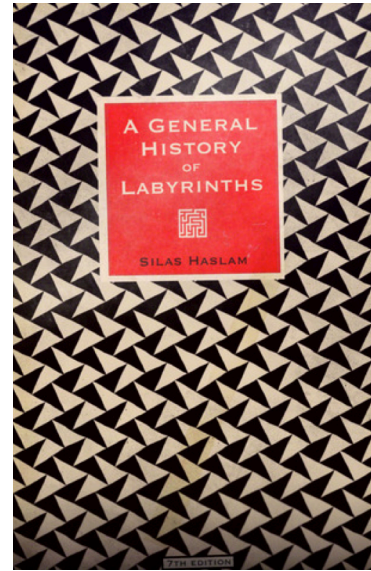


On Haslam's *A General History of Labyrinths*

- ◆ THE UNACKNOWLEDGED FIRST UNION FROM WHICH
BORGES NEVER FULLY RECOVERED;
THE RECIPROCAL INFLUENCES OF JOHN BARTH
AND BORGES, REAL AND PUTATIVE;
& A NEW TRANSLATION FROM THE SPANISH OF
"THE SCENT OF FALLEN LEAVES"



In recovering and reprising for a 21st century audience the original text of the lost poem "The Scent of Fallen Leaves," Silas Haslam and Harper & Row have restored for readers of Spanish the lush tribute that Jorge Luis Borges – fighting through impending blindness – created for Anna Schärff, his first wife, a Viennese artist's model of haunting beauty.

This early marriage of the maestro's, which Haslam sets out for us in engaging detail, was managed with utmost secrecy so as not to disconcert the author's mother, the aging Leonor Acevedo Suárez, descended from a traditional Uruguayan family of *Criollo* origin, and within whom roiled many of the cultural inhibitions to which women of her upbringing might naturally be disposed. The alliance, however clandestine, is held by all surviving accounts to have been a mutually nurturing union.

But the young bride suffered from increasingly intense bouts of schizophrenia, until, not a year into the marriage, she was institutionalized, an action necessitated by her vivid public display, in the couple's opera box, of grotesquely agitated body movements.

As Haslam wends his way through the labyrinths of Borges' personality, he reflects upon the great writer's abidingly tender treatment of his fragile and failing wife:

These steadfast actions of Borges', his astonishingly gentle superintendences, stand in marked contrast to the conduct of his Anglo-American coeval, T. S. Eliot, whose fierce, fugitive and predominantly disobliging relations with his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood Eliot, have been studiously chronicled.

Anna died in an English sanitarium in 1966. In her passing Borges suffered an overwhelming grief; yet from that grief drew great inspiration. A parallel may be found in the protagonist of John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (a novel deeply influenced, according to Barth himself, by the work of Borges), released by Doubleday & Co. in the same month, the same week, as Anna's death. It is but one in a chain of Barth's fantasias upon which the anguished Borges is thought to have, in turn, modeled several of his own works, including the dark 1967 English language expansion of his *Manual de zoología fantástica* (in clandestine collaboration with his American accessory, some speculate, though such conjecture is without evidentiary support; see endnote).

Borges found in Anna a vision to love lifelong, and immoderately, fully in keeping with the extravagances that distinguish much of his published work. The author loved Anna through spells of hope and bouts of despair, loved her through the extended treatments that persecuted her last decade. Yet Anna was succeeded some few years after her death – when Borges felt his life

hopelessly emptied – by one Elsa Astete Millán, who had herself been recently widowed; all in all, a highly public and very short-lived second union serving as unhappy sequela to the wholly private and long-enduring first.

For the last decade and a half of his career, as he figured with ever greater prominence upon the international stage, Borges traveled widely. He was accompanied during these journeys by María Kodama, his personal assistant – youthful, elegant, ethereal – a writer herself, an ambitious woman of Asian and European descent. [NOTE: *Kodama provided the uncollected papers from which Haslam gleaned much of the material for the extended Borges section of his book.*]

Some months before Borges' death – and not overmuch should be inferred from this – the couple married through the offices of a Paraguayan attorney, in what was then a common practice among Argentines wishing to circumvent their country's divorce laws.

Three wives, then? Borges? Borges was no Neruda. There are no “white hills, white thighs, you . . . lying in surrender,” as “my rough peasant's body digs in you / and makes the son leap from the depth of the earth.” The master, in fact, rarely privileges the concept of female sexuality. With few exceptions, women are missing from the preponderance of Borges' literary output.

And yet not absent in the entire. Not if we adduce as evidence his story initially titled “Ulrica” (from *The Book of Sand*). Here women and sex – and explicit sexual congress – assume vital roles. A character in the story “El muerto” hungers after a “splendid, contemptuous, red-haired woman” and later makes love to “the woman with shining hair.” Women are contemplated as objects of unrequited love, as well, in his short stories “The Aleph” and “The Zaphir.”

Perhaps these occasional flowerings can be credited to his largely unrecognized association with Barth. Such delinquent attributions are not unprecedented in literary history. Whatever their genesis, Borges, to be sure, was not carved of ice, regardless of prevailing critical belief.

And so we come to “The Scent of Fallen Leaves,” recovered from a sachet of the author's random papers and passed, along with many others, by Borges' widow to Haslam. If there remain hesitations concerning the issue of where Borges' affections reposed, or into whose possession he had ceded his soul, this translation from the restored Spanish text (appearing here, in English, for the first time) should lay them to rest:

THE SCENT OF FALLEN LEAVES

for Anna

O my darling, what has drawn my attention
to this page?
Nothing more than the recollection
of fallen-leaf sweetness,

of autumn air trickling through
our window. You crack it
an inch in the fall. An inch is enough.
We sleep in sweetness.

Nothing more than the coddling
of your bones and skin
when I come to our bed and you are
sleeping, yet your hand

curls into mine in reflex, and your body
shifts like an angel's
flying through the cambered entrance
of a cathedral.

Is this a love song? It is. Not a very good
one, just very human,
and all I can muster from an unmade sea
of thoughts on this,

the day after my fifty-third birthday.
You are twenty-six years
younger than I am. Time is a river.
It moves in one direction.

How many years are left me of buoyance,
body and mind?
I am twenty-two when we ring the chimes
of love. You know this,

and so do others, for you have been
generous beyond
all understanding, even as I have been
generous with you.

I am forty, at most, when I sit at this desk
and pour out
my music to the walls. It rarely goes
further. Yet I know

that Eduardo Falú would play to an empty
room. I know
what lies beyond Segovia's easy fingers
and easy smile.

But I am fifty-three. Already the shadows
move along the walls
and I know what they mean. Still,
my withers remain unwrung.

I do not fear the shadows. I saw them
overcome my grandfather,
a gracious soldier, who died in the house
where I was born, and

great humor until the end. I saw them
overcome my father, now
fourteen years gone, who passed with
a sovereign dignity, a grit

I never saw but always sensed. So I do not
fear the shadows.
But I fear your loneliness when I am gone,
the loneliness

of our unborn children, my books,
the long shelves of my
cave untended, I fear your sense
of propriety, that you will move

not a thing – out of fear, out of loneliness.
It is my quiet vote
against an unyielding progress that has
drawn me to this page.

Autumn will be upon us again, and last
night, for my birthday,
we listened to Vivaldi interpret autumn
for us. The orchestra

was but thirty-two strong, thirty-two
virtuosi plying their trades.
When I am gone you must go on, Anna,
great beauty in the leaves.

– Translation by Bruce Sager, from the text
provided by María Kodama, *A General History of
Labyrinths*, Silas Haslam, Harper & Row, 2016

◆ BRUCE SAGER, *formerly an executive in the United States intelligence community, is a poet and occasional Spanish translator who currently works from Westminster, Maryland. While educating at Johns Hopkins in the early 1970's, he came to know John Barth, who joined the faculty of the University in 1973. Barth, in several off-the-cuff exchanges over the years, has gently parried Sager's suggestions of any direct collaboration with Borges, though neither has the great postmodern master of fictions and metafiction ever tendered an express denial.* ◆ NOTE: BRUCE SAGER WAS RENDERED COMATOSE DURING GENDER REASSIGNMENT SURGERY SHORTLY AFTER PROVIDING THE PRECEDING BIOGRAPHICAL GLOSS (AND PERSONAL CITATIONS APPEARING THEREIN) IN SUPPORT OF HIS *SOI-DISANT* "RECIPROCAL INFLUENCE" SPECULATIONS; AS OF THIS WRITING, SAGER REMAINS INSENTIENT, AND LOST THEREBY TO FURTHER INQUIRY.

Note to Reader:

If you're at all confused,
by all means,
go ahead:
Google
"Haslam Footnote Borges"
;)



What makes it difficult
for a poet not to tell lies
is that, in poetry,
all facts and all beliefs
cease to be true or false
and become interesting possibilities.

The Dyer's Hand

WYSTAN AUDEN

