator. It is an enumeration of places, people, objects, moments, actions, snatches of an anthem. ... I could do the same to remember Buenos Aires.

Things I remember:

- the scarlet of the ten-peso bill
- different kinds of rolls sold at the baker's: pebete (sweetish, brioche-like dough), fugaza (flat, crusty), miñón (smaller and crustier)
- the scent of the eau de cologne the barber patted onto my father's face at the shop in Harrods
- a comic radio show on Sunday midday: *La Revista Dislocada*
- the sepia-coloured girlie magazines sold under the arches of Puente Saavedra
- the tiny turkey sandwiches at the Petit Café
- a strong smell of ammonia around the huge rubber trees of Barrancas de Belgrano
- the sound of the soda cart over the cobblestones outside my window
- the soda siphon and the bottle of wine on the dinner table
- the smell of chicken broth before lunch
- the large steamers moored at the port, reeking of smoke, ready to cross the Atlantic
- jacaranda trees in the early spring mornings

One of the earliest poems I learned by heart was Heine's "Ich hatte einst ein schönes Vaterland" ("Once I had a lovely homeland").

THURSDAY

Memory as nightmare: the narrator of *The Invention of Morel* dreams of a brothel of blind women which (he says) he once visited in Calcutta. In the dream, the brothel becomes a rich, stuccoed Florentine palazzo. Here in Buenos Aires, I dream in Spanish of people who never speak and can't hear me, and always of the city I knew, never as it is now. In my dreams, the Avenida 9 de Julio ends at Avenida Santa Fe.

Bioy's narrator has the impression that he is merely playing a game, not fighting for his life.

The day after tomorrow, I leave. I have lunch with my nephew Tomás. We talk about the betrayal of Argentina's history, and of his need to keep believing in the possibility of doing something positive. He is thrilled by a line he has read in Simone de Beauvoir: "I discovered with scorn the ephemeral nature of glory."

Perhaps, in order for a book to attract us, it must establish between our experience and that of the fiction—between the two imaginations, ours and that on the page—a link of coincidences.

MONDAY

I'm back in France. On the plane, I read an article on the so-called Argentine ants. Vicious fighters in their homeland, in Europe these insects have stopped fighting (for some undetermined reason) and with that surplus energy have managed to build a tunnel, six thousand kilometres long, from northern Spain to southern Italy.

Today I start setting up my library.

The shelves are ready, waxed and clean. I realize that before I can put the books in place, I have to open all the boxes, since the subjects are mixed up and I won't otherwise know how much space I need for, say, detective novels or the works of Bioy. In one of the first boxes I find a copy of Bioy's *La otra aventura*, a collection of essays I edited when I worked for the publisher Galerna in Buenos Aires. I was twenty years old, and we were three in the company: the editor, his wife and I. The book is small, 8½ by 17½ centimetres, with a black line drawing on a red background. I remember going to Bioy's house to pick up the manuscript, a bundle of carbon copies, and reading them on the bus back home.

That was in the early months of 1968. Just over thirty years later I saw Bioy again, weeks before his death. He had shrivelled into a frail, bony man who mumbled his words, but his eyes were still extraordinarily bright. He told me that he had thought of the plot for a new novel, a fantastic novel. "There will be an island in it," he said. And then, with a smile, "Again."

I have a photo of Bioy aged seventeen, in profile, bearded, classically handsome. I also have one of him at that last meeting, shoulders hunched, cheeks caved in. It isn't certain that Morel would have chosen to preserve the young man rather than the dying one, the image of what was over the image of what would be. Morel says to the image of his beloved Faustine (with whom the narrator also has fallen in love), "The influence of the future on the past." Exactly.

What others see as our finest achievements are often not what we ourselves see. Edith Sorel once interviewed Marc Chagall in his house in St-Paul-de-Vence. The painter was in his mid-eighties and was living with his second wife, Vava, whom he had married a decade earlier. Edith was asking Chagall about how it felt to be one

of the world's most famous artists, when Vava excused herself and left the room for a minute. Chagall quickly grabbed Edith's hand, pointed to his departing wife and, his face glowing with pleasure, whispered, "She's a Brodsky!" For the poor Jewish boy who had grown up in the shtetl of Vitebsk, more than any artistic fame, what filled him with pride was having married the daughter of a rich merchant family.

Who is Faustine? Who was she in Bioy's mind? I've just read that the Argentinian Inés Schmidt became the model for Rosa Fröhlich, the Marlene Dietrich character in *The Blue Angel*, after Heinrich Mann met her in Florence in 1905.

TUESDAY

I'm in my library, surrounded by empty shelves and growing columns of books. It occurs to me that I can trace all my memories through these piling-up volumes. Then suddenly everything seems redundant, all this accumulation of printed paper. Unless it is my own experience that isn't necessary. It is like the double reality that the narrator experiences when he quotes Cicero: "The two suns that, as I heard from my father, were seen during the Consulate of Tuditanus and Aquilius." Impossibly, the narrator finds in the house an identical copy of the pamphlet he is carrying in his pocket: not two copies of the same pamphlet but twice the same copy. Double reality obliterates itself; that is why meeting our doppelgänger means that we must die.

Title for an essay: "The Library as Doppelgänger."

The room in which my library is to be lodged seems to me huge, and as the books begin to fill it, even more so. I pick up a collection by the Iraqi poet Bakr Al-Sayyab and read:

My new room

Is vast, vaster indeed
Than my tomb shall be.

For years, for lack of space, I kept most of my books in storage. I used to think I could hear them call out to me at night. Now I stand for a long time among them all, flooded with images, bits of remembered text, quotations in random order, titles and names. I find my early copy of *The Invention of Morel*: the second edition, published by *Sur* in 1948, the year I was born.

FRIDAY

Several days of unpacking, and many weeks more to come. Memories and false memories. I think I remember something in a certain way, distinctly. A note on the endpaper pages of a book I open by chance tells me I'm wrong; the event happened somewhere else, with someone else, at a different time. Bioy's narrator: "Our habits suppose a certain way in which things take place, a vague coherence of the world. Now reality appears to me changed, unreal."

Papers that have fluttered out of my books as I dust: a Buenos Aires tramway ticket (trams stopped running in the late sixties); a phone number and a name I can't place; a line, "*laudant illa sed ista legunt*"; a bookmark from the now defunct Librairie Maspéro in Paris; a ticket stub for Grease; a stub for an Athens–Toronto flight; a bill for books from Thorpe's in Guildford, still in shillings and pence; a sticker from Mitchell's Bookstore in Buenos Aires; a drawing of two ducks or two doves done in red crayon; a Spanish playing card, the ten of clubs; the address of Estela Ocampo in Barcelona; a receipt from a store in Milan for a hat I don't remember ever owning; a passport photo of Severo Sarduy; a brochure from the Huntington Library in Pasadena; an envelope addressed to me on George Street in Toronto.

andalou was projected onto one of the walls. The architect of this nightmare was an Austrian-born Frenchman, Alfonso Laurencic, who called his creations "psychotechnic torture."

LATE AFTERNOON

I will sleep one night in the library to make the space truly mine. C. says that this is equivalent to a dog peeing in the corners.

Morel's first idea is to construct an anthology of images exhibited as mementoes; that is why the villa is called a museum. He suggests that our technology is constantly inventing machines "to counterbalance absence." Absence, he argues, is merely spatial, and he imagines that every voice, every image produced by those no longer alive is preserved somewhere, forever. One day, he hopes, there will be a machine capable of rebuilding everything, like an alphabet that allows us to understand and compose any possible word. Then, he says, "life will be a storage-room for death." One single advantage for Morel's people-images: they have no memory of the repetition; they relive the moment as if it were always the first time.

It is said that those who don't visit the Chapel of San Andrés de Teixido in Galicia during their lifetime must do so after death. "*A San Andrés de Teixido vai de morto quen non foi de vivo.*"

A definition of hell: every one of our acts, our utterances, our thoughts preserved since the beginning of time, increasing infinity by an infinite number of infinities, a repetition from which there is no escape.

THURSDAY

I see (I hadn't remembered) that the narrator hears Faustine speak of Canada, my Canada. Since I became a Canadian citizen in 1985,

I've enjoyed finding references to Canada in unexpected places and I've become attentive to capital Cs on the page. I'm aware that, for Bioy, Canada was equivalent to Shangri-La without the exoticism: mere distance, the archetypal faraway place. It is curious how readers form their own text by remarking on certain words, certain names that have a private meaning, that echo for them alone and are unnoticed by any other. This reminds me of the anonymous reviewer of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* who, in the English magazine *Horse & Hound*, remarked that Lawrence's book contained fine descriptions of the British countryside, unfortunately marred by certain sentimental or erotic digressions.

Hubert Nyssen asks me if I've ever thought that the brain is like a folded codex of almost limitless memory: the mind as book.

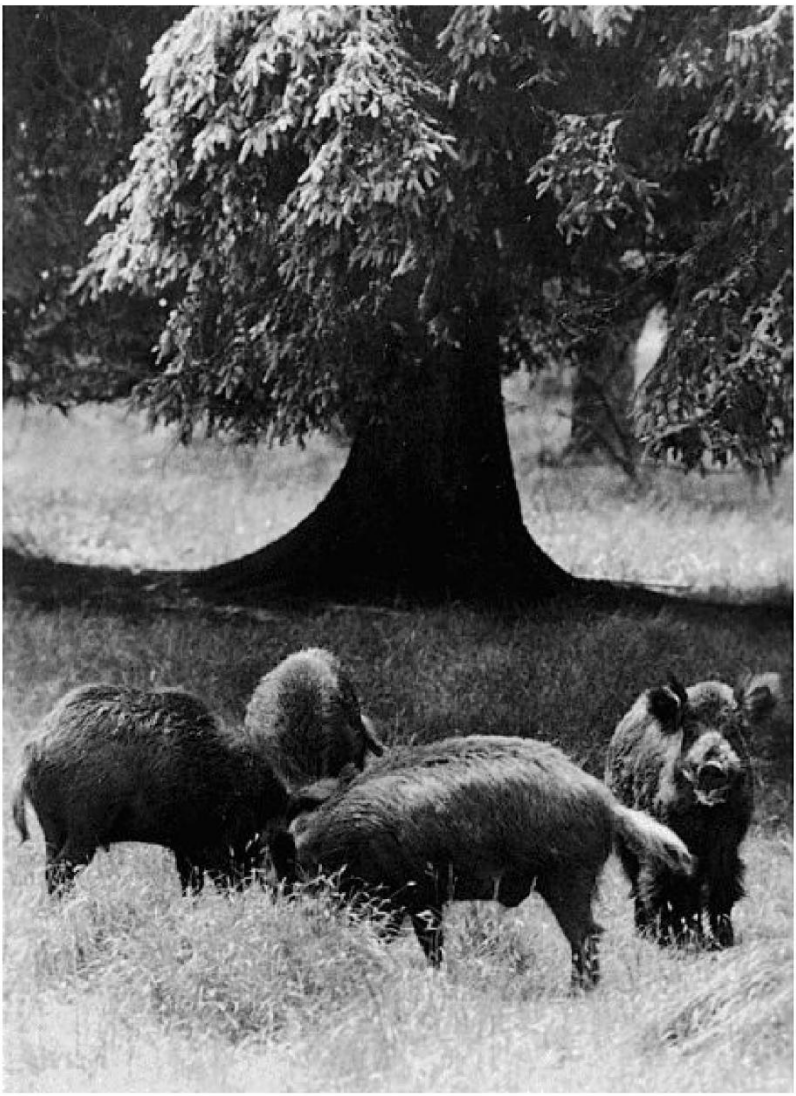
FRIDAY

I've finished *The Invention of Morel*, again. Bioy's voice echoes in the room. I pick up his diary to read this evening, before I fall asleep.

The books I take up to my bed at night and the books I sort out in the library during the day are different books. The former impose on me their time and length, their own rhythm of telling before I fall asleep; the latter are ruled by my own notions of order and categories, and obey me almost blindly (sometimes they rebel and I have to change their place on the shelf).

What company will Bioy's novels keep when the library is all set up? In what grouping will I find them? Where will *The Invention of Morel* sit after all these towering columns of books are up on the shelves? (If I keep them in alphabetical order, grouped by language, Bioy's novels will be preceded by the poems of Jaime Gil de Biedma and will be followed by the superb short stories of Isidoro Blaisten.)

I find this comment in Bioy's diary: "I've always said that I write for the reader, but the fact that I continue writing today, when readers (whole-hearted, full-blooded readers) have vanished, proves irrefutably that I write simply for myself."



July

The Island of Dr. Moreau

TUESDAY

I'm on the Eurostar to London. The air conditioning doesn't seem to be working and it's humid and hot. Two women in front of me have been talking ever since we left Paris, too low for me to catch every word but not low enough for me to be able to shut them out. Their voices grate, one especially, and my head is drumming. Then the one with the less grating voice says, quite distinctly, "He curled up in a little ball and died."

A dog? A cat? Was she describing the death of someone she knew? I have the feeling of having walked into a story whose beginning and end I'll never know.

I try to go back to my book, H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, in a pocket hardcover Everyman edition I've had since high school. The first time I read *Dr. Moreau* was during the summer holidays. I was twelve, the book a birthday present from my best friend, Lenny Fagin. That was a lucky summer; in the quiet country house we had rented near Buenos Aires, I discovered Nicholas Blake's *The Beast Must Die*, the stories of Horacio Quiroga, Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. Now Wells was to be added to my desert island hoard.

I knew nothing of either the book or the author; I shared the uncertainty of the protagonist—"Edward Prendick, a private