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*The "Fecal Dialectic": Homosexual Panic
and the Origin of Writing in Borges*

Near the end of a 1931 essay on the defects of the Argentine character, "Nuestras imposibilidades" [Our Impossibilities], in which he discusses the Argentine penchant for taking pride in putting one over on someone else ("la viveza criolla"), Borges writes:

Añadiré otro ejemplo curioso: el de la sodomía. En todos los países de la tierra, una invisible reprobación recae sobre los dos ejecutores del inimaginable contacto. *Abominación hicieron los dos; su sangre sobre ellos*, dice el Levítico. No así entre el malevaje de Buenos Aires, que reclama una especie de veneración para el agente activo—porque lo embromó al compañero. Entrego esa dialéctica fecal a los apologistas de la *viveza*, del *alacraneo* y de la *cachada*, que tanto infierno encubren. (*Discusión* 17–18)¹

[I'll add another strange example: that of sodomy. In all of the countries of the earth, an invisible reproof falls on both partners in the unimaginable contact. "Both of them committed an abomination; their blood shall be upon them," says Leviticus. Not so in the Buenos Aires underworld, which showers the active partner with a sort of veneration—because he put something over on his companion. I leave that fecal dialectic to the apologists of trickery, backbiting and mockery, who conceal so much of hell.]

But of course he does not, and cannot, leave this "fecal dialectic" alone (though he does remove the reference to the matter from subsequent editions of *Discusión* and hence from the so-called *Obras completas*). What I will examine here is his phobic treatment of a theme that evidently fascinated him.² I will not, for now, speculate on the enigmas of Borges's sexual

nature,³ though it is worth noting that his failed relationships with a variety of women have been the focus of literary gossip for many years in Buenos Aires, and that the recent publication of some love letters to Estela Canto, and the revelation that Borges sought psychiatric help for impotence for several years in the 1940s, show the currency of that gossip.⁴ Instead, I will discuss first Borges's treatment in a series of essays of the homosexuality of two eminent nineteenth-century men of letters whose works and lives he mentions often, Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman, and then discuss the treatment of sexual preference in a variety of stories, especially in "La intrusa" (*El informe de Brodie* [1970]) and "La secta del fénix" (1952, later included in the second edition of *Ficciones*).

First, Wilde. The Anglo-Irish writer is the subject of an early essay in *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926) on "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," and of the later "Sobre Oscar Wilde" in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952). In both the relation of work to life is alluded to, but only laterally. In the essay on "Reading Gaol," the simplicity and directness of the language of the poem is contrasted with the verbal ingenuity of Wilde's earlier works; this new simplicity is called "austerity," and the poem is offered as possible evidence of Wilde's religious conversion, though a limit is set to the usefulness of such speculation: "Erraría sin embargo quien arbitrara que el único interés de la famosa Balada está en el tono autobiográfico y en las inducciones que sobre el Wilde final podemos sacar de ella" (134) [Nonetheless one would err if one were to judge that the only interest of the famous Ballad is in the autobiographical tone and in the insights that we can derive from the Ballad into the final Wilde]. Before alluding to the trials and prison sentence, the discussion of Wilde's literary activities is encoded in a reference to another writer who flaunted his sexual preferences. Wilde, according to Borges, was not a great poet or dramatist, but his epigrams and wit put forth an aesthetic creed that was highly influential: "Fue un agitador de ideas ambientes. Su actividad fué comparable a la que hoy ejerce Cocteau, si bien su gesto fué más suelto y travieso que el del citado francesito" (132) [He was an agitator for fashionable ideas. His attitude was comparable to that exercised today by Cocteau, although his activity was more fluid and more mischievous than that of the aforementioned little Frenchman]. And then comes an account of the famous trial, notable for its reticences:

Es sabido que Wilde pudo haberse zafado de la condena que el pleito Queensberry le infligió y que no lo hizo por creer que su nombradía bastaba a defenderlo de la ejecución de ese fallo. Una vez condenado, estaba satisfecha la justicia y no había interés alguno en que la senten-

cia se realizase. Le dejaron pues una noche para que huyese a Francia y Wilde no quiso aprovechar el pasadizo largo de esa noche y se dejó arrestar en la mañana siguiente. Muchas motivaciones pueden explicar su actitud: la egolatría, el fatalismo o acaso una curiosidad de apurar la vida en todas sus formas o hasta una urgencia de leyenda para su fama venidera. (133)

[It is well-known that Wilde could have escaped from the judgment in the Queensberry Case and that if he failed to do so it was because he was convinced that his fame would exempt him from the sentence being applied. They left him free for a night so that he could flee to France and Wilde refused to take advantage of the long passageway offered him by that night and let himself be arrested the following morning. Many motives might explain his attitude: egocentrism, fatalism, perhaps a curiosity to experience all that life offered him, even the desire to shape his future fame into a legend.]

Note the lack of any reference here to the content of the charges against Wilde: "the Queensberry Case" is made to stand for both the first trial in which the Marquess of Queensberry was found innocent of libel and for the second and third trials in which Wilde was tried and then found guilty of sodomy. The incident in question actually took place after the acquittal of Queensberry and the arraignment of Wilde before the second trial (Ellmann 452 and 456); it was not, then, properly part of the "Queensberry Case," but part of the Crown case against Wilde. The matter at issue, the "unimaginable contact" between Wilde and a series of boys, is completely erased from Borges's account.

The later essay takes a different tack. Once again Wilde is celebrated for his epigrams and wit, though now Borges affirms that Wilde's real achievement was his ability to tell the truth. After years of rereading Wilde, Borges says, he has discovered something other critics ignore: "el hecho comprobable y elemental de que Wilde, casi siempre, tiene razón" (692) [the verifiable and elementary fact that Wilde is almost always right]. The alleged reason why other readers have failed to discover this "fact" is said to be due to Wilde's polished prose: "su obra es tan armoniosa que puede parecer inevitable y aun baladí" (692) [his work is so harmonious that it may appear inevitable or even trifling]. A further difficulty resides in the gap between Wilde's life, for Borges an example of scandal and tragedy, and the essential happiness expressed in his work: "Una observación lateral. El nombre de Oscar Wilde está vinculado a las ciudades de la llanura; su gloria, a la condena y la cárcel. Sin embargo . . . el sabor fundamental de

su obra es la felicidad" (692) [One lateral observation. Oscar Wilde's name is linked to the cities of the plain; his glory, to his conviction and imprisonment. Nonetheless . . . the fundamental flavor of his work is happiness]. Then, after contrasting Wilde with Chesterton, whose optimistic philosophy is belied by the nightmarish qualities of his work, Borges concludes that Wilde was "un hombre que guarda, pese a los hábitos del mal y de la desdicha, una invulnerable inocencia" (693) [a man who, despite the habits of evil and misfortune, retains an invulnerable innocence]. Once again, euphemisms—references to the cities of the plain, bad habits—stand for the scandalous revelation of Wilde's homosexuality, that Love which not only does not dare speak its name but of which Borges does not dare speak. In reference to the most public case of homosexuality in the nineteenth century,⁵ Borges proves more Victorian than the Victorians themselves.

Though Borges contrasts Wilde to Chesterton at the close of the essay in *Otras inquisiciones*, the contrast to Whitman would be equally revealing, for in Whitman's case the relation of life to work is particularly problematic for Borges. "Who touches this book touches a man": Whitman constantly asserts the identity of the author and the speaker of the poems, yet the speaker's openly avowed homosexuality—or perhaps better, pansexuality—was not matched by any comparable admission by the man himself, as witnessed by the famous exchange with John Addington Symonds.⁶ The differences between the poetic persona and the historical man are the focus of Borges's two essays on Whitman, "El otro Whitman" (originally 1929, collected in the 1932 edition of *Discusión*) and the much later "Nota sobre Walt Whitman" (included in the 1955 edition of *Discusión*). Eduardo González, in *The Monstered Self*, has discussed Borges's suppression of the homoerotic elements in Whitman's poetry in his translation of *Leaves of Grass* (50–51).⁷ The same issue may be approached through a discussion of Borges's treatment of Whitman's homoeroticism in his essays on the North American poet.

In "El otro Whitman," he finds Whitman to be "poeta de un laconismo trémulo y suficiente, hombre de destino comunicado, no proclamado" (207) [a poet of a trembling and sufficient laconism, a man whose destiny is communicated, not proclaimed], a poet with a single theme, "la peculiar poesía de la arbitrariedad y la privación" (208) [the strange poetry of arbitrariness and privation]. In a note to the essay (omitted from the *Obras completas* version), Borges writes:

Casi todo lo escrito sobre Whitman está falseado por dos interminables errores. Uno es la identificación sumaria de Whitman, hombre

caviloso de letras, con Whitman, héroe semidivino de *Leaves of Grass* como don Quijote lo es del *Quijote*; otro la insensata adopción del estilo y vocabulario de sus poemas—vale decir del mismo sorprendente fenómeno que se quiere explicar. (*Discusión* 70n.)

[Almost everything written about Whitman is rendered false by two unending errors. The first is the summary identification of Whitman, cautious man of letters, with Whitman, semi-divine hero of *Leaves of Grass* just as Don Quixote is hero of the *Quixote*; the other is the senseless adoption of the style and vocabulary of the poems—that is, of the very surprising phenomenon that the critic is trying to explain.]

The "other" Whitman of the title of the essay is Whitman the individual man, a point more fully developed in the later essay.

"Nota sobre Walt Whitman" expands on the point just mentioned, insisting that though Whitman never visited California or the Platte River, the speaker describes his experiences there; that though Whitman was a poor man of letters, the speaker of the poems was a noble savage; that though Whitman was in New York in 1859, the speaker of the poems was in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, witnessing the execution of John Brown (250). The crucial line for our argument here is the following: "Este [Whitman] fue casto, reservado y más bien taciturno; aquél [el yo de los poemas] efusivo y orgiástico" (250) [This Whitman was chaste, reserved and rather taciturn; that one was effusive and orgiastic]. Even before the more recent biographies, there were abundant grounds for doubting that Whitman the man was absolutely chaste; Borges is forcing the issue because for him the contact with other male bodies was, as he put it, unimaginable.

Not by chance, though, the essays on Whitman are key links in the chain that goes from "La nadería de la personalidad" to "Borges y yo." In Whitman the floating signifier that is the "I" escapes definition in the best poems. In "When I heard at the close of the day," for instance, the proper name is blotted out, the subject of public fame and private unhappiness, while the "I" finds a more anonymous pleasure:

When I heard at the close of the day how my name
had been receiv'd with plaudits in the
capitol, still it was not a happy night for
me that follow'd, . . .

But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of
perfect health, refresh'd, singing, inhaling
the ripe breath of autumn, . . .

And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was
 on his way coming, O then I was happy, . . .
 And that night while all was still I heard the
 waters roll slowly continually up the shores,
 I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands
 as directed to me whispering to congratulate
 me,
 For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under
 the same cover in the cool night,
 In the stillness in the autumn moonbeam his face
 was inclined toward me,
 And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that
 night I was happy. (276–77)

Borges refers guardedly to this poem in his late story “El otro” [The Other] in *El libro de arena* (1975). In that story Borges sits, seventy years old, by the Charles River in Cambridge, to be joined by a fifteen-year-old Borges who is sitting by the Lemman River in Geneva. The younger Borges recites “con fervor, ahora lo recuerdo, aquella breve pieza en que Walt Whitman rememora una compartida noche ante el mar, en que fue realmente feliz” [with fervor, now I recall, that brief piece in which Walt Whitman remembered a shared night by the sea, when he was truly happy]. The dialogue continues:

—Si Whitman la ha cantado—observé—es porque la deseaba y no sucedió. El poema gana si adivinamos que es la manifestación de un anhelo, no la historia de un hecho.

Se quedó mirándome.

—Usted no lo conoce—exclamó—. Whitman es incapaz de mentir.
 (18–19)

“If Whitman has sung about it,” I observed, “it is because he desired it and it never happened. The poem gains in stature if we discover that it is the expression of a desire, not the story of an event.”

He stared at me.

“You don’t know him,” he exclaimed. “Whitman is incapable of lying.”]

The importance of the poem for the older Borges would seem to be not the startlingly direct reference to a homosexual encounter, but the force of the public/private dichotomy, the opposition of “my name” and “I.” And yet, reading this poem as a prototype of “Borges y yo” [Borges and I] ignores

what for the younger Borges must have been its most important aspect: its testimony to an experience of intense happiness. In “La felicidad escrita” [Writing about Happiness], an essay in the 1928 collection *El idioma de los argentinos*, Borges argues that happiness is an experience that has yet to be adequately recorded in poetry (45, 53). That Whitman’s expression of happiness in this poem was both intensely personal and homoerotic must be said to count, even if, as Borges suggests in “El otro,” it was an expression of a happiness imagined and not experienced, something which is impossible for us to know either way.

In discussions of both Wilde and Whitman, then, Borges retreats into a facile distinction between work and life and assumes that there could be no imaginative traffic from one to the other. The two cases are opposite, though. In Wilde’s case, the “black legend” of Wilde’s public vice must be washed away to save the innocence and happiness of the writings; the public scandal is unavoidable, though, so Borges refers to it guardedly and euphemistically. In Whitman’s case, no reference is made to the homoerotic elements in *Leaves of Grass*, and the man is turned into a kind of monk who presides over the rites of democracy as a chaste and almost disembodied celebrant. In the references to both writers, the assertion that their work was essentially happy implies by contrast (given the antithetical nature of the discussions of work and life) that their lives were essentially sad, and not in Quentin Crisp’s sense of that word.

Borges’s work occasionally includes suggestions of the homoerotic together with careful signs of the suppression of those elements. The clearest of these is the equivocal epigraph to “La intrusa” [The Intruder] (1025) which reads, rather laconically, “2 Reyes, I, 26.” The first chapter of the second book of *Kings* does not have a twenty-sixth verse, but the second book of *Samuel*, sometimes also known as the second book of *Kings*, contains the most famous of all declarations of homosexual love: “I am distressed for thee, my brother, Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me; thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.”

“La intrusa” is the text in which Borges most clearly expresses what Sedgwick and others have called “homosexual panic.”⁸ In the story, the familiar (and often critiqued) notion in Lévi-Strauss of woman as a medium of exchange is enacted in the “love triangle” that links each of the Nilsen brothers to Juliana. Yet, as the story makes clear, woman here is the token that allows the functioning of homosexual desire, even though—in the perverse world of the story—that desire requires the death of the woman: the Nilsen brothers will only be free to desire one another when their desire is constituted not in relating to a present woman as alleged “obscure object

of desire” but in relation to their shared memories of a dead woman. The woman must be “sacrificed” to the incestuous desire of the two brothers; she is the fetishized totem that makes possible their transgression of the incest taboo.

The epigraph, on David’s love for Jonathan “passing the love of woman,” makes credible a gay reading of the story. But note that the homosexual desire that “passes the love of woman” is for Borges constituted through violence. Here, that violence is committed by two brothers against a woman; in other stories (“La forma de la espada,” “El muerto,” “El Sur,” “La muerte y la brújula”) by man against man; once (in “Emma Zunz”) by a woman against a man.⁹ And, since violence is allied with representation and writing, so the scene of writing is disrupted by the experience of death. When, at the close of “La muralla y los libros,” Borges defines “el hecho estético” [beauty] as the “inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce” (635) [imminence of a revelation, which is not produced], he could be describing the tantalizing movements of desire in his fiction.

In the early eighties the story was adapted for the screen by Carlos Hugo Christensen, an Argentine-born director active in Brazil since at least 1955.¹⁰ Christensen’s Portuguese-language adaptation of the story, *A Intrusa*, fills out the brief story with the usual excursions into gaucho culture (horse races, knife fights, songfests) but also with explicitly homoerotic elements. The Nilsen brothers are improbably cast as pretty blondes who look as though they work as models in their spare time modeling jeans for Calvin Klein. When Borges was told of one of the additions to the story, a bedroom scene in which both brothers begin kissing Juliana and end up kissing one another, his outrage was expressed in terms stronger than those he used when a good piece of fiction was turned into a terrible film.¹¹ Isidoro Blaisten’s memory of Borges’s remark is: “I said they were in love with the same woman, but not at the same time and in the same bed—or in such an uncomfortable position!” (conversation, July 1991).¹² Roberto Alifano, in turn, recalls that Borges came out in favor of censorship vis-à-vis this film, though he usually opposed it (162). No doubt Borges would add Christensen to the list of the damned mentioned in “Nuestras imposibilidades”: “una invisible reprobación recae sobre los dos ejecutores del inimaginable contacto.” The unimaginable, the unspeakable, the fascinating contact.

So far, I have not commented on the phobic content of the phrase from “Nuestras imposibilidades” which speaks of a “fecal dialectic.” After the initial quotation from the 1931 essay on politics, Borges never has anything directly to say about gay male sex nor about the rectal area of the male body. In fact, reference to male bodies and the “unspeakable contacts” between

them is suppressed in Borges’s many works; even the 1931 essay was eventually omitted from Borges’s “complete” works. Yet the matter does not stop there; as is often the case with what is repressed, it leaves its mark everywhere. One reader of this article has suggested that homophobia inflects the famous beginning of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” where it is suggested that “los espejos y la cópula son abominables, porque multiplican el número de los hombres” (431) [mirrors and copulation are abominable because they multiply the number of men].

In a 1952 story, “La secta del Fénix” [The Sect of the Phoenix], later included in the second (1956) edition of *Ficciones*, Borges writes:

Sin un libro sagrado que los congregue como la Escritura a Israel, sin una memoria común, sin esa otra memoria que es un idioma, desparramados por la faz de la tierra, diversos de color y de rasgos, una sola cosa—el Secreto—los une y los unirá hasta el fin de los días. . . . [P]uedo dar fe de que el cumplimiento del rito es la única práctica religiosa que observan los sectarios. El rito constituye el Secreto. Este, como ya indiqué, se trasmite de generación en generación, pero el uso no quiere que las madres lo enseñen a los hijos, ni tampoco los sacerdotes; la iniciación en el misterio es tarea de los individuos más bajos. Un esclavo, un leproso o un pordiosero hacen de mistagogos. También un niño puede adoctrinar a otro niño. El acto en sí es trivial, momentáneo y no requiere descripción. . . . El Secreto es sagrado pero no deja de ser un poco ridículo; su ejercicio es furtivo y aun clandestino y los adeptos no hablan de él. No hay palabras decentes para nombrarlo, pero se entiende que todas las palabras lo nombran o mejor dicho, que inevitablemente lo aluden, y así, en el diálogo yo he dicho una cosa cualquiera y los adeptos han sonreído o se han puesto incómodos, porque sintieron que yo había tocado el Secreto. (523)

[Without a sacred book that brings them together like the Bible for the people of Israel, without a common memory, without that other memory that is a common language, scattered over the face of the earth, differing in race and aspect, only one thing—the Secret—unites them and will go on uniting them to the end of time. . . . I can testify that the performance of the rite is the only religious practice observed by the members of the sect. The rite constitutes the Secret. This Secret, as I have already indicated, is transmitted from generation to generation, but custom requires that mothers not teach it to their children, nor the priests either; the initiation in the mystery is left to the lowest individuals. A slave, a leper or a beggar serve as initiators. Also a child

can teach another child. The act in itself is trivial, brief and requires no description. . . . There are no decent words to name it, but everyone understands that all words name it or rather that inevitably they all allude to it; in conversation I have sometimes said something that made the initiated smile or grow uncomfortable, because they felt that I had referred to the Secret.]

The content of this passage is undeniably homoerotic. The secret taught by one boy to another, the secret revealed in empty spaces such as basements¹³ and vacant lots (charged with frightening energy for Borges, as revealed by Estela Canto),¹⁴ the secret which serves to unite a diverse group of people and is jealously guarded from others, the secret whose name one dare not speak: that secret, for Borges, was male homosexuality.¹⁵

The phoenix is the symbol of this secret because in it male creates male without the intervention of the female. The eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes: "According to Pliny (*Nat. hist.* x. 2), there is only one phoenix at a time, and he, at the close of his long life, builds himself a nest with twigs of cassia and frankincense, on which he dies; from his corpse is generated a worm which grows into the young phoenix" (21: 457). Woscoboinik, commenting on the appearance of the phoenix in this story and in a couple of other Borges texts, comments:

La mujer se presenta en el mito sólo ligada a Venus, que de diosa de la belleza, el amor y la fecundidad, pasa a ser la de la muerte. Así, el Fénix es simultáneamente su propio padre y su propio hijo, "heredero de sí mismo", inmortal, que renace de sus cenizas y atestigua el paso del tiempo. Fantasía de autoengendramiento narcisista y tanático, que niega la paternidad, la mujer, la relación sexual y la procreación. (160) [Woman is only present in the myth linked to Venus, who instead of being goddess of beauty, love and fecundity is here goddess of death. Thus, the Phoenix is simultaneously father and son, "heir to itself," immortal, reborn from the ashes and testifying to the passage of time. A fantasy of narcissistic and deathly self-engendering, which denies paternity, woman, sexual relations and procreation.]

The "phoenix sect" of the Borges story must be constituted through that ultimate act of "male bonding," anal penetration, but that act is shrouded in secrecy.

But of course if he returned so often to this secret, once even calling it a "fecal dialectic," it must be because he was in some way implicated in that dialectic. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White find that "disgust always

bears the imprint of desire" (191) and analyze the processes of "displaced abjection" through which the phobic material is negated, incorporated, and expressed. In Borges, the fear of a "fecal dialectic" manifests itself first in the suppression of references to male-male contact, whether the bodies in question be those of Wilde or Whitman or perhaps even David and Jonathan. Then, homoeroticism is coded in violent contact between men, particularly in the important leitmotiv of the knife fight. The recurrent representation of this topos places the "Borges" figure (Dahlmann in "El Sur," Fierro in "El fin," Lönnrot in "La muerte y la brújula," and so on) in the place of the "victim" or "passive partner," as in the revealing last lines of the poem "El tango," where things are as explicit as they will ever be in Borges:

. . . El tango crea un turbio
Pasado irreal que de algún modo es cierto,
El recuerdo imposible de haber muerto
Peleando, en una esquina del suburbio. (889)

[The tango creates a confused unreal past that is in some sense true, the impossible memory of having died fighting on a suburban street-corner.]

And finally, since writing is impossible from the place of the victim, there is an insistent doubling, an appropriation of the place of the other in order for the story to be told: this is most explicit in "La forma de la espada" [The Shape of the Sword] in which John Vincent Moon pretends to be not the one marked by the sword but the one who marked him,¹⁶ but the same process is at work in many other texts including "La muerte y la brújula" [Death and the Compass], "Los teólogos" [The Theologians], and "Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto" [Abenjacán el-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth]. Apropos of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony," Judith Butler has written:

The question is not: what meaning does that inscription carry within it, but what cultural apparatus arranges this meeting between instrument and body, what interventions into this ritualistic repetition are possible? The "real" and the "sexually factic" are phantasmatic constructions—illusions of substance—that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can. (146)¹⁷

Deleuze and Guattari (apropos of the same Kafka story) speak of "this cruel system of inscribed signs" (145). Writing can only be performed by a speaker who assumes simultaneously both the position of the victimizer

and that of the victim, in a strange position of alienation from self. Borges describes this sense of alienation in the early essay "La nadería de la personalidad" [The Nothingness of Personality], and in that essay he reveals the desire to liberate a feminine (homosexual?) soul: in conversation with his friend, "encima de cualquier alarde egoísta, vocaba en mi pecho la voluntad de mostrar por entero mi alma al amigo. *Hubiera querido desnudarme de ella y dejarla allí palpitante*" (*Inquisiciones* 90) [beyond any sort of egotistical display, the desire to reveal my soul completely to my friend was crying out in my breast. *I would have liked to bare myself of it/her (my soul) and leave it lying there, palpitating*].¹⁸ The feminine principle here is the excluded middle that makes possible the homosocial but that does not succeed in crasing the homosexual.

Juan Orbe, approaching the inscription of the "lower bodily strata" from a completely different angle than I do here, has noted the importance of the latrine in a key Borges text, "La biblioteca de Babel" [The Library of Babel], in which reference is made to "letrinas para el bibliotecario sentado" (466) [latrines for the seated librarian]. Also, in "La lotería en Babilonia" [The Lottery of Babylon] there is a sacred latrine named "Qaphqa" in which messages "de variable veracidad" [of varying truthfulness] are left for the all-powerful Company that runs the lottery (458). Orbe notes the association of writing to fecal "production" in Borges but does not see the presence of homoeroticism in this obsessional element. However, the frequent presence of an Other, almost always male, almost always locked in some sort of phallic combat with the protagonist, suggests that the "fecal dialectic" is "fecal" only because it involves (phantasmatic) anal penetration. The fecal "production" that is writing (for Borges, in this account) is the result of male-male impregnation, an impossibility for human biology but certainly not for the human imagination.¹⁹ And the phobic site of writing is the rectum.

In "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," Yeats²⁰ writes:

'A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.' (255)

Put "Borges" in the place occupied by "woman" here, and all hell would break loose.²¹ His (feminine) soul would be revealed and would lie palpi-

tating before him, before us. To hold off that revelation,²² to cover his ass, he writes.²³

Notes

In memory of Estela Canto

- 1 In the 1932 preface to *Discusión*, Borges describes the essay in these terms: "*Nuestras imposibilidades* no es el charro ejercicio de invectiva que dijeron algunos; es un informe reticente y dolido de ciertos caracteres de nuestro ser que no son tan gloriosos" (177) ["Our Impossibilities" isn't the tawdry piece of invective that some have claimed; it is the incomplete and painful report on certain features of our being that are less than glorious]. The 1955 edition (and subsequent ones, including the *Obras completas*) omits the essay, and the sentence in the preface just quoted is glossed with a note (dated 1955): "El artículo, que ahora parecería muy débil, no figura en esta reedición" (177n.) [The article, that would now seem rather weak, does not appear in this new edition]. Josefina Ludmer has already commented at length on Borges's fear of "weakness" in his treatment of the gaucho and the compadrito (221–36, esp. 224); since the essay in question deals with the defects of the Argentine national character, the admission of possible "weakness" is especially revealing. The omission is curious not only because Borges thus suppresses his most explicitly homophobic passage; the essay could also be read in relation to his later critiques of Argentine nationalism when that idea became identified with the figure of Juan Domingo Perón. The "Revolución Libertadora" against Perón of course also took place in 1955.
- 2 Borges is not discussed in David William Foster's *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Writing*, though his name is invoked once in the book apropos of *No país das sombras* by the Brazilian writer Aguinaldo Silva. Borges is however mentioned prominently in a bizarre story by Jorge Asís, "Los homosexuales controlan todo," in which the narrator "defends" Borges against the charges made by his homophobic friend Aldo, who asks: "Che, ¿y ese Borges? . . . —Borges, ¿también? —¿También qué? —¿Se la come?" (21) [Hey, and that Borges guy? Borges, too? What? Does he suck dick too?]. The friend goes on to insist that homosexuals occupy all positions of power in Argentina, and that Borges, by virtue of being so famous, must therefore also be homosexual.
- 3 For Borges's most direct assertion of his love for another man (in this case, apparently for the Mallorcan poet Jacobo Sureda, the recipient of the *Cartas de juventud*), see the odd confessional moment in "La nadería de la personalidad," in which Borges explains that he desired to bare his soul to his friend, quoted on p. 40 of this essay. What is curious about this passage is how excessive it is in its original context. In the midst of a philosophical argument derivative from Schopenhauer, Borges suddenly dramatizes his sense that the self is an empty shifter with this very personal anecdote. What's more, the "personal" quality of the anecdote contradicts the thesis of the essay that "personality" is an empty concept; even though Borges reaches this conclusion by the end of the narration of the episode, to tell the story he has had to posit or postulate the reality and presence of the notion of "personality." Later he will do much the same thing in at least two stories, "La escritura del dios" and "La busca de Averroes."

In a 1984 interview with Mirta Schmidt, Borges says that he has had various homosexual friends with whom he reached an accord ("un pacto tácito") not to discuss their

- homosexuality (qtd. in Stortini 112). The odd things about the conversation reported by Borges with a gay friend in Seville is that the friend insisted on coming out to him and asked whether Borges would still accept his friendship. Borges does not speak in the interview of any gay Argentine friends he had, but of course he was close for many years to José Bianco, whose homosexuality was a secret to no one.
- 4 The gossip has focused on the question of whether Borges was impotent. The evidence offered—the alleged testimony, usually at third or fourth hand, of the women who were the objects of his attentions—could as easily be taken as signs that Borges did not give free expression to his "true" sexual nature. Canto offers a fascinating discussion of the enigmas of Borges's sexual nature in her book; see also Julio Woscoboinik's appendix to the second edition (1991) of his 1988 psychoanalytic study of Borges, in which he comments on the points of contact between Canto's experiences with Borges and his own hypotheses based on a reading of the work (257–62).
 - 5 Cf. Neil Bartlett on Wilde: "If a stranger asked you to name a homosexual, would you give your own name in reply? Or if you asked someone else, your sister, for instance, or your father, to name a homosexual, what would their response be? There is one, just one, whose name everyone knows. In fact he is famous above all else for being a homosexual. And since his name alone can conjure my past, it was his name I started with, the first entry I looked up in the catalogue. His words began to ghost my writing" (26). On Wilde, also see Koestenbaum ("Wilde's Hard Labor") and Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*, chap. 3). For a useful account of Wilde's period (without focusing on Wilde per se), see Dellamora; both Dellamora and Bartlett reconstruct elements of a homosexual life just prior to the "discovery" of homosexuality in the Wilde cases.
 - 6 On the correspondence with Symonds, see Sedgwick, *Between Men* 203–4, and Moon 11–13.
 - 7 González's point is well taken, though Borges's translation of one of Whitman's key homoerotic poems, "When I heard at the close of the day," is quite faithful to the original.
 - 8 For Sedgwick's discussion of the concept, see *Between Men* 83–96 and *Epistemology of the Closet* 19–21, 138–39, 182–212.
 - 9 Though he does not propose directly that Emma Zunz be read against lesbian theory, Bernard McGuirk's fascinating analysis of the story as "écriture feminine" could easily be extended in this direction ("Z/Z," unpublished manuscript). The repugnance that Emma feels during intercourse with the Swedish sailor and the laconic description of her relations with her friends the Kornfuss sisters and of their visit to the gym would certainly justify this approach.
 - 10 Among his productions in Brazil were *Mãos sagradas* (1955) and *Alice* (1968).
 - 11 See, for example, his review of the Spencer Tracy version of *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde*.
 - 12 Roberto Alifano's recollection is less colorful, but the substance is the same. Alifano writes: "Borges se sintió absolutamente defraudado por la película; su indignación se debía a que el director presentaba a los hermanos Nilsen como homosexuales. 'En ningún momento ni remotamente pasó por mi cabeza la idea de la relación homosexual entre esos dos hombres,' me comentó Borges. Casi inmediatamente me dictó un artículo que titulé *La censura* donde a pesar de pronunciarse en contra de esa arbitrariedad tan usual de los gobiernos totalitarios, la aprobaba en el caso específico de la película basada en su cuento" (162) [Borges felt absolutely let down by the film; his indignation was due to the fact that the director presented the Nilsen brothers as homosexuals. "At no point did the idea of a homosexual relation between those two men ever go through my head," Borges commented to me. Almost immediately he dictated to me an article he entitled "Censorship" in which he declared that although he was opposed to that frequent arbitrary measure imposed by totalitarian governments, he approved of it in the specific instance of the film based on his story].
 - 13 The revelation of the Aleph takes place in Carlos Argentino's basement, and I have already noted elsewhere (*El precursor velado* 40) that the basement scene is charged with erotic energy, perhaps with suggestions of mutual masturbation.
 - 14 Canto writes of Borges's fear of beaches (50) and vacant lots (52), repeatedly insinuating that as a boy Borges must have suffered some sort of rape: "Se tiene la tentación de imaginar que una experiencia extraña y aterradora acechaba al niño Georgie en uno de esos terrenos baldíos. Una experiencia que tuvo que ver con la muerte. . . . Todo esto, naturalmente, es una pura 'conjetura'" (52) [One is tempted to imagine that some strange and terrifying experience happened to young Georgie in one of these vacant lots. . . . All of this, of course, is pure "conjecture"].
 - 15 Earlier accounts have tended to see the "Secret" in "La secta del Fénix" as sexual intercourse in general, and perhaps male-female genital intercourse in particular: in particular, see Christ 155–59. In a note on this passage, Christ clarifies that in a conversation with Borges in New York in 1968, Borges claims that the "Secret" is procreative heterosexuality, citing Whitman on what "the divine husband knows, from the work of fatherhood" (190). The exchange replays some of the misunderstandings between Whitman and Symonds and can hardly be regarded as the last word on the story.
 - 16 In "The Mark of the Knife," I comment at length on this story, which ends with John Vincent Moon's revelation that he is the villain of his story, the one on whose face is written the mark of his infamy (495).
 - 17 Earlier in *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes: "If the creation of values, that historical mode of signification, requires the destruction of the body, much as the instrument of torture in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* destroys the body on which it writes, then there must be a body prior to that inscription, stable and self-identical, subject to that sacrificial destruction. In a sense, for Foucault, as for Nietzsche, cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page; in order for this inscription to signify, however, that medium must itself be destroyed—that is, fully transvaluated into a sublimated domain of values. Within the metaphors of this notion of cultural values is the figure of history as a relentless writing instrument and the body as the medium which must be destroyed and transfigured in order for 'culture' to emerge" (130).
 - 18 I assume that the "friend" in question is the Mallorcan poet Jacobo Sureda, with whom Borges carried on a passionate epistolary relationship in 1921 and 1922, recently published by Carlos Meneses as *Cartas de juventud*. Meneses in his introduction is at pains to assert that the letters are of interest because in them Borges reveals his passion for Concepción Guerrero, a young woman he met in Argentine in the period between the two trips to Europe (47–52). Equally interesting in the letter, however, is the strength of Borges's feelings for Sureda, who would seem to be the "friend" mentioned in "La nadería de la personalidad." The epistolary romance with Concepción Guerrero and Jacobo Sureda, then, anticipates the love triangle in "La intrusa."
 - 19 For a brief consideration of the relations between anality and *écriture*, see Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 208n.

- 20 Yeats is perhaps Borges's favorite among twentieth-century English-language poets, but this poem is not one he cites, for reasons that should be obvious by now.
- 21 "Entrego esa dialéctica fecal a los apologistas de la viveza, del alacraneo y de la cachada, que tanto infierno encubren" (*Discusión* 18) [I leave that fecal dialectic to the apologists of trickery, backbiting, and mockery, who conceal so much of hell].
- 22 And remember: "esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético" (635) [this imminence of a revelation that does not take place is, perhaps, the aesthetic fact (beauty)].
- 23 Cf. Roa Bastos: "Sentí por primera vez que la escritura era para mí los bordes de una cicatriz que guardaba intacta su herida secreta e indecible" (74) [I felt for the first time that writing was for me the edges of a scar that kept intact a secret and unspeakable wound]. As this essay goes to press, I have received the new Foster sourcebook on gay and lesbian themes in Latin American writing, with an interesting essay on Borges by Daniel Altamiranda.

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