

# Seven Nights

by Jorge Luis Borges

*Originally published in Spanish as **Siete Noches**  
Translated by Eliot Weinberger / Introduction by Alastair Reid*

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## Back cover

Jorge Luis Borges's fictions blur the distinctions between fact and fantasy, scholarship and imagination. Behind his playful cerebrations lies an impressive erudition amassed over a lifetime of study, in spite of failing eyesight and eventual blindness. Allusive motifs run through his writings in amazing diversity, and in *Seven Nights* they are distilled into the form of public lectures, originally given in Buenos Aires in 1977, and now made available for the first time in English translation.

“*The Divine Comedy*”; “Nightmares”; “*The Thousand and One Nights*”; “Buddhism”; “Poetry”; “The Kabbalah”; “Blindness”—the relevance of these lectures to Borges’s *oeuvre* is thoughtfully explored in an introduction by Alastair Reid, who as a translator has in the past himself worked closely with the author. The texts themselves have been rendered into English by Eliot Weinberger, translator of the poetry of Octavio Paz and Homero Aridjis.

Borges was born in 1899 in Buenos Aires, where he still lives, and has long been acknowledged internationally as one of the foremost writers of the century. His ingenious and innovative work was introduced to North American readers in 1962 through *Labyrinths* (New Directions) and *Ficciones* (Grove)—paving the way for the immense popularity of Latin American literature of recent years.

“Jorge Luis Borges is. . . a central fact of Western culture. . . He is also one of the finest, subtlest, and least appreciated of comedians.”

—J. D. O’Hara, *The Washington Post Book World*

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## Introduction

The seven lectures which make up this volume were delivered by Borges in Buenos Aires at the Teatro Coliseo, at intervals between June and August 1977. In an Epilogue to the first Spanish edition of the book, published in Mexico in 1980, Roy Bartholomew tells how the lectures were widely taped, appeared later as pirated records, and were printed, in a cut and mangled form, in the literary supplement of a Buenos Aires newspaper. Later, at a remove of two years, he worked on a version of the lectures with Borges, who corrected them extensively for publication.

Among his many other literary selves, Borges has had a separate existence as a lecturer for almost the past forty years, and, like every separate dimension of Borges, the lectures shed a different kind of light on the whole, and make clear more of Borges' webbed connections. Borges' dismissal from his post in the suburban library in 1946 had made lecturing his essential means of earning a livelihood, but he undertook it with some trepidation for, unable to read a written text, he had first to prepare the lectures, with his mother's help, and then commit them to memory. Yet the obligation to memorize his material did Borges a great service, for, as his blindness encroached, he was at the same time memorizing a considerable private library of reference and quotation. Asked a question now, he will pause, as though riffling through bookshelves in his head, and come up with a verse from one of his essential texts, an idiosyncratic collection familiar to his readers. Certain lectures, like Borges' endlessly shifting lecture on Dante, which he has given many times, but probably never twice in the same form, exist by now in that remembered library, and it is appropriate that this group of them become part of the Borges canon.

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From the seventies on, however, Borges has traveled, lectured, and granted interviews with relative abandon, throughout Europe, South America, and the United States, and there his past lecturing experience has served him well, for it has meant that he has had ready an eclectic range of succinct literary opinions and an abundance of quotation, and has given memorable interviews. Borges' presence is an intensely moving one, and since, in the last ten years especially, he has been seen on television by vast numbers of people, his presence has become fastened to his written image, so that at certain times he appears to be a pure embodiment of his own writing. He prefers of late to give *charlas* rather than formal lectures, but then, whatever Borges is talking about, it is his manner to make sudden shifts and connections as they occur to him, so that the lecture becomes a series of separate insights linked by the eccentric thread of Borges' attention. Of his indefatigable traveling, he remaked to me last year: "In Buenos Aires, one day is much like another. . . But when I travel, I move from one comfortable armchair to another, a kindly ghost materializes and talks to me, very informedly, about my writings, then vanishes, to be replaced at once with another. It makes for great variety."

I have listened and talked to Borges over the last twenty years in a variety of speaking contexts—in London, Oxford, Scotland, Spain, Buenos Aires, and New York—and have come to admire the range and fascinations of the spoken Borges, as distinct from the written one. The terse and scrupulous texts of the written Borges we all know well—their spare inevitability, their disquieting, sometimes dizzying effect, their singular vocabulary, of images as well as words. Some words have become his—one could not use the word *vertiginoso* without being intensely aware of him, for his work defines it. We know from his essays the play of his mind, his speculative ironies, his obliqueness, the surprising connections he makes; and, through his poems, we come to know his obsessions, and his essential metaphors.

The spoken Borges, however, is much more elusive, and Protean. Where his writings show language as a game, his conversation quite often becomes play, a demonstration of ironies. He will quite often be deliberately perverse, making an apparently outrageous statement, and arguing it toward sense. "All literature is really for children," he will say suddenly, and then he will go on to make a brilliant case. Borges'

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conversational speculations follow a thread of his own, and his wiser interviewers have let his mind move of its own accord, content to keep track. Something may give him a reason to quote Oscar Wilde, and he will go on to talk about Wilde, about the French language, his schooldays in Geneva, Calvin, the Scots, always turning to the library in his memory. Everything connects, but it is Borges alone who can make these connections, across cultures, across literatures, across languages, across time.

The lectures in this book all reveal these connected shifts in Borges' attention, the flow of his mind and memory. In understanding Borges, it is important to remember that, for him, literary experience has been more vivid and affecting than real experience, or, better said, that there is no sensible difference between the two; so that when Borges is talking about books and writers, it is like talking of landscapes and journeys, so vivid has his reading been to him. Through literature, he maintains, we can travel through time, and become all men; it is his Aleph. So, his lectures wander along the thread of a preoccupation, as in the lecture on "Nightmares," and shift from personal memories to writers, to an examination of other people's metaphors, to language itself. There is nothing formal about Borges' literary speculations. Criticism, he has reminded us, is simply a branch of imaginative literature; and, while the play of his mind makes material for critics, Borges is not much concerned with literary judgment. For him, literature at its highest point generates awe, the disquieting astonishment that arises from a poem, a deep image, a crucial paragraph, what he calls either *asombro* or *sagrada horror*, "holy dread." The writers he reaches for are those who have given him this essential experience; and it is what most distinguishes his own work, when, in a few phrases, the sharp edges of reality quiver in doubt, the awe is tangible. The lectures are separate literary journeys that we could not take by ourselves. Borges is our Virgil; only he knows the way.

The presence of Borges sometimes takes on an uncanny dimension: at certain times, he seems to be living his own metaphors. If he is asked about some remark he made years ago, he is likely to disclaim it, saying that it was obviously made by Borges, the Other. The figure of the other Borges, the writer, to whom the living Borges is chained, is familiar to us from poems and prose pieces, but in

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conversation, he dramatizes the division, and makes us feel it directly. His work generates its own awe, but his presence intensifies it: those who have heard him are afterward better able to catch the wavelength of his writing, hearing that frail, precise voice threading its way through the words.

It is important, then, in reading these lectures, to imagine them spoken by Borges, and to follow the shifts in his text as if they were the shifts in a living attention, for the lectures also demonstrate the difference between the spoken and the written: the language has not been tempered down to written inevitability. There is a speaker present, the thread of a voice to follow. One has only to imagine the lecture on “Blindness” being delivered by a blind Borges to realize that his presence added a moving dimension to the language of the lecture.

It is just and appropriate that Borges’ lectures should appear in an English version, since he has delivered many similar lectures in English. Borges speaks English with great respect and a careful formality. Since his early days in his father’s English library, he has always thought of English as the language of literature, Spanish the language of real life, and his English does have certain mannerisms that come more from literature than from the spoken reality. Eliot Weinberger’s translation has been careful to keep Borges’ precise phrasing and tone. His version sounds like Borges in English. Wisely, since the original Spanish text was a corrected transcript, he has made essential alterations in the text, removing certain repetitions, to give the spoken sentences a written fluency. Paradoxically, while Borges’ written texts are as spare as any great writer’s, he has been generous with himself in the form of lectures and interviews. These lectures, in this able version, save something from that prodigal flow.

—Alastair Reid

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## The Divine Comedy

**P**aul Claudel has written—in a page unworthy of Paul Claudel—that the spectacles awaiting us after death will no doubt little resemble those that Dante showed us in the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*.

This curious remark is a proof of the intensity of Dante's text: the fact that while reading the poem, or remembering it later, we tend to believe that Dante imagined the other world exactly as he presented it. We inevitably assume that Dante believed that after death he would encounter the inverted mountain of Hell or the terraces of Purgatory or the concentric heavens of Paradise. Moreover, he would speak with shades—shades of classical Antiquity—and some of them would reply in Italian tercets.

This is, of course, absurd. Claudel's observation corresponds not to reason—for to rationalize it is to realize it's absurd—but rather to a sentiment, and one which could isolate us from the pleasure, the intense pleasure, of reading the work.

There is a great deal of evidence that refutes this. One is a statement attributed to Dante's son. He said that his father had proposed to show the life of sinners through the image of Hell, the life of penitents through the image of Purgatory, and the life of the just through the image of Paradise. He did not read it in a literal way. We have, moreover, Dante's own testimony, in the epistle to the Can Grande della Scala.

The epistle has been considered apocryphal, but it could not have been written much later than Dante. Whoever wrote it, it is believable as a product of its time. In it, the author affirms that the *Commedia* may be read four ways: literal, moral, anagogical, and allegorical. Dante, then, would be the symbol of man, Beatrice of faith, and Virgil of reason.

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The idea of a text capable of multiple readings is characteristic of the Middle Ages, those maligned and complex Middle Ages that gave us Gothic architecture, the Icelandic sagas, and the Scholastic philosophy in which everything was discussed. That gave us, above all, the *Commedia*, which we continue to read, and which continues to astonish us; which will last beyond our lives, far beyond our waking lives, and will be enriched by each generation of readers.

Dante never presumed that what he was showing us corresponded to a real image of the world of death. Nothing of the kind. Dante could not possibly have thought that.

I believe, nevertheless, in the usefulness of that ingenious concept: the idea that what we are reading is a true story. It serves to carry us away. Personally, I am a hedonistic reader; I have never read a book merely because it was ancient. I read books for the aesthetic emotions they offer me, and I ignore the commentaries and criticism. When I first read the *Commedia*, I was carried away. I read it as I had read other, less famous works. I would like to tell you—since we are among friends, and since I am talking not to all of you, but rather with each one of you—the story of my personal involvement with the *Commedia*.

It all began shortly before the dictatorship. I was employed in a library in the Almagro section of Buenos Aires. I lived at Las Heras and Pueyrredón, and I had to travel by slow and solitary streetcars all the way from the north side of town to Almagro South, to the library at Avenida La Plata and Carlos Calvo. Chance—except that there is no chance; what we call chance is our ignorance of the complex machinery of causality—led me to discover three small volumes in the Mitchell Bookstore (now gone—it brings back many memories). Those three volumes—I should have brought one with me, as a talisman—were the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*, in the English version by Carlyle (not Thomas Carlyle). They were very handy books, published by Dent. They fit into my pocket. On the left was the Italian text, and on the right a literal translation. I devised this modus operandi: I first read a verse, a tercet, in the English prose; then I read the verse in Italian; and so on through to the end of the canto. Then I read the whole canto in English, and finally in Italian. With that first reading I realized that the translations were no substitute for the original text. The translation could be, at best, a means and a stimulus for the reader to approach the

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original. This was especially true for a Spanish reader. I think that Cervantes, somewhere in *Don Quixote*, says that with two cents of the Tuscan language one can understand Ariosto.

Well, those two cents were given to me by the semantic brotherhood of Spanish and Italian. I observed at the time that poetry, above all the great poetry of Dante, is much more than what it says. Poetry is, among so many other things, an intonation, an accentuation that is often untranslatable. I saw this from the beginning. When I reached the peak of Paradise, when I reached the deserted Paradise, there, at that moment in which Dante is abandoned by Virgil and he finds himself alone and calls out to him, at that moment I felt I could read the Italian text directly, only occasionally looking at the English. So I read the three volumes on those slow streetcar rides. Later I read other editions.

I have read the *Commedia* many times. The truth is that I don't know Italian. I only know the Italian Dante taught me, and later Ariosto, when I read *Orlando Furioso*. And then the simpler parts of Croce. I have read almost all of Croce, and though I am not always in agreement with him, I am enchanted by him. Enchantment, as Stevenson said, is one of the special qualities a writer must have. Without enchantment, the rest is useless.

I have read the *Commedia* many times, in all of the editions I could find, and I have been distracted by the different commentaries, the varied interpretations of that multifaceted work. (Of all the editions, three in particular are noteworthy: those by Attilio Momigliano, Carlo Grabher, and Hugo Steiner.) I have found that in the oldest editions theological commentary predominates; in the nineteenth century, historical; and currently, aesthetic, which directs us toward the accentuation of each line, one of the great virtues of Dante.

I have compared Dante to Milton, but Milton has only one music: what they call in English a "sublime style." That music is always the same, regardless of the emotions of the characters. In Dante, however, as in Shakespeare, the music corresponds to the emotions. Intonation and accentuation are foremost; each phrase must be read aloud.

Truly fine poetry must be read aloud. A good poem does not allow itself to be read in a low voice or silently. If we can read it silently, it is not a valid poem: a poem demands pronunciation. Poetry always

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remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art. It remembers that it was first song.

There are two lines which confirm this. One is in Homer—or the Greeks whom we call Homer—where he says, in the *Odyssey*, “The gods weave misfortunes for men, so that the generations to come will have something to sing about.” The other, much later, is from Mallarmé, who repeats, less beautifully, what Homer said: “*tout aboutit en un livre*,” everything ends up in a book. The Greeks speak of generations that will sing; Mallarmé speaks of an object, of a thing among things, a book. But the idea is the same: the idea that we are made for art, we are made for memory, we are made for poetry, or perhaps we are made for oblivion. But something remains, and that something is history or poetry, which are not essentially different.

Carlyle and other critics have observed that the most notable characteristic of Dante is intensity. If we think of the hundred cantos of the poem, it seems a miracle that that intensity never lets up, except in a few places in the *Paradiso* which for the poet were light and for us are shadow. I can't think of another example, except perhaps *Macbeth*, which begins with the three witches and continues to the death of the hero without a weak moment.

I would like to mention another aspect: the gentleness of Dante. We always think of the somber and sententious Florentine poem, and we forget that the work is full of delights, of pleasures, of tenderness. That tenderness is part of the structure of the work. For example, Dante must have read somewhere that the cube is the most solid of volumes. It was a current, unpoetical observation, and yet Dante used it as a metaphor for man, who must support misfortune: “*buon tetragono a i colpe di fortuna*,” man is a good tetragon, a cube. That is truly rare.

I'd also like to recall the curious metaphor of the arrow. Dante wants to make us feel the speed of the arrow as it leaves the bow and hits the target. He tells us that it is fixed in the target, that it shoots from the bow, and leaves the string. He inverts the beginning and end to show how quickly this has occurred.

There is a verse that is always in my memory. It is the one in the first canto of the *Purgatorio* where he refers to that morning, that incredible morning on the mountain of Purgatory, at the South Pole. Dante, who has left the filth, the sadness, and the horror of Hell, says,

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“*dolce color d'oriental zaffiro.*” The lines impose that slowness on the voice:

*dolce color d'oriental zaffiro  
che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto  
del mezzo puro infino al primo giro.*

I would like to linger over the curious mechanism of this verse—but the word *mechanism* is too harsh for what I want to say. Dante describes the Eastern sky, describes the dawn, and compares the color of the dawn to a sapphire. He compares it to a sapphire called *Oriental sapphire*, a sapphire of the East. The line is a game of mirrors, since the Orient is the color of the sapphire and the sapphire is an Oriental sapphire. That is to say, the sapphire is weighted with the riches of the word *Oriental*. It is full of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which Dante did not know, but which nevertheless is there.

I will also recall the famous last line of the fifth canto of the *Inferno*: “*e caddi come corpo morto cade.*” The fall resounds through the repetition of the word *fall*.

The *Commedia* is full of felicities of this kind. But what sustains the poem is that it is a narrative. When I was young, narrative was scorned. It was considered to be nothing more than anecdote. It was forgotten that poetry began by being narrative, that the roots of poetry are the epic, that the epic is the first poetic genre. In the epic there is time: a before, during, and after. All of that is in poetry.

I would advise the reader to ignore the feud between the Guelphs and Ghibellines, Scholastic philosophy, the mythological allusions, and the lines of Virgil which Dante repeats, sometimes improving them, as excellent as they are in the original Latin. It is better, at least in the beginning, merely to follow the story. I don't think anyone can keep from doing so.

We enter, then, into a story, and we enter in a way that is almost magical. Normally, when dealing with the supernatural, one has an unbelieving writer guiding unbelieving readers, and he must prepare them for what is to come. Dante does not need this: “*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi rotrovai per una selva oscura.*” That is, at thirty-five I found myself in a dark forest. It may be allegorical, but we

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physically believe it. Thirty-five is halfway through life because the Bible prescribes a life of seventy years for the prudent man. It is assumed that everything after seventy is *bleak*, as the English say; everything is sadness and anxiety. So when Dante writes, “*nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*,” he is not exercising a vague rhetoric. He is telling us exactly the date of his vision.

I don't think that Dante was a visionary. A vision is brief. A vision as large as the *Commedia* is impossible. His vision was voluntary: we may abandon ourselves to it and read it with poetic faith. Coleridge said that poetic faith is the willing suspension of disbelief. If we attend the theater, we know that, amid the scenery, there are costumed people speaking the words of Shakespeare or Ibsen or Pirandello which have been put in their mouths. But we accept that these people are not costumed, that the man in the antechamber slowly talking to himself of vengeance really is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. We lose ourselves. Films are even stranger, for what we are seeing are not disguised people but photographs of disguised people, and yet we believe them while the film is being shown.

In the case of Dante, everything is so vivid that we begin to imagine that he believed in his other world, in the same way that he believed in a geocentric astronomy and not in other astronomies.

We believe Dante so profoundly for a reason that was pointed out by Paul Groussac: because the *Commedia* is written in the first person. It is not a mere grammatical artifice; it does not mean saying *I saw* for *they saw* or *it was*. It means something more. It means that Dante is one of the characters of the *Commedia*. According to Groussac, this was a new development. Before Dante, St. Augustine had written his *Confessions*. But those confessions, because of their splendid rhetoric, are not as close to us as Dante is; the rhetoric interposes itself between what he wants to say and what we hear.

Rhetoric must be a bridge, a road; too often it is a wall, an obstacle. We see it in writers as diverse as Seneca, Quevedo, Milton, and Lugones. In all of them the words come between them and us.

We know Dante more intimately than his contemporaries. One might say that we know him as he knew Virgil, who was a dream of his. We certainly know him better than we know Beatrice Portinari, better than anyone. He has placed himself in the center of the action.

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Everything is not only seen by him, but he is also an active participant. But his role is not always in accord with what he is describing.

We see Dante terrified by Hell. He must be terrified, not because he is a coward but rather so that we will believe in Hell. Dante is terrified, he is afraid, he comments on this and that. We know his opinions not by what he says but by the poetics, the intonation, the accentuation of his language.

There is another character. (In fact, there are three, but I will now speak of the second.) And that is Virgil. Dante has succeeded in giving us a second image of Virgil. The first is the image left us by the *Aeneid* or the *Georgics*. The second, the more intimate image, has been given to us by poetry, by Dante's pious poetry.

One of the subjects of literature—as it is of life—is friendship. I would say that friendship is the Argentine passion. There are many friendships in literature, which is a web of friendship: Quixote and Sancho; Fierro and Cruz, our two gauchos lost in the frontier; the old soldier and Fabio Cáceres; Kim and the lama. Friendship is a common theme, but in general writers tend to emphasize the contrast between the two friends.

In the case of Dante, the matter is more delicate. It is not exactly a contrast, although there is a filial relationship. Dante comes to be the son of Virgil, yet at the same time he is superior to Virgil for he believes he will be saved, since he has been given the vision. But he knows, from the beginning, that Virgil is a lost soul, a reprobate. When Virgil tells him that he cannot accompany him beyond Purgatory, he knows that the Latin poet will always inhabit the terrible *nobile castello* with the great shades of Antiquity, those who never heard the word of Christ. At that moment, Dante hails him with magnificent words: “*Tu, duca; tu, signore; tu, maestro. . .*” He speaks of the great labor and of the great love with which his work has been studied, and this relation is always maintained between the two. But Virgil is essentially a sad figure who knows he is forever condemned to that castle filled with the absence of God. Dante, however, will be permitted to see God; he will be permitted to understand the universe.

We have, first, two characters. And then there are the thousands, hundreds, a multitude of characters of whom it has been said that they are episodic. I would call them eternal.

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A contemporary novel requires five or six hundred pages to make us know somebody, if it ever does. For Dante a single moment is enough. In that moment a person is defined forever. Dante unconsciously sought that central moment. I have wanted to do the same in many stories, and I have been admired for a discovery which actually belongs to Dante in the Middle Ages: that of presenting a moment as a cipher of a life. In Dante we have characters whose lives may consist of only a few tercets, and yet their lives are eternal. They live in a word, in a gesture; they need do nothing more. They are merely part of a canto, but that part is eternal. They keep living and renewing themselves in the memory and in the imagination of men.

Carlyle said that there are two characteristics of Dante. Of course there are others, but two are essential: tenderness and rigor, which do not contradict one another. On the one hand, there is his human tenderness, what Shakespeare called “the milk of human kindness.” On the other, there is the knowledge that we are inhabitants of a rigorous world, that there is an order to it. That order corresponds to the Other, the third speaker.

Let us recall two examples. First, the best-known episode of the *Inferno*, the story of Paolo and Francesca in the fifth canto. I would not presume to summarize what Dante has said—it would be irreverent for me to say in other words what Dante has said for always in his Italian—but I'd like simply to recall the circumstances.

Dante and Virgil arrive at the second circle. There they see the whirlwind of souls and smell the stench of sin, the stench of punishment. There is Minos, twining his tail around himself to indicate to which circle the condemned must descend. It is physically disagreeable, deliberately ugly, because it is understood that in Hell nothing can be beautiful. In that circle where the lustful are punished there are great, illustrious names. I say “great names” because Dante, when he began the canto, had not yet reached the perfection of his art, the point where the characters became something more than their names. But halfway through the canto, Dante makes his great discovery: the possibility of a dialogue between the souls of the dead and Dante himself, who will respond and judge in his fashion. No, he will not judge them. He knows that he is not the Judge, that the Judge is the Other, the third speaker, the Divinity.

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Well then: there are Helen, Achilles, Paris, Tristan, and other luminaries. But Dante sees two whom he does not know, less illustrious, and who belong to the contemporary world: Paolo and Francesca. He knows that they have both died as adulterers. He calls to them and they come, “*quali colombe dal disio chiamate.*” Here we have two sinners, and Dante compares them to two doves called by desire, because sensuality must also be the essence of the scene. They draw near, and Francesca, who is the only one to speak—Paolo cannot—thanks him for calling them and speaks these pathetic words: “*Se fosse amico il Re dell'universo / noi pregheremmo lui per la tua pace,*” if we were friends of the King of the universe—she cannot say God, because that name is forbidden in Hell and Purgatory—we would pray for your peace, since you have taken pity on our misfortune.

Francesca tells her story, and she tells it twice. The first time she tells it in a reserved fashion, but she insists that she is still in love with Paolo. Repentence is forbidden in Hell. She knows she has sinned and must continue to be faithful to her sin, which gives her a heroic grandeur. It would be terrible if she repented, if she denied what happened. Francesca knows the punishment is just; she accepts it, and continues to love Paolo.

Dante is curious about one thing. “*Amor condusse noi ad una morte*”: Paolo and Francesca were executed together. Dante is not interested in adultery, nor in the way they were discovered and brought to justice. What interests him is something more intimate, and that is how they knew they were in love, how they fell in love, how they reached the time of the sweet sighs. He asks them.

To digress for a moment, I would like to recall a stanza, perhaps the finest, of Leopoldo Lugones, who was no doubt inspired by the fifth canto of the *Inferno*. It is the first quatrain of his “*Alma venturosa*” (“Fortunate soul”), one of the sonnets of *Las horas dorados* (“The golden hours”) of 1922:

*Al promediar la tarde de aquel dia,  
Cuando iba mi habitual adiós a darte,  
Fue una vaga congoja de dejarte  
Lo que me hizo saber que te quería.*

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[Halfway through the afternoon that day,  
As I bid you my habitual goodbye,  
A vague dismay at leaving  
Made me know that I loved you.]

An inferior poet would have said that a man feels great sadness on leaving his woman, and he would have said that they see each other rarely. In contrast, “As I bid you my habitual goodbye” may be a slow and heavy line, but it expresses that they see each other frequently. And then: “A vague dismay at leaving / Made me know that I loved you.”

The theme is essentially the same in the fifth canto: two people who discover that they are in love and didn't know it. This is what Dante wants to know; he wants them to tell him how it happened. She tells how, to entertain themselves one day, they were reading about Lancelot and how he complained of love. They were alone and suspected nothing. They did not suspect they were in love. And they were reading a story from the *Matière de Bretagne*, one of those books conceived by the British in France after the Saxon invasion—one of those books that fed the madness of Alonso Quijano and revealed their guilty love to Paolo and Francesca. Well: Francesca states that at times they blushed. Then, “*quando leggemmo il disiato riso,*” when we read how the longed-for smile was kissed by such a lover, this one, who will never be separated from me, kissed my mouth, *tutto tremante*.

There is something that Dante does not say, but which one feels at a distance from the episode and perhaps gives it its virtue. Dante relates the fate of the two lovers with an infinite pity, and we sense that he envies their fate. Paolo and Francesca are in Hell and he will be saved, but they have loved and he never won the love of the woman he loved, Beatrice. There is a certain injustice to this, and Dante must feel it as something terrible, now that he is separated from her. In contrast, these two sinners are together. They cannot speak to each other, they turn in the black whirlwind without hope, yet they are together. When she speaks, she says “we,” speaking for the two of them, another form of being together. They are together for eternity; they share Hell—and that, for Dante, must have been a kind of Paradise.

We know that he is quite moved. He then collapses as though he were dead.

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Everyone is defined forever in a single instant of their lives, a moment in which a man encounters his self for always. It has been said that Dante is cruel toward Francesca, by condemning her. But that is to ignore the Third Character. The judgment of God does not always coincide with the feelings of Dante. Those who do not understand the *Commedia* say that Dante wrote it to take revenge on his enemies and to reward his friends. There is nothing more false. Nietzsche said, slanderously, that Dante is a hyena making verses among the tombs. A versifying hyena is a contradiction; moreover, Dante does not enjoy suffering. He knows that there are unpardonable, capital sins. For each he selects a person who has committed that sin. But in each there may be something admirable or worthy. Francesca and Paolo are not merely voluptuaries. They have committed no other sin, but one is enough to condemn them.

The idea of God as indecipherable is a concept we find in another of the essential books of mankind, the *Book of Job*. You will recall how Job condemns God, how his friends defend Him, and how at the end God speaks from the whirlwind and rebukes equally those who accuse or defend Him. God is beyond all human justice, as He Himself declares in the *Book of Job*. And the men humble themselves before God, because they have dared to judge Him, to defend Him. It is unnecessary. God, as Nietzsche would say, is beyond good and evil. He is another category.

If Dante had always agreed with the God he imagines, it would have meant that his was a false god, merely a replica of Dante himself. However, Dante must accept his God, as he must accept that Beatrice never loved him, that Florence is vile, as he will have to accept his exile and his death in Ravenna. He must accept the evil of the world, and at the same time, he must worship a God he does not understand.

There is a character missing in the *Commedia*, one who could not be there because he had become too human. That character is Jesus. He does not appear in the *Commedia* as he appears in the Gospels; the human Jesus of the Gospels could not be the Second Person of the Trinity that the *Commedia* requires.

I would like to turn to the second example, which for me is the high point of the *Commedia*. It occurs in the twenty-sixth canto, and it is the episode of Ulysses. (I once wrote an article titled “The Enigma of Ulysses.” I published it, but later lost it, and I’d like to try to reconstruct

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it now.) I think that it is the most enigmatic of the episodes of the *Commedia*, and perhaps the most intense. But it is very difficult, when dealing with peaks, to know which is the highest—and the *Commedia* is made of peaks.

I have chosen the *Commedia* for this first talk because I am a man of letters and I believe that the apex of literature, of all literature, is the *Commedia*. This does not imply that I agree with its theology, or with its mythology, which is a combination of Christian and pagan myth. What it means is that no book has given me such intense aesthetic emotions. And, I repeat, I am a hedonistic reader; I look for emotion in books.

The *Commedia* is a book that everyone ought to read. Not to do so is to deprive oneself of the greatest gift that literature can give us; it is to submit to a strange asceticism. Why should we deny ourselves the joy of reading the *Commedia*? Besides, it is not difficult to read. What is difficult is outside of the reading: the opinions, the discussions. But the book itself is crystalline. And there is the central character, Dante, who is perhaps the most vivid character in literature, not to mention the other characters. But I will return to the episode of Ulysses.

They reach a ditch, I think it is the eighth, the one of swindlers. There is, in the beginning, an apostrophe against Florence, where he says that it beats its wings over heaven and earth and its name is spread through Hell. Then he sees above him countless flames, and inside the flames are the dark souls of the swindlers, dark because they continue to hide themselves. The flames move, and Dante almost falls. Virgil holds him back—the words of Virgil. He speaks of those who are inside the flames, and Virgil mentions two great names, Ulysses and Diomedes. They are there because together they plotted the strategy of the Trojan horse, which allowed the Greeks to enter the besieged city.

There are Ulysses and Diomedes, and Dante wants to meet them. He tells Virgil his desire to speak with these illustrious ancient shades, these celebrated and great ancient heroes. Virgil approves, but asks him to leave the talking to him, since we are dealing with two proud Greeks—it is better if Dante does not speak. This has been explained in various ways. Torquato Tasso believed that Virgil wanted to surpass Homer. That suspicion is totally absurd, for Virgil sang of Ulysses and Diomedes, and if Dante knows them it was because Virgil made them known. We may ignore the hypothesis that Dante was scorned because

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he was a descendant of Aeneas, a barbarian, worthless to the Greeks. Virgil, like Diomedes and Ulysses, is a dream of Dante's. Dante is dreaming them, but he dreams them with such intensity, in a way that is so vivid, that he can believe that those dreams—which have no other voice than that which he gives them, no other form than that which he lends them—may scorn him, he who is nobody, who hasn't even written his *Commedia*.

Dante has entered the game, as we enter it: Dante too is swindled by the *Commedia*. He thinks: they are celebrated heroes of Antiquity, and I am nobody, a poor man. Why should they take notice of what I say to them? Then Virgil asks them to tell how they died, and the voice of the invisible Ulysses speaks. Ulysses has no face; he is within the flame.

Here we come to what is wonderful, a legend created by Dante, a legend superior to many in the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid*, or those that will be included in that other book in which Ulysses appears, as Sinbad of the Sea (Sinbad the Sailor), *The Thousand and One Nights*.

The legend was suggested to Dante by various things; above all, the belief that the city of Lisbon was founded by Ulysses and the stories of the Fortunate Isles in the Atlantic. The Celts were thought to have populated the Atlantic coast from those fantastic lands: an island with a river that rises up and crosses the sky and is full of boats and fish that do not fall back to earth; a revolving island of fire; an island where bronze greyhounds chase silver deer. Some of this must have been known to Dante; what is important is what he made of these legends. He originated something that is essentially noble.

Ulysses leaves Penelope. He calls together his companions and reminds them that, although they are now old and married men, they have crossed thousands of dangers with him. He proposes a noble enterprise: to pass through the Pillars of Hercules and cross the sea, to explore the Southern Hemisphere, which, it was then believed, was a hemisphere of water—it was not known if anyone was there. He tells them that they are men, not beasts; they have been born for courage, for knowledge; they have been born to know and to understand.

They follow him and “make wings of their oars.” (It is curious that this metaphor is also found in the *Odyssey*, which Dante could not have known.) They sail and leave behind Ceuta and Seville, enter the open sea, and turn toward the left. (Toward the left, or on the left, means evil

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in the *Commedia*. To climb to Purgatory one goes to the right; to descend to Hell, to the left. That is to say, the “sinister” side has a double meaning.) Then he tells us, “in the night I saw all the stars of the other hemisphere”—our hemisphere, the Southern, full of stars. (The great Irish poet Yeats speaks of the “starladen sky.” That is untrue in the Northern Hemisphere, where there are few stars compared to ours.)

They sail for five months and then, at last, see land. What they see is a brown mountain in the distance, a mountain taller than any they have ever seen. Ulysses says that their joy was soon turned to grief, for a whirlwind blew from the land and the ship was lost. That mountain is Purgatory, as we will learn in another canto. Dante believes that Purgatory—he pretends to believe in poetic justice—is antipodal to the city of Jerusalem.

Well, we reach that terrible moment, and we wonder why Ulysses has been punished. Evidently it was not for the ruse of the Trojan horse, since the culminating moment of his life, the one told to Dante and to us, is another: it is that generous, bold enterprise of wanting to know the forbidden, the impossible. We ask ourselves why this canto has such force. Before answering I would like to mention something which has never been said before, as far as I know.

It is that other great book, a great poem of our times, *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, who certainly knew Dante in the Longfellow translation. We have the mad enterprise of the crippled Captain Ahab, who wants to revenge himself on the white whale. At the end they find the whale, who sinks the ship, and the great novel ends exactly as Dante's canto ends: the sea closes over them. Melville must have remembered the *Commedia* at that point, though I prefer to think that he had read it and absorbed it in such a way he could literally forget it; that the *Commedia* had become part of him, and that he could rediscover what he had read years before. But the story is the same, except that Ahab is not moved by a noble aim but rather by a desire for vengeance. Ulysses, in contrast, acts as the greatest of men. Moreover, he invokes a just reason, one related to intelligence, and he is punished.

To what do we owe the tragic weight of this episode? I think there is an explanation, the only valid one, and that is that Dante felt, in some way, that he was Ulysses. I don't know if he felt it in a conscious way—it doesn't matter. In some tercet of the *Commedia* he says that no one is

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permitted to know the judgments of Providence. We cannot anticipate them; no one can know who will be saved and who condemned. But Dante has dared, through poetry, to do precisely that. He shows us the condemned and the chosen. He must have known that doing so courted danger. He could not ignore that he was anticipating the indecipherable providence of God.

For this reason the character of Ulysses has such force, because Ulysses is a mirror of Dante, because Dante felt that perhaps he too deserved this punishment. Writing the poem, whether for good or ill, he was infringing on the mysterious laws of the night, of God, of Divinity.

I have reached the end, and again I would like to insist that no one has the right to deprive himself of this pleasure—the *Commedia*—of reading it in an open way. Later come the commentaries, the desire to know what each mythological allusion means, to see how Dante took a great line of Virgil and perhaps improved it by translating it. In the beginning we must read the book with the faith of a child, abandoning ourselves to it; then it will accompany us to the end. It has accompanied me for so many years, and I know that as soon as I open it tomorrow I will discover things I did not see before. I know that this book will go on, beyond my waking life, and beyond ours.

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## Nightmares

Dreams are the genus; nightmares the species. I will speak first of dreams, and then of nightmares.

Lately I've been rereading psychology books, and I have felt singularly defrauded. All of them discuss the mechanisms of dreams or the subjects of dreams, but they do not mention, as I had hoped, that which is so astonishing, so strange—the fact of dreaming.

Thus, in a psychology book I admire greatly, *The Mind of Man*, Gustav Spiller states that dreams correspond to the lowest plane of mental activity—I would maintain that, at least for me, this is an error—and he speaks of the incoherence, the disconnectedness, of the fables of dreams. I would like to recall Paul Groussac and his fine essay, “Among Dreams,” in *The Intellectual Voyage*. Groussac writes that it is astonishing that each morning we wake up sane—that is, relatively sane—after having passed through that zone of shades, those labyrinths of dreams.

The study of dreams is particularly difficult, for we cannot examine dreams directly, we can only speak of the memory of dreams. And it is possible that the memory of dreams does not correspond exactly to the dreams themselves. A great writer of the eighteenth century, Sir Thomas Browne, believed that our memory of dreams is more impoverished than the splendor of reality. Others, in turn, believe that we improve our dreams. If we think of the dream as a work of fiction—and I think it is—it may be that we continue to spin tales when we wake and later when we recount them.

I want to recall that great book by Boethius, *De consolatione philosophiae*, which Dante read and reread, as he read and reread all of the literature of the Middle Ages. Boethius, who has been called “the last Roman,” Boethius the senator imagined a spectator at a horse race.

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