

# **A Chain of Endless Tigers: Borges at the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, April 9, 1976**

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Resource Center. These films may now be accessed at: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPpNc-fVwbPG8jFo5WmPh\\_OllJoym5\\_1k](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPpNc-fVwbPG8jFo5WmPh_OllJoym5_1k). A special thank you to Donald Yates for his assistance editing the transcription.

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I am about to talk of the writer—not of the average writer, for there is no such person of course. Not the Platonic writer, he may exist in some Platonic heaven, and of course I share with him, as all other writers do—but of a certain writer who happened to be born in downtown Buenos Aires, I am told in 1899. I know those things from hearsay, they may not be true. As a good solipsist, I suspect that those things never happened. But I go back to a memory, my memory also may be an invention for all I know, but I go back to my earliest memory and I think, not of that large house in downtown Buenos Aires with the two patios, with a cistern, with the turtles inside the cistern, and the last patio, that had once been the patio of the slaves, but I think of a certain library. I think of my father's library in a suburb to the North of Buenos Aires—we called it Palermo. I suppose the place hardly exists now; things are so changed. But they exist in my memory, and memory, of course, is perhaps far more real than actual experience, since actual experience takes things for granted and goes onto other things. But memory loves to linger. Memory loves to stay.

I think of that library. It seemed to me an endless library. A library, a rambling library, composed mostly of English books. This I think, was a blessing to me. For, though I was born to two languages—to Spanish and to English—poetry and literature came to me through English. So when I speak, let's say of *The Thousand and One Nights*, or as Captain Burton has it, of *The Book of One Thousand Nights and One Night*, I'm really thinking of Burton's translation. But when I speak of the Bible, I am speaking not of the Hebrew version, I don't know Hebrew, but of the King James Bible. And so also poetry came to me through the English language and through the English music. I remember my father intoning the verses of Swinburne, of Keats, of Shelley, of FitzGerald, who in a sense invented *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. And those words taught me that language

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could not only be a means of communication, but could also be a music, a witchcraft and a spell. And when I read those verses today, my mother used to tell me—my mother who died in July of last year—my mother used to tell me that I was intoning them with the very voice of my father. So although my father died in 1938, his voice still lives in me, and his love of English poetry. And when I say, for example, “Dreaming when Dawn's left hand was in the sky,” well you're hearing now my father's voice, not my own. So that, poetry came to through English. And then also, so many other gifts.

Of course, I knew that they were gifts. I was aware of that. And they were far finer gifts than the gifts I got, for example, on my birthdays and on Christmas. Since, as a child, I always felt that I was unworthy of gifts. I always felt, “What have I done to be given gifts? I have done nothing at all.” Of course, I could not word that feeling because children are shy, children are somehow mysterious, mysterious with their shyness. So I could not say that. But the other gifts, those were showered on me. I suppose, since I feel grateful to them, I should name them now. For example, the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* by Edgar Allan Poe. And then later on, the *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, one of the finest books ever written, I should say. In the last chapter we get the strange concept of white being a nightmare color. And I suppose that when Herman Melville wrote his *Moby Dick: or, The White Whale*, he was thinking in terms of Edgar Allan Poe's *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*. He thought that quite commonplace thing, white, might be made into nightmare even if we all tend to make of black or scarlet a nightmare. But he did a finer thing. He made of white a nightmare.

Well I read those stories and then other nightmares came into my world. They were fine nightmares. I am talking of *The Time Machine*, of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, of *The Country of the Blind*, of *The First Men in the Moon*, of *The Invisible Man*, and the further fine literary nightmares of H.G. Wells. Those had been written a few years before and I was reading them in Buenos Aires. And I also read a writer who has been read throughout my life. I am talking of Rudyard Kipling. Kipling is judged by his political opinions. I suppose those opinions may have been wrong; I think of them having been right. I think the British Empire made for good. But that is neither here nor there. I do not think a writer should be judged by his

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opinions, since, after all, opinions are on the surface, when writing comes from something deeper down.

So I remember reading, as a boy, the *Plain Tales from the Hills*. I did not understand them quite well. But after all, what does it mean to understand a book? I don't think anyone who takes a book, who analyzes it, understands it. The only person who understands a book is a person who feels the book. The person who gets the feeling of the book. Even as the only way to understand a woman is to be in love with her. Well, I remember reading those books, and also other books that seem to have been with me all the time. Robert Louis Stevenson, that fine Scottish writer, I came to him through *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. I have seen films made on that book afterwards, film scripts and I think a mistake is always committed. The mistake of having the same actor play Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Since you see Dr. Jekyll becoming Mr. Hyde, you know all about him, while the readers of the book have the two characters. Those characters, if you remember, were different. Remember that Dr. Jekyll was a stout, portly, tallish man, while the other was darker, shorter, although something seemed to be wrong about him but you couldn't lay your finger on it. And he was younger. Then in the end, we find that those two characters are the same, that they blend into the same man. Now that is carefully avoided by the film people, who have the same actor playing the two roles. And that kind thing, that kind of mistake has been committed over and over again. I've seen three films of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and I've seen that mistake going on. Then there's another book I read, one of the few Spanish books my father had in his library. And that book was *Don Quixote*. You've been hearing all of *Don Quixote*. I remember that first, that edition. I remember the steel engravings. And at first I was rather put out by the language. The language seemed to me unnatural. The Spanish was not the kind of Spanish I heard. But somehow, the story of Alonso Quijano, who dreamt, who did his best to dream himself into Don Quixote, and eventually became Don Quixote and who in the last chapter finds out that he's not Don Quixote but Alonso Quijano, that story has been with me throughout my life. I think it one of the finest stories in the world. For people who have not read it—and I suppose there are unhappy people, or rather happy people, since they have that happiness in store—I would tell them to begin with the second part. The first part is not much account.

Cervantes is certainly shaky about it, had to work in romantic tales; he thought it might bore readers otherwise. But the second part is very fine, it's really one of the greatest novels in the world. And they will find many strange facts. For example, the characters in the second part of *Don Quixote* have read *Don Quixote*. They know all about the book. All this of course was followed later on by Pirandello. But I think Cervantes did it in a finer way and in a more subtle kind of way.

Well, I seem to have been reading that book all the time. And there were other books I read. Why should I not speak on the first book I read on Buddhism: *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold. And why not remember those perhaps not too fine verses I read, but that somehow stuck in my mind after I read them. That would have been in 1908 or 1910; I was a boy then. But boys are very sensitive to reading. In fact, you might say that you only read when you are a boy or a young man. After that, you may discover a new poet, you may discover Robert Frost, for example, as I discovered him. But that discovery is not a major event in your life. You read it, you analyze it, you catalogue it, you do with it as Doctor Dryasdust by T. Carlyle did. And then you go on to other things. Why when you're a boy, when you're a young man, then you're swept off your feet by beauty. You say, as a great Andalusian writer said, "Oh Lord. There is too much beauty in the world. Let there be not... so much beauty." And I suppose if we were sensitive to things, we would feel poetry not always belonging to certain things, let's say to Greek mythology, to a sunset, to a lost love, to the hope of coming love. But we should think of poetry as being with us all the time. I suppose God thinks of the world in that way. Since the world is being begotten every morning, and goes on and on, it seems to us He takes interest in this dry world of ours, and we should be interested also. Since, after all, nothing exists except the present. Because our memories are part of the present. Our hopes and fears, uncertainty of the future are also part of the present.

Well, I have been telling about those first books, I should also have mentioned Sarmiento's *Facundo, The History of the Argentine Republic* written by Vicente Fidel López. And also of certain things to be found in my house. Those things that I looked at reverently. For example, portraits of my forefathers, sabers and lances that have fought against the Spaniards and the Indians. The battle of Junín on the Western Frontier. Those things

were also part of my life. Since, somehow, I had my share in them. And then I go on to 1914, when we went to a city I greatly love, Geneva. I have the happiness to possess many hometowns. Why not mention Buenos Aires? Why not mention Montevideo? Why not mention Geneva? Why not mention Edinburgh? Why not mention Austin, in Texas? Why not mention Boston, also? And other cities. I don't want to go on, because of course, I know that in an enumeration what is really remarked are the omissions. So, let those cities stand for the other loved, unnamed cities. They also included—though why should I name them? Since I am not an atlas after all.

Well, in Geneva, I was given two gifts. One gift was the French tongue, since I had to study everything in French. I don't think greatly of the French language, but I think greatly of French literature. And with French there came to me, let us say, Racine, Corneille, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, D'Alambert, Vigo. And then afterward, of course, Verlaine, the music of Verlaine. That has been with me all the time. And of course, Flaubert, that discovery led to an endless world. And then, I also, let's say, dug up out of the past a language that is very mistakenly called a dead language. A language that we all feel wistful about. We're always regretting Latin. I had Latin. My Latin, as everybody's Latin, is very rusty today. But still, I wrote quite bad Latin hexameters and I read Seneca, I read Virgil, and even to forget, to have forgotten Virgil or Seneca or Horace, is a possession. And after all, since my language is Spanish, I still have some kind of bastard Latin in me. I should be thankful, also, for Spanish. And then, I had been reading Schopenhauer in English. And then, I was greatly daring then, I said, "Well, I should teach myself German in order to read Schopenhauer in the text." And I did it in this way: I knew that German grammar is a weariness of the flesh. So, I got myself a copy of Heine's *Buch der Lieder*. I knew that poetry should make for brevity. And of course, Heine makes for brevity, and for beauty also. And I also bought a rather bulky German-English dictionary. So the languages I knew, the one that was akin to German was English of course. Then I began to read Heine, and after two or three months, a wonderful thing happened. I felt that I could do without the dictionary. I was going on and I was reading the finest poetry in the world. I was reading: *Das küßte mich auf deutsch, und sprach auf deutsch / (Man glaubt es kaum,*

*/ Wie gut es klang) das Wort: »Ich liebe dich!« / Es war ein Traum.*<sup>1</sup> Well then I was reading Hugo von Hoffmannsthal also. And Dehmel and Liliencron: *und in die Schlacht sind wir hineingeritten.*<sup>2</sup>

And all those things came to me, and I was really thankful for them. And I was also writing at the time. My father had always encouraged my writing. I asked him once for advice, and then he said to me: "Read much. Write much. Tear up everything you've written. And above all, don't rush into print!" And I followed his advice. We came back to Buenos Aires. That would have been in 1921 or so. And in 1923, I came to him with my manuscript. And I said, "I think that this book may be not wholly unworthy of print. I would like you to go over it." And then he said to me, he was a very wise man, he said to me, "Don't think anybody can help anybody else. You must make your own mistakes and find out when it's only too late. I know that this book is full of blunders. I don't have to read it in order to know that. But I won't help you. You publish your book, you go ahead. And you must fumble, you must grope, you must find your own way." And I have been trying to do that ever since 1923, when I published my first book, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. A book made of the discovery of my hometown. That long, straggling, shabby city, of low, flat-roofed houses stretching out to the West and to the South into the pampa. All those things were given back to me and also, having so many fine friendships. Well, I published that book and I have been going on and on, and I am sorry to say that I have published 50 books. But that kind of thing can't be helped. Once you begin you never are going to stop. Of course, if you come to visit me in Buenos Aires, you'll find none of those books at home, since I never reread what I have written. I prefer to think of myself as being a young man of 76 who wants to go on and with no special use for wistfulness, except the wistfulness we use for literary effect.

Well, I would like to say something about what I write. I suppose many people think of me as a poet. Some friends think that I'm an intruder, an outsider in poetry, and that I'm really a short story writer. And before answering questions, I would like to speak about two or three of

1 From Heinrich Heine's "In der Fremde" Part 3. Published in *Neue Gedichte* (1844).

2 Appears to be a reference to Detlev von Liliencron's *Die Schlacht bei Stellau* 1201 (1906).

my stories that perhaps you may have read. One of the stories is called “El Zahir,” “The Zahir.” I picked that word from Lane’s *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*—one of the names of God. I don’t know what it means; I don’t know Arabic. But I got that word... the whole story came to me, came to me from a single word: *inolvidable* in Spanish, “unforgettable” in English. We use that word all the time, and we never trouble to think about it. But once that quite common word struck me. And I said to myself, what if there *were* an unforgettable thing in the world? What if there really were something unforgettable? And the story came out of the adjective “unforgettable,” *inolvidable*, in Spanish. And I thought, well you’ve heard of unforgettable unicorns, but they won’t do me any good, since unicorns *are* unforgettable. You must have something, something quite trivial. And then I thought of a coin, since a coin has thousands and thousands of sisters or brothers, if you will. And then I thought of a common twenty-cent coin, a coin exactly like the other thousand thousands of coins to be found. And then, I said, well, what if that one coin were to be unforgettable? What if there were something, let us say, some witchcraft in the coin that made it unforgettable? Then I said I would write a story about it. I had that, but I needed something more. Of course, if my hero (and since I am unable to create characters I am always the character or hero), what if I were given that coin, let’s say, in a store or in a bookshop. That would do me no good. There must be something emotional to have come first.

Then I remembered what Edgar Allan Poe had said: that there is nothing more poetic, nothing more apt to poetry than the death of a beautiful woman. And so I thought of having loved a woman and having not been loved by her, and of that woman dying. And then perhaps I might think that since she was dead, I in a sense possessed her. Since I had no rivals; since she only existed in my memory. So I created a beautiful woman. I made her die. Those things are very easy on paper; you can do that. And then I went to the wake. There are wakes in Buenos Aires, still. And then, I walked out of the wake in the wee hours because I had to give my hero distress, sorrow, a kind of relief also, in the fact the woman who had despised him and whom he loved had died. And I had to give him all those mixed emotions, in order that he should be fit for the coin. Then he goes to a neighboring store, he has a cup of brandy, and then when he’s handed back the change, he finds that coin—alike to other coins, and quite differ-

ent, since that coin is unforgettable. He takes it into his hand; he looks at it. The more he looks at it, he knows that his doom is sealed. He sees he shall never forget the coin. He spends a sleepless night, tossing to and fro, thinking about the coin. Not thinking of what his duty was to the lady who had died, no. The coin has taken hold of him. Then he feels this will lead to madness, and then he attempts many things. He attempts, for example, he buys a sovereign. He buys an English, a British sovereign, with Saint George and the Dragon and he says, “if I try to think of this gold coin, well this of course will shine brighter than my tawdry dime.” But he can’t. That coin is no good to him. And then he finally takes the subway. He goes to a southwestern suburb of Buenos Aires where he loses the coin. But the memory of the coin is not lost. And in the end, he feels that he is going mad. And then he thinks to himself that, after all, the moment will come when I shall no longer be Borges, I shall only be the coin. And who knows, since all things are a token and a symbol, behind the coin, I may see God. Who knows? And that’s the end of the story. Well, that would be one of the stories I wrote.

Then I wrote another story, maybe you have read it, and in any case you will forgive me for repeating it, when after all, my justification lies in my stories. I cannot be justified by other things. I can only be justified by my writing. And I think that my stories may be allowed, at least, to be read. Well that story’s called “The Aleph.” And that came to me through a book written by a German Lutheran theologian on God and on the attributes of God. And among those attributes I found his eternity. Why should I use the word “eternity”? It’s a fine word that was coined by Bishop Wilkins in the eighteenth century. The word “everness”—a very, very fine word. Well among the attributes of God, I found the attribute of eternity.

Now, we are not to think of eternity as standing for the sum total of days. We think of eternity as, to quote Shakespeare as I’ve quoted him before, “all our yesterdays, and today, and all our tomorrows.” But eternity is something far uncannier than that. Eternity stands for an eternal now. And in this eternal now, God is seeing the invasions of Genghis, and also he’s seeing the Punic Wars, he sees the discovery of America by Eric the Red, he sees the other discovery by Columbus. He sees our Wars of Independence. He sees the two World Wars, and also the things that are looming ahead, the things to come. He sees everything, and he sees them in one

eternal moment, an eternal now. Then I thought to myself, after reading this page, I felt dizzy after reading it: what if I take this idea of eternity and I apply it to a less important category, the category of space. What if instead of time—time of course is the riddle, the chief riddle—I think of space? What if I think of all space, as to be found within a certain point in space? I then thought of how Josiah Royce fancied of a map of England. Royce thought the map of England might be drawn on the ground of England. That map drew a point to point correspondence with all things in England, and among them of course the map. And in the map, the map, and in the map, the map, and in the map, the map and so on, forever and ever.

And I said, well, I will take that idea. I will imagine a circle. A circle seems to comprehend all things, seems to enclose all things. I will take a small, luminous circle. It had to be luminous in order to be seen, and in that circle I will find the whole of space, everything. Let us say, the stars, the spaces between the stars, the oceans, the continents, the cities... it's ourselves, our bodies, the atoms, everything. And all those things will be found in one small disc. Now, what will I do with that disc? It had to be placed in some tawdry place. Because if not, the contents would be lost. So I thought of a certain rather dingy, shabby street in Buenos Aires, called calle Brasil. I knew the neighborhood quite well. And I thought, well here, in a basement, there might be an Aleph. I gave the thing the name Aleph, I took it from Cantor's book on the Mengenlehre, on transfinite numbers, and I said, here we might have an Aleph. I did say a circle enclosing all things and all also enclosing itself and so on, to eternity. Then I also needed a preliminary story. I needed a man who was sadly shaken. I needed that man to see the Aleph. I thought of a favor, more or less like the first one, and then I wrote the story. And there the man sees the Aleph. He sees all things to be found in the visual world. He sees them all at once. He's gifted. I mean, at that moment, he sees things as God sees them in space. And he also sees the Aleph. And he also sees that one thing that no man has ever seen; that perhaps no god has ever seen, the Universe. And he's shaken, he's shaken to pieces after that revelation. Well, that's the story. I think it a story that's one of my favorites to mention.

Then I wrote another story called "The Congress." "The Congress" is a story based on Carlyle's *French Revolution*, the idea of a congress of mankind. Of all men or mankind being represented in one congress. And

of a certain *estanciero*, or cattleman or ranchman in Uruguay having the idea to found that congress wherein all mankind should be represented. Then, of course, he has to go through the normal struggles. He has to find representatives let us say of all the races of mankind, of all the offices, of all the categories of mankind. And also, since the past is represented also, he needs a collection of books. And in the end, he finds out that no single book can be left out. Because every book stands for something that should find its place in the congress. So that, and then he had to find a language for the congress, and that language, like Esperanto or Volapük, whatever it might be. Then the thing goes on and on. And then there is a moment when the reader feels that the congress is so vast that, of course, it can never be attained. Then in the end, we get that revelation. There is no need of the congress, since the universe is already the congress. Then the man burns all his books, he goes for a long walk through Buenos Aires with his friends. All this happens way back in 1899. He goes for a long walk, he sees all things. He thinks of the trees, of the people he runs across in the streets, all those are congressmen also. And then he feels thankful, some gratitude. For, after all, his scheme has come to naught. But really, the universe stood in no need of a scheme, since the universe is a congress. I think that is perhaps the best story I've ever written. Though critics have not been too fond of it.

And now, I suppose I should go on to speaking of the writer in general. Because after all, the writer's destiny, and I am supposed to speak on that, the writer's destiny is one of the strangest destinies on earth. Of course, all fates are strange, especially to one who has to undergo them. Now, the destiny of a writer is not made primarily of words. A young man feels words. Indeed, I don't think anybody can be a writer who has no feeling for words. For example, when we read, "till white England bring black Spain to shame," I suppose the sense is irrelevant.<sup>3</sup> We may not think of England as being white or Spain as being black. But we feel, let us say, there is something, fire, in the words, we are carried away by the words. Then we have that near rhyme of Spain and shame. Why analyze those things? Things explained are generally explained away. I do not care for

<sup>3</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Thomas Middleton" published in *Tristram of Lyonesse and Other Poems* (1882).

literary analysis. I think we have to feel things. Or let us take another example: this one from that book I read in my father's library—that library I never seem to have strayed away from: "Dreaming when Dawn's left hand was in the Sky." Now this was a gift made by Edward FitzGerald to the Persian original. You will not find those words in the text, as far as I know. You see, I suppose that the witchcraft, the magic lies in the word "left," since, had he written, "Dreaming when Dawn's right hand was in the Sky," that would avail you nothing. But "Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky," seems like a thing seen in a dream. It seems something mysterious, really.

Well, I will give you other examples of word magic. Of course, word magic is also thought magic. And it's also, let us say, the magic, the witchcraft, of the music also, of the word's music. Well, a writer should begin, I should say by being sensitive to words. If you are not sensitive to words then you cannot be a writer. But after a time, the writer discovers that words should not be too obtrusive. That was a great mistake made, for example, well, by many fine writers. The fact that the words stand out. And then they go in for purple patches. The words are too visible. Well, I suppose, in a page well-written, the words should be invisible. What we should hear is what's happening, let's say, in, beyond the words. And that is only found, I suppose in novels, chiefly. We all think of Cervantes, of Tolstoy, of Conrad, as being great novelists. And yet we may have no Spanish, no Russian, or no English. Because you know that a great novel can survive anything, even the translations. And after that, I suppose, a writer should have but one tenet, and this is the one I have found: when, as a writer, you want to write something real, you should be sincere, you should be true, not to mere circumstantial reality (that being for journalism), but to your dream. Coleridge wrote that when you're witnessing a play, or when you're reading a book, you don't believe in them, but there is what he finely called "a willing suspension of disbelief." Now, how do we, how can a reader achieve willing suspension of disbelief? Only if he thinks that what the writer is writing may not be true, but that, well, the writing is true to his dream, to his vision. So, as long as I write things that belong to my dream, then I am being a writer.

I will tell you now, after all, I am supposed to reveal things that are no secret, really, I will tell you now the way I set about writing a story. Firstly,

I do not set about writing a story. I may be walking down the street, or up and down the National Library in Buenos Aires or anywhere and then suddenly, I glimpse a shape. We might, to use a convenient metaphor, talk of an island. A long island, like Whitman's Long Island. And then I glimpse the two ends of the island, and those might stand for the beginning and for the end of the story. So that, when I write a story, I know the end of the story. And I know how the story should begin. But I have to discover what happens in between. And that is my task.

Then, of course, I have to find the right setting for the story, to find out that the thing happened in the outlying slums of Buenos Aires at the turn of the century, or whether it happened in the East or whether it happened in the States, or where it happened. And then, I must look for the names of the characters. Then, after that, I merely have to find my way, I have to grope my way into the darkness of the story. Of course I may take a wrong turn, and I generally do. And then I have to retrace my steps and go back. But a moment comes when I see the whole thing, and then I am allowed to write it down.

That, I suppose, is my way of writing short stories. I mean, to discover something. And of course "to invent" in Latin means "to discover." De Quincey pointed out that when people spoke of the invention of the cross of St. Helena, they did not think that St. Helena had forged the cross, they thought that she had discovered it. And the words "to invent" and "to discover" are the same. And this, of course, takes us back to Plato, who thought that all things already existed. The man who said, for example, that the statue was in the marble, you merely have chip off what's irrelevant. Or the very fine poem of Timrod the Southern Confederate laureate who wrote of that cemetery, that very poor cemetery of the Confederate dead after the war between the States. And then in the last line he says, "the shaft is in the stone."<sup>4</sup> They say nothing of the world, but things are there. Well you have to discover things, and that is only done, let us say, by patience. Or rather, by letting the dream have its way with you.

4 From "Ode: Sung on the Occasion of Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead at Magnolia Cemetery, Charleston, S.C., 1867." Posthumously published in *The Poems of Henry Timrod*, edited by Paul H. Hayne (1873).

Once you have your story, then you have to write it down. And, I should say, the less you add to it the better. There was a time when I would tend to overwrite my stuff. I would go in for metaphors, I would go in for ornament, but that thing is wrong. I think that if a certain story, or maybe if a certain conception interests me, it may interest other men, who are, after all, not much unlike myself. So this advice I would give. But rather than rambling on, I do not know if what I have written is worth anything, but I know that my sole justification lies in writing. Besides, I have been blind or near blind for the last fifteen years. And what else can I do but go on writing? Since, writing, after all, is my justification. And also, it gives me a certain kind of quiet joy. I should be grateful for being a writer. And now, I would like you to ask me questions and I will do my best to answer them. Thank you.

Question: Sr. Borges, you told us that some of your friends consider you a poet, others a short story writer. Would it be fair to say that all your work is poetic and that you simply write in prose or in verse?

Borges: That's a very generous statement. I think there is no essential difference, except in questions of print, between a poem and tale. And if you're allowed to recall that poetry, after all, began by the epic, as you say, poetry began by storytelling. You find for example, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, then you find the *Finnesburh Fragment*, the *Beowulf*, and so on, the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Cantar de Mio Cid*—you could say poetry began by telling tales. So that I wonder if there is an essential difference. When I say “creating” the word is far too ambitious, but when I am evolving something, I do not know if I am thinking of, what I am dreaming about, may turn into a tale or into a poem. And I suppose that is quite irrelevant and circumstantial. I suppose you are right, sir. I think of myself as a poet, though none of my friends do. Thank you.

Question: In some anthologies of Latin American literature, your name appears along with Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo as writers of the so-called fantastic literature. Do you agree with that label, and what does it mean to be a writer of fantastic literature?

Borges: Silvina Ocampo and Bioy Casares are very dear friends of mine. And of course, we attempt literature of the fantastic. Of course, I suppose

that, let's say, there were times when all literature was a literature of the fantastic, since men believed in ghosts, since men believed in omens. But today, since we're unbelievers, we think of reality as being on one side, and of unreality or the fantastic as being on the other. But that, I think, is a mistake, since I wonder whether a railway accident is more real than the dream I had this morning I forgot all about. I suppose all things are real or unreal. In fact you may call reality the sum total of things. But when I speak of literature of the fantastic, then I think in terms of let's say, books like, well, for example, in *The Invisible Man* of Wells, you have an invisible man, in those stories I was telling you about, in “The Zahir,” we have an unforgettable thing; in “The Aleph,” a point of space wherein may be found all the points of space. Those things, of course, are still real, I think. What really, well, I don't suppose there is this much difference. So if you are writing literature, what you are writing is unreal if you compare it to reality. But what is called reality, the commonplace reality, and I suppose it is real because it is also included in the world.

I wrote a poem called “The Other Tiger.” That poem, I think, is one of my good poems. I begin, I am thinking of a tiger. I seem to always be thinking about tigers, I don't know why. Something so fine about them. Well, remember, Blake's “Tyger, tyger burning bright / In the forests of the night.”<sup>5</sup> And there was Chesterton who called the tiger an “emblem of awful elegance.”<sup>6</sup> Well, I wander into a floor of the library and then I think of a tiger. Then I think of that tiger as being in the jungle, in Bengal or in Sumatra. Then I say, I will write a poem about the tiger. Then I describe him, give him metaphors, I give him tropes, I give him adjectives. And after I've written some ten lines about him, then I think that after all, what I have written is merely the verbal tiger. How does that affect the real tiger? Then I define the real tiger, and I say, the real tiger, not the one to be found in the preceding poem, or this one—and then describe him. Well if I describe him, he's also real. Then I go on looking for the third tiger, and I know that all tigers, all verbal tigers, will be but verbal equations. And that real tiger will always be beyond my reach. Then the poem ends, because I know the search is endless. I know that if I begin searching for the tiger,

5 From William Blake's “The Tyger,” published in *Songs of Experience* (1794).

6 Reference to Chesterton's biography *William Blake* (1910).

I'm merely going, let us say, to weave a chain of endless tigers, but that I shall never find the other tiger, the tiger who's not in the poem. But at the same time, that poem of mine—that makes for the unreality of poetry—makes for reality. Since when we think that there is a real tiger in Bengal, there is at this moment a real tiger, and indeed many tigers in Bengal. But at the same time, the tiger of my poem is also an object of the universe. My verbal tiger is as much a part of the universe as a fiery, vertebrate tiger in India. So that the poem may be allowed to stand, let's say, as a justification of art. Since in real writing, we may not be creating mirrors of the universe, but we may be creating things quite as real as mirrors, quite as real as the rest of the universe.

Question: Earlier in your speech you said that you regret what happens after one leaves boyhood, in reading literature. One loses a certain sense of discovery, and I believe you said that one then begins to analyze literature. Which, in the context of that comment, what do you feel are the limits of the critic and of literary criticism?

Borges: The critic, I should say, the critic is of no importance. I think that what is really important is the pleasure felt by the reader and by the writer, also. Of course, you all remember Wordsworth, who thought that he had lost something magical. You remember that poem about intimations of immortality in early childhood, when he said that a glory had been lost. Well at the same time, in old age, you will be allowed a quieter glory. You will be allowed a certain serene light. We may look at things in a quieter way. So, when I think of my lost boyhood, my memory of lost boyhood is quite as fine as the boyhood I have lost, and the things, and the plains and rivers and horses I have lost.

Question: Mr. Borges, it seems fairly obvious to those of us who are students in the field that you really opened the way for the whole new wave of magic realism in Latin American literature. You're the progenitor of that whole explosion. Do you have a sense of some of these authors, García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes and others continuing your work?

Borges: I have heard of these authors and have only read García Márquez. I think him a very fine writer, a far better writer than myself, of course. But I wonder if I was really helpful. If they would have written the same thing

without me, if I have helped. But really, since I went blind for reading purposes in 1955, I have done but little contemporary reading. Because, when I lost my eyesight in 1955, I felt that this should not be the end of something, but the beginning of something else. And then I went in for the study of Old English and now of Old Norse, and I have done little contemporary reading. I am afraid contemporary writers may be much like myself. And then I am not interested in that.

Flynn: Are there any other questions?

Borges: Perhaps you would like to ask something?

Flynn: I've asked plenty of questions, thank you.

Borges: Since I am not allowed to ask anything, you might, eh?

Flynn: Why don't you ask questions perhaps?

Borges: No, I won't. [Laughs] I never ask questions, even in examinations.

Question: You mention Plato, the philosopher, it seems to me that you admire him. Are there other philosophers that have been influential in your work?

Borges: Yes. I should say, besides Plato, I owe, well, an endless debt to Berkeley, to Hume, to Schopenhauer, I could name them. To Mauthner, to Bradley, to Royce, well, to Bertrand Russell, and I'd go on, but I think that those names are sufficient. Especially the name of Berkeley. And of Descartes, also. Those names are names that mean much to me. I should have named them really. But I named Plato and I have spoken also of the Kabbalah, of the Gnostics. No need for some out of the way reading. Really, I'm not a real student of philosophy.

Question: You mentioned philosophers. I wonder if Unamuno has any bearing on your writing, like the others you wrote. Is it a counter... [film cut off]

Borges: Well, I think of Unamuno as being a fine writer. But as to his interest in personal immortality, I cannot share it. When I die, I want to die wholly. I want to die in body and soul. And Unamuno seems strangely interested in having me going on and on. I don't know why.

Flynn: I would like to ask you a question concerning time. This afternoon, during your talk, you mentioned that it's the great enigma, I believe you said that. I believe it's Valle Inclán, he calls it the Sterile Satan, advancing a kind of agnostic religion, I expect. Could you, this is a rather naïve question in a sense, but could you perhaps boil down your attitude towards time? Before you spoke of eternity... Is time something negative for you, or evil?

Borges: No, I don't think of it as evil. I think that time is the one essential thing. Since we might think in terms of a spaceless universe. Space, after all, only belongs to sight, to taste, to feeling. But what I think we might have, at least ideally, we might have, we might have a spaceless universe compounded of time. That is to say, a universe compounded of mind, a single mind, of music and words. And then, there'd be no need for space. Well you cannot, well time cannot be thought away. Because if we think of time as having...

Question: If, as in "The Circular Ruins," you were suddenly to come up against, to have the revelation that you were in fact dreamed by somebody else, what would that do to you, after the initial surprise and anger wore off?

Borges: Yes, I recall "The Circular Ruins." When I wrote that story, the writing took me a week, six days, perhaps. I was caught up by the story. I was leading my everyday life. I was going to the cinema. I was dining out with friends. I was, well, I was going to my job, an old library in Buenos Aires. I was doing all those things, and yet I thought of those things as being unreal as compared to a story of the dreamer who is being dreamt. So that story may perhaps be thought of as being my finest story, since it was the one story that caught me up and carried me away when I was writing it. I've never had that sense, the story being more real than myself, the writer. That was never allowed me, afterwards. I've never written anything and gotten carried away by it.

Question: I don't know if you have said, how many languages have you written in, please? Have you written in Spanish strictly or...

Borges: Yes, I have written in Spanish. As well attempted English, though I respect it far too much to go on, no. Then of course I have done some writing in French and some quite bad and justly forgotten Latin hexameters, and that's that. I can read Italian, I can read Portuguese, of course. I can even decipher Old English, but really, the writing in those languages is quite beyond me.

Question: Do you write on a schedule or as the mood strikes you? Do you set time away per day...

Borges: No, I write of the Holy Ghost, I suppose we could say. I have no schedule. I couldn't have a schedule since I have to dictate what I write. So I can fall back on friends, on a chance visitor sometimes. But I seem to be writing things all the time. Because, after all, since I am blind, I spend, well, some part of the day in loneliness. Then, of course, I try to be thinking things out, to be evolving poems, to be evolving short stories. And some, most of them just fizzled out and others remain with me and I try to lick them into form and then to dictate them.

Question: Mr. Borges, when you wrote "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," was that a spontaneous story, or were you attempting to create a parody of archeological concern?

Borges: No, no. I should say that many things went into the shaping of that story. I suppose it all came out of my love of encyclopedias. I think that I have done most of my reading in encyclopedias. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, *Brockhaus's Konversations-Lexikon*, *Diccionario Enciclopédico Hispano-Americano* and so on. Those make very good, very fine desultory reading. And then, since I seemed to have run out of encyclopedias, I said how fine it would be, I wanted to find an encyclopedia not of this actual world, but of some other possible world. Then, the whole idea of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" came. And then I thought how that encyclopedia of a finely ordered world might change the actual world. But of course I was aware that the world is being changed by books all the time. What we call reality has been changed, let us say, by the Bible, for example. By Plato, by the Latin poets. In fact, this world is being changed by books all the time. Then of course, I wove many things into that story. And I wrote it down. I was engrossed when I wrote it. And then I also got

the idea from a language based on idealism, but I wrote that all so long ago. But I know I was quite happy when I was writing it. Many people seem to have taken to that story. In spite of the rather forbidding title. We have Tlön, that's a dark word that may be akin to a German *Traum*. Then Uqbar, that has an Oriental ring to it, an Arabic ring, and then after that we get the brevity and clarity of Latin, *Orbis Tertius*. I suppose, well, the title is interesting. But that story took me quite some time in the writing. Because I worked many things in, there are many friends who are also worked in.

Question: I am just wondering if we are to expect more novels or short stories from you.

Borges: Well, I think that you're standing, well, that you should stand in fear, not of novels, I've never written novels, but I will go on writing stories and poems. I think I'll go on writing, what else can I do? Besides, if writing is very pleasant, why should I give up that particular pleasure? In fact, at the moment, I have some quite bad news for you. I have written twenty-five poems, and with five more completed, a new book will come out.<sup>7</sup> But I give you fair warning.

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7 *La moneda de hierro* (1976).