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## KAFKA AND BORGES IN THE “THE SECRET MIRACLE”

### Abstract

The centerpiece of this essay is an analysis of Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Secret Miracle,” set in Prague during the first few days of Czechoslovakia’s occupation by the Nazis. I argue that the protagonist of the story is a fictional amalgam of Kafka’s biography and Borges’ own; and that Borges’ creative process draws on his literary engagements with Kafka, including his assimilation of the *Book of Job* through the prism of Kafka. The essay begins with a synopsis of Borges’s views on Kafka, which changed over the years; and it explores the historical circumstances in Europe and Argentina that inspired the story. Notwithstanding the astute borrowings from Kafka’s writings and biography, Borges’s story ends with a decisively Borgesian turn: his own denouement to a literary theme he shares with Kafka, namely, the punishment of the guiltless.

**Keywords:** Jorge Luis Borges, Franz Kafka, the *Book of Job*, Max Brod, Ambrose Bierce.

### KAFKA Y BORGES EN «EL MILAGRO SECRETO»


### Resumen

El eje principal de este ensayo es un análisis de “El milagro secreto” de Jorge Luis Borges, un relato ambientado en Praga durante los primeros días de la ocupación nazi de Checoslovaquia. Sostengo que el protagonista del relato es una amalgama ficticia de la biografía de Kafka con la del propio Borges, y que su proceso creativo se nutre de sus meditaciones y lecturas de Kafka, entre ellas su asimilación del *Libro de Job* por el prisma de Kafka. El ensayo comienza con una sinopsis de las opiniones de Borges sobre Kafka, que cambiaron con el paso del tiempo, y discute las circunstancias históricas en Europa y Argentina que inspiraron el relato. No obstante, los elementos compartidos, y sus astutos préstamos de la obra y biografía de Kafka, el relato de Borges concluye con un giro decididamente borgiano: su propia resolución a un tema literario que comparte con Kafka, el tema del castigo de los inocentes.

**Palabras clave:** Jorge Luis Borges, Franz Kafka, el *Libro de Job*, Max Brod, Ambrose Bierce.

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When Jorge Luis Borges began writing about Franz Kafka in 1935, he praised Kafka's originality with reservations.<sup>2</sup> In "Nightmares and Kafka," Borges calls Kafka the father of an original approach to literature that transposes the climate of a nightmare to a work of narrative fiction predicated on "the fear of a half-awoken mind that knows it is trafficking with ghosts and not with realities."<sup>3</sup> (Borges 2011a: 100). But he adds the caveat that little more can be gained from Kafka's fables than the delight of experiencing this peculiar kind of literary hallucination, and cautions against reading Kafka's nightmares as symbols or allegories calling for decipherment or interpretation, citing Freud's approach to dream analysis as an example of a misleading way to make sense of Kafka's tales. Notwithstanding his reservations, or the anxiety of influence he likely felt with his oeuvre, Borges was an admiring, assiduous reader, translator and promoter of Kafka's works. His engagements with Kafka were to have a clear impact in the creation of several of his own signature tales, not to mention his short fictional prose pieces that cover similar ground as Kafka's parables.<sup>4</sup>

From 1935 onwards, references to Kafka appear assiduously in his writings. In 1938 Borges wrote an essay protesting Kafka's exclusion from literary histories in Nazi Germany, and a prologue to the first Argentine edition of *The Metamorphosis* that includes other short pieces by Kafka. Borges is listed as editor and translator of the entire volume, but some literary critics have contested his authorship of the translation.<sup>5</sup> In Borges'

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<sup>2</sup> For a reliable synthesis of Borges' encounters with Kafka, see the third chapter of Sarah Roger's *Borges and Kafka. Sons and Writers* (Roger 2017), the most thoughtful comprehensive account of Borges' engagements with Kafka.

<sup>3</sup> "el temor de la mente semidespierta que sabe que trafica con fantasmas y no con realidades"

Note: all translations from original texts cited in Spanish in the footnotes are my own when an English version appears in the body of the text.

<sup>4</sup> See Sarah Roger's two chapters of the repercussions of Kafka in Borges' signature tales (Roger 2017: 67-112).

<sup>5</sup> A 1925 Spanish translation of *The Metamorphosis* published in the *Revista de Occidente*, was widely attributed to Borges because he published the same translation in 1938 in a book along with eight other short pieces by Kafka. The volume titled *La metamorfosis* attributes the selection and all of the translations to him. In a 1974 interview with Fernando Sorrentino (Sorrentino 1996: 137), Borges denied that he translated *The Metamorphosis*. Subsequently some critics concluded Borges was not the translator of the 1925 translation reissued in 1938, and some of their arguments are worth considering; but no one has identified the presumptive translator of the work, if it was not Borges. In other interviews and articles published after 1974 Borges acknowledged he translated the book, and offered reasons why he was not pleased with it. See for example Borges 2011b: 209. The attribution of the translation to Borges is not unreasonable. Borges contributed to the *Revista de Occidente* shortly before it printed the translation; and names of translators did not appear as a matter of course in the journal. Borges may have rejected the translation because its language



prologue, he moves beyond the view that Kafka is primarily “a writer of nightmares,”<sup>6</sup> pointing out that after 1914 Kafka’s works are informed by “the pressures of the war”<sup>7</sup> (Borges 1976: 9), and that another one of Kafka’s literary virtues is “the invention of intolerable situations”<sup>8</sup> (Borges 1976: 11). That being said, his praise continued to be qualified.

In his prologue to *The Metamorphosis*, and elsewhere, Borges argued that Kafka’s plots are akin to the logic of Zeno’s paradoxes; Kafka’s main character type is an individual, lacking psychological depth, who won’t achieve their objectives, just as Zeno’s Achilles won’t overcome Zeno’s tortoise in a race, if the tortoise is granted a head start. In “Kafka and his Precursors,” Borges turned this thought on its head, arguing that Zeno’s paradoxes can be read as Kafkaesque. In the 1930s Borges described Kafka’s plots as “terribly simple”<sup>9</sup> (Borges 1996b: 306), with deferments and postponements that don’t come to closure, but he appreciated them all the same as literary explorations of infinity. While he found it monotonous that Kafka’s protagonists were invariably individuals of lower ranks in hierarchical orders, the situations he invented for them were not uninteresting, even though his novels tested the patience of his readers. After all, it only takes a few pages to flesh out conceits that drag on and on: it only takes a couple of pages to realize that Joseph K. will never know why he is being tried in *The Trial*, or that the purported land surveyor from *The Castle* will never enter the castle:

There is only one man in Kafka’s oeuvre: the *homo domesticus* [...] desirous of a place, even a very humble one, in any Order; in the universe in a ministry, in an insane asylum, in jail. The basic plot and the climate are essential, but not the development of the storyline or of psychological depth. This is why his stories are better than his novels.<sup>10</sup> (Borges 1976: 11-12)

In a passing comment, Borges went so far as to call Kafka a nihilist (Borges 1999a: 259), perhaps because he thought there was no room for meaning in the simplicity of his unbearable situations, or in stories whose predictable mechanical form can be reduced to the paradoxes of presocratic philosophers. Borges was at first skeptical of theological

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corresponds to the grammar and vocabulary conventions of Spanish from Spain, and not from the Spanish from Argentina.

<sup>6</sup> “un escritor de pesadillas”

<sup>7</sup> “la opresión de la guerra”

<sup>8</sup> “la invención de situaciones intolerables”

<sup>9</sup> “de una terrible simplicidad”

<sup>10</sup> “Hombres, no hay más que uno en su obra: el *homo domesticus* [...] ganoso de un lugar, siquiera humildísimo en un Orden cualquiera; en el universo, en un ministerio, en un asilo de lunáticos, en la cárcel. El argumento y el ambiente son lo esencial; no las evoluciones de la fábula ni la penetración psicológica. De ahí la primacía de sus cuentos sobre sus novelas.”



interpretations of Kafka's works, as attempts to identify misleading profundities in works in which they are beside the point: "some have attempted theological interpretations of Kafka. While not completely arbitrary, these efforts are not that useful."<sup>11</sup> (Borges 1976: 11)

By the end of World War II, Borges recognized human dimensions in Kafka's writings that cannot be characterized as nihilistic, most notably in his literary exploration of "the unbearable, tragic solitude of the individual who lacks even the lowliest place in the order of the universe" (Borges 1999d: 310). In time, the caveats and reservations receded, culminating in Borges' judgement that Kafka was of unparalleled significance for 20<sup>th</sup> century literature: "Kafka is the great classic writer of our strange and tormented century"<sup>12</sup> (Borges 1996a: 454). He offered several apologies for his earlier misgivings, including this one:

I will never forget my first reading of Kafka in 1917 in a certain publication that lionized its own modernity. Its editors—who didn't always lack talent—were dedicated to the abolition of punctuation, the abolition of capital letters, the abolition of rhyme, the alarming simulation of metaphor, the abuse of compound words, and other tasks appropriate to youth at the time and perhaps to youth at any time. Amidst the clatter of type, a fable signed by one Franz Kafka seemed inexplicably insipid to my young reader's docility. After all these years I dare to confess my unpardonable lack of literary sensitivity: I had seen, without noticing it, a revelation. (Borges 1999c: 502)

Toward the end of his life, Borges revisited his essay on Kafka's literary nightmares, connecting them to the nightmares of our times: "Kafka could only dream nightmares, which he knew reality supplies" (Borges 1999c: 501). He also called Kafka prophetic, anticipating practices of authoritarian states: "Kafka was prophetic. The man imprisoned by an order, the man against the state, were among his central themes."<sup>13</sup> (Borges 2011b: 209) Borges' assessment was in line with that of many others, including Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, or George Steiner, who read Kafka's *The Trial* as a prophetic work in light of the advent of Stalinism and Nazism: "the arrest of Joseph K., the opaque tribunals, his literally bestial death, are the alphabet of our totalitarian politics" (Steiner 1999: 239).

If Borges once cautioned against theological interpretations of Kafka, in the last decade of his life he changed his mind. Arguing that theological ideas belong to Kafka's

<sup>11</sup> "Se han esbozado interpretaciones teológicas de su obra. No son arbitrarias [...] pero tampoco son muy útiles."

<sup>12</sup> "Kafka es el gran escritor clásico de nuestro atormentado siglo."

<sup>13</sup> "Y cuando Kafka hace referencias es profético. El hombre que está aprisionado por un orden, el hombre contra el Estado, ese fue uno de sus temas preferidos."



literary world, he wrote “one can define Kafka’s work as a parable or a series of parables whose theme is the moral relationship of the individual with God and with His incomprehensible universe” (Borges 1999c: 501). It took decades for Borges to express these views in his literary essays, but his literary imagination was ahead of his literary criticism: his mature assessments of Kafka are exemplified in “The Secret Miracle,” published in 1943. Indeed, there is no better commentary on this signature tale than Borges’ own observations regarding Kafka’s theological resonances, or his prophetic dimension regarding the nightmares of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Borges’ “The Secret Miracle,” can be read as a nightmare “that reality engenders” inspired by the historical nightmare of the Nazi occupation of Prague. And Borges’ protagonist, Jaromir Hladík, engages in a dialogue with “God and with His incomprehensible universe” when he prays for a “secret miracle” granted to him as he is about to be executed by a firing squad. His “miracle” entails the opportunity to finish a play called *The Enemies*, a work of literature that was not meant for posterity, or to please God: “he did not work for posterity, nor did he work for God, whose literary preferences were largely unknown to him” (Borges, 1998b: 162). It does not matter to him if his play has any literary merit (“he never asked himself if it was banal or admirable” [Borges 1998b: 160]), but he thinks that working on it may grant him “the possibility of rescuing (albeit symbolically) that which was fundamental to his life” (Borges 1998b: 160). In a dream he asks God for the time he needs “to complete that play that can justify me and justify Thee as well” (Borges, 1998b: 160).

Even if it takes place in the confines of a dream, Hladík’s contention that God would be justified if he were able to justify his own life, is the stuff of hubris. And yet it is also a way of expressing hope for some kind of redeeming grace for himself, while coping with an intolerable situation, of which he is a victim, involving the punishment of the guiltless. The theological notion of “justification” in “The Secret Miracle” has antecedents in the *Book of Job*, which Borges called “one of the essential books for humanity”<sup>14</sup> precisely because it addresses “the idea of God as unfathomable”<sup>15</sup> (Borges 1989c: 216). In the biblical narrative Job is described as a righteous man, and in Hebrew the notion of righteousness is related to the notion of “justification,” in the theological sense in which the word is used in Hladík’s conversation with God. Righteous Job remains righteous to the extent that he is unwilling to deny his God when deprived of health, family and fortune. But he feels unshakably *justified* protesting his fate, and *justified* in his conviction that he has done nothing wrong to deserve his punishments, against the claims of his neighbors who insist he must be guilty of something to have provoked the wrath of God. Job’s neighbors are incapable of distinguishing the punishment of the guilty from the punishment of the guiltless. As such they are incapable of grasping the theological issues

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<sup>14</sup> “[uno] de los libros esenciales de la humanidad”

<sup>15</sup> “Dios está más allá de todos los juicios humanos”



with which Job is grappling, namely, his attempt to understand the punishment of the guiltless, and by implication, the problem of evil. In the *Book of Job*, the question remains unanswered, underscoring the human inability to make sense of the universe, as well as related theological quandaries involving the disproportion between human and Divine understanding. The biblical Job and Borges' Hladík both experience this disproportion, even if they respond to it in different ways.

It is worth noting that in the original publication of the story Borges included an epigraph from a theological work, in which theologian and philosopher John Henry Newman discusses the fable of a monk who is detained "by the song of a bird for three hundred years, which to his consciousness passed as only one hour" (Newman 1903: 502). Borges wisely removed the epigraph, when he published the story in *Ficciones* (1944), one year later, because Newman discusses this fable in the larger context of a meditation on how eternity may be experienced by sinners. The epigraph could confound readers familiar with Newman's book who might take it as a way of hinting that Hladík may not be innocent, and this suggestion would be at cross-purposes with the story about the punishment of a guiltless man. Borges exchanged the epigraph of the original publication with a quotation from the *Qur'an*, in which, thanks to God's intervention, one hundred years of time is experienced as no more than one day by an individual who has a dialogue with God. Rather than using a quotation that might be wrongly interpreted as a meditation on sin and time, the definitive epigraph is consistent with the theological underpinnings of Borges' story, and it prefigures its protagonist's appeal to God, another commonality between the *Book of Job* and Borges' story. In their despair Job and Hladík make pleas to God for a respite before their inevitable doom. In a minor passage, Job imagines a conversation he might have with God, in which he requests a moment of happiness before his death, one that does not involve any action from God, other than to leave him alone or in peace, if only for a little while: "Let me be, that I may be happy for a moment, before I depart to a land of gloom, a land of deep darkness, never to return, a land of gathering shadows and deepening darkness" (*Job* 10: 21-23, *New English Bible*).

The *Book of Job* mattered to Borges, and it also matters to the literary criticism of Franz Kafka, including Max Brod's Kafka biography, which Borges consulted. Brod, who was Kafka's literary executor, argues that "the final conclusion arrived at in Job as in Kafka is the confirmation of the fact that the yardstick by which man works is not that by which measurements are taken in the world of the Absolute" (Brod 1997: 176). Brod also points out that "Kafka disputes with God as Job once did" (Brod 1997: 172). The disproportion between human and Divine understanding that Brod considers central to Kafka, in situations perceived as incomprehensible and unfair, even if the unfairness is the product of evil perpetrated by humans, is just as central to "The Secret Miracle." Kafka's Job-like characters and Borges' Hladík are guiltless. Their fate upsets them, and they can't justify it, but they do not blaspheme, as Job's wife would like her husband to



do to protest his treatment by God, and none of them give up. They all try to find solutions to deal with the contingencies they are facing, even as they are attempting to cope with a universe they don't fully grasp, but unlike Job they are not necessarily righteous, pious or even observant; they have personal weaknesses and flaws, which make them closer to each other than to their biblical antecedent.

In Borges' story, the fantastic circumstances that allow for a meaningful albeit secret respite from the tragic historical circumstances that will end his life allow an individual to experience the comfort of a private literary joy, of the kind Kafka mentions when discussing the miseries of life and the compensations of literature, with metaphors that come from criminal trials, incarcerations and executions, as in the following entries from his diaries:

If I am condemned, then I am not only condemned to die, but also condemned to struggle until I die. (Kafka 1965: 161)

The strange, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps saving comfort that there is in writing: it is a leap out of murderer's row. (Kafka 1965: 212)

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Borges published "The Secret Miracle" in 1943, as World War II was in its fourth year, but the story is set in 1939, before the Nazi invasion of Poland, at the time when Hitler's armies broke international accords that ceded the Sudetenland to Germany, annexing the entire former Czechoslovakia with impunity. The story begins in March 14, with the Nazi occupation of Prague, and ends two weeks later, on March 29, 1939, with the execution of its protagonist. The Argentine public that read the story in February 1943 in the literary journal *Sur*, was aware of the publication's stance against Nazism, as editor in chief Victoria Ocampo and other members of its board, including Borges, had published editorials and special issues to condemn the political and military objectives of authoritarian regimes and the local support for them in neutral Argentina, and they had deplored the invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland. In January 1943, one month before "The Secret Miracle" appeared in *Sur*'s February edition, the journal published a chilling report on Hitler's call for the total extermination of Eastern European Jewry, after Nazi propaganda cast responsibility on Jews for the defeat of German forces on the Russian front:

Hitler has ordered the total extermination of Eastern European Jews in countries occupied by Nazi Germany, and Jews are presently being transported to Poland, in gruesome conditions of horror and brutality. Jewish ghettos are being systematically cleared; Jews



who remain in good health are interned in forced labor camps; the sick are abandoned to die in the elements; and everyone else is being killed in mass executions.<sup>16</sup> ("Comentarios" 1943: 124<sup>17</sup>)

Borges' story about the arrest of a man in Prague by the Nazi occupying forces for the crime of being Jewish sent a message to his readers in 1943 that the murder of Jewish people was part and parcel of the Nazi project from the beginning of the war. The story is also a multilayered homage to Kafka, whose works were proscribed in Nazi Germany. In 1938, as Borges was about to publish his edited volume of *The Metamorphosis*, he wrote an article expressing alarm that literary histories published in Germany after Hitler came to power systematically excluded Jewish writers as well as other writers who did not align with his regime. Borges singles out Kafka in this piece, and he wrote about or translated most of the other writers he mentions:

Also obliterated are Franz Werfel, Alfred Döblin, Johannes Becher, Wilhelm Klemm, Gustav Meyrink, Max Brod, Franz Kafka, Gottfried Benn, Martin Buber, Albert Ehrenstein, Fritz von Unruh, Kasimir Edschmid, Lion Feuchtwanger, Arnold Zweig, Stefan Zweig, Erich Maria Remarque, and Bertolt Brecht....I do not want to list names; I need only recall that three of them—Becher, Döblin, Franz Kafka—belong to extraordinary writers and that, among the others there is not one that in all honesty should be excluded from a history of German literature. The (unreasonable) reasons for this manifold silence are evident: most of those eliminated are Jewish, none is a National Socialist. (Borges 1999a: 200-201)

In "The Secret Miracle" Borges fictionalizes the intermediary step from the banning of Jewish writers to Hitler's call for the extermination of Eastern European Jews: the detention and execution of writers for their religious background or political convictions. Jaromir Hladík fits both categories, as the son of a Jewish mother who signed a protest against the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938. The Gestapo officer assigned to his case takes note of his "Judaizing" publications, including an essay identifying Judaic elements in the writings of Jakob Böhme, a Lutheran theologian, but misjudges his standing or his fame. Hladík is not particularly influential or famous, but this does not change the point

<sup>16</sup> "Hitler ordenó [el total exterminio de los judíos en los países ocupados de la Europa Central] y ahora los judíos son transportados a Polonia, en espantosas condiciones de horror y brutalidad. Los ghettos judíos son sistemáticamente vaciados; a los judíos que aún conservan buena salud, se los somete a trabajos en los campos de concentración, hasta su muerte; a los enfermos, se los abandona para que perezcan en la intemperie; otros son ejecutados en masa."

<sup>17</sup> The editorial note is not signed by any individual as was the custom in the journal, but it appears in the section called "Comentarios," *Sur*, no. 100, January, 1943, p. 124.





that the officer was charged to identify and execute political dissidents and prominent Jews in occupied Prague.

On the eve of his execution, Hladík prays to God to be granted a year to finish his play, *The Enemies*; in a dream “an ubiquitous voice” tells him his wish has been granted. The next morning, as he is facing the firing squad, the “secret miracle” occurs: the “physical universe” (Borges 1998b: 161) comes to a stand-still, allowing him to finish his play, in an arrested state, without writing implements, because he was composing it in verse, and had memorized the sections of the work he had completed. As he puts the final touches on the play, his execution resumes, and he dies from the bullets of the firing squad.

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Many literary critics have noticed allusions to Kafka’s Prague in the story, starting with Hladík’s home address in Zeltnergasse, a street associated with Kafka and his family.<sup>18</sup> I would like to make a stronger claim, namely that the story’s protagonist, is a fictional amalgam of the lives of Kafka and of Borges himself. The creation of a literary alter-ego evoking the author is commonplace in Kafka’s novels, when his main protagonist is called “Mr. K.,” a conceit Borges used in his own way, in poems such as “Limits,” or narratives such as “The Double,” “Borges and I,” “The Conjectural Poem,” or “August 25, 1983” which rehearse different kinds of autobiographical projections or splitting, as when an autobiographical persona encounters his own self at a different stage of life, sometimes in a dream, or when he feels the blurring of the lines between his private and public sense of self, or between his dreams and awakenings; or when an individual pretends to be someone they are not, and speaks about himself in the third person, rather than the first. Borges imagines this sort of splitting in “Ein Traum” (A Dream), a 1976 poem with a German title, about a love triangle in which Kafka’s partner betrays him with his best friend, and all three characters in the dream know they are products of a dream by Kafka, aware of himself as the dreamer who can control aspects of his dream, and as a character of his own dream. In the same issue of *Sur* in which the “The Secret Miracle” appeared, Borges also published a review of a book by Silvina Ocampo, in which he credits Walt Whitman as originating contemporary uses of splitting in works of literature: “From the time Walt Whitman wrote vast poems about an imagined Walt Whitman, there

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<sup>18</sup> As Sarah Roger has pointed out, “Borges’ debt to Kafka is laid bare from the opening sentence of the story (Roger 2017: 106). For a helpful overview of Prague in Borges, and of Kafka in this particular story see Vrhel 1999: 439-449.



is hardly a writer who does not split in a *doppelgänger*.<sup>19</sup> (Borges 1943: 66). The kind of splitting that takes place in Borges' "Ein Traum" is similar to the plot of Jaromir Hladík's unfinished play, *The Enemies*, in which a love triangle turns out to be the product of his protagonist's dream-like delirium ("The play has not taken place; it is the circular delirium that Kubin endlessly experiences and reexperiences" [Borges 1998b: 160]). In the play it turns out that Kubin first appears as his rival, the Baron Römerstadt, and that both are products of Kubin's delirious imagination, in the same way that all of the characters of the triangle in Borges' "Ein Traum" are products of a dream by Kafka. In Hladík's play, there is another layer of splitting, as the jilted lover confuses his identity with the identity of his rival. In a shorter text, inspired by Kafka's Chinese parables, Borges makes an observation that would apply to *The Enemies*: "the real would confuse itself with the dreamt, or better said, the real was one of the configurations of the dream"<sup>20</sup> (Borges 1989b: 179).

In Borges' fictions inspired by the logic of a dream, two things can be one, and Borges takes this conceit to a dizzying level of complexity when he creates a composite character (who in turn creates another composite character in the fiction within the fiction), in a fictional world of dreams and nightmares within dreams and nightmares. The composite character of the fiction within the fiction is a dream-play in which Baron Römerstadt and Jaroslav Kubin<sup>21</sup> can be one, or the other, or both at the same time, and they are all played by one actor, playing multiple characters, one of whom turns out to be the dreamer of the entire drama. In the fiction proper, Borges has created Hladík, a character that combines elements drawn from his own biography, and that of Kafka, along with references to the literary works of both woven into the story, or attributed to the protagonist. In the story, Borges adopts and adapts plot elements, and even texts that come directly from Kafka's writings, and titles that happen to be amalgams of his own writings.

It may not be a coincidence that the first letter of the protagonist's name, Jaromir Hladík, is a "J" like the first letter of Borges' first name "Jorge," or that the last letter of his last name is "K," like Kafka; or that "J," is the first letter of "Jaroslav Kubin," the name of the protagonist of Jaromir Hladík's play, or that "K," the first letter of his character's last name coincides with Kafka's. It is also the case that the initials "J" and "K," correspond to

<sup>19</sup> "Desde que Walt Whitman redactó los vastos poemas del imaginario Walt Whitman, casi no hay escritor que no se desdoble en un *doppelgänger*."

<sup>20</sup> "Lo real se confundía con lo soñado o, mejor dicho, lo real era una de las configuraciones del sueño."

<sup>21</sup> I thank one of the blind readers of this piece for pointing out that "Kubin" was the last name of Alfred Kubin, a writer Kafka apparently admired who was also an artist and illustrator. I took a rapid glance at his only novel, *The Other Side. A Fantastic Novel*, originally published in 1908—a few years before Kafka published his first short stories—and noticed that the novel's protagonist travels to a realm, a dreamlike world in which characters appear to be able to enter each other's fantasies.



Joseph K., the name of Kafka's protagonist in *The Trial*. More importantly, Borges leaves several clues that connect the biography of his protagonist to Kafka's biography, and to his own. Kafka was 40 years old when he died in 1924, as is Jaromir Hladík when he dies in 1939. Borges was also 40 years old in 1939, when he had recently published an edited volume of Kafka's writings in Buenos Aires, after publishing a slate of articles about Kafka and some translations of his shorter pieces. Like Borges, Jaromir Hladík was born in 1899. Hladík sets the action of *The Enemies* in 1899, the year of his birth, even though the play is supposed to be a symbolic account of his adult life, which ends when he is granted the secret miracle in 1939. Jaromir Hladík published Expressionist poetry in 1924, the year of Kafka's death; and Borges was the first translator of German expressionistic poetry into Spanish. His engagements with German expressionistic poetry, including poems he composed in the expressionistic style of his own translations, concluded with the last essays he wrote on the subject in 1924, when he would have been working on his translation of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, if those who have contested his authorship of the translation are mistaken.

Some specific feelings Borges attributes to Hladík are identical with those he had attributed to Kafka, as an individual devoted to a literary life with a sense of ambivalent remorse about anything he wrote, and who was reluctant to publish. What Borges' narrator says about Hladík corresponds to what Borges wrote about Kafka's life:

Apart from a few friends and many routines, the problematic pursuit of literature constituted the whole of his life; like every writer he measured other men's virtues by what they had accomplished, yet asked that other men measure him by what he planned someday to do. All the books he had sent to the press left him with complex regret (Borges 1998b: 159).

Hladík is first introduced in the story as the author of the unfinished play *The Enemies* and author of *Vindication of eternity*, an essay whose title happens to be an amalgam of the titles of two essays by Borges: "A Vindication of the Kabbalah," which addresses Kabbalistic practices, and the "History of Eternity," which explores the possibility that time can stand still. The amalgam of these titles corresponds to Jewish mysticism and time, the two themes that prefigure the story's fantastic twist involving a mystical event that brings the physical universe to a standstill, allowing Hladík the time he needed to complete his unfinished play in his mind.

"The Secret Miracle" begins in the middle of the night of March 14, 1939, when Hladík is having a nightmare that incorporates rumblings coming from his street of Nazi tanks invading Prague, in a route that prominently features the corner of Zeltnergasse, where Kafka and his family had once resided. This beginning exemplifies Borges views on the nightmare, outlined in his essay on Kafka's literary nightmares:



The images of a nightmare are not the cause of the horror that is experienced, but its mere indicators and effects. For example, we are suffering from a chest discomfort and we justify it by means of the representation of a Sphynx that has settled on our chest. The discomfort generates the Sphynx, and not the opposite.<sup>22</sup> (Borges 2011a: 100)

The discomforting pressure in the chest that generates a nightmare in Borges' example is akin to the sounds of invading tanks that stimulate Hladík's dreamworld; this also goes for Borges' entire story, as the historical "nightmare" of the Nazi invasion generated the nightmarish resonances of the signature tale, which, at times, feels like the dream of a character attempting to escape an intolerable reality. On the surface Hladík's nightmare is about two families who have been playing a game of chess for centuries, but it is inspired by his anxieties regarding personal inadequacies, akin to Gregor Samsa of *The Metamorphosis*, a narrative whose setting was also inspired by the apartment of Kafka's family in the Zeltnergasse, where "The Secret Miracle" begins.

In his essay on Kafka and the nightmare, Borges cites an example from Wordsworth's *Prelude* in which a book is also a snail, to make the point that in a dream two different or incongruous things can be one and the same: "It is a book and it is not a book because it appears to be a snail, and it is both of these things and neither of them"<sup>23</sup> (Borges 2011a: 99). This phenomenon appears in stories in which Borges hints that his narrative may be a dream, as in "The Circular Ruins" with its "stone figure of a horse or a tiger" (Borges 1998a: 96) in the temple where a character who is the product of someone else's dream would like to dream another person into existence. In "The Secret Miracle" Hladík's nightmare involves his inability, in the dream, to remember the rules of chess, or what chess pieces look like, as clocks are ticking, adding to his anxiety that he has a limited amount of time to make a move in a high-stakes game, although he ignores the nature of those stakes. In the nightmare Hladík runs desperately in a rainy desert, feeling the urgency to make a move in a chess game taking place in a secret tower, so that the rainy desert and the secret tower are the incongruous settings of his dream, until he is awoken by sounds of Nazi tanks and voices of German officers that generated his nightmare in the first place:

The dreamer was running across the sand of a desert in the rain, but he could recall neither the figures nor the rules of chess. At that point, Hladík awoke. The din of the rain and the terrible clocks ceased. A rhythmic and unanimous sound, punctuated by the barking of

<sup>22</sup> "Las imágenes de la pesadilla no son la causa del horror experimentado, sino sus meros exponentes y efectos. Verbigracia, padecemos un malestar y lo justificamos mediante la representación de una esfinge que se ha acostado a meditar sobre nuestro abdomen. El malestar genera la esfinge, no la esfinge el horror."

<sup>23</sup> "Es un libro y no lo es, porque también semeja un caracol, y es ambas y ninguna de las dos cosas."



orders rose from the Zeltnergasse. It was sunrise, and the armored vanguard of the third Reich was rolling into Prague. (Borges 1998b: 157)

Within days of the occupation, someone has informed on Hladík, and he is promptly arrested by the Gestapo. To describe the circumstances of Hladík's arrest, Borges adjusts the first sentence of Kafka's *The Trial*, in a magisterial adaption:

*The Trial*: "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested." (Kafka 2023: 1)

"**The Secret Miracle**": "On the nineteenth [of March] the authorities received a report from an informer. That same day, toward dusk, Jaromir Hladík was arrested." (Borges 1998b: 157)

Borges' adjustment is more than a simple borrowing; it is a profound commentary that brings to the surface what Kafka could not make explicit, namely that he was living in an antisemitic milieu. In his Kafka biography Frederick Karl makes the point that in 1914-1915, when Kafka wrote the bulk of the manuscript of *The Trial*,

the buildup of pressures on Prague Jews was enormous. On every side, their loyalties were questioned, and their position was, in reality untenable. [...] That this sense of Jewish entrapment did not escape [Kafka] is clear, and every one of his works beginning in 1914 until his death can be read in one respect as part of his recognition of being trapped politically, socially, racially, and ethnically. (Karl 1993: 495)

The milieu Karl describes would later contribute to the antisemitic persecution of Jews in Prague, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, culminating in the atrocities the editors of *Sur* condemned in January 1943, one month before the publication of Borges' "The Secret Miracle" in February 1943. In his reworking of the first line of Kafka's *The Trial*, Borges underscores that Hladík was as much a victim of the antisemitic resentment of the local population that denounced him, as he was of the antisemitism of the Nazi invaders who killed him. Borges never makes it clear if Hladík is a Jew, or if he identifies as Jewish, even though his mother was Jewish and he has scholarly interests in Jewish themes, nor does he ever make it clear how Hladík makes a living. Nor does he seem to have any permanent affiliation to an institution of higher learning when he studied Jewish themes – like Kafka, or Borges, he probably does not – but he is identified as a Jew by the local informer who denounced him to the Gestapo investigators. The agent in charge of his case makes the following determinations: that Hladík is a Jew who signed a document against the Nazi incorporation of Austria, and that his Judaizing writings in the German language are potentially corrupting of German culture.

Before publishing "The Secret Miracle," Borges had called Kafka's *The Trial* a "hallucinatory book,"<sup>24</sup> in which a character subjected to a "ludicrous trial"<sup>25</sup> will never know the offense for which he is sentenced to death (Borges 1996b: 306). "The Secret Miracle" is also a "hallucinatory" narrative in which a character is subjected to a "ludicrous trial" and sentenced to death. In both Kafka's novel and Borges' story, their protagonists do not question their fate, but struggle to do find ways to survive and cope with situations whose causes they accept rather than deplore. Neither asks themselves why this is happening to them, even if what is happening to them causes them anguish.

Borges makes explicit the antisemitism of his protagonist's Prague milieu, but the charges laid against Hladík by the Nazi investigators are also identical to accusations laid against Borges himself in his native Argentina. Borges was accused of corrupting the Argentine youth with his cosmopolitan approach to literature, in a milieu in which cosmopolitanism was a dog-whistle for Judaism. The daily newspaper *Crisol* published an editorial against Borges, accusing him of "maliciously" hiding his Jewish ancestry:

We have acknowledged Borges's literary talent, which no one can deny. But we have also noticed his sordid morals, and his Jewish ancestry, maliciously hidden, but poorly dissimulated because even his poetry has the tonality of the psalms which characterize Hebrew poetry.<sup>26</sup> ("Nota editorial" 1934: 1)

The document Hladík signed protesting National Socialism pales in comparison to the articles Borges wrote and the manifestos he signed to condemn Nazi Germany. In May 1939, the year in which his story is set, Borges signed a document in a political pamphlet titled *The People Against the Nazi Invasion*. The document explicitly addresses the Nazi invasion of Prague and its global implications:

In the name of a pan-Germanic barbarism and of the racist national-socialist ideology, [Hitler's henchmen] aim to establish the hegemony of the Fuhrer from Berlin in the entire world. Hundreds of miles from Wilhelmstraße we in Argentina are also documenting the vast organization of Nazi penetration, which includes the moral conquest of the world.<sup>27</sup> (*El pueblo contra la invasión nazi* 1938: 21)

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<sup>24</sup> "libro alucinatorio"

<sup>25</sup> "disparatado proceso"

<sup>26</sup> "A Borges le hemos reconocido su valor literario, que nadie puede negarle, su sordidez moral, también pública y su ascendencia judía, maliciosamente oculta, pero mal disimulada, pues hasta sus poemas tienen ese acento sálmico característico de la poesía hebrea."

<sup>27</sup> "En nombre de la barbarie pangermánica, y de la ideología racista del nacional-socialismo, [los secuaces de Hitler desean] instaurar en todo el mundo la hegemonía del Fuhrer de Berlín. [...] No hay duda que la vasta organización de penetración nazi — que estamos documentando también los argentinos, a centenares de millas de la Wilhelmstrasse [que incluye] la conquista moral del mundo."



The “crimes” for which Hladík is arrested, investigated, convicted and executed, as well as his literary and scholarly, philosophical and theological interests, correspond to views Borges expressed, with the difference that they pale in comparison. Borges’ literary interests and political engagements were well more sustained, encompassing and wide-ranging.

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If Borges draws on *The Trial* to develop the theme of Hladík’s arrest, he draws on another work of literature, Ambrose Bierce’s “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” to develop another conceit of his story: the expansion of time in the mind of an individual who is about to be executed. In Bierce’s story the dilation of time is unambiguously triggered by a process of wishful thinking whereas in Borges’ story the physical universe may have actually frozen for everyone except for Hladík’s mind.

But even the fantastic turn of Borges’ story--the moment in which the physical world stands still in order for Hladík to work on his play--could have been inspired by a moment in Bierce’s story when everything appears to be frozen, as a sergeant gives the order to execute the protagonist Farquhar: “The company faced the bridge, staring stonily, motionless. The sentinels, facing the banks of the stream, might have been statues adorning the bridge.” (Bierce 1985: 184) Another aspect of Bierce’s story that might have inspired Borges, is the dreamlike quality of the narrative, as when Farquhar notices details of insects and leaves of grass from afar, or when he “distinctly hear[s] whispers in an unknown tongue” (Bierce 1985: 191), or the uncanny feeling he has fallen into a deep asleep while walking from a river to his home as he traverses unpopulated roads that are as wide as city streets.

Borges offers an oblique salute to Bierce’s story, but also to Kafka’s *The Trial*, when Hladík expresses the arbitrary thoughts that dying by a firing squad is intolerable, and that he would not have been afraid to die by hanging, decapitation, or having his throat slit, as if any one of these methods of execution were any less daunting.<sup>28</sup> The mention of “hanging” alludes to Bierce’s story, as Farquhar in Bierce’s story has an inverse set of feelings and scruples: “‘To be hanged and drowned,’ he thought, ‘that is not so bad; but I do not wish to be shot’” (Bierce, 1985: 188). The mention of dying with a knife at one’s throat is an allusion to Kafka, as this is the way Joseph K. is executed in *The Trial*.

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<sup>28</sup> “He wouldn’t have quailed at being hanged, or decapitated, or having his throat slit, but being shot by a firing squad was unbearable.” (Borges 1998b: 158)



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The narrator of "The Secret Miracle" considers it ironic that Hladík's "secret miracle" would not have taken place without the impersonal aspects of the Nazi bureaucratic machine that brings his life to an end. The Gestapo agent who condemns Hladík aims "to work impersonally and deliberately, as vegetables do, or planets"<sup>29</sup> (Borges 1989b: 158). This is why rather than executing Hladík immediately after his sentencing, he schedules the execution in ten days' time. Initially, Hladík is intensely focused on his fears and hopes for survival, but on the eve of his execution he has come to terms with the inevitability of his death. At that juncture, he turns his thoughts to his unfinished play, the only writing project that ever truly mattered to him. He knows that his scholarly pieces were perfunctory, feels no affection for the poems for which he is remembered in some anthologies as a minor poet, and is well aware that his translation of the *Sefer Yezirah*, a major book of Jewish mysticism, was decidedly sloppy. In that translation some of his choices were conjectures, others were downright arbitrary, and his sense of fatigue prompted him to publish a manuscript that was not ripe for publication.<sup>30</sup> But he does not want to revisit, rework or think about any of his publications. Instead, he wants to finish *The Enemies*, a play about a love triangle in which he identifies with the jilted character, a play tinged with an atmosphere of paranoia, and full of contradictions intended to suggest it is a complex dream.

*The Enemies* is set in a dangerous world of intrigue, in which dreams and realities become confused. Its first scene takes place in the Hradcany, the castle district of Prague, in the library of Baron Römerstadt, when he welcomes a strange visitor, while Hungarian music can be heard playing in the background, suggesting a period of political and military tensions when Prague was the site of geopolitical conflicts. The Baron appears to be involved in high-stakes political and diplomatic intrigue in which he even kills another individual. Other mysterious characters visit him, and he is certain that all of his visitors are secret enemies. His visitors speak about the woman to whom he is engaged, Julia de Weidenau, and about Jaroslav Kubin, who is also in love with her. The excessive number of inconsistencies and incongruities in the story belie the play's coherence but not its dreamlike quality, akin, at times, to another work of literature Borges admired, set in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Prague, *The Golem*, by Gustav Meyrink. The dream-like qualities of Hladík's play also make it possible to imagine that the political and criminal intrigue of the play might be subterfuges to the jilted lover's painful feelings of humiliation. As it turns out,

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<sup>29</sup> "de obrar impersonal y pausadamente, como los vegetales y los planetas"

<sup>30</sup> The three elements he regretted from the translation were his "negligencia, la fatiga, y la conjetura" [negligence, fatigue and conjectures] (Borges 1989a: 509-510).





the protagonist had been dreaming all along, and he is not Römerstadt, the man who will marry Julia de Weidenau, but Jaroslav Kubin, the man she had rejected.

There are clear suggestions in the story that like Jaroslav, the protagonist of his play, Jaromir, its author, has also suffered from unrequited love, and never got over the pain of rejection.<sup>31</sup> As Jaromir is awaiting his execution, but before he is granted the miraculous opportunity to finish his play, he tries but is unable to remember the woman who inspired the female protagonist of his play: "Vainly he tried to recall the woman that Julia de Weidenau had symbolized..." (Borges 1998b: 161) Provocatively, Jaroslav, the name of the jilted character in the fiction within the fiction, contains the first three letters of the name of Jaromir, the author of the fiction within the fiction, and his mother's last name "Jaroslavski" contains the entire name of the fictional character with whom he identifies. One could add that "Julia" was the name of Kafka's mother, and also of the female character of "Fratricide," a short story by Kafka about a love triangle, which is the most likely antecedent to Borges's variation of the theme, in his story, "The Intruder." Borges was well aware of the tensions between Kafka and Kafka's authoritarian father, and he was perhaps also aware of Kafka's mother's attempts to temper the anger of her husband against their children. Notwithstanding Borges' resistance to Freud's theories, which he would sometimes rebuke in essays about Kafka, Borges has created a wildly provocative Freudian dream-like situation in which Jaromir identifies with a character who is symbolically conceived (figuratively and literally) the year of his own birth, by a woman who has sexually rejected him; and wants to bring this story to closure, to better process what is fundamental about his own life.

As much as this story is intertwined with Borges' engagements with Kafka, as much as it blends so many elements of Kafka's and Borges' experiences, its ending is decisively Borgesian. Like the Mesoamerican priest in "The Writing of the God," who deciphers a sacred book in his solitude, or Pierre Menard, who finds a way to produce a text that is syntactically identical to texts that are already in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Jaromir Hladík immersed himself in a literary project that matters only to himself, a project not intended for publication, or for anyone else's eyes or tastes, including God's. Borges gives clear indications that Hladík was content while working on the project, but it is unclear if he made good on his original intention, namely "the possibility of rescuing (albeit symbolically) that which was fundamental to his life" (Borges 1998b: 158). Nothing in the description of the play suggests anything other than the banal feelings of paranoia of an obsessive individual suffering from mental health issues associated to his romantic failures. Even as he borrows a few details from the frozen outside world, as he makes slight adjustments to describe the physical appearance of a character, the basic conceit of

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<sup>31</sup> Edwin Williamson has made the most sustained case about the importance of this theme in the life of Borges, particularly regarding his relationship to Norah Lange. See Williamson 2004.



the play, and its form, were both fully fleshed-out before the Nazi occupation of Prague. There is no hint he added anything substantive. If he did, Borges' narrator does not share what those additions might have been. It would even be possible to suggest an understandable moral failure on Hladík's behalf, that he appears to give no thought to others who may be suffering from the Nazi occupation, including his own acquaintances, if it weren't for the fact that nothing in his trajectory suggests he had a particularly strong moral compass to begin with. The great irony of Borges' story involves the extraordinary banality of the contents of the play Hladík was able to finish in his mind, at least to the extent that the play's details are summarized in the story. That being said, it is impossible for readers of the story not to gain a measure of emphatic satisfaction that Hladík was able to finish his literary project in the allotted period of time, and that he had a respite from the horrors of the Nazi occupation, even if he did not give much thought to them. Borges' story avoids bathos by honoring the dignity of the everyday, commonplace or even the special private experiences of the guiltless, those who were killed in the barbaric crimes the story is denouncing, especially those whose lives are unremarkable.

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