Borges And I
It’s Borges, the other one, that things happen to. I walk through Buenos Aires and I pause—mechanically now, perhaps—to gaze at the arch of an entryway and its inner door; news of Borges reaches me by mail, or I see his name on a list of academics or in some biographical dictionary. My taste runs to hourglasses, maps, seventeenth-century typefaces, etymologies, the taste of coffee, and the prose of Robert Louis Stevenson; Borges shares those preferences, but in a vain sort of way that turns them into the accoutrements of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that our relationship is hostile—I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature, and that literature is my justification. I willingly admit that he has written a number of sound pages, but those pages will not save me, perhaps because the good in them no longer belongs to any individual, not even to that other man, but rather to language itself, or to tradition. Beyond that, I am doomed—utterly and inevitably—to oblivion, and fleeting moments will be all of me that survives in that other man. Little by little, I have been turning everything over to him, though I know the perverse way he has of distorting and magnifying everything. Spinoza believed that all things wish to go on being what they are—stone wishes eternally to be stone, and tiger, to be tiger. I shall endure in Borges, not in myself (if, indeed, I am anybody at all), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others’, or in the tedious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him, and I moved on from the mythologies of the slums and outskirts of the city to games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now, and I shall have to think up other things. So my life is a point-counterpoint, a kind of fugue, and a falling away—and everything winds up being lost to me, and everything falls into oblivion, or into the hands of the other man. I am not sure which of us it is that’s writing this page.

The Plot
To make his horror perfect, Caesar, hemmed about at the foot of a statue by his friends' impatient knives, discovers among the faces and the blades the face of Marcus Junius Brutus, his ward, perhaps his very son—and so Caesar stops defending himself, and cries out Et tu, Brute? Shakespeare and Quevedo record that pathetic cry.

Fate is partial to repetitions, variations, symmetries. Nineteen centuries later, in the southern part of the province of Buenos Aires, a gaucho is set upon by other gauchos, and as he falls he recognizes a godson of his, and says to him in gentle remonstrance and slow surprise (these words must be heard, not read): Pero, ¡che! Heches, but he does not know that he has died so that a scene can be played out again.

The Dead Man
That a man from the outskirts of Buenos Aires, a sad sort of hoodlum whose only recommendation was his infatuation with courage, should go out into the wilderness of horse country along the Brazilian frontier and become a leader of a band of smugglers—such a thing would, on the face of it, seem impossible. For those who think so, I want to tell the story of the fate of Benjamín Otálora, whom no one may remember anymore in the neighborhood of Balvanera but who died as he lived, by a bullet, in the province of Rio Grande do Sul.*I do not know the full details of his adventure; when I am apprised of them, I will correct and expand these pages. For now, this summary may be instructive: In 1891, Benjamín Otálora is nineteen years old—a strapping young man with a miserly brow, earnest blue eyes, and the strength and stamina of a Basque. A lucky knife thrust has revealed to him that he is a man of courage; he is not distressed by the death of his opponent, or by the immediate need to flee the country. The ward boss of his parish gives him a letter of introduction to a man named Azevedo Bandeira, over in Uruguay. Otálora takes ship; the crossing is stormy, creaking; the next day finds him wandering aimlessly through the streets of Montevideo, with unconfessed and perhaps unrecognized sadness. He doesn’t manage to come across Azevedo Bandeira. Toward midnight, in a general-store-and-bar in Paso del Molino,*he witnesses a fight between
two cattle drovers. A knife gleams; Otálora doesn't know whose side he should be on, but he is attracted by the pure taste of danger, the way other men are attracted by gambling or music. In the confusion, he checks a low thrust meant for a man in a broad-brimmed black hat and a poncho. That man later turns out to be Azevedo Bandeira. (When Otálora discovers this, he tears up the letter of introduction, because he'd rather all the credit be his alone.) Though Azevedo Bandeira is a strong, well-built man, he gives the unjustifiable impression of being something of a fake, a forgery. In his face (which is always too close) there mingle the Jew, the Negro, and the Indian; in his air, the monkey and the tiger; the scar that crosses his face is just another piece of decoration, like the bristling black mustache.

Whether it’s a projection or an error caused by drink, the fight stops as quickly as it started. Otálora drinks with the cattle drovers and then goes out carousing with them and then accompanies them to a big house in the Old City—by now the sun is high in the sky. Out in the back patio, the men lay out their bedrolls. Otálora vaguely compares that night with the previous one; now he is on terra firma, among friends. He does, he has to admit, feel a small twinge of remorse at not missing Buenos Aires. He sleeps till orisons, when he is awakened by the same paisano who had drunkenly attacked Bandeira. (Otálora recalls that this man has been with the others, drunk with them, made the rounds of the city with them, that Bandeira sat him at his right hand and made him keep drinking.) The man tells him the boss wants to see him. In a kind of office that opens off the long entryway at the front of the house (Otálora has never seen an entryway with doors opening off it), Azevedo Bandeira is waiting for him, with a splendid, contemptuous red-haired woman. Bandeira heaps praise on Otálora, offers him a glass of harsh brandy, tells him again that he looks like a man of mettle, and asks him if he’d like to go up north with the boys to bring a herd back. Otálora takes the job; by dawn the next morning they are on their way to Tacuarembó. That is the moment at which Otálora begins a new life, a life of vast sunrises and days that smell of horses.

This life is new to him, and sometimes terrible, and yet it is in his blood, for just as the men of other lands worship the sea and can feel it deep inside them, the men of ours (including the man who weaves these symbols) yearn for the inexhaustible plains that echo under the horses’ hooves. Otálora has been brought up in neighborhoods full of cart drivers and leather braiders; within a year, he has become a gaacho. He learns to ride, to keep the horses together, to butcher the animals, to use the rope that lassos them and the bolas that bring them down, to bear up under weariness, storms, cold weather, and the sun, to herd the animals with whistles and shouts. Only once during this period of apprenticeship does he see Azevedo Bandeira, but he is always aware of his presence, because to be a "Bandeira man" is to be taken seriously—in fact, to be feared—and because no matter the deed of manly strength or courage they see done, the gauchos say Bandeira does it better. One of them says he thinks Bandeira was born on the other side of the Cuareim, in Rio Grande do Sul; that fact, which ought to bring him down a notch or two in their estimation, lends his aura a vague new wealth of teeming forests, swamps, impenetrable and almost infinite distances. Gradually, Otalora realizes that Bandeira has many irons in the fire, and that his main business is smuggling. Being a drover is being a servant; Otalora decides to rise higher—decides to become a smuggler. One night, two of his companions are to cross the border to bring back several loads of brandy; Otalora provokes one of them, wounds him, and takes his place. He is moved by ambition, but also by an obscure loyalty. Once and for all (he thinks) / want the boss to see that I’m a better man than all these Uruguaysans of his put together.

Another year goes by before Otalora returns to Montevideo. They ride through the outskirts, and then through the city (which seems enormous to Otalora); they come to the boss’s house; the men lay out their bedrolls in the back patio. Days go by, and Otalora hasn't seen Bandeira. They say, timorously, that he’s sick; a black man takes the kettle and mate up to him in his room. One afternoon, Otalora is asked to carry the things up to Bandeira. He feels somehow humiliated by this, but derives some pride from it, too. The bedroom is dark and shabby. There is a balcony facing west, a long table with a
gleaming jumble of quirts and bullwhips, cinches, firearms, and knives, a distant mirror of cloudy glass. Bandeira is lying on his back, dozing and moaning some; a vehemence of last sunlight spotlights him. The vast white bed makes him seem smaller, and somehow dimmer; Otalora notes the gray hairs, the weariness, the slackness, and the lines of age. It suddenly galls him that it's this old man that's giving them their orders.

One thrust, he thinks, would be enough to settle that matter. Just then, he sees in the mirror that someone has come into the room. It is the redhead woman; she is barefoot and half dressed, and staring at him with cold curiosity. Bandeira sits up; while he talks about things out on the range and sips *mate* after *mate*, his fingers toy with the woman's hair.

Finally, he gives Otalora leave to go.

Days later, they receive the order to head up north again. They come to a godforsaken ranch somewhere (that could be anywhere) in the middle of the unending plains. Not a tree, not a stream of water; the sun beats down on it from first light to last. There are stone corrals for the stock, which is longhorned and poorly. The miserable place is called *El Suspiro*—The Sigh.

Otálora hears from the peons that Bandeira will be coming up from Montevideo before long. He asks why, and somebody explains that there's a foreigner, a would-be gaucho type, that's getting too big for his britches. Otálora takes this as a joke, but he's flattered that the joke is possible. He later finds out that Bandeira has had a falling-out with some politico and the politico has withdrawn his protection. The news pleases Otálora.

Crates of firearms begin to arrive; a silver washbowl and pitcher arrive for the woman's bedroom, then curtains of elaborately figured damask; one morning a somber-faced rider with a thick beard and a poncho rides down from up in the mountains. His name is Ulpiano Suárez, and he is Azevedo Bandeira's *capanga*, his foreman. He talks very little, and there is something Brazilian about his speech when he does. Otálora doesn't know whether to attribute the man's reserve to hostility, contempt, or mere savagery, but he does know that for the plan he has in mind he has to win his friendship.

At this point there enters into Benjamín Otálora's life a sorrel with black feet, mane, and muzzle. Azevedo Bandeira brings the horse up with him from the south; its bridle and all its other gear is tipped with silver and the bindings on its saddle are of jaguar skin. That extravagant horse is a symbol of the boss's authority, which is why the youth covets it, and why he also comes to covet, with grudge-filled desire, the woman with the resplendent hair. The woman, the gear, and the sorrel are attributes (adjectives) of a man he hopes to destroy.

Here, the story grows deeper and more complicated. Azevedo Bandeira is accomplished in the art of progressive humiliation, the satanic ability to humiliate his interlocutor little by little, step by step, with a combination of truths and evasions; Otálora decides to employ that same ambiguous method for the hard task he has set himself. He decides that he will gradually push Azevedo Bandeira out of the picture.

Through days of common danger he manages to win Suárez 'friendship. He confides his plan to him, and Suárez promises to help. Many things happen after this, some of which I know about: Otálora doesn't obey Bandeira; he keeps forgetting, improving his orders, even turning them upside down. The universe seems to conspire with him, and things move very fast. One noon, there is a shoot-out with men from Rio Grande do Sul on the prairies bordering the Tacuarembó. Otálora usurps Bandeira's place and gives the Uruguayans orders. He is shot in the shoulder, but that afternoon Otálora goes back to *El Suspiro* on the boss's sorrel and that afternoon a few drops of his blood stain the jaguarskin and that night he sleeps with the woman with the shining hair. Other versions change the order of these events and even deny that they all occurred on a single day.

Though Bandeira is still nominally the boss, he gives orders that aren't carried out; Benjamín Otálora never touches him, out of a mixture of habit and pity.

The last scene of the story takes place during the excitement of the last night of 1894. That night, the men of *El Suspiro* eat freshbutchered lamb and drink bellicose liquor. Somebody is infinitely strumming at a milonga that he has some difficulty playing. At the head
of the table, Otálora, drunk, builds exultancy upon exultancy, jubilation upon jubilation; that vertiginous tower is a symbol of his inexorable fate. Bandeira, taciturn among the boisterous men, lets the night take its clamorous course. When the twelve strokes of the clock chime at last, he stands up like a man remembering an engagement. He stands up and knocks softly on the woman's door. She opens it immediately, as though she were waiting for the knock. She comes out barefoot and half dressed. In an effeminate, wheedling voice, the boss speaks an order:
"Since you and the city slicker there are so in love, go give him a kiss so everybody can see."
He adds a vulgar detail. The woman tries to resist, but two men have taken her by the arms, and they throw her on top of Otálora. In tears, she kisses his face and his chest. Ulpiano Suárez has pulled his gun. Otálora realizes, before he dies, that he has been betrayed from the beginning, that he has been sentenced to death, that he has been allowed to love, to command, and win because he was already as good as dead, because so far as Bandeira was concerned, he was already a dead man.
Suárez fires, almost with a sneer.

The South
The man that stepped off the boat in Buenos Aires in 1871 was a minister of the Evangelical Church; his name was Johannes Dahlmann. By 1939, one of his grandsons, Juan Dahlmann, was secretary of a municipal library on Calle Córdoba and considered himself profoundly Argentine. His maternal grandfather had been Francisco Flores, of the 2nd Infantry of the Line, who died on the border of Buenos Aires "from a spear wielded by the Indians under Catriel." In the contrary pulls from his two lineages, Juan Dahlmann (perhaps impelled by his Germanic blood) chose that of his romantic ancestor, or that of a romantic death. That slightly willful but never ostentatious "Argentinization" drew sustenance from an old sword, a locket containing the daguerreotype of a bearded, inexpressive man, the joy and courage of certain melodies, the habit of certain verses in Martín Fierro, the passing years, a certain lack of spiritedness, and solitude. At the price of some self-denial, Dahlmann had managed to save the shell of a large country house in the South that had once belonged to the Flores family; one of the touchstones of his memory was the image of the eucalyptus trees and the long pink-colored house that had once been scarlet. His work, and perhaps his indolence, held him in the city. Summer after summer he contented himself with the abstract idea of possession and with the certainty that his house was waiting for him, at a precise place on the flatlands. In late February, 1939, something happened to him. Though blind to guilt, fate can be merciless with the slightest distractions. That afternoon Dahlmann had come upon a copy (from which some pages were missing) of Weil's Arabian Nights; eager to examine his find, he did not wait for the elevator—he hurriedly took the stairs. Something in the dimness brushed his forehead—a bat? a bird? On the face of the woman who opened the door to him, he saw an expression of horror, and the hand he passed over his forehead came back red with blood. His brow had caught the edge of a recently painted casement window that somebody had forgotten to close.
Dahlmann managed to sleep, but by the early hours of morning he was awake, and from that time on, the flavor of all things was monstrous to him. Fever wore him away, and illustrations from the Arabian Nights began to illuminate nightmares. Friends and members of his family would visit him and with exaggerated smiles tell him how well he looked. Dahlmann, in a kind of feeble stupor, would hear their words, and it would amaze him that they couldn't see he was in hell. Eight days passed, like eight hundred years. One afternoon, his usual physician appeared with a new man, and they drove Dahlmann to a sanatorium on Calle Ecuador; he needed to have an X-ray. Sitting in the cab they had hired to drive them, Dahlmann reflected that he might, at last, in a room that was not his own, be able to sleep. He felt happy, he felt like talking, but the moment they arrived, his clothes were stripped from him, his head was shaved, he was strapped with metal bands to a table, he was blinded and dizzied with bright lights, his heart and lungs were listened to, and a man in a surgical mask stuck a needle in his arm. He awoke nauseated, bandaged, in a cell much like the bottom of a
well, and in the days and nights that followed, he realized that until then he had been only somewhere on the outskirts of hell. Ice left but the slightest trace of coolness in his mouth.

During these days, Dahlmann hated every inch of himself; he hated his identity, his bodily needs, his humiliation, the beard that prickled his face. He stoically suffered the treatments administered to him, which were quite painful, but when the surgeon told him he’d been on the verge of death from septicemia, Dahlmann, suddenly self-pitying, broke down and cried.

The physical miseries, the unending anticipation of bad nights had not allowed him to think about anything as abstract as death.

The next day, the surgeon told him he was coming right along, and that he’d soon be able to go out to the country house to convalesce. Incredibly, the promised day arrived.

Reality is partial to symmetries and slight anachronisms; Dahlmann had come to the sanatorium in a cab, and it was a cab that took him to the station at Plaza Constitución. The first cool breath of autumn, after the oppression of the summer, was like a natural symbol of his life brought back from fever and the brink of death. The city, at that seven o’clock in the morning, had not lost that look of a ramshackle old house that cities take on at night; the streets were like long porches and corridors, the plazas like interior courtyards. After his long stay in hospital, Dahlmann took it all in with delight and a touch of vertigo; a few seconds before his eyes registered them, he would recall the corners, the marquees, the modest variety of Buenos Aires. In the yellow light of the new day, it all came back to him.

Everyone knows that the South begins on the other side of Avenida Rivadavia. Dahlmann had often said that that was no mere saying, that by crossing Rivadavia one entered an older and more stable world.

From the cab, he sought among the new buildings the window barred with wrought iron, the door knocker, the arch of a doorway, the long entryway, the almost-secret courtyard. In the grand hall of the station he saw that he had thirty minutes before his train left. He suddenly remembered that there was a café on Calle Brasil (a few yards from Yrigoyen’s house) where there was a huge cat that would let people pet it, like some disdainful deity. He went in. There was the cat, asleep. He ordered a cup of coffee, slowly spooned sugar into it, tasted it (a pleasure that had been forbidden him in the clinic), and thought, while he stroked the cat’s black fur, that this contact was illusory, that he and the cat were separated as though by a pane of glass, because man lives in time, in successiveness, while the magical animal lives in the present, in the eternity of the instant.

The train, stretching along the next-to-last platform, was waiting. Dahlmann walked through the cars until he came to one that was almost empty. He lifted his bag onto the luggage rack; when the train pulled out, he opened his bag and after a slight hesitation took from it the first volume of The Arabian Nights. To travel with this book so closely linked to the history of his torment was an affirmation that the torment was past, and was a joyous, secret challenge to the frustrated forces of evil.

On both sides of the train, the city unraveled into suburbs; that sight, and later the sight of lawns and large country homes, led Dahlmann to put aside his reading. The truth is, Dahlmann read very little; the lodestone mountain and the genie sworn to kill the man who released him from the bottle were, as anyone will admit, wondrous things, but not much more wondrous than this morning and the fact of being. Happiness distracted him from Scheherazade and her superfluous miracles; Dahlmann closed the book and allowed himself simply to live.

Lunch (with bouillon served in bowls of shining metal, as in the now-distant summers of his childhood) was another quiet, savored pleasure. Tomorrow I will wake up at my ranch, he thought, and it was as though he were two men at once: the man gliding along through the autumn day and the geography of his native land, and the other man, imprisoned in a sanatorium and subjected to methodical attentions. He saw unplastered brick houses, long and angular, infinitely watching the trains go by; he saw horsemen on the clod-strewn roads; he saw ditches and lakes and pastures; he saw long glowing clouds that seemed made of marble, and all these things were fortuitous, like some dream of the flat prairies. He also thought he recognized trees and crops that he couldn’t have told one the name of—his direct
knowledge of the country was considerably inferior to his nostalgic, literary knowledge. From time to time he nodded off, and in his dreams there was the rushing momentum of the train. Now the unbearable white sun of midday was the yellow sun that comes before nightfall and that soon would turn to red. The car was different now, too; it was not the same car that had pulled out of the station in Buenos Aires—the plains and the hours had penetrated and transfigured it. Outside, the moving shadow of the train stretched out toward the horizon. The elemental earth was not disturbed by settlements or any other signs of humanity. All was vast, but at the same time intimate and somehow secret. In all the immense countryside, there would sometimes be nothing but a bull. The solitude was perfect, if perhaps hostile, and Dahlmann almost suspected that he was traveling not only into the South but into the past.

From that fantastic conjecture he was distracted by the conductor, who seeing Dahlmann's ticket informed him that the train would not be leaving him at the usual station, but at a different one, a little before it, that Dahlmann barely knew. (The man added an explanation that Dahlmann didn't try to understand, didn't even listen to, because the mechanics of it didn't matter.)

The train came to its laborious halt in virtually the middle of the countryside. The station sat on the other side of the tracks, and was hardly more than a covered platform. They had no vehicle there, but the station-master figured Dahlmann might be able to find one at a store he directed him to—ten or twelve blocks away. Dahlmann accepted the walk as a small adventure. The sun had sunk below the horizon now, but one final splendor brought a glory to the living yet silent plains before they were blotted out by night. Less to keep from tiring himself than to make those things last, Dahlmann walked slowly, inhaling with grave happiness the smell of clover.

The store had once been bright red, but the years had tempered its violent color (to its advantage). There was something in its sorry architecture that reminded Dahlmann of a steel engraving, perhaps from an old edition of Paulet Virginie.

There were several horses tied to the rail in front. Inside, Dahlmann thought he recognized the owner; then he realized that he'd been fooled by the man's resemblance to one of the employees at the sanatorium. When the man heard Dahlmann's story, he said he'd have the calash harnessed up; to add yet another event to that day, and to pass the time, Dahlmann decided to eat there in the country store.

At one table some rough-looking young men were noisily eating and drinking; at first Dahlmann didn't pay much attention. On the floor, curled against the bar, lay an old man, as motionless as an object. The many years had worn him away and polished him, as a stone is worn smooth by running water or a saying is polished by generations of humankind. He was small, dark, and dried up, and he seemed to be outside time, in a sort of eternity. Dahlmann was warmed by the tightness of the man's hairband, the baize poncho he wore, his gaucho trousers, and the boots made out of the skin of a horse's leg, and he said to himself, recalling futile arguments with people from districts in the North, or from Entre Ríos, that only in the South did gauchos like that exist anymore. Dahlmann made himself comfortable near the window. Little by little, darkness was enveloping the countryside, but the smells and sounds of the plains still floated in through the thick iron grate at the window. The store-keeper brought him sardines and then roast meat; Dahlmann washed them down with more than one glass of red wine. Idly, he savored the harsh bouquet of the wine and let his gaze wander over the store, which by now had turned a little sleepy. The kerosene lantern hung from one of the beams. There were three customers at the other table: two looked like laborers; the other, with coarse, Indian-like features, sat drinking with his wide-brimmed hat on. Dahlmann suddenly felt something lightly brush his face. Next to the tumbler of cloudy glass, on one of the stripes in the tablecloth, lay a little ball of wadded bread. That was all, but somebody had thrown it at him.

The drinkers at the other table seemed unaware of his presence. Dahlmann, puzzled, decided that nothing had happened, and he opened the volume of The Arabian Nights, as though to block out reality. Another wad of bread hit him a few minutes
later, and this time the laborers laughed. Dahlmann told himself he wasn’t scared, but that it would be madness for him, a sick man, to be dragged by strangers into some chaotic bar fight. He made up his mind to leave; he was already on his feet when the storekeeper came over and urged him, his voice alarmed: "Sr. Dahlmann, ignore those boys over there—they’re just feeling their oats."

Dahlmann did not find it strange that the storekeeper should know his name by now but he sensed that the man’s conciliatory words actually made the situation worse. Before, the men’s provocation had been directed at an accidental face, almost at nobody; now it was aimed at him, at his name, and the men at the other table would know that name. Dahlmann brushed the storekeeper aside, faced the laborers, and asked them what their problem was.

The young thug with the Indian-looking face stood up, stumbling as he did so. At one pace from Dahlmann, he shouted insults at him, as though he were far away. He was playacting, exaggerating his drunkenness, and the exaggeration produced an impression both fierce and mocking. Amid curses and obscenities, the man threw a long knife into the air, followed it with his eyes, caught it, and challenged Dahlmann to fight. The storekeeper’s voice shook as he objected that Dahlmann was unarmed. At that point, something unforeseeable happened. From out of a corner, the motionless old gaucho in whom Dahlmann had seen a symbol of the South (the South that belonged to him) tossed him a naked dagger—it came to rest at Dahlmann’s feet. It was as though the South itself had decided that Dahlmann should accept the challenge. Dahlmann bent to pick up the dagger, and as he did he sensed two things: first, that that virtually instinctive action committed him to fight, and second, that in his clumsy hand the weapon would serve less to defend him than to justify the other man's killing him. He had toyed with a knife now and then, as all men did, but his knowledge of knife fighting went no further than a vague recollection that thrusts should be aimed upward, and with the blade facing inward. "Enough stalling," the other man said. "Let's go outside."

They went outside, and while there was no hope in Dahlmann, there was no fear, either. As he crossed the threshold, he felt that on that first night in the sanatorium, when they’d stuck that needle in him, dying in a knife fight under the open sky, grappling with his adversary, would have been a liberation, a joy, and a fiesta. He sensed that had he been able to choose or dream his death that night, this is the death he would have dreamed or chosen. Dahlmann firmly grips the knife, which he may have no idea how to manage, and steps out into the plains.

The Secret Miracle

And God caused him to die for an hundred years, and then raised him to life. And God said, "How long hast thou waited?" He said, "I have waited a day or part of a day."

Qur'an, 2:261

On the night of March 14, 1939, in an apartment on Prague's Zeltnergasse, Jaromir Hladik, author of the unfinished tragedy The Enemies, a book titled A Vindication of Eternity, and a study of Jakob Boehme’s indirect Jewish sources, dreamed of a long game of chess. The game was played not by two individuals, but by two illustrious families; it had been started many centuries in the past. No one could say what the forgotten prize was to be, but it was rumored to be vast, perhaps even infinite. The chess pieces and the chessboard themselves were in a secret tower. Jaromir (in the dream) was the firstborn son of one of the contending families; the clocks chimed the hour of the inescapable game; the dreamer was running across the sand of a desert in the rain, but he could recall neither the figures nor the rules of chess. At that point, Hladik awoke. The din of the rain and the terrible clocks ceased. A rhythmic and unanimous sound, punctuated by the barking of orders, rose from the Zeltnergasse. It was sunrise, and the armored vanguard of the Third Reich was rolling into Prague.

On the nineteenth, the authorities received a report from an informer. That same day, toward dusk, Jaromir Hladik was arrested. He was led to a white, aseptic jail on the opposite bank of the Moldau. He was unable to refute even one
of the Gestapo's charges: His mother's family's name was Jaroslavski, he came of Jewish blood, his article on Boehme dealt with a Jewish subject, his was one of the accusing signatures appended to a protest against the Anschluss. In 1928, he had translated the *Sefer Yetsirah* for Hermann Barsdorf Publishers; that company's effusive catalog had exaggerated (as commercial catalogs do) the translator's renown; the catalog had been perused by Capt. Julius Rothe, one of the officers in whose hands his fate now lay. There is no one who outside his own area of knowledge is not credulous; two or three adjectives in Fraktur were enough to persuade Julius Rothe of Hladik's preeminence, and therefore that he should be put to death— *pour encourager les autres*. The date was set for March 29, at 9:00a.m. That delay (whose importance the reader will soon discover) was caused by the administrative desire to work impersonally and deliberately, as vegetables do, or planets.

Hladik's first emotion was simple terror. He reflected that he wouldn't have quailed at being hanged, or decapitated, or having his throat slit, but being shot by a firing squad was unbearable. In vain he told himself a thousand times that the pure and universal act of dying was what ought to strike fear, not the concrete circumstances of it, and yet Hladik never wearied of picturing to himself those circumstances.

Absurdly, he tried to foresee every variation. He anticipated the process endlessly, from the sleepless dawn to the mysterious discharge of the rifles. Long before the day that Julius Rothe had set, Hladik died hundreds of deaths— standing in courtyards whose shapes and angles ran the entire gamut of geometry, shot down by soldiers of changing faces and varying numbers who sometimes took aim at him from afar, sometimes from quite near. He faced his imaginary executions with true fear, perhaps with true courage.

Each enactment lasted several seconds; when the circle was closed, Hladik would return, unendingly, to the shivering eve of his death. Then it occurred to him that reality seldom coincides with the way we envision it beforehand; he inferred, with perverse logic, that to foresee any particular detail is in fact to prevent its happening. Trusting in that frail magic, he began to invent horrible details— so *that they would not occur*; naturally he wound up fearing that those details might be prophetic. Miserable in the night, he tried to buttress his courage somehow on the fleeting stuff of time. He knew that time was rushing toward the morning of March 29; he reasoned aloud: *It is now the night of the twenty-second; so long as this night and six more last I am invulnerable, immortal.* He mused that the nights he slept were deep, dim cisterns into which he could sink. Sometimes, impatiently, he yearned for the shots that would end his life once and for all, the blast that would redeem him, for good or ill, from his vain imaginings. On the twentyeighth, as the last rays of the sun were glimmering on the high bars of his window, he was diverted from those abject thoughts by the image of his play, *The Enemies*.

Hladik was past forty. Apart from a few friends and many routines, the problematic pursuit of literature constituted the whole of his life; like every writer, he measured other men's virtues by what they had accomplished, yet asked that other men measure him by what he planned someday to do. All the books he had sent to the press left him with complex regret. Into his articles on the work of Boehme, Ibn Ezra, and Fludd, he had poured mere diligence, application; into his translation of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, oversight, weariness, and conjecture. He judged *A Vindicati on of Eternity* to be less unsatisfactory, perhaps. The first volume documents the diverse eternities that mankind has invented, from Parmenides' static Being to Hinton's modifiable past; the second denies (with Francis Bradley) that all the events of the universe constitute a temporal series. It argues that the number of humankind's possible experiences is *not* infinite, and that a single "repetition" is sufficient to prove that time is a fallacy.... Unfortunately, no less fallacious are the arguments that prove that fallacy; Hladik was in the habit of ticking them off with a certain disdainful perplexity. He had also drafted a cycle of expressionist poems; these, to the poet's confusion, appeared in a 1924 anthology and there was never a subsequent anthology that didn't inherit them. With his verse drama *The Enemies*, Hladik believed he could redeem himself from all that equivocal
and languid past. (He admired verse in drama because it does not allow the spectators to forget unreality, which is a condition of art.) This play observed the unities of time, place, and action; it took place in Hradcany, in the library of Baron Römerstadt, on one of the last evenings of the nineteenth century. In Act I, Scene I, a stranger pays a visit to Römerstadt. (A clock strikes seven, a vehemence of last sunlight exalts the window-pane, on a breeze float the ecstatic notes of a familiar Hungarian melody.) This visit is followed by others; the persons who come to importune Römerstadt are strangers to him, though he has the uneasy sense that he has seen them before, perhaps in a dream. All fawn upon him, but it is clear—first to the play’s audience, then to the baron himself—that they are secret enemies, sworn to his destruction. Römerstadt manages to check or fend off their complex intrigues; in the dialogue they allude to his fiancée, Julia de Weidenau, and to one Jaroslav Kubin, who once importuned her with his love. Kubin has now gone mad, and believes himself to be Römerstadt.... The dangers mount; by the end of the second act, Römerstadt finds himself forced to kill one of the conspirators. Then the third and last act begins. Little by little, incoherences multiply; actors come back onstage who had apparently been discarded from the plot; for one instant, the man that Römerstadt killed returns. Someone points out that the hour has grown no later: the clock strikes seven; upon the high windowpanes the western sunlight shimmers; the thrilling Hungarian melody floats upon the air. The first interlocutor comes onstage again and repeats the same words he spoke in Act I, Scene I. Without the least surprise or astonishment, Römerstadt talks with him; the audience realizes that Römerstadt is the pitiable Jaroslav Kubin. The play has not taken place; it is the circular delirium that Kubin endlessly experiences. Hladik had never asked himself whether this tragic-comedy of errors was banal or admirable, carefully plotted or accidental. In the design I have outlined here, he had intuitively hit upon the best way of hiding his short-comings and giving full play to his strengths, the possibility of rescuing (albeit symbolically) that which was fundamental to his life. He had finished the first act and one or another scene of the third; the metrical nature of the play allowed him to go over it continually, correcting the hexameters, without a manuscript. It occurred to him that he still had two acts to go, yet very soon he was to die. In the darkness he spoke with God. If, he prayed, I do somehow exist, if I am not one of Thy repetitions or errata, then I exist as the author of The Enemies. In order to complete that play, which can justify me and justify Thee as well, I need one more year. Grant me those days, Thou who art the centuries and time itself. It was the last night, the most monstrous night, but ten minutes later sleep flooded Hladik like some dark ocean.

Toward dawn, he dreamed that he was in hiding, in one of the naves of the Clementine Library. What are you looking for? a librarian wearing dark glasses asked him. I’m looking for God, Hladik replied.

God, the librarian said, is in one of the letters on one of the pages of one of the four hundred thousand volumes in the Clementine Library. My parents and my parents’ parents searched for that letter; I myself have gone blind searching for it. He removed his spectacles and Hladik saw his eyes, which were dead. A reader came in to return an atlas. This atlas is worthless, he said, and handed it to Hladik. Hladik opened it at random. He saw a map of India—a dizzying page. Suddenly certain, he touched one of the tiny letters. A voice that was everywhere spoke to him: The time for your labor has been granted. Here Hladik awoke. He remembered that the dreams of men belong to God and that Maimonides had written that the words of a dream, when they are clear and distinct and one cannot see who spoke them, are holy. Hladik put his clothes on; two soldiers entered the cell and ordered him to follow them.

From inside his cell, Hladik had thought that when he emerged he would see a maze of galleries, stairways, and wings. Reality was not so rich; he and the soldiers made their way down a single iron staircase into a rearyard. Several soldiers—some with their uniforms unbuttoned—were looking over a motorcycle, arguing about it. The sergeant looked at his watch; it was eight forty-four. They had to wait until nine. Hladik, feeling more insignificant than ill fortune, sat down on a pile of firewood.
He noticed that the soldiers' eyes avoided his own. To make the wait easier, the sergeant handed him a cigarette. Hladik did not smoke; he accepted the cigarette out of courtesy, or out of humility. When he lighted it, he saw that his hands were trembling. The day clouded over; the soldiers were speaking in low voices, as though he were already dead. Vainly he tried to recall the woman that Julia de Weidenau had symbolized....
The firing squad fell in, lined up straight. Hladik, standing against the prison wall, awaited the discharge. Someone was afraid the wall would be spattered with blood; the prisoner was ordered to come forward a few steps. Absurdly, Hladik was reminded of the preliminary shufflings about of photographers. A heavy drop of rain grazed Hladik's temple and rolled slowly down his cheek; the sergeant called out the final order. The physical universe stopped. The weapons converged upon Hladik, but the men who were to kill him were immobile. The sergeant's arm seemed to freeze, eternal, in an inconclusive gesture. On one of the paving stones of the yard, a bee cast a motionless shadow. As though in a painting, the wind had died. Hladik attempted a scream, a syllable, the twisting of a hand. He realized that he was paralyzed. He could hear not the slightest murmur of the halted world. I am in hell, he thought, I am dead. Then I am mad, he thought. And then, time has halted. Then he reflected that if that were true, his thoughts would have halted as well. He tried to test this conjecture: he repeated (without moving his lips) Virgil's mysterious fourth eclogue. He imagined that the now-remote soldiers must be as disturbed by this as he was; he wished he could communicate with them. He was surprised and puzzled to feel neither the slightest weariness nor any faintness from his long immobility. After an indeterminate time, he slept. When he awoke, the world was still motionless and muffled. The drop of water still hung on his cheek; on the yard, there still hung the shadow of the bee; in the air the smoke from the cigarette he'd smoked had never wafted away. Another of those "days" passed before Hladik understood. He had asked God for an entire year in which to finish his work; God in His omnipotence had granted him a year. God had performed for him a secret miracle: the German bullet would kill him, at the determined hour, but in Hladik's mind a year would pass between the order to fire and the discharge of the rifles. From perplexity Hladik moved to stupor, from stupor to resignation, from resignation to sudden gratitude.
He had no document but his memory; the fact that he had to learn each hexameter as he added it imposed upon him a providential strictness, unsuspected by those who essay and then forget vague provisional paragraphs. He did not work for posterity, nor did he work for God, whose literary preferences were largely unknown to him. Painstakingly, motionlessly, secretly, he forged in time his grand invisible labyrinth. He re-did the third act twice. He struck out one and another overly obvious symbol—the repeated chimings of the clock, the music. No detail was irksome to him. He cut, condensed, expanded; in some cases he decided the original version should stand. He came to love the courtyard, the prison; one of the faces that stood before him altered his conception of Romerstadt's character. He discovered that the hard-won cacophonies that were so alarming to Flaubert are mere visual superstitions—weaknesses and irritations of the written, not the sounded, word.... He completed his play; only a single epithet was left to be decided upon now. He found it; the drop of water rolled down his cheek. He began a maddened cry, he shook his head, and the fourfold volley felled him. Jaromir Hladik died on the twenty-ninth of March, at 9:02 a.m.

The Circular Ruins
And if he left off dreaming about you ... ?
Through the Looking-Glass, VI
No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe as it sank into the sacred mud, and yet within days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man had come there from the South, and that his homeland was one of those infinite villages that lie up-river, on the violent flank of the mountain, where the language of
the Zend is uncontaminated by Greek and where leprosy is uncommon. But in fact the gray man had kissed the mud, scrambled up the steep bank (without pushing back, probably without even feeling, the sharp-leaved bulrushes that slashed his flesh), and dragged himself, faint and bloody, to the circular enclosure, crowned by the stone figure of a horse or tiger, which had once been the color of fire but was now the color of ashes. That ring was a temple devoured by an ancient holocaust; now, the malarial jungle had profaned it and its god went unhonored by mankind. The foreigner lay down at the foot of the pedestal. He was awakened by the sun high in the sky. He examined his wounds and saw, without astonishment, that they had healed; he closed his pale eyes and slept, not out of any weakness of the flesh but out of willed determination. He knew that this temple was the place that his unconquerable plan called for; he knew that the unrelenting trees had not succeeded in strangling the ruins of another promising temple downriver—like this one, a temple to dead, incinerated gods; he knew that his immediate obligation was to sleep. About midnight he was awakened by the inconsolable cry of a bird. Prints of unshod feet, a few figs, and a jug of water told him that the men of the region had respectfully spied upon his sleep and that they sought his favor, or feared his magic. He felt the coldness of fear, and he sought out a tomblike niche in the crumbling wall, where he covered himself with unknown leaves. The goal that led him on was not impossible, though it was clearly supernatural: He wanted to dream a man. He wanted to dream him completely, in painstaking detail, and impose him upon reality. This magical objective had come to fill his entire soul; if someone had asked him his own name, or inquired into any feature of his life till then, he would never have been able to answer. The uninhabited and crumbling temple suited him, for it was a minimum of visible world; so did the proximity of the woodcutters, for they saw to his frugal needs. The rice and fruit of their tribute were nourishment enough for his body, which was consecrated to the sole task of sleeping and dreaming.

At first, his dreams were chaotic; a little later, they became dialectical. The foreigner dreamed that he was in the center of a circular amphitheater, which was somehow the ruined temple; clouds of taciturn students completely filled the terraces of seats. The faces of those farthest away hung at many centuries' distance and at a cosmic height, yet they were absolutely clear. The man lectured on anatomy, cosmography, magic; the faces listened earnestly, intently, and attempted to respond with understanding—as though they sensed the importance of that education that would redeem one of them from his state of hollow appearance and insert him into the real world. The man, both in sleep and when awake, pondered his phantasms' answers; he did not allow himself to be taken in by impostors, and he sensed in certain perplexities a growing intelligence. He was seeking a soul worthy of taking its place in the universe. On the ninth or tenth night, he realized (with some bitterness) that nothing could be expected from those students who passively accepted his teachings, but only from those who might occasionally, in a reasonable way, venture an objection. The first—those who sometimes questioned—had a bit more préexistence. One afternoon (afternoons now paid their tribute to sleep as well; now the man was awake no more than two or three hours around daybreak) he dismissed the vast illusory classroom once and for all and retained but a single pupil—a taciturn, sallow-skinned young man, at times intractable, with sharp features that echoed those of the man that dreamed him. The pupil was not disconcerted for long by the elimination of his classmates; after only a few of the private classes, his progress amazed his teacher. Yet disaster would not be forestalled. One day the man emerged from sleep as though from a viscous desert, looked up at the hollow light of the evening (which for a moment he confused with the light of dawn), and realized that he had not dreamed. All that night and the next day, the unbearable lucidity of insomnia harried him, like a hawk. He went off to explore the jungle, hoping to tire himself; among the hemlocks he managed no more than a few intervals of feeble sleep, fleetingly veined with the most rudimentary of visions—useless to him. He reconvened his
class, but no sooner had he spoken a few brief words of exhortation than the faces blurred, twisted, and faded away.

In his almost perpetual state of wakefulness, tears of anger burned the man's old eyes. He understood that the task of molding the incoherent and dizzying stuff that dreams are made of is the most difficult work a man can undertake, even if he fathom all the enigmas of the higher and lower spheres—much more difficult than weaving a rope of sand or minting coins of the faceless wind. He understood that initial failure was inevitable. He swore to put behind him the vast hallucination that at first had drawn him off the track, and he sought another way to approach his task. Before he began, he devoted a month to recovering the strength his delirium had squandered. He abandoned all premeditation of dreaming, and almost instantly managed to sleep for a fair portion of the day. The few times he did dream during this period, he did not focus on his dreams; he would wait to take up his task again until the disk of the moon was whole. Then, that evening, he purified himself in the waters of the river, bowed down to the planetary gods, uttered those syllables of a powerful name that it is lawful to pronounce, and laid himself down to sleep. Almost immediately he dreamed a beating heart.

He dreamed the heart warm, active, secret—about the size of a closed fist, a garnet-colored thing inside the dimness of a human body that was still faceless and sexless; he dreamed it, with painstaking love, for fourteen brilliant nights. Each night he perceived it with greater clarity, greater certainty. He did not touch it; he only witnessed it, observed it, perhaps, with his eyes. He perceived it, he lived it, from many angles, many distances. On the fourteenth night, he stroked the pulmonary artery with his forefinger, and then the entire heart, inside and out. And his inspection made him proud. He deliberately did not sleep the next night; then he took up the heart again, invoked the name of a planet, and set about dreaming another of the major organs. Before the year was out he had reached the skeleton, the eyelids.

The countless hairs of the body were perhaps the most difficult task. The man had dreamed a fully fleshed man—a stripling—but this youth did not stand up or speak, nor could it open its eyes. Night after night, the man dreamed the youth asleep.

In the cosmogonies of the Gnostics, the demiurges knead up a red Adam who cannot manage to stand; as rude and inept and elementary as that Adam of dust was the Adam of dream wrought from the sorcerer's nights. One afternoon, the man almost destroyed his creation, but he could not bring himself to do it. (He'd have been better off if he had.) After making vows to all the deities of the earth and the river, he threw himself at the feet of the idol that was perhaps a tiger or perhaps a colt, and he begged for its untried aid. That evening, at sunset, the statue filled his dreams. In the dream it was alive, and trembling—yet it was not the dread-inspiring hybrid form of horse and tiger it had been. It was, instead, those two vehement creatures plus bull, and rose, and tempest, too—and all that, simultaneously. The manifold god revealed to the man that its earthly name was Fire, and that in that circular temple (and others like it) men had made sacrifices and worshiped it, and that it would magically bring to life the phantasm the man had dreamed—so fully bring him to life that every creature, save Fire itself and the man who dreamed him, would take him for a man of flesh and blood. Fire ordered the dreamer to send the youth, once instructed in the rites, to that other ruined temple whose pyramids still stood downriver, so that a voice might glorify the god in that deserted place. In the dreaming man's dream, the dreamed man awoke.

The sorcerer carried out Fire's instructions. He consecrated a period of time (which in the end encompassed two full years) to revealing to the youth the arcana of the universe and the secrets of the cult of Fire. Deep inside, it grieved the man to separate himself from his creation. Under the pretext of pedagogical necessity, he drew out the hours of sleep more every day. He also redid the right shoulder (which was perhaps defective). From time to time, he was disturbed by a sense that all this had happened before-----His days were, in general, happy; when he closed his eyes, he would think Now I will be with my son. Or, less frequently, The son I have engendered is waiting for me, and he will not exist if I do not go to him. Gradually, the man accustomed the youth to
reality. Once he ordered him to set a flag on a distant mountaintop. The next day, the flag crackled on the summit. He attempted other, similar experiments—each more daring than the last. He saw with some bitterness that his son was ready—perhaps even impatient—to be born. That night he kissed him for the first time, then sent him off, through many leagues of impenetrable jungle, many leagues of swamp, to that other temple whose ruins bleached in the sun downstream. But first (so that the son would never know that he was a phantasm, so that he would believe himself to be a man like other men) the man infused in him a total lack of memory of his years of education. The man's victory, and his peace, were dulled by the wearisome sameness of his days. In the twilight hours of dusk and dawn, he would prostrate himself before the stone figure, imagining perhaps that his unreal son performed identical rituals in other circular ruins, downstream. At night he did not dream, or dreamed the dreams that all men dream. His perceptions of the universe's sounds and shapes were somewhat pale: the absent son was nourished by those diminutions of his soul. His life's goal had been accomplished; the man lived on now in a sort of ecstasy. After a period of time (which some tellers of the story choose to compute in years, others in decades), two rowers woke the man at midnight. He could not see their faces, but they told him of a magical man in a temple in the North, a man who could walk on fire and not be burned. The sorcerer suddenly remembered the god's words. He remembered that of all the creatures on the earth, Fire was the only one who knew that his son was a phantasm. That recollection, comforting at first, soon came to torment him. He feared that his son would meditate upon his unnatural privilege and somehow discover that he was a mere simulacrum. To be not a man, but the projection of another man's dream—what incomparable humiliation, what vertigo! Every parent feels concern for the children he has procreated (or allowed to be procreated) in happiness or in mere confusion; it was only natural that the sorcerer should fear for the future of the son he had conceived organ by organ, feature by feature, through a thousand and one secret nights. The end of his meditations came suddenly,