

PRIMAL SCENES OR FICTIONAL FOUNDATIONS?
AN APPROACH TO THE MYTHOLOGICAL ORIGINS
OF BORGES NARRATIVE FICTION



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*I always thought of myself as a writer, even before
I wrote a book. ("An Autobiographical Essay")
La biblioteca existe ab eterno ("La biblioteca de Babel")*

THE PARADOXES OF ORIGINALITY

What is the status of the question of origins in Borges? Although Borges's name and texts are most frequently associated with a "postmodern" scepticism towards the fixation of origins, relegating such enquiries to the realm of narrative and fiction, there is clearly a fascination with original scenes throughout his oeuvre—a fascination which is, paradoxically enough, most notable in texts that are not primarily fictional. For example, Borges's poetry often dwells on quasi-sublime and "precise" moments in which a vast future scenario spreads out before the eyes of the poet or some historico-fictional character. Suffice it for the present purpose to allude to "Un sajón," a poem in which the very instant when the first Anglo-Saxon "[p]isó con receloso pie desnudo / [l]a arena minuciosa" of the British dunes—in A.D. 449—

is cast forth as pregnant with “una lengua que el tiempo exaltaría / [a] música de Shakespeare” (OC 883-84). Many of Borges’s most celebrated essays also touch upon the quasi-transcendental origin of historical (cultural, metaphysical) phenomena. Thus, according to Borges, the prophetic origin of modern universalism is found in a certain passage from Snorri’s *Heimskringla* (“El pudor de la historia”); the primal scene of silent reading has been registered in a chapter of Augustine’s *Confessiones* (“El culto de los libros”); the transition from allegory to novel occurs in a line from Chaucer’s translation of Boccaccio’s *Teseida* (“De las alegorías a las novelas”); etc. These moments could well be referred to as origins; their status or value, however, is highly questionable, hovering somewhere between a mythological and an ironic mode.

Much of this ambiguity remains if the question of originality is focused towards the realm of poetics. For it is well known that Borges, on several occasions, pronounced himself in favour of a literature inclined towards the reelaboration of the *déjà-lu*—ideas and metaphors already belonging to language and tradition—rather than with the pursuit of newness and originality. At the same time, however, Borges seemed almost obsessively preoccupied with the task of rewriting and censoring his own work, especially that part which belongs to the first decade of his literary trajectory—the 1920s—as though in an attempt to safeguard, retrospectively, the purity of his own origin. It is no wonder, then, that the paradoxes of originality have haunted Borges criticism from the very beginning. On the following pages, I shall review some alternative genealogies of Borges’s fictional narrative—the foundations, that is, of the literary mode which is probably most conspicuously “Borgesian.” I also intend to add a few novel remarks on the issue, especially with respect to the more remote prehistory of Borges’s oeuvre. Thus, although I start out with some reflections on “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” —and the so-called “Christmas Eve-Accident” which frames it as the mythological origin of Borges’s narrative fiction—I shall soon move towards the less heeded proto-fictional texts of the 1920s and early 30s, in order to end up at the very origins of Borges’s writing: his juvenilia and their scene of writing, the library. At the very end

of this *viaje a la semilla*, I reproduce—in an appendix of sorts—Borges’s childhood manuscript “Handbook of Greek Mythology.”

JORGE LUIS BORGES, THE AUTHOR OF PIERRE MENARD

Borges’s own version of his “fictional foundation” conjures up a quasi-mythological primal scene situated well beyond the realm of influence and indebtedness. According to “An Autobiographical Essay,” his first story was conceived under dramatic circumstances: Recovering from septicemia after the so-called Christmas Eve-Accident, Borges decided to put his artistic and intellectual abilities on trial. As if to prepare an excuse for himself in the case of a misfire, he opted to write in a different genre: “I decided I would try to write a story” (45). The experiment succeeded. Borges came up with this strange, fictionalized essay—“Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”—which, in its turn, gave way to a series of other *ficciones*. Leonor Acevedo de Borges has probably grasped the underlying intent of her son’s creative *peripeteia* when she recounts it as follows: “Il eut un autre accident horrible, après quoi il commença à écrire des nouvelles fantastiques, ce qui ne lui était jamais arrivé auparavant; je crois qu’il y a quelque chose de changé dans son cerveau” (11). And, for a relatively long period of time, the status of “Pierre Menard” as the true beginning of Borges’s fictional oeuvre remained virtually unquestioned.

However, as soon as one actually starts to *read* this metanarrative account, it becomes difficult to regard it simply as an original scene from which Borges’s fictional universe arises. As Michel Lafon points out, the autobiographical anecdote is a relatively late invention, composed several decades after the incident took place (Lafon 100ff). There is also a profound narrative or even proto-fictional quality about this epiphanic scene which recalls episodes from Borges’s own fictional work. Its canonical version is strongly reminiscent of the short story “El Sur,” from which it even quotes some crucial phrases. Still, the most translucent example of the theme of the accident as a creative epiphany in Borges’s oeuvre is probably “Funes el memorioso.” In this story the theme is wrought in a more uncanny manner: Ireneo Funes is thrown off his horse, loses his con-

sciousness, and wakes up to a different reality: “Al caer, perdió el conocimiento; cuando lo recobró, el presente era casi intolerable de tan rico y tan nítido, y también las memorias más antiguas y más triviales” (OC 488). There is, thus, a sense in which Borges’s fictional writing constitutes the original scene of the Christmas Eve-Accident, rather than vice versa.

Now, if we turn to the text which emerged from the legendary experiment—“Pierre Menard”—there is apparently nothing much “foundational” about its textual particularities. Ironically enough, the story is totally wrapped up in echoes, repetitions, rewritings, and allusions. As will be remembered, it is framed as an obituary note whose primary concern is to rectify an allegedly fallacious catalogue of Pierre Menard’s oeuvre, perpetrated by a certain Madame Henri Bachelier. No truly “original” text can be found among the *visible* work, which consists of translations, transcriptions, polemics, rectifications, and monographs on several philosophers; not to mention the *subterranean* one, that is, the celebrated rewriting of *Don Quijote*. The story’s generalized “non-originality” includes at least one more fundamental trait: Pierre Menard appears as a waxen *doppelgänger* of Paul Valéry (if not of the latter’s alter ego, Edmond Teste)—not only in that they are compatriots, contemporaries, and share many of the same aesthetic preferences, but also insofar as “Pierre Menard” seems to derive from Paul Valéry’s *Introduction à la Poétique*, reviewed by Borges for *El Hogar* the year before he wrote his originary *ficción*. As Borges paraphrases and translates him, Valéry suggests that literature is a kind of expansion of the most elementary linguistic operations—“ya que toda creación literaria se reduce a una combinación de las potencias de un vocabulario determinado, según formas establecidas una vez por todas” (*Textos cautivos* 241). Borges argues that such a view of literature is incompatible with Valéry’s observation, a few pages later, that a work of art only exists *en action*—an assertion which presupposes the intervention of a *reader* as the figure on whom the realization of the work depends. Writes Borges:

La primera [observación] establece un número elevado pero finito de obras posibles; la segunda, un número de obras indeterminado, cre-

ciente. La segunda admite que el tiempo y sus incomprendiones y distracciones colaboran con el poeta muerto. (242)

To illustrate his point, Borges recurs to an example from Cervantes: “¡Vive Dios, que me espanta esta grandeza!” This exclamation, which sounds perfectly rigid and lofty in modern Spanish, is most likely to have appeared as a quite ordinary expression of surprise to the author and his contemporaries. “El tiempo,” Borges concludes, “—amigo de Cervantes— ha sabido corregirle las pruebas” (242). These final glosses obviously prefigure the fictional apparatus of “Pierre Menard.” Perhaps it should be added that the glosses on Cervantes actually originate from a much earlier essay, “La fruición literaria” (*El idioma* 91-92), from which Borges unannouncedly quotes in his review article. Thus it is not impossible that the prehistory of “Pierre Menard” stretches back to some indefinite moment around an earlier Christmas Eve—that of 1926—when Borges might have started to ponder on the theme of the essay which was to appear in the columns of the Buenos Aires paper *La Prensa*, on January 23, 1927. In any case, as soon as the story is inscribed into a more secular history of Borges’s writing, its assumed *ex nihilo*-originality dissolves into a series of consciously staged echoes and reflections.

REVISIONARY STRATEGIES AND ROADS NOT TAKEN

The displacement of “Pierre Menard” from the *origo* of Borges’s fictional universe is indebted to the considerable amount of bibliographic and critical work which has been carried out during the last couple of decades. An important episode in this respect was Enrique Sacerio-Garí’s exhumation and reevaluation of the essays and reviews Borges wrote for the magazine *El Hogar* during the period from 1936 to 1939. Collaborating with Emir Rodríguez Monegal—who had acquired the complete series of the magazine for the years in question—Sacerio-Garí wrote a Ph.D.-dissertation arguing that Borges’s contributions in *El Hogar* were literary experiments which resulted in the discovery of the most idiosyncratically Borgesian devices. Subsequently, Rodríguez Monegal and Sacerio-Garí offered a selection of these texts to a general audience—*Textos cautivos: Ensa-*

ayos y reseñas en "El Hogar" (1936-1939)—and, more recently, the remaining texts have been reissued as *Borges en El Hogar*.

However, this is surely not the only alternative to Borges's autobiographical account of his own genesis as a writer of narrative fiction. Well before Sacerio-Garí's revisionary genealogy, Ronald J. Christ had proposed that the 1936 fictional review article "El acercamiento a Almutásim" constitutes the true beginning of Borges's distinguishing style. An entire chapter of Christ's pioneer study *The Narrow Act*—suggestively titled "The Achievement of Form"—was dedicated to a detailed analysis of this text *qua* "foundational fiction." According to Christ, "if 'Pierre Menard' had something new, it was in the order of its brilliant conceit and not of its form, which is fundamentally similar to that of 'The Approach'" (88). Later, several other critics have insisted that the difference between "Pierre Menard" and "The Approach" is one of degree rather than essence. According to James E. Holloway, for instance, it is the latter which represents "the first of Borges' metaphysical fictions, his first labyrinth story" (37).

Whereas critics such as Christ and Sacerio-Garí present alternative candidates for the *incipit narratio* in Borges's oeuvre, others have based their revisionary genealogies on different strategies. I have no intention to simulate comprehensiveness in this matter, but I find Mary Lusky Friedman's *The Emperor's Kites. A Morphology of Borges' Tales* representative of what might be termed a "linguistic turn" in the question of origins in Borges. As the subtitle suggests, Friedman's book is an attempt to reconstruct the "ur-narrative" of Borges's *ficciones* on formalist grounds. According to her, the essential pattern (or "Borgesian Paradigm") of these texts crystallizes in the first half of the 1930s—more specifically, with the "twice-told tales" included in *Historia universal de la infamia*. Another, and probably more consistent way of "theorizing" the question of origins in Borges, would be to regard the very issue (the *origin* of the *work* of an *author*) with profound suspicion. This is a position which may be illustrated by Annick Louis's denunciation of the reductiveness inherent in *every* quest for Borges's fictional genealogy: "Toute tentative d'appréhender à travers un seul recours les diverses pratiques

borgésiennes me semble destinée à une réduction et à un appauvrissement qui renient les principes posés par cette oeuvre" (25).

With Michel Lafon's *Borges ou la réécriture* (1990), the revisionary process apparently comes full circle. This is a book which reinscribes—from a "post-structuralist" perspective associated with Genette rather than with Derrida/Barthes—not only the question of origins as one that deserves the critic's attention but also the "originary" status of "Pierre Menard." According to Lafon, the very reliance of "Pierre Menard" on earlier writings by Borges (documented by Sacerio-Garí and many others)—as well as its traffic with autobiographical material—is precisely what turns it into an emblem of the passage from the early to the mature Borges. The "autobiographeme" of the Christmas Eve-Accident is, according to Lafon, the last in a series of similar scenes that are constantly worked into, and rewritten throughout, Borges's mature work: "si la deuxième partie de la vie de Borges est [...] vide d'(auto)biographèmes, c'est précisément parce qu'elle est le temps de la construction et de la réécriture de tous les (auto)biographèmes qui en structurent la première partie" (104). Thus it is precisely its non-originary impurity (Lafon seems to be saying) which restores "Pierre Menard" to the very foundations of Borges's oeuvre.

As a general tendency, the Borges criticism of the 1990s shifted its focus towards a younger and more "innocent" version of the author. In the wake of the posthumous reissuing of early material—prior, that is, to the *Hogar*-texts of the 1930s—among which the three "lost" collections of essays from the 20s stand out as the most remarkable—the focus shifted to the shy and rather self-conscious *ultraísta* and *criollo* who preferred to sign his books "Jorje Luis." This is the version of Borges that was inexorably exiled from the 1974 *Obras completas* yet—somewhat reluctantly, it seems—allowed to occupy the margins of the Pléiade edition of his *Ceuvres complètes*. Interestingly, there appears to have been a general consensus that the newly (re)discovered Borges was a *different* Borges; the mature writer's younger self, perhaps, but not his origin. Beatriz Sarlo, one of the first critics to foreground the earliest period of Borges, suggests that there is no sudden change, only discrete modifications between the young *criollo* and the mature universalist. The avant-

gardist survives in the old man; a tension between local culture and Western tradition prevails throughout his work; and marginality is an abiding feature in virtually all of his writings. Nevertheless, the impression remains that the sum of these gradual modifications amounts to a metamorphosis of sorts; most definitely, the verbose criollo avant-gardist is not the serene and almost unreal storyteller.

Rafael Olea Franco is quite clear about this when he speaks of “el primer Borges” as “el otro Borges”: Here we have to do with a writer who does not abound in labyrinthine constructions or games with shifting mirrors, yet who is “igualmente rico y complejo” and who defines “paulatinamente su escritura por medio de diversas experimentaciones literarias” (22)—a simulacrum of Borges, as it were, and at times almost a caricature. Olea Franco furthermore suggests that the transition between the two versions of Borges can be quite accurately situated: “Todo se inicia en *Discusión*” (230); thus it is implied that the innovative poetics of reading outlined in this 1932 book of essays contributed in an essential way to the shift from poetry to the narrative genre as the preferred—and most profoundly Borgesian—mode of writing.

Borges’s first short story appeared the year after *Discusión* had been issued. It might be worth while to recall some of the circumstances of this event. “Hombres de las orillas” was published, pseudonomously, in the columns of *Crítica’s Suplemento Multicolor de los Sábados*. When it reappeared, along with Borges’s other major contributions to the periodical, in *Historia universal de la infamia*—as the only “cuento directo” of a book consisting mainly of rewritings of “ajenas historias” (OC 291)—the title had been changed to “Hombre de la esquina rosada.” “Me tomó unos seis años,” Borges later recalls, “de 1927 a 1933, recorrer el camino desde aquel bosquejo demasiado autoconciente, ‘Hombres pelearon’, hasta mi primer cuento verdadero, ‘Hombre de la esquina rosada’” (Olea Franco 244). The expressions “cuento directo” and “cuento verdadero” are here most probably used in a purely formal, generic sense—to signify a text which observes the basic laws of the genre, without regards to the text’s status as the originary narrative in Borges’s work. For, as is well known, Borges was never very comfortable with what he referred to as the story’s “éxito singular y un poco misterioso” (OC

291). And, to be sure, even a superficial reading of the story is likely to realize its anomaly as part of Borges's oeuvre. The quasi-realistic scenarios, tinted by local color, combined with the protagonist's sentimental soliloquies and little less than overt sexual allusions, suggests a curious contamination by the journalistic context (which is quite differently felt in the other "infamous" stories). It is not unthinkable that Borges recognized the improbable future of "Borges" as a writer of quasi-costumbrista *compadrito* stories. Such an anagnorisis might perhaps be said to represent a foundation of sorts, and a rather Borgesian one at that: the moment in which the writer realizes his own essential destiny.

WRITING VIOLENCE ON THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER

As if to complicate the situation even further, Borges's first short story is not identical with his first narrative text. In the interview from which I have just quoted, "Hombres pelearon" was referred to as a preliminary version of "Hombre de la esquina rosada." Originally published in the literary magazine *Martín Fierro* (under the title "Leyenda policial"), the earlier text narrates an anecdote of a local hoodlum who is killed by the man he chases. The anecdote is characterized by an almost perfect simplicity which—combined with some vernacular idiosyncrasies—suggests a "poetics of orality" of sorts. "Hombres pelearon" purifies the narrative sequence, as if in an attempt to grasp the most basic *modus existendi* of the genre; and the story advances in such a smooth and straightforward manner that it seems virtually pointless. Apparently, no complicating circumstances threaten the unfolding of the plot line.

Borges allowed the anecdote to appear in print a second time, grouped together with "Sentirse en muerte"—under the common title of "Dos esquinas"—in *El idioma de los argentinos*. As far as I can tell, after that it did not reappear until the publication of the first tome of Borges's complete works in French, where it was relegated to the section "En marge d'«Histoire universelle de l'infamie.»" These circumstances, in addition to Borges's characterization of the story as a mere sketch, suggest a rather awkward kind of "originality": a foundational text which is perfectly expendable as part of

Borges's oeuvre and whose principal merit is to prepare for a story ("Hombre de la esquina...") which also failed as a foundation for his work in the narrative genre.

There is, however, a certain reflection on the rhetorical apparatus of fiction in "Hombres pelearon" which somehow prefigures the metaleptic reversals so characteristic of Borges's mature fictional work. When the narrator, in the opening lines, depicts his own narration metaphorically as a *walk* towards the past suburban scene, narration is itself presented as a narrative activity—thus suggesting a continuity between narration (discourse) and narrated events (story). Similarly, the story's final paragraph inscribes a scenario in which the narrator foresees a future retelling of the story *sub specie æternitatis* in a way that may be read as a foregrounding of the formal constituents of narrative. Moreover, many of Borges's later stories could be shown to correspond, often in a quite remarkable way, to the narrative schema of this early text. For instance, "La muerte y la brújula"—a labyrinthine Borges narrative if ever there was one—retains the earlier text's retrospective, metanarrative presentation of the scene; it also includes characters based on local archetypes; a plot line which traverses an urban landscape in order to end up on its (southern) margins, an anaphoric insistence on the protagonist's sense perceptions ("vio"), the description of a duel—as well as an ending which suggests alternative ways of narrating or construing the "same" story.

In fact, if we turn to the other of the "two corners," "Sentirse en muerte," we find that this anecdotal *conte philosophique* also observes the same narrative pattern. Now it is the narrator himself who traverses the city until he reaches its utmost boundaries, where he is, metaphorically speaking, annihilated by the vision which awaits him there. The story line leads to a suburban street-corner, at the very edge of the city, from where the narrator contemplates a scene of absolute serenity. At this point the "emotional anecdote" ends. The story line, figured by the streets, disintegrates—"el callejón, ya pampeano, se desmoronaba hacia el Maldonado" (*El idioma* 124)—and the final scene evokes a state of timelessness, or originariness, from which a counter-narrative situation emerges. "Me quedé mirando esa sencillez," writes Borges,

Pensé, con seguridad en voz alta: Esto es lo mismo de hace veinte años... [...] Me sentí muerto, me sentí percibidor abstracto del mundo [...] Esa pura representación de hechos homogéneos [...] no es meramente idéntica a la que hubo en esa esquina hace tantos años; es, sin parecidos ni repeticiones, la misma. (124-125)

It is almost as if the narrator (*qua wanderer*) had failed to opt for the proper direction for the anecdote to reach a *narrative* solution. For, in a quite literal way, the central event of the text appears as non-narratable; it cannot be accounted for in the narrative idiom of the anecdote which consequently turns into a prolonged reflection on the distance between its own figurality and the episode it is supposed to represent.

Again Borges could be said to foreground the formal constraints of narrative: Confronting an extreme situation, a point which is at once the end and the origin of all narrative activity, the text unfolds its own limits within the space of the story. Any attempt to account for the essential qualities of this original scene is condemned to dramatize its inevitable displacement from the narrative realm. “Sentirse en muerte” thus becomes a story of loss—of failure and defeat. It appears as an early version of the Borgesian “mythology of writing” as an activity which is bound to fictionalize, to disrupt, or violate the experience it was meant to represent. In my view, the grouping of these two proto-narratives amounts to a significant *event*—or a prophetic gesture—in the pre-history of Borges’s fictional narrative. Taken together, they represent a first attempt to transcribe the scenarios of his early poetry in narrative terms, embracing the city of Buenos Aires—and particularly its margins, its horizon, its *past*—as their preferred zones. They both approach death and nothingness as, respectively, physical violence and meta-physical *horror*; and both evince, to a higher or lesser degree, the reflective and “metanarrative” figuralities which recur throughout Borges’s fictional work.

AN ORIGINAL SCENE OF WRITING?

Perhaps the quest for an original scene of Borges’s narratives should have ended here, at the “Two Corners”: a vantage point from where

one might contemplate a horizon of as yet unwritten stories. However, it is tempting to go on for a few more pages with what might by now start to appear as a *regressus in infinitum*: There is an even earlier text by Borges which is seldom heeded by critics yet which, in my view, deserves to be considered alongside the “two corners.” I am thinking of “Boletín de una noche toda” — a brief, handwritten sketch, dating back to the mid 1920s, which relates the experience of *returning* from a nightly stroll, of undressing and getting to bed in utter darkness. The anecdote of these rather trivial acts gives way to a reflection on darkness, nakedness, madness, and non-existence. “Nadie ha pensado la oscuridad,” writes Borges, and goes on with a description of a total undressing:

Después, voy despojándome de mi nombre, de mi pasado, de mi conjetural porvenir. Soy cualquier otro. Ya me dejó la visión, luego el escuchar, el soñar, el tacto. Soy casi nadie: soy como las plantas (negras de oscuridad en negro jardín) que no despertará el pleno día. Pero no en día, sino en tenebrosidad soy yacente. Soy tullido, ciego, desaforado, terrible en mi cotidiano desaparecer. Soy nadie. (*Textos recobrados* 185-186)

This text is the first example of which I know where Borges combines the narrative (anecdotal) mode with his characteristic metaphysical stance. It clearly anticipates the “feeling in death” of Borges’s later corner-text — albeit in a much more somber and even uncanny idiom; in fact, the latter even quotes, almost literally, a phrase from its precursor text: “Aspiré noche, en asueto serenísimo de pensar” (*Idioma* 124).

Yet why stop there? Before Borges’ own books, there were those of others — and there was writing. Arguably, it is more than a mere coincidence that Borges’s juvenilia evince much of the same narrative simplicity and violent conflicts as do the “two corners” as well as many of Borges’s later fictions. By “juvenilia” I am referring to the most well known extant pieces such as “El rey de la selva” — a very brief, Kipling-like tale pseudonymously published when Borges was thirteen years old — and “Bernardo del Carpio” — a tragedy in three scenes, based on the story of the legendary Spanish hero, written around 1907; to which might be added Borges’s 1910 transla-

tion of Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" into Spanish, as well as a few other writings. As in a multi-layered palimpsest, or a penitimento, the almost "generic" simplicity of these earliest writings occasionally shines through the textual surface of even the most labyrinthine stories from *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*.

Another benefit to be had from this *regressus* is the appearance of what is undoubtedly an original scene of Borges's writing, namely the *library*. This is a scene which entirely embraces the literary life of Borges—a librarian not only by profession, but also by conviction. "If I were asked to name the chief event in my life," Borges observes in his "Autobiographical Essay," "I should say my father's library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library" (24)—to which should be added the Miguel Cané library, where some of his most renowned stories were written; the Biblioteca Nacional in the Mexico Street; and even Paradise, which in the "Poema de los dones" appears in the form of a library—to mention but a few examples. The library is a scene in which writing is indissolubly involved with reading and with its derivatives: re-writing, translation, transcription, copying—the very activities which are commonly held to distinguish Borges's fictional writing as "Borgesian." It is not difficult to imagine, as Borges has done on several occasions, the early texts as somehow emerging from the library in which they were probably written. Their origin is Borges's myopic yet blissful reading—a reading which *demands action*, which strives to *become writing*.

Another autobiographical "myth" has it that Borges's very first literary endeavour took place when he was about nine years old. "I had set down in quite bad English a kind of handbook on Greek mythology," writes Borges: "This may have been my first literary venture" (26). Richard Burgin's *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* provides a more detailed scene of writing: "[I]t must have been some fifteen pages long," Borges says, referring to the same handbook,

with the story of the Golden Fleece and the Labyrinth and Hercules, he was my favourite, and then something about the loves of the gods, and the tale of Troy. That was the first thing I ever wrote. I remember it was written in a very short and crabbed handwriting because I was very shortsighted. (Burgin 20)

Interestingly, whenever these memories are evoked, Borges seems to emphasize the very scene of writing, in which the act of copying or *writing into* appears as a virtually “autotelic” activity: “I very neatly wrote these things into copybooks” (“Autobiographical” 26).

As far as I know, Borges’s mythological compilation has never been printed in a readable version (apart from shorter passages quoted in secondary sources). This is regrettable, for it deserves a few moments’s contemplation. In the form of an appendix of sorts, I therefore offer my own version of the very young Borges’s literary debut. Some of us may take pleasure in the very existence, at or beyond the origin of Borges’s fictional writing, of a manuscript which is simultaneously much more and much less than a book; yet its interest is not due to mere chronological circumstances. The “crabbed handwriting” actually conceals a textual universe which is—if not dazzling—in the least complex and suggestive. Despite a somewhat chaotic appearance, the text reveals a clear penchant towards structure. It falls neatly into three different parts—“The Gods,” “The Mo[n]sters,” and “Heroes”—each of which is divided into two or three subchapters; whereas the stories of “Troya’s Horse” and “How Jason g[o]t the fleece” have been inserted as independent pieces. Accordingly, it is probably misleading to entitle the entire text as “The Gods,” since this is clearly intended as the title only of the first section (“The Gods / Number One”). Also, the manuscript’s reliance on Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary*, pointed out by Borges himself and repeated by some of his critics (such as Ghiglione), is possibly exaggerated. Borges’s version contains many elements that could probably be retraced to other sources; one of these elements being the curious interpolation of proper names in their Spanish rather than English rendering (Baco, Teseo, Minotauro, etc.); another, some of the quasi-Homeric epithets (such as “the brazen-feet bulls”) which I have not been able to verify in Lemprière.

Perhaps it is impossible to argue convincingly that the scene in which a boy, entirely surrounded by books, inscribes his own version of the foundational myths of Western literature, represents the *incipit narratio* in Borges. Yet if it were, then it would also be possible to produce an exact description of the primal scene of Borges’s fictional writing—“I can still picture it. It was in a room of its own,

with glass-fronted shelves, and must have contained thousands of volumes" ("Autobiographical" 24)—as well as the text which represents the mythological origin of Borges's narrative oeuvre: the *Handbook on Greek Mythology*. To all those who feel that this is a preposterous way to conclude an essay on the question of origins in Borges, I have no definitive answer. In any case, I invite the sceptical reader to enter this maze of more or less heterogeneous episodes and enumerations of heroes, gods, and monsters; to observe the repeated effort to establish a narratorial voice through "metadiscursive" interpolations ("Now I will tell you") and perfectly "literary" exclamations ("Ah Acteon, why did you want to look at Diana?")—and to ask himself in which (and how many) senses such a text amounts to a mythological foundation or an original scene.

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APPENDIX: BORGES'S HANDBOOK ON GREEK MYTHOLOGY

The following transcription intends to be as "diplomatic" as possible, but it doubtlessly contains both additional errors and unwarranted corrections. I've been working on a copy held at the Fundación San Telmo, Buenos Aires, for which I am grateful to Nicolás Helft and Ana Becú.

The Gods / Number One

The first mythology was made in Greece. The gods can be men or wimen, are this. Now I will tell you some of these, Baco and other Jupiter was the god of gods. Ends [?] are victories, that is the way to call [?] a [?] god. Jupiter was also god of the olympos. Now I will tell you some thing about Diana. One day as Diana was bathing her self into a brook, Acteon saw her. She was so angry, that she change him into a deer, and was eated by his dog. Ah Acteon, why did you want to look at Diana? Acteon, why did you do that? Diana's temple is in Athenas. Saturno use to eat his sons, one after another, but his wife coverd one of her sons with a stone. So he eat lad and stone. Then a great pain fell on him, so he told that thing to some other god. So they where taken out of his mouth [?] so he had no pain, because it was the stone who gave him that pain. [2] No I will tell you about some other gods, Júpiter chance [i.e. changed] into a bull and went to the seasid, where Europa fed him with muss. So he carrid her, up the sea, and marraid her.

The mosters / Number one

The metology mosters are this ones, Jahron [?]. much mosters these ones. Another lion of Nimea is one of them. Neso is another moster. Neso is horse and man togheger. Gorgans are mosters, with one eye and one tooth, and hair make of snakes, and arms made of brass. Perseo killed one of them. Now I will tell you the story of Perseo.

Heroes / Number one

Polidecto wish to married Daifnea, so he told her that he love her, but she would not like that. So he was his [?] stone, now the king had a brother. He was a kind man. He loved Daifnia, now she had a son named Perseo. [3] In that land lived the gorgans, now Daifnai did not lick to be the [unreadable] of Polidecto. So she went to the tempel. Polidecto wished to have her. So he made a larse fist [i.e. large feast], to which any person would be there. So Perseo went, he had nothing to give the king. After that feast, he had seen a gooddness who say to him. You may have the head of the Gorgan. Then when he had to gave some thing to Polidecto, he told him he may have the gorgan's head. He went up the town, till at last he saw Minerva. He sat by the side of Medusa and cut of her head, then the gods who love him, gave him the hat of darkness, and the wing of Mercurio. He also save Adromeda from the sea-moster. Then he married her, and live happy after wards.

The gods / Number two

Now I will tell you some thing about Mercurio. Mercurio stold Cupido's armes and bones. Also he stole of Neptune's fork, he had wings on his feet and on his head. [4] He was also a great thief who stold sheep from Apollo. Now I will tell you some thing about Marte, he was god of war. Whose sord was stolen by Mercurio, the thief. A picture of Marte is some thing like one of a knight. He had no beard like other gods, such as Neptune.

Troya's horse / From the war of Troya

When blood pay for hearts, the ent [end?] of war come, the anger grow in Greece, like flowers in a sumer field, then Greece made a great wooden horse, filled with soldiers, and gave it to Troy. Then Apolo, god of light and of the burning sun, went to Troya, and told it was filled with soldiers. They did not hear. So Greece was victory. Troya wish another presend, not the wooden horse. That was not the presend they wished. Troya would be victory without that horse. Luck is not oure [?] run [?]. [5]

(Mosters) / Number two

The Sphinx was a moster, with the wings of a eagle, and lion's head, and a body of a [?] man. He went to Theban, and told conundrums to every person he saw. One day Edipo went to the sphinx, and the sphinx gave him a conundrum, now I will tell it to you. What animal walkes in four feet in the morning, in the evening in two, and at night in three, to which Edipo answer, the Man. There the Sphinx killed him self. The strength had no rest [?].

The lion of Nemea, was also a great moster, and was killed by Hercules. Hercules, God of strenth. The hira of Lerna, was a moster with one hundred heads. If one of her heads was cut, there will come two more. [6]

Heroes / Number two

When Theseo was young, his father went to another country and was made king. Liveing nothing to his son but his sworde and sandles. One day his mother gave him the sandles and sorde. So he went to Thebe in search, in search of his father. Soon he went there, and soon find himself in his father's castle. There have had been a war in Creta and Thepas, and Creta was victory, Dedalo made a great laberinto, on which live the moster called Minotauro. That moster was a man with head of bull and teeth [?] of lion. Theseo went to killed the moster, and so Ariana helped him, he killed the moster and married her, but when Bacos saw her, he took her up to olimpos. [7]

*The Gods / Number three**Hercules*

He was god of strength. When his father was at war, Jupiter aprance [?] as his father [and?], to his mother, Hercules was left alone in a forest, as Juno and Minerva saw him. Juno gave him some milk, but he bite her. Then Minerva gae him to his mother. Juno would have him drown by two serpents [?] but that was no good. Quiron taugt Hercules of the sky. Lino taugt him much ect. ect. There was a war, and the enemy was victory. Hercules had to do twelwe works, this were the works, he had to killed the lion of Nemea, the hira of Lerna, a boar, called the boar of Herimanto, the giants birch [?] to the deer of golden horns. He had to clin the stables of Augea, ect. On his long trabels he killed Anteo the giant. After the last work, he was resive in the olimpos by the gods. At last Jupiter took him to olimpus, and was made god of strengt for he was so strong. Now I will tell you you some thing about Pan. [8] Pan, his feet where goat's ones. He had a long beard, and horn of goat. He fell in love with one of Diana's Ninfas, called Sirinx [?], but Sirinx [?] was changed into a brach. And with these branches he made something as a pipe. Now I will tell you some thing about Fabus, he was god of light and of the blaring sun, a great [statue?] Fabun hav had bin in Rodas. It is [said that?] ships pass down that statue [?], but that is not true. Now I will tell you some of the names of the heroes, Achilles Jason and others. Now some names of Gods, Pheton, Marte, Jupiter, Hercules and Baco. As it is told Mercurio was a robber. Mercurio had many names. Ich [i.e. each] work work he do, he changed his names. He stold Fabus's sheep. But at last he was discovered.

How Jason get the fleece / From the story of the golden Fleece

At last they reach that wished land, where the fleece was there. There they saw Aetes and his daughter, Medea, and [Chalciope?] who was [Phrixo's?] wife. Aetes gave Jason the fleece, if he do these works. He had to taim the brazen-foot [?] bulls, who sent fire out of their noses, to fight tree houndred seed men, and killed the dragon who keep the fleece. Medea helped him, so he have the fleece. Aetes came with a great many soldiers, to killed Jason. But Medea killed her young brother, and she told Jason to put [?] sail at the Arco [i.e. Argo]. As they were in sea they met a giant called Talus, which Medea fight him and by her art she was victory. After that long trabel, they reach Colchis.

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