

## La memoria de Shakespeare

Jorge Luis Borges

Hay devotos de Goethe, de las Eddas y de los tardío cantar de los Niebelungen; Shakespeare ha sido mi destino. Lo es aún, pero en una manera que nadie pudo haber presentido, salvo un solo hombre, Daniel Thorpe, que acaba de morir in Pretoria. Hay un otro, cuya cara no he visto nunca.

Soy Hermann Soergel. El curioso lector ha hojeado quizá mi *Cronología de Shakespeare*, que alguna vez creí necesaria para la buena inteligencia del texto y que fue traducido a varios idiomas, incluso el castellano. No es imposible que recuerde asimismo una prolongada polémica sobre cierta enmienda que Theobald intercaló en su edición crítica de 1734 y que desde esa fecha es parte indiscutida del canon. Hoy me sorprende el tono incivil de aquellas ajenas páginas. Hacia 1914 redacté, y no di a la imprenta, un estudio sobre las palabras compuestas que el helenista y dramaturgo George Chapman forjó para sus versiones homéricas y que retrotraen el inglés, sin que él pudiera sospecharlo, a su origen (*Urprung*) anglosajón. No pensé nunca que su voz, que he olvidado, me sería familiar ... Alguna separata firmada con iniciales completa, creo, mi biografía literaria. No sé si es lícito agregar una versión inédita de Macbeth, que emprendí para no

## The memory of Shakespeare

There are devotees of Goethe, of the Eddas, of the late songs of the Niebelungen; Shakespeare has been my vocation. He even now is; but in a manner no one could have foreseen, save one man, Daniel Thorpe, who has just died in Pretoria. There is another, whose face I have never seen.

I am Hermann Soergel. The curious reader has perhaps leafed through my *Chronology of Shakespeare*, which I once thought necessary for any sufficient understanding of the text, and which has been translated into many languages; English even. It is not impossible, either, that he should remember the prolonged controversy over certain emendations Theobald had introduced in his critical edition of 1734, which since that date are indisputably part of the canon; I am surprised now by the uncivil tone of those alien pages. Around 1914 I composed, but did not send to the printer, a study of the compound words that the Hellenist and dramaturge George Chapman had coined for his translations of Homer: which, without his having possibly suspected it, return English to its Anglosaxon origins (*Urprung*). I never thought that his voice, which I have forgotten now, would then become so familiar to me ... A miscellany signed with initials complete, I believe, my literary *vita*. I do not know if it is licit to adjoin an unpublished translation of Macbeth, which I began in order to

seguir pensando en la muerte de mi hermano Otto Julius, que cayó en el frente occidental in 1917. No la concluí; comprendi que el inglés dispone, para su bien, dos registros — el germánico y el latino — en tanto que nuestro alemán, pese a su mejor música, debe limitarse a uno solo.

He nombrade ya a Daniel Thorpe. Me lo presentó el mayor Barclay, en cierto congreso shakespiriano. No diré el lugar, ni la fecha; sé harto bien que tales precisiones, in realidad, vaguedades.

Más importante que la cara de Daniel Thorpe, que mi ceguera parcial me ayuda a olvidar, erasu notoria desdicha. Al cabo de los años, un hombre puede simular muchas cosas pero no la felicidad. De un modo casi físico, Daniel Thorpe exhalaba melancolía.

Después de una larga sesión, la noche nos halló en una taberna cualquiera. Para sentirnos en Inglaterra (donde ya estabámos) apuramos en rituales jarros de peltre cerveza tibia y negra.

— En el Punjab — dijo el mayor — me indicaron un pordiosero. Una tradición del Islam atribuye al rey Salomón una sortija que le permitía entender la lengua de los pájaros. Era fama que el pordiosero tenía en su poder la sortija. Su valor tan inapreciable que no pudo nunca venderla y murió en uno de los patios de la mezquita de Wazil Khan, en Lahore.

Pensé que Chaucer no desconocía la fabula del prodigioso anillo, pero

keep myself from dwelling on the death of my brother Otto Julius, who fell in 1917 on the Western Front. I did not finish it: I understood that English possesses, to its advantage, two registers — a germanic and a latinate — while our German, for all its superior music, must confine itself to just one.

I have already mentioned Daniel Thorpe. I was introduced to him at a certain Shakespearean congress by Barclay, who was chairing it. I shall not mention the date, or the place; I know very well that such precisions are, in reality, vaguenesses.

More important than the face of Thorpe, which my partial blindness helps me forget, was his quite evident misfortune. Toward the end of his years a man can feign many things, but not happiness. Daniel Thorpe emitted melancholy in a way almost physical.

After a long session, the night found us in a bar somewhere. In order to feel that we were in England (where we already were) we drained from the customary tankards of pewter the dark and tepid beer.

— In the Punjab — Barclay began — I was shown a mendicant. A tradition of Islam assigns to King Solomon a ring that allowed him to understand the language of the birds. The beggar was reputed to have the ring in his keeping. But he could never sell it, so incalculable was its worth, and he died in a patio of the mosque of Wazil Khan, in Lahore.

Chaucer must have known, I thought, the fable of the prodigious ring; but

decirlo hubiera sido estropear la anécdota de Barclay.

— Y la sortija? — pregunté.

— Se perdió, según la costumbre de los objetos mágicos. Quizás esté ahora en algún escondrijo de la mezquita o en la mano de un hombre que vive en un lugar donde faltan pájaros.

— O donde hay tantos — dije — que lo que dicen se confunde. Su historia, Barclay, tiene algo de parábola.

Fue entonces cuando habló Daniel Thorpe. Lo hizo de un modo impersonal, sin mirarnos. Pronunciaba el inglés de un modo peculiar, que atribuí a una larga estadía en el Oriente.

— No es una parábola — dijo — y, si lo es, es verdad. Hay cosas de valor tan inapreciable que no pueden venderse.

Las palabras que trato de reconstruir me impresionaron menos que la convicción con que las dijo Daniel Thorpe. Pensamos que diría algo más, pero de golpe se calló, como arrepentido. Era ya muy tarde, pero Daniel Thorpe me propuso que prosiguiéramos la charla en su habitación. Al cabo de algunas trivialidades, me dijo:

Le ofrezco la sortija del rey. Claro está que se trata de una metáfora, pero lo que esa metáfora cubre no es menos prodigioso que la sortija. Le ofrezco la memoria de Shakespeare desde los días más pueriles y antiguos hasta los del principio de abril de 1616.

No acerté a pronunciar una palabra. Fue como si me ofrecieran el mar.

to say so would have been to spoil the anecdote of the Chair.

— And the ring? — I queried.

— It was lost, as is usual with magical objects. Perhaps it is even now in some hiding place in the mosque; or on the hand of man who lives in a place without birds.

— Or where there are so many — I said — that what they say is confounded. Your story, Barclay, has the air of a parable.

It was then that Thorpe spoke. He did so in an impersonal way, without looking at us. He pronounced his English in a peculiar manner, which I attributed to long residence in the East.

— It is not a parable — he said — and if it is, it is true. There are things whose worth is so incalculable that they cannot be sold.

The words I am trying to recollect impressed me less than the conviction with which Daniel Thorpe spoke them. We think we would say much; but all at once are silent, like penitents.

Barclay took his leave. The two of us returned together to the hotel. It was already very late, but Thorpe proposed that we go on with our talk in his room. After some trivialities, he said:

— He offers you the ring of Solomon. A turn of speech, clearly, is being tried on you. But what the metaphor conceals is no less a marvel than the ring. It is the memory of Shakespeare he offers you: from his days most old and infant, and to the beginning of the April of 1616.

I could find nothing to say. It was as if I had been offered the sea.

Thorpe continuó:

— No soy un impostor. No estoy loco. Le ruego que suspenda su juicio hasta haberme oído. El mayor le habrá dicho que soy, o era, militar médico. La historia cabe en pocas palabras. Empieza en el Oriente, en un hospital de sangre, en el alba. La precisa fecha no importa. Con su última voz, un soldado raso, Adam Clay, a quien habían alcanzado dos descargas de rifle, me ofreció, antes del fin, la preciosa memoria. La agonía y la fiebre son inventivas; acepté la oferta sin darle fe. Además, después de una acción de guerra, nada es muy raro. Apenas tuvo tiempo de explicarme las singulares condiciones del don. El poseedor tiene que ofrecerlo en voz alta y el otro que aceptarlo. El que lo da lo pierde para siempre.

El nombre del soldado y la escena patética de la entrega me parecieron literarios, en el mal sentido de la palabra.

Un poco intimidado, le pregunté:

— Usted, ahora, tiene la memoria de Shakespeare?

Thorpe contestó:

— Tengo, aún, dos memorias. La mía personal y la de aquel Shakespeare que parcialmente soy. Mejor dicho, dos memorias me tienen. Hay una zona en que se confunden. Hay una cara de mujer que no sé a qué siglo atribuir.

Yo le pregunté entonces:

— Qué ha hecho usted con la memoria de Shakespeare?

Thorpe continued:

— I am not an impostor. I am not mad. I ask that you suspend your judgement until you have heard me out. Barclay will have told you that I am, or was, a military doctor. The story can be put in a few words. It begins in the East, in a field-hospital, at dawn. The precise date is not important. With his dying breath, a mercenary, Adam Clay, in whom two volleys of shot had lodged, offers me, before the end, the precious memory. Agony and fever are inventive: I accept what is offered without giving it credence. Besides, nothing is strange after a battle. He scarcely has time to set out for me the singular conditions of the gift. The possessor must offer it in a raised voice; and the other is to accept in the same way. And he who gives it away loses it forever.

The name of the soldier and the affecting scene of the bequeathal seemed literary to me, in the pejorative sense of the word.

A little intimidated even so, I asked:

— And you possess, now, the memory of Shakespeare?

Thorpe replied:

— I have, even now, two memories: my own, and the memory of that Shakespeare I partially am. Or, rather, two memories possess me. There is a zone in which they are confused. There is a woman's face I do not know where, in which century, to place.

I asked him then:

— What have you made of the memory of Shakespeare?

Hubo un silencio. Después dijo:  
— He escrito una biografía novelada que mereció el desdén de la crítica y algún éxito comercial en los Estados Unidos y en las colonias. Creo que es todo. Le he prevenido que mi don no es una sinecura. Sigo a la espera de su respuesta.

Me quedé pensando. No había consagrado yo mi vida, no menos incolora que extraña, a la busca de Shakespeare? No era justo que al fin de la jornada diera con él?

Dije, articulando bien cada palabra:  
— Acepto la memoria de Shakespeare. Algo, sin duda, aconteció, pero no lo sentí.

Apenas un principio de fatiga, acaso imaginaria.

Recuerdo claramente que Thorpe me dijo:

— La memory ha entrado su conciencia, pero hay que describirla. Surgirá en los sueños, en la vigilia, al volver las hojas de un libro o al doblar una esquina. No se impaciente usted, no invente recuerdos. El azar favorecerlo o demorarlo, según su misterioso modo. A medida que yo vaya olvidando, usted recordará. No le prometo un plazo.

Lo que quedaba de la noche lo dedicamos a discutir el carácter de Shylock. Me abstuve de indagar si Shakespeare había tenido trato personal con judíos. No quise que Thorpe imaginara que yo lo sometía a una prueba. Comprobé, no sé si con alivio o con inquietud, que sus opiniones

There was a silence. Then he said:  
— I have written a biographical novel: which has merited both the scorn of the critics and the commercial success it has had, in the United States and in the colonies. I believe that is all. I have warned you already that the gift is no sinecure. I now await your reply.

I sat thinking. Had I not consecrated my life, which had been no less colourless than strange, to the search for Shakespeare? Was it not fitting that, at journey's end, I should meet him?

Articulating each word well, I said:  
— I accept the memory of Shakespeare.

Something, doubtless, happened; but I did not sense it.

The onset, faintly, of fatigue then; perhaps imaginary.

I remember clearly Thorpe's saying:  
— The memory has entered your mind; but it must be found out. It will surface in dreams, and through wakeful nights, as you turn the leaves of a book, or round a corner. Do not be impatient, do not invent memories. Chance will favour or delay its comings, in its mysterious way. Even as I go on forgetting you should remember. But I cannot say how long we shall be thus.

We gave over what remained of the night to debating the character of Shylock. I abstained from inquiring if Shakespeare had had personal dealings with Jews; I did not wish that Thorpe should imagine I was subjecting him to a test. I ascertained, whether with relief or disquiet I do not know, that his opinions

eran tan académicas y tan convencionales como las mías.

A pesar de la vigilia anterior, casi no dormí la noche siguiente. Descubrí, como otras tantas veces, que era un cobarde. Por el temor de ser defraudado, no me entregué a la generosa esperanza. Quise pensar que era ilusorio el presente del Thorpe. Irresistiblemente, la esperanza prevaleció. Shakespeare sería mío, como nadie lo fue de nadie, ni en el amor, ni en el amistad, ni siquiera en el odio. De algún modo yo sería Shakespeare. No escribiría las tragedias ni los intrincando sonetos, pero recordaría el instante que me fueron reveladas las brujas, que también son las parcas, y aquel otro que me fueron dadas las vastas líneas:

*And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars  
From this worldweary flesh.*

Recordaría a Anne Hathaway como recuerdo a aquella mujer, ya madura, que me enseñó el amor en un departamento de Lübeck, hace ya tantos años. (Traté de recordarla y sólo pude recobrar el empapelado, que era amarillo, y la claridad que venía a la ventana. Este primera fracaso hubiera debido anticiparme los otros.)

Yo había postulado que las imágenes de la prodigiosa memoria serían, ante todo, visuales. Tal no fue el hecho. Días después, al afeitarme, pronuncié ante el espejo unas palabras que me extrañaron y que pertenecían, como un colega me indicó, al A,B,C, de

were as academic and as conventional as mine.

Despite the vigil of the day before, I hardly slept the following night. I discovered, as I have at many other times, that I was a coward. Fearing to be deceived, I did not yield nobly to hope. I wanted to think that Thorpe's gift was illusory. Irresistibly, hope prevailed. Shakespeare could be mine, as none has belonged to any. Not in his loves, not in his friendships, not even in his hatreds; but in some way or other I would be Shakespeare. I would not write the tragedies, or the intricate sonnets. But I would remember the moment in which the witches were revealed to me, who are also the Fates, and that other in which I was given the tremendous lines

*And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars  
From this worldweary flesh.*

I would remember Anne Hathaway as I remember that woman, already mature, who taught me love in an apartment in Lübeck, many years ago now. (I tried to remember her and could only recollect the wallpaper, which was yellow, and the brightness that came in at the window. This initial failure should have made me anticipate the others.)

I had postulated that the monstrosities of that prodigious memory would be, above all, visual. It was not so in fact. Days later, while shaving, I said out before the mirror some words which surprised me: and which pertained, as a colleague pointed out, to the ABC's of

Chaucer. Una tarde, al salir del Museo Británico, silbé una melodía muy simple que no había oído nunca.

Ya habrá advertido el lector el rasgo común de esas primeras revelaciones de una memoria que era, pese al esplendor de algunas metáforas, harto más auditiva que visual.

De Quincey afirma que el cerebro del hombre es un palimpsesto. Cada nueva escritura cubre la escritura anterior y es cubierta por la sigue, pero la todopoderosa memoria puede exhumar cualquier impresión, por momentánea que haya sido, si le dan el estímulo suficiente.

A juzgar por su testamento, no había un solo libro, ni siquiera la Biblia, en casa de Shakespeare, pero nadie ignora las obras que frecuentó. Chaucer, Gower, Spenser, Christopher Marlowe. La *Crónica de Holinshed*, el Montaigne de Florio, el Plutarco de North. Yo poseía de manera latente la memoria de Shakespeare; la lectura, es decir la relectura, de esos viejos volúmenes sería el estímulo que buscaba. Releí también los sonetos, que son su obra más inmediata. Di alguna vez con la explicación, o con las muchas explicaciones. Los buenos versos imponen la lectura en voz alta; al cabo de unas días recobré sin esfuerzo las erres ásperas y las vocales abiertas del siglo dieciséis.

Escribí en la *Zeitschrift für germanische philologie* que el soneto 127 se refería

Chaucer. One evening, coming out of the British Museum, I whistled a very simple melody I had never ever heard.

The reader will have noticed the characteristic common to these initial revealings: of a memory which, in spite of the splendour of certain metaphors, was very much more auditive than visual.

De Quincey affirms that the mind of man is a palimpsest. Each new inscription covers the inscription before, and is covered by the inscription that follows; but that all-powerful memory could exhume any impression, momentary as it may have been, if it was given sufficient stimulus.

To judge by his will, there was not a single book, not even the Bible, in Shakespeare's house. But no one is ignorant of the works he went back to: Chaucer, Gower, Spenser, Christopher Marlowe; Holinshed's chronicle; the Montaigne of Florio; North's Plutarch. I possessed in a latent fashion the memory of Shakespeare: and the reading of these ancient volumes — their rereading, that is to say — could be the stimulus I sought. I read again the sonnets also, which are his more direct works. I sometimes found the meaning, or the many meanings. The best verses impose themselves on the voice reading them out: and at the end of a few days I had recollected, without exertion, the harsh consonants and open vowels of the 16th century.

I wrote in the *Zeitschrift für germanische philologie* that Sonnet 127 must refer

a la memorable derrota de la Armada Invencible. No recordé que Samuel Butler, en 1899, ya había formulado esa tesis.

Una visita a Stratford-on-Avon fue, previsiblemente, estéril.

Después advino la transformación gradual de mis sueños. No me fueron deparadas, como a De Quincey, pesadillas espléndidas, ni piadosas visiones alegóricas, a la manera de su maestro, Jean Paul. Rostros y habitaciones desconocidas entraron en mis noches. El primer rostro que identifiqué fue el de Chapman; después, el de Ben Jonson, y el de un vecino del poeta, que no figura en las biografías, pero que Shakespeare vería con frecuencia.

Quien adquiere una enciclopedia no adquiere cada línea, cada párrafo, cada página y cada grabado; adquiere la mera posibilidad de conocer algunas de esas cosas. Si ello acontece con un ente concreto y relativamente sencilla, dado el orden alfabético de las partes; ¿qué no acontecerá con un ente abstracto y variable, *ondoyant et divers*, como la mágica memoria de un muerto?

A nadie le está dado abarcar en un solo instante la plenitud de su pasado. Ni a Shakespeare, que yo sepa, ni a mí, que fui su parcial heredero, nos depararon ese don. La memoria del hombre no es una suma; es un desorden de posibilidades indefinidas. San Agustín, si no me engaño, habla de los palacios y cavernas de la memoria. La segunda metáfora es la más justa. En esas cavernas entré.

to the memorable defeat of the Spanish Armada. I did not remember that Samuel Butler, in 1899, had already formulated that thesis.

A visit to Stratford-on-Avon proved, foreseeably, fruitless.

Then came the gradual transformation of my dreams. I was not, like De Quincey, given resplendent nightmares, or devout allegorical visions in the manner of his master Jean Paul. Unknown dwellings and faces entered my nights. The first one I identified was Chapman's; then the face of Ben Jonson, and then that of a neighbour of the poet, who does not appear in his biographies, but whom Shakespeare must have frequently seen.

A man who acquires an encyclopaedia does not acquire each line, each paragraph, each page and each engraving; he commands the possibility, merely, of knowing some of those things. If they happen to be concrete and relatively simple entities, their parts are given in alphabetical order; but what will happen with an entity as abstract and variable, *ondoyant et divers*, as the miraculous memory of a dead man?

To no one is it given to comprehend in an instant the whole of his existence. To neither Shakespeare, whom I would know, nor to me who was his partial inheritor, was this gift granted. The memory of man is not a summa: it is a disorder of indefinite possibilities. Augustine, if I am not mistaken, speaks of the palaces and caverns of Memory. The second metaphor is the more exact. I entered those caverns.



Como la nuestra, la memoria de Shakespeare incluía zonas, grandes zonas de sombra rechazadas voluntariamente por él. No sin algún escándalo recordé que Ben Jonson le hacía recitar hexámetros latinos y griegos y que el oído, el incomparable oído de Shakespeare, solía equivocarse una cantidad, entre la risotada de los colegas.

Conocí estados de ventura y sombra que trascienden la común experiencia humana. Sin que yo lo supiera, la larga y estudiosa soledad me había preparado para la dócil recepción del milagro.

Al cabo de unos treinta días, la memoria del muerto me animaba. Durante de una semana de curiosa felicidad, casi creí ser Shakespeare. La obra se renovó para mí. Sé que la luna, para Shakespeare, era menos la luna que Diana y menos Diana que la obscura palabra que se demora: *moon*. Otro descubrimiento anoté. Las aparentes negligencias de Shakespeare, esas *absence dans l'infini* de que apologeticamente habla Hugo, fueron deliberadas. Shakespeare las toleró, o intercaló, para que su discurso, destinado a la escena, pareciera espontáneo y no demasiado pulido y artificial (*nicht allzu glatt und gekünstelt*). Esa misma razón lo movió a mezclar sus metáforas:

*my way of life*

*Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf.*

Una mañana discerní una culpa en el fondo de la memoria. No traté

Just as ours does, the memory of Shakespeare included zones, great zones of shadow, which were screened off by will. I recalled, not without shock, that Ben Jonson had made him recite hexameters in Latin and Greek: and that his ear, the incomparable ear of Shakespeare, used to mistake amid the hilarity of his companions a certain foot.

I knew states of gladness and dark that transcended common human experience. Though I could not have foreknown it, long and studious solitude had prepared me for the quiet reception of the miracle.

By the end of some thirty days the memory of the dead man was enlivening me. Through a week of curious felicity I almost believed I was Shakespeare. His words came newly to me. I understood that the moon was for Shakespeare less the moon than Diana; and less Diana than that obscure and delaying syllable "moon". I noted down another discovery. The apparent negligences of Shakespeare, that *absence dans l'infini* of which Hugo spoke apologetically, were deliberate. Shakespeare either tolerated or interposed them, so that his words, intended for the stage, should seem spontaneous and not too polished or artificial (*nicht allzu glatt und gekünstelt*.) The same reason impelled him to mix his metaphors:

*my way of life*

*Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf.*

One day I discerned guilt in the depth of the memory. I did not attempt

definirla; Shakespeare lo ha hecho para siempre. Básteme declarar que esa culpa nada tenía en común con la perversión.

Comprendí que las tres facultades de la alma humana, memoria, entendimiento y voluntad, no son una ficción escolástica. La memoria de Shakespeare no podía revelarme otra cosa que la circunstancias de Shakespeare. Es evidente que éstas no constituyen la singularidad del poeta; lo que es importante es la obra que ejecutó con ese material deleznable.

Ingenuamente, yo había premeditado, como Thorpe, una biografía. No tardé descubrir que ese género literario requiere condiciones de escritor que ciertamente no son mías. No sé narrar. No sé narrar mi propia historia, que es tanto más extraordinario que la de Shakespeare. Además, ese libro sería inútil. El azar o destino dieron a Shakespeare las triviales cosas terribles que todo hombre conoce; él supo transmutarlas en fábulas, en personajes mucho más vívidos que el hombre gris que los soñó, en versos que no dejarán caer las generaciones, en música verbal. ¿A qué destejer esa red, a qué minar la torre, a qué reducir a las módicas proporciones de una biografía documental o de una novela realista el sonido y la furia de Macbeth?

Goethe constituye, según se sabe, el culto oficial de Alemania; más íntimo es el culto de Shakespeare, que profesamos no sin nostalgia. (En

to determine the deed; Shakespeare has done it once and for all. It suffices me to declare that the offence had nothing in common with perversion.

I understood that the three faculties of the human soul, memory, understanding and will, were not Scholastic fictions. The memory of Shakespeare could reveal to me nothing other than the circumstances of his life. It is evident that these do not constitute the singularity of the poet; what is important is how he worked upon that fragile material.

Ingenuously, like Thorpe, I had planned a biography. I was not long in discovering that that literary genre requires of the writer capabilities that certainly were not mine. I cannot narrate. I cannot narrate my own story, which is entirely more extraordinary than that of Shakespeare. What is more, the book would be useless. Chance or fate had visited on Shakespeare all the trivial, terrible things men endure: he knew how to transmute these in fables, in creatures much more vivid than the shadowy man who dreamed them, in verses that generations will not relinquish, in the music of words. To what end unwind the snare, undermine the tower ... and reduce to the modest proportions of a biography or a realist novel the sound and fury of Macbeth?

The cult of Goethe, as is known, is the official cult of Germany; more intimate is our cult of Shakespeare, which we profess not without nostalgia. (In

Inglaterra, Shakespeare, que tan legano está de los ingleses, constituye el culto oficial; el libro de Inglaterra es la Biblia.)

En la primera etapa de la aventura sentí la dicha de ser Shakespeare; en la postrera, la opresión y el terror. Al principio las dos memorias no mezclaban sus aguas. Con el tiempo, el gran río de Shakespeare amenazó, y casi anegó, mi modesto caudal. Advertí con temor que estaba olvidando la lengua de mis padres. Ya que la identidad personal se basa en la memoria, temí por mi razón.

Mis amigos venían a visitarme; me asombró que no percibieran que yo estaba en el infierno.

Empecé a no entender las cotidianas cosas que me rodeaban. Cierta mañana me perdí entre grandes formas de hierro, de madera y cristal. Me aturdieron silbatos y clamores. Tardé un instante, que pudo parecerme infinito, en reconocer las máquinas y las vagones de la estación de Bremen.

A medida que transcurren de los años, todo hombre está obligado a sobrellevar la creciente carga de su memoria. Dos me agobiaban, confundiéndose a veces: la mía y la del otro, incomunicable.

Todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser, ha escrito Spinoza. La piedra quiere ser una piedra, el tigre un tigre, yo quería volver a ser Hermann Soergel.

He olvidado la fecha en que decidí liberarme. Di con el método más fácil. En el teléfono marqué números al azar. Voces de niño o de mujer contestaban. Pensé que mi deber era respetarlas.

England, Shakespeare, who is so distant from the English, constitutes the official cult; England's book is the Bible.)

In the first stage of these happenings I felt the happiness of being Shakespeare; in the last, oppression and terror. In the beginning the two memories did not mix their waters. With time the great river of Shakespeare threatened, and almost flooded, my modest flow. I realized with fear that I was forgetting the language of my fathers. Because the identity of persons is founded upon memory, I feared for my reason.

My friends came to visit me; and I was amazed they could not perceive that I was in hell.

I began to mistake the common things around me. One morning I was lost amid great shapes of iron and wood and crystal. Whistles and cries alarmed me. It took me a moment, but one which seemed infinite, to recognize the engines and wagons of the station of Bremen.

As their years pass men are obliged to take up the growing burden of memory. Two weighed me down, confounding themselves at times: mine, and that of the other: incomunicable himself.

All things desire, Spinoza has written, to persist in their being. The stone wants to be a stone, the tiger a tiger. I wished to go back to being Hermann Soergel.

I have forgotten the date on which I decided to free myself. I chanced upon a most easy method. On the telephone I dialled numbers at random. The voices of children or women answered; but I thought it my duty to protect them.

Di al fin con una voz culta de hombre.  
Le dije:

—¿Quieres la memoria de Shakespeare? Se que lo que te ofrezco es muy grave. Piénsalo bien.

Una voz incrédula replicó:

—Afrontaré ese riesgo. Acepto la memoria de Shakespeare.

Declaré las condiciones del don. Paradójicamente, sentía a la vez la nostalgia del libro que yo hubiera debido escribir y que me fue vedado escribir y el temor que el huésped, el espectro, no me dejara nunca.

Colgué el tubo y repetí como una esperanza estas resignadas palabras:

*Simply the thing I am shall make me live.*

Yo había imaginado disciplinas para despertar la antigua memoria; hube de buscar otras para borrarla. Una de tantas fue el estudio de la mitología de William Blake, discípulo rebelde de Swedenborg. Comprobé que era menos compleja que complicada.

Ese y otros caminos fue inútiles; todos me llevaban a Shakespeare.

Di al fin con la única solución para poblar la espera: la estricta y vasta música: Bach.

P.S. 1924 —Ya soy un hombre entre los hombres. En la vigilia soy el profesor emérito Hermann Soergel, que manejo un fichero y que redacto

I heard at last the educated tones of a man. I said to him:

—Do you wish to possess the memory of Shakespeare? Know that what I offer you is a grave thing. Think well on it.

An incredulous voice replied:

—I shall face that danger. I accept the memory of Shakespeare.

I stated the conditions of the gift. I remember feeling a sort of nostalgia, for the book I might have written, the book I was close to writing; and the fear as well, paradoxically, that my guest, the spectre, would not ever leave me.

I hung up the mouthpiece and repeated, like a prayer, his resigned words:

*Simply the thing I am shall make me live.*

I had imagined disciplines that would awaken his ancient memory; I had now to seek out rigours to erase it. One way among many was the study of the mythology of William Blake, the rebellious disciple of Swedenborg. I found that less complex than complicated.

These and other stratagems were useless; everything carried me back to Shakespeare. But I found at last the one thing that would sustain hope: vast and strict music: Bach.

P.S. 1924 — I am now a man among men again. In my waking hours I am Hermann Soergel, professor emeritus, who manages a filing cabinet and edits

trivialidades eruditas, pero en el alba sé,  
alguna vez, que el que sueña es el otro.  
De tarde en tarde me sorprenden  
pequeñas y fugaces memorias que acaso  
son auténticas.

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erudite trivialities. But at dawn I know,  
sometimes, that the one who dreams is  
the other; and from time to time I am  
surprised by fleeting memories,  
oddments, which are perhaps his.

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*ghivarghese kuzhikandam*

## afterword

That the narrator in *La memoria de Shakespeare* would be a German born toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century — and maturing through its *fin de siècle* decadence perhaps, for he seems no longer young at the time of the Great War — does not seem a circumstance of much consequence to its fiction. A professor of Old English ‘managing a filing cabinet’ anywhere at all, and nearer our own time, could be brought to succumb to the memory of Shakespeare just as Hermann Soergel does

— or so, again, it would appear —

and posing its academic protagonist conspicuously within his *milieu* might lay over the fiction a superfluous period colouring. The master science philology had once been, whose quondam prestige might be thought pertinent to our story, had long been moribund at the time of its writing with its controlling impulses having disbanded and returned themselves variously to the academic study of antique languages;

and the Victorian enthusiasm for an Anglosaxon past, which a scrupulous translator might think to take account of, seems a remote and occulted passage now in the literary history of English — whose spectacular relic is the *Odyssey* rendered by Newman into the language, as he thought, of *Beowulf*; and the aborting of which literary monstrosity had launched Arnold on his momentous career, as cultural Censor to imperial Britannia.

The stray reader of the story who is possessed of such ‘erudite trivialities’ — and who remembers, as well, their once fateful political import — may detect some unusual intent in the writing now and again: where, for instance, his philological acumen decides Soergel that ‘the coinages of George Chapman return English to its Anglosaxon roots without his having suspected it.’

The circumstance that the Romantic enthusiasm of German literati, spreading to England, had restored Shakespeare’s fortunes there — engendering a movement of collective feeling which completed itself in his apotheosis as *the poet of the nation* — may encourage some further probing now:

especially if one makes much of Soergel's remarking how far from Shakespeare the English of his day are.

But the formal texture of our fiction seems to afford such historical *facta* no particular purchase. They at most only shade, and then very little, the staging of its protagonist as a 'character' — and that process is completed immediately upon his exhibition of expertise, almost, by his telling us that he had begun a translation of *Macbeth* 'in order to keep himself from dwelling on the death of his brother' in the trenches of the Western Front. So I shall not try the reader's patience by attempting to delineate the fictional character Hermann Soergel is: just how he keeps himself amid horror displays him enough to us. And, besides, painting closely into some recognizable setting its particular specimen of the literary fauna fictional characters are is not, I am sure, what *La memoria de Shakespeare* sets out to do.

The cultural authority that philology had lately enjoyed in its setting seems a circumstance peripheral, then, to the workings of our story. But the comprehensive doubling of register that defeats Soergel's translation of *Macbeth* — a doubling that is so pronounced a determinant of literary English — does, however, seem central to the fiction; and just how Professor Soergel confesses his insecure purchase on register in English should foreclose now — or so a fastidious translator might insist — the rendering of his speech in an entirely natural way. To stilt his speaking conspicuously would have compromised the fictive datum our protagonist is, though: by bringing him too much before us as a character, precisely, and formally contravening thus his wish to go back to being Hermann Soergel: which would have been fatal: for the success of *La memoria de Shakespeare* consists finally in just how its protagonist is brought to say *simply the thing I am shall make me live* — he repeats the words as he would a prayer — and that forlorn voicing sounds as it goes, let me risk saying, the only way in which Shakespeare could *be* Professor Soergel's at all — whether 'as none has belonged to any' or not.

If such formal consideration is not deterrent enough let me note that the original could not point us, at all, toward how our professor's speech might be appropriately stilted into English. There is no congruent contrast of register in Spanish; and native grammarians of the language are wont to boast that, among the Romance languages, their tongue has most conserved the ordonnance of Latin — which is more than a little surprising when one recalls that, as the imperium of Rome contracted, the commanders of her Visigothic legions had carved out for themselves a considerable kingdom in the great province Iberia had been.

The narratologically adept — or such among them as are apt to look for symmetries between their own and the situations of the fictions they are served — might be diverted now by noting that Soergel can as little 'be theirs' — to have and hold as a 'character' — as Shakespeare can

be his. But I would rather not take Borges to be holding a mirror up just so to his readers.

There is a learned sort of irony, I suppose, in having an insistent German professor of Old English undone by its nominal legatee: for the poetry surviving in the tongue — however imperfectly the written record has preserved it: and however insecure its construal thence may always be, into a scrutable English — is thought to best display the literary genius of antique Germania.

Or so I gather from the introduction to a selection of Anglosaxon verse I happen to possess, rendered into an idiomatic English sometime in the latter third of the last century — whose author complains, as it happens, that philologists have watched over the ‘word-hoard’ of Anglosaxon ‘more as dragons than modest ancillae.’

That our protagonist would have been born into a recently unified Germany, moreover, would nicely inflect so studied an exercise of *ironia*. But the telling of his story would gain very little, it seems to me, by elaborating such rarefactions of mood.

So, the circumstance that Soergel would be a newly German professor of Old English is a detail my rendering does not insist upon; and, keeping in mind that he could not say whether he was relieved or disquieted to find that Thorpe’s opinions were ‘as academic and conventional’ as his own, I have not tried to make him sound always bookish. I have not, in fact, attempted to very closely manage the surface *lexis* of his speech — so to call it — and have wanted, rather, that Soergel’s words should find voice in ways as much their own as are the ways in which — as he turns the leaves of a book, or rounds a corner — the potent memory of the ‘shadowy man’ called Shakespeare takes possession of him. I do not know if I have succeeded in leaving the writing to itself opportunely; and it may well be that, where I have thought to do so, the fastidious reader will hear only noise.

Here is an example: perhaps too nice. I have rendered “estados de ventura y sombra” as “states of gladness and dark”: where “darkness” might have communicated a professorial precision. And I had sought just that earlier with “seemed literary to me, in the pejorative sense of the word” for “me parecieron literarios en el mal sentido de la palabra.”

I have been careless enough to insist on what our story *does not* set out to do; so I shall try to specify more closely the special doing with words — the distinctive *perlocutio* — that makes *La memoria de Shakespeare* a work of art. What the work specially does

— or means to do, I shall hazard —

is make its speaking voice *just so present* that its final “simply the thing I am shall make me live” is palpably a gathering to self — however *voiced*

there by Shakespeare: and so brief, exiguous surely — but upon which its resigned bearer may go his own way nonetheless: however more as caricature than character he recedes from us, then, to ‘manage his filing cabinet.’

I must emphasize how exiguous this ‘gathering to self’ is — how *etiolated* a mimesis — but shall insist that it is a palpable thing even so: *and only so*. That Hermann Soergel should be returned to himself through a prayerful mouthing of Shakespeare’s words

and through such an ‘apobasis’ come to *be* their *author* as poorly much as he could be — even as he just so works himself free of the spectral *person* who, as pervading memory, had overcome him —

would be some rare species of irony again: but distinctly of that genus termed ‘dramatic’ now: the articulation of which might be thought the properly literary work, now, of our story: and the recognition of which would *constitute*, then, our understanding of *La memoria de Shakespeare* as a work of literary art. Seeing things so would clearly deliver the story to our knowing minds — without involving us in doubtfully etiolated mimeses and such like — and I do not doubt that sophisticated readers will have relished just such a completing of the discreet entertainment the fiction will have provided them. The work might, in fact, be best received so; and I can excuse myself now only by confessing that, perversely, I take the understanding of a literary work for some *fugitive* apprehending of its distinctive doing — and not any secure possession of mind, at all — which, if at all achieved, will not long survive our attending upon its verbal surface.

o

I have taken *La memoria de Shakespeare* on its own fictive terms: without referring its doings to the singularities of its author: and it might well be understood otherwise were it read particularly as the work of Borges. Those who know his verse might recall the poem *Al idioma Alemana* upon reading the story: for the inverted symmetry, as it were, of their speakers’ situations. More pertinently, the speaking voice in the poem seems to belong as much to the author as to man himself — producing a congress of the two as practised there as their cohabitation in *Borges y Yo*, for instance, is awkward — and that is surely pertinent to the understanding of our fiction: which depends very much on distinguishing the shadowy *man* from the *author* we know.

Adepts of literary theory may well take *La memoria de Shakespeare* for an allegory now, bearing somehow upon the *author function* posited by



Foucault — of whom we may safely assume Borges to have been well aware, for Foucault was at the height of his fame when the story was written; and, besides, the ‘Chinese Encyclopedia’ Borges once concocted had received such flattering notice in *The Order of Things*. I do not know if Borges would have contrived to oblige professional theorists of literature so

and the foreword to *Biblioteca Personal* suggests that he would not have done so with an easy mind.

I like to think that he could not have cared to; and have supposed that he did not. But the *conchetto* of an ‘author function’ may have attracted him enough, anyway, to try some fictional turn thereon — recall that Soergel has Shakespeare making his tremendous creatures out of ‘the trivial, terrible things men endure’ — and the circumstance that he had for so long been a literary personage when he writes the last of his acclaimed *ficciones* might well have induced Borges to do so.

It seems proper to note now that Borges’ late and valedictory verses do often enough presume upon its auditors receiving their speaker *as* the person of renown he himself was: which would be scandalous in any idiom of literary English. My redaction of *Al idioma Alemán* is appended below: and the demands of lyric propriety have forced me to render the lines “*Mis noches están llenas de Virgilio/dije una vez; también pude haber dicho*” much against the plain sense and evident implicature of the words: which would be appropriate as they stand — or so it seems to me — only if the intended readers of these lines were attending to *everything* said by the *person* their author is.

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### To the German language

My vocation is Castilian:  
the bronze of Quevedo.  
But the slow processions of night  
bring other music, exalting, close  
— voices coming through my blood,  
    Shakespeare and Scripture  
— or by chance, which has been kind.  
And then you: mild, sweet German:  
whom I chose, sought out myself, and singly  
— through wakeful nights, grammars,  
jungles of declension,  
dictionaries, never finding the nuance  
precisely — made my way toward.  
My nights are full of Virgil,  
I boasted once; I should have said  
Hölderlin, Angelus Silesius.

### Al idioma Alemán

Mi destino es la lengua Castellana,  
el bronce de Francisco de Quevedo,  
pero en la lente noche caminada  
me exaltan otras músicas más íntimas.  
Alguna me fue dada por la sangre—  
oh voz de Shakespeare y de la Escritura—  
otras por el azar, que es davidoso,  
pero a ti, dulce lengua de Alemania,  
te he elegido, y buscado, solitario.  
A través de vigiliyas y gramáticas,  
de la jungla de las declinaciones,  
del diccionario, que acierta nunca  
con el matiz preciso, fuí acercándome.  
Mis noches están llenas de Virgilio,  
dije una vez; también pude haber dicho  
de Hölderlin, y de Angelus Silesius.

Heine gave me his sky's nightingales;  
Goethe, the luck of late love,  
indulgent and greedy at once;  
Keller, the rose a hand leaves  
in the hand of a dying suitor  
— who was never to know her white  
from her red — O tongue of Germania,  
you are your own work: desire's  
twining your compounded moods,  
your open vowels, your syllables  
biding the studied metres of the Greek,  
your rustle of forest and night.

I possessed you once. Now,  
at the term of my years, wearied,  
I make you out from afar as if, remotely,  
like algebra or the moon.

Heine me dio sus altos ruiseñores;  
Goethe, la suerte de un amor tardío,  
a la vez indulgente y mercenario;  
Keller, la rosa que una mano deja  
en la mano de un muerto que la amaba  
y que nunca sabra si es blanca o roja.  
Tu, lengua de Alemania, eres tu obra  
capital: el amor entrelazado  
de las voces compuestas, las vocales  
abiertas, los sonidos que permiten  
el estudioso hexámetro del griego  
y tu rumor de selvas y de noches.  
Te tuve alguna vez. Ahora, en la linde  
de los años cansados, te diviso  
lejana como el álgebra y la luna.

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The licensed English translation may be found in *The Book of Sand*;  
and in the *Selected Poems* put out by Viking as well. My rendering  
has taken a great many liberties besides the egregious departure  
already noted. But I have done so in order to sound in another  
tongue — with less restraint: but in a finally saving way, I trust —  
the bronze of Quevedo.

That “destino” may name both destiny and vocation is a bit of  
Spanish luck immoderately disadvantaging any englishing of the  
poem; and my beginning with “vocation” would have forced much  
of what follows.

Regarding the elidings and *puncta* of the first two lines, I note that Borges  
belongs to the generation immediately succeeding the first avowedly  
modernist poets in Latin America: who were votaries of Gongora.

I have taken *voces compuestas* for *amor entrelazado*: and sought to  
render that *identifying* with the ‘nominal’ sentence “desire’s/twining  
your compounded moods”

eliding the copula a strict grammarian would insist upon.

I have tried to account for redoing “*dije una vez; también pude haber  
dicho*” already: if not for doing so in just the way I have. I cannot  
defend very ably my many other strayings from the text. But I shall try  
to excuse some one or two — among the more marked, at least —  
if only to show that I have not done just as I please. That “*his sky’s  
nightingales*” renders “*sus altos ruiseñores*” seems an impertinence  
needing some defense: the strange visions of the ninth among Heine’s  
*Songs to Seraphine* must speak for me here. But I should most of all try  
to account for the “Germania” I have put in for “Germany”: for that  
must seem as perverse as it is wilful.

Tacitus titles thus his study of the savage race his martial hero  
Germanicus had subdued: and commends, pointedly, their antique

virtues. His *Germania* is the first civilised notice that the tribes of the great forests beyond the Rhine receive; and I hope that noting the circumstance will pardon a little — remembering now that the Romans of Tacitus' day had affected to leave culture to their effete Athenians — the extreme licence of "*syllables/biding the studied metres of the Greek/your rustle of forest and night.*"

I wish I could have managed rhythm and diction here much more closely than I have been able to.

But I would want the archaism to work somewhat more: or somewhat else: when the poem is read after *La Memoria de Shakespeare* at least. I can only gesture at that obscure intent though: and thus. Borges speaks there as a poet memorializing poets; recall, now, the enmity Plato foments between the partisans of Sophia and poets; and note then that, from the institution of their nation in a state and until the debacle of National Socialism, the more nativist among German philosophers were wont to think — encouraged and perhaps abetted even by the pretensions of philology — that, after the tongue of the Greeks who came before Socrates, theirs was the most appropriate language for philosophy.

◦

I close by noting that my rendering of the story has taken no liberties of the sort I have taken with the poem. I understand that *La memoria de Shakespeare* has appeared recently in English: as *Shakespeare's Memory*. That would a more idiomatic rendering of our fiction's title certainly, considered in itself, than "The memory of Shakespeare" is; but I would rather not introduce in so familiar a way its strangely potent spectre.