

JORGE GUILLERMO BORGES (1874-1938):
TWO NOTES

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Borges mentioned on numerous occasions that his father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, had wanted to be a writer, but that, despite having published poetry, a novel, and the first translation of FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* into Spanish, he came to believe that his talent had not been sufficient to allow him to realize his ambition. An early end to his efforts was finally dictated by the onset of blindness, an inherited disease—"retinitis pigmentosa hereditaria"—that had afflicted his mother and the males of at least two previous generations. Borges also said that his father had written short stories, a drama, and a collection of philosophical essays—all of which he destroyed.

During the fifteen-year friendship that I enjoyed with Borges, I made frequent trips to Argentina and, since I had indicated interest in writing a book about him, he gave me access to the books, papers and manuscripts that he had accumulated in the modest apartment that he occupied with his mother on Maipú street in downtown Buenos Aires. In 1968, while working with this material, I came across a manuscript that had his father's name on it. I realized that it was doubtlessly the essay collection that he thought his father had destroyed. It was comprised of ninety-nine pages, with extensive penned corrections and revisions. The first page carried the title "La senda" and the notation "Geneva 1917". (The Borges *ménage's* trip to Europe in 1914 was interrupted by the outbreak of hostilities in that year and they were obliged to spend the next four years in Switzerland.)

Borges was surprised when I told him of my discovery. He said that his recollection was that his father had shown the manuscript to his friend and law school classmate, Macedonio Fernández, who was also much given over to philosophical speculation, and that he had returned the manuscript with a penned observation that indicated that he had not found it persuasive. Indeed, there were a few lines written on the title page in a hand other than that of the author, but they were smudged and unfortunately not entirely decipherable. When his father knew of the less than enthusiastic response of his friend, Borges said that he was sure that he had destroyed the manuscript. He said that that was invariably what his father did when a text of his submitted for publication was rejected. (Borges admitted to me that he himself did the same. The rejected text, he explained, had immediately become an embarrassment.)

Borges and his mother agreed to let me make a copy of "La senda." What subsequently happened to the original manuscript no one seems to know. I have since sent a copy of my copy to Borges's nephew, Miguel de Torre, in Buenos Aires.

Looking through it now, I come across reflections that eloquently express the over-all pessimistic view that Borges's father held of human existence. A few excerpts may lead to an understanding of the true character that lay behind the seemingly enigmatic figure that he presented. Descriptions offered by those who knew him often include the terms "callado," "secreto," and "cortés." Ulises Petit de Murat, a close friend of the family, who has drawn a compelling portrait Borges in his *Borges, Buenos Aires* (1980), describes his father as "el cortés, indescifrable doctor Borges."

Early in the manuscript, he writes:

No es en las grandes tragedias [*sic*] donde se encuentran los grandes dolores; es en la Vida monótona, mediocre y pobre en recias sacudidas y contrastes que el dolor y la miseria se ensañan.

Nada más triste que el carecer de lágrimas cuando se debe llorar, que el hallarse mudo de emociones ante el espectáculo de una gran pena, que el verse aislado y solo sin poder compartir el llanto que abate el corazón cercano al nuestro.

Later, he expands on the essential loneliness that he perceives in the human condition:

De todas las herencias, la de ser dueño de sí mismo es quizás [sic] la más penosa. La soledad es el precio de ese arrogante sentimiento de personalidad que hace de cada individuo un ser aparte, un elegido del destino, un dios, un mundo. La conciencia del propio YO entronizado en el centro del universo se guarda celosamente dignidades y fronteras, en murallas de aislamiento que en vano pretendemos disimular y que nunca desaparecen totalmente Por un momento, en la expansión [sic] de la amistad o el abrazo del amor, nos olvidamos, confundiendo anhelos en focos de interés común y en su llama bienhechora confortamos nuestra soledad Es posible atravesar un Sahara y sus llanuras abrazadas [sic] y no sufrir de sed, pero es muy difícil cruzar la Vida y sus innumerables multitudes y no sentirse solo.

Borges claimed that from an early age, it was understood that he would be a writer. That is to say, that he wanted to be a writer. This is, of course, not surprising. Being urged by both his father and his grandmother to engage in the singular joy inherent in reading, it is a natural consequence that sooner or later one wants to indulge his own initiative and begin to create... and to imitate. And so it was that in his earliest attempts to become a writer he followed the prose models that he so admired. In this he received scarce guidance from his father. He recalled that he was told to strike out on his own and make all the mistakes that were necessary. He told him to read a lot, write a lot, tear up a lot and, at all costs, not to rush into print. Thereafter, when the emerging writer felt that the time had come, his father would pay for the publication of his first book.

A decade or so later, when he was composing “La senda” in Geneva, Borges’s father offered an insight into why he was determined to let his son “go it alone” while beginning to write. His reasons are sensible and practical, but this paragraph ends with a dark shroud of pessimism being drawn over the observation.

El padre no renace en sus hijos. Cada vida gira en su órbita marcada, constituye una propiedad excluyente, se hace o se deshace en virtud de condiciones intrínsecas [sic] intransmisibles y si se acerca demasiado a las demás [sic] vidas, es para sufrir el golpe de rudas decepciones. Rara vez la herencia conserva de padre a hijo el sello y las aptitudes; conserva más bien los caracteres ordinarios de la estirpe, aquello que el padre tiene de común con los demás padres y los demás hijos El padre derrocha en el hijo un amor no siempre altruista; enamórase, como puede enamorarse el creador de su obra; quiere proyectarse en ella, perfeccionarla y prote-

jerla [*sic*], olvidando que su obra es un ser viviente y como tal celoso de sí mismo, de su voluntad, inclinaciones y deseos. Todo amor es peligroso y aquel cuyos réditos han de pagarse en ciegas obediencias encierra a la larga un desencanto. El concepto de la responsabilidad en cuya virtud el hijo pertenece al padre y se convierte en su deudor por todo lo que tiene es y vale va sufriendo [*sic*] con los tiempos un cambio tan notable que el día ha de llegar en que el hijo, como el hombre a su Dios, le enrostrará la carga que echó sobre sus hombros al darle vida.

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Now, one more observation concerning this father-son relationship. In the August, 1973, issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, I published an article titled “Behind ‘Borges and I,’” in which I analyzed three unpublished texts that I found while working with Borges’s manuscript materials at his apartment on Maipú. They all dealt with Borges’s depictions of himself at specific moments in his life. The first was composed around 1925, the second in 1940 and the third in 1950. In my conversations with him—most often in his office at the Biblioteca Nacional—I spoke to him about these unpublished pages that I had come across. He had no idea that these brief texts had survived and could not remember the circumstances in which he wrote them. The 1940 sketch described his preparation to commit suicide in an upstairs room at the Las Delicias hotel in Adrogué, where he and his family frequently spent holidays. The last line reads as follows: “He left behind this poem, evidently written down at the library (as the letterhead shows), which I copy textually” (my translation).

The piece ended there and there was no poem to be found. But later, in another composition notebook from the same year, I found what must have been the missing poem. It had the form of a tentative and unfinished outline, with alternative words and expressions to be refined later. It does, in fact, describe the details of a suicide and the possible reasons for it. Borges recognized the verses as I read them, but could not recall why the text had been abandoned. I asked him then about the next-to-last stanza, which contained these lines:

O quizá he muerto:
hace dos años en una escalera sombría en la calle Ayacucho,
hace veinte años en un dormitorio venal en el centro de Europa.

Or perhaps I have died:
two years ago on a murky stairway on Ayacucho Street,
twenty years ago in a venal bedroom in the heart of Europe.
(my translation)

The first reference is clearly to the December, 1938, accident that nearly cost him his life. I asked him if the second one spoke of something that had happened in Geneva. He said that was correct and proceeded to tell of the incident that he had been alluding to.

He said he was eighteen and predictably interested in sex, but had not found a way to become close to a woman. But then one day, he did meet a woman who talked with him and seemed to be available to him for a sexual encounter. That was, he said, his first time and an overwhelming experience. But soon thereafter—he did not explain how—he discovered that his father had arranged the apparently casual meeting. He knew that his father had had affairs during the years in Geneva and could not help but think that the woman who had offered him her body was someone that he had been intimate with.

He seemed to suggest that it was not the sexual act in itself that produced the nervous breakdown that he suffered at that time, but the realization that his sexual initiation had been secretly arranged by his father. He did not go into details of what went through his mind, but the fact was that he did fall into a state of near nervous collapse and seemed inconsolable. It was shortly after this crisis that his father took him out of school at the nearby Collège Calvin and, following a doctor's advice that the shaken son be moved to different surroundings, moved the family for several months to Lugano.

This account contradicts the now generally accepted version of the sexual initiation in Geneva, which has Borges's father either accompanying him to a house of prostitution in the Place Dufour or writing out the address of the residence there where his son could see to the matter on his own. It is principally Estela Canto, with whom Borges was in love in Buenos Aires in the mid-forties, who put forth the pertinent details in her 1989 book, *Borges a contraluz*.

In the end, I cannot claim validity for the account that Borges offered me some thirty years before Canto came forth with her version, which involved his seeing a Buenos Aires psychiatrist for treatment of sexual problems. But I bring it to light because, in my mind, it could give substance to a concept that Borges repeatedly invoked in his writings: the idea that a person who believes that he is in full control of the decisions he is making may, in fact, be executing the predestined patterns of someone else, that, in other words, he is an actor in a play written by someone else. This is the idea behind one of the first of Borges's *ficciones*, "Las ruinas circulares," and it appears later in Borges's poetry—in "El truco" and the second of his two poems about chess—and in other stories—"El muerto," "Guayaquil," and "El Evangelio según Marcos."

Borges always said that all of his writing was autobiographical, but keyed and coded in a way that kept it from revealing more than he wanted to of his secret personal self. Perhaps, that is what we have ventured to identify here.

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