

## THE RAG-AND-BONE SHOP: ON BORGES, YEATS AND IRELAND<sup>1</sup>

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for my sweetie

What follows grows out of my interest over the couple of year in the few fragments that are accessible of Borges's working papers. As I explained in a recent article in this same journal, few important manuscripts are in public collections, and these few are mostly clean copies of works that offer us little if our interest is Borges's habits of composition. I have taken recently to scanning and looking with a magnifying glass at other papers: marginalia in the manuscripts, a few very rough drafts (most notably the page that contains the quotations that are crucial to "La postulación de la realidad" and "El arte narrativo y la magia"), and other materials that are reproduced (often in very low resolution) in facsimile pages in various books, and on the internet. This paper will be a reflection on one of these last. I will necessarily leave out discussions of Borges's many other references to Irish literature and culture (notable in his essays on Shaw and Joyce, for instance), and will only touch lightly on a couple of the Irish stories (most notably "La forma de la espada" and the Irish subplot in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," both stories I have written about extensively elsewhere). I will have more of

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1 This paper was presented at the National University of Ireland in Galway in April 2010. I am grateful to Nicholas Allen and Bill Richardson for the invitation to speak there, and for a series of wonderful discussions.

a discussion of “Tema del traidor y del héroe,” for reasons that will become apparent when I get there.

A book that Borges read is for sale for ten thousand US dollars: presumably not for the book itself (other copies can be bought for less than twenty), but for the four pages of manuscript notes at the book’s end (which is indeed where Borges tended to take working notes as he read).<sup>2</sup> One of those four pages is included in the bookseller’s website as a teaser. It reads in its entirety:

I call to my own opposite . . . 58.  
 The man’s flight from his horoscope . . . 59.  
 The search of the mask: 60.  
 At certain moments I become happy . . . 72.  
 I want to create for myself an unpopular theater: 77.  
 When there is nothing there is God: 94.  
 Grant me an old man’s frenzy . . . 109.

The book is Peter Ure’s *Towards a Mythology: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, published by the University Press of Liverpool in 1946. If we assign the value of the book itself at twenty dollars, the page I just transcribed should be worth something like \$2495.25. I had no intention of spending ten thousand dollars to read the other three pages, and as it turned out the bookseller was kind enough to share the other three pages with me; the page that is posted is by far the most interesting of the four (the others consist of transcriptions of three poems, “Leda and the Swan,” “Death,” and “A Deep-Sworn Vow,” with one page with some fragments of a translation of “Leda and the Swan”<sup>3</sup>). So I would like to use this occasion to

2 Hundreds of examples of such marginalia have been collected and annotated in a new book that is a monument of scholarship: Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez’s *Borges, libros y lecturas* (2010). All of the books so annotated are in the Biblioteca Nacional in Buenos Aires, so this work necessarily does not include the Peter Ure book commented on here, though there are other titles that are related to Yeats.

3 The copy I was sent is very poor for this page, but it is clear that this is the beginning of a translation of “Leda and the Swan.” The words that are legible seem to be: “Sobre la tambaleante muchacha asistiendo los vientos/ Por las oscuras malezas (?), tenida la nuca en el pico,” then halfway down the page “en un ímpetu blanco,” then lower down still “Amputada así,” then “Poseído” and lower still “Asumir.” These are lines 2 and 3 of “Leda and the Swan,” the end of line 7, the second half-line of line 11, and the beginnings of lines 12 and 13. Later Borges would write: “Yeats elegirá el instante en que se confunden Leda y el cisne que era un dios”: “Los cuatro ciclos,” in *El Oro de los tigres*, OC 1129.

reflect on the sample that has been gifted to us here by whoever has put this book on consignment (with Lirolay Books in Wilmington, Delaware).<sup>4</sup> To do justice to these sparse notes it is important to know what Borges has to say about Yeats elsewhere, and of course to read the Ure book.

One of the interesting features of Borges's references to Yeats is that they are widely scattered: except for a couple of pages in his manual on English literature, he never writes any extended essay on Yeats, but refers to him some three dozen times, most prominently in several important epigraphs. This is a similar situation to one of his most important literary relations, his readings of Robert Louis Stevenson (and I devoted an entire book to this relationship twenty-five years ago). The fact that Yeats is so present and yet so seemingly absent (for instance, there is no essay devoted to his work in *Otras inquisiciones*, but this is true of Stevenson, Conrad and Kipling too) is striking, particularly when we notice how important some of the references are in the works in which they appear. Here's a sample, in chronological order, with a focus on the references included in the *Obras completas*, but with some references to the dispersed work that was collected posthumously.

In "Las kenningar," the important 1933 essay on formulaic metaphors in Icelandic skaldic poetry (which also serves as one of Borges's final good-byes to the avant garde, since it contains a poignant reference to "[e]l ultraísta muerto cuyo fantasma sigue siempre habitándome" (OC 380), he quotes the famous final line of "Byzantium," "That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea" (OC, 378). There are numerous references to Yeats in the columns that Borges wrote on world literature in *El Hogar* from 1936 to 1939. On 11 November 1936, Borges noted in the section of his page "De la vida literaria" (which often contains tidbits of literary gossip) that Yeats's wife was a seer and that the system expounded in *A Vision de-*

4 The bookseller's note states: "Borges used the four end papers of this volume to transcribe, in his distinctive slender handwriting, excerpts of poems of Yeats accompanied with notes and the translation of some verses to Spanish. The book comes from the estate of the Argentine writer Estela Canto, with whom Borges maintained a close relationship between 1944 and 1951. - Green cloth covered boards, titles on spine & crest of Liverpool University on front panel in gilt - 123p - 23x15x1cm. - A bit of sunning to the spine and boards, light wear to hinges & corners, small ink mark on the lower panel, top edge slightly dusty, some light scattered foxing to end-papers & two pages at end, else Very Good. Bookseller's paper label on first end-paper / Additional images available/. Bookseller Inventory # 5739B."

rived from her “revelaciones directas y sobrenaturales” (*Borges en El Hogar* 21). On 28 May 1937, Borges published a review of Yeats’s *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (*Textos cautivos* 135-36), a book which, he says, “adolece de alguna arbitrariedad” (135).<sup>5</sup> He notes that Yeats included only two Kipling poems and one by Rupert Brooke but fourteen of his own, and calls him “[e]l complaciente compilador” (135). The review ends, interestingly enough, with a comment on a translation that Yeats included, Arthur Symons’ version of San Juan de la Cruz’s “Cántico espiritual” (136).<sup>6</sup> In his review of G. K. Chesterton’s *Autobiography* on 1 October 1937 (*Textos cautivos* 173) he quotes (in translation) a Yeats line: “No hay un imbécil que pueda tratarme de amigo” (the original, “There is not a fool can call me friend,” appears in “To a Young Beauty” [138]). On 10 June 1938, in an article on Padraic Colum, he notes that Colum’s meeting Yeats inspired his interest in “un teatro poético, que fuese también popular” (*Borges en El Hogar* 111). A slightly later reference is from the 1945 essay on the occasion of the death of Valéry: “Yeats, Rilke y Eliot han escrito versos más memorables que los de Valéry” (OC 686).

In “Nota sobre Walt Whitman,” originally published in 1947 and included in the second edition of *Discusión*, Borges writes: “Yeats, hacia el año mil novecientos, buscó lo absoluto en el manejo de símbolos que despertaran la memoria genérica, o gran Memoria, que late bajo las mentes individuales” (OC 249; for a similar discussion in a preface to William Shand, see *Prólogos* 148). Since there are numerous references to *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and *A Vision* in this period, and since Peter Ure explicates the relations between Yeats’s hermetic system and the later poetry, this fragment serves to connect the notes in the Ure book with his own writings. From the same period is this passing remark from a preface to Quevedo later included in *Otras inquisiciones*: “Las mejores piezas de Quevedo existen más allá de la moción que las engendró y de las comunes ideas que las informan. No son oscuras; eluden el error de perturbar, o de distraer, con enigmas, a diferencias de otras de Mallarmé, de Yeats y de George” (OC, 666, also in *Prólogos* 125). Like the previous comment, this implies a reflection on the relation between the hermetic system and the poetry.

5 There is a much later reference to this same anthology in the Norton lectures at Harvard (*This Craft of Verse* 61).

6 Borges talks about a different translation of this poem in *This Craft of Verse*.

The same interest comes up in the 1951 essay “El ruiseñor de Keats,” in which Borges states that one of the many echoes of Keats’s poem is the following: “A los que habría que agregar el genial poeta William Butler Yeats que, en la primera estrofa de *Sailing to Byzantium*, habla de las ‘muerientes generaciones’ de pájaros, con alusión deliberada o involuntaria a la Oda. Véase T. R. Henn: *The Lonely Tower*, 1950, pág. 211” (OC 718n.). Of interest here is the reference to a second critical work on Yeats, published four years after the Ure book, suggesting that Borges was following fairly closely the critical debates about the Irish poet; the page in question is part of Henn’s chapter “Byzantium.” I should add that Henn in his preface says about Yeats what we could easily apply to Borges:

I am not suggesting that Yeats was in any sense a scholar, and indeed he frequently denies the imputation. He read widely, voraciously, and probably unsystematically, ransacking artists, philosophers, poets, to reject or confirm his theories, or to supply him with images. He had a powerful, imprecise and ingenious memory, and there was much laid aside in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. (xvii)

Similarly, in the book on Lugones that Borges published with Bettina Edelberg in 1955, there are two crucial references to Yeats’s poetry: “Alguien podría objetar la frecuencia de temas mitológicos en la literatura de nuestro tiempo (Yeats, Valéry, Kafka, Gide); pero su empleo, ahora, no es puramente ornamental, es también significativo de situaciones individuales” (OCC 468), and, in a section on Lugones’s 1909 *Lunario sentimental*, a reference to “este sentido mítico de la luna (tan evidente, para citar un solo ejemplo, en la obra de Yeats)” (OCC 475). From the same period as this, in the 1957 *Manual de zoología fantástica* (later expanded as *El libro de los seres imaginarios*), he writes: “En la poesía de Yeats, el Doble es nuestro anverso, nuestro contrario, el que nos complementa, el que no somos ni seremos” (OCC 616). This is a topic to which Ure devotes considerable attention, in the chapter “Attis’ Image,” as noted in the first of Borges’s jottings in the back of the book.

Later references are these lines in the 1959 poem “La luna”: “De la Diana triforme Apolodoro/ Me dejó divisar la sombra mágica;/ Hugo me dio una hoz que era de oro,/ Y un irlandés, su negra luna trágica” (OC 820), and the 1972 brief prose piece “Los cuatro ciclos,” which claims that there are four fundamental stories: the siege of Troy, the travels of Odysseus, the

search for the Golden Fleece, and the sacrifice of a god (whether Attis or Odin or Christ). In the paragraph on the *Iliad* Borges writes: “Yeats elegirá el instante en que se confunden Leda y el cisne que era un dios” (*El oro de los tigres*, OC 1128). The most extensive passage on Yeats is in the 1965 manual *Introducción a la literatura inglesa*, written when Borges was teaching British and US literature at the University of Buenos Aires, where there is a page is devoted to Yeats (with Stevenson this is also the case: Borges refers to Stevenson some hundred times in his work, yet the page and a half in the manual on British literature is the only extended commentary). The paragraph begins with a reference to Eliot’s judgment that Yeats was the most important poet of “nuestro tiempo” (OCC 854), a judgment with which Borges concurs elsewhere when he says that Yeats’s poetry interests him more than Eliot’s (*Círculo secreto* 69). This is followed by a discussion of the two main periods in Yeats’s poetry, the “Celtic twilight” and the later poems. The three paragraphs are no doubt worth quoting in full here:

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS (1865-1939) es, según Eliot, el primer poeta de nuestro tiempo. Su obra se divide en dos períodos; el inicial corresponde a lo que se llamó el *Celtic Twilight* (Penumbra celta) y se caracteriza por la dulzura de su música, por sus imágenes deliberadamente vagas y por el empleo frecuente de la antigua mitología de Irlanda. Es indiscutible que en esta época influyeron en él los prerrafaelistas. El segundo, que pertenece a su madurez, casi nos revela otro hombre. La mitología persiste, pero ya no es decorativa o nostálgica y está cargada de significación. Alterna, además, con vívidas y concretas imágenes contemporáneas. El verso busca la precisión, no la sugestión. Yeats creyó en la existencia de una memoria universal, de la que forman parte todas las memorias individuales, y que es dable evocar mediante ciertos símbolos. Lo cautivaron las especulaciones teosóficas o, como tantos otros, concibió una doctrina cíclica de la historia. Ésta, según su propia declaración, le fue revelada por el espíritu de un viajero árabe. La técnica del arte dramático japonés influyó en su obra teatral, voluntariamente antirrealista. En una escena, las espadas de los guerreros caen sobre los escudos enemigos; Yeats indica que las armas no deben tocarse y que un golpe de gong debe marcar el imaginario choque.

Elegimos, al azar, unos versos, llenos de belleza y de hondura. Un grupo de mujeres espléndidas desciende lentamente por una escalera. Alguien

pregunta para qué han sido creadas. Recibe la respuesta: *For desecration and the lover's night* (para la profanación, para la noche del amante).<sup>7</sup>

Entre sus obras citaremos *La tierra del deseo del corazón*, *El umbral del rey*, *El viento entre los juncos*, *En las siete selvas*, *Per amica silentia lunae*, *La torre*, *La escalera de caracol*, *Edipo rey*, *Autobiografía*. En 1923 recibió el Premio Nobel de literatura. (OCC 854-55)

The discussion of Yeats's two periods is very close to Ure's, both in the insistence that the later Yeats is almost a different man (or a different poet), though the "mythology" to which Borges refers (and which is the focus of Ure's book) "casi nos revela otro hombre" (OCC 854). This discussion, then, recapitulates many of the points that Borges had made elsewhere in his earlier references to Yeats, adding little that is new, and confirming that he had followed some of the critical debates about the Irish poet and playwright.<sup>8</sup>

No doubt the most striking presence of Yeats in Borges's work is in two epigraphs. The first, that of "Tema del traidor y del héroe," reads: "So the Platonic Year/ Whirls out new right and wrong,/ Whirls in the old instead;/ All men are dancers and their tread/ Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong" (OC 496). The second, that of "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz," reads: "I'm looking for the face I had/ Before the world was made" (OC 561). In both cases the Yeats quotation relates directly to the theme of the story. In the latter, the last two lines of the first stanza of the Yeats poem "Before the World Was Made" comes into the theme of the story

7 This is a line from the play *A Full Moon in March* (1935).

8 I am omitting from this discussion a variety of other references to Yeats: a complete list can be found in the "Finder's Guide" to Borges's works at [www.borges.pitt.edu](http://www.borges.pitt.edu). Some others of note include references to Akugatawa's interest in Yeats (*Círculo secreto* 20), Arnold Bennett's early interest in Yeats (*Círculo secreto* 62), a passing reference to Yeats in a discussion of Ray Bradbury's science fiction (*Introducción a la literatura norteamericana* 60), Yeats's interest in Blake (*Biblioteca personal* 113), the importance of the word "rider" in Yeats (*Círculo secreto* 73, also in *Prólogos* 62), the idea that "las hazñas verbales de Johannes Becher, de Yeats y de James Joyce" are superior to those of Kafka (*Biblioteca personal* 13), and an impassioned discussion of "the pattern, the framework, the plot of, say, Yeats's sonnet 'Leda and the Swan'" and of two lines from "After Long Silence" in the Norton lectures at Harvard in 1967-68 (*This Craft of Verse* 78 and 82-83; see also pages 61 and 95). In a talk on Lugones Borges says: "proscribir la retórica nos llevaría a negar buena parte de la labor de Homero y de Hugo, de Shakespeare y de Yeats, y no hay razón alguna para que nos empobrecamos de esa manera" (*Textos recobrados 1956-1986* 173).

when Borges states that Cruz, though illiterate, “reads” his destiny in the face of his adversary (the gaucho Martín Fierro), with comparisons to Alexander the Great’s discovery of his destiny through his reading about Achilles and Karl XII of Sweden who reads his in that of Alexander. In the context of the José Hernández poem, in which some critics have found at least a homosocial thread (if not a homoerotic one), it is interesting that the next lines of the Yeats poem are: “What if I look upon a man/ As though on my beloved” (266).

The case of “Tema del traidor y del héroe” is more obviously germane to the present discussion. The story’s epigraph comes from the famous Yeats poem “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” one of the Irish poet’s mediations during the struggle for independence.<sup>9</sup> Other poems from the same sequence, all included in the book *The Tower* (1928), are “Sailing to Byzantium,” “Meditations in Time of Civil War” and “Leda and the Swan”: poems that reflect on the ruptures in the known world at times of historical crisis. The poem on 1919 contrasts the innocence of the past, when children played war, with the present moment when the “days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare/ Rides upon sleep” (205), where there is “Violence upon the roads: violence of horses” (207), where the speaker feels a “Thunder of feet, tumult of images,/ Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind” (208). The lines that Borges uses as his epigraph, which close the poem’s second section, are:

So the Platonic Year  
Whirls out new right and wrong,  
Whirls in the old instead;  
All men are dancers and their tread  
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong. (206)

Equally suggestive, though, are the quintets of the fifth section:

Come let us mock at the great  
That had such burdens on the mind  
And toiled so hard and late  
To leave some monument behind,  
Nor thought of the levelling wind. (207)

9 This poem is the subject of an extensive commentary (essentially the whole of the book): Michael Wood’s *Yeats & Violence* (2010).



and those that follow, that lash away at the good and the wise, to close:

Mock mockers after that  
That would not lift a hand maybe  
To help good, wise or great  
To bar that foul storm out, for we  
Traffic in mockery. (207)

That is to say, Yeats's reflection on the contemporary Irish situation, from the time of the Easter Rising of 1916, through the War of Independence of 1919, to the civil war of 1922-23, is marked by an admiration for the sacrifice of the partisans of independence, at the same time that the poet (motivated perhaps by his mystical ideas about history, expressed in his hermetic books *Per amica silentia lunae* [1918] and *A Vision* [1925]), withholds himself to some extent, expressing a certain skepticism and distance. He includes himself in those he criticizes in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen": "for we/ Traffic in mockery."

"Tema del traidor y del héroe" is part of a series of texts in which Borges affirms that the relation between history and literature is complex. It is a text that establishes networks of meaning that greatly exceed the "realidad . . . declarada al lector" (to quote a phrase from "La postulación de la realidad" [OC 219]), in which possibilities abound or swarm. "Kilpatrick fue ultimado en un teatro, pero de teatro hizo también la entera ciudad" (OC 497): for those who read Borges deeply (and perhaps obsessively), the stage is much wider still.

And the figure of the reader is of course at the center of the tale. Ryan is the reader of the (hi)stories about what happened to his great-grandfather a century earlier. At the same time, Borges is a reader of Conrad, of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, of Shakespeare and his critics, of Bolívar's letters and speeches: thus the story begins with the suggestion that the story could take place in any "país oprimido y tenaz" and includes Poland, the republic of Venice, the Balkans and the South American republics in his list, before settling on Ireland: "Digamos (para comodidad narrativa) Irlanda; digamos 1824" (OC 496). And he invites the first readers of the story, which was published in *Sur* in February 1944, to think about how history was incessantly being rewritten. He keeps on inviting readers,

even us, even now, to think about the relations among the multiple (hi) stories that are implied, but not narrated, in a (hi)story.<sup>10</sup>

It is abundantly clear, then, that Borges was intimately acquainted with Yeats's work—not only the poetry but also the plays, autobiography, hermetic books, as well as with some of the criticism about him. In what follows, now, I would like to look at Borges's seven jottings in the back of the Ure book. Most of them relate to the chapter "Attis' Image," about Yeats's hermetic system." I call to my own opposite": this reference on page 58 refers to Ure's discussion of Yeats's notion of the "anti-self" (in *A Vision*), and is a quotation from "Ego Dominus Tuus," from a dialogue around this theme. The lines quoted by Ure are:

Ille. By the help of an image  
 I call to my own opposite, summon all  
 That I have handled least, least looked upon.  
 Hic. And I would find myself and not an image.  
 Ille. That is our modern hope and by its light  
 We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind  
 And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;  
 Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,  
 We are but critics, or but half create,  
 Timid, entangled, empty and abashed,  
 Lacking the countenance of our friends. (58-59)

The following quotation from Ure follows shortly after this, in a discussion of "the modern creative artist" as someone in search of his or her anti-self. Borges quotes Ure: "The man's flight from his horoscope." This comes from a quotation from *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, in which Yeats says:

When I think of any great poetical writer of the past . . . I comprehend, if I know the lineaments of his life, that the work is the man's flight from his entire horoscope, his blind struggle in the network of stars. . . . If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinguished from the

10 A fuller discussion of "Tema del traidor y del héroe" appeared recently in my new book on Borges, *Innumerables relaciones: cómo leer con Borges*, published by the Universidad Nacional del Litoral. See also Robin Fiddian's recent article in the *Modern Language Review*.

passive acceptance of a code[,] is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask. . . Wordsworth, great poet though he be, is so often flat and heavy partly because his moral sense, being a discipline he had not created, a mere obedience, has no theatrical element. (59)<sup>11</sup>

This is followed by another annotation, “The search of the mask,” from the following page of the Ure book. There, Ure discusses Yeats’s formulation of the “twenty-eight incarnations” in which “Here the whole scheme is a scheme of conflict, of men seeking their opposites: all men of the first fourteen phases have a ‘mask’ (i. e., an object of will) from among Phases sixteen to twenty-seven, and vice-versa” (60). Unlike the previous two notations, where Borges is using Ure as a memory aid to remind him of some lines from Yeats that he finds of special interest, this one points to Ure’s exposition of a rather obscure section of Yeats’s prose works.

The next notation, “At certain moments I become happy,” however, is again using Ure to remember a quotation from Yeats, in this case a passage from *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* which helps gloss the famous great lines from “Vacillation”:

While on the shop and street I gazed  
My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.

The passage from section XXI of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* reads:

At certain moments, always unforeseen, I become happy. . . Perhaps I am sitting in some crowded restaurant. . .<sup>12</sup> I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life, and it seems strange that I cannot speak to them: everything fills me with affection, I have no longer any fears or [any]

11 Ure’s ellipses are of interest here. The first (after “of the past”) reads: “the realist is a historian and obscures the cleavage by the record of his eyes” (*Mythologies* 328). The second (after “stars”) is very extensive: Ure skips here from the third section of “Anima Hominis” to the sixth, in which Yeats quotes from one of his old diaries (and the ellipsis after “mask” is Yeats’s own).

12 The ellipsis here is: “Sometimes it is my own verse when, instead of discovering new technical flaws, I read with all the excitement of the first writing.”

needs. . .<sup>13</sup> latterly I seem to understand that I enter upon [this mood] the moment I cease to hate. (72)

The next quotation from Ure is again a quotation from Yeats, this time from Ure's chapter "The Persecution of the Abstract." "I want to create for myself an unpopular theater" refers to the 1919 essay "A People's Theatre: A Letter to Lady Gregory," which explains Yeats's intention to depart, as Ure puts it, "from the tradition that Synge and Lady Gregory and Yeats himself had created, the digging, to use the poet's own metaphor, of a new quarry." Here Ure quotes from the 1919 letter:

I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many . . . I want to make . . . a feeling of exclusiveness, a bond among chosen spirits, a mystery almost for leisured and lettered people . . . I seek, not a theatre but the theatre's anti-self. (77)

This passage has many echoes in Borges, perhaps most notably the idea expressed at the beginning of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" that a novel could reveal a hidden pattern or secret that would be accessible to "unos pocos lectores . . . muy pocos lectores" (OC 431). As we will discuss in a moment, this rejection of the "popular" or of "populism" is something that Borges felt with intensity during the triumphant years of Peronism (1945-55), out of which came his famous 1951 talk "El escritor argentino y la tradición." Yeats's retreat from a "popular theater" during the period from the Easter Rising through the Irish Civil War must have resonated with him, although the expression "not a theatre but the theatre's anti-self" does not sound like anything that Borges would ever formulate, in this or in any other regard.

The next quotation, "When there is nothing there is God" is a compressed version of several quotations that Ure makes from *The Hour Glass* and *The Unicorn from the Stars*. From the first work, Ure quotes from the

13 Here Ure omits the rest of the paragraph, which reads: "I do not even remember that this happy mood must come to an end. It seems as if the vehicle had suddenly grown pure and far extended and so luminous that one half imagines that the images from *Anima Mundi*, embodied there and drunk with that sweetness, would, as some country drunkard who had thrown a wisp into his own thatch, burn up time," and part of the first sentence of the following one, which reads: "It may be an hour before the mood passes, but . . ."

philosopher's assent to belief in God: "Go and call my pupils again. I will make them understand. I will say to them that only amid spiritual terror or only when all that laid hold on life is shaken can we see truth . . . We sink in on God, we find him in becoming nothing—we perish into reality" (94). From *The Unicorn*, Ure quotes from a speech by Martin, "who awakes from his trance to declare: 'I saw in a broken vision, but now all is clear to me. Where there is nothing, where there is nothing—there is God!'" (94). Ure notes that these plays, particularly *The Hour Glass*, are "entirely swamped by the uprush of the 'system'" (95), but comments (à propos of Auden's elegy for Yeats) that "Auden was wrong, for, while it is true that *A Vision* has no intrinsic value, in its intimate relationship with the poetry it meant everything—or nearly everything—to Yeats the artist" (95).

The final annotation on the page on the internet is: "Grant me an old man's frenzy." Here Ure, in his chapter "The Horror of Daybreak," is quoting from "An Acre of Grass" in *Last Poems*:

Grant me an old man's frenzy,  
 Myself must I remake,  
 Till I am Timon and Lear  
 Or that William Blake  
 Who beat upon the wall  
 Till Truth obeyed his call. (109)

Ure sees this as a "struggle . . . between what is conceived as 'truth' and natural desire" (109). This leads to a fascinating discussion of such poems as "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and "Byzantium," in which, according to Ure, "Yeats spoke in his own person, and showed us the landscape through the glass of his own elaborate, introspective, self-conscious personality. In the mechanical songs . . . the direct voice has ceased and all is obliquity" (111). Here "mechanical" is used to refer to the Crazy Jane poems, but also to poems like the ones mentioned, in which the voice speaks through a mask (according to the system of twenty-eight incarnations already mentioned). He goes on to say: "The personae of these poems are mythological characters, like Cuchalain, like Robert Gregory. Their obliquity is perhaps more pronounced, for they are the product of a greater selectivity from the poet's personal experience" (112). Of the Crazy Jane poems, he comments: "This, I think, is what has happened with the Crazy Jane type of poem: that the transformation is not quite complete ap-

pears now and again from an unassimilated or unassimilable thought or image hailing from the grand manner” (112).

In Ure’s conclusions the critic notes the “complete ‘Otherness’ of the thought that lies behind most of the poetry” (115), and concludes that Yeats’s method “was entirely invalid if we suppose that he asked [these questions] because he wanted to supply the answers for the use of others; but the answers had power to fulfill his own needs and those of his poetry” (119). It is worth noting that Henn drew similar conclusions four years later (see, for instance, 119-47, including a reference to Ure on 121).

Borges read the Ure book some time between its publication date (1946) and his blindness (which was gradual, but he stopped being able to read by 1955). It seems to me most probable that he read it soon after publication, and that some of its arguments about the relations between a writer and a national culture are reflected obliquely in the famous 1951 lecture “El escritor argentino y la tradición.” Since the latter is a trenchant response to Peronist and nationalist versions of Argentine national culture, it is worth exploring here the various ways in which Ure’s views on Yeats are relevant.

All of this explicit interest in Yeats culminates in a text which we know about but do not actually have. On page 171 of Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez’s *Borges, libros y lecturas*, where the authors, à propos of a list of lectures that Borges gave in 1950, 1951 and 1952, note that he gave a lecture “Obra y destinos de William Butler Yeats” in 1951. Since this talk was never published, and we can presume that it has been lost, we can only infer its contents from the other mentions of Yeats in Borges’s work, and from the presentation in that same year of “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (in which the presence of Yeats is implicit but not explicit). It is interesting that the 1951 talk on Yeats was about the “destinies” of Yeats, implying that Borges thought of him in terms of a multifaceted identity.

You will recall that “El escritor argentino y la tradición” proposes that Argentina’s cultural relations to the West are analogous to that of Jews to Central European culture and that of the Irish to English culture, and that in all three cases Borges argues (initially following Thorstein Veblen’s “The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe,” 1919) that the periphery is freer to innovate than the center: “podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con

una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas” (OC 273). Since this was a talk given in 1951 during the most frenzied period of Peronist nationalism, it is highly significant that Ireland is invoked here. Though Yeats is not mentioned by name (Shaw, Berkeley and Swift are), Yeats’s own uncomfortable relations to Irish national culture after the outbreak of violence and throughout the period of civil war may have been present to Borges as he spoke about the difficulties of the Argentine intellectual in a period of populist nationalism.<sup>14</sup> In any case, Yeats is a tutelar figure for Borges, one whose presence is particularly strong in the period from the mid-1930s to the 1950s, Borges’s most prodigious creative period.

In a 1946 essay on Cervantes’s *Novelas ejemplares*, Borges recalls these lines from Yeats’s *Adam’s Curse*: “Un solo verso puede exigir muchas horas; pero si no aparece el don de un momento, nuestro tejer y nuestro destejer son inútiles” (*Cervantes y el Quijote* 152, also in *Prólogos* 45). He is translating, of course, from the opening of the poem:

We sat together at one summer’s end,  
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,  
And you and I, and talked of poetry.  
I said: ‘A line will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.’ (78)

In one of the 1966-67 Norton lectures he refers to Yeats in the illustrious company of Góngora, Donne and Joyce: “Their words, their stanzas may be far-fetched; we may find strange things in them. But we are made to feel that the emotion behind those words is a true one. This should be sufficient for us to tender them our admiration” (*This Craft of Verse* 95). And in one of the 1977 lectures included in *Siete noches*, Borges refers to Yeats’s line “The full round moon and the star-laden sky” (*Siete noches* 30), the second line of “The Sorrow of Love” in the 1892 version,<sup>15</sup> Yeats is for Borges a writer whose works dialogue with his own over a period of a half

14 This is of course a major issue in Yeats criticism. For two recent interventions, see Nicholas Allen’s *Modernism, Ireland and Civil War* (66-88) and Michael Wood’s *Yeats & Violence*.

15 This line was later changed (in 1925) to “The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,” which is the version that appears in the *Collected Poems* of 1956.

century. The jottings at the end of Peter Ure's *Towards a Mythology: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats* serve to confirm that Yeats's way of creating an interplay of history and mythology was vital to Borges's own creative project in the period in which he produced *Ficciones*, *El Aleph* and *Otras inquisiciones*.

As can be inferred from the annotations transcribed by Laura Rosato and Germán Álvarez in *Borges, libros y lecturas* (from some five hundred of Borges's books), used the blank pages of books, particularly the end papers (as is the case of the Ure book), as an extension of his notebooks, as a sort of creative laboratory. His marginalia connect his reading to his writing. These particular annotations, put on the Internet almost by accident, help clarify the thinking that is developed in his most influential essay on Argentine (and Latin American) culture, and flesh out a rich imaginative relationship between his thinking on the relations between centers and peripheries and between creativity and poetic system.

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58

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