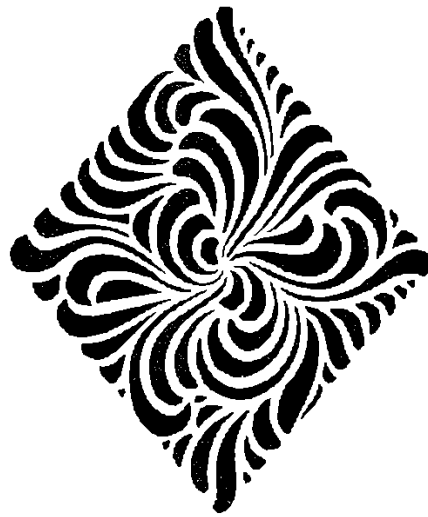


SELECTED NON-FICTIONS

Jorge Luis Borges



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“horrible bronze solecisms,” be converted into bronze bathtubs; praised the death penalty; rejoiced that every town had a barracks; adulated and invented the Teutonic Race. Those who yearn for further imprecations or apotheoses may consult *Past and Present* (1843) and the *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850).

Bertrand Russell concludes: “In a certain sense, it is legitimate to state that the atmosphere at the beginning of the eighteenth century was rational, and that of our time is antirational.” I would omit the timid adverbial phrase with which the sentence begins.

[1941]

[EW]

A Comment on August 23, 1944

That crowded day gave me three distinct surprises: the physical degree of joy I felt when they told me that Paris had been liberated; the discovery that a collective emotion can be noble; the puzzling and flagrant enthusiasm of many who were supporters of Hitler. I know that if I question that enthusiasm, I may easily resemble those futile hydrographers who asked why a single ruby was enough to arrest the course of a river; many will accuse me of trying to explain a fantastic event. Still, it happened, and thousands of persons in Buenos Aires can bear witness.

I realized immediately that it was useless to ask those people themselves. They are fickle, and by behaving incoherently they are no longer aware that incoherence need be justified. They adore the German race, but they abhor “Saxon” America; they condemn the articles of Versailles, but they applaud the wonders of the *Blitzkrieg*; they are anti-Semitic, but they profess a religion of Hebrew origin; they celebrate submarine warfare, but they vigorously condemn British acts of piracy; they denounce imperialism, but they defend and proclaim the theory of *Lebensraum*; they idolize San Martín, but they regard the independence of America as a mistake; they apply the canon of Jesus to the actions of England, but the canon of Zarathustra to those of Germany.

I also reflected that any other uncertainty was preferable to the uncertainty of a dialogue with these siblings of chaos, exonerated from honor and piety by the infinite repetition of the interesting formula *I am Argentine*. Furthermore, did Freud not argue and Walt Whitman not foresee that men

have very little knowledge of the real motives for their conduct? Perhaps, I said to myself, the magic of the symbols *Paris* and *liberation* is so powerful that Hitler's partisans have forgotten that the defeat of his forces is the meaning of those symbols. Wearily, I chose to imagine that the probable explanation for this conundrum was their fear, their inconstancy, and their mere adherence to reality.

Several nights later, I was enlightened by a book and a memory. The book was Shaw's *Man and Superman*; the passage in question was John Tanner's metaphysical dream, where he affirms that the horror of Hell is its unreality. This conviction can be compared with the doctrine of another Irishman, John Scotus Erigena, who denied the substantive existence of sin and evil, and declared that all creatures, including the Devil, will return to God. The memory was the day that had been the exact and hateful opposite of August 23, 1944: June 14, 1940. A certain Germanophile, whose name I do not wish to remember, came to my house that day. Standing in the doorway, he announced the dreadful news: the Nazi armies had occupied Paris. I felt a confusion of sadness, disgust, malaise. Then it occurred to me that his insolent joy did not explain the stentorian voice or the abrupt proclamation. He added that the German troops would soon be in London. Any opposition was useless, nothing could prevent their victory. That was when I knew that he, too, was terrified.

I do not know whether the facts I have related require clarification. I believe I can interpret them like this: for Europeans and Americans, one order and only one is possible; it used to be called Rome, and now it is called Western Culture. To be a Nazi (to play the energetic barbarian, Viking, Tartar, sixteenth-century conquistador, gaucho, or Indian) is, after all, mentally and morally impossible. Nazism suffers from unreality, like Erigena's hell. It is uninhabitable; men can only die for it, lie for it, wound and kill for it. No one, in the intimate depths of his being, can wish it to triumph. I shall risk this conjecture: *Hitler wants to be defeated*. Hitler is blindly collaborating with the inevitable armies that will annihilate him, as the metal vultures and the dragon (which must have known that they were monsters) collaborated, mysteriously, with Hercules.

[1944]

[SJL]