

Enrique Anderson Imbert

THE CHESHIRE CAT
(El gato de Cheshire)

(If you are looking for a story in this book, you can find it by using Control f, and the title.)

Part I

Prologue

I have always preferred short forms: they are better suited to a relativist theory of life and an imaginative creation of literature. In my stories, and even in my novels, the shortest unit of artifice is the metaphor, the prose poem, magical realism, and the use of fantasy. If I were able to do it, I would narrate pure intuitions, but literary technique demands some concrete form. I try to draw this form with two different inks, one that is delible and another that is indelible, so that when the material form is erased, the outline of the intuitive form remains, like a smile in the air. The Smile of the Cheshire Cat. Lewis Carroll, a mathematician and poet, tells us that Alice, in Alice in Wonderland, saw a cat that was smiling at her from the branch of a tree which vanished, and then appeared and disappeared, over and over again:

“I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t appear and disappear so suddenly: you are making me dizzy.”

“All right,” the Cheshire cat replied. And this time he disappeared gradually, beginning with the point of his tail and ending with the smile. When everything else had become invisible, the smile remained for a while.

“Good! Many times I have seen a cat without a smile,” Alice thought, “but a smile without a cat!” (*Alice in Wonderland*, Chap. VI, London, 1865).

So here are my smiles without a cat. They smiled that way on the branches of trees in La Plata when, in 1926, I first described them (do you remember Don Ezequiel Martinez Estrada?; or then, our fourth grade classroom in the Colegio Nacional?) Those efforts gradually became less awkward, thanks to the things I read in the Biblioteca. That way, the art of telling tales, which originated from mythology and folklore, eventually formed more specific types of literature. The classical narrator, as opposed to the romantic one, for whom originality is more stylistic than thematic, is able to combine without pretense the things he has created, with those he has constructed based on the creations of others. When he attempts to use old-fashioned forms of fiction, he is happy to pick out traditional forms and, with a new way of looking at them, creates a surprising new form.

The books where I learned to tell tales were in no way related—they were like monads, as Leibnitz, another mathematician and poet, would say—but for me, both a reader and a writer, they were the origin of the pre-established harmony of my personal library. My little short-stories are also monads, little psychic atoms in which a total vision of life is presented from different perspectives. If I were trying to define it, the key word I would use would be: freedom.

Addendum 1990. Written during a period of almost fifty years, from 1926 to 1964, these miniatures show consecutive literary mannerisms. Since I combined them without thinking of the date, the reader will not find the periods related to any particular "ism." Of all the "isms," the one I least appreciate, because it contradicts my nature and my literary style, is Super-realism. I ought to have rejected the unconscious fantasies that I was not able to compose with lucidity and art. They became even more obscure because they are expressed in prose, a form which always demands clarity. If I had written them in free verse they might have been seen as poetic.

THE SONGS OF YESTERDAY ARE THOSE OF TODAY
(Los Cantares de antaño son los de hogaño)

Luis de Tejada (1603-1680) left handwritten drafts, and there are also later copies of dubious veracity. Very few of his verses survived. They are not enough to make him memorable, but he was the first important poet who appeared in what is today Argentina. Almost everything we have from him belongs to the last period of his life when he had entered the Dominican Order and, repenting for his previous conduct, wrote autobiographical poems—"A Ballad about his Life"—sacred verses and, of less importance, items of descriptive prose... His style is usually baroque: in vocabulary, in syntax, and in concepts. From Spanish books he learned how to be affected. Góngora was one of his favorite authors, and his influence was evident in some of the things he said.

E. Anderson Imbert, *History of Latin American Literature*, I (Mexico 1962), 110.

Andres Bent Miró, a professor at the University of Cordoba, was like most philologists: when he read an ancient text, he modernized the past in his own mind. In that summer of 1964, however, he did the opposite: it was not the past that came alive in him, but rather, Andres Bent Miró who, with a leap and a jump, went to the past.

As he was reviewing some codices in the hall of the Monastery, he discovered, among the pages of *De Contemptu Mundi*, a short manuscript. He sat down at a table and read: it was a madrigal dedicated to "Lucinda." At the end was a signature: Luis de Tejada. A stupendous find: it did not appear in any of the editions of Tejada's work, nor was it mentioned in any bibliography.

He had hardly started to read, when his senses told him that someone was speaking to him. He raised his eyes (as he did it, the paper fell from his hands), and he saw at his side an old man with black eyes, wearing a white habit. The old man introduced himself as Luis de Tejada.

Andres Bent Miró told him that, while he was reading a madrigal by him, something suddenly transported him three centuries backward. Tejada replied that the same "something" must have been what brought him unexpectedly to this hall, that he was thrilled to have a view of the future, and he would like to know what madrigal it was.

In order to please him and be able to read it to him, Andres Bent Miró picked up the paper from the table where it had fallen from his hands, but now that paper was blank. Then he told him he remembered that it had been a madrigal about "Lucinda."

Tejada denied he had ever written it, and he said that he never would have since, he pointed to his grey hair and white robe, he was not at an age nor in a place for madrigals.

He said that the next time he happened to visit him by jumping through the centuries, he would try to do it while he was still a young man. Perhaps then, he added, he would have written this famous and non-existent madrigal for “Lucinda.”

“This cannot be,” Andres Bent Miró exclaimed, at a loss for words. “Why, not more than a moment ago I had your madrigal in my hands, and I read it with my own eyes! It was signed with your signature. You must have written it! When?... I don’t know. I am completely confused.”

“Slowly, slowly... Don’t get upset,” Tejada said. “There is a way to fix this. When I saw you, I thought that the change of years meant the future for me and the past for you; but now, I realize that all this is happening outside of human time, in a time of God when there is neither past nor future, but an eternal present. Go ahead and dictate the madrigal to me: that way I can write it before you return to human time, and then it will be possible for you to have found it.

As Tejada was dipping his pen in the ink, Andres Bent Miró felt like he was in a state of vertigo.

A vertigo of crazy verbs and adverbs outside of time. The madrigal he had read in the twentieth century, was one that Tejada had not yet written, but that he *would* write in a moment in the seventeenth century: and if Tejada is going to be able to write it today, it is because Andres Bent Miró still has to dictate it to him; and if he can dictate it to him, it is because he had found it three centuries later, thanks to the fact that three centuries earlier Tejada would write the words on the same paper where a wind of three centuries erased the letters.

While Andres Bent Miró repeated the words of the madrigal, Tejada wrote them down.

Vertigo... A vertigo of the sun and the moon, causing successive eclipses, which the astronomer forecasts and records. The vertigo of a dog that leaps over itself and bites its tail, like a Cerberus of Time with his triple bark: past, present, and future. A vertigo of images that follow one another simultaneously and continually, always repeated, always in motion, as if a ghost had placed them between two mirrors that were opposite each other and, though the ghost was invisible, was causing the mirrors to reflect its image, each one copying that of the other.

In the middle of this vertigo, Andres Bent Miró suddenly jumped to 1964. He found himself still in the Monastery, with the madrigal in his hand. He read it again. He noted that, when he copied it, Tejada had inserted a small correction: in place of “Lucinda,” he had written “Anarda.”

DODECAPHONY (Dodecafonía)

“What times those were!,” said the hydra to its sympathetic visitor. “A month never went by without someone coming to kill me. He would come confidently to this shore, he would bend over the waters and challenge me, shouting; then, I would emerge (slowly, so as to give more dignity to the spectacle) and he, brandishing his sword, would cut off my heads. One would fall off and instantly, before a single drop of blood fell, another would appear. I let myself be coveted by that bloodthirsty sword: so it could reach me, I

would stretch out toward this brave hero, whistling and dancing with my twelve heads, always twelve, no matter how many he managed to cut off. Finally, this hero would be exhausted and would no longer have the strength to lift his sword (then I would relieve him of the humiliation of returning to his home in defeat). And thus, month after month, I amused myself with these harmless decapitators. Now they don't come any longer; my immortal fame has discouraged them. I regret it. Those contests between heads and swords were lots of fun. I would wait, with a bit of tenseness, for the sword which would sometimes hesitate, and sometimes strike quickly; and immediately I would feel another head blossom like a new change of life, and it showed the same expression as before, or else it repeated it exactly. Thanks to my expectation that the growth of a new head was inevitable and, nevertheless surprising, I enjoyed myself as though I were listening to music. Movement. Pure movement. Now I am bored, and the heads you see no longer sound like notes of music, but yawns in the void.

"You have spoken," said his visitor, "of your expectation of change, of continuity and repetition. You will see that you failed to wait for the best part of your melody, which is, the conclusion. So, are you ready to play one more time?"

And, rising to his feet, Hercules brandished his sword.

THE UNICORN

It charged toward her. It had two horns. The charge was like that of a bull, the body was not.

"I know you," the girl said, laughing. Do you think I am going to be so foolish as to grab you by the horns? One of your horns is false. You are a metaphor."

Then the Unicorn, seeing it had been recognized, kneeled before the girl.

CHAOS AND CREATION

The world lacked a being that was able to console everyone. Then, men created God. Whether they conceived of Him thinking of their fondest dreams or, on the contrary, they shaped Him with the natural clay of the earth and gave Him a fearful aspect, the fact is, that God appeared with a human figure.

Now the world was complete: it had God.

Animals, with their heads lowered, always looked at the ground; men, with their heads raised, sometimes looked up at the sky. Where the recently created God was looking, nobody was able to say. Because He was very lonely, He complained that, in spite of the fact they made Him so similar to men, they left Him alone and far away from mankind; He wandered through the wastelands of heaven, worried by the thought that, one day, because He was useless, men would un-create Him.

THE POMEGRANATE
(La Granada)

...inside it the seeds are distributed and planted in such a way that no place, no matter how small it is, is empty... Each one of those seeds has within it a little white kernel so that it can better support the soft with the hard... Why is it that men, who are so skilled in philosophizing human things, are not that way when it comes to philosophizing the design of this fruit?

(Fray Luis de Granada, *An Introduction to the symbols of Faith.*)

To everyone's amazement, a madman flew underneath a bridge. When he read about it in the newspapers, even knowing it was a crazy thing to do, he knew he had to repeat the feat. In order to make it even more difficult, he used one of the largest planes; he flew at night and then returned. Now, safe and sound in his house, he realizes he has not finished the deed: he still has to overcome his exhibitionism, and not say anything to anybody.

*

An old man without arms and legs was watching the passers-by from the ground, and murmured something. Flies had landed on the tears from his eyes, but he did not blink. He didn't want to frighten these flies—velvety, large and smooth, domesticated flies—out of fear that other, more voracious flies would come to land on him.

*

Nathaniel, an unsuccessful writer, decided to commit suicide. He loaded his revolver and placed it by his side on his desk, and he began to write a goodbye letter. The letter got longer and longer until it glowed, and breathed, and lived. This is it, the work he had wanted! In order to publish it, Nathaniel did not commit suicide.

*

Roberto told a secret and Basilio, when he heard him, promised: "I will be as silent as the tomb." This was the beginning of a great friendship. From then on, they always went everywhere together, Roberto speaking, and Basilio listening. As time went on, Basilio became even more silent and empty. One day Roberto noted with disgust that Basilio was indeed a tomb, and with his eyes—opened like an R. I. P. on a tombstone—he was inviting him to jump inside.

*

Even his ability to pass through mirrors, like light can pass through transparent glass, didn't free him from the oppression of feeling imprisoned. He hardly came out of a room of mirrors when he felt himself confronted by another which was just as deceptive; and after that, another; another and another, until the tedium convinced him it would be best not to try to escape, and to accept the illusion of freedom that any of them gave him.

*

Seated at the table with an open book he seemed to be reading. In reality, he was looking at the cat, which was washing its face underneath the table. What he could not understand, however, was how he could see it, through the book, and through the table.

*

The young people all gather at the plaza, each one with their stick, according to their plan. They come supported by crutches, suspended on stilts, and mounted on brooms. The whole area is filled with pikes, canes, lances, and banners. Martin comes with a toothbrush in his mouth.

*

Cheer up. Your wishes have been granted. You will write the best stories in the world. The problem is that no one will read them.

*

He made himself some wings with the feathers of an ostrich. He climbed up the bell tower and launched himself into the air. When they found him with his legs broken, he explained that the feathers were to blame, because they were too heavy.

“The next time,” he said, “I will fly without wings.”

*

Some robbers went to the Church of Carmen to steal the painting of “San Sebastian,” by El Greco. They had already taken it down, when the frightened sacristan appeared. He put one hand on his heart and the other on the painting, and shouted:

“I swear that as long as I live, you will never steal anything.”

“We believe that,” the chief of the robbers answered respectfully, and then killed him.

*

The man fires his revolver at his terrible enemy. Five shots. He pulls the trigger one more time. When he hears the empty weapon click, he feels defenseless. And now, finding himself alone with the dead man, he feels afraid.

*

One night he climbed through a window into someone else’s house and stuck his hand into a chest of jewels. In the darkness he felt his fingers touch the fingers of another hand that was also caressing the treasure.

*

She looked at herself in the mirror, and since then, the mirror was not the same; every night the quicksilver trembled, because it was quickened.

*

The entire family is suddenly shocked, when they are gathered in the dining room on Sunday, and the little boy runs in, with his arm pointing at the door, and shouting:

“Mama, Mama, here comes an Orchid.”

All of their eyes turned toward the open door.

*

The oak trees collected birds, and those that collected a lot exchanged with others.

b “Here, I will give you this one,” said the young oak, who was more generous, than he was a collector. And he sent his neighbor a lark.

*

He had received a travel grant, but where should he go? To America?, to Europe?, to Asia?, to Africa?, to Oceania? The morning darkened, and when he looked up expecting to see some clouds, he was able to see an enormous hand that was rapidly moving through the sky. If it was only this hand that was going to move him through the map of the world, what would he be then: a peon?, a king?, a tower?, a horse?, a bishop in a game of chess?

*

There was a little island that was round and green, hidden in the deep blue sea: it had only one dried-up tree in the center, with several gray branches.

From far away, an angel who looked down thought that the little island was the round, green foliage of a tree that was moving across the clear blue sky (the angel also thought that the branches were gray roots, which were hanging from the tree).

*

They were not able to explain either the composure, or the theology of its halo. In the meantime, this human animal walked across the patio of the jail with a beautiful halo shining on its head.

*

The bride stuck a knife in his neck, but he did not want to pull it out. After that, the knife became part of his life. However: it was only the beginning of his life. The smooth round handle of the knife that stuck out over his shoulder gave his body the interesting consistency of a luxurious suit of armor. It also made him appear more virile.

He knew that, and he went around basking in the evident admiration of the ladies, exhibiting it quite boldly.

*

I approached the owl and, without trying to hide my annoyance, I said to it:

“Why are you watching me?”

It did not move: it was perched on the branch of a small pine tree, its eyes as dark as night.

“Why are you watching me?” I insisted.

It still did not answer; I didn't know if that was because it wasn't looking at me, and therefore did not even hear me, or because it didn't want to give itself away and admit that it was watching me.

*

I took a bath, I shaved, I dressed; I looked at myself in the mirror. “Let's go!” I said to my agoraphobia, and we went out together for a walk in the park.

*

On the dividing wall between two old houses in Babylon, there was a hole. During the last few weeks it had taken the shape of a mouth or the shape of an ear; since last night it had assumed the shape of an eye. Right now, the hole is looking back and forth from one side to the other: “Aren't they coming?, aren't they coming tonight either?” it says. And it listens to the slightest little noises to see if it can hear the stealthy footsteps of the two lovers. But it waits in vain. The time passes, and the hole, which will never learn what happened to Pyramus and Thisbe, is finally filled with spider webs.

*

Someone was walking down the street whistling music from “Salome.” The man lying in his bed began to sing along with the melody; he closed his eyes and remembered the old railroad neighborhood he had not seen since he was a child; he felt a chill in his legs: the coldness of legs, when they are naked while wearing shorts, and whistling “Salome.” He pulled himself out of bed and dragged himself toward the doorway: seated in his wheelchair, he began to turn the wheels and, like a happy child, the beggar without legs rolled down the street.

*

The Emperor of China declared publicly that he, and only he, was responsible for the last eclipse of the sun; he had caused it without meaning to by making an administrative mistake. After that the court praised the Emperor for this admirable trait of humility and contrition.

THE SUN (El sol)

The Demiurge created them in order to amuse himself with them for a while, but he made his first mistake by creating them with a consciousness. With this consciousness, the homunculi were able to create their own world. When the Demiurge got tired of the game and decided to cancel his creations they already existed, and they held on to their world with determination. Then he thought, if they could all be distracted at the same time, it would be easy to cut off the remaining thread of their lives.

However, it was too late. The Demiurge made his second mistake of creating them on a round planet that was spinning through the stars in the sky. And there was one star that saved the homunculi. On the side that was facing the sun, there were always brothers who were on guard and were always alert: if there were some who relinquished their control while they were asleep, there were others who watched and were ready to resist. Through their philosophizing, they eventually converted the Demiurge into a servant of the homunculi.

SPIRAL (Espiral)

I got home at dawn and was struggling to keep from falling asleep. When I entered, all was dark. So that I wouldn't wake up anyone, I walked on tiptoes until I got to the spiral staircase that led up to my room. I had hardly put my foot on the first step when I began to wonder if this was really my house, or only one that was identical to mine. While I was climbing, I was afraid another boy like me would be sleeping in my bed, and maybe having a dream about the same task of climbing up this spiral staircase. Making the last turn, I entered my room, and there he was—or there I was—illuminated by the light of the moon, seated on the side of the bed with his eyes wide open. We stood there for a moment, staring at each other. We both smiled. I felt that his smile was the same as the one on my mouth. Like when one looks in a mirror, one of the two of us was not real. “Who is dreaming whom?”, one of us exclaimed, or perhaps both of us together. Then we heard the sound of someone climbing up the spiral staircase. We quickly merged into each other, we got into bed, and began to dream that I was coming up the stairs again.

MAPS (Mapas)

There were lots of maps that were hanging in the school. The young boy, Beltran, looked at them absentmindedly. In the book he was reading there were also maps. None of them really interested Beltran. Even with the globe of the world that was located in the vestibule in front of the principal's office, the only thing which interested him was that you could make it spin with a finger: “Maybe,” he thought, “there is a big finger that

is spinning this planet on which we live; maybe it's not even a finger, but just someone blowing on it." Beltran was bored with maps. After that, several more years went by. Then how was it that he suddenly discovered Geography? What we do know is that one afternoon he was on the way home, kicking a stone with his foot, when it occurred to him that all those maps in his school weren't worth anything, because they were too small, incomplete, fragmented, flat, and uninhabitable. "The real map," he insisted, "is the planet itself, which is the map of another planet that was millions of times larger, inhabited by giants millions of times larger than men, where a child is kicking a stone millions of times larger than the one I am kicking now." Beltran stopped and looked around. Everything seemed new: he looked with amazement at the plaza, the streets, the river, and the grove of trees. He felt like a microbe crawling across the map of the world in the vestibule of the school. "I am living," he said, "on a map. But this map that seems so large to me must be in a school that I cannot see; and there, for another Beltran, it would be just as small, incomplete, fragmented, flat, and uninhabited as the maps in my own school. A map is always inside another. There will also be one that is so large that it coincides with the universe."

THE BURNING TORCH (La antorcha)

That night in Alabama there would be a procession of men who were carrying torches. Afterward we would set fire to the houses of the Negroes.

I put on my Ku Klux Klan tunic, I lit a torch, and I set out to meet my fellow-believers. I passed through a narrow street that was so dark even my torch could not illuminate it. I seemed to hear footsteps by my side. Frightened, I dropped the torch on the ground. It was a Negro who said kindly: "be careful, don't burn yourself," as he picked up the torch and handed it to me, holding it by the end that was burning.

HEROES (Héroes)

A hand touched him from behind. He was afraid to turn around: he didn't want to look over his shoulder and see the vindictive Past that was calling to him. Oedipus put aside these thoughts and continued walking, in the direction of Thebes.

Some of the sailors who returned from their long voyages used to go and visit Sinbad, the paralytic. Sinbad closed his eyes and told them about some of the adventures during his imaginary travels. To make them appear more real, he sometimes compared them to Odysseus. "I willing to wager," Sinbad thought, when he was by himself, "that he never left his house either."

Theseus, who had just killed the Minotaur was about to leave the Labyrinth and follow the thread that he had unrolled, when he heard footsteps and stopped. It was Ariadne who was coming down the path, re-rolling the thread.

“Darling,” Ariadne said to him, pretending that she didn’t know about his love-affair with another woman, and that she didn’t notice his gesture of desperation, showing he didn’t know what to do: “here is the ball of thread, all rolled up again.”

IN THE LAND OF THE EPHEMERAL (En el país de los Efímeros)

This chronicle is from the Ninth Century, but the events which it tells us about are much older than that.

The knight Guingamor set out in search of the Land of the Blessed whose inhabitants, according to an Irish monk, did not grow old, or aged just a little; who lived forever, or at least, for several centuries. All a visitor had to do in order to enjoy this everlasting youth was to eat an apple.

He never found this place, but he found another where the trees (but not apple trees) flourished and bore fruit before they dried up after a week, where women (always young) became pregnant overnight and the next day gave birth to children who, seven days later, were the same size as their parents, who then died.

Upon seeing himself surrounded by such short lives, the knight Guingamor, whose age never seemed to change, felt like his lifetime had been extended, so he stayed there and was quite happy.

“Either he forgot that he was searching for the land of the long-lived, and not that of the ephemeral, or in view of the circumstances, he became ephemeral too” the chronicle concludes.

THE PLAGUE (La peste)

The first sign that the fairies of Ireland were sickening, or dying off, was noticed by the men of Sligo.

In a place called Rosses, there is a cluster of stones; a shepherd slept there once and, when he awakened, he was mad. A few days later it happened again to someone else. And then, to another. There was no doubt: what was happening was that the fairies were stealing the souls of the sleepers, leaving them only their dreams. When they woke up, the poor shepherds were not able to think or speak of anything but the few fantasies that remained in their mind. Because the fairies had always been so kind to men, how else could this unexpected malice be explained, except that now they needed to strip men of their souls, in order to use them to strengthen mentally weak fairies? This explanation was confirmed when, sometime later, the fairies began to carry off the newborn babies, leaving the sickened fairies in their cradle. After these robberies, people were alarmed,

but not really angry: instead they felt sorry about the plague that seemed to be afflicting the fairies. It was sad day for everyone when they witnessed the funeral procession of an immortal fairy.

LOUD LAUGHTER (La carcajada)

“Of course they exist!” Miguel answered. “Are you referring to the beings who are as invisible to us as we are to them, so that we are next to each other in adjacent worlds, but in different dimensions? Yes. Believe me, they do exist. I was about to get to know one. After much experimentation, I noticed in the air before my eyes a sort of a smudge that, as it became clearer, appeared to be a face; the problem was that my eyes, which were not used to this hidden world, distorted the face like a badly focused lens distorts an ameba. The face I began to see was also looking at me. It looked at me with an expression of astonishment and incredulity. That face was outside of me—its expression indicated it did not believe in me—but at the same time it was inside me, since it was I who was distorting it. Seeing in front of me, on the border between two adjacent worlds, (the one which was presented to me from outside, and the one I was seeing on the inside), seeing those two beings fluctuating at the same time, on the same face, I was not able to contain myself, and I roared with laughter. And with this laughter, the face disappeared.

VANITY (Vanidad)

Nestor had committed almost every sin. So when he died, he was given the following punishment: he began to go back in time, and as he retraced his steps, he felt the pain he had inflicted on other’s lives. He felt the betrayal, the insult, the impotence in the face of slander, the desperation of being robbed, the pain of a knife in the back. After that, they brought him to the court of judgment. Here, however, he committed a new sin, that of vanity, because on feeling in his own flesh the torments he had afflicted on others, he could not help but admire his tremendous power to do evil.

THEOLOGIES AND DEMONOLOGIES (Teologías y Demonologías)

In Paradise they sometimes use the services of Hell in order to amplify the pleasure of the blessed. From time to time, they use screeches, ill-smelling outbursts, a cluster of ugliness and pain, all this, in order to create a contrast. In turn, Paradise will send some of its happiness to Hell so that the sinners, also in contrast, will be aware of what they have lost while they are suffering.

*

A young boy climbed up on a mountain in Armenia and, as he was climbing, he saw Noah's Ark.

"Ah, then it's true, Noah's Ark actually existed!" he said to himself. "When the flood receded, it was left stranded amid these mountains. That is, unless Noah constructed it here, so high above sea level trusting that, after it rained for forty days and forty nights, the water would rise this high and make it float, but then there never was a flood. In this case, the fish would have been correct when they said they never believed a word of it, when they were told that Noah saved all the creatures of the animal kingdom from the water. 'Nobody ever saved us from the water,' they said."

*

Elohim is pleased on seeing the wars. He believes they are part of some mysterious cult that men are rendering to Him. It began with Cain and Abel. Little by little, killing one another became a ritual. Wars are now a mass sacrifice that converts the entire earth into a vast temple. Flattered, Elohim looks at the ceremony and smiles.

*

In heaven an angel, the most Luciferian of all, said to another angel:

"Do you know what bothers me about this place? It seems like a waiting room. Look: all the Seraphim and Cherubim act like they are waiting for something. I am starting to get bored. Or could it be that all they are waiting for is for me to commit an atrocity?"

*

In reality, the devil didn't need to use his wings in order to fly: he waved them in the air only because that was the way he was used to seeing them, when he was dreaming.

*

In heaven souls have a spherical form: they come in contact with each other in some places, but there are still untouched zones where they can move freely. In hell, though, souls acquire the form of a cube. Rigid and smooth, they touch each other on all sides, without leaving any free space.

*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge dreamed that he traveled to Paradise, and that an angel gave him a flower, as proof that he had been there.

When Coleridge awakened and found himself with a flower in his hand, he understood that the flower was from hell, and that they gave it to him only to drive him mad.

*

The danger was not from those who were preparing to climb the tower of Babel up to heaven but that, once it was constructed, someone might climb down from there to earth. This had already happened. It couldn't be permitted to happen again. So the tower was destroyed.

*

I told him that I did not believe in guardian angels.

“That must be, because you don't have one. Well, *I* do,” he told me. He turned his head around and gave an order to someone who was invisible:

“Your finger, Raziel!”

And, removing his hat, he turned around and left it hanging there in the air.

*

The Golem had the form of a man and moved like a man; but in reality, he was only a walking book. The Cabalist, Elijah, had created him by recombining the letters of some magic cosmogony. His entire skin was a handwritten parchment. Elijah was the only one who was capable of reading the Golem, but he never needed to do that, because he knew it all from memory.

*

Theotimus, the cenobite, left the monastery and was wandering around in the forest. He walked and walked, and got more and more thirsty. He went to drink from a small stream that was flowing happily through the flowers, but when he reached it, he found that the water was fetid. He felt a sensation of revulsion. He refrained from drinking, and continued to walk along the bank of the stream. As the ground rose higher, he noticed that the water seemed to get cleaner. When he arrived at the source from which crystalline water flowed out, he drank with great pleasure: the source was the open mouth of a dead dog.

*

“What good news can you give me from down there?” God asked.

The angel, who had just come back after an extended residence on the earth, without saying anything handed Him an open book—it was by Descartes—and pointed to a passage:

“God, who is omnipotent, would be able to deceive me. But for what! Isn't God pure goodness, and absolute truth? Well, perhaps there is some type of evil spirit who is just as astute and powerful, and might deceive us.”

God blushed.

*

The Rabbi Judah died, and many people accompanied him to this final dwelling place. When they were gathered there, a voice from heaven proclaimed that all those who had participated faithfully in the funeral rites would be guaranteed a place in the other world. The news spread through the entire city. A servant of Rabbi Judah who had always given him loving care but who, because of some misfortune had to miss the funeral, on hearing that for being absent he would be excluded from this blessing, felt so disconsolate that he committed suicide. The voice from heaven proclaimed that the servant also would be assured a place in the other world. Again, the news spread through the city. The same people, who just before this had been rewarded for their devotion to the rabbi, protested: they cited biblical verses that condemned suicide as a major offense to Yahweh. Again they heard the voice from heaven: it explained that Yahweh, who hadn't read these verses, did not know he had been offended. But now that he knew, he rectified what he had said, and the servant was condemned after all.

*

There is an infinite series of hells with tortures that are always different, and continue to become more and more painful. We only hear about the first one, which is the easiest to accept. God didn't want us to be aware of the others. He feared that, because of our incapacity to imagine such horror, we might refuse to believe in the hells, and that with these doubts, we would also cease to believe in the first one, which is the only one we are able to understand.

*

The advice of an old Jesuit, to a young Jesuit:

“So now go out and, with all your strength and all your skills, fight against those who show indifference toward the existence of God. And so that you will not be distracted by the hope that He is going to help you, act as if God did not exist.

*

He hesitated for a moment, but then he decided and picked up his gun. “What does it matter!” he thought. “When all is said and done, no one can condemn me. If man is free, I have the right to commit suicide. If he is not, it is God who permits my suicide.”

*

Abel, the shepherd, offered Yahweh a lamb. Cain, the laborer, offered a fruit. Yahweh preferred the bloody sacrifice of Abel to the fruitful offering of Cain.

With the passage of centuries, most religions have imitated Cain, and not Abel. Today we consider the civilized thing to do is to put flowers on the altar, rather than to slaughter an animal. Cain, then, was right. If he was mistaken, it was afterward, when he killed his brother. But why did he do that? They say it was envy. That's possible, however...

“So you say you prefer blood?” he must have said to Yahweh. “Well, here is the most precious blood I can offer you; not that of a lamb, but that of my brother.”

Did Cain misinterpret the wishes of Yahweh and then overdo his obedience? Or was this killing a violent attempt at irony?

THE PRISONER (El Prisionero)

When they put Luis Augusto Bianqui in a cell, it took him several days to realize that he was able to dissolve his body, slip out through a skylight, reassume his bodily form on the outside, walk into the street, and live as he always did. There was just one problem. Every time the guard came by the cell in order to check it Bianqui, no matter where he might be, would have to stop whatever he was doing and immediately return to his form as a prisoner. It was a question of awareness! If the jailor's attention could be deceived, Bianqui's freedom could continue. He had studied the schedule of the guards' rounds so that he could move around through the city during the times that were more or less safe, without any fear of being interrupted. However, the guards sometimes made unexpected inspections. More than once he had felt a tug from his cell and had to vanish, while in the arms of a woman. But that started to become too uncomfortable. So he decided to give up his power to evaporate, and after that he no longer left his cell any more.

ANTONIUS

Back in the third century a young Egyptian lost control of his mind so that he was no longer able to tell the difference between what he saw, and what he imagined. Since he was a Christian, although neither a hermit nor a cenobite, Antonius went to church as often as he could. At night he prayed and dreamed in the desert, and during the day he spent time contemplating in the small towns of the Nile valley.

He prayed in the desert until his eyes closed; and although he feared his prayers would not be enough to liberate him from his sinful sleep, he still went to sleep.

He meditated in the towns in order to be strong in his virtue and, thanks to the example of Jesus Christ, he had the strength of mind to resist the obvious temptations of the flesh, of the world, and the devil.

In the desert, all the nights coalesced into one long night. Nights that were identical, profound, and interminable, and while Antonius was sleeping, he became like a slave without the ability to reason, or to choose.

The days, however, passed by under a deceptive sun. Days that were disconcertingly different, with things, people, and places, that Antonius imagined were put there in order to test his chaste spirit.

The nights were real when, dazed and inert, Antonius surrendered himself to the power of sleep; the days were unreal, since that was when his consciousness became filled with phantasmagoric thoughts and imaginings.

While in the desert he dreamed of the same woman, and always yielded to her spells. That woman took control of him, but she never revealed herself completely. Night after

night, Antonius continued to see her, with many different expressions and appearances. Once, it was the sudden shape of a mouth that her eyes acquired when she looked at him with mischief; then, it was a hydrography of veins around a nipple, or a mole that had appeared on her belly, or a shadow that covered her buttocks, or the lips of her vagina that opened like a rose. Although he began to know her little by little, but only vaguely, there was no doubt she was a determined woman. Her features were related to each other, and they belonged to a woman so real that she even had a name: Ophelia. And Ophelia herself was part of the substance of this painful reality which kept appearing relentlessly. The emotions Antonius felt—desire, anxiety—were real; the effect on his body—sweat, orgasm—was also real. So real, that Antonius was more afraid of falling asleep in the desert, than wandering around through the little towns; he knew that when he dozed off, he would succumb; but if he stayed awake, he would not. Ophelia was impossible to refuse. Perhaps someday she would depart forever from this nightmare, but if that happened, it wouldn't be because he dismissed her, but because she was attracted from below, by the king of hades. It would be a desertion, not an expulsion. Meanwhile, the continuity of his dreams, as coherent as reality itself, kept him bound to that woman: the two of them were partners, bowed under the weight of a common yoke. Antonius sinned without fail, in a unique, persistent, and incomparable night.

The following day, when he visited one of the towns and walked among the people, he would meet women who would make advances and offer themselves to him. Antonius rejected them: those women, although each one was different, seemed unstable, illusory, mere simulations that titillated his imagination. They were interior images, and these images were inside his consciousness; so Antonius took a stand before them and declared them non-existent. He saw them, and he repudiated them, and he did it freely. These heterogeneous women were what they were, mental figures, as complete as ideas but, like ideas, deceptive, fortuitous, and deniable. They were not linked to each other, nor to anything else.

Thus, Antonius had relations with one woman in a dream, and rejected many women in wakefulness. His reality real was a prolonged sin in the night of the desert when, on falling asleep, he could not imagine anything. But his intermittent chastity while he was awake, when he was able to resist the temptations of his imagination, was unreal. For him, what was real was the necessity of having an erotic nightmare, and what was unreal was the possibility of an ascetic will. Antonius considered himself the most depraved sinner in the world, and he suffered because of his repeated offenses to Jesus Christ.

But he was a saint without realizing it. An insane saint. His madness was in feeling responsible for his dreams, and not feeling responsible for his actions; in short, for not appreciating the value of free will.

THE KNIFE (El cuchillo)

Today, when I was searching through a trunk in the attic, I happened to come across the knife again. It is very old. I have seen it many times since I was a child. According to what they told me, it came from Japan, along with the other things that my grandfather

left behind when he committed suicide. It is no longer good for anything, and I wonder if it ever was used for something: it seems more like some adornment that might have been used for, who knows what, kind of ceremony. I couldn't use it even as a paper cutter, because the blade is so long and so curved. Then why keep it? The truth is, I am not the one who keeps it; it keeps itself. It just remains there. When I found it again, I thought about throwing it out. But what resistance! I can't just throw it out in the street. It sticks to me like glue. It will be with me to the end, I can see that now. Wherever I go, it will go too, along with the rest of my belongings. From the way it seems, it has no place else to go, and therefore it stays by my side. We don't have anything to say to each other. We only have the time that we have spend together. It is useless: my desire to throw the knife in the garbage is useless. So what does it want? I am beginning to get worried, because when I pick it up it pulls my hand and touches my belly.

DIZZINESS (Vértigos)

Two monks, Geronimo and Theodor, were speaking, seated at a table in the refectory of the convent when, through the window, they saw an amazing bird pass by. They both jumped up, pushing the table so that a jug of water fell off, and they rushed out into the patio where the bird landed on the fountain and began to sing.

While the bird was singing Geronimo was spellbound, as though he was seeing three hundred years of history, from the coronation of Charles the Great, until the fall of Jerusalem during the crusades of Godfrey of Bouillon. And not just real history, but all of the parallel histories that might have occurred, if the Pope had refused to crown Charlemagne. By the time the bird was quiet, Geronimo found himself alone, with no sign of his companion Theodor. He returned to the refectory of the convent and managed to raise the jug, that was still falling, before it spilled a drop of water. After that, on the same table, he wrote about his experience in a chronicle.

The other monk, Theodor, on hearing the warbling of the marvelous bird, blinked as though he were in a rapture and a flash of lightning had dazzled him. Just one blink, and already the bird was silent. Theodor saw he was alone. There was no sign of Geronimo. The convent was in ruins. The painter, Jacquemart of Hesdin, found Theodor wandering through a ruined gallery, mute and withdrawn. He took him and used him as a model for a painting he had promised Charles VI: it was the painting of a monk who, according to an old legend recorded by a chronicler named Geronimo, had disappeared from a convent and flown back through time, three centuries earlier.

STATES OF NATURE (Naturalezas)

The seagull did not notice the shadow it was casting on the water: but the water did; it felt it was being touched.

*

The scarecrow called out in vain to the lark that was flying higher and higher:

“You don’t pay attention to me, and none of this has any affect on you. These other birds do, and I am able to scare them; but you fly down here whenever you feel like it. Come on down. Listen to me, please...”

*

He hears the song of the wind in the branches of the casuarina trees: it sounds like a song of the sea.

“Yes. I hear that song. But I would really like to hear the other one, the one that the trees sing to each other, but which we can never hear.

*

With their round trip ticket under their wing, the locusts rise up in a cloud; it seems that they are leaving but, alas, they return in a cloud. All day long they devour the plants in the field.

The chewing noise made by the jaws of millions of locusts that now are invisible in the lavender dust of twilight sounds like rain.

I don’t see the rain, nor do I feel it; but I hear it. A rain that has passed through several of my senses, not making any impression; but when it reaches my ears, it splashes and makes itself heard. And it is raining on me, it is raining in buckets. It is drumming on the trees, and beating on the grass; it is a cloudburst of loud notes, and here I am dry, in the middle of this arid field, looking up at a sky that is so empty that not even a light drizzle could fall.

*

Mario was walking through the garden; something (a movement?) caught his attention. He turned around and looked. It was the flowers. Nameless flowers, pale flowers, that had just opened, right after arriving from some unknown future, or from some paradise. Their forms and colors still had the impetus of their arrival. And these flowers, were they deciding at this moment whether to stop being light, or in reverse, were they trying to start bringing light? Bringing light! All over the world, Mario thought, the flowers must be opening their pretty blossoms, one after the other, so that they make the sun keep on moving, and are flattered by its response.

*

I pause for a moment, after hearing the sound of a bell. The bell is not hard to locate. It is there: a beautiful, bright springtime morning hanging down from the sun. But what about the clapper?; what is the clapper that has moved to produced that wonderful sound? This tulip? Perhaps my head? All things seem to hear the announcement of this bell and

are immobile and silent. I myself, do not dare to take a single step. Suddenly, I see a butterfly fluttering about in front of my eyes. I look up above it. Nothing. However, the air is disturbed; although I don't see anything, I know that some great descent has just taken place, like the arrival of some invisible ship. It must be something that is very light in order to settle down in our world, using only a butterfly as an anchor.

*

In 1515 the ship sank, and Fray Pedro Sanchez de Reina, the only survivor, swam to a deserted little island in the southern sea: the sea still had the form of the hand of God when the water was created.

When he saw them, Fray Pedro loved the trees in the same way that he loved people. He loved them, without being able to take advantage of them. He didn't think about anything like firewood, a mast, a hut, or a plow. He did not even think of a cross. The trees were not means, but ends; like men. He prayed they would be permitted to walk with him.

Granted.

Since then, Fray Pedro travels around the island always accompanied by a larch, a cypress, or a locust tree. Sometimes he is followed by several different trees and, with the graciousness of a teacher in school, he talks to them. And talking to them makes them grow.

CAESAR AND HIS BALL (César y su Bola)

People thought Caesar was an eccentric, and they laughed at what they thought were his eccentricities. Caesar was very well centered, however, and one of his eccentricities was talking to himself. Wherever he went he was always accompanied by invisible beings with whom he carried on a conversation. These beings must have been pretty amusing, because Caesar had a talent for comic imitation: with his cheeks puffed out, he would imitate the full moon; with his arms, the branches of a tree; with his legs, the jump of a cricket that wants to be a kangaroo; and so forth. If those who make people laugh go to heaven, he must have been able to gain entrance to the heaven of invisible beings.

One day he appeared rolling a sphere—no one knew where it came from—and he kept it by his side. Wherever he went, the ball went with him. The ball was made of some unknown material. To the touch, it was as soft as the skin of a child; nevertheless, it was still indestructible. Its shape never changed. It had the ability to move by itself. Sometimes it would revolve like a planet, but if someone wanted to pet it or pick it up, it was impossible: the ball would stay put and nothing on earth could move it. It was also sensitive to human souls. Whenever it was approached, it would change color. If it was approached with an evil intention, its interior light would become dark; and when it was mistreated it, would become black. At other times it would acquire a brilliant sheen; but only when Caesar played with it did it glow with a radiant blue.

When confronted with this portent which challenged their memory and their logic, men began to go crazy. Since they could not destroy the ball, they destroyed Caesar. Until they took away his body, the ball stayed by his side and, with the agitation of its light, those who saw it knew it was crying. After that, it rolled through the streets mournfully. The last one to see it was a child. It had vanished forever.

There were a few men who felt sorry for having destroyed such a beautiful friendship that, in truth, had never hurt anyone.

THE STATUES (Las Estatuas)

In the garden of Brighton, a college for girls, there are two statues: one of the woman who founded the school, and another of a famous professor.

One night, while everyone was sleeping, a mischievous student slipped out of her dormitory and, between the two pedestals, painted the imprint of footsteps on the ground: small footprints of a woman, and large footprints of a man, that joined each other in the garden, where they seemed to make love like two ghosts. After that, she carefully sneaked back to her dormitory, and she gloated in advance over what would happen when people entered the garden in the morning. What faces they would make! However, the next morning when she went to enjoy the results of her joke, she saw that the footprints had been scrubbed off: the hands of the female founder were slightly dirty, as though they were covered with paint.

TAO

Li-Peh-Yang lived in China some two thousand and five hundred years ago. He was the librarian of the Emperor. He was so learned they called him Lao-tze, which means, "the old philosopher." However, Lao-tze scorned the past and books of philosophy. In reality, he was a poet who was not without a good sense of humor. Like the good poet he was, he invented the word "Tao," in order to mock the words of the philosophers. "Tao," he wrote in his book *Tao-Teh-Ching*, "is the name of that which is nameless. What Tao is will never be known by anyone who does not already know it. If one knows it, they will not be able to explain it; if that were possible, it wouldn't be worth the effort to understand it. Knowing what Tao is, is to be ignorant; men are wise only when they ignore Tao. Tao is the opposite of itself. I believe Tao, I believe in Tao, I believe with Tao."

Nobody understood Lao-tze. Like a black sun, the word Tao irradiates oxymorons and antonyms in the precious little book, *Tao-Teh-Ching*; and it continues to irradiate them in the work of thousands of explainers. Explainers of explainers. The less they understand, the more important they consider it. So that they would consider him the first Emperor, Tsín Shih Hevang-ti decided to erase the past: he created the Great Wall, he assassinated intellectuals, and he burned books. All except *Tao-Teh-Ching*. That was because Tao

had been converted into some kind of magic principle. Millions of Chinese believed it was like a solemn religion. Each time a Chinaman opens his mouth to praise Tao, anyone who has good hearing, can hear the distant laughter of Lao-tze, the creative poet, the Dadaist, the humorist, who lived in the third year of the twenty-first sovereign of the Chou Dynasty.

AMBITION (Ambición)

The elm had some initials engraved on its bark: that was undoubtedly the signature of the poet who created it.

All by itself near the river, it thought about its life: a majestic growth from the seed to the highest flower, a flower that enlarged the tree's growth, as it spread its fragrance. It would have liked to continue growing like that other tree, the one of smoke that rose up as its dry leaves were burned in the fall. And in the spring, when the magpies that had perched on it flew away like leaves that, after gliding for a while returned to the branches, the elm felt like its foliage was the traveler. It could recognize birds by their manner of flight: the aerial acrobatics of the chajá bird, the sadness of the swallow that, no matter how high it flies, always dreams of some place beyond its wings, the rebelliousness of the earwig that climbs from the ground, not to explore, but in a rapid assault against the sky. If the wind rocked it, the elm knew that it was coming from someone who, on seeing the globe of the earth, blew on it to make it spin. The changing colors of the sky were also the result of the different intensity of that constant act of blowing.

Faced with so much sky and so much freedom, the ambition of this elm was to fly. It straightened up, it stretched its branches. Then, one day it grew a new bud. It was not an ordinary bud: it was a feather. A green feather. The beginnings of a wing.

INTELLIGENCE (Inteligencia)

Professor Pulpeiro knew more things than any other man; and all those things that he knew were of such an extraordinary nature that no one who ignored them could really be considered ignorant. Because the specialty of Pulpeiro was the verification of literary frauds. He had enthralled international academic organizations with the discovery of plagiarisms, falsified texts, incorrect dates, apocryphal authors, misleading explanations, and ambiguous compositions.

Now, during his summer vacation, he was stretched out on a hammock, trying to solve a dilemma. What should he do? The dedication of his entire life to the investigation of literary fallacies had been the actual preparation for a premeditated plan: for himself to commit a perfect fraud. A fraud within a fraud. A dual deceit. Backed by his authority he could, for example, trick his readers using the false charge that the book, *Existential Ethics* by the rector of the University, was a cabalistic recombination of the words from a pornographic novel of the sixteenth century. Should he destroy his prestige as a scholar with a single article in *Philology*, a mischievous trick that would just deceive his

colleagues for a short time? Or would the deceit be more serious and more prolonged, if he went on making everyone believe that his scholarship was genuine?

*

“I don’t like to write letters,” Cicero was thinking. “When I write them, I have to remember very carefully what the person I am writing to thinks about me. Only in that way, can I tell him what he expects me to say. If I were to write spontaneously, it would give him an image that was so different, he would not recognize me. That also does not take into account that the person to whom I am writing is changing, and it is possible that he may be someone else, by the time my letter arrives. In which case, it is probable that he will not expect to receive a letter from me.

*

“My intention,” the Writer told the journalist, who asked him why he had been such a failure, “is to write for an extraterrestrial audience. It is not hard to imagine that the material also becomes more complicated on other planets, in other galaxies, and in them there is life, even intelligent life. I, of course, have no other recourse than to write in the language of my fellow men; but when I write, I am thinking of non-human beings, and therefore, I try to keep from falling into demagogical anthropomorphisms. You will remember the anthropocentric psalmist who, swollen with human pride and expecting a loving response, asked God: ‘What is there about man that makes you worry about him?’ Now, imagine that God answered sarcastically: ‘Yes, that is just what I would like to know; tell me, what does man think he is, to suppose that I ought to worry about him?’ So I am writing for the possible clientele of the God who ignores human beings.”

*

Ramon, who was an atheist, decides to invent a Utopia. When he is ready to write about it, he will use only one tense: the future. In the meantime, he is creating it in his mind, detail by detail. He leaves out everything that does not serve him, and he uses only institutions that suit him. To start with, he formulates a population of millions of human beings who are his equals; then, he boldly decides to introduce several small changes in the human personality. He imagines there will be a few things like peace, justice, freedom, order, and happiness. It is long, and it becomes very complicated, but finally Utopia is perfected.

But perfect? In order to be completely perfect, it lacks only the possibility to be real. What path should be followed, and what direction should be taken, in order to achieve Utopia? Ramon imagines a miracle that would put into practice this admirable creation: he imagines that one day a loving God...

Ah, no! The moment he thought about God, Ramon lost interest in his Utopia. If God exists, who would need to worry about a worldly paradise!

*

On the first day of class the teacher laid the lesson plan on his desk, he looked at the students and was about to speak, when a little nun came into the room and apologized for having arrived several centuries too late. The teacher began to teach, but he couldn't help looking at the nun who seemed unreal: always quiet and modest, with lowered eyes.

*The heron has beautiful eyes,
and does not look up*

The weeks went by. Now, the diminutive nun looks up from her book, and the teacher is able to see her eyes. If he says something that is interesting, the nun responds with an expression that suggests the possibility of a smile. After that, the teacher tries to speak of interesting things, in order to see her smile.

Her religious habit, with ample folds and creases, was especially designed so that it would not make a man think about the body of the woman it covers. But the black veil and the white wimple that enclosed the face of this nun could not hide an aura of beauty. A small revelation. However, that revelation was what made the teacher, hours later, continue to think about it when he was alone in his house.

*I was there in my study
studying my lesson
and I thought of my love.
I could not study any longer.*

His imagination began to travel back into the long lost Past, the dark night, the unknown distances, the opaque walls of the convent, the black robe of the little nun; and he recalled a ballad from the museum of Brocense dating back to the days of Charles V:

*Do not show me anything else,
because it will kill me.*

*The nun was there
in the monastery,
her little white breasts
beneath her black veil.*

*More,
and it will kill me!*

*

Leopoldo died without being able to carry out his final project: an anthology of the last words that some famous men had been able to say at the moment they died. During their entire existence these men had nurtured their consciousness with the concept of time, each one, with a particular time. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, another Time arrived and, with a gulp, it devoured them; but until the last moment, they were still conscious and were still talking, still nurturing their own personal time.

Leopoldo had intended to illustrate his anthology with a reproduction of a fresco of Goya—"Kronos devouring his children"—and use the following scene as an epigraph:

Rea approached Kronos and said to him:

"Dear husband, how many times have I told you that it is bad manners to speak with your mouth full?"

"No, woman," Kronos answered with his mouth full. "It is not me. It's him, your child who keeps on speaking when I swallow him."

*

Khon, the new professor, rented a small apartment that was near the library. He was one of those absentminded professors who walks down the streets without seeing anyone, as though he was lost in a cloud, in a dream, or in oblivion. Whenever the Dean met him, he would have to repeat his greeting. Khon would see him emerge from nothingness, and he would excuse himself with the same simplicity that he would have excused himself in the presence of an angel.

"Have you been able to find a comfortable place to live?" the Dean asked him.

"Yes, thank you. The apartment is quite nice, with windows looking over the garden. The only problem is that it doesn't have a floor. It is very disturbing to walk through the room without touching the surface; but in general, I am very comfortable, thank you."

*

There are men who tell many lies during their life, but not Vicente Fernandez. He lied just once, although this lie time lasted during his entire life. This is the history of his lie.

Vicente Fernandez was the most prolific poet of his generation. Twenty-five voluminous volumes. But in his heart of hearts, he was still dissatisfied with himself:

"My ambition," he said, "is to write a poem which is so perfect that it condemns all of my other work to oblivion."

Nobody believed him. Vicente Fernandez has now passed away. And what people remember about him is not his poems, but that lie.

*

With calculating machines the technicians put together an Academy of Philosophy. First, they chose all the most important works in the history of thought. Then, by means of a rigorous system of analysis, they stripped them of all their integral parts—language, references, epoch, environment, disputes, anecdotes—thus reducing them to an essential view of the world. Lastly, using the core of those fundamental works, they created the electronic brains. So that the machine-philosophers would be able to communicate with each other, they had them use the same language. Some—especially, the mechanistic philosophies—functioned quite well, though nothing they said surprised the technicians. On the other hand, those that dealt with philosophers who discredited machines, emitted bizarre combinations of symbols. The machine-philosophers for whom reality was only a product of consciousness, only used verbs. Others eliminated the verbs, and instead linked nouns together, or modified them with a string of adjectives. There were machine philosophers who, with desperate neologisms, struggled to restore the original form of the

national language from when it was first used. There was even some black speech whose words—if they really were words—nobody could identify. The technicians, obfuscated by so much gibberish, tried to construct a third type of language—like the “Tritos Anthropos of Aristotle”—that permitted them to pass from the cybernetic form, to a personal one. And they found it. Once they started to use it, metaphors began to flow out. For example, answering the question, “what is the universe?” one formula replied, “an eye”; another, “a yawn”; and still another, “a soup.” But that was unsatisfactory. They had to dismantle the Academy and return all the instruments to the Ministry of War.

*

Last night I ate some kangaroo meat, knowing that a food like that carried with it an aspect that was bound to cause a nightmare.

I was accused of plagiarism, and I was condemned to add a new phrase to a utopian library. With pushes and shoves, they forced me to read all the books that a mechanical combination of letters had produced; when I was done, I was supposed to dictate to the machine a phrase it had omitted. Suddenly, that library where at random they mixed real books with possible ones was destroyed overnight, and I found myself looking at the only one I recognized as mine; after such a vast number of other books had disappeared, I was compelled to reread my book over and over, each time from a different point of view. But I was never able to choose the point of view: a lottery—created in bad faith by some literary critics—imposed on me the obligation to read my own writing with the eyes of one of those authors from whom I had plagiarized some metaphor. When was done, I was supposed to surprise them with some phrase no one could possibly think of writing. I woke up with a shout. Or did I shout the unknown phrase that was demanded of me, and that was why, free of my obligation, I was allowed to wake up?

GLOW WORMS (Noctílucas)

Ezequiel took a long voyage to see if, in this way, he could escape from the Other. Arriving in Puerto Rico, he traveled from San Juan to the village of San Germán, and then during the night they were taking him by boat, along the southern coast to Parguerra. The breeze smelled of floating seaweed. Myriads of glow worms curled on the edges of Silence. Stillness. No more phosphorescence. Only the black, black sea.

He heard someone tell him to touch the water (and in the darkness it seemed whoever said that must be smiling).

He no sooner wet his fingers when, stretching out over a page of algae, there was a calligraphy of lights. He submerged his entire hand: it shone brightly like a door knocker of polished bronze. Then, when he opened his palms, it began to rain upward: as it spread across the sky, an empty halo searched for its saint. “Now, fill that bucket,” he heard the same smiling voice tell him. Ezequiel no longer had any doubts: the Other had not remained in Buenos Aires, but was still accompanying him. Before he had always felt its presence behind his back or in the depths of mirrors, but he was never actually

able to see it. He picked up the bucket, he raised it up and, turning around, he threw it into the water. The water, shimmering with glow worms, exploded into the air and splashed upon an invisible form. For an instant, he saw the Other, covered with a living skin that was fluid and golden. It was standing on the deck like a ghostly statue. The face was identical to his own, except that it was embellished by a luminous smile.

PLATO'S CAVE (La cueva de Platón)

The analogy of Plato's cave (*Republic*, VII), might be expressed in a different way.

These men have lived as prisoners in a subterranean cave with their backs to a fire, believing that the shadows they see moving along the wall in front of them are the only things that are real. When they talk about it, they cannot agree about the name, or the significance of each shadow. Then, suddenly, all the cave dwellers are freed from their chains. They rise up and turn around, they discover the fire, they come out of the cave and into the sunlight. After a while, they are imprisoned again, and they are put back in the same position as before. Now, disdainful of the shadows that they know are unreal, they talk about the splendid reality which they have just seen. Once again, they are unable to agree about what they saw in the light.

THE DETECTIVE (El Detective)

There are those who say they remember a past they have never seen. Gossips who, influenced by what they have heard or what they have read, are convinced that they were witnesses of a non-existent incident. Liars who eventually start believing that their lies are real. Those who have been hypnotized or drugged and then, when they examine their thoughts, discover an impression caused by something that happened during their infancy of which they were never aware. Those who suffer from paramnesia and think that only what there are seeing now is real. Schizophrenics with double personalities in which one of them remembers what happened to its twin. Megalomaniacs who put themselves in the center of some historic events, replacing the heroes and reading, as though they were autobiographical, the biographies of others. Spiritualists who, while in a mediumistic state, communicate with the dead and give them the opportunity to speak for themselves. Those who feel they have been reincarnated and still have memories of their previous life. In short, all those who suffer from having a distorted imagination.

The case of Mr. Holmes—not Sherlock or Mycroft, but a younger brother—is much more rational.

But he did have the capacity to recall things that had never occurred. He remembered, especially, crimes committed by others.

Someone stabbed another person. From a distance Mr. Holmes knew the moment of the stabbing, as if he were the one who had held the knife. He saw the bed where the victim was sleeping, his expression of fear when he woke up, the sight of the blood.

After that, he remembered so vividly that when he spoke of what happened, he did so with a pronoun that was first-person singular.

Then, Mr. Holmes immediately set out in pursuit of the killer. The methods he used were not those of his famous brothers. Neither induction nor deduction. What he did was to search for the real possessor of the memories that had been passed to him. It was easier to identify the killer if, at the time of attack, he had happened to see himself in a mirror; if that were the case, Mr. Holmes would never forget the face. But if the killer was unable to see himself, Holmes looked for a clue that was psychological: for example, a sensation of familiarity with some little known circumstance, or a feeling of vengeance, of hate, of desperation, or the sight of a hand holding a weapon, or the opinion we have about ourselves during most of our life. And so, thanks to these introspective glimpses, he would reconstruct all that happened during the murder.

When he apprehended a murderer, he was impressed by the total lack of remorse that he saw in him. Because, when he killed someone, the murderer delegated the awareness of his act: it was Mr. Holmes who saw it for him. The murderer fled through the streets as though suffering from amnesia and, when he finally remembered, there was still a little piece of the memory that remained in the mind of Mr. Holmes. Eventually they capture him, they accuse him, and they describe his crime: the murderer is astonished, as though they were returning to him an object that he had lost without knowing he possessed it. He looked at it with innocent eyes, eyes that were empty of memories.

PRUDENCE (Prudencia)

As though it came out of nowhere, he saw himself, naked while swimming desperately in an unknown sea. How did he ever end up there? He didn't even know who he was, or what year it was. Although he no longer can speak, the language he once used has a habit of seeing things in a certain way: they are ghosts of impersonal memories that, after wandering between the words, reappear unexpectedly, silent, but still affective. He had the feeling that, somewhere inside him was some silent, unknown language that was helping him think. Could he be recovering his memory after an attack of amnesia? Perhaps his consciousness had been emptied, like a bucket, and now it was being refilled. These few thoughts from a new life that were pouring into his mind were enough to make him wonder if he hadn't been shipwrecked.

Near to him was a floating log. He was about to reach out and grab it, when he heard a splash and then some rapid breathing: on one side of him, the threatening head of another man emerged; threatening, because that man was now going to try to take the log before he could.

His first impulse was to kill the man. But then the idea occurred to him that perhaps, when he was shipwrecked and suffering from amnesia, he had somehow entered another century, after some miraculous journey through time. But from which century, to what other century? A journey to the future, or to the past? It it was the future, the important thing was to save himself from the waves, even at the expense of another man's life; if,

on the other hand, he had traveled to the past, this man also had to be saved: he could be an ancestor, or a direct forefather, and, if he let him die, he himself might vanish forever, along with all the other descendants of the man who was trying to take the log.

THE FUTURE (Porvenir)

It was truly alarming. Men were covering the surface of the earth with hard substances: pavement of stone or asphalt, cities with tall buildings pressed close to each other; machines went around flattening everything, forests were cut, rivers were piped through underground tunnels; there were aqueducts of metal or cement, debris and trash buried in the subsoil, with pieces of shrapnel and bombs sunken deep in the ground...

“We must have a little more patience,” one plant said to another in the space between the tiles in a humble patio. “Men aren’t going to last very long. After that, we will come back and be in charge.”

*

No one could explain how or why mankind had multiplied from one day to the next like germs. Plazas, streets, and towns were full of people. The cities were connected with each other by masses of people who, according to the pessimists, would soon cover the entire planet. Billions of men, women and children. There wasn’t enough room to take even a little step. A newcomer would not have been able to find any open space, not even using a pitchfork. People were pressed shoulder to shoulder, with their noses breathing the night air.

“And to think that before all this,” one young man said to his neighbor, “I used to race, and I once was an Olympic champion.”

*

It was total war, with all the latest weapons. Everything was destroyed. Only one verse turned out to be indestructible, but there was no longer anyone left to read it.

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE (Orfeo y Eurídice)

Orpheus remembered quite well what the Lords of death had told him: “You can take Eurydice back to the surface of the earth, so go ahead and she will follow you; but there is one condition: when you leave this underground world of darkness, you must not look back; if you do, you will lose Eurydice forever.”

Then, understanding that none of this would be of any use to him since, by nature, he was incapable of loving a woman, Orpheus turned his head and looked back at Eurydice over his shoulder.

From the depths of Hades, like a distant echo, he heard the voice of the twice-dead Eurydice. And that “Goodbye” was filled with the scorn of a woman, who was really a woman, for a man who was not a man.

MOONLIGHT (Luna)

Jacob, a foolish child, sometimes climbed up on the roof so that he could spy on the activity of his neighbors.

That night, the pharmacist and his wife were in the patio, enjoying a cold drink and a piece of cake, when they heard the child walking on the roof.

“Ssh!” the pharmacist whispered to his wife. “There is that boy again. Don’t look; he must be spying on us again. This time, I am going to teach him a lesson. Listen to what I am going to say, as if it were nothing unusual...”

Then, raising his voice he said:

“This cake is really delicious. You must be sure and put it away when we are finished so that no one can steal it.”

“But how could they possibly steal it? The door to the street is locked, the windows and shutters are closed...”

“Well... someone might come down from the roof.”

“Impossible. There aren’t any stairs, and the walls are smooth...”

“Okay, I’ll tell you a secret. On nights like this, all a person would have to do is say ‘abracadabra’ three times so that, diving head first, you could slide through the moonlight all the way down and grab the cake; then, you could climb up a moonbeam and fly away quite happily. But it’s getting late, so let’s go inside and get ready for bed.”

They entered their house and, leaving the cake on the table, they looked out of their bedroom window to see what the boy would do. What they saw was that, after saying ‘abracadabra’ three times, the foolish rascal dove off the roof head first and, sliding through the moonlight as though he were riding a golden toboggan, he grabbed the cake and, with the happiness of a salmon, rose up again and disappeared between the chimneys on the rooftop.

(End of Part 1)