

THE ENIGMAS OF BORGES, AND  
THE ENIGMA OF BORGES

Peter Gyngell, B.A.

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## PREFACE

A number of the quoted texts were published originally in English; I have no Spanish, and the remaining texts are quoted in translation.

Where possible, translations of Borges' fictions will be taken from *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969* [Borges, 1971]; they are limited in number but, because of the involvement of Borges and Norman Thomas di Giovanni, they are taken to have the greater authority; in the opinion of Emir Rodriguez Monegal, a close friend of Borges, these translations are 'the best one can ask for' [461]; furthermore, this book contains Borges' 'Autobiographical Essay', together with his Commentaries on each story. Otherwise, the translations made by Andrew Hurley and published in *Collected Fictions* [Borges, 1998a] will be used.

Translations of Borges' poetry will be taken primarily from *Selected Poems 1923-1967* [Borges, 1972], since these translations again result from the collaboration of di Giovanni and Borges; others will be taken from *Selected Poems* [Borges, 2000a], and from the papers given at a symposium on Borges' poetry at the University of Arkansas in 1983 [Cortínez; 97-347]. Having no Spanish, I shall generally confine myself to commenting on *what* Borges says in his poetry, rather than *how* he says it.

Translations of Borges' non-fictions will be taken from *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952* [Borges, 1964] and from *The Total Library: Non-Fiction, 1922-1986* [Borges, 2001].

## INTRODUCTION

The enigmas mentioned in the first part of the title of this thesis arise from a study of Borges' fictions. Some result from Borges' occasional desire to hoodwink his readers, but most of them arise from an apparent unwillingness or inability on the part of many of his critics to understand those stories fully.

The enigma that Borges himself presents, however, is of an entirely different nature; it stems primarily from his apparent inability to deal appropriately with many of the topics that he addresses not only in some of his lectures and essays, but also in a small number of his fictions.

The 'enigmas' in Part 1 are therefore illusions, while the 'enigma' in Part 2 is very real. In this thesis my aim is to demystify some examples of the former, and to examine some aspects of the latter.

The thesis is therefore in two parts. The first, which deals primarily with the enigmas presented by Borges' fiction, will be discussed in Chapters 1-4. It will be suggested that the principal characteristics of his fiction are wit, a fascination with death, a sense of doubt, and a deep appreciation of humility. No poetry will be quoted in Chapter 1, which deals with his wit, since his poetry is not relevant to that topic; but the poems quoted in Chapters 2 and 3 are intended to assist in establishing the importance and depth of, first, his obsession with death, and secondly, his 'precious gift' of doubt, as Borges put it. Some of the fictions discussed in Chapter 4, which illustrate his views on humility, are, I suggest, amongst his finest.

The second part of the thesis, dealing with the enigma which Borges himself presents, will be addressed in Chapters 5 and 6.

A more detailed résumé of the contents of the individual chapters will be provided later; before that, however, it is necessary to consider certain topics which are relevant to a number of the chapters.

To assume that any study of Jorge Luis Borges should commence at his birth in 1899, or even with his first appearance in print only ten years later, would be a mistake. As far as Borges was concerned, his ancestors were his beginning. It is necessary to study them briefly, if Borges' work is to be put into perspective. The following details are provided by his three biographers, Monegal, Williamson and Woodall, and by Borges' own 'Autobiographical Essay' [1971; 135-185].

According to Williamson [3], the ancestors of Borges 'were among the first Europeans to arrive in America'. In the century preceding Borges' birth some of his maternal ancestors were distinguished soldiers; in the early 1800's Manuel Isodoro Acevedo, the grandfather of Borges' mother, fought in the wars of independence against the Spanish forces; in 1820 Borges' great-great-uncle, Miguel Estanislao Soler, was involved in the same wars, and became governor of Buenos Aires. Soler's daughter married Isodoro de Acevedo Laprida, who 'had fought in the civil war against Rosas, the tyrant who ruled Argentina' for seventeen years [Monegal; 4]; and their daughter, Leonor, who was born in 1876, was to become Borges' mother.

Borges' paternal grandfather, who later became Colonel Francisco Borges, had been involved in the same wars from the age of fifteen; later he fought in Paraguay, and in frontier wars in the south and east. His wife, however, was an

English woman called Frances (Fanny) Haslam; and her father, Edward Young Haslam, was a distinguished journalist. He was also distinguished as one of the first recipients of ‘an innovative operation performed on his eyes: his condition, unfortunately for his daughter, her son and then her grandson [Borges] was, like colour-blindness, heritable’ [Woodall; 7].

Fanny Haslam had two sons; the elder followed his father into the military; the younger was to become Borges’ father. Fanny Haslam’s marriage to Colonel Borges did not last long; he was killed in a military uprising only seven months after his second son’s birth. She was a great reader, Borges tells us, as was Borges’ father; it was Borges’ father who showed him the paradoxes of Zeno, which intrigued his son throughout his life [Borges, 1971; 138].

Borges’ mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges, was not only a great reader but also translated books by Hawthorne, Herbert Read, Melville, Virginia Woolf and Faulkner [Borges, 1971; 139], as well as by Katherine Mansfield — ‘probably her best translation’, according to Williamson [372]. Woodall describes her as Borges’ ‘life partner’ [242], her death preceding that of her son by only eleven years.

As will be seen, his military heritage was to have a considerable influence on Borges’ writing, not only in his fictions but even more frequently in his poems; in a paper on one book of Borges’ poetry, *The Iron Coin* [Borges, 2000a; 369-387], one critic writes of Borges’ ‘awareness of his ancestors as being part of himself’ [Poust; 311].

But it will also be seen that his less warlike grandfather on his mother’s side — in particular, the contents of that grandfather’s library — as well as his

ever worsening eyesight were also to be of considerable influence. Borges' father inherited that library; in his Prologue to the book of poems *The Self and the Other*, published in 1964, Borges tells his readers: 'Less than by the classroom I received my education in a library — my father's library; despite the vicissitudes of time and geography, I believe that I have not read those esteemed volumes in vain' [2000a; 149]. In a poem entitled 'Poem of the Gifts' [Borges, 1972; 117-119; tr. Ben Bellitt] he describes himself as one 'for whom Paradise was always a metaphor, / An image of libraries'. Later, in his *Autobiographical Essay*, Borges writes: 'If I were asked to name the chief event in my life, I should say my father's library. In fact, I sometimes think that I have never strayed outside that library' [1971; 140]. According to Williamson [35], 'the little boy would spend hours lying on the floor with his head stuck in a book'. It was partly because he spent so much time there, Borges tells us, that he was 'expected to be a writer' [1971; 142]; it was also the reason for his repeated statement during the seminars at the University of Arkansas in 1983 that 'I've done most of my reading in English' [Cortínez; 9; 72].

At first Borges lost his sight only gradually, but it left him almost entirely in 1955; according to Monegal, he was 'the sixth generation of the Borgeses to be so afflicted' [5]. This process affected not only *what* he wrote — his poems refer often to his blindness — but also *how* he wrote; for a time he became addicted to the sonnet-form, since he could more easily remember the lines that he had formed in his head [Borges, 1971; 177].



I shall suggest that there are two reasons why it has become necessary to demystify Borges' fictions; first, because Borges went out of his way to conceal his intentions, especially in those earlier fictions that are dealt with in Chapter 1; and secondly, because a great deal of the commentary which his fictions have inspired has had the effect of making many of them appear unnecessarily enigmatic.

Borges himself sums it up in these words: 'I wonder whether our modern worship of complexity is not wrong' [1971; 190]. In his Foreword to Ronald Christ's *The Narrow Act* he states: 'I am often asked what my message is; the obvious answer is that I have no message. I am neither a thinker nor a moralist' [Christ; xv]; and in an interview that he gave to Richard Burgin, with whom he had 'more than a professional relationship', Borges said that his critics 'all make things too self-conscious and too intricate at the same time, no? Don't you think so, no?' [Borges, 1998b; ix; 20].

In *Borges on Writing* [Borges, 1994], consisting of transcripts of the seminars at Columbia University which he conducted in 1971, this point is made very clearly. One of its editors, Norman Thomas di Giovanni, who served for eight years as Borges' translator and literary agent according to Monegal [451], states: 'If you once read what the professors say about [Borges'] work, you won't translate another line. They make such a fuss about hidden meanings' [Borges, 1994; 131]. Later di Giovanni comments:

I think that too much gibberish is praised as 'imaginative' and 'poetic'. Perhaps this is the fault of professors and pseudoscholars who look at writing through microscopes, placing too much emphasis on single words and abstractions and refusing to believe that writers write specifically about specific things ... I think one of the problems is that a lot of the early translators were intimidated

by Borges' reputation for being deep. They equated being deep with being obscure [Borges, 1994; 156-157].

As if to underline this point, Borges mentions in his 'Autobiographical Essay' that 'a sham literary feud was cooked up in Buenos Aires ... This sham is now taken into serious consideration by 'credulous universities'. But it was partly publicity, partly a boyish prank' [Borges, 1971; 165].

Di Giovanni illustrates the distinction between the readers that Borges did *not* have in mind and those that he *did* have in mind by mentioning Alastair Reid's first translation of Borges' poem 'A Page to Commemorate Colonel Suárez, Victor at Junín', which made it clear that Reid did not have the required 'historical and biographical information' [Borges, 1994; 148] to understand the poem fully. But such historical knowledge, Borges quickly added, was 'all taken for granted' [149] by the poet. In other words, his intended readers — perhaps 'audience' would be the more appropriate word — were his fellow-countrymen.

As the next few paragraphs will show, Borges assumed that his readers would consist primarily of sophisticated Argentines; first, the readers of the many journals in which he was involved as editor and/or contributor — *Prisma*, founded in 1921, and lasting two issues; the first *Proa*, of which only three numbers were published; the second *Proa*, which lasted fifteen issues; the Saturday supplement of a yellow-press daily, *Crítica*; a popular society weekly, *El Hogar*; a pseudo-scientific magazine, *Urbe*; and *Destiempo*, a magazine that lasted only three issues [Borges, 1971; 163-164, 166-168, 173]; and, secondly, those whom he met frequently in Buenos Aires for lengthy literary debates, of which he tells us: 'We met on Saturday evenings at a café ... in the Plaza del Once.

There we would talk until daybreak' [1971; 156] — in other words, those who could be relied upon to appreciate his jokes and understand his many references to the geography and history of Argentina. The implications of this statement are of considerable importance in any attempt to understand Borges' writings — whether fictional, non-fictional, or poetic.

Unintentionally, Borges demonstrated the truth of this in 1925. He had published a set of essays entitled *Inquisitions*, but he subsequently took considerable trouble to disown them, buying up as many copies as he could in order to destroy them [Borges, 1964; ix]. Such an exercise would have been futile if Borges had not assumed that most, if not all, of the copies of that book had remained in or around Buenos Aires.

And how did Borges see his fellow-countrymen? In his essay on 'Our Poor Individualism' he says that, to the Argentine, the state is 'an inconceivable abstraction'. He goes on:

The Argentine can think only in terms of a personal relationship ... One night of Argentine literature is enough to confirm this: that desperate night when a rural police sergeant, shouting that he would not condone the crime of killing a brave man, began to fight alongside the deserter Martín Fierro against his own men ... For the European the world is a cosmos where each person corresponds intimately to the function he performs; for the Argentine it is a chaos [Borges, 1964; 33-34].

Borges tells the story of this 'rural police sergeant' in 'The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)' [1971; 54-57]. Cruz was a man who came to understand 'that his real destiny was as a lone wolf, not a gregarious dog' [57]. In Borges' Commentary on this story he writes: 'In the dramatic moment when ... Cruz finds

out who he is and refuses to act against Martín Fierro, there may be something deeply and unconsciously Hispanic' [1971; 196].

His Commentary adds even more light on the subject. It identifies the tricks he was obliged to play to ensure that his readers did not recognise the involvement of Cruz and of one of Argentine's national heroes, Martín Fierro, until the last possible moment, because the facts were well known to those who had read 'the gauchesco poem *Martín Fierro*' [Borges, 1971; 195]; clearly, Borges took this knowledge for granted.

It is interesting that Alberto Manguel, who, when young, was Borges' constant companion for four years, and who later became an internationally acclaimed author, tells his readers that Hernández' poem *Martín Fierro* was the book that 'the adolescent Borges chose to take with him on board ship' — despite his mother's disapproval — when the family sailed to Europe shortly before WW1 [Manguel; 29].

In his remarks on 'Men Fought', Borges tells the reader: 'In it I was trying to tell a purely Argentine story in an Argentine way. This story I have been retelling, with small variations, ever since. It is the tale of the motiveless, or disinterested, duel — of courage for its own sake' [Borges, 1971; 160-161].

In his Commentary on 'The Other Death' he talks of seeing 'in a setting of that backwoods civil war, the gaucho idea of courage as the one cardinal virtue' [1971; 198].

Eliot Weinberger, in his Introduction to *The Total Library*, makes the same point: 'Borges was writing for Argentines about Argentina ... [I]t is

important to note ... that Borges was an active participant in his national culture' [Borges, 2001; xvi].

In his essay *The Four Cardinal Points of Borges*, Donald Yates, one of the editors of *Labyrinths* and a friend of Borges' for many years, states: 'If Borges has any identity whatever, it is as an Argentine, and ... that has made all the difference' [Yates, 1971; 26]. Sarlo approaches the same issue from a different aspect: 'Borges could not but feel the problem of a culture which was defined as European but which was not altogether so, because it was developed in a peripheral country and blended with the criollo world' [Sarlo, 1993; 36].

In the Introduction to the edition of *Selected Poems 1923-1967* which was published by Allen Lane in 1972, di Giovanni tells us [xxiv] of an occasion on which Borges pursued this desire to please his fellow-countrymen to excess: 'During one period, Borges confided to me, he had laid his hands on a dictionary of Argentinisms and worked in so many fancy local words that his own countrymen barely understood him'.

Far from looking for readers outside Argentina, Borges appears to have had no ambition to seek fame overseas prior to his meeting di Giovanni. According to Monegal, 'Borges' shyness ... went so far as to prevent the production and distribution of [his] books' [269]. It was only in the early 1970's, when Borges had passed his seventieth birthday, and when di Giovanni began to take care of Borges' authorial rights in England and the USA, that Borges earned 'a substantial income for the first time in his life' [Monegal; 459].

However, while it is important to recognise the readers whom Borges took for granted, those readers are not to be regarded merely as passive recipients of

his writings. For Borges, the reader contributes as much as anyone else to the literary experience.

For example, a study of the views expressed by many of those who have commented on Borges will demonstrate that they offer a wide variety of interpretations; but Borges would accept all of them. In one of the 'Discussions' that took place at the University of Arkansas in 1983 Borges was asked: 'Does a book have any meaning other than the one you bring to it?', to which he replied: 'I suppose a book has a different meaning to each reader. It's changing all the time. It's growing like a plant, like a wilderness. It keeps on growing, and evolving, throughout time' [Cortínez; 29].

His sonnet 'To Manuel Mujica Lainez' [Borges, 2000a; 375; tr. Eric McHenry] makes the same point:

The eternal Writing, Isaac Luria maintains,  
Has many meanings, each authentic as the next,  
True to whomever is the reader.

Borges, in his review of Edward Shanks' study of Rudyard Kipling, states that 'in art nothing is more secondary than the author's intentions' [2001, 250; tr. Suzanne Jill Levine]. Borges opens his Foreword to *Selected Poems 1923-1967* with: 'First and foremost, I think of myself as a reader, then as a poet, then as a prose writer' [1972; xv]. But in *This Craft of Verse* he goes further: 'I think of writing as being a kind of collaboration ... the reader does his part of the work; he is enriching the book' [Borges, 2000c; 119]. Unfortunately, Sturrock interprets this negatively: 'What we perceive, therefore, as readers is all that there is' [23].

We should also note Borges' comment in one of his essays on the problems of translation, 'The Homeric Versions': 'The concept of the 'definitive text' corresponds only to religion or to exhaustion' (2001; 69; tr. Esther Allen].

In this thesis it is not meant to give Borges unstinted praise. The process of demystifying Borges' enigmas requires that the sometimes heretical opinions offered by J. M. Coetzee, James Woodall and Colin Wilson should be taken into account. Coetzee's view of Borges is that '[t]he stories that had made him famous had been written in the 1930's and 1940's'; and that, by 1961, when Borges shared the inaugural Prix Formentor with Samuel Beckett, 'he had lost his creative drive and had furthermore become suspicious of these earlier "baroque" pieces. Though he lived until 1986, he would only fitfully reproduce their intellectual daring and intensity' [Coetzee, 2001; 165].

Woodall, in his biography of Borges, implicitly supports Coetzee's view. Discussing 'Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', which is included in *The Garden Of Forking Paths*, published in 1941, he writes: 'The joke ... is a brilliant one ... The note he hit very precisely ... he would go on to multiply, distort and amplify over the next ten to fifteen years' [1996; 114]. But, we should note, *only* over the next ten to fifteen years — i.e., in *Et Cetera*, *The Garden Of Forking Paths*, *Artifices*, and in *The Aleph* [Borges, 1998a; 53-63; 65-128; 129-180; 181-288].

This thesis will, in general, support Woodall's view. For example, 'The Congress' [Borges, 1998a; 422-436], a story that appears in *The Book of Sand* [Borges 1998a; 409-485], published in 1975, and — excepting only 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' — the longest of the *Collected Fictions*, appears to be a laboured

attempt to recreate the inventiveness that Borges displayed unfailingly in the earlier period that Woodall mentions; and it is widely acknowledged that during that earlier period Borges wrote some of the greatest fiction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Colin Wilson goes further than Woodall and Coetzee; he states that Borges' 'central aim as a writer [was to] undermine the 'order' of the all-too-predictable modern world', but that Borges was

a fine writer, a fascinating writer, but not a really important writer ... He is *not* a thinker, of any description at all ... [H]is sense of the unreality of time is caused by the fact that he has spent most of his life marking time — drifting without a purpose [71; 76-77; Wilson's italics].

To some extent Borges agreed with Wilson: 'I am not a thinker. I am merely a man who has tried to explore the literary possibilities of metaphysics and of religion' [1972; xv]. This issue will be addressed more fully in Chapter 6.

Despite Wilson's acknowledgement of Borges' 'impish Spike-Milliganish\* sense of humour' [71] he generally seems to be unaware of Borges' wit. He accuses Borges of Conradian 'gloom, pessimism, fatalism' [75]; but, as I hope Chapter 3 will confirm, 'doubt' — in all its many varieties — might be the more appropriate word.

However, I shall suggest that Borges' wit underscores many of his best-known fictions. This characteristic of Borges has been widely acknowledged. In

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\*Between short periods in a mental asylum, Spike Milligan wrote some of the most witty — and, sometimes, the most bizarre — radio programmes (*The Goon Show*) ever broadcast by the BBC.



his essay *At Work with Borges* di Giovanni speaks of Borges' 'irrepressible boyish humour' [1971; 70]; and in *The Lesson of the Master* di Giovanni tells us:

Whim, caprice, and daydreams guided him, even in his private life ... Writers on Borges have taken him far more seriously than he took himself ... [S]o po-faced are these exegetes that to a man (or woman) they miss the point that Borges was one of the great comic writers of our time [2003; 47-48].

Borges' wit is sometimes — but not often — genuinely funny; sometimes Borges fabricates hoaxes; sometimes his humour takes the form of satire, and sometimes of mockery. To suggest, as I shall, that stories such as 'The Garden of Forking Paths' and 'The Aleph' are hoaxes is, perhaps, heresy; but heresy and heretics were always favourite topics with Borges.

Borges makes this statement in his Commentary on 'The Immortals':

Bioy [Casares] and I had invented a new way of telling gruesome and uncanny tales. It lay in understating the grimness ... while playing up certain humorous aspects — a kind of graft between Alfred Hitchcock and the Marx Brothers. This not only made for more amusing and less pretentious writing, but at the same time underlined the horror [Borges, 1971; 204].

Speaking about 'The Other Duel' [then entitled 'The End of the Duel'] during one of the seminars at Columbia University, he said: 'I thought of it as being a grim story, and I made it into a joke to make it still more grim. I invented some people telling the story in a comic way in order to make it harder and more pitiless' [Borges, 1994; 47].

Di Giovanni is right to point out that Borges' wit is insufficiently recognised; but this is also true of his obsession with death and of his sense of doubt. This point is especially relevant to Borges' poetry, which, as I hope to

demonstrate in Chapters 2 and 3, provides considerable evidence of these characteristics.

It will already be apparent that considerable store is being laid on the opinions expressed by di Giovanni, and this will continue to be the case throughout the thesis. Many critics and their opinions are referred to, but di Giovanni's opinions will be questioned less frequently than those of some other critics. It is necessary to justify this reliance, and perhaps no better justification can be offered than to illustrate the reliance that Borges himself placed on di Giovanni.

The first such illustration was the collaboration which they demonstrated in the seminars that Borges gave at Columbia University in 1971, and which were published in 1973 under the title *Borges on Writing* [Borges; 1994]. There were three sessions; and, as we are advised in the Introduction,

[f]or the fiction session, di Giovanni read the story line by line, and Borges interrupted when he wished to comment on it ... For the poetry meeting the same method was followed ... The translation seminar naturally involved di Giovanni more intimately as a participant' [Borges, 1994; 10].

It was di Giovanni who conducted all three seminars, with Borges, after a short introductory talk, always by his side and eager to contribute.

The second illustration of the close cooperation that existed between di Giovanni and Borges is to be found in the preparation of *Selected Poems 1923-1967* [Borges, 1972]. In his Foreword Borges writes [xiii-xiv]:

When this book was begun, some three years ago in Cambridge, it was the first time I had ever taken a hand in the translation of any of my own work. Di Giovanni and I have gone very thoroughly over

each piece, each line, and each word; the fact that I am not only a collaborator but also the writer has given us greater freedom, since we are less tied to verbal precision than to inner meanings and intentions.

One of the more remarkable examples of this collaboration is described by di Giovanni in these words:

Poets whose knowledge of Spanish was little, or nonexistent, or out of practice received line-for-line and word-for-word transliterations, together with any other aids — such as notes, suggestions, or sources — that Borges or I could give ... [W]here passages were exceptionally difficult, as in so much of Borges' earlier poetry, these hard lines might be spelled out word for word [Borges, 1972; xix-xx].

It is particularly interesting that, as di Giovanni tells us, the twelve translators involved in the creation of *Selected Poems 1923-1967* were chosen not primarily because of their knowledge of Spanish but because they were poets [Borges, 1994; 138]; indeed, some of those translators — Richard Wilbur and John Updike, for example — had no knowledge of Spanish.

At a seminar in the University of Arkansas in 1983 Borges makes an interesting and relevant point: 'I think a translator should be a poet in his own right ... I think a poem should be recreated. If not, the whole thing is merely pedantic' [Cortínez; 85].

The following words in di Giovanni's Introduction to *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, concerning their first meeting, are also relevant:

'What I liked about you, di Giovanni,' Borges confided to me ... 'was that there at Harvard you were the only person who took me seriously as a poet'. 'But I see you as a poet, Borges'. 'Yes,' he said, 'I see myself as a poet — that's our link' [Borges, 1972; xx].

Perhaps it is not surprising that Borges described di Giovanni to his publisher as the ‘onlie begetter’ of *Selected Poems 1923-1967* [di Giovanni, 2003; 10].

The third illustration of their close relationship is a very different one. In *The Lesson of the Master* di Giovanni tells of his first meeting with Borges in Cambridge, MA., while Borges was giving the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University in 1967-1968; the story is told in the first section of the book entitled *In Memory of Borges* [di Giovanni, 2003; 16-43]. The author found Borges a most unhappy man; Borges’ marriage to Elsa Astete Millán only four months earlier was already under stress. Woodall quotes di Giovanni as saying that Borges ‘had a lousy marriage’, and states that Borges ‘never did explain anything to Elsa; instead he poured out his heart to di Giovanni’ [Woodall; 219; 230].

By May 1970, di Giovanni tells us, Borges was ‘in a fit of despair ... because Borges could no longer bear life at home’ [2003; 39]. Di Giovanni immediately took steps to resolve Borges’ dilemma. Since divorce was not permitted in Argentina, di Giovanni arranged for a lawyer to organize a legal separation; and on July 7 he and Borges flew out of Buenos Aires. ‘Like good conspirators we allowed no one knowledge of the whole plan’, writes di Giovanni [2003; 41]. Elsa knew nothing of these developments until the pair had left.

They did not return to Buenos Aires until the early days of August; at this point, according to Woodall [231], Elsa ‘disappeared from his life’. Di Giovanni finishes the story with this apt reminiscence: “Here in Argentina,’ Borges had told

me on my very first morning in Buenos Aires, ‘friendship is perhaps more important than love’ [2003; 43].

It would be easy to give many more illustrations of the strong bond that existed between Borges and di Giovanni; indeed, Woodall devotes one complete chapter to the subject [221-239]. They worked very closely together in Buenos Aires for four years; and even after di Giovanni had left they continued to collaborate for another four years.

Jason Wilson [2006; 141] describes him as ‘a crucial figure in lifting Borges out of his gloom and sense of defeat’ resulting from Borges’ blindness, and as ‘one of the most acute witnesses to Borges’s later creativity, who provoked Borges to start writing again’.

It is clear that Borges owed a great debt to di Giovanni — as, indeed, do all those readers of Borges who have no Spanish.

Finally, here is a more comprehensive introduction to the chapters that follow.

Borges’ wit — a feature of his work that is universally acknowledged — will be discussed in Chapter 1. Referring to the fictions in *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Woodall comments: ‘There was much wit in these stories, but little joy’ [121]. This chapter will attempt not only to confirm Woodall’s comment, but also to demonstrate that many more of Borges’ fictions reveal his wit than Woodall and most other critics have perhaps discerned.

By way of contrast, the next chapter will deal with Borges’ fascination with death. It will become evident that this characteristic was noticeable in both his poems and his fictions from the time that he was a young man; indeed, his

fascination became an obsession. However, even in these fictions there is occasional evidence of Borges' sense of humour.

Borges has also been described, by Donald Yates, as 'the ultimate skeptic' [cited in Mualem, 214], and Borges once described doubt as 'the most precious gift' [1998b; 245]. Much of Borges' writing bears this out, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 3; there my primary objective is to illustrate the many aspects of Borges' 'precious gift' that appear in both his poetry and his fiction.

The humility which Borges often displayed is clearly present in the fictions discussed in Chapter 4. Among others, this chapter will deal with a small group of fictions that I have labelled 'Ancient Simplicities', a label that is taken from the introductory paragraph to Borges' story 'The Man on the Threshold' [1971; 85], which reads: '[T]he story has an ancient simplicity ... something perhaps straight out of the *Arabian Nights*'. That particular story is, perhaps, not the most successful of them; but others in this group — many of them from *Et Cetera* [Borges, 1998a; 53-63] — are, I shall suggest, among the finest that he wrote. As Coetzee states [2001; 165], Borges would 'only fitfully reproduce the intellectual daring and intensity' of his earlier fictions; but these 'ancient simplicities' demonstrate exactly that 'intellectual daring and intensity'. Furthermore, many of them illustrate his ideal of concision.

Although a number of Borges' fictions are used as illustrations in Chapters 2 and 3, many of his poems will also be quoted. This is in line with his priorities, which he made very clear; as mentioned earlier, in his Foreword to *Selected Poems 1923-1967* he states: 'First and foremost, I think of myself as a reader, then as a poet, then as a prose writer' [Borges, 1972; xv].

Not surprisingly, therefore, while Borges published nine books of fiction he published no less than fourteen books of poetry\*.

However, it is surprising that, in view of the priority which Borges assigned to his poetry, so little has been written about it when compared to the volumes dedicated to his fiction; and no attempt appears to have been made to correct that situation until three years before his death, in a symposium held at the University of Arkansas under the heading *Borges the Poet* [Cortínez, 1986].

In Chapters 1-4 it will not be possible to deal with all of Borges' fictions; the discussion of these will therefore be limited to pieces in *The Aleph and Other Stories* [Borges, 1971], *Et Cetera*, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, *Artifices* and *The Aleph* [Borges, 1998a; 53-63; 68-128; 131-180; 183-288], and to a small number of stories in the later books. Nor will it be possible to deal with all of Borges' poems in Chapters 2 and 3; but a significant number will be quoted in order to establish the importance of both his obsession with death as well as that of his 'gift' of doubt.

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\*The books of poems are *Fervor de Buenos Aires* [1972, 3-29; 2000a, 1-31], *Moon Across the Way* [1972, 33-45; 2000a, 33-47], *San Martin Copybook* [1972, 49-71; 2000a, 49-65], *The Self and the Other* [1972, 75-221; 2000a, 145-245], *For the Guitar [For Six Strings]* [1972, 225-231; 2000a, 247-261], *The Gold of the Tigers* [2000a, 303-339], *The Unending Rose* [2000a, 341-367], *The Iron Coin* [369-387], *The History of the Night* [2000a, 389-415], *The Limit* [2000a, 417-459], *Atlas* [2000a, 463], and *Los Conjurados* [2000a, 465-483]. The books of fiction are *A Universal History of Iniquity* [1998a, 64], *The Garden of Forking Paths* [1998a, 67-128], *Artifices* [1998a, 129-179], *The Aleph* [1998a, 181-288], *Brodies Report* [1998a, 343-408], *The Book of Sand* [1998a, 409-485], and *Shakespeare's Memory* [1998a, 487-513]. *The Maker* [1998a, 67-143; 2000a, 289-324] and *In Praise of Darkness* [1998a, 329-341; 2000a, 263-301] contain both poems and fictions.

Having dealt as thoroughly as space permits in Part 1 with the enigmas presented by the fictions of Borges, I propose to deal in Part 2 with the enigma that Borges himself presents. Chapter 5 will point out some of the complex questions that arise from the public lectures and the university seminars which he presented, and from a small number of his fictions. In this chapter I shall suggest that Borges pretended to a level of scholarship and academic rigour which he did not truly possess; indeed, it may be that the relevant authorities at Harvard University regretted the invitation which they made to Borges to present the Charles Eliot Norton lectures for 1967-1968, later published in *This Craft of Verse* [Borges, 2000c].

In Chapter 6 I shall deal with some of Borges' non-fictions, in particular the essays and reviews which he wrote. Woodall, one of his biographers, summarising a collection of non-fictional pieces, *Other Inquisitions* [Borges, 1964], states: 'It is in fact a rather chaotic book ... As a work of criticism *per se*, the book is almost useless' [Woodall; 166-167]. It will be suggested that this view of *Other Inquisitions* is not only justifiable, but that it is also more widely applicable than Woodall implies; indeed, that a number of the non-fictions in another collection, *The Total Library* [Borges, 2001], also demonstrate that Borges was — to use his own words — 'adrift on the sea of metaphysics' [1964; 171].

Part 2 will therefore demonstrate that many of Borges' lectures and non-fictions and a few of his fictions display contradictions, errors and omissions that raise questions to which there is no immediately apparent answer; and that,



sometimes, material which Borges omits is rather more importance than material which he includes.

A comprehensive Summary of the thesis will be followed by a Postscript, in which Borges will be viewed briefly from a different perspective.

## PART 1: THE ENIGMAS OF BORGES

## CHAPTER 1 BORGES AND HUMOUR

Most of his critics agree that Borges' sense of humour should be taken very seriously, and this is stated very clearly by Borges' himself in an exchange with Ronald Christ [1995; 265]:

- RC: You like jokes very much, don't you?  
 JLB: Yes, I do, yes.  
 RC: But the people who write books about your books, your fictions in particular ...  
 JLB: No, no — they write far too seriously.  
 RC: They seldom seem to recognize that some of them are very funny.  
 JLB: They are meant to be fun.

Jason Wilson calls Borges 'the Joker, the Trickster, a mischief-maker' [2006; 14]. He talks of Borges' 'absurdist humour, his crazy Lewis Carroll logic' [19]; and of Borges and his devoted friend Macedonio Fernández he records:

They once planned a jointly-written novel to be called *El Hombre que sera presidente* (*The Man who would be President*). It would be a Dada gesture that would provoke a nervous breakdown in Buenos Aires and open the way for the arrival of Bolshevism, by introducing pens with nibs on both sides, sugar bowls that didn't release sugar [2006; 60].

Wilson mentions that Borges' friend Mastronardi 'remembered Borges' acute jokes and Homeric guffaws' [2006; 63], and he reports that 'Borges told Luis Harss [another Argentine writer] in 1966 that behind all his stories there's a joke' [2006; 107].

Wilson also mentions the comment of another of Borges' very close friends, Xul Solar; when asked by Borges what he had been doing throughout one stiflingly hot afternoon, he replied: 'Nothing whatever, except for founding twelve religions' [2006; 66].

Borges delighted also in self-mockery; towards the end of his 'Autobiographical Essay' he states: 'I have ... secretly longed to write, under a pen name, a merciless tirade against myself. Ah, the unvarnished truths I harbor!' [1971; 185].

At a seminar given at the University of Columbia in 1971 Borges was asked: 'When you write a story like 'Pierre Menard', are you playing a joke on other people, or on yourself?' He replied: 'I think that I'm playing an impersonal joke. I'm not fooling anybody. I'm not fooling myself. I'm doing it for the sheer fun of it' [1994; 65].

In 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins' Borges quotes from 'a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*', in which he discovers a division of animals into fourteen categories, including '(h) those that are included in this classification ... (j) innumerable ones ... [and] (l) others' [1964; 103]. Appropriately, Foucault writes that this passage caused 'laughter that shattered ... all the familiar landmarks of my thought' [xv].

Sturrock warns us: 'Borges is never to be accused of taking his philosophy too seriously' [30], adding later: 'There is really no end to Borges' duplicity' [153]. Andrew Hurley summarises the dilemma often faced by Borges' readers when, commenting on 'The Mirror of Ink', he writes: 'One would not want to spoil JLB's little joke, *if joke it is*' [Borges, 1998a; 531; my italics].

Sarlo tells the reader [32]: ‘The twists of his stories are mixed up with anecdotes that he himself mischievously invented’. Woodall writes: ‘[T]he spirit of paradox ... runs through Borges’ fiction’; he talks of Borges’ ‘track record as a hoaxer’; and, writing about ‘The Library of Babel’, Woodall states: ‘[T]he story is ... a delirious reversal of what a library is meant for — accessibility to knowledge ... an elaborate skit’ [xvii, xx, 118]. But, significantly, Woodall also acknowledges that ‘The Library of Babel’ is ‘one of Borges’ most despairing statements about reality’ [118]; in Chapter 3 it will be suggested that this story is, perhaps, an example of Borges’ blackest humour.

Borges’ Preface to the 1954 Edition of *A Universal History of Iniquity* tells the reader that its contents ‘are the irresponsible *sport* of a shy sort of man who could not bring himself to write short stories, and so *amused himself* by changing and distorting (sometimes without aesthetic justification) the stories of other men’ [Borges, 1998a; 4; my italics].

In his Foreword to *The Garden of Forking Paths* Borges states:

It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books — setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them [Borges, 1998a; 67].

Writing with approval about Chesterton’s Father Brown stories, Borges says that ‘[t]he settings for the crimes are remarkable ... and carefully and sensationally false’ [Borges, 2001; tr. Eliot Weinberger; 114].

Monegal [285] quotes José Bianco, a writer who was Borges’ lifelong friend: ‘Trained in the stimulating exercise of paradox, [Borges] tended to

deliberately demolish tedious conversations with a joke ... He hasn't lost this good habit'. Monegal [287-288] also comments on Borges' work for the magazine *El Hogar*:

Even the less promising subjects (a biography of Joan of Arc, Spengler's biography) are made irresistible by his irony and gift for paradox ... I was barely fifteen then and was promptly seduced by Borges' wit and impeccable style and the vast range of his reading... For many young readers, Borges was ... the most irreverent mentor that ever was.

Wheelock writes [12]: 'Borges is funny, both as a writer and as a person, and he delights in being so. He is forever spoofing and poking fun. His conviction that all cerebration is but useful fictionmaking is the source of his ironic humor.'

In his Introduction to *Other Inquisitions* [Borges, 1964], James E. Irby writes: '[T]he alternative of infinite chaos is ... always about to emerge ... [H]is rhetoric is ... a silent parody and extension of itself' [xiv, xv].

Di Giovanni [2003; 112] quotes a comment by the American poet Richard Howard on *A Universal History of Infamy*: 'Written in the style of incredulity, it jeopardizes all styles, even its own, and reminds us, once again, that we share our century with the greatest confidence man in literature'.

In an interview with Richard Burgin in 1967 Borges tells him of the 'stock joke ... of working in imaginary and real people in the same story ... When a man writes he feels rather lonely, and then he has to keep up his spirits, no?' [Borges, 1998b; 32].

'The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim' [Borges, 1998a; 82-87] was acknowledged by the author in his 'Autobiographical Essay' to be a hoax; significantly, he added

that the story ‘now seems to me to foreshadow and *even to set the pattern* for those tales that were somehow awaiting me’ [1971; 167-168; my italics].

However, despite this degree of unanimity, Borges’ wit is perhaps more extensive than many of his critics have acknowledged. At the beginning of ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ Borges defines his idea of a hoax, confessing to the enjoyment that he and Bioy Casares found in planning ‘a first-person novel whose narrator would omit or distort things and engage in all sorts of contradictions, so that a few of the book’s readers — a *very* few — might divine the horrifying or banal truth’ [Borges, 1998a; 68; italics in quoted text], and Woodall [123] tells the reader that the two conspirators ‘spent most of their time laughing over the typewriter’.

Bearing all these statements in mind, I would contend that many of Borges’ fictions are either satires or hoaxes. Note, however, that Borges wanted *some* readers to appreciate the joke. This obliges him to place along the way some clues that are discernible by the reader; and we shall see that Borges often enjoyed his jokes so much that he did not hide his clues as effectively as he might have wished.

‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ [Borges, 1998a; 119-128].

A number of stories will be discussed to illustrate Borges’ sense of humour, but for reasons that will soon become apparent it is appropriate to deal with this story first.

‘Forking Paths’ is one of the less obvious examples of Borges’ wit. It tells of a Chinese spy, Yu Tsun, in the service of German Intelligence during the First

World War. He is in England, but needs urgently to send a warning to his ‘Leader’ in Berlin, the warning being the name of a French town, Albert, which he has discovered to be the centre for an attack planned by the Allies; such a warning would allow the Germans to bomb the town and perhaps forestall the attack.

Yu Tsun decides that the only means of achieving his objective in time is to murder someone of prestige whose name – when the murder is reported in the newspapers – will convey that warning. In the telephone book he finds the address of a certain Dr Albert; he seeks him out and murders him.

An Irishman, Captain Madden, who is in the pay of the English, is attempting to apprehend Yu Tsun. Madden appears and arrests him, and Yu Tsun is tried and condemned to death. The story purports to be his confession.

To demonstrate that the story is a hoax we must identify the clues that Borges has laid. As it turns out, the first clue is shrouded in some complexity; but, to find it, we need go no further than the opening paragraph [119]:

On page 242 of *The History of the First World War*, Liddell Hart tells the reader that an Allied offensive ... planned for July 24, 1916, had to be put off until the morning of the twenty-ninth. Torrential rains were the cause of that delay.

However, page 242 of the edition of Hart’s book given in the Bibliography contains no such information; this is to be found on page 240. Furthermore, the two dates quoted in Borges’ text are erroneous; Hart tells us that the attack had been planned for June 29, not July 24, and that it was postponed, ‘owing to a momentary break in the weather ... [and] torrential rain which flooded the trenches’ [Borges, 1998a; 119], until July 1, and not July 29. Page 242 of Hart’s book deals with July 1, the beginning of the disastrous Somme offensive, and

neither July 24 nor July 29 is mentioned on that or on any later page of the book. According to Balderston [151] these matters are dealt with on page 234, 252, or 315 in later editions of Hart's book; but the facts remain erroneous, and they are never stated on a page numbered 242.

Balderston [150-151] also draws attention to the fact that, in Borges' review of Kasner and Newman's *Mathematics and the Imagination* (not included in *The Total Library*), he says that Hart's book was among 'the works that I have reread the most and covered with handwritten notes'. It must be assumed, therefore, that Borges was well aware, not only of the correct page number, but also of the circumstances and the correct dates of the *Somme* offensive.

We must also note that, according to the story as it appears in *Labyrinths* [Borges, 2000b; 44-54; tr. D. A. Yates], the relevant page number in Hart's book is 22. Indeed, most editions of *Ficciones* refer to page 22 [Balderston; 151], indicating that this may have been the page number that appears in Borges' original text.

If this assumption is correct it implies a deliberate error on the part of Borges, and Balderston supports this theory [41]. Liddell Hart would hardly have reached a description of 1916, the middle of WW1, so early in his book; page 22 is part of Hart's first chapter, which deals with the origins of the war.

I suggest the following explanation: Borges originally gave 22 as the relevant page number; then, realizing that this was too obvious an error [or too obvious a clue], he changed 22 to the more credible — but still erroneous — 242.

But there are other facets of this hoax to be considered. We should note that Borges could have chosen the title of almost any of the eight stories in *The*



*Garden of Forking Paths* as the title of that book; and, having made his choice, the natural place for 'Forking Paths' to appear would be at the beginning; instead, he puts it at the end. I suggest that he made this choice for two reasons; first, because he wanted to give the book a title which would be a veiled warning to his readers that they were being led up the garden path; secondly, because he wanted to remind his readers of that warning at the end.

I further suggest that Borges begins the book with 'Tlön', instead of with 'Forking Paths', so that the 'vast debate' [Borges, 1998a; 68] between Casares and Borges — i.e., the conspiracy to ensure that only 'a *very* few [readers] might divine the horrifying or banal truth' — appears at the beginning of the book as yet another warning to the readers. Irby appears to agree; he points out that 'Tlön' was not the first of the stories in *The Garden of Forking Paths* to be published, and its leading position in that book 'was not, therefore, a matter of chronological but rather of theoretical priority ... it declares their basic principles' [1971; 35].

Yet another erroneous fact is to be found at the end of the story. Yu Tsun claims that, as a result of his deeds, the town Albert was bombed; he tells the reader: 'I read about it in the ... newspapers' [Borges; 127]; but no German bombing is reported by Liddell Hart.

Another question that must be asked relates to the importance of Dr Albert; why should Yu Tsun assume that a press report about the doctor's murder would appear as soon as the following morning? The murdered man was neither a well-known sportsman, politician, nor a member of a royal family — the only categories, it would seem, that would be assumed worthy of instant attention by press reporters and their readers.

These anomalies may not be regarded as significant were they the only clues that Borges presents, but there is another related anomaly to be considered; it is the footnote on the first page, which is equally suspicious.

Yu Tsun has discovered that an accomplice of his had been murdered by Madden; but a so-called 'Ed. note' claims that this is a 'bizarre and despicable supposition', and that Madden killed the man 'in self-defense' [119]. We are assured by Hurley [Borges, 1998a; 521] and by Irby [Borges, 2000b; 20] that Borges wrote all the 'editors notes'; but, whoever he is, why is the editor rushing to Madden's defence? In any case, how could the writer of the 'Ed. note' know that the supposition was 'bizarre and despicable'? — only if he were Madden!

It seems that Borges may have added to his enjoyment in hoaxing his readers by helping them — but not too obviously — to discern his clues. Having described his Leader as 'that sick and hateful man', Yu Tsun adds: 'I wanted to prove to him that a yellow man could save his armies' [120-121]. Unlikely as it is that a Chinese spy would be working for German Intelligence — we should recall that it was a Chinese encyclopedia that contained the taxonomy mentioned earlier that causes the Foucaults amongst us to burst out laughing — it is even more unlikely that, in 1916, an Irishman would be allowed to work for British Intelligence. This was one of the worst periods of the Anglo-Irish conflict; 1916 was the year of the Easter Rising in Dublin, and stories such as 'The Shape of the Sword' and 'The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' [Borges, 1998a; 138-142, 143-146] demonstrate that Borges was very aware of what the Irish delicately called their 'troubles'. Not surprisingly, Yu Tsun sneers at '[a]n Irishman at the orders of the English, a man accused of ... perhaps even treason' [119].

On his way to Dr Albert's house Yu Tsun is directed to 'turn left at every crossing'; this, he tells us, is 'the common way of discovering the central lawn of a certain type of maze. I am something of a *connoisseur* of mazes' [122; italics in quoted text]. While doing so Yu Tsun recollects that his grandfather, Ts'ui Pen, had devoted the last years of his life to writing a very long novel and constructing a labyrinth 'in which all men would lose their way ... [but] his novel made no sense and no one ever found the labyrinth' [122].

Yu Tsun is delighted to discover that Dr Albert is a Sinologist who has made a detailed study of his grandfather's manuscript, and has decided that the novel itself is the labyrinth. Albert has also discovered a letter of Ts'ui Pen's that says: 'I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths'. This phrase suggests to Albert 'the image of forking in *time*, rather than in space ... *He creates*, thereby, 'several futures' [125; italics in quoted text].

'The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths' [Borges, 1971; 58-59] and many other stories demonstrate that Borges, too, was 'something of a *connoisseur* of mazes'. But in that story the first labyrinth was designed by architects, and the second by no one — or by God — since it was the Arabian Desert. Both are labyrinths in space; and the second more successful labyrinth consists entirely of space.

Dr Albert is suggesting that one can talk about time in exactly the same way that one can talk about space. But the concept of labyrinths in time is meaningless except to pseudo-philosophers like Zeno of Elea. The underlying fallacy of his paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise is revealed when one realises that, following Zeno's logic, neither contestant can ever reach the finishing line;

and this is confirmed by Zeno's other famous paradox, that of the arrow that is never able to reach its target.

That Zeno's paradox is nonsense becomes clear when his argument is stated in the form of a simple Aristotelian syllogism:

Major premise — A can run ten times as fast as B;

Minor premise — A challenges B to a race, and gives B ten yards start;

Conclusion — Therefore neither A nor B can reach the finishing line.

This obvious nonsense arises from the confusion of the measurement of time with the measurement of space made by Dr Albert. The former is essentially about movement, whereas the latter is essentially about the lack of movement; a watch that has stopped is of no help in measuring time, while nothing is achieved by taking a tape-measure to a moving object. Zeno's paradoxes appear to deal with labyrinths because there is no escape from them, there being no way out — i.e., the finishing line cannot be reached. But the paradoxes are nonsense, and so is the concept of labyrinths in time.

Borges himself points to this conclusion in his 'New Refutation of Time' [1964; 171-187]. After pleading in the opening paragraph that the essay is 'the feeble machination of an Argentine adrift on the sea of metaphysics', Borges proceeds to summarise the diverse views of a number of metaphysicians about the nature of time, only to end with the words:

And yet, and yet ... Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges [187].

This is an excellent demonstration of the fact that Borges was able to write — quite deliberately, I suggest — great prose and nonsense at the same time. His ‘New Refutation of Time’ is a desperate attempt at humour, as I shall attempt to demonstrate in Chapter 6.

In his Commentary on ‘al-Bokhari’ the author tells the reader that ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ won a second prize in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, and that he felt that it was a ‘fair attempt at Chestertonian storytelling’ [Borges, 1971; 198-199]; and, in the relevant Foreword, ‘Forking Paths’ is described as ‘a detective story ... whose purpose will not be kept from [its readers] but which they will not understand, I think, until the final paragraph’ [Borges, 1998a; 67].

But no crime is committed that requires any ‘detective’ to solve; Madden witnesses the murder of Dr Albert, and is able to arrest Yu Tsun immediately. Surely the only detective involved in this story is the reader, the criminal being Borges himself. And his ‘crime’? — Attempted Gross Deception.

Sturrock tells his readers [191]: ‘[This] is in every way a war story. The history ... is the history of the Great War— the *written* history of the Great War ... I have not checked [the quotation from Liddell Hart] because it does not matter in the least whether it is accurate’ [Sturrock’s italics]. I respectfully suggest that a greater interest in Borges’ accuracy might have proved enlightening to Sturrock — for the reasons already given.

Balderston takes Sturrock to task on this issue [1993; 42]. However, Balderston’s thesis is that the story is about the horrors of trench warfare: ‘The ‘silence’ in this story is filled with violence ... any attempt to connect body (reality,

experience) and imagination (literature, writing) is sustained by suppressed violence' [55].

One might say that making a hoax out of a story to do with the Somme offensive of 1916 — one of the most disastrous episodes in the history of Western Europe in the 20th century — is either an illustration of Borges' obsession with death or a demonstration of very bad taste; I suggest that it is both. But this is one facet of the enigma that Borges himself presents, and is best dealt with in Part 2.

I must add that, during an exchange of emails in 2009, Balderston rejected my suggestion that 'Forking Paths' is a hoax. His chapter on the story in *Out of Context* [39-55] makes it clear that, for him, the story is entirely devoted to declaiming the horrors of war, and he presents considerable evidence to that end. With great respect, I suggest that Balderston is overlooking Borges' sense of humour, which is at least an equally important aspect of the story.

Before leaving the subject of 'The Garden of Forking Paths' I should mention an article subtitled *Books Borges Never Wrote* by Allen Ruch, which captures Borges' humour exactly. With a poker face that would have delighted Borges, Ruch solemnly advises us: 'In 1985 the American composer Stephen Albert, a direct descendant of the Sinologist of the same name, wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning symphony based on *Finnegans Wake*' [127] — Borges having made clear in an article entitled *Joyce's Latest Novel* his 'essential bewilderment' at Joyce's book, which he calls a 'concatenation of puns ... that is difficult not to categorize as frustrated and incompetent' [Borges, 2001; 195; tr. Eliot Weinberger].

As mentioned earlier, a question raised by ‘Forking Paths’ will be discussed in Chapter 5. Questions are also raised by Borges’ review of *Finnegans Wake*; these will be discussed in Chapter 6.

‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’ [Borges, 1998a; 88-95].

This story purports to be written in praise of a symbolist poet from Nîmes, recently deceased. Monegal [266] describes Borges’ story as ‘the most dazzling piece of all his fictions ... in which he invents not only a book but the entire production of an imaginary writer’. Monegal’s statement about ‘an imaginary writer’ is incorrect, as Balderston demonstrates [35-36]; but more of that later.

The first clue that the story is a hoax is presented to the reader in the opening page; it is the narrator’s style, which is bombastic and self-congratulatory in the extreme. He boasts of attending the ‘unforgettable *vendredis*’ of a certain baroness, at which he had ‘had the honor to meet [Menard] the mourned-for poet’. He pours scorn on the readers of a ‘Protestant’ newspaper; they are, he says, ‘deplorable ... few and Calvinist (if not Masonic and circumcised) though they be’. And a certain countess who has publicly commended the narrator is described by him as ‘one of the rarest and most cultured spirits of the principality of Monaco ... [despite the fact that she is] now of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, following her recent marriage to [an] international philanthropist’ [88; italics in quoted text].

Borges is defining an affected narrator who is defining Menard. Like Menard, the narrator is a dilettante — ‘conceited, a snob, and anti-Semitic’ [Woodall; 113] — and, clearly, wishing to be one of a very select circle.

But it is surely one of Borges' clues to state that a baroness — no less! — would regularly hold her 'at-homes' on a Friday; on that day the weekend visitors would begin to arrive, and any self-respecting hostess would be far too busy making appropriate arrangements for them — as Borges and his parents would certainly have known from their time in 'society'.

We are told that Menard is an author whose '*visible* product ... is easily enumerated', and that the first such product was 'a symbolist sonnet that appeared twice (with variants) in the review *La Conque* (in the numbers for March and October, 1899)' [88; 89; italics in quoted text]; however, Balderston points out that *La Conque* had ceased publication seven years earlier [18-19].

Menard's product also includes 'a monograph on the possibility of constructing a poetic vocabulary [consisting of] ideal objects created by convention essentially for the needs of poetry' [89]; one wonders what Menard would consider to be 'ideal'. There is also 'a handwritten list of lines of poetry that owe their excellence to punctuation' [90]; perhaps we should note that no-one before Menard had realized that writing poetry was an exercise in punctuation.

The remaining seventeen product items include 'a technical article on the possibility of enriching the game of chess by eliminating one of the rook's pawns'; but 'Menard proposes, recommends, debates, and finally rejects this innovation' [89]. The officials at FIDE must have awaited his decision with bated breath!

Menard's 'resigned or ironic habit of putting forth ideas that were the exact opposite of those he actually held' — such as his 'diatribe against Paul Valéry ... which states the exact reverse of Menard's true opinion of Valéry' [89-



90] — is described as ‘divine modesty’ [93]; but ‘modesty’ is the last thing that one finds in this story.

These examples make it clear that no reader can complain that Borges’ clues in ‘Pierre Menard’ are too subtle.

But we have yet to deal with the supreme item in Menard’s ‘product’, which is

the *œuvre nonpareil* ... perhaps the most significant writing of our time ... the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part I of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of Chapter XXII. I know that such a claim is on the face of it absurd; justifying that ‘absurdity’ shall be the primary object of this note’ [90; italics in quoted text].

Menard describes his purpose in writing this as ‘merely astonishing’ [91]; ‘merely’ is a marvellous irony in this context!

The narrator informs us: ‘[His] method was to be relatively simple: Learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918 — *be Miguel de Cervantes*’. But Menard decides that ‘the undertaking was impossible from the outset, and of all the impossible ways of bringing it about, this was the least interesting’; far better to ‘[continue] to be Pierre Menard and [come] to the Quixote *through the experiences of Pierre Menard* ... If I could just be immortal, I could do it’ [91-92; italics in quoted text]. It is surely surprising that Menard, who was determined to demonstrate that the impossible was possible, failed to regard the achievement of immortality as being ‘relatively simple’.

Cervantes, Menard claims, composed something that was merely ‘a reasonable, necessary, perhaps even inevitable undertaking’. But Menard regards his own task as ‘virtually impossible’ [93]; that was his motive in undertaking it.

Summing up Menard’s achievement, the narrator tells us:

[H]e has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique — the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution ... This technique fills the calmest books with adventure. Attributing the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or James Joyce — is that not sufficient renovation of those faint spiritual admonitions? [95]

Borges must have enjoyed the thought that James Joyce might have ‘renovated’ Saint Augustine’s *Imitatio Christi*!

Some of Borges’ most telling clues are contained in footnotes, as we saw in the discussion of ‘Forking Paths’. The last line of this story, contained in a footnote, reads: ‘In the evening [Menard] liked to go out for walks ... [H]e would often carry along a notebook and make a cheery bonfire’ [95]. Indeed, what else could he do with his notes? Obviously the bonfire burnt well — which is hardly surprising, in view of the amount of rubbish that was put on it.

Monegal tells his readers:

The story is presented as a parody of the kind of article written in defense of a misunderstood genius by one of his followers ... [Borges makes it] a brilliant parody of French literary life ... [But] [t]here is a joke within the joke ... The text that the narrator of ‘Pierre Menard’ takes so literally was already satirical and contained a parody of the literary model Cervantes was attempting to discredit [328-329].

Borges must have enjoyed himself immensely. As Woodall says [114]: ‘The joke ... is a brilliant one ... Borges revels in the fraud ... The note he hit very

precisely in ‘Pierre Menard’ he would go on to multiply, distort and amplify over the next ten to fifteen years’; and Manguel describes the story as ‘a superb and hilarious imagining’ [63].

During the seminar at Columbia University previously mentioned, Borges told the students:

I had undergone an operation, and I didn’t know whether I could go on writing ... I attempted something new — a story that was also a bit of a hoax — and when I got away with that ... I could feel that my life was in some way justified [Borges, 1994; 54].

But ‘Pierre Menard’ is not just a *bit* of a hoax; it is a huge hoax!

It is surprising that Sturrock should appear to have missed the joke. Having stated that Borges ‘never ... lost the spirit of irreverence’, and that ‘Pierre Menard’ is a ‘supreme fantasy’ [14, 15], he proceeds to translate *vendredis* into English, apparently unaware of the snob-value of the French word. He fails to distinguish Borges from the narrator who, in Sturrock’s opinion, demonstrates a ‘spiteful and ornate narrative persona’ [16]. He does, however, have some brief doubts: ‘[T]he mannerisms of his narrator have their function in the narrative as well. It does seem to be the case, though, that they are *also* satirical’ [16; Sturrock’s italics].

He further declares that ‘Pierre Menard’ demonstrates that ‘Borges’ ideal ... is an anonymous literature, or books without author’s names [*sic*] on them’ [201]. This, he claims [204], is confirmed in ‘Pierre Menard’ when the narrator tells the reader: ‘There is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately pointless’ [Borges, 1998a; 94]. The logic of Sturrock’s claim seems, at the least, questionable; and he ignores the footnote about the ‘cheery bonfire’ at the end of

the story. Clearly, Sturrock wishes the reader to take ‘Pierre Menard’ very seriously indeed.

Fishburn [2001; 384] calls Sturrock’s book ‘a brilliant structuralist analysis of Borges’ oeuvre’. However, she is right not to accept Sturrock’s ‘underlying assumption [that] ... there is a general quality of detachment and aloofness about [Borges’] writing’, because Borges’ ‘detachment’ stems from his wit, and is not to be confused with ‘aloofness’.

Wheelock seems to miss the point entirely. He seeks to lift discussion of ‘Pierre Menard’ to an even higher plane; the reason for the ‘greater richness’ of Menard’s version of the *Quixote*, he states, is that ‘it is mythic; it is totally removed from familiar, mundane reality’ [71].

Bloom describes ‘Pierre Menard’ as ‘hilarious’ [464]; but Sarlo sees little humour in it; she takes the view shared by many other critics that the story asserts merely ‘that all texts are the rewriting of other texts’ [32].

Williamson sees it differently: ‘[The story] presents us with an exact inversion of Borges’ ideal of writing, for this is a kind of writing that results in the complete annihilation of personality ... Menard’s success would ... have amounted to the destruction of original creation’; then he adds: ‘A bitter, self-mocking irony pervades “Pierre Menard”’ [237]. But I suggest that Borges is enjoying himself far too much to concern himself with ‘the destruction of original creation’, or to suffer from ‘self-mocking irony’.

However, Jason Wilson gets the joke [2006; 107]; he says that ‘Pierre Menard’

began as a hoax review ... The story bursts out loud with laughter and self-mocking ... The story moves into absurdity when Menard decides to rewrite the *Quixote* from scratch ... You can hear Borges guffawing.

Unfortunately, Wilson goes on to argue [2006; 107]: '[I]n an illustrated history of French literature ... you'll find a reference to Louis Menard in a footnote. Here was the seed. Borges saw himself as a footnote in world literature'. He goes on to say that Borges' story is 'a severe judgement on himself ... Here was Borges' dilemma: a philosophic mind that was too hedonistic to take systematic philosophy as anything but farce' [2006; 107-108]. But there seems little evidence of any 'severe judgement'; again, Borges was enjoying himself far too much for that.

Borges enjoyed writing about arrogant would-be authors; in 'Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth' [Borges, 1971; 75-84] he tells of a man who

cultured a dark beard and thought of himself as the author of a substantial epic, which his contemporaries would barely be able to scan and whose subject had not yet been revealed to him [75];

this description of a 'substantial epic' could well have been applied to Menard's writings.

Coetzee [168] is less enthusiastic about 'Pierre Menard'; of the fictions in *The Garden of Forking Paths* he regards it as 'the least satisfactory: a cross between spoof scholarly essay and *conte philosophique* ... Nevertheless, its intellectual daring is remarkable'.

In his Foreword to *The Garden of Forking Paths* Borges tells the reader: 'The catalog of writings I have ascribed to [Pierre Menard] ... is a diagram of his

mental history' [1998a; 67] — a 'mental history' which, I venture to suggest, would intrigue any psychiatrist.

But there is another aspect to this story by Borges. In his book *Out of Context*, Balderston, editor of the journal *Variaciones Borges*, gives the historical background to seven of Borges' fictions, one of which is 'Pierre Menard'. Balderston's extensive research has established not only that there had been such an author in Nîmes, but also that every reference which Borges makes to the writings of his protagonist is supported by reference to the writings of the original Pierre Menard. However, Borges fails to refer to one important item that Balderston includes; apparently, the original Menard had written a paper to encourage Sigmund Freud to investigate the implications of 'modern scientific handwriting analysis', suggesting that such a study would contribute to Freud's teaching; indeed, the original Menard 'saw himself as a lesser disciple of the Viennese master' [Balderston, 35-36]. But, as Monegal recalls [22], Borges regarded Freud 'either as a charlatan or as a madman'. As already mentioned, at a seminar given at the University of Columbia in 1971 Borges stated that he wrote 'Pierre Menard' for the sheer fun of it' [Borges, 1994; 65]; and the 'sheer fun' of 'Pierre Menard' was not sufficient to make Borges bring to our attention any encouragement that Freud might have received from the first Menard.

'A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain' [Borges, 1998a; 107-111].

According to Woodall, this story was 'a variant on 'Pierre Menard', though much more of a skit' [120], and there is much to support Woodall's claim. Pierre Menard is someone who strives for success in the eyes of the world, but 'Herbert

Quain' tells the story of a man who strives for failure; paradoxically, Quain defines success as failure, and failure as success.

In a comedy that Quain has written, *The Secret Mirror*, the second [and last] act precedes the first, and is written by one of its characters, and its '*unseen* centre around which the plot revolves is Miss Ulrica Thrale' [110; my italics]. We learn of her engagement, and then of its cancellation — more regression. But *The Secret Mirror* was judged a success by the critics; so Quain, who 'had grown used to failure ... resolved to have his revenge', and wrote a book called *Statements*, which was 'the most original of his works [but] certainly the least praised' [111].

The irony of Borges' story lies in the fact that Quain 'believed that 'great literature' is the commonest thing in the world, and that there was hardly a conversation in the street that did not attain those 'heights' [107-108]. But Quain was determined not to be common, because he was no man-in-the-street.

Quain's earlier titles included *April March*, a 'regressive, ramifying fiction'; it had a 'third (and single) Chapter' [108], which perhaps accounts in part for its complexity. It begins at the end, and then proceeds to offer a range of possible antecedents, some of which 'are marred by pallid jokes and instances of pointless pseudoexactitude' [110]. Clearly, Quain was very determined to fail.

The publication of Quain's detective story *The God of the Labyrinth* coincided almost exactly with that of a book by Ellery Queen, thus guaranteeing the failure of Quain's book. Dare one suggest that his publication date was deliberately timed by the author to ensure this 'coincidence'?

But Quain would have been comforted by the fact that *The God of the Labyrinth* would have been a failure in any case, in part because of its 'somewhat

careless plotting’, and in part because the reader becomes aware of an alternative and ‘correct’ solution of the mystery, and is shown to be ‘more perspicacious than the detective’ [108].

We should perhaps console ourselves with the thought that, apparently, failure was something that Quain had little difficulty in finding; he can rest in peace.

‘Herbert Quain’ is a delightful example of Borges’ love of circularity, congruent with his love of mirrors. In the unlikely event that Borges ever listened to the BBC’s *Goon Show*, he would have immensely enjoyed Spike Milligan’s song *I’m Walking Backwards for Christmas*. According to Quain, ‘there was no lower discipline than history’ [107]; by walking backwards, therefore, he would have attained his greatest success — failure. Colin Wilson rightly mentions this ‘impish, Spike-Milliganish sense of humour’ in Borges [71].

We should note that the main clue that Borges gives his readers — the fact that Quain was determined to avoid success — appears in the last paragraph of the story; from there the reader is, of course, expected to work backwards.

Monegal quotes a review of this story by Bioy Casares, in which the latter states that Borges ‘has discovered the literary possibilities of metaphysics’ [363]; clearly, Bioy Casares got the joke, even if no-one else did.

But Sturrock — one of the few who have commented on it — will hear no suggestion of humour; according to him ‘a figure like Herbert Quain ... is nothing more nor less than the principle of literary invention ... The last item in his oeuvre is an attempt to pass on to his readers the pleasures he has had from invention himself’ [151].



'Death and the Compass' [Borges, 1971; 41-53].

On the face of it this is a deeply philosophical piece, and has been treated as such by many of Borges' critics.

It tells the story of four murders and two investigators. The first investigator, Treviranus, is a very conventional police commissioner who decides that the first murder is merely an accident. His colleague, Lönnrot, 'a kind of Auguste Dupin' [41], disagrees; he tells Treviranus: 'You'll say that reality is under no obligation to be interesting ... To which I'd reply ... that reality may disregard the obligation but that we may not' [42]. Already the reader is warned of a paradox.

Two more murders take place, and are investigated by both men. But when Treviranus receives a map with a letter telling him that a fourth murder would *not* be committed because the locations of the first three murders formed 'a mystical equilateral triangle', he passes it on to Lönnrot because, in Treviranus' opinion, he is the man 'most deserving of such cranky notions' [48].

Lönnrot is intrigued. He decides that there *will* be a fourth murder, and that it will take place at the base of the rhombus formed in conjunction with that 'mystical equilateral triangle'. Assuming that he has solved the mystery, he telephones Treviranus to say: 'Tomorrow ... the murderers will be safely behind bars; we can rest quite easy' [48].

Lönnrot journeys to the fourth location, and finds himself in a house that is 'a clutter of meaningless symmetries and almost insane repetitions' [49]. Coming, eventually, out of this labyrinth he is confronted by one Red Scharlach, who takes Lönnrot prisoner and then confesses to the murders. The first murder

had indeed been an accident — Treviranus had been right; but Scharlach had vowed to murder Lönnrot in revenge for having sent Scharlach's brother to prison. Knowing Lönnrot's methods he arranges the next two murders solely as a means of tempting 'Lönnrot the reasoner' [52] to seek out that fourth location, and then to murder him.

Borges envelopes the story in numerous distractions. He introduces overtones to suggest that the criminal is a Jew; Lönnrot suddenly turns 'bibliophile and Hebraic scholar' [43] in order to unmask the criminal; messages are left at the scenes of the crimes pointing out that the first, second, and third letters of 'the Name' have been written, thereby inviting expectation of the fourth letter of the Tetragrammaton, completing 'God's unspeakable name' [43]; and the murders take place on the third [Jewish] day of three consecutive months.

When Lönnrot realizes that he is to die he suggests that Scharlach's plan to capture him was unnecessarily elaborate; Scharlach promises to take note of the criticism 'the next time I kill you' [53].

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery it can also be a form of mockery. This, I suggest, is Borges' intention in 'Death and the Compass'. His mockery is aimed at Edgar Allen Poe, and at the analytic detective story that Poe invented, in which Auguste Dupin is the principle character. Borges is suggesting that the murderer is as likely as the detective to be gifted with intelligence; and that the Auguste Dupins of this world are also likely to be gifted with the arrogance which Lönnrot himself demonstrates when he criticizes Treviranus' theory about the first murder because it is insufficiently 'interesting', when he criticizes Scharlach's already successful plan to capture him, and when he

postulates an after-life in which Lönnrot and Scharlach are destined to meet again.

Scharlach's scorn when he promises Lönnrot that '[t]he next time I kill you ... I promise you a maze which is made up of a single straight line and which is invisible and unending' [53] is a well-deserved paradox.

Of course, he must execute Lönnrot in the classic Borgesian manner: 'He moved back a few steps. Then, taking careful aim, he fired' [53].

In his Commentary on the story Borges states: 'The killer and the slain, whose minds work in the same way, may be the same man'; of necessity, therefore, Lönnrot is in no way superior to Scharlach. Borges adds: 'This is hinted at by the similarity of their names. The end syllable of 'Lönnrot' means 'red' in German, and 'Red Scharlach' is also translatable in German as 'Red Scarlet' [Borges, 1971; 194].

Sturrock, following Borges' lead, spends much time dealing with the apparent significance of those two names; but he then concludes merely that 'Scharlach is the redder, his surname meaning 'scarlet fever' in German' [129]. Sturrock also suggests that the '[m]aster criminal and the detective who reasons his way after him are twin virtualities of a single sequence of events' [129]; if those words mean that Lönnrot and Scharlach think on the same lines then they are unarguable, but they add nothing to our understanding of the story.

In Sturrock's analysis Edgar Allen Poe and Auguste Dupin are never mentioned. Having described it as '[t]he most compelling of Borges' own stories of detection' [127], he goes on to suggest that the story's 'chief lesson, perhaps, is

in showing that fiction is ‘interesting’ while brute facts are not’ [132]. Sturrock’s logic is as unconvincing as his search for a ‘lesson’.

Wheelock goes further; he rejects the idea that Borges used the colour red ‘to give a hint of the cosmic identity of the two men. On the contrary, I think it indicates their immediate, ideal lack of identity ... they are two hypostatizations which for one reason or another — perhaps their near-identity — cannot both exist’ [Wheelock, 1969; 90]. Wheelock is therefore offering ‘cosmic identity’, ‘lack of identity’ and ‘near-identity’; this is the sort of metaphysics that Borges would have put to scorn, as I hope to demonstrate in Chapter 6.

Rightly, I suggest, Jason Wilson [2006; 111-113] states that ‘Death and the Compass’ is a ‘spoof on the detective stories [Borges] loved ... Borges loved pure reasoning, dispensed often with boring, everyday details, lived in his mind ... The merging of Trevarinus and Lönnrot is the Janus that is Borges, mocking beloved philosophical doctrines’.

In ‘Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth’ [Borges, 1971; 75-84] we find one character saying: ‘Don’t go on multiplying the mysteries. They should be kept simple. Bear in mind Poe’s purloined letter’; to which his friend replies: ‘Or made complex ... bear in mind the universe’ [76].

Again, Colin Wilson fails to see the ‘spoof’; suggesting that this was one of Borges’ best stories, he nevertheless holds that ‘[a]ll the erudition, all the brilliance, are mustered to say something completely unimportant’ [75]. But Borges would have been very concerned at the accusation that he was trying to say something ‘important’.

Jason Wilson [2006; 238] offers an interesting insight into this story. He states that the Borges family often spent their summers in the Hotel Las Delicias, which, according to Estela Canto, ‘was a rundown building, with a nostalgic charm ... [T]he great windows with red, blue and yellow glass rhombi fascinated Borges’; and Wilson adds: ‘In ‘Death and the Compass’ [Borges] described these rhombi, giving them a magical meaning’.

Another insight into ‘Death and the Compass’ is to be found in a detective story by Luis Fernando Verissimo, *Borges and the Eternal Orang-Utans* [2004]. The narrator, a disciple of Borges, finds himself unexpectedly in the presence of the Master at a conference in Buenos Aires on Edgar Allen Poe. A murder is committed in a locked room of the hotel in which the conference participants are staying. Borges appoints himself the Auguste Dupin of the investigation, sitting in his hotel room and receiving the details from a plodding policeman and from the narrator (who has discovered the body). Eventually Borges discovers the murderer, the delay in so doing being caused by the narrator’s return to his home in Brazil; he happens to have been the murderer.

In Verissimo’s book there are subliminal references to many of Borges’ stories, above all to ‘Death and the Compass’; and the author, described on the cover as ‘one of Brazil’s most popular writers thanks to his satirical column in [a] national weekly’, enjoys himself immensely. I suggest that Borges also would have enjoyed it; this is despite the sad fact that, many years later, Borges was to tell an audience in New York: ‘I wrote a detective story, in a sense out of Kafka; it was called ‘Death and the Compass’. When it was finished, I felt it was like Kafka,

I hope so' [Borges, 1998b; 218]; this sad comment by Borges is discussed in Chapter 6.

'Three Versions of Judas' [Borges, 1998a; 163-167].

This is another satire that Borges will have enjoyed writing. It masquerades as a theological dissertation, but it demonstrates that theologians can prove anything — and enjoy going around in circles while doing so.

In the first edition of his *Kristus och Judas*, Nils Runeberg, 'a deeply religious man' [163], put forward the following argument:

1. Judas' action in identifying Jesus in the garden was superfluous, because Jesus was well known to all concerned;
2. But to assume an error in the Scriptures is intolerable;
3. Therefore, Judas' so-called betrayal was simply a means of forcing Christ to declare His divinity and set in motion a vast uprising against Rome's yoke. As Judas saw it,

[t]he Word had stooped to become mortal; Judas, a disciple of the Word, would stoop to become an informer (the most heinous crime that infamy will bear) and to dwell amid inextinguishable flames [164].

But this argument was refuted by theologians of every faith; whereupon Runeberg changed his ground. He admitted that Jesus 'had no need of a man to carry out His plan for the redemption of all mankind'; but the idea that Judas' motive was greed, as John 12:6 states, was equally unacceptable. Runeberg therefore

proposed a motive at the opposite extreme ... The ascetic, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, debases and mortifies the flesh; Judas debased and mortified the spirit ... He thought that happiness, like goodness, is a divine attribute, which should not be usurped by men [165].

Then Runeberg revised *Kristus och Judas* even further, and reached a ‘monstrous’ conclusion:

God ... stooped to become man for the redemption of the human race; we might then well presume that the sacrifice ... was perfect ... To claim that He was a man, and yet was incapable of sin, is to fall into contradiction ... God was made totally man, but man to the point of iniquity ... He chose an abject existence: He was Judas [166].

Theologians disdained this idea. To Runeberg, their reaction merely confirmed that he was right, but that ‘God did not want His terrible secret spread throughout the earth’ [167].

However, in these three versions Runeberg presented his readers with a series of non-sequiturs at which even inexperienced logicians would balk. First, he confuses statements of faith with statements of fact; one can deduce a statement of faith from another statement of faith, but one cannot (validly) deduce a statement of fact from a statement of faith. In the first version of *Kristus och Judas*, the ‘factual’ conclusion is derived from a statement of faith — i.e., the minor premise of the syllogism.

Then, having stated ‘To assume an error in the Scriptures is intolerable’, he goes on to make such an ‘intolerable’ statement in his second version; he claims that the idea that Judas’ motive was greed, as John 12:6 states, was

unacceptable. Regardless of this, however, the conclusion he reached in the second version can be derived from neither of the given premises.

The argument that Runeberg offered in the third version of *Kristus och Judas* must have been born of desperation; to claim that Jesus was a man, he declared, and yet be incapable of sin, 'is to fall into contradiction ... God was made totally man ... He was Judas' [166].

Typically, Wheelock takes the story very seriously:

The reduction of God to the condition of man can only be paralleled by the reduction of man to the condition of a demon in hell ... Borges again testifies to the paradoxical impotence and omnipotence of the human mind [165].

Sturrock [174] takes the story equally seriously, but sees it as a comment on the challenge that is always presented to the writer of fiction:

The gravest sin which, as a maker of fictions, can beset him, is the sin of contingency, or the haphazard ... The sacrifice of Jesus also works by endowing our collective and individual histories with finality: it is a proof, if we accept it, that the world is not fact but fiction, a story willed by God.

Incredibly, Sturrock was not joking when he offered such a conclusion!

Jaén also suggests that the story deals with the writing of fiction, and 'the fictional nature of facts' [35]. He adds: [T]he lack of an individual self results from being part of a linguistic tradition [63] ... [B]oth author and reader (through a subtle version of infinite regression) are turned into a figment of someone's imagination' [103]. Such an 'infinite regression' is very subtle indeed!

Williamson offers this suggestion:



Runeberg believes ... that he has himself been punished for discovering God the Father's secret, and his punishment bears an uncanny resemblance to the afflictions visited upon Borges' own father — blindness and an aneurysm [269];

— but there is no mention of blindness in the text, and nowhere is there any suggestion that Borges' father had discovered 'God the Father's secret'.

Monegal describes the story as a 'Christological fantasy' [384], and sees no humour in it. Concentrating his attention solely on Runeberg's third version of Judas, he compares the story with 'The Shape of the Sword' and 'The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero', and states: 'Borges suggests that the hero is as much a villain as the villain is a hero. They are two sides of the same character: man' [385].

But Borges sums up his own feelings on this subject as follows: '[T]he concept of the Son ... might have been thought long spent' [Borges, 1998a; 167]. As Irby points out, 'Borges as theologian is a complete heretic, as the casuistical 'Three Versions of Judas' more than suffices to show' [Borges, 2000b; 18].

'The Theologians' [Borges, 1998a; 201-207].

This story was published in *The Aleph*, five years later than 'The Three Versions of Judas'. Like 'Three Versions', it is a rather obvious satire on theologians.

We are told that the twelfth book of the *Civitas Dei*, untouched by the flames of the ravaging Huns, had come to 'enjoy a special veneration'; but,

[a] hundred years later, Aurelian, bishop-coadjutor of Aquileia, learned that ... the new-born sect called the *Montoni* ... was claiming

that history is a circle, and that all things that exist have existed and will exist again ... John of Pannonia, who had distinguished himself by a treatise on the seventh attribute of God, was preparing to refute this abominable heresy [201].

However, this ‘intrusion’ on the part of John of Pannonia, long his theological adversary, pained Aurelian. The latter resolved to refute the heresy himself, and ‘steal a march’ on John by ‘the crafting of syllogisms and the invention of contumely’ [202]. To that end he read every book in his library, and ‘[t]he labor of composition took ... nine days’ [202-203].

But John’s refutation turned out to be ‘almost ludicrously brief ... [and] Aurelian felt an almost physical sense of humiliation’; consequently, ‘Aurelian wrote not a word that was not aimed, however unconfessably, at besting John’, despite the fact that they agreed on many points — such as ‘the orthodoxy ... which taught that the earth is foursquare, like the Jewish tabernacle. Then, *unfortunately*, another tempestuous heresy spread to those four corners of the earth’ [203; my italics].

Indeed, many such tempestuous heresies arose; so that, eventually, Aurelian was able to convince the elders of the church that the fault lay with John of Pannonia, who, in arguing his defence, ‘committed the supreme *faux pas* of [speaking] with genius and with sarcasm’ [206]. John was burned at the stake.

Later Aurelian, too, died in fire; but when he entered the kingdom of heaven and spoke with God, he found that

God takes so little interest in religious differences that He took him for John of Pannonia. That, however, would be to impute confusion to the divine intelligence. It is *more correct* to say that in paradise ... the accuser and the victim were a single person [207; my italics].

Borges' sarcasm is patently obvious throughout. For example, 'the orthodoxy ... which taught that the earth is foursquare, like the Jewish tabernacle' [204]; furthermore:

Other Histrioni believed that ... since there can be no repetitions, the righteous are duty-bound to eliminate (commit) the most abominable acts so that those acts will not sully the future and so that the coming of the kingdom of Jesus may be hastened' [205].

I suggest that Borges' tongue was firmly in his cheek when he wrote this story.

The only criticism that might be leveled at 'The Theologians' is that it is too discursive; it is almost twice the length of 'Three Versions'. Even as early as 1949, when this story was published [Borges, 1998a; vi], Borges seems in danger of losing his penchant for concision — and, consequently, his penchant for subtlety.

Sturrock's comments illustrate Borges' typical circularity:

The history of theology ... is unusually dialectical. New doctrine is born of old doctrine, new theologians establish themselves by disagreeing with old ones. Short of some divine intervention there seems no reason why this perfectly non-empirical process should ever stop [160; footnote].

This statement is hardly revealing; and it is not surprising that Sturrock should add this pseudo-philosophical conclusion: 'the recurrence makes of [John] an inhabitant not of time, but of eternity, not of history but of literature' [162].

Monegal also discerns only Borges' circularity: '[T]he two antagonists engaged in an endless religious dispute are the same person' [408].

Jaén seems determined to ignore any possibility of satire in ‘The Theologians’:

Drawing on idealist conceptions from Berkeley and Hume, but also on esoteric, mainly Buddhist, conceptions of the nature of the self as nothingness, Borges plays with the idea of human existence as a vacuous dream without a dreamer [10].

Wheelock is equally determined to emphasise Borges’ so-called philosophical intentions: ‘[C]osmic destiny becomes dominant over ideas of prophetic, linear time and all that it implies of personal responsibility’ [84].

Williamson would have us believe that Borges was dealing only with ‘the cycles of time, the rivals who are mere reflections of each other, and a number of Gnostic heresies about the cryptic relations between the world beyond and our own’ [297].

Like ‘Three Versions of Judas’, this is another story which demonstrates that theologians can prove anything — and that they seem to enjoy going around in circles while doing so.

‘Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth’ [Borges, 1971; 75-84].

In his Commentary on this story, Borges states: ‘When I wrote ‘Ibn Hakkan’ ... it became a cross between a permissible detective story and a caricature of one. The more I worked on it, the more hopeless the plot seemed and the stronger my need to parody. What I ended up with I hope will be read for its humour’ [Borges, 1971; 199].

The reader is invited to decide between alternatives offered by two narrators:

(a) That Ibn Hakkan, a king with ‘a saffron-colored beard’ who is fleeing with his treasure-chest of gold from God’s retribution for having ‘trampled underfoot’ his ‘tribes of the desert’, arrives in Cornwall and builds a great labyrinth ‘on the high dunes’ in which to hide; but his vizier whom he had murdered follows him there, slays not only Ibn Hakkan but also his black slave and the lion that had accompanied him, crushes all three faces with a rock, and departs with the gold; or,

(b) That it was the vizier who fled, but only with some of the gold. Pretending to be Ibn Hakkan, he builds a crimson labyrinth in a prominent place on the shore of Cornwall in order to lure the king to follow him there; when Ibn Hakkan does so, the vizier kills him, as well as the slave and the lion; and, having crushed all three faces with a rock, the vizier returns to recover the rest of the gold.

Borges concludes the relevant paragraph in his Commentary as follows:

I certainly can’t expect anyone to take seriously or to look for symbols in such pictorial whims as a black slave, a lion in Cornwall, a red-haired king, and a scarlet maze so large that on first sight its outer ramparts appear to be a straight blank wall [Borges, 1971; 199].

‘Pictorial whims’ seems to be a very appropriate description of the games that are played in this story.

Despite Borges’ statement, Jaén would have us believe that the two narrators and their

problems with textual expression remind us of the problems of language ... The use of rhetorical figures and narrative structures based on paradox and contradiction ... [are] closely related to the theme of the loss of reality. The criticism of language they imply radically undermines all linguistic accounts [37].

He adds '[a]ny set of circumstances may be repeated at any time. The mere repetition makes singularity meaningless' [74]. Jaén seems to take 'Ibn Hakkan' very seriously indeed.

So does Irwin, who reminds us of the following exchange between the two narrators: 'Don't go on multiplying the mysteries. They should be kept simple. Bear in mind Poe's purloined letter'; to which his friend replies: 'Or made complex ... bear in mind the universe' [Borges, 1971; 76]. Mention of Poe leads Irwin to point out that the names of both narrators (Dunraven and Unwin) have associations with Poe's 'The Raven' and 'The Purloined Letter'. He then makes this point:

Borges ... has the poet Dunraven suggest a mathematical solution to the mystery of the labyrinth and the mathematician Unwin counter with a poetic one ... One recalls that in 'The Philosophy of Composition' the author of 'The Raven' depicts the writing of a poem as a matter of almost mathematical calculation [38-39].

Via Hegel's 'The Phenomenology of the Mind' and a double triad, Irwin reaches this conclusion: 'The lion symbolizes ... the triumph not of pure animal instinct but of animal instinct contaminated by, because lodged in a differential, master/slave relationship with, the dark repressed shadow-self' [42].

Bearing in mind Borges' hope that the story 'will be read for its humour' [1971; 199], the comments made by Jaén and Irwin justify di Giovanni's concerns about 'professors and pseudoscholars who look at writing through microscopes' [Borges, 1994; 156], as well as the need that has arisen to demystify some of the enigmas that have developed around Borges' writings. I have been unable to find any other critic who has discussed *Ibn Hakkan*.

‘The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths’ [Borges, 1971; 58-59] — which, according to its epigraph, is associated with ‘Ibn Hakkan’ — is discussed in Chapter 4.

‘The Aleph’ [Borges, 1971; 3-17].

Despite almost unanimous views to the contrary, I suggest that this story contains an astounding example of Borges’ wit, that it is a satire on Borges himself, and perhaps on poets in general. Again, he is ‘having fun’ — a suggestion that will probably horrify the critics who regard the story as having deep philosophical significance; however, Jason Wilson [2006; 17] describes it as ‘a Buddhist joke’.

Fortunately, Borges’ clues are only thinly concealed in this fiction.

Borges the narrator is invited to hear one Carlos Argentino Daneri’s ideas on ‘modern man’. But ‘[s]o foolish did his ideas seem to me, so pompous and drawn out his exposition, that I linked them at once to literature’ [5]. Obviously the last thing with which the narrator would wish to be associated is something as degrading as ‘literature’, especially if his name were Borges.

Daneri, a man who — typically — drinks ‘pseudo-cognac’ [11] — has written, as a contribution to literature, a lengthy poem entitled ‘The Earth’, which he reads to Borges ‘with ringing satisfaction’ [6]. As the title implies, the poet’s humble intention is ‘to set to verse the entire face of the planet’ [7]. Little wonder, perhaps, that he drinks pseudo-cognac!

Two weeks later the narrator is invited to hear a revised version of some of those verses, when Daneri takes the opportunity to condemn ‘our modern mania

for having books prefaced' [8]. The narrator shares Daneri's aversion to prefaces. Perhaps we should overlook the fact that Borges himself wrote many prefaces, to his own work and to that of many others; di Giovanni tells the reader of Borges' 'attraction for society belles, many of them dabblers in literature. The forewords he wrote to their books were a joke in Buenos Aires. A preface by Borges, it was said, was the kiss of death' [di Giovanni, 2003; 145-146]; and Borges himself makes fun of his dear friend Macedonio, because he wrote '[o]ne novel of twenty chapters [which] is prefaced by fifty-six different forewords' [1971; 158].

However, it transpires that — despite his condemnation of prefaces — the real reason for Daneri's latest invitation is to ask Borges to use his influence to persuade a certain 'literary hand of renown' to write a preface to his poem [8]; but when Borges realises that his is not the 'hand of renown' that Daneri has in mind, he promises to do so and then proceeds to forget his promise [9].

Nevertheless, this does not prevent Daneri from telephoning Borges some months later to complain bitterly that his house is under threat of demolition by developers. He cannot allow this to happen because

to finish the poem he could not get along without the house because down in the cellar there was an Aleph ... the only place on earth where all places are — seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending [10-11].

Naturally, the narrator does not wait for an invitation: 'I'll be right over to see it' [11] he says, in total disbelief. To his amazement, however, the Aleph is there:

In a single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or



transparency ... The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished ... [I] saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth, and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth [13-14].

One of the narrator's visions was of 'survivors of a battle sending out picture postcards' [14]; one wonders whether this was one of the 'delightful' or the 'awful' acts.

Unwilling to concede Daneri's triumph, the narrator suggests that Daneri has been suffering from delusions; he prescribes getting 'away from the pernicious metropolis ... [and] that fresh air and quiet were the great physicians' [15].

But, says the narrator, 'I believe that the Aleph of [Daneri's] was a false Aleph' because, as Captain Burton had pointed out, so many similar devices encountered in literature 'are merely optical instruments' [16-17]; besides, as he points out, they suffer 'the disadvantage of not existing' [16] — which is, indeed, a disadvantage!

We should note the similarity between Daneri and Menard; both of them reek of conceit, and both are determined to teach the world what literature is about. As Woodall stated [114], Borges continues to hit the note he had struck in 'Pierre Menard'.

But let us consider the allusions to Borges. Daneri 'holds a minor position in an unreadable library ... Until only recently he took advantage of his nights and holidays to stay at home' [4]. This description exactly fits Borges; however, only he — because of his failing eyesight — and not Daneri, would have found a library 'unreadable'.

Daneri explains:

The cellar stairway is so steep that my aunt and uncle forbade my using it ... One day when no one was at home I started down in secret, but I stumbled and fell. When I opened my eyes, I saw the Aleph [10].

It was Borges who fell on the stairs as an immediate precursor to realising his vocation; as he writes in his 'Autobiographical Essay':

I was running up the stairs and suddenly felt something brush my scalp. I had grazed a freshly-painted open casement window ... [I] had to be rushed to the hospital for an immediate operation. Septicemia had set in and for a month I hovered ... between life and death ... [L]ater, I wondered whether I could ever write again [1971; 170-171].

And, like Daneri, it was Borges who (famously) won only second place in the National Prize for Literature [15].

Here occurs an interesting discrepancy between the version of the story in *The Aleph and Other Stories* and that to be found in the *Complete Fictions*. According to the latter, Daneri subsequently consecrated himself 'to setting the compendia of Dr Acevedo Diaz to verse' [1988; 285], which serves to remind us that it was Dr Diaz who gained first place over Borges in that National Prize [Borges, 1998a; 543]. But according to the former, '[Daneri's] felicitous pen ... has now set itself the task of writing an epic on our national hero, General San Martín' [1971; 16]. I have been unable to find any reference to this discrepancy in the literature; I can only assume that it derives from the limitations placed by 'the Borges estate' on the text which Hurley was allowed to translate [Borges, 1998a; 519].

Not surprisingly, Daneri's mental activity is said to be 'continuous, deeply felt, far-reaching, and — all in all — meaningless' [4]; this is a delightful paradox.

Furthermore, in a story that has the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet as its title, how much credibility can be attributed to a cast-list that includes the names 'Zunino', 'Zungri' and 'Zunni'? Perhaps they are appropriate in the music-hall, but nowhere else. In this context, Wheelock [39] observes: 'It is no doubt significant that those who want to destroy the house which contains the Aleph ... have names beginning with Z'. Like most critics, Wheelock refuses to see any humour here.

Sturrock [70] suggests that 'three Z's in a story named after the initial letter of the Hebrew and Phoenician alphabets presumably have something to do with the capaciousness of literature' — whatever that may mean! Not unexpectedly, Sturrock then decides not to 'flounder about in the deep waters of *El Aleph*.'

However he returns to it, although somewhat tentatively [107]: 'There is something elegiac about the story ... In the end is the Word.' However 'capacious' literature might be, Sturrock seems nonplussed by *The Aleph*, and he certainly sees no possibility of humour in it.

Monegal suggests [417] that '[i]n satirizing the habits of his compatriots, the vanity of their literary prizes and academic associations, Borges vents his feelings about the humiliation he was subjected to' when he failed to win first prize in that literary competition. Jason Wilson [2006; 44] states that the story 'is a study in literary and sexual envy'. Woodall [147] believes that 'Borges' Aleph was to be an emblem of the mysteries of all knowledge'; and Sarlo [56] suggests

that ‘The Aleph’ is ‘a metaphysical fiction ... [It] also engages with a topic of Western classical philosophy, the principle of identity.’

Daneri describes his technique as one ‘whose roots go back to Scripture — enumeration, congeries, conglomeration’ [6], and Wheelock argues that

[i]n Daneri’s poetry Borges has been said to be satirizing his own. I don’t quite agree ... He satirizes himself as a man ... The Aleph is finally the symbol of Borges himself ... Borges, the Aleph, the many philosophies and religions — they are finally false [35].

There appears to be a resolute determination on the part of many of Borges’ critics to ignore his sense of humour in this story. However, Jason Wilson is an exception; referring to Ramón Gómez de la Serna, with whom Borges ‘was not a close friend’ [2006; 45], Wilson describes ‘The Aleph’ as a ‘wicked mockery’ [2006; 46] of de la Serna, because of the latter’s sympathy with Daneri’s ambition to write his all-encompassing poem ‘The Earth’, and adds that ‘few literary critics have noted this’.

But perhaps the supreme irony of ‘The Aleph’ lies in its opening paragraphs. The narrator tells the reader that he has fallen into the habit of making regular visits to the house where Daneri lives because that is where the love of his life, one Beatriz Viterbo, had lived and died, Daneri being her first cousin. Noting the similarity between Daneri’s name and that of Dante Alighieri, many critics have taken the narrator’s love affair to imply a reference to the love that Dante held for his Beatrice, both loves being unrequited.

I suggest that the real explanation is much simpler: Borges needed some such excuse to justify his regular visits to the house where Daneri lived; otherwise, how could he explain his continued association with such a fool?

Some lines in Borges' Commentary on the story are especially relevant:

'The Aleph' has been praised by readers for its variety of elements: the fantastic, the satiric, the autobiographical, and the pathetic. I wonder whether our modern worship of complexity is not wrong, however ... Critics ... have detected Beatrice Portinari in Beatrice Viterbo, Dante in Daneri, and the descent into hell in the descent into the cellar. *I am, of course, grateful for these unlooked-for gifts* [190; my italics].

As mentioned earlier, Borges enjoyed writing about arrogant would-be authors; in 'Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth' [1971; 75-84] he tells of a man who 'cultured a dark beard and thought of himself as the author of a substantial epic, which his contemporaries would barely be able to scan and whose subject had not yet been revealed to him' [75].

I suggest that Borges made his attitude to 'The Aleph' very clear when he wrote: 'Once, in Madrid, a journalist asked me whether Buenos Aires actually possessed an Aleph. *I nearly yielded to temptation and said yes*' [1971; 190; my italics].

Once again we should look to the epigraph for guidance. Quoting Hobbes' *Leviathan* [IV: 46], Borges scorns those who 'will teach us that Eternity is the Standing still of the Present Time' [3] — which is exactly what the Aleph is supposed to teach.

'The Immortals' [Borges, 1971; 109-114].

This story is one of the *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*. It was written in conjunction with Bioy Casares, and makes it easy to believe Woodall's remark

[123] that the two conspirators ‘spent most of their time laughing over the typewriter.’

Bustos is feeling his age, and the moment has come for him to visit the ‘eminent gerontologist’ Dr Narbondo, who ‘specialized in the replacement of malfunctioning organs’ [111]. Entering the doctor’s rooms, he finds one ‘inhabited by four personages, or pieces of furniture ... Their color was the same as the walls, their material wood, their form cubic’ [12], and the good doctor introduces them by name. These are the ‘immortals’.

Narbondo explains [113]:

With the replacement of the organism’s various components ... with other corresponding stainless or polyethylene parts, there is no earthly reason why the soul ... should not be immortal ... The body can be vulcanized and from time to time recaulked, and so the mind keeps going. Surgery brings immortality to mankind.

He offers to perform the same miracle for Bustos, and at a discounted price. Bustos pretends that he cannot wait for the miracle to be performed; then he runs from Narbondo’s surgery as fast as his legs can carry him, changes his hotel, and hides himself from the world.

The story is full of delicious and sometimes macabre schoolboy humour; Bustos tells of a book he was given by the author, and how he tore out the flyleaf before trying to sell it ‘to successive men of the book trade’ because it bore the author’s inscription; how tuberculosis had denied that author the happiness of acknowledging the letter that Bustos had written him ‘in one of my characteristic outbursts of generosity’ [109]; how Bustos was ‘sick at heart’ because his appointment with the doctor prevented him from taking his place in the front row

at a particularly important sports event; how he whiled away the time in the doctor's waiting room 'with the latest issues of the *Ladies' Companion* and *Jumbo*'; how — according to the doctor — '[t]he brain, refreshed night and day by a system of electrical charges, is the last organic bulwark in which ball bearings and cells collaborate' [113]; and how the doctor goes so far as to offer a money-back guarantee of the process. There is little wonder that Bustos hastens to don a false beard and spectacles when he reaches his new hotel.

In his Commentary, written only a few years' later, Borges states: 'I think that this joint story ... is among my very best' [204]. But, however enjoyable 'The Immortals' may be, one must question the criteria upon which Borges' assessment was based; indeed, none of the critics listed in the bibliography appears to consider the story worthy of mention. In fact, his Commentary implies that Borges took the story rather more seriously than one would expect: 'I have for years lived in fear of never dying. Such an idea as immortality would, of course, be unbearable' [204]. This comment would appear to be equally applicable to 'The Immortal', published in *The Aleph* seventeen years earlier, and which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

I submit that the two fictions which follow are — for different reasons — examples of that rare phenomenon on Borges' part of being not entirely successful attempts at wit.

'The Cult of the Phoenix' [Borges, 1998a; 170-173].

Here Borges examines, with characteristic pseudo-academic zeal, the many and conflicting accounts of the origin of this cult, whose members are also

known as ‘the People of the Secret’. They have been thought, sometimes, to be gypsies, and sometimes to be Jews; but ‘what cannot be denied is that they ... resemble every man in the world’ [172]. They

perform a certain ritual ... [which] is sacred, but that does not prevent its being a bit ridiculous ... [W]orshippers of the Phoenix ... could not bring themselves to admit that their parents had ever stooped to such acts [173].

So now the Secret is out! Having — as he saw it — failed to convey the humour of scholars’ attempts to study the history of sexual intercourse in the same way as they study (for example) the history of Buddhism, Borges is obliged to explain his joke. But by doing so it means that this humourist has failed in his task, as I believe Borges has failed. Perhaps he sensed this himself; in his Foreword to *Artifices* he writes that, in this story, ‘I set myself the problem of suggesting a common act ... I am not sure to what extent I have succeeded’ [Borges, 1998a; 129].

Jaén confines himself to labelling the story ‘ironic’ [5]; but most of Borges’ critics appear to have gone out of their way to illustrate one of di Giovanni’s recollections of his time with Borges:

On numerous occasions I heard his stock reply to anyone who laid it on the line and told him what some piece of work of his was really all about. Borges always smiled, humbly, and sweetly, and ‘Ah, thank you!’ would come his ambiguous put-down. ‘You have enriched my work!’ [2003; 60]

Monegal quotes a conversation between Borges and Ronald Christ in 1968: ‘When I first heard about this act, when I was a boy, I was shocked, shocked to think that my mother, my father had performed it’ [34]. He goes on to tell of



Borges' unhappy time at a state school for boys, and of '[o]ne of the scars ... left by his schoolmates' coarse description of the mysteries of sex' [100]. This issue of Borges' sexual diffidence will be raised again in the discussion of 'Emma Zunz' in Chapter 3.

Monegal sees no attempt at satire; he states that the story displays an 'obsession with fatherhood' [40], and he astounds no-one by adding that it is a story 'in which sex plays a decisive role' [185].

Ronald Christ takes the story even more seriously: 'The rite that is celebrated by the sect of the Phoenix is the last rite, that of death. We die in order to be reborn' [168]. Furthermore, he credits De Quincey's essay on 'Secret Societies' as having been the foundation of Borges' story. De Quincey cites the example of the 'immortality' of the Kings of France; no sooner has the cry gone out 'His Majesty is dead' than, without a moment's pause, another cry is heard: 'May the King live for ever' [170]. This can hardly be described as a 'common act', to quote Borges' words in the Foreword.

But no-one takes the story more seriously than Wheelock:

Critics commit a fundamental error when they suppose that the definite something which Borges had in mind ... is the same thing as the secret rite alluded to so overtly in the story ... The title of the story suggests world-dissolution ... the abandonment of one's fixed world and a movement into another, and this movement involves, however briefly, a return to myth (chaos) [56, 58].

Remembering di Giovanni's words, we can be sure that Borges would have 'smiled, humbly, and sweetly, and 'Ah, thank you!' would come his ambiguous put-down. 'You have enriched my work!' [2003; 60]. On this occasion Borges smiled very sweetly indeed; he wrote the following letter to Wheelock:

My Dear Friend: I think I can call you this, after listening to the reading ... of that beautiful book which I am surprised and honored to have inspired, and in which you have penetrated so intimately into my mind. You have enriched and enlarged it' [Wheelock; dust jacket].

But Borges may not have made that comment about Jason Wilson's remark [2006; 39-40]:

This forgotten secret is obviously linked to D. H. Lawrence; the phoenix as the penis. In fact, this trivial, momentary and sacred act, associated with mud and renounced by mystics, could be masturbation. Few have caught on to the joke.

'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' [Borges, 1998a; 68-81]

It is especially ironical that this unsuccessful attempt at wit should occur in the story that, as mentioned previously, opens with an announcement of the comedy technique on which Borges and Bioy Casares so enthusiastically agreed [68]. In part, this story demonstrates his wit; in part, it demonstrates Borges' scepticism; I suggest that it is the mixture of the two that causes the story to fail.

Part 1 begins with the 'vast debate' that Irby had in mind when he wrote of the story's 'theoretical priority' [1971; 35], in which Borges and Casares explore the possibility of a 'narrator [who] would omit or distort things and engage in all sorts of contradictions' [68].

For example, while the story itself is dated '1940', its Postscript is dated '1947'; but, as Monegal [332-333] points out, that Postscript was published in 1940, at the same time as the story. Readers of the original publication [in the magazine *Sur*] will have required no stronger hint that — to put it mildly — things were not as they seemed; most of those readers would remember the delicious

comedy of ‘Pierre Menard’, written by the same author and published in the same magazine only one year earlier.

Part 1 reveals the following: As the result of a largely coincidental remark on Bioy Casares’ part, he and Borges discover that in one — and only one — copy of *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, which is

a literal (though also laggardly) reprint of the 1902 *Encyclopædia Britannica*’ [68] — the last four pages of Volume XLVI are devoted to an article on an otherwise unchronicled country called Uqbar, the borders of which have only ‘nebulous points of reference [69],

that ‘the literature of Uqbar was a literature of fantasy, and ... never referred to reality’, and that part of that fantasy is ‘the imaginary realm ... [of] Tlön’ [70]. The bibliography attached to this article leads Borges ‘two or three years afterward’ to learn of

a German theologian who in the early seventeenth century described an imaginary community, the Rosy Cross — which other men founded in imitation of his foredescription [70].

The second part of the story introduces us to one Herbert Ashe who, like Tlön, is ‘afflicted with unreality’ [70]. He enjoys making out that grey is white — or, more precisely, that 10 equals 12; and then, that black is white — or, again more precisely, that 10 equals 60 [71]. A few days before his death he receives a parcel containing a book written in English, with 1001 pages, entitled *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Vol. XI.*, showing ‘no date or place of publication’; but it is stamped *Orbis Tertius*, and contains ‘a vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet’ [71]. A book with 1001 pages would have had special significance for Borges; since childhood one of his very special favourites

had been *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, being Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights* [Monegal; 72].

Although described as 'coherent', Tlön's 'apparent contradictions' include not only 'transparent tigers and towers of blood' [72], but also a language of the southern hemisphere in which '[t]here are no nouns [but merely] impersonal verbs'; while in the northern hemisphere 'the primary unit is not the verb but the monosyllabic adjective'. Later, however, we are told that '[t]he languages of Tlön's northern hemisphere possess all the nouns of the Indo-European languages — and many, many more' [73]. It is an understatement to suggest that many problems would have arisen when people in those parts of the same country attempted to communicate with each other.

Furthermore,

the almost countless numbers of ... [p]hilosophies ... are incredible, but possess ... a certain agreeable sensationalism. The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility — they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy [74].

One more illustration of the fantastic life on Tlön will suffice. For a century 'the duplication of lost objects' had been practiced; these 'secondary' objects were called *hrönir*. Many of the initial attempts to reproduce these objects failed; but success was claimed when a rusty wheel was unearthed, even though the wheel was 'dated some time *later*' than the date of its discovery [77; italics in quoted text]. Success was also claimed when a group of schoolchildren 'unearthed — or produced ... the verdigris'd and mutilated torso of a king'; the fact that their

principal happened to die while the initial excavations were under way was, apparently, regarded as irrelevant [77].

Now we should turn to the Postscript, dated 1947, in which Borges offers to ‘recall’ some of the ‘[s]o many things [that] have happened since 1940’. A secret benevolent society, after many generations of preparation, and strongly influenced by a reclusive American millionaire, decided not to be content with inventing a country such as Tlön but to invent a planet; and, by 1914, that society had produced, and published secretly, the forty volumes that constituted the *First Encyclopædia of Tlön*.

We are told that it was

the grandest work of letters ever produced by humankind ... [and was] the basis for another, yet more painstaking work, to be written ... in one of the languages of Tlön ... [and] tentatively titled *Orbis Tertius* [78-79].

Then occurs ‘the first intrusion of the fantastic world of Tlön into the real world’ — a compass, throbbing mysteriously, the letters on the dial belonging to one of the alphabets of Tlön, is discovered in a crate of silverware. This is followed by the appearance of a very small but incredibly heavy cone-shaped object, consisting of a metal ‘not of this world’, and made as an ‘image of the deity in certain Tlönian religions’ [79-80].

In 1944 a copy of the *First Encyclopædia of Tlön* is discovered in a Memphis library, causing a great hue and cry in the international press.

Almost immediately, reality ‘caved in’ at more than one point. The truth is, it wanted to cave in. Ten years ago any symmetry, any system with an appearance of order — dialectical materialism, anti-

Semitism, Nazism — could spellbind and hypnotize mankind. How could the world not fall under the sway of Tlön? [80-81].

As the result of its contact with Tlön, we are told, our world has ‘disintegrated’. Tlön’s ‘primitive language has filtered into our schools’. The academic subjects that we have known are increasingly under threat of extinction: ‘French and English and mere Spanish will disappear from the earth’. But none of this, we should be glad to learn, will deter Borges; he intends to continue making his ‘indecisive translation’ of a book on burial inscriptions, even though he does not intend to publish it [80-81].

At this point it might be as well to remind ourselves of the task that Bioy Casares and Borges set themselves in the opening paragraph of the story: ‘[T]o omit or distort things and engage in all sorts of contradictions so that a few of the book’s readers — a *very* few — might divine the horrifying or banal truth’ [68; italics in quoted text]. As will be apparent from this summary, it would be difficult to imagine a text in which distortion and contradiction take more significant roles.

The second point to be remembered is that, while the Postscript to the story was ‘dated’ 1947, it was in fact published with the story in 1940; and they were published together in 1941 as the first story in *The Garden of Forking Paths*. I shall proceed on the assumption that Borges’ intention was to predict what would happen between 1940 and 1947. Such an assumption is based on what he tells the reader of the birth of the Rosicrucian movement — founded ‘in imitation of [a German theologian’s] foredescription’ [70], which leads to the suggestion that the disintegration of our world as described in the Postscript will be brought

about in imitation of another ‘foredescription’ — *The First Encyclopædia of Tlön* — which was, after all, regarded as ‘the grandest work of letters ever produced by humankind’ [80].

In view of Borges’ obvious enjoyment in the telling of this story, and its mass of contradictions, it is tempting to describe it simply as a prime example of his wit; but there is more to ‘Tlön’.

To understand this story fully I suggest that it is necessary to be aware of the politico-economic situation in Argentina in the 1930’s, an awareness that Borges could take for granted as being in the mind of any intelligent resident of Buenos Aires during those years.

Realising the threat to peace in Europe, and the possible involvement of the USA in addressing that threat, Argentina was faced with the very real prospect of its two most significant trading allies, Britain and the USA, erecting protectionist barriers against its trading partners. As a result, the Argentine legislature was, to quote the historian Crassweller, ‘stultified’:

[T]he Congress in 1937 ... manage[d] to pass only three laws in the entire year, one law authorizing itself to spend more money, and two laws authorizing the president to leave Buenos Aires for vacations ... For Argentina, the old technique of balancing its trade deficit with the United States against its surplus with England was no longer possible ... The absolute primacy of the English economic connection ... faded ... New uncertainties created insecurity and insecurity generated resentment [Crassweller; 75 - 79].

As early as 1933, Crassweller adds, Martínez Estrada had written

an absolutely exhaustive analysis of the national ills, presented without hope of redemption or betterment ... Estrada struck a note consistent with the intellectual discord of the time ... [and] his bleak book won the national book prize for literature [80].

It should be noted that Monegal [357] testifies to Borges' admiration for Estrada.

Another historian writes:

During the 1930's anti-imperialism developed on a web of conspiracy theories ... [T]he British, and later the North Americans, came to be viewed in much the same terms as the *nacionalistas* painted the Jews, as covert and malign conspiratorial forces [Rock; 205].

For Borges, brought up by English grandparents to esteem all that is English, the now increasing influence of the USA in Argentina's affairs would have been especially worrying. Both Monegal [357] and Cohen [18] point out that, in Borges' introduction to an anthology of Argentinian poetry published in 1941, he refers to the United States as 'barbarous'.

I suggest that 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' is to some extent a reflection of the scepticism and despair for Argentina's future that Borges shared with his contemporaries in the late 1930's; and, above all, a reflection of his fears at that time of the domination of Argentina by the new and growing imperial power of the USA.

These fears appear often. In *This Craft of Verse*, six lectures that he gave at Harvard in 1967-1968, Borges' opinion of the USA is but thinly disguised; he reminds his listeners that Bishop Berkeley — who was not a favourite of Borges', as a reading of his very satirical *Argumentum Ornithologicum* [Borges, 1998a; 299] will confirm — 'was a prophet of the greatness of America' [Borges, 2000c; 3]; adding later, with his tongue in his cheek, that 'as you all know, America has an ethical sense of a thing being right or wrong' [53]; and the picture of the USA's



intellectual environment which he drew in his Prologue to Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* reads: 'Vast populations, towering cities, erroneous and clamorous publicity, have conspired to make unknown great men one of America's traditions' [Borges, 2001; 246].

In his despair, all that he feels capable of doing is hiding himself away and addressing some pointless task, such as translating Browne's *Urne Buriall*. However, despite — or perhaps because of — this, he succeeds brilliantly in conveying to his readers the ineluctable doom hovering over him and his country. In the late 1930's the influence of the 'barbarous' United States was seen by Borges as all-pervasive.

He summarises the situation in these prophetic words from the Postscript:

Contact with Tlön, the *habit* of Tlön, has disintegrated this world. Spellbound by Tlön's rigor, humanity has forgotten, and continues to forget, that it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels [81; italics in quoted text].

Clearly, Borges felt that the USA was not the Utopia that many — in Argentina and many other places — had believed it to be.

An important statement by Monegal should be quoted in the context of this story:

[A]gainst the common belief that fantastic literature is an evasion of reality [Borges] postulates that fantastic literature helps us to understand reality in a deeper and more complex way [408-409].

This comment is, I submit, very relevant to 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'.

Nevertheless, I would also submit that *Tlön* is not a complete success. The reader is presented not only with two totally incompatible themes — heavy

philosophical satire and economic politics — but also with a story that is overwritten, at least by Borges' standards. 'Tlön' is the longest story in the *Collected Fictions*; and I suggest that this is brought about, at least in part, by Borges' vain attempt to reconcile its irreconcilable themes.

Borges appears to have forgotten that brevity is the soul of wit, because 'Tlön' is at least twice — and usually three times — the length of the other stories discussed in this chapter; and its failure is underlined by the fact that, having specified the careful precision of his comic technique in the story's opening paragraphs, Borges then proceeds to ignore it, the clues to his jokes being childishly obvious.

'The Gospel According to Mark' [Borges, 1998a; 397-401].

In view of the statements by Coetzee and Woodall, quoted earlier, about the decline in Borges' later work, we should look at this late example of his wit, published in *Brodie's Report* in 1970.

A man named Espinosa from Buenos Aires, thirty-three years of age, who possessed 'an almost unlimited goodness', and who 'abounded in debatable habits and opinions, out of a spirit of acquiescence' [397], had accepted an invitation to visit a ranch at Los Alamos, 'not because he liked the country but out of a natural desire to please, and because he could find no good reason for saying no' [398].

There he came to know the Gutre family, the foreman of the ranch and his two children. Their predecessors had come from Scotland in the early nineteenth century, and had intermarried with Indians; they had forgotten how to write, and

‘even Spanish gave them some difficulty’ [399]. Finding a copy of the Bible, printed in English, he began to read to the Gutres the Gospel according to St Mark, and ‘was surprised that they listened first attentively, and then with mute fascination. The presence of gold letters on the binding may have given it increased authority’. The young man began to give the Gutres ‘timid orders, which were immediately followed. The Gutres would trail him through the rooms and along the hallway, as though they were lost’; and when he had finished reading Mark’s Gospel they asked him to read it to them again [400].

One day the father asked him ‘whether Christ had allowed himself to be killed in order to save all mankind’, and whether ‘those that drove the nails will also be saved’; he replied ‘Yes’ [401]. Then,

[k]neeling on the floor they asked his blessing. Then they cursed him, spat on him, and drove him to the back of the house ... When they opened the door, he saw ... there was no roof on the shed; they had torn down the roof beams to build the Cross [401].

It would have been difficult for Borges to have offered a less subtle comment on the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. As Hurley points out [Borges, 1998a; 558], by giving the young man the name ‘Espinosa’, meaning ‘thorny’, the reference to the crown of thorns makes it even more obvious to his Spanish readers. Rarely does Borges specify the age of a character, but we are told that Espinosa is thirty-three, the age at which Jesus is thought to have been crucified. As to his followers, Borges implies that Espinosa’s ‘elocution lessons in Ramos Mejía’ [400] and the presence of gold lettering on the Bible were sufficient to ensure their devoted attention to his words. Borges gives us another indication of his intentions by having Gutre’s daughter give herself to Espinosa during the

night before his crucifixion; after all, Mark's gospel tells us [15:41] that Mary Magdalene was just one of the many women 'which came up with [Jesus] unto Jerusalem'.

There are no hidden clues here, as there were in the fictions previously discussed in this chapter, and little enjoyment is evident on Borges' part. The smile is grim, and the humour is strained; but both the smile and the humour are still present.

Hurley sees the joke [Borges, 1998a; 559], but Monegal [464] does not, and Woodall [226] calls it 'Borges's most perfectly shocking story'. Williamson [361] views it as 'a barbarous parody of Christ's passion', and makes this surprising suggestion: 'At the core of the tale lies the notion of a family's sacrificing a man of intelligence and culture in order to gain redemption. Borges may have had in mind his mother's family'.

'Ragnarök' [Borges, 1998a; 321-322]

This story offers a brief but fitting epilogue to a chapter on Borges' wit; no clues are needed to find the humour in it, and I suggest that Borges' laughter is almost audible.

In a dream the narrator sees the College of Philosophy and Letters. It is nightfall.

From the Underworld, we heard the cries of humans and animals. A voice cried: *Here they come!* and then: *The gods! The gods!* ... They haughtily received our homage ... [and] one of them ... burst out in a triumphant bitter clucking that was half gargle and half whistle [321-322].

It was suspected that the gods were unable to talk, and that they were

testaments to the degeneration of the Olympian line. The clothes they wore were ... of the criminal luxury of the Underworld's gambling dens ... Suddenly we felt that they were cunning, ignorant, and cruel ... and that ... they would wind up destroying us [322].

So, in typical Borgesian fashion, 'we drew our heavy revolvers ... and exultantly killed the gods' [322].

We should recall 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', and its 'almost countless numbers' of philosophies: 'The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility — they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy' [Borges, 1998a; 74].

The *Encyclopedia Mythica*\* tells us that Ragnarok 'means the end of the cosmos in Norse mythology', that "Twilight of the Gods" 'is the result of a famous mistranslation', and that "'destruction of the powers" (where "powers" means "gods")' is to be preferred. But it goes on to say that,

[a]fter the destruction, a new and idyllic world will arise from the sea and will be filled with abundant supplies. Some of the gods will survive, others will be reborn. Wickedness and misery will no longer exist and gods and men will live happily together.

I suggest that Borges' sense of humour is clearly displayed by the fact that he ignored both the mythological elements contained in this quotation; the 'gods' were merely those who inhabited 'the Underworld's gambling dens and houses of

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\*Internet access October 1, 2011; Google search on "Ragnarok".

ill repute' [322], and no 'idyllic world' is prophesied after their destruction. Perhaps Borges was having too much fun!

Williamson appears to be the only writer to comment on this story, but he takes a very different view of it [340]:

Borges was expressing his dismay at the Revolución Libertadora's failure to bring about "democratic regeneration"; he had to accept that Perón had destroyed everything he had ever believed in or hoped for.

In 1876 Wagner gave us his interpretation of the end of the world in *Götterdämmerung*, which, in the words of Percy Scholes [882], is 'that twilight of the gods which is now to darken into eternal night'; and in her recent novel *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*, A. S. Byatt tells us how '[t]he world ends because neither the all too human gods, with their armies and quarrels, nor the fiery thinker [Loki] know how to save it' [171].

But Borges neither echoes Wagner nor anticipates Byatt, which would have been very easy for him. Instead, he greets the destruction of the gods with sheer delight, because it was an occasion for heart-felt rejoicing — for both the gods and for humanity. As Borges wrote in his 'Autobiographical Essay', 'I have for years lived in fear of never dying. Such an idea as immortality would, of course, be unbearable' [Borges, 1971; 204]. The gods, too, find it unbearable, and could not be blamed for contemplating suicide to release them from such a curse; that is why they present themselves as such ready targets for the 'heavy revolvers'. This story is, I suggest, a clear indication of Borges' determination to take every opportunity to exercise his wit.

Despite the reservations that have been expressed about 'Tlön', 'The Cult', and 'The Gospel According to Mark', the fictions that have been discussed in this chapter provide sufficient evidence, I believe, not only that many of those who have commented on Borges' work have failed to appreciate the extent of his wit, but also that those fictions illustrate the truth of di Giovanni's statement in *The Lesson of the Master*:

Writers on Borges have taken him far more seriously than he took himself. Laughter loomed large in Borges' world, and to him literature was joy ... [H]is critics ... miss the point that Jorge Luis Borges was one of the great comic writers of our time [2003; 48].

However, in order to put Borges' sense of humour into perspective it is now necessary to discuss his obsession with death.

## CHAPTER 2 BORGES AND HIS OBSESSION WITH DEATH

One aspect of the enigma that Borges himself presents is that a fascination with death is at least as powerful a motivating force as his wit. But a surprisingly neglected aspect of Borges' writings is the degree to which this topic of death permeates both his verse and his prose. As a writer he is not unique in this, but death appears to have fascinated Borges to such an extent as to become an obsession, and from a very early date.

Balderston quotes from a poem that Borges wrote as early as 1920; its title is 'Trench'. It does not appear in either *Selected Poems* or in *Selected Poems 1923-1967*. It deals with 'the realities of trench warfare' [Balderston; 52; Balderston's translation]:

Anguish  
 In the background a mountain walks  
 Men the color of earth and shipwrecked in the lowest crack  
 Fatalism anoints the souls of those who bathed their small hopes  
                   in the basins of the night.  
 The bayonets dream of nuptial encounters  
 The world has been lost and the eyes of the dead search for it  
 Silence howls in the sunken horizons.

In his poem 'Deaths of Buenos Aires' Borges writes: 'Life is death coming on' [1972; 63; tr. Ben Belitt]; and in another poem, 'Limits (or Goodbyes)' [Borges; 1972; 237; tr. Alan Dugan], he tells us: 'Death invades me, constantly'.

In Bloom's view, 'Borges' favourite image is linked to death, or to ... the myth of the death drive' [469]; I suggest that, by 'favourite image', Bloom is referring to the frequency with which the topic of death occurs in Borges' writings.



As will be seen, Borges' poetry firmly establishes the relevance of his fascination with death; again, however, the enigmas discussed in this chapter arise largely from his critics' often apparent failure to understand the importance of this fascination in his fictions.

Since it was one of the last of Borges' poems, published only a year before his death, it is perhaps not surprising that 'The Web' [2000a, 483; tr. Alastair Reid] should contain the following lines:

Which of my cities will I die in? .  
 What language am I doomed to die in? ...  
 What time will it be? ...  
 These questions are digressions, not from fear  
                   but from impatient hope,  
 part of the fatal web of cause and effect  
 that no man can foresee, nor any god.

But it is, I suggest, rather more surprising that one of Borges' first poems in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, published 62 years earlier than 'The Web', should be a contemplation of a cemetery in Buenos Aires. In 'Recoleta Cemetery' [2000a; 7; tr. Stephen Kessler] we read: 'The tombs are beautiful', and Jason Wilson [2000; 104] quotes Thomas Hutchinson as calling those tombs 'gorgeous monuments of marble'; but later, according to Wilson [2000; 105], Borges confided to the poet Willis Barnstone: 'What a terrible morbid place! All that baroque marble pomposity is an awful aspect of our military past'.

Borges' poem continues:

Benign shade of the trees,  
 wind full of birds and undulating limbs,  
 souls dispersed into other souls,

it might be a miracle that they once stopped being,  
 an incomprehensible miracle,  
 although its imaginary repetition  
 slanders our days with horror.  
 I thought these things in the Recoleta,  
 in the place of my ashes.

Later, in his essay 'New Refutation of Time', Borges leaves no doubt about his interest in this cemetery: 'I never pass the Recoleta cemetery without remembering that my father, my grandparents and my great-grandparents are buried there, as I shall be; then I remember that I have already remembered that, many times before' [1964; 177].

Only six years after 'Recoleta Cemetery', and as if to ensure that his readers did not forget his interest in the subject, Borges published 'Deaths of Buenos Aires' [1972; 61-65; tr. Ben Belitt], which is written in two sections, 'La Chacarita' and 'La Recoleta'. As di Giovanni explains [Borges, 1972; 295],

La Chacarita is the vast western cemetery of Buenos Aires, opened to accommodate the victims of the yellow-fever epidemic of 1871, when 13,614 people died in six months. La Recoleta is the old northern cemetery, whose crypts were filled with Argentine's illustrious dead, including all of Borges' immediate ancestors.

Some of its lines make his fascination with death very clear indeed [1972; 63; italics in quoted text]:

*Death is life lived away,  
 life is death coming on.*

Cremator of all and mimic of graveyards,  
*La Quema* summons that garbage of death to sit at your feet,  
 a passing intruder.

We exhaust and infect all reality: 210 cartloads a day  
 to outrage the mornings, on their way

to this smoking necropolis  
with a waste of quotidian things we have fouled with mortality.

D. L. Shaw, in his paper *Some Unamunesque Preoccupations in Borges' Poetry* [1986; 243-253], presented at a symposium on Borges' poetry in 1983, states that both Unamuno and Borges seek to 'transcend the contingency of life through art knowing the attempt to be vain ... for both belong to a historical pattern of collapsing confidence in ... a "fatherly world according to design"' [244]. He further states that the opening lines of Borges' 'Recoleta Cemetery' — 'Convinced of our decrepitude / by so many noble certainties of dust' [2000a; 7; tr. Stephen Kessler] — contain

[a]ll the threat to our ultimate substantiality which Unamuno perceived in the inevitability of death ... Life, 'La Recoleta' tells, is the absolute ... and a street in the very suburbs which Borges celebrates with such warmth and tenderness may have only the reality of a legend or a line of poetry [245] ... Borges is implicitly admitting that ... for him, despite his often-expressed scepticism, a recurrent preoccupation underlying the repeated affirmation [was] his desire merely for oblivion ... the absolute had been lost ... In [Borges'] work we perceive one of the noblest ways of accommodating our minds and spirits to that loss [250-251].

However, it appears that Borges' obsession was not unique amongst his fellow-countrymen. In his notes Hurley quotes 'a modern guidebook':

According to Argentine novelist Tomás Elo Martínez, Argentines are 'cadaver cultists' who honour their most revered national figures not on the date of their birth but of their death ... It is a common saying and only a slight exaggeration that it is cheaper to live extravagantly all your life than to be buried in Recoleta [Borges, 1998a; 542];

and, in his novel about an Argentine gravestone molester in the Perón era, Nathan Englander describes Buenos Aires as 'a city obsessed with its dead' [5].

In his fiction ‘The Duel’, Borges, writing of someone’s death, says that, in 1964, [t]he newspapers printed long obituaries of the sort that are still *de rigueur* in Argentina’ [1998a; 385].

In *This Craft of Verse*, lectures given at Harvard University in 1967-1968, he reminds his audience on two occasions of what he describes as ‘those perhaps too-well-known lines’ by Robert Frost [Borges, 2000c; 30; 107], which are taken from ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ [Frost; 130]:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

Borges suggests that, by repeating the word ‘sleep’, it becomes a metaphor for death [2000c; 107]; and in his poem ‘Ars Poetica’ [1972; 143; tr. W. S. Merwin], Borges writes:

... the death  
That our flesh goes in fear of is that death  
That comes every night and is called sleep.

Borges’ admiration for Frost was confirmed during a discussion on English and North American Literature at the University of Arkansas in 1983: ‘Robert Frost is to me, perhaps, one of the finest poets ... Frost is a great poet’ [Cortínez; 73]. It is therefore relevant to note that Ian Hamilton, the editor of *Robert Frost: Selected Poems*, states in his Introduction: ‘Many of the poems in which Frost was truly and desolately himself are those which inhabit, stoically, a friendless realm’ [Frost; 21].

A substantial proportion of the pieces in both *Selected Poems 1923-1967* [Borges, 1972] and in *Selected Poems* [Borges, 2000a] speak of death. It was constantly in Borges' thoughts, as the following examples illustrate.

These lines are taken from 'Empty Drawing Room' [1972; 9; tr. W. S. Merwin], and published in *Fervor*:

The daguerreotypes tell their lie:  
 a false nearness  
 of old age cloistered in a mirror,  
 and when we look hard they elude us  
 like pointless dates ...

In 'Remorse for Any Death' [1972; 15; tr. W. S. Merwin] the following words appear, almost with enthusiasm: 'Free of memory and hope, / unlimited, abstract, almost future, / the dead body is not a dead person: it is death.'

One of his poems is aptly titled 'Inscription on Any Tomb' [1972; 17; tr. W.S. Merwin]; in it Borges writes:

Let not the rash marble risk  
 garrulous breaches of oblivion's omnipotence,  
 in many words recalling  
 name, renown, events, birthplace.  
 All those glass jewels are best left in the dark.

Borges' next book of poems, *Moon Across the Way* [1972; 33-45], was also published while still in his twenties. Some of them seem to be written as a celebration of death. For example, in 'General Quiroga Rides to his Death in a Carriage' [35, tr. Alastair Reed], we find:

To ride to your death in a carriage — what a splendid thing to do!  
 General Quiroga had in mind to approach the haunts of death  
 taking six or seven companions with slit throats as escort.

In the *San Martin Copybook* [1972, 49-71; 2000a, 49-65], published only four years after *Moon Across the Way*, his poem ‘The Mythical Founding of Buenos Aires’ [1972; 49-51; tr. Alastair Reid] tells of ‘a small red star inset to mark the spot / where Juan Díaz fasted and the Indians dined’; this is explained in a note by di Giovanni [1972; 294]:

Juan Díaz de Solis, looking for a passage to the Far East, entered the Río de la Plata ... in February 1516. On rowing ashore, he and his companions were killed and eaten by Indians — all within sight of his ships’ crews.

In the same book of poems we find a celebration of the death of Borges’ grandfather, ‘Isidoro Acevedo’ [1972, 53-55; tr. di Giovanni]:

In the visionary defense of his country that his faith hungered  
 for (and not that his fever imposed),  
 he plundered his days  
 and rounded up an army of Buenos Aires ghosts  
 so as to get himself killed in the fighting ...

It was in the metaphor of a journey that I was told of his  
 death, and I did not believe it.  
 I was a boy, who knew nothing then of dying; I was immortal,  
 and afterward for days I searched the sunless rooms for him.

In one of Borges’ best-known poems, ‘Deathwatch on the Southside’ [1972, 57-59; tr. Robert Fitzgerald], also published in 1929, he writes:

I am touched by the frail wisdoms  
 lost in every man’s death —  
 his habit of books, of a key, of one body  
 among the others ...  
 I know that every privilege, however obscure,  
 is in the line of miracles,  
 and here is a great one: to take part in this vigil,  
 gathered around a being no one knows — the Dead;  
 gathered to set him apart or guard him,  
 his first night in death.

Likewise, in ‘To Francisco Lopez Merino’ [1972, 69-71; tr. Ben Belitt] Borges writes:

... you might even have thought to humor yourself  
with your death, like a dream  
that brings forgetfulness of the world, but in a comradely way  
where oblivion blesses us.

Borges’ *San Martin Copybook* is described by Graciela Palau de Nemes [166] as having death as its ‘main theme’. But she then goes on to suggest that, in the poem ‘Isidoro Acevedo’ [Borges, 1972; 53-55], Borges is ‘trying to attain immortality’ [de Nemes; 166]; clearly, she was not aware of Borges’ words: ‘I have for years lived in fear of never dying. Such an idea as immortality would, of course, be unbearable’ [Borges, 1971; 204].

The poems quoted above were all published before or during 1929. Borges published no more poetry until 1960, and these will be dealt with later.

As for Borges’ prose, death is featured in almost every story in the *Collected Fictions*, as well as in *The Aleph* — and most of those deaths are violent. Borges’ fictions do not require the subtlety of metaphors; and, like some of his poems, some of his fictions might be labelled ‘celebrations’ of death. But, as will be seen, many of Borges’ critics appear to have gone out of their way to ignore this overriding motivation.

*A Universal History of Iniquity* [1998a, 3-64] was published in 1935. It contains fourteen stories; of these, nine tell of violent deaths, and some of many deaths. In the remainder we read of a character who is already dead [‘A Theologian in Death’, 53-54], of the King’s hand that will ‘burn for all eternity’

['The Chamber of Statues', 54-56], and of 'a man from Cairo ... (who) received a painful beating ... until he was at the point of death' ['The Story of the Two Dreamers'; 56-57].

Monegal tells us [1988; 6]:

[Borges] was born and brought up in a house that was, up to a point, a family museum ... The place of honour went to the swords that had liberated South America ... [T]he daguerreotypes framed in black velvet memorialized a parade of dark, sad gentlemen or reserved ladies, many of them prematurely widowed.

During the talks he gave at Columbia University in 1972 and 1973 — more than twenty years before his death — Borges says: 'Yes, I have always been obsessed with time'. He frequently mentions the fact that he was getting old; and when asked why he had 'left the world of fantasy ... and come closer to the real world' he answers: 'I'm rather old and tired'. He believed that people thought kindly of him in the USA partly because he was 'an old man'; '[a]t any moment I will be seventy-two years old' [1994; 57, 63, 65, 69].

In the Afterword to his collection *Museum*, included in *The Maker*, he writes:

A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, bays, ships (etc., etc) ... A short time before he dies, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face [1998a; 327].

'The End' [Borges, 1998a; 168-170].

Recabarren, the owner of the general-store-and-bar, had become paralysed, and is resting his 'great useless body'. A black man is playing the guitar; many years earlier this man had been beaten there in a song contest, but



he continues to frequent the bar. However, to Recabarren, the black man does not count [169].

A rider appears on the horizon. Slowly, he rides to the bar. The black man recognizes him as the man who had killed his brother seven years before. Without any urgency, he challenges the rider to a duel; without any urgency, the rider accepts.

They walk away for some distance. Martín Fierro — for such was the rider's name — makes the first thrust with his knife; but the black man recovers and buries his knife in Martín Fierro's belly. Fierro does not get up.

The black man, '[h]is work of vengeance done ... was nobody now' [170]; and he still 'didn't count' as far as Recabarren was concerned.

I suggest that 'The End' is a prose-poem on death, despite the fact that it does not appear in *Selected Poems*. I further suggest that it is a ballet-sequence, the reader being given the appropriate back-drop in these words:

There is an hour just at evening when the plains seem on the verge of saying something; they never do, or perhaps they do — eternally — though we don't understand it; or perhaps we do understand but what they say is as untranslatable as music [170].

Monegal hardly touches on the story, and Woodall not at all. On the other hand, Wheelock deals with it at length. He suggests that the tension set up in the rivalry between Fierro and the black man is 'esthetic; in the ambiguity of the dual existence of the abstraction 'gaucho' ... there is a suggestion of 'gaucho' as a Platonic form' [14]. My suggestion is that, in view of his revulsion to any form of Idealism, nothing could have been further from Borges' mind. Subsequently, Wheelock states that, as soon as Fierro appears on the horizon, '[w]e already

know which of the gauchos will survive, because the Negro first appeared when ... there was still 'much light in the sky'. Fierro appears with the dying sun' [99]. Such a suggestion of symbolism on Borges' part would have amused di Giovanni, bearing in mind the latter's denunciation of 'po-faced exegetes'.

Sturrock suggests that it is Recabarren who drives the story:

His name is a strong clue that whatever does happen within eye-shot has been willed by himself. *Recabar* is a Spanish verb meaning 'to achieve one's desire' ... [and] the real-life contestants ... are a nineteenth century poet [Hernández] and a twentieth-century prose-writer [Borges], who has set out to correct something of which he perhaps does not approve in the other's work [42-43].

Consequently, Sturrock sees the bed-ridden storekeeper as

a predestined maker of fictions ... [T]he wish that Recabarren fulfils is ... the wish of a literary man ... [H]e is, like all makers of fiction in Borges, an engineer or pure artificer ... [T]he work of imagination involves [authors] in the duplication of their selves [42-44].

But this sits strangely with the statement that 'the black man didn't count' [169]; could such a non-person have been chosen by Recabarren as his instrument of doom? It is difficult not to feel that Sturrock is taking some unwarranted liberties with Borges' text; and that, again, di Giovanni would have been amused at Sturrock's inventiveness.

Williamson also suggests that Borges was rewriting the ending of Hernández' poem 'The Gaucho Martín Fierro':

This time, however, it is Fierro who is killed ... [and] the victor has to all intents and purposes taken on Fierro's identity ... [T]he seemingly contrary identities of killer and killed, avenger and victim, dissolve into one another, thereby opening the story up to a potentially infinite progression [323].

Williamson suggests that Recabarren ‘may have conjured up the encounter in his imagination’; he refers to ‘the bilingual pun latent in the name Recabarren’, but he points out that ‘the word *recabar* is fused with the English word ‘barren’, so that the name itself suggests that all our efforts to assert a unique, authentic self are futile: we must be resigned to open-endedness and irresolution’ [323-324].

It is true that ‘open-endedness and irresolution’ are implied; but in the context of this story, any ‘infinite progression’ can only lead towards death.

‘The South’ [Borges, 1998a; 174-179].

In his Foreword to *Artifices*, Borges says that this ‘may be my best story’, and tells the reader that ‘it is possible to read it both as a forthright narration of novelistic events and in quite another way, as well’ [1998a; 129]. These words present a challenge that cannot be ignored.

Like Borges, Juan Dahlmann was ‘secretary of a municipal library’. One day he, like Borges,

hurriedly took the stairs ... His brow ... caught the edge of a recently painted window that somebody had forgotten to close ... Fever wore him away ... [T]hey drove Dahlmann to a sanatorium ... [and, after receiving treatment] he realized that until then he had been only somewhere on the outskirts of hell [174-175].

Eventually, we are told, he recovered. He was allowed to leave the sanatorium, and took a train to his ‘large country house in the South that had once belonged to [his ancestors] the Flores family’ [174]. However, the train did not stop at the station he required, but at a station a few miles in advance. To fill

the time during which he waited for transport, 'Dahlmann decided to eat there in the country store' [178], only to find himself increasingly insulted by the labourers who were also eating there. One of them, who was 'playacting, exaggerating his drunkenness', challenged Dahlmann to a fight with knives; another 'tossed him a naked dagger'.

Dahlmann realized that 'in his clumsy hand the weapon would serve less to defend him than to justify the other man's killing him'; nevertheless, 'Dahlmann firmly grips the knife ... and steps out into the plains' [179]; and so the story ends.

Jason Wilson [2006; 105] sees the story as a postulation by Borges of 'his ideal death, a man of action not a man of fiction'. But Borges has suggested that there is 'quite another way' of reading this story [1998a; 129]. The clue lies, I suggest, in the following lines:

Dahlmann thought he recognized the owner [of the store]; then he realized that he'd been fooled by the man's resemblance to one of the employees at the sanatorium ... [and] Dahlmann did not find it strange that the storekeeper should know his name [178].

On this evidence Dahlmann was still in the sanatorium, and was merely dreaming his release.

But, while a man might dream of his release, he cannot dream his death; that is why the story has no ending. Dahlmann has woken up — to find himself still in hell.

This interpretation conflicts with that which Borges gave in an interview with Richard Stern in 1996; talking about 'The South', he says:

But there's another possibility, the possibility of the second half of the story which is hallucination. When the man is killed, he's not

really killed. He died in the hospital, and though that was a dream, a kind of wishful thinking, that was the kind of death he would have liked to have — in the pampas with a knife in his hand being stabbed to death [1998b; 8].

In my defence I can only quote Borges himself; in *The Art of Writing* he tells us: ‘I think of writing as being a kind of collaboration ... the reader does his part of the work; he is enriching the book’ [1994; 119].

However, Monegal sees the story as a form of exorcism on Borges’ part; he tells us: ‘All his life Borges had lamented not having been a man of action; all his life he had felt that to be a writer was to be a coward’. But he concedes that ‘everything seems to happen in slow motion’, and that the plot is ‘a dream or nightmare Borges once had that now is Dahlmann’s’ [262]. Later, however, Monegal describes ‘The South’ as dealing ‘with the destiny of a man torn apart by his double allegiance to European culture and life and to native barbarianism’ [377]; but this, I would respectfully suggest, has more relevance to Dahlmann’s background than to the pseudo-events in the story.

Later still, Monegal suggests that, during the Peronist ‘nightmare’ [426], — which ended in 1955, only two years after ‘The South’ was published — ‘Borges must have felt like Dahlmann and probably dreamed of a similarly savage ending’ [427]. Subsequently, commenting on Borges’ Foreword to *Ficciones* [Borges, 1998a; 67], Monegal anticipates Borges’ interview with Richard Burgin referred to above, and suggests that the ‘other way’ of reading the story is that its second part

is a hallucination ... Dahlmann never fought a knife duel in the pampas; he died under the surgeon’s scalpel in a Buenos Aires hospital [437].

Sarlo reminds us that Borges was — like Dahlmann —

the product of cross-cultural mixing ... ‘The South’ has attempted to present, in its allegorical terms, [the] cultural mixture which never offers a happy ending but rather leads to conflict [48].

In the Preface to Sarlo’s book *A Writer on the Edge* the editor explains that, ‘[s]ince 1978 [Sarlo] has directed ... the most important journal of socialist theory in Argentina’ [Sarlo; xiv]; but I suggest that Sarlo allows her naturally deep awareness of that ‘cultural mixture’ to blind her to Borges’ dramatic intentions.

Sturrock is of the opinion that Dahlmann, having bought an incomplete translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*,

has been inspired to get in on the literary act ... [hence] his eagerness to examine it ... taking the stairs instead of the lift ... and sets in motion the sequence of events which leads him inexorably and gratifyingly to a heroic death in the land of his dreams, the South [58].

Sturrock’s justification for using the words ‘gratifyingly’ and ‘heroic death’ is questionable, to say the least. I suggest that there was no death, and certainly neither a gratifying nor an heroic one.

Sturrock further suggests that the cat that Dahlmann so fondly stroked in the store was

like Keats’ immortal nightingale ... perfectly quintessential because of the common assumption that animals, being without memory or foresight, dwell in a perpetual present [73].

However, this is hardly a ‘common assumption’; it would generate only scorn on the part of those who own an animal, and who rely entirely on that animal’s memory and foresight in order to train it – for example, to teach it that food will appear only when it obeys a certain command. But, according to Sturrock, ‘[t]he encounter between Dahlmann and the cat is an encounter between the temporal and the intemporal ... [and that the cat] is a second inhabitant of eternity’ [73]. These words again serve to categorise Sturrock – at least in this instance – as one of those ‘po-faced exegetes’ against whom di Giovanni so strongly declaims; Borges’ description of the cat as a ‘magical animal [that] lives in the present, in the eternity of the instant’ [1998a; 176] simply reinforces Monegal’s view that Dahlmann is hallucinating [437].

Jason Wilson [2006; 104-105] suggests that

Dahlmann ... chose to die a Romantic death ... [He] is lent a knife by an old wizened gaucho who, like the cat, lived outside time ... and Borges postulates his ideal death, a man of action, not a man of fiction.

It is valid, I suggest, to maintain the similarity between Dahlmann and Borges; but, again, the ‘symbolism’ of the cat is questionable. As di Giovanni pointed out, ‘how typical of Borges ... to subsume his interpreters’ [2003; 52].

In a later interview with Richard Burgin, Borges makes this interesting comment in relation to ‘The South’: ‘[P]erhaps if I were personally brave I wouldn’t care so much about bravery. Because, of course, what one cares for is what one hasn’t got, no? [1998b; 18].

But Colin Wilson's opinion is that 'The South' 'is just a damn silly and pointless story ... Here you see Borges' schoolboy romanticism and his Conradian pessimism in their most naked form' [76]; and Wilson is entitled to his opinion.

'The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)' [1971; 54-57].

This story illustrates not only Borges' fascination with death, but also his ideal of Argentine manhood, as well as the readership that he assumed.

Cruz's father had died 'in a ditch, his skull split by a saber that had seen service in the Peruvian and Brazilian wars' [54], and he was a man who had come to understand 'that his real destiny was as a lone wolf, not a gregarious dog' [57]. This sets the tone for the whole story.

Cruz 'lived ... in a world of unrelieved barbarism'; and when a fellow drover persisted in poking fun at him, Cruz 'laid him out with his knife'. While on the run he was captured, and sent to serve in a northern outpost of the army [55].

Later, after promotion to sergeant, he was ordered to capture an outlaw who had killed two men. His search took him, as he came to realize, to the spot where his father had been killed. The outlaw was found, but he 'badly wounded or killed several of Cruz's men' [56-57]. Then

Cruz ... began to understand. He understood that ... every man must obey what is within him ... He understood that the other man was himself ... Cruz called out that he would not be party to the crime of killing a brave man, and began fighting against his own soldiers, shoulder to shoulder with Martín Fierro, the deserter [57].

As Jaén points out [110], '[i]t is only on the last line that the name Martín Fierro is mentioned, and then we discover who Cruz really is'. However, this was



well known to readers of Hernández' poem *Martín Fierro*; again, Borges felt able to take this knowledge for granted.

In Borges' Commentary on this story, he writes: 'In the dramatic moment when ... Cruz finds out who [the outlaw] is and refuses to act against Martín Fierro, there may be something deeply and unconsciously Hispanic' [1971; 195-196].

As mentioned in the Introduction, Borges' view was that

The Argentine can think only in terms of a personal relationship... For the European the world is a cosmos where each person corresponds intimately to the function he performs; for the Argentine it is a chaos [Borges, 1964; 33-34].

'The Immortal' [Borges, 1998a; 183-195].

In the Afterword to *The Aleph* Borges tells the reader that the subject of 'The Immortal' 'is the effect that immortality would have on mankind' [287]; and Borges spares no pains to demonstrate that the effect would be horrifying. One is reminded of the occasion, narrated by Willis Barnstone, on which Borges was greeted effusively by someone who seized his hand and shook it furiously, saying 'Borges, you are immortal' — to which Borges replied: 'Don't be a pessimist, sir' [Borges, 1998b; 144].

Rufus, military tribune of a Roman legion, has witnessed the death of many men whom he describes with wonderful irony as having 'magnanimously coveted the steel blade' [183]; he himself had 'barely glimpsed the face of Mars'. Such 'privation' grieved him, and he set himself the quest of finding the secret City of the Immortals. But he confesses: 'I am not certain whether I ever believed

in the City of the Immortals; I think the task of finding it was enough for me' [184].

His search leads him through the 'ardent desert' and through many lands, including 'the lands of the Troglodytes, who devour serpents and lack all verbal commerce' [184]. Some of his men were 'burned with fever ... others drank up insanity and death'; others planned mutiny. In his flight Rufus became separated from the rest of his men, and a 'Cretan arrow rent my flesh. For several days I wandered without finding water' [185].

His nightmare over, there lay before him 'the patent City of the Immortals', dazzling in the rays of the sun. But, from the niches that surrounded the City emerged 'the bestial lineage of the Troglodytes ... In pain ... I let the moon and the sun cast lots for my bleak fate ... In vain did I plead with [the Troglodytes] to kill me' [185-186].

Rufus was unable to scale the walls of the City, and could find no door; but he found a pit, out of which rose a ladder which he must descend. In 'a chaos of squalid galleries' he discovered a labyrinth, and a labyrinth within a labyrinth. 'The silence was hostile, and virtually perfect' [187] he tells us.

Coming to the end of one corridor he found a series of metal rungs leading up the wall; '[t]hus it was that I was led to ascend from the blind realm of black and intertwining labyrinths into the brilliant City'. He was 'arrested by the great antiquity of its construction' [187]. But, after deciding that the City was the work of the gods, he eventually concluded that those gods were mad, and that '[s]o long as this City endures, no one in the world can ever be happy or courageous' [188], and he made his tortuous escape.

One of the Troglodytes had followed him, and was awaiting his return from the City. The Troglodyte had been writing in the sand, but the characters were meaningless. As they began their return to the village of the Troglodytes, Rufus attempted to teach him some words — but, seemingly, to no avail. In despair, he ‘toyed with the possibility of a language that had no nouns, a language that had impersonal verbs or indeclinable adjectives’ [189] — in other words, a language that bore no relevance to the real world.

Suddenly, rain fell in ‘vivid torrents’, and the Troglodyte spoke. He was Homer, but could remember ‘[l]ess than the meagerest rhapsode’ of the *Odyssey* [190].

Now Rufus understands: The Troglodytes were the Immortals; they had destroyed the earlier City, and in its place had built their own ‘incoherent city’ [190]. He concludes: ‘What is divine, terrible, and incomprehensible is *to know oneself immortal*’; significantly, all religions hold that rewards or punishments relate to what one has done ‘*when alive*’ [191; italics in quoted text], despite their belief in immortality.

But Rufus must live for many hundreds of years before he is released from immortality. Finally, however,

a thorny tree scratched the back of my hand ... Incredulous, speechless, and in joy I contemplated the formation of a slow drop of blood. *I am once more mortal*, I told myself over and over, *again I am like all other men*. That night, I slept until daybreak’ [193; italics in quoted text].

There is little wonder that he found immortality ‘unbearable’, to use Borges’ word; Rufus’ joy over seeing the drop of blood was overwhelming. It

brings to mind Stevie Smith's poem 'Sweet Death, Kind Death' — joy at the release from the prospective torture of immortality.

Almost without exception, critics of 'The Immortal' appear to have ignored Borges' frequent and clear expressions of his horror of immortality. Ronald Christ, for example, suggests that the story

is one of eternal life and all-encompassing memory ... of sublime impersonality in literature ... whose intention is to question the ... notion of limits to one's life ... limits that, the story argues, do not exist [213-214].

Woodall describes the story as

a parable full of labyrinths and hopes for endless life, for eternal escape from self ... In abnegating his earthly self and embracing multiple identities, this narrator is also disclaiming ... responsibility for the text we are reading [151].

Wheelock asserts that Borges is dealing with language itself, that 'acquires a metaphysical and fictional dimension ... [which] leads to the loss of the power of the word as a tool for knowledge' [11]. He characterizes Rufus' resolve to find the City as an attempt find 'his own elevation to immutable self-being' [130] — whatever that means; but Borges had made it plain that Rufus' resolve arose from nothing more than pique and boredom when he said: 'I think the task of finding it was enough for me' [1998a; 184].

I suggest that Monegal is correct in stating that, in the City of the Immortals, 'Borges manages to produce a space that is the perversion of all architecture' [66]; he suggests the influence of Paranesi, although I should have thought that Escher's influence would have been more obvious and compelling.

But, to Monegal, the most memorable symbol in *The Immortal* is ‘the labyrinth of the mother’s womb’, as indicated by Borges’ frequent use of the number nine, and the consequent ‘rejection of the brutality and violence of the external world that is so common in infants’ [69]. Later, however, he describes the story ‘as an allegory of reading’ [412]. Perhaps we should simply accept that Monegal was confused.

Williamson, on the other hand, sees it as ‘a fictional exploration of Nietzsche’s theory of Eternal Return, in which infinite time has wiped out the identity of individuals’ [297].

Finally, Sturrock declares that Rufus’ fellow legionaries are ‘literary men who have lived out their creative fever and [that] these dead legionaries are perhaps the very authors of the City of the Immortals’ [188].

Comments such as these surely demonstrate the relevance of di Giovanni’s advice that, for the reader of Borges, ‘there is no need to ignore what is before one’s eyes and look for the far-fetched’ [2003; 56]. I suggest that, in this story, Borges’ horror of immortality is clearly ‘before one’s eyes’.

‘The Dead Man’ [Borges, 1971; 60-66].

This is the story of Benjamin Otálora, who is

a sorry hoodlum with ... a passion for recklessness ... of whom perhaps not a single memory lingers ... a strapping young man of nineteen ... A lucky blow with a knife has made clear to him that he is also brave [60-61].

Luck also brings him to the attention of Azevedo Bandeira, ‘the boss’ [62], who asks Otálora to bring him a large herd of cattle from the north. Thus begins a

life of great excitement for Otálora, and his ambition knows no bounds — an ambition not only to replace Bandeira, but also to steal his ‘woman with the shining hair’ [64].

On New Year’s Eve night, ‘at the head of the table, Otálora, feeling his drink, piles exultation upon exultation, boast upon boast’ [65]. But at midnight Bandeira makes the woman kiss Otálora. Only then does Otálora realize ‘before dying, that he has been betrayed from the start, that he has been sentenced to death’ [66]. Bandeira’s bodyguard fires the shot.

Otálora’s death has all the inevitability of Greek tragedy, in which were displayed some of the most famous examples of an obsession with death; Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* are only the first that come to mind.

Borges’ satisfaction with this story is evident from his Commentary:

‘The Dead Man’ should not be taken ... as a deliberate allegory on human life, though, like poor Otálora, we are given all things only to have them snatched from us at the moment we die. I prefer the story to be read as a kind of adventure [1971; 196-197].

As in many other pieces, there is no enigma here other than that created by Borges’ critics. Williamson — having decided that Borges was ‘now feeling himself to be a mere reflection of his father ... and both father and son were mired in a paralyzing condition of ‘unreality’ as a result’ [233] — sees the story as an expression of ‘Borges’ resentment of his father for having, as it were, ‘tricked’ him by encouraging him to rebel against the sword of honor while having at the same time preempted the desired outcome of that rebellion’ [234].

Monegal agrees: ‘All his life Borges had lamented not having been a man of action; all his life he had felt that to be a writer was to be a coward. Now, in writing about these primitive men ... he is still trying to exorcise those feelings’ [262].

Wheelock is at his most obscure, and therefore at his most unhelpful, when he states that, in this story, ‘[e]very hypostat arises out of a ‘pregnancy’ and a series of these pregnancies produces the illusory structure of man’s reality, which is finally his hope or his will’ [89].

Jaén also ignores Borges’ Commentary. In his chapter entitled *The Loss of Salvation*, he writes: ‘Often the idea is reduced to a scheme in which a human being directs the destiny of another, as [Bandeira] directs Benjamin Otálora’s’ [159].

It is a pity that many of Borges’ critics appear not to have read his Commentary.

*Brodies Report* [1971; 103-108], first published in 1970, demonstrates that, for Borges, the topic of death remained inescapable; five of its stories, discussed below, illustrate this point, and most display considerable cynicism; Coetzee [173] describes the book as ‘the most defiantly masculine of Borges’s collections’.

‘The Intruder’ [Borges, 1971; 103-108].

Here Borges retells a story that, he says, might have first been told at a wake [103] — certainly an appropriate occasion. Two brothers both live in a house with only one book, ‘a worn Bible’; we are told that ‘it is likely that one of

them, at least, had killed his man', and that '[t]o fall out with one of them was to reckon with two enemies' [104].

There is a woman whom they both love; but they resolve this conflict very simply — by murdering her. In his Commentary on the story Borges tells us that it is 'perhaps the best I have ever written', despite the fact that his mother 'from the outset thoroughly disliked the tale' [1971; 203].

In 'Unworthy' [1998a, 352-357] the police settle an old score by shooting 'at point-blank range' two unarmed robbers who had been betrayed by a 'squealer' [357]; 'I hope they kill me' [356], says the latter — in both hope and remorse.

The narrator of 'The Meeting' [1971; 115-121], a young boy, tells the reader:

I was reeling with adventure; I wished very hard that someone would be killed' [118]; and someone was. The story tells of many other fights, in which 'in some uncanny way it could have been the weapons, not the men, which fought ... [T]he knives — not their tools, the men — knew how to fight [121].

In his Commentary on this story Borges writes:

A dagger, for example, has to fulfil a destiny ... Back of all this lies my personal — or perhaps Argentine — obsession with knives ... [K]nife duelling has what Dr Johnson said of the lives of sailors and seamen — 'the dignity of danger' [205].

Woodall says of 'The Meeting': 'Borges had not been so visceral or unpleasant since *A Universal History of Infamy*' [226].



‘Rosendo’s Tale’ [Borges, 1971; 125-131].

The narrator describes himself as someone who was ‘[f]earful for his health, like most people in Buenos Aires ... [and] first learned to handle a knife the way everyone else did, fencing with a charred stick. If you jabbed your man, it left a mark’ [125 - 126]. Rosendo killed a man after opening ‘a slice in his face’ [127]. He was jailed for the crime, but was released on the word of someone from ‘party headquarters’. In consequence, he explains, ‘the law had me in the palm of their hands. If I was no use to the party they’d clap me back inside’ [128].

Rosendo goes on to tell of a friend of his who challenged his wife’s lover to a duel which the lover won; ‘[h]e was out to kill, and he got killed — but a fair fight, man to man’ [130]. Attending a cockfight some days later, Rosendo asks himself ‘[w]hat is it in these animals ... that makes them gouge each other’s eyes out like that?’ [130]. Finally, however, Rosendo refuses to accept a challenge to a duel, and — to everyone’s astonishment — makes ‘a clean break with that life’; ending up in ‘a respectable neighbourhood’ in Buenos Aires [131] he ‘finally attains manhood and sanity’, as Borges tells us in his Commentary [206].

However, despite the conclusion, Rosendo’s tale is of a man who had relished death.

‘The Other Duel’ [Borges, 1998a; 386-389].

The last of these five stories in *Brodies Report* is one of Borges’ most gruesome. Two gauchos who have maintained a personal feud throughout their lives find themselves on the same side in a civil war. But they are on the losing side, and are captured with many others. Their hands are bound behind them,

and they await their inevitable deaths by having their throats slit. But the leader of the victorious army knows of their feud, and offers them the opportunity to settle it by racing against each other after he has slit their throats. They accept. Their hands are untied so that they can run more easily; they stumble a few steps, and then fall headlong.

Talking about this story to students of Columbia University, Borges says:

I must have carried it around [in my head] some twenty-five or thirty years ... I thought of it as being as grim story, and I made it into a joke to make it still more grim ... [T]he two men did not think of themselves as victims. They were given the chance of their lives ... When I think of people in my family who had their throats cut or who were shot, I realize I'm leading a very tame kind of life [1994; 41, 49, 50].

'The Other Duel' appears to be entirely given over to gruesome events, but there is also some macabre humour. After the battle the conqueror kindly agrees to postpone cutting the throats of the other prisoners so that they can watch the race and lay bets on it, and allows all his prisoners a siesta before they die. He is obviously a gentleman.

Returning to Borges' poetry, his collection, *The Maker* [2000a; 69-143], was published in 1960, more than thirty years after the *San Martin Copybook*; it contains, in the words of Monegal, 'some of [Borges'] most brilliant and ironic pieces' [400]. In it we find that the poet's fascination with death continues unabated. This is clear as soon as we read the Prologue 'For Leopold Lugones' [2000a; 69; tr. Kenneth Krabbenhoft]. Lugones had taken his own life in 1938; prior to that, as Williamson points out, he and Borges had once been at

loggerheads over Lugones' 'elitist nationalism', his 'mystification' of the famous poem *Martín Fierro* [14], and his espousal of fascism [132]. But Lugones had also been Argentina's 'preeminent poet' [Williamson, 99]. The Prologue was written in 1960, and in it Borges 'dreams' of entering Lugones' office to 'exchange a few conventional but cordial words', and to give him a copy of *The Maker*. But he then realises that he has 'fabricate[d] an impossible scene' — that of reconciliation. However: 'So be it, I say to myself, for I too will soon be dead'.

In one of the poems in this collection, 'The Moon' [2000a; 109-113; tr. Alan S. Trueblood], we read of that particular day when 'all hope fails':

In a certain ironclad wood is said to dwell  
 a giant wolf whose fate will be to slay  
 the moon, once he has knocked it from the sky  
 in the red dawning of the final day.

(This is well known throughout the prophetic North  
 as also that on that day, as all hope fails,  
 the seas of all the world will be infested  
 by a ship built solely out of dead men's nails.)

In 'Rain' [2000a; 115; tr. Alastair Reid] Borges refers to what was, for him, an especially poignant death:

Quite suddenly the evening clears at last  
 As now outside the soft small rain is falling.

... The evening's rain  
 Brings me the voice, the dear voice of my father,  
 Who comes back now, who never has been dead.

In the group of poems in *Museum*, a section of *The Maker*, we find *Quatrain* [Borges, 1972; 235; tr. Alan Dugan]; Borges tells us that he took it from

a twelfth-century Arabic poem, but Monegal refutes this, stating that the many other attributions made by Borges in *The Maker* are also to be ignored [400]. It reads:

Others died, but that happened in the past,  
Which is the season (no one doesn't know this) most  
propitious for death.  
Is it possible that I, a subject of Yakub Almansur,  
Must die as the roses and Aristotle had to die?

Another of Borges' poems in *Museum* is aptly titled 'Limits (or Goodbyes)' [Borges; 1972; 237; tr. Alan Dugan]; ignoring — on Monegal's recommendation — the attribution to Julio Platero Haedo, it reads:

There's a line of Verlaine's that I'm not going to remember again,  
There's a nearby street that's forbidden to my footsteps.  
There's a mirror that has seen me for the last time.  
There's a door I've closed until the end of the world ...  
Death invades me, constantly.

We should note that Borges published this poem more than twenty years before his death.

Borges appears to have been enamoured of the word 'limit', which is yet another of his metaphors for death. 'Limits (or Goodbyes)' was published in 1960 [*Selected Poems 1923-1967*; 237]; the same poem, but now titled simply 'Limits', is included in Borges' *Personal Anthology* [65], published in 1967. 'Limits' is also the title used for a different poem in *The Self and the Other* [*Selected Poems*; 181-183], published in 1964, and which is also included in the *Personal Anthology*. And then there is Borges' collection called *The Limit*— a title over which he

pondered at some length [Cortínez, 21]; this was published in 1981 [*Selected Poems*; 419-459], and its last poem is called 'The Limit' [459].

In 'The Poet Tells of his Fame' [1972; 239; tr. W. S. Merwin] Borges is even more forthright on the subject of death; ignoring another attribution, we find these words:

The angels already know my last couplet by heart.  
The tools of my art are humiliation and anguish.  
Oh, if only I had been born dead!

His next book of poems, *The Self and the Other* [1972; 75-221], appeared in 1964. While this also was published more than twenty years before his death, again almost every page illustrates his obsession. 'Conjectural Poem' [1972, 83-85; tr. di Giovanni], in which 'Doctor Francisco Laprido ... reflects before he dies', ends with the following lines:

The circle's  
about to close. I wait to let it come.  
My feet tread the shadows of the lances  
that spar for the kill. The taunts of my death,  
the horses, the horsemen, the horses' manes,  
tighten the ring around me ... Now the first  
blow, the lance's hard steel ripping my chest,  
and across my throat the intimate knife.

'Intimate' is a magnificent word in this context!

Monegal comments that, for Borges, 'the 'Conjectural Poem' was much more than an elegy; it was, in cipher, an image of his own fate' [377].

In 'To a Minor Poet of the Greek Anthology' [1972; 87; tr. W. S. Merwin] these words appear: '[A]nd is there a greater blessing / than to be the ash of which oblivion is made?'

Another poem in this book is entitled ‘Matthew XXV: 30’ [Borges, 1972; 93; tr. Alastair Reid]. Fully to appreciate its fatalism, di Giovanni [299] reminds the reader of the relevant biblical text, which reads: ‘And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: then there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth’. Clearly, Borges is the ‘unprofitable servant’ in these lines:

In vain have oceans been squandered on you, in vain  
The sun, wonderfully seen through Whitman’s eyes.  
You have used up the years and they have used up you,  
And still, and still, you have not written the poem.

In ‘The Dagger’ [1972; 95; tr. di Giovanni] we find a different illustration of Borges’ fascination with death:

Whoever lays eyes on it has to pick up the dagger  
and toy with it, as if he had always been on the  
lookout for it. The hand is quick to grip the  
waiting hilt, and the powerful obeying blade  
slides in and out of the sheath with a click.

In this context it is tempting to quote the whole of ‘Limits’ [1972; 103-105; tr. Alastair Reid]; here are some of its more desperate lines:

Of all the streets that blur into the sunset,  
There must be one (which, I am not sure)  
That I by now have walked for the last time  
Without guessing it, the pawn of that Someone  
Who fixes in advance omnipotent laws ...  
If there is a limit to all things and a measure  
And a last time and nothing more and forgetfulness,

Who will tell us to whom in this house  
We without knowing it have said farewell? ...  
There is a door you have closed forever  
And some mirror is expecting you in vain ...  
At dawn I seem to hear the turbulent  
Murmur of crowds milling and fading away:

They are all I have been loved by, forgotten by;  
Space, time, and Borges now are leaving me.

*The Witness* [1972; 258-259; tr. di Giovanni], one of Borges' prose-poems in *The Maker*, tells us:

Before daybreak [the Saxon] will die, and with him will die — never to come back again — the last actual images of heathen rites ... Events that fill up space and reach their end when someone dies may cause us wonder, but some thing — or an endless number of things — dies with each man's last breath ...

At the end of 'Poem of the Gifts' [1972; 117-119; tr. Ben Bellitt] 'sleep' is equated with 'oblivion'; we read:

I watch the delectable  
World first disfigure then extinguish itself  
In a pallor of ashes, until all that is gone  
Seems at one with sleep and at one with oblivion'.

On a different note, Borges' lament 'Elvira de Alvear' [1972; 125; tr. di Giovanni] refers to a woman who, according to di Giovanni,

was a wealthy Argentine society woman and minor poet ... She and Borges were close friends for a long period. He wrote a preface to her poems in 1934 ... [Borges'] poem (which has her name as its title) is reproduced on a bronze plaque on the Alvear family tomb in the Recoleta cemetery [Borges, 1972; 301-303].

The poem contains the following lines:

She once had everything but one by one  
Each thing abandoned her ...  
Of Elvira what I saw first, years and years  
Past, was her smile and it is now the last.

‘Allusion to the Death of Colonel Francisco Borges (1833-1874)’ [1972; 135; tr. di Giovanni] refers to Borges’ paternal grandfather, a distinguished soldier:

I leave him on his horse on that evening  
 In which he rode across the plain to meet  
 His death, and of all the hours of his fate  
 May this one, though bitter, go on living.  
 ... Ahead, death lurks  
 Patiently in the barrels of the guns ...  
 Here was his home — in the thick of battle.

Jason Wilson [2000; 167] gives an interestingly different translation of this last line: ‘Because that was your life: a thing dragged along by battles’.

In ‘The Borges’ [1972; 137; tr. Alastair Reid] the poet thinks back on his ‘Portuguese forebears’, who, to quote his words, were a ‘ghostly race’. He refers to a king of Portugal, who — as di Giovanni tells the reader — in the 16<sup>th</sup> century ‘led an ill-fated crusade against the Mohammedans of northwest Africa [in which] he and his army were annihilated in the desert’ [1972; 304]. Of this ‘ghostly race’ Borges tells us: ‘They are that king lost on the mystic strand / And those at home who swear he is not dead.’

‘Ars Poetica’ [1972; 143; tr. W S. Merwin] dwells on Heraclitus’ famous contemplation on the river of time, and confirms Borges’ equation of ‘sleep’ with ‘death’:

To know that we are lost like the river  
 And that faces dissolve like water.  
 ... To see in death sleep, and in the sunset  
 A sad gold — such is poetry,  
 Which is immortal and poor.



In ‘To One No Longer Young’ [1972; 147; tr. Alastair Reid] — addressed, presumably, to Aeneas — Borges again reminds the reader of his obsession with death:

Why do you go on searching in the furtive  
Bronze of Greek hexameters for war  
When these six feet of ground wait for you here,  
The sudden rush of blood, the yawning grave?  
Here watching you is the inscrutable glass  
Which will dream up and then forget the face  
Of all your dwindling days, your agony.

The poem ‘Texas’ [1972; 153; tr. Mark Strand] tells of ‘the never understood, / Anxious, and brief affair that is life’.

Di Giovanni [1972; 306] states that Borges’ poem ‘Snorri Sturlosen (1197-1241)’ [1972; 163; trs Richard Howard and César Rennert] refers to an Icelandic historian and poet; it contains the following lines:

You, who bequeathed a mythology  
Of ice and fire to filial recall ...  
Discovered in amazement one night  
Of swords that your untrustworthy flesh  
Trembled. On that night without sequel  
You realized you were a coward ... On  
Your head, your sickly face, falls the sword  
As it fell so often in your book.

Borges’ sonnet ‘To Charles XII of Sweden’ [1972; 165; trs Richard Howard and César Rennert], speaks of a king who, di Giovanni tells us [1972; 306], was ‘according to Voltaire ... the most extraordinary man who ever lived’:

... the deeds that move  
The memory of men to song,  
Mortal combat, the hard horror  
Of grapeshot, the sudden sword and

Bloody fame ...  
 Arctic, ablaze, alone, no one  
 Reached your soul and now you are dead.

In his poem 'Edgar Allan Poe' [1972; 173; trs Richard Howard and César Rennert] Borges writes with apparent envy:

All the cold symbols he collected  
 Of death's victory. And feared them not.  
                                   ... Perhaps,  
 On the wrong side of death, solitary  
 And unyielding, he devises more  
 Magnificent and atrocious marvels still.

'Camden 1892' [1972; 175; trs Richard Howard and César Rennert] Borges tells of the death of one of Borges' special idols, Walt Whitman:

                                  ... The old man lies  
 Prostrate, pale, even white in his decent  
 Room, the room of a poor man ... His voice declares:  
 I am almost gone. But my verses scan  
 Life and its splendour. I was Walt Whitman.

In the sonnet 'Paris 1856' [1972; 177; trs Richard Howard and César Rennert] Borges contemplates the death of the philosopher and poet Heinrich Heine:

A long prostration has addicted him  
 To presuming on death ...  
 They cannot save you, your larks, your doves,  
 Nor all your golden nights and famous flowers.

Borges' sonnet 'The Enigmas' [1972; 181; tr. John Updike] is a more personal contemplation:

I who am singing these lines today  
 Will be tomorrow the enigmatic corpse  
 Who dwells in a realm, magical and barren,  
 Without a before or an after or a when ...  
 What errant labyrinth, what blinding flash  
 Of splendour and glory shall become my fate  
 When the end of this adventure presents me with  
 The curious experience of death?

Borges' poem 'To My Reader' [1972; 183; tr. Alastair Reid] is another testimony to his full awareness of the 'fleeting life':

... Have they not shown you,  
 The powers that preordain your destiny,  
 The certainty of dust? ... A marble slab awaits you  
 Which you will not read — on it, already written,  
 The date, the city, and the epitaph.  
 Other men too are only dreams of time ...  
 Dark, you will enter the darkness that expects you ...  
 Know that in some sense you by now are dead.

Again, 'dust' symbolises death, as it does in the poem 'Someone' [1972; 185; tr. W. S. Merwin], in which we find further evidence of Borges' fascination; it ends with these words:

Perhaps in death when the dust  
 is dust, we will be forever  
 this undecipherable root,  
 from which will grow forever,  
 serene or horrible,  
 our solitary heaven or hell.

'Oedipus and the Riddle' [1972; 191; tr. John Hollander] offers these, perhaps consolatory, lines: 'It would annihilate us all to see / The huge shape of our being; mercifully / God offers us issue and oblivion.'

Borges' 'Another Poem of Gifts' [1972; 199-203; tr. Alan Dugan] strikes a more personal note:

I want to give thanks to the divine  
Labyrinth of causes and effects ...  
For Frances Haslam, who begged her children's pardon  
For dying so slowly ...

Borges' poem 'Junin' [1972; 211; tr. di Giovanni] is another that refers to his paternal grandfather:

I am myself and I am him today,  
The man who died, the man whose blood and name  
Are mine ... Shadow  
Or final ash, do you hear me now or do  
You ignore this voice in your bronze sleep?

'Bronze sleep' is an especially striking metaphor for death.

In 'A Soldier Under Lee' [1972; 213; tr. di Giovanni] we find these lines:

A bullet has caught this soldier by the bank  
Of some bright-running creek whose name  
He does not know. He drops among the trees face down.  
... No marble marks the place or tells your name;  
Six feet of ground are now your shred of fame.

'A Morning of 1649' [1972; 217; tr. Alastair Reid] contemplates the execution of Charles I:

Liberated  
From need of lies, he knows this very day  
He goes to death, but not to oblivion —  
That he is a king. The execution waits.

Borges' last poem in *The Self and the Other*, 'The Labyrinth' [1972; 221; tr. John Updike] revisits his fiction 'The House of Asterion' [1998a; 220-222], and it ends as follows:

I know that in the hidden shadows there  
 Lurks another, whose task is to exhaust  
 The loneliness that braids and weaves this hell,  
 To crave my blood, and to fatten on my death.  
 We seek each other. Oh, if only this  
 Were the last day of our antithesis!

The collection *For the Guitar* [1972; 224-231] includes a poem called 'Milonga of the Two Brothers' [225-227; tr. di Giovanni]; some of its lines read:

Gentlemen, here's the story  
 Of the Iberra brothers —  
 Men of loving and fighting,  
 The first to rush to danger,  
 Flower of all knife fighters,  
 And now they're six feet under.

*In Praise of Darkness* [2000a; 263-301] is a collection of poems published in 1969; its title is itself testimony to Borges' obsession with death. Lyon, in a paper on this collection entitled *Intimations on a Possible Immortality: Ambiguity in 'Elogio de la Sombra'* which he presented at a symposium on Borges' poetry in 1983, points out that, of the thirty-four pieces in the collection, '[f]ourteen deal directly with death, finality, mortality, or immortality' [297]. Commenting on the last lines of 'Things' [Borges, 2000a; 277; tr. Stephen Kessler] — 'How many things ... / Blind and so mysteriously reserved. / They will endure beyond our vanishing; / And they will never know that we have gone' —

Lyon writes [299]: ‘In short, there is no expectation of a future existence, of a life beyond the present’; and he adds:

Night and nothingness are the winners; existence began with the poet and will obviously end with him. There is to be no continuance. Several other poems from the book postulate a similar end for man and for human endeavour – nothingness.

Two of the most striking poems from *In Praise of Darkness* are those entitled ‘Ritter, Tod, und Teufel (I)’ and ‘(II)’, in which Borges considers Dürer’s famous engraving, *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. These are the subject of a paper presented at the symposium in 1983 by Lima. The first of these two poems contains these lines [Lima; 344; tr. Lima]:

Beneath the esoteric helmet lies the stern  
profile, as cruel as the cruel sword that  
lies in wait ...  
Torpido, furtive, the obscene throng  
has circled him: the Devil with his abject  
eyes, the labyrinthine snakes,  
the white old man with sunglasses in his hand.

As Lima suggests [344], Borges is very aware of the presence of the Knight’s ‘formidable enemies’.

In the second of these poems Borges’ fascination with death is even more obvious. It reads [Lima; 344-345; tr. Lima]:

There are two paths. The one the man  
of iron and of pride pursues upon his steed,  
firm in faith, through the uncertain forest  
of the world, between the mocking taunts the Devil mouths  
and the immobile dance of Death. The other,  
mine, the briefer path ...  
I will become but ash and darkest space;

I, who set out last, will first attain  
my mortal end ...

Lima [346] comments that Borges ‘does not begrudge the Knight his everness’; but the strength of Borges’ words in a poem which contemplates his own death is particularly interesting; it reminds us of his upbringing amongst Argentine’s ‘cadaver cultists’, as the novelist Tomás Eloy Martínez put it [Borges, 1998a; 542].

‘The Hourglass’ [Borges, 2000a; 99-101; tr. Alastair Reed] is another contemplation of Dürer’s engraving. He writes of ‘a world of dust, of chance, of nothingness’, ‘dust’ being a sure sign of Borges’ obsession; and, ‘seeing that hourglass’, he continues:

All these: the pillar of smoke, the pillar of fire,  
Carthage, Rome, and their constricting wars...  
all are obliterated, all brought down  
by the tireless trickle of the endless sand.  
I do not have to save myself – I too  
am a whim of time, that shifty element.

In the prose-poem ‘His End and His Beginning’ [Borges, 2000a; 297; tr. Alexander Coleman] the poet’s musings on the subject of death take this form:

After dying, now alone, torn apart, and rejected by his body, he fell asleep ... At the office ... [h]e had the sense that the others were avoiding looking at him, perhaps because they knew he had already died ... He finally understood ... that there really were no shapes or sounds or colors, and that they were not dreams at all. They were his reality ... He now belonged to another world, detached from past, present, and future. He ... went through regions of despair and solitude ... All their horror came from being so new and splendidous ... [A]ll that time since death he had always been in heaven.

The title-poem to this collection, 'In Praise of Darkness' [2000a; 299-301; tr. Hoyt Rogers], makes the poet's sense of death even more immediate:

I live among vague, luminous shapes  
that are not darkness yet ...  
In my life there were always too many things ...  
This penumbra is slow and does not pain me ...  
Soon I will know who I am.

*The Gold of the Tigers* is a collection published in 1972, but one of its poems was introduced by Borges to the audience at Columbia University in his lecture on poetry in 1971 as describing 'the feeling I get every morning when I wake and find that I am Borges' [Borges, 1994; 97]; its title is 'The Watcher' [Borges, 1994; 95-96; tr. di Giovanni]:

The light comes in and I awake. There he is.  
He starts by telling me his name, which is (of course) my own.  
I return to the slavery that's lasted more than seven times ten years ...  
He has converted me to the idolatrous worship of dead soldiers,  
to whom perhaps I would have nothing to say ...  
I'm inside a circular cell and the endless wall is closing in ...  
The door of suicide is open, but theologians hold  
that I'll be there in the far shadow of the other kingdom,  
waiting for myself.

In a paper presented to the symposium on Borges' poetry in 1983 by Alice Poust, *Knowledge in Borges' 'La moneda de hierro'* [*The Iron Coin*; Borges, 2000a; 369-387], she states that Borges employed the term 'scepticism ... regarding the powers of human knowledge' [Poust; 305]. But the 'scepticism' that she illustrates savours of Borges' obsession with death. Poust quotes 'You Are Not the Others' [Borges, 2000a; 385; tr. Eric McHenry], in which we again find the metaphor 'dust':



... Jesus' pain will afford no pardon,  
 Nor Socrates' suffering, nor the inviolate  
 Golden Siddhartha, who within the twilit  
 Final hour of evening, in a garden,  
 Accepted death. These too are dust ...

She then makes the rather obvious remark that '[t]he poem is born of the poet's knowledge that he is going to die, an awareness that leads him to feel the solitude of the human condition' [Poust; 306-307].

Published only one year later, in *The History of the Night* [2000a; 389-415], the poem 'Alhambra' [395; tr. Hoyt Rogers] also contemplates the imminence of death. In part it reads:

Pleasing to know or to foreknow, sorrowing king,  
 That your courtesies become farewells,  
 That to you the key will be denied,

That the infidel's cross will eclipse the moon,  
 That the afternoon you witness is your last.

In 'Adam Is Your Ashes' [2000a; 413; tr. Eric McHenry], there is the following 'prophecy': 'The sword will die just like the ripening cluster. / The glass is no more fragile than the rock. / All things are their own prophecy of dust.'

*La Cifra [The Limit]* is a collection of poems which Borges published in 1981, five years before his death. Twenty-two poems from this collection are contained in *Selected Poems* [2000a; 417-459], and it is not surprising that many contain references to the poet's expectation of death. For example, in the prose-poem 'Two Forms of Insomnia' [2000a; 433; tr. Alan S. Trueblood] Borges writes:

What is longevity? It is the horror of existing in a human body whose faculties are in decline. It is insomnia measured by decades and not by metal hands ... It is trying to sink into death.

In 'The Cloisters' [2000a; 435; tr. W. S. Merwin] he writes morbidly of the 'stained glass and the stones' brought to Manhattan '[f]rom a place in the kingdom of France':

We see in the tapestries  
the resurrection and the death  
of the doomed white unicorn  
because the time of this place  
does not obey an order ...  
I am not used to eternity.

Another poem in this collection is aptly titled 'Epilogue' [2000a; 439; tr. Stephen Kessler]; it begins: 'Now that the number of steps you were given / to walk on earth have been taken, / I say that you have died. I too have died.'

In 'Yesterdays' [2000a; 445; tr. Stephen Kessler] Borges is still remembering Dürer's engraving:

I am the faulty memory of an engraving  
that's still here in the room and that my eyes,  
now darkened, once saw clearly:  
The Knight, Death, and the Devil.

I am that other one who saw the desert  
and in its eternity goes on watching it.  
I am a mirror, an echo. The epitaph.

'The Limit' [2000a; 459; tr. Alan S. Trueblood] contains the following lines: 'You'll never see the moon aglow again. / You've now attained the limit set for you / by destiny ... / Take a good look. It could be the last'.

*La Cifra* contains seventeen *haiku* that are not contained in *Selected Poems* [Borges, 2000a]. In a paper on them presented by María Kodama at the symposium on Borges' poetry at the University of Arkansas in 1983 [Kodama; 170-181], she gives two that are relevant to Borges' obsession with death, and which appear in her translation:

The man is dead. The beard is unaware of it. His nails keep growing  
[178].

This old hand goes on writing verses for oblivion [180].

However, any discussion of Borges' fascination with death must include the full text of 'The Generous Enemy' [1972; 241; tr. W. S. Merwin]. Borges' footnote states that the poem is 'from the *Anhang zur Heimskringla* by H. Gering (1893)'; but di Giovanni tells us that, although Barfod's story was told in the *Heimskringla*, the following 'greeting' from the King of Dublin is a fiction, and that the poem is 'made up of a number of Norse kennings, which Borges has wilfully bestowed on the Irish king' [Borges, 1972; 309-310].

The preface to the poem reads: *In the year 1102, Magnus Barfod undertook the general conquest of the Irish kingdoms; it is said that on the eve of his death he received this greeting from Muirchertach, the King of Dublin:*

May gold and the storm fight on your side, Magnus Barfod.  
May your fighting meet with good fortune, tomorrow, on the  
fields of my kingdom.

May your royal hands strike awe, weaving the sword's web.  
May those who oppose your sword be food for the red swan.  
May your many gods sate you with glory, may they sate you  
with blood.

May you be victorious in the dawn, King who tread upon Ireland.  
May tomorrow shine the brightest of all your days.

Because it will be your last. That I swear to you, King Magnus.  
Because before its light is blotted out I will defeat you and blot  
you out, Magnus Barfod.

One cannot overlook Borges' enthusiasm in this poem; indeed, it might almost be called another 'celebration' of death; and perhaps it is also an illustration of the fact that even this topic does not entirely banish his sense of humour.

Incidentally, the translation of this poem by Kenneth Krabbenhoft which appears in *Selected Poems* bears the interesting title 'The Generous Friend' [Borges, 2000a; 141]; the irony of this version of the title may well have met with Borges' approval, had he lived to see it.

From the items dealt with in this chapter it will be seen that, in his fourteen books of poetry and his nine books of fiction, Borges dwells continuously and extensively on the theme of death; that his fascination with the subject began at an early age, and that it continued throughout his life. The fact that he shared this fascination with his fellow countrymen does nothing to lessen it. Nor can it be held to have increased it, since it dominated his thinking from the outset. Therefore, I suggest, the word 'obsession' does not overstate the case.



Borges and his family were in Switzerland from 1914 to 1919; in his ‘Autobiographical Essay’, published more than 50 years later, he writes: ‘At some point while in Switzerland, I began reading Schopenhauer. Today, were I to choose a single philosopher, I would choose him’ [Borges, 1971; 147]; and, as will be seen in the following pages, the sense of doubt that he found in Schopenhauer — well-known as the philosopher of pessimism — never left him.

‘Boast of Quietness’ was published in 1925 [Borges, 2000a; v], when he was only 26 years of age; and, Borges’ epilogue to his *Other Inquisitions*, published nearly 40 years later, suggests that the essays it contains display a tendency ‘to evaluate religious or philosophical ideas ... for what is singular and marvellous about them’ — to which he adds: ‘Perhaps this is an indication of a basic scepticism’ [189].

During an interview with Ronald Christ in 1966, Borges talked about the artificial language that Bishop Wilkins invented, and in particular about Wilkins’ invention of the word ‘neverness’; he describes this as ‘a beautiful word, a word that’s a poem in itself, full of hopelessness, sadness, and despair’ [Christ, 1995; 282].

In the first of the Charles Eliot Norton lectures given at Harvard University in 1967-1968, and published in *This Craft of Verse*, he tells his audience: ‘I have only my perplexities to offer you. I am nearing seventy. I have given the major part of my life to literature, and I can offer you only doubts’ [Borges, 2000c; 2]; and in the third of those lectures Borges makes his scepticism sound more like pessimism, or even despair [2000c; 49]:

[W]hen people wrote about the Golden Fleece (one of the ancient stories of mankind), readers and hearers were made to feel from the beginning that the treasure would be found at the end. Well, nowadays if an adventure is attempted, we know that it will end in failure.

In his 'Autobiographical Essay', published two years later, he writes [1971; 140]:

As most of my people had been soldiers ... and I knew I would never be, I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish kind of person and not a man of action ... Throughout my boyhood, I thought that to be loved would have amounted to an injustice. I did not feel that I deserved any particular love ... that I was a kind of fake.

In the first of the 'Discussions' that Borges held at the University of Arkansas in 1983, scepticism and optimism appear to be allied; when asked: '[A]fter a lecture you gave at Harvard ... someone asked you a question about life after death ... You said, "I am out for oblivion." Are you still out for oblivion?', Borges replies: 'Yes, I am ... very hopeful of it' [Cortínez; 31].

In the discussion on Hispanic literature which followed there is still more evidence of Borges' self-doubt: '[U]ltimately life is full of errors, above all my life, which is a kind of anthology of errors' [Cortínez; 50; tr. Mauricio Roberto Rosales].

Many of Borges' biographers and critics have touched upon the subject of Borges' doubts; Colin Wilson, for example, suggests that Borges' view of life was 'pure Joseph Conrad: gloom, pessimism, fatalism' [75].

Bloom describes Borges as 'a skeptic who cared more for imaginative literature than for religion or philosophy' [465], and as 'a skeptical humanist' [467]; and Borges was described by Donald A. Yates, one of the editors of

*Labyrinths* and a friend of Borges' for many years, as 'the ultimate skeptic' [cited in Mualem, 214].

But Coetzee [169], writing about 'Pierre Menard', while confirming Borges' scepticism also sees it as a potential source of humour:

What Borges achieves is to invent a vehicle (imperfect in this case, but rapidly perfected in the stories that follow) in which the paradoxes of philosophical scepticism can be elegantly staged and followed to their vertiginous conclusions.

However, as I hope this chapter will demonstrate, few of those critics seem to have appreciated the depth to which these various forms of doubt permeate both Borges' poetry and his fiction, and how many illustrations of that 'precious gift' are to be found. First we shall deal with Borges' earlier poetry.

In his 'Autobiographical Essay' [1971; 150] Borges tells how, while in Spain at the age of 20, he wrote a poem called 'Hymn to the Sea' [tr. di Giovanni]; it contains this indication of youthful scepticism:

O Protean, I have been born of you —  
both of us chained and wandering,  
both of us hungering for stars,  
both of us with hopes and disappointments ...

The next examples are taken from his first book of poems published in 1923, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* [Borges; 1972, 3-29; 2000a, 1-31]. In 'Unknown Street' he writes of his perplexity when 'the coming of night is recognised / like an awaited music, / not as a symbol of our essential insignificance' [1972, 3; tr. W. S. Merwin]



In 'Daybreak' [1972, 21-23; tr. Di Giovanni] Borges suggests that this time of day may sometimes fail to show that prospect of hope with which it is usually associated; he describes daybreak as

The hour in which the persistent dream of life  
is in danger of breaking down,  
the hour in which God might easily  
destroy all his work!

Borges' 'precious gift' also pervades the poem 'Plainness' [1972, 27; tr. Di Giovanni]:

This is the best that can happen —  
what Heaven perhaps will grant us:  
not to be wondered at or required to succeed  
but simply to be let in  
as part of an undeniable Reality,  
like the stones of the road, like trees.

Borges' 'Parting' [1972, 29; tr. W. S. Merwin] begins with words that border on despair: 'Three hundred nights like three hundred walls / must rise between my love and me / and the sea will be a black art between us.'

Borges' second book of poems, *Moon Across the Way* [1972; 33-45], published when he was only 26, includes 'Anticipation of Love' [1972, 33; tr. Robert Fitzgerald]; its final 'anticipation' is, in fact, a denial:

Cast up into silence  
I shall discern that ultimate beach of your being  
and see you for the first time, perhaps,  
as God must see you —  
the fiction of Time destroyed,  
free from love, from me.

‘Manuscript Found in a Book of Joseph Conrad’ [1972, 37; tr. Alastair Reid] contains more evidence of Borges’ scepticism: ‘The smoke blurs gray across the constellations / Afar. The present sheds past, name, and plan. / The world is a few vague tepid observations’.

In ‘My Whole Life’ [1972; 43; tr. W. S. Merwin], Borges again reveals his pessimism: ‘I have got near to happiness and have stood in the shadow of suffering ... / I believe deeply that this is all and that I will neither see nor accomplish new things’.

‘Sunset over Villa Ortúzar’ [1972; 45; tr. W. S. Merwin] demonstrates yet more pessimism: ‘The world is like something useless, thrown away. / It is still day in the sky, but night is lurking in the gullies ... / Far from here, I shall sink again to my poverty.’

The *San Martin Copybook* [2000a; 49-65], published four years later, includes the ‘dispirited’ poem ‘Northern Suburb’ [2000a, 65; tr. Charles Tomlinson]:

Once this suburb meant friendship,  
a plot of aversions and affections, like the other playthings of love;  
that faith only just survives  
in some distanced events which will die ...  
That dispersed love is our dispirited secret.

The preceding paragraphs contain some of the illustrations of Borges’ sense of doubt that are to be found in the poems published before 1930. He published no more poems until 1960, five years after he became totally blind.

Turning now to a selection from the many examples of the same ‘precious gift’ which are displayed in his fictions, it will again be seen that enigmas arise because of the process of mystification to which much of Borges’ fiction has been subjected by his critics, who have often failed to appreciate the breadth and depth of his sense of doubt.

‘The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim’ [Borges, 1971; 27-33]

The hoax that Borges perpetrated when this story was first published was mentioned in the Introduction. But humour is a rare commodity in ‘The Approach’, and the fact that the story is a hoax cannot hide Borges’ scepticism.

The narrator is examining a book about a law student whose name we never learn. Believing that he has accidentally killed a man in a street riot in Bombay, the student ‘decides to lose himself somewhere within the bounds of India ... [He] falls among the lowest class of people and, in a kind of contest of evildoing, takes up their ways’ [29-30].

But he then perceives the possibility of some mitigation for his deed. One of the abominable men by whom he is surrounded creates ‘a certain tenderness, a moment of happiness, a forgiving silence’; and the student comes to the conclusion that

somewhere on the face of the earth is a man from whom this light has emanated ... The story’s outline is now plain: the untiring search for a human soul through the barely perceptible reflections cast by this soul in others [30].

The student’s search for these ‘barely perceptible reflections’ finally brings him to a corridor ‘at whose end is a door and a cheap beaded curtain ... A man’s

voice ... prays him to enter. The student parts the curtain and steps forward. At this point the novel comes to its end' [31].

According to the narrator, the story has been

an ascendant progression whose last term is the foreshadowed 'man called Al-Mu'tasim' ... a single God who reconciles himself to the many varieties of mankind ... [But] the Almighty is also in search of Someone, and that Someone of Someone above him ... and so on to the End (or rather, Endlessness) of Time ... Al-Mu'tasim ... means etymologically 'The Seeker after Help' [31-32].

The only vestige of humour present in this story is the moment when the student, having discovered that those who have more closely known Al-Mu'tasim are those who enjoy the greater proportion of divinity, then realises that the person immediately before Al-Mu'tasim 'in an ascendant progression' is a Persian bookseller, and that the man before the bookseller is a saint [31]. Even here Borges is determined to underscore the pre-eminence of the bibliophiles of this world.

Since the author of this book is a Bombay attorney, and since its central character is a law student, it is not unreasonable to assume that the book is an autobiography, at least to some extent. However, this possibility does not seem to be canvassed by any of Borges' critics, despite the fact that it is, perhaps, the explanation for the student's anonymity since, without it, the author's name would be emblazoned on the book's front cover.

The first edition of the book, which appeared on paper that was 'almost newsprint', was an unexpected success, and it was followed by a second edition containing illustrations. However, the narrator surmises that the earlier edition 'may be a better book' [28] because, in that first version, 'there are but few

supernatural traces; the man called Al-Mu'tasim' is obviously a symbol, though certain personal traits are not lacking.'

But in the later version 'the novel declines into allegory. Al-Mu'tasim is God, and the hero's various wanderings are in some way the journey of a soul on its ascending steps toward the divine union' [31]. His derisive reference to allegory in the second version underscores his approval of the lack of 'supernatural traces' in the first.

With these words Borges effectively dismisses the views of three of his critics. Monegal, for example, describes the story as 'a tale about a mystical ascension to divinity' [362]; Sturrock argues that the story is about 'the methodical ascent from the sordid to the magnificent' [193]; while Jaén suggests that it is 'closely related to the theme of the loss of salvation' [66].

The student realises that his eternity is 'impoverished' when he 'parts the curtain and steps forward' [31] — when, in fact, the story comes to an end. After all, the title of the story tells the reader that it is about an *approach*, and not about a *discovery*; and the sudden end to the story would appear to endorse this by preventing any such discovery. As mentioned later in this chapter, Borges uses the same technique at the end of 'Averroës' Search'. Borges' words in 'Boast of Quietness' [Borges, 2000a, 43; tr. Stephen Kessler], quoted earlier — 'he doesn't expect to arrive' — are, I suggest, very relevant.

In 'A History of Eternity' [2001; 123-139; tr. Esther Allen] Borges states:

Hell is mere physical violence, but the three inextricable Persons add up to an intellectual horror, stifled and specious like the infinity of facing mirrors ... Mine is an impoverished eternity, without a God or even a co-proprietor, and entirely devoid of archetypes [130; 137].

In ‘Ramón Llull’s Thinking Machine’ [2001; 155-159; tr. Esther Allen] Borges writes: ‘The perpetual motion machines ... don’t work ... nor do the metaphysical and theological theories that customarily declare who we are and what manner of thing the world is’ [155].

It should be noted that ‘A History of Eternity’ and ‘Ramón Llull’s Thinking Machine’ were written in 1936 and 1937, at about the same time as ‘The Approach’ — which, in their light, can be seen as yet another illustration of Borges’ sense of doubt.

‘The Lottery in Babylon’ [Borges, 1998a; 101-106].

It is not difficult to discern both wit and scepticism in this story; it is also an illustration of Borges’ agnosticism.

The narrator, now an exile from Babylon, recalls that what had been a commonplace lottery which ‘had no moral force whatsoever’ — i.e., one in which only winners were declared — was replaced by one in which there was one loser for every thirty winners, and that ‘that small risk ... piqued the public’s interest. Babylonians flocked to buy tickets’. But when the losers refused to pay the fines they were locked in prison; thus, the Company, we are told, ‘acquired omnipotence — its ecclesiastical, metaphysical force’ [102].

Later, the lists of fines to be paid by the losers were replaced by announcements of the days in prison they must endure. To everyone’s surprise, this ‘met with great success — indeed, the Company was forced by its players to increase the number of unlucky draws’ [102].

But, unlike the poor, '[t]he members of the priestly class gambled heavily, and so enjoyed all the vicissitudes of terror and hope'; this inspired 'indignant demonstrations'; as a result there were 'disturbances [and] regrettable instances of bloodshed' [103]. Consequently,

the Company was forced to assume all public power ... [and] the Lottery was made secret, free of charge, and open to all ... Under the Company's beneficent influence, our customs are now steeped in chance ... Scribes take a secret oath to omit, interpolate, alter ... The Company, with godlike modesty, shuns all publicity [103 -106].

It is obvious, I suggest, that the target of Borges' satire in 'The Lottery in Babylon' is the established church, under whatever label and in whatever country it might operate — i.e., the institution [or Company] that assures its adherents that there is salvation after death. When, in western civilization, this salvation came to require the purchasing of indulgences from the priesthood, an element of chance was instilled into the process. Martin Luther's ninety-five 'theses' added drama to the situation; and this was further enhanced by Calvin's doctrine of predestination — the notion that everyone's fate after death was predetermined before birth. The wheel of Chance therefore came full circle.

Of course, every statement that the Company makes on this issue is inscribed as 'doctrine', even if written only in 'the rubble of a mask factory' [104]. Above all, the doctrine of an after-life has the effect of confirming the authority and power of the priesthood — a power never given even to a royal family, however ancient. The priests alone have the ability to effect salvation; consequently, 'the individuals of the Company were (and still are) all-powerful' [103].

But, in a manner reminiscent of his early paper ‘A History of Angels’ [2001; 16-19], Borges has fun in the process. For example:

On nights when the moon is full, this symbol [Beth] gives me power over men with the mark of Gimel, but it subjects me to those with the Aleph, who on nights when there is no moon owe obedience to those marked with the Gimel [101]

The moon, obviously, has even stranger effects than many people realise!

The result of a lucky draw is ‘secret, or known by all to be so’ [103] — like the ‘*new* system [that is] complicated further by having been in practice for centuries’ [104; my italics]. There is ‘a sacred latrine called Qaphqa [pronounced ‘Kafka’, of course] ... [which] gave access to the Company’ [104]; and as for ‘the sleeping man who suddenly awakes and turns and chokes the woman sleeping at his side — is he not, perhaps, implementing one of the Company’s secret decisions?’ [106].

Monegal writes [360]: “The Lottery’... is a humorous tale ... [and] contains a wealth of hidden allusion and jokes’. The story illustrates that the Company — the church — is awash in absurdity. In ‘A History of Eternity’ Borges wrote that the Christian eternity ‘is inconceivable without the professional mystery of the Trinity and the attendant debates over predestination and damnation’; and, disclosing his personal theory of eternity, he writes:

Mine is an impoverished eternity, without God or even a co-proprietor, and entirely devoid of archetypes ... I derive this conclusion: life is too impoverished not to be immortal. But we lack even the certainty of our own poverty’ [Borges, 2001; 129-130, 137-138].



It would be difficult to find greater scepticism than that displayed in these words.

‘The Lottery in Babylon’ is an outstanding illustration of Woodall’s assessment [121] that there was ‘but little joy’ in many of Borges’ stories.

Colin Wilson’s summary of ‘The Lottery’ seems perceptive: ‘[H]uman beings find life so meaningless that they cannot do without terror and misery to keep them on their toes’ [73]; unfortunately, he did not also appreciate the element of wit in the story.

In terms of narrative technique, however, there are some interesting points to note. On only two occasions does the personality of the narrator intervene. The opening words are: ‘Like all men of Babylon, I have been proconsul; like all, I have been a slave’ [101]; and, midway through the story we are told: ‘I have but little time remaining; we are told that the ship is about to sail’ [104]. These few glimpses of a credible human being are a necessary antidote to the depiction of a totally unreal society.

Borges makes it impossible for his readers not to ask the reason for these glimpses, and where the ship is going. Surely this is the ship of Death, and the narrator is about to find out for himself the truth about ‘salvation’.

Appropriately, perhaps, it was by the rivers of Babylon that ‘we sat down, yea, we wept’ in despair — as Psalm 137 tells us.

‘The Library of Babel’ [Borges, 1998a; 112-118]

The previous discussion of the relevance of the Church and its officers leads us to a discussion of a story which contains, perhaps, Borges’ blackest

humour. Woodall [118] describes ‘The Library of Babel’ as ‘a delirious reversal of what a library is meant for — accessibility to knowledge ... an elaborate skit’; appropriately, he also calls it ‘one of Borges’ most despairing statements about reality’; and Jason Wilson [2006; 102] describes it as ‘[a] parable about loneliness and despair, with its writing a kind of self-therapy or exorcism’.

The story concerns ‘the universe’, otherwise known as the Library: ‘*The Library is a sphere ... whose circumference is unattainable ...* Man [is] the imperfect librarian’; but the universe — i.e., the Library — ‘can only be the handiwork of a god’ [113; italics in quoted text].

Librarians care for the books that the Library contains, and they are multitudinous. These books ‘people’ the universe; and, like the people of the universe, they exhibit the most extraordinary variety: ‘Each book is unique and irreplaceable, but ... there are always several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles — books that differ by no more than a single letter, or a comma’ [114-115].

Of every book there is a refutation, and then a refutation of that refutation, and so on *ad infinitum*; indeed, ‘the bookshelves contain ... all that is able to be expressed, in every language. *All ...* [including] the true story of [its reader’s] death’ [115; italics in quoted text], the latter a paradox that Borges must have appreciated.

Many books contain no more than a small group of letters — MCV, for example — which are repeated endlessly: ‘For every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency’ [114].

However, this extraordinary diversity is cloaked in a semblance of uniformity: '[E]ach bookshelf holds thirty-two books identical in format; each book contains four hundred ten pages; each page, forty lines; each line, approximately eighty black letters' [113].

We are told that there was a

belief in what was termed the Book-Man ... [that] there must exist a book that is the cipher and perfect compendium *of all other books*, and that some librarian must have examined that book; this librarian is analogous to a god ... Many have gone in search of Him' [116-117; italics in quoted text]

Like the other librarians, the narrator was born in the Library; and, when he dies, he tells us:

compassionate hands will throw me over the railing; my tomb will be the unfathomable air, my body will sink for ages, and will decay and dissolve in the wind engendered by my fall, which shall be infinite [112].

Not surprisingly, the librarians are a dying race: 'I have sometimes traveled for nights on end, down corridors and polished staircases, without coming across a single librarian' [114, footnote]. The librarians are the carers, or priests, of this universe; and the books represent the unimaginably complex human race — which, to a significant degree, appears to consist of idiots if the contents of many of the books are to be taken as a guide.

Furthermore, if the refutations of refutations are indeed *ad infinitum*, the human race appears to be overwhelmed in disagreement — which is, perhaps, an arguable opinion.

It is significant that, according to *Genesis 11*, the Tower of Babel was erected by those who rejected the concept of one universal language, and whose arrogance caused them to build a tower ‘whose top may reach unto heaven’.

To say that ‘The Library of Babel’ depicts the author’s scepticism is an understatement; it is his idea of Hell, and an idea that would be shared by many. This goes to show that Woodall was correct in describing *The Library of Babel* as ‘one of Borges’ most despairing statements’ [118]. Borges confirms this when he speaks about the story in one of the ‘Discussions’ at the University of Arkansas: ‘It is a kind of methodical nightmare, no? Yes. It’s not a real nightmare. I view the universe as an endless library, with endless meaningless books. It’s horrible, that story’ [Cortínez; 23].

In his ‘Conversation’ with Alastair Reid, Borges states that, when writing both ‘The Library’ and ‘The Lottery’ ‘I played with being very close to Kafka ... but I went on being Borges, I couldn’t do it. But now and then, when a page of mine comes out as it should, then I imitate Kafka, really’ [Borges, 1998b; 217]. But I suggest that the pages that come out as Borges desired are very few, because he never knew despair to the degree that Kafka did. This point is considered further in Chapter 6.

Before closing this discussion, one must ask whether it is possible that there is a link between ‘The Library of Babel’ and ‘The Lottery in Babylon’. These are two of only three pieces in the hundred or more contained in *Collected Fictions* for which a precise location is specified in the title, the third being ‘Guayaquil’. This would have no significance but for two other facts: First, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the Tower of Babel was built on the

eastern side of Babylon, on the bank of the Euphrates which ran through Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.; and the *World Book Encyclopaedia* tells us that Babel was the Hebrew name for Babylon; secondly, as Woodall points out [179], the Argentine National Library in Buenos Aires was ‘located in a building [which] had originally been marked for housing the national lottery’. In other words, not only are we dealing with two names which relate to the same city in Babylonia, but also with the two functions relevant to those names which relate to the same city in Argentina. If this discussion did not concern the fictions of Borges, but those of some other writer, all of this might be mere coincidence — but is it? Readers of Borges know that he cannot always be dismissed that easily.

‘Funes, His Memory’ [Borges, 1998a; 131-137].

Previous translators have used the title ‘Funes the Memorious’; Hurley acknowledges that ‘it must be a brave (or foolhardy) translator who dares change such an odd and memorable title’ [535], explaining that ‘memorious’ strikes him ‘as vaguely Lewis Carroll-esque’. But there is good reason to believe that Borges would approve of such an overtone, Carroll being one of the first authors that he had read [Borges, 1971; 141] and whom he greatly admired [Monegal, 350, 407]. I suggest that Borges — ever the poet — would have approved the rhythm of the ‘odd and memorable title’, and would have abjured Hurley’s clumsy alternative.

We are introduced to Ireneo Funes as a nineteen-year-old ‘street tough from Fray Bentos’ [131], who enjoys taking risks such as running along narrow and broken sidewalks, who can tell the time of day precisely without the aid of a

watch, and who knows the name of everyone who lives in his small Uruguayan town despite 'shying away from people' [131].

But a riding accident leaves him 'hopelessly crippled', never stirring from his cot [132]. Insomnia gives him the opportunity to maintain an acute awareness for twenty-four hours a day [134]; he can now spend a whole day recollecting a previous whole day [135].

We are told:

He had lived ... for nineteen years as though in a dream: he looked without seeing, heard without listening, forgot ... virtually everything ... Now his perception and his memory were perfect ... Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree in every patch of forest, but every time he had perceived or imagined that leaf [134-136].

Furthermore:

He had effortlessly learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very good at thinking. To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract [137].

As if to illustrate the truth of this last remark, we are told that Funes was a man who believed that a dictionary provided a 'full understanding' of a language [133]. Inevitably, therefore, he finds it necessary to delude himself; while he claims to have learned four foreign languages, his understanding of them must of necessity be limited, because he has had no opportunity to converse in them; it is not only memory that is required to learn a language, as Borges would have known as well as anyone.

His mother warns the visiting narrator that he should not be surprised to find Ireneo's room in darkness, explaining that he 'often spent his off hours

without lighting the candle' [134]. 'It was hard for him to sleep'; confined to his cot, he could sleep only by turning his head toward something he imagines as 'black, compact, made of homogeneous shadow' [137].

The pleasure that Funes derives from his condition is illusory. In particular, to spend a subsequent day remembering all the details of a previous day necessarily implies that remembering the details of that subsequent day will be impossible; paradoxically, therefore, the use of his gift denies him the use of his gift. As Ronald Christ comments, *Funes* is 'a story that illustrates the tragic absurdity of absolute memory' [9]:

Our principal antidotes to universality and immortality are death and forgetting. Because they confirm our mortality and our individual identity, death and forgetting make the universe bearable, real for us [212].

The narrator comments that 'we all have the certainty, deep inside, that we are immortal and that sooner or later every man will ... know all there is to know' [135]. But Borges' views on immortality are well known; as he wrote in his Commentary on 'The Immortals', 'I have for years lived in fear of never dying. Such an idea as immortality would, of course, be unbearable' [Borges, 1971; 204]; in other words, 'doubt' is a blessing, and 'certainty' a curse.

The editor of *This Craft of Verse* [Borges, 2000c; footnote; 148-149] implies that there was a special irony for Borges in this story; he tells his readers:

Borges' memory was legendary. An American professor of Bohemian origin reports that, during a chat with Borges in 1976 at the University of Indiana, the Argentine writer recited to him an eight-stanza Romanian poem which he had learned from its author, a young refugee, in Geneva in 1916. Borges did not know Romanian.

However, while Borges' memory may well have been 'legendary', this particular story is difficult to swallow.

I suggest that 'Funes, His Memory' is one of Borges' most bitter pieces, because it depicts the horror of Perfection — in this case, that of the perfect memory. Borges seems to confirm this in his first discussion at the University of Arkansas: 'If you had a perfect memory, you'd die ... Yes, to go on living one has to forget ... So oblivion is part of memory, a very precious part of memory' [Cortínez; 19].

Borges takes his argument even further in the second of those discussions: 'If we remembered everything we wouldn't be able to imagine anything. It's beneficial that our memory is short. Forgetfulness is the most valuable thing about memory' [Cortínez; 54; tr. Mauricio Roberto Rosales].

Jason Wilson [2006; 109] calls it an 'absurdist tale'; however, most of his critics appear not to realise that Borges could display some humour even in these most unlikely surroundings; for example, Funes' premature death from 'congestion' is a fitting — if cruel — joke on Borges' part; it is little wonder that such a man as Funes should die of some form of congestion.

In his Foreword to *Artifices* Borges describes 'Funes' as 'one long metaphor for insomnia' [129]. Perhaps in consequence of this, Monegal concentrates his attention on what he calls Borges' 'dread lucidity of insomnia ... [I]f Funes was crippled after the accident, Borges had also been symbolically crippled by insomnia: riveted to his bed by a pitiless disease of the mind' [276-277].



Later, however, Monegal goes on to accept that this ‘curious tale contains more than that’ [383]; but Monegal appears not to discern how much more is involved.

Jaén states: ‘Among all of Borges’ stories, this one is probably the most directly concerned with a theory of language ... [It] turns out to be a dialogue and meditation on the topics of memory and language’ [147]; but a meditation on language by a man who believes that a dictionary provides a ‘full understanding’ of a Latin or of any other text [Borges, 1998a; 133] is, I suggest, not likely to prove very fruitful.

Jaén goes on to remind us that Funes was irritated by the fact that a dog, when spoken of ‘at three-fourteen (seen in profile), should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front)’ [148]. Jaén continues: ‘From a metafictional perspective, the story suggests that in order to narrate, it is necessary to forget details as much as to remember them’ [150]; but if this is all that a ‘metafictional perspective’ provides, I suggest that it contributes little; and Jaén again appears to be unaware of Borges’ sense of humour.

As a part of his meditation on language Funes claimed to have invented a numbering system, in which a single word would replace every numerical description. Understandably, the narrator has no hesitation in describing this as a ‘mad principle’ [135-136]. In order to make use of his numbering system, Funes had ‘resolved to reduce every one of his past days to some seventy thousand recollections, which he would then define by numbers’. Happily, he felt obliged to abandon this project; even Funes came to realize that the task was not only ‘interminable’ but also ‘pointless’ [136].

However, Sturrock points out the ‘ultimate paradox’ of the story: ‘[T]he fact that Funes was able to say anything at all about himself indicates an unsuspected gift for abstraction’ [112]; in other words, Funes’ statements about himself could not be true — another paradox that Borges would certainly have enjoyed.

But Wheelock states:

Borges characterizes Funes’ mental world, apparently, as that of primordial chaos before the human consciousness entered into linear time and into prophetic perspectivizing ... Taking fictional contrasts as objective truths is, for Borges, the same thing as ‘salvation’ or intellectual death. To find truth is to tear aside the veil that hides ultimate reality [29].

It is a great pity that Wheelock did not have the opportunity to discuss his views with di Giovanni, who must have had Wheelock particularly in mind when he wrote: ‘Writers on Borges have taken him far more seriously than he took himself’ [2003; 48].

In an essay entitled *James Joyce, author of ‘Funes el memorioso’*, Patricia Novillo-Corvalán takes a different approach. She draws our attention to Borges’ ‘A Fragment on Joyce’ [2001; 220-221; tr. Esther Allen]. This note was written in 1941, and Borges introduces the subject of ‘Funes the Memorious’ as ‘[a]mong the works I have not written and will not write’. He goes on to describe Funes as ‘indisputably ... a monster ... because a straightforward reading of the four hundred thousand words of *Ulysses* would require similar monsters’ [220]. Borges suggests that Stuart Gilbert, the ‘official interpreter’ of *Ulysses*, had revealed in Joyce’s novel ‘imperceptible and laborious correspondences ... Among

these voluntary tics, the most widely praised has been the most meaningless' [221].

Nevertheless Novillo-Corvalán, in justifying the title of her article, writes twenty pages about these 'voluntary tics'; citing support from T.S. Eliot — not, in Borges' opinion, a gifted critic, as his note on Eliot [2001; 167-168; tr. Esther Allen] demonstrates — she suggests that Borges 'subjects his own rhetoric to analogous exercises that aim to undermine the uniqueness of his writing, and instead privileges the activities of citation, rewriting and plagiarism' [61]. Despite having, in part, based her article on Borges' note on Joyce, she appears to have given it only a perfunctory reading, and to have been unaware of Borges' sarcasm.

But the second basis of her article is perhaps even more baffling; this is Borges' essay on 'Kafka and His Precursors' [1972; 106-108]. In this Borges suggests that the form of Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise 'is, exactly, that of [Kafka's] *The Castle*' [106]; that Kierkegaard's religious parable about 'a forger who examines Bank of England notes while under constant surveillance' is another of Kafka's precursors; that Léon Bloy's story of 'people who have a collection of atlases, globes, train schedules, and trunks, and then die without ever having left the town where they were born' [108] is another such precursor; and so on. 'Kafka's idiosyncrasy, in greater or lesser degree, is present in each of these writings, but if Kafka had not written we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist' [108]. Borges sums it up as follows: 'The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future' [108; italics in quoted text].

But this statement can only mean that either:

- (a) a writer has literary precursors only if that writer exists; or,
- (b) one writer will often remind us of another.

Whichever is the case, it is a statement of the blindingly obvious, and warrants neither metaphysical speculation nor any literary conclusions. I shall return to a discussion of 'Kafka and His Precursors' in Chapter 6.

'Funes' must be one of Borges' most memorable fictions. It is surprising, therefore, that Woodall mentions it only in passing, and Williamson and Irwin not at all.

'Emma Zunz' [Borges, 1998a; 215-219].

A young woman learns of the suicide of her beloved father, who had been dismissed by their mutual employer on a false accusation of embezzlement. She allows herself to be raped by a sailor from a boat that has just landed. She does this immediately before exacting her revenge for her father's death by murdering the man who employed them both, intending to accuse him of the rape to justify the killing. But, as any reader would understand, and as Monegal confirms [410], only a cursory examination of the dead body would reveal that such a defence would, quite rightly, be seen as a fabrication.

However, I suggest that Borges' intentions in this story relate in part to the woman's name. 'Zunz' is a non-name, like Kafka's 'K.', and, as such, it serves to highlight its predecessor, 'Emma'. Jason Wilson [2006; 39] states that 'Borges had chosen the name for its ugliness (he also disliked Flaubert's Emma Bovary)', and infers that 'Emma' is probably Jane Austen, an author for whom Borges had little respect. In his 'Autobiographical Essay' Borges reminds us of 'Mark Twain's

suggestion that a fine library could be started by leaving out the works of Jane Austen, and that even if that library contained no other books it would still be a fine library, since her books were left out' [Borges, 1971; 160]. In one of his seminars at Columbia University he refers to 'The Duel' [Borges, 1998a; 381-385], in which he describes this 'story about two society ladies' as 'almost Jane Austen' [Borges, 1994; 49]. According to Woodall [138], Estela Canto, for whom Borges once felt a considerable attraction, complained about his 'contempt of writing 'meant "for women" ... [such as] the novels of Jane Austen'; and, in his discussion of this story Jason Wilson comments [2006; 39] 'what a mockery of Jane Austen'.

This dismissive attitude on the part of Borges' is in sharp contrast to his comments on Virginia Woolf, whom he described in 1936 as having 'indisputably among the most sensitive minds and imaginations now felicitously experimenting with the English novel'; tellingly, he adds: 'From infancy, she was raised not to speak if she had nothing to say' [Borges, 2001; 173; tr. Esther Allen].

'Emma Zunz' gives us another view of Borges at his most bitter. During coition Emma 'thought (she could not help thinking) that her father had done to her mother the horrible thing being done to her now. She thought it with weak-limbed astonishment, and then, immediately, took refuge in vertigo'. As Borges had noted previously, '[o]ne characteristic of hell is its unreality, which might be thought to mitigate hell's terrors, but perhaps makes them all the worse' [217].

Wheelock appears to confuse rather than help matters when he observes:

[W]e see in 'Emma Zunz' the same downward regression to myth that we find in every instance where a change of reality occurs ... Borges is conscious that he is presenting not the displacement of

one hypostat by another, but the illegitimate or expedient movement of a mere attribute from a subordinate to a dominant position [141].

Irwin appears merely to state the obvious: 'It is as if the effort to avenge the father had subtly metamorphosed into vengeance against the father for the act of fatherhood' [290].

Monegal's comments explain some of the relevant background; he reminds us of 'The Cult of the Phoenix' [Borges, 1998a; 171-173]: '[T]he many worshippers of the Phoenix ... could not bring themselves to admit that their parents had ever stooped to such acts' [173]; he quotes a conversation between Borges and Ronald Christ: 'When I first heard about this act, when I was a boy, I was shocked, shocked to think that my mother, my father had performed it' [34]; and he tells of Borges' most unhappy time at a state school for boys: 'One of the scars was left by his schoolmates' coarse description of the mysteries of sex' [100].

At the end of the story Borges writes:

The story [that Emma told] was unbelievable, yes — and yet it convinced everyone, because in substance it was true ... her hatred was real. The outrage that had been done to her was real, as well; all that were false were the circumstances, the time, and one or two proper names' [219].

On which Monegal comments: 'What matters is the fact that an action committed by one man can be atoned for by another' [411].

Borges underscores this by giving Emma's father the name Emmanuel, thereby suggesting that Emma felt that she herself had participated in the crime committed by her father.

In other words, everyone shares in the guilt. That being so, ‘Emma Zunz’ is a clear portrayal of Borges’ pessimism.

‘Averroës’ Search’ [Borges, 1998a; 235-241].

A first reading of this story would appear to illustrate the truth of the description that Yates gave of Borges — ‘The ultimate skeptic’ [Mualem; 214].

In this story Borges is describing what he calls ‘the process of failure, the process of defeat ... [the case of] a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to other men, but is forbidden to him’ [Borges, 1998a; 241]. In this instance, it is the case of an Arab philosopher and author who sets himself the task of interpreting Aristotle’s *Poetics* — and, in particular, the meaning of the words ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’ — for the benefit of those whose culture is entirely foreign to that of Ancient Greece, and while that Arab philosopher has no knowledge of classical Greek theatre.

Averroës joins some companions at a discussion over dinner. That discussion is dominated by a guest who knows nothing of the subjects he discusses — including that of a theatrical performance he had witnessed — and is clearly a dishonest man. Believing afterwards that he has found illumination, Averroës writes: ‘*Aristotle gives the name ‘tragedy’ to panegyrics and the name ‘comedy’ to satires and anathemas*’ [241; italics in quoted text].

Finally, Borges also claims illumination:

I felt, on the last page, that my story was a symbol of the man I had been as I was writing it, and that in order to write that story I had to be that man, and that in order to be that man I had had to write that story, and so on, *ad infinitum* [241].

But this is not merely scepticism; it is despair at ever finding a ‘solution’. Is Borges also ‘a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to other men, but is forbidden to him’? We should note that the title of the story tells the reader that we are dealing only with a *search*, and not with a *discovery* — just as in ‘The Approach’, discussed above. As if to endorse this point, there is another sudden ending: ‘And just when I stop believing in him, Averroës disappears’ [241]; this prevents any possibility of *discovery*. Again, Borges’ words in ‘Boast of Quietness’ [Borges, 2000a, 43; tr. Stephen Kessler] about not expecting to arrive, might, I suggest, be relevant.

Chapter 4 below discusses the implications of gross arrogance on the part of some of Borges’ characters; a memorable demonstration of such arrogance is implicit in ‘Blue Tigers’ [1998a; 494-503], in which a certain very senior academic presumes to lecture on Eastern and Western Logic, despite the fact that — to quote Kipling, one of Borges’ favourite authors — ‘East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet’. Perhaps Borges saw Averroës’ attempt to bridge the gap between Arabic and Greek thinking as another example of arrogance.

However, it is possible to take a different approach to ‘Averroës’ Search’; in it there is an irony that suggests that the story could well be discussed in Chapter 1, as an example of Borges’ wit. The clue that appears to have been overlooked is — not for the first time — in the opening paragraph of the story. Averroës is writing a refutation of a book entitled *Destruction of Philosophers* [235]. Appropriately, Sturrock states that Borges shows ‘traditional philosophy to have



been travelling earnestly in circles, getting nowhere' [21]; therefore *Destruction of Philosophers* would be a title very much after Borges' heart.

In Averroës' sudden disappearance at the end of the story Borges is again making fun of Berkeley's Idealism, as he does in *Argumentum Ornithologicum* [Borges, 1998a; 299], and when he wrote in his essay 'New Refutation of Time' [1964; 182] 'Berkeley's God is a ubiquitous spectator whose purpose is to give coherence to the world'; the cow in E. M. Forster's meadow has vanished, for no one is watching it any longer. Significantly, Averroës disappears 'just when I stop believing in him'.

The story presents us with an array of philosophers, none of whom knows what he is talking about. The most obvious example is the guest at dinner who, first, recalls a bed of roses that 'exhibit characters reading *There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet*' [237] — a recollection that is, not surprisingly, but courteously, questioned by Averroës and some of his fellow guests.

But the guest's second recollection is accepted without challenge; he describes a theatrical performance which he has attended and that has mystified him. He knows nothing about the theatre — a degree of ignorance that is equalled by that of his host, who comments that there was no need for twenty people to be involved in the performance: "A single speaker could *tell* anything, no matter how complex it might be." To that verdict, [his guests] all gave their nod' [239; italics in quoted text].

Interestingly, Monegal and Sarlo have nothing to say about this story, and Woodall mentions it only in passing.

Wheelock rightly states that '[m]ental impotence is betokened in various ways throughout the story'; but he adds nothing to our understanding when he says that the conception of tragedy and comedy that Averroës finally attains is 'only one articulation of the [Platonic] form' [156].

Irwin suggests that the story tells the reader that, for Borges, self-consciousness 'as if trapped in an endless labyrinth of mirrors ... cannot *imagine* a way out of itself, cannot think in the absence of thought' [93; Irwin's italics]. This acknowledges Borges' infatuation with labyrinths and mirrors, but it does not appear to add anything to it. Neither does Jaén's only comment: 'This is a narrator ... who, while narrating the story, deals with narrative problems or problems of expression of the story he narrates' [36].

Cohen [74] is more explicit in his interpretation of Borges' problem:

Borges feels himself to be as absurd when he tries to imagine an Arab philosopher imprisoned in the world of the Koran, as was Averroës when he tried to understand the theatre of the Greeks. Each man lives in a maze of his own conceptions, conditioned by his own civilization, his own experience, his own reading.

Sturrock shares Cohen's view:

Borges ... draws an analogy between Averroës as author, commenting on Aristotle with a seemingly quite inadequate experience of Aristotle's world, and Borges as author, with an equally inadequate experience of Averroës' world [85].

However, Borges' statement that he might also be 'a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to other men, but is forbidden to him' is unusually modest. In reality, his approach to the story is one of total self-confidence. As he explained in one of his seminars at Columbia University, he often played the 'old

literary trick of pretending that I know nothing whatever about many things in order to make the reader believe in the others' [Borges, 1994; 25].

But no matter which interpretation is adopted, how does one explain the relevance of the red-haired slave girl who was attacked by black-haired slave girls, an event of which 'Averroës was not to know ... until that evening' [241]. Wheelock suggests, rather bewilderingly, that the torture of the red-haired girl 'is parallel to Averroës' defeat ... If Averroës had fully understood the two types of drama, the red-haired girl presumably would have prevailed over the others, or at least would have fended them off' [158].

Furthermore, as Hurley points out [541], how does one explain the relevance of the very Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in a discussion amongst 'Islamic luminaries'?

Could it be that Borges is simply teasing us? — that the story has no 'meaning', and that we are foolish to search for it? And if anyone then asks 'Why write it?', Borges might answer by repeating the statement he made about writing 'Pierre Menard' — 'For the sheer fun of it' [Borges, 1994; 65]. Even sceptics are allowed to have fun.

'A Weary Man's Utopia' [Borges, 1998a; 460-465].

In Chapter 4 I shall deal with what might be called Borges' 'ancient simplicities'; but it seems appropriate to consider here what may be described a 'future simplicity'.

At some unspecified time in the future, we are told, mankind will talk only in Latin. All equipment will be made of metal. Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* will

be considered to be a fantasy, on a par with *Gulliver's Travels*. Only the young will have names; older people will be addressed either as 'somebody' or 'you'. In school, children will be taught 'Doubt, and the Art of Forgetting — especially the art of forgetting all that is personal and local' [461]. (Inevitably one thinks of Funes; what would have been his fate in such a society?)

No one suffers either poverty or wealth. There are no cities, and there are no museums or libraries. Printing, 'one of the worst evils of mankind' [462], is forbidden; and there are no politicians — they have all been obliged to find themselves 'honest work' [464].

When a man reaches the age of one hundred — having, by law, begotten only one child — 'he is ready to confront himself and his solitude ... [and] when he wishes he kills himself' [463]. After being accompanied by his family and friends to the death chamber in the crematory — 'invented by a philanthropist whose name ... was Adolf Hitler' [465] — he merely waves goodbye.

This story was not written with the degree of economy typical of the ancient simplicities mentioned previously, but it is utterly sobering because it is utterly possible.

Perhaps it represents the highest point — or the lowest point, depending on one's perspective — of Borges' scepticism. Indeed, it is neo-Kafka. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, Borges' admiration for Kafka was considerable; however, as mentioned earlier, he once stated: 'I played being close to Kafka ... but I went on being Borges, I couldn't do it' [Borges, 1998b; 217].

But, even in ‘A Weary Man’s Utopia’ we find an element of wit; unlikely as it may seem, could Utopia be the country in which politicians are made to find themselves honest work?

In 1960 Borges published his first book of poetry since 1929, entitled *The Maker* [1972, 255-266; 2000a, 67-143]. In one of the lectures which he gave at Harvard University in 1967 he explains that, when he speaks of a ‘maker’ (‘el hacedor’), he is speaking of a poet, just as ‘the ancients’ did [Borges, 2000c; 43]. The second appendix to *Selected Poems 1923-1967* contains some prose-poems from *The Maker*, all of which were translated by di Giovanni in collaboration with Borges [1972; 261].

In the prose-poem entitled ‘The Maker’ [1972; 256-257] we find that Borges’ scepticism has not deserted him. In one of the more obvious of his semi-autobiographical pieces, he is writing of the onset of Homer’s blindness and of his ensuing death:

Little by little, the beautiful world began to leave him; a persistent mist erased the lines of his hand, the night lost its multitude of stars, the ground became uncertain beneath his steps. Everything grew distant and blurred ... I shall no longer look upon the sky and its mythological dread (he felt), nor this face which the years will transform ... He already divined ... a rumour of men defending a shrine which the gods would not save and of black ships roaming the seas in search of a loved island ... These things we know, but not what he felt when he sank into the final darkness.

In another prose-poem ‘Everything and Nothing’ [1972; 259-260] Borges tells us that Shakespeare was obliged ‘to cover up the fact that he was nobody’,

and that on or after his death God said to him: 'I too have no self; I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare'.

Yet another prose-poem, 'Borges and I' [1972; 260-261], contains more evidence of Borges' pessimism: 'In any case, I am fated to become lost once and for all ... And so, my life is running away, and I lose everything and everything is left to oblivion or to the other man'.

In 'Paradiso XXX, 108' [Borges, 2000a; 81; tr. Kenneth Krabbenhoft] Borges' contemplations take this despairing turn:

Diodorus Siculus tells the story of a god who had been cut into pieces and then scattered; which of us, strolling at dusk or recollecting a day from the past, has never felt that something of infinite importance has been lost?

Borges' 'Parable of the Palace' [2000a; 83-85; tr. Kenneth Krabbenhoft] also ends with a sense of hopelessness:

The poet was the Emperor's slave and died accordingly. His poem fell into oblivion because that was what it deserved. His descendants are still searching for the word that is the world, but they will not find it.

In 'Ariosto and the Arabs' [2000a; 123-127; tr. Eric McHenry] we find that, in Borges' examination of this 'modest dreamer', the world contains

An elephant suspended from cruel claws  
Mountains whose magnetic power draws  
Ships to be shattered in their amorous arms ...  
Glory  
is among the guises of oblivion'.



‘Luke XXIII’ [1972; 141; tr. Mark Strand] refers to the chapter in Luke’s gospel which deals with the Crucifixion, and dwells with some cynicism on the man whom Luke calls the ‘malefactor’ [Luke 23:39] on the cross beside Jesus:

... That simplicity which made him,  
From the disgrace of punishment, ask for  
And be granted Paradise

Was what drove him time  
And again to sin and bloody crime.

Borges’ ‘Poem Written in a Copy of Beowulf’ [1972; 155; tr. Alastair Reid], bemoaning his blindness — since, as he puts it, ‘my night came down’ — contains these despairing words:

Used up by the years my memory  
Loses its grip on words that I have vainly  
Repeated and repeated. My life in the same way  
Weaves and unweaves its weary history.

In the sonnet ‘Emanuel Swedenborg’ [1972; 167; trs Richard Howard and César Rennert] we find:

He knew that Glory and Hell too  
Are in your soul with all their myths;  
He knew, like the Greeks, that the days  
Of time are Eternity’s mirrors.

Similarly, another sonnet, ‘Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)’ [1972; 169; trs Richard Howard and César Rennert], contains more evidence of Borges’ scepticism:



Content, he knows the world is an eternal  
 Vessel of wrath and that the coveted  
 Heaven was created for a few  
 And Hell for almost all.

‘The Instant’ [2000a; 215; tr. Alastair Reid] ends with these lines:

Between dawn and nightfall is an abyss  
 of agonies, felicities, and cares.  
 The face that looks back from the wasted mirrors,  
 the mirrors of night, is not the same face.  
 The fleeting day is frail and is eternal:  
 expect no other Heaven, no other Hell.

More evidence of Borges’ despair appears in these words from his sonnet  
 ‘Adam Cast Forth’ [1972; 195; tr. Alastair Reid]:

Now it is imprecise  
 In memory, that lucid paradise,  
 But I know that it exists and will persist  
 Though not for me. The unforgiving earth  
 Is my affliction ...

In the first of two poems entitled ‘1964’ [2000a; 217; tr. Alastair Reid] we  
 find yet more evidence of Borges’ lack of hope:

It is not magic now, the world. Alone  
 you will not share the clarity of moonlight  
 or the placid gardens. Now there will be no moon  
 that is not a reflection of the past,  
 mirror of solitude, a sun of sorrow.  
 Goodbye now to the touch of hands and bodies  
 that love brought close together. Now you have only  
 your loyal memories and the empty days.  
 We only lose (you vainly tell yourself)  
 what we do not have, what we have never had ...  
 Some sign — a rose — can tear the heart from you  
 and a chord on a guitar can do you in.

The poem 'Lines I Might Have Written and Lost Around 1922' [1972; 209; tr. William Ferguson] is aptly titled; it contains the following lines:

... the ancient recurring defeats of a war in heaven,  
 ruinous white dawns that come for us  
 out of the empty ends of space  
 as from the ends of time,  
 black gardens of rain, a sphinx in a book  
 I was always afraid to reopen ...  
 am I these things, and others,  
 or are they secret keys, impossible algebras  
 of what we shall never know?

In 'Fragments from an Apocryphal Gospel' [2000a; 293; tr. Stephen Kessler], published in 1969 in the collection *In Praise of Darkness* [2000a; 263-301], Borges writes: 'Wretched are the poor in spirit, for under the earth they will be as they are on earth'.

*The Iron Coin* [2000a; 369-387] is a collection published in 1976; it contains 'The Moon' [2000a; 379; tr. Willis Barnstone], which is dedicated to María Kodama; it reads:

There is such loneliness in that gold.  
 The moon of the nights is not the moon  
 Whom the first Adam saw. The long centuries  
 Of human vigil have filled her  
 With ancient lament. Look at her. She is your mirror.

This collection also contains 'Remorse' [2000a; 381; tr. Willis Barnstone], one of Borges' most despairing statements:

I have committed the worst sin of all  
 That a man can commit. I have not been  
 Happy. Let the glaciers of oblivion  
 Drag me and mercilessly let me fall.  
 My parents bred and bore me for a higher

Faith ...  
 I let them down. I wasn't happy ...  
 They willed me bravery. I wasn't brave.

Jason Wilson [2006; 138-139] points out that 'Remorse' was published only 'a few days after [his mother's] death'; he adds: 'His parents had gifted him life, but he had defrauded them and his art had simply "woven nothingnesses" ... This poem stands for much that he wrote over his last years'.

In 'Music Box' [2000a; 397; tr. Willis Barnstone], published only a year later in *The History of the Night* [2000a; 389-415], we find: 'Drops of slow honey ... / I fear that each one may be the last'.

'Things that Might Have Been' [2000a; 407; tr. Hoyt Rogers] — a title that typifies Borges' disillusionment — contains the following lines: 'I think about things that might have been and never were ... / The love we never shared ... / The child I never had'.

In 'The Mirror' [2000a; 407; tr. Hoyt Rogers] we read:

Now I fear the mirror may disclose  
 The true, unvarnished visage of my soul  
 Bruised by shadows, black and blue with guilt —  
 The face God sees, that men perhaps see too.

The first appendix to *Selected Poems 1923-1967* contains five early poems by Borges which were not included in the original collection [Borges, 1972; 245-254]. One of these is 'Along the Byways of Nimes' [1972; 249; tr. di Giovanni]; it contains this portrayal of what Borges labels his 'shame' and 'disgrace':

This place is much like happiness,  
 yet I myself am not happy ...  
 My own dark worries mortify the calm.

I am deeply wrought  
by the shame of being sad among so much beauty  
and the disgrace of unfulfilled hopes.

Another of those five poems is titled 'Rose' [1972; 250; tr. di Giovanni];  
again, it is a portrayal of total helplessness:

Rose,  
the unfading rose beyond my verse ...  
the blind and burning rose beyond my verse,  
unattainable rose.

And in 'The Stranger' [2000a; 219; tr. Alastair Reid] Borges foresees what  
he calls 'our final agony':

Before our final agony,  
we are granted agonies and ecstasies;  
both abound in this city, Buenos Aires,  
which for the stranger walking in my dream  
(the stranger I have been under other stars)  
is a series of unfocused images  
made for forgetting.

*La Cifra [The Limit]*, a collection of poems published in 1981, contains  
seventeen *haiku* that are not contained in *Selected Poems* [Borges, 2000a]. María  
Kodama, who was married to Borges for his final year, and to whom Borges  
bequeathed the copyright of all his writings [Williamson; 484-487], presented a  
paper on them at the symposium on Borges' poetry conducted at the University of  
Arkansas in 1983 [Kodama; 170-181]. Describing the nature of the *haiku* she tells  
us: 'To learn is to sink into the object until its inner nature is revealed to us and  
awakens our poetic impulse. Thus a falling leaf is not a token or symbol of  
autumn, or a part of autumn; it is autumn itself [176]'; and Borges was later to

state that the object of the haiku was ‘to appreciate a precious instant’ [Williamson; 446; 532, note 12].

Since the Japanese *haiku* is restricted to seventeen syllables, the fact that Borges composed precisely seventeen *haiku* for this collection is unlikely to be coincidental. Significantly, María Kodama expresses the opinion that many of them ‘express the futility of all human endeavours’ [Kodama; 179], and they include the following illustrations [177; tr. Kodama] of this sense of futility:

The almond blossoms hold no cheer for me today; they are but your  
memory.

Since that day I’ve not moved the pieces on the chessboard.

The evening and the mountains have told me something; I have  
already lost it.

Williamson [468-469] takes the matter further. He writes of Borges’ visit with María Kodama to a Shinto temple in 1984; he adds that this visit inspired a ‘parable’ called ‘On Salvation by Deeds’ contained in the collection *Atlas* published in that year, but the parable is not included in *Selected Poems* [Borges, 2000a]; in it Borges tells us that

the Shinto gods are in favor of permitting the human race to be destroyed as a punishment for its folly [in inventing the atomic bomb], but one of them recalls another invention, ‘something quite different, which fits in the space encompassed by seventeen syllables.’ After the dissenting god utters these seventeen syllables, it is decided to forego punishment — and thus, ‘because of a haiku, the human race was saved’.

Significantly, Williamson adds: ‘This tenuous sense that the world, ultimately, was ruled by benevolent spirits was as much as Borges could do to

overcome skepticism'; and Williamson rightly implies that 'much' was, in fact, very little.

Earlier, Williamson [386] refers to the *tankas* which Borges wrote — 'a Japanese verse form related to the haiku' — and describes them as illustrations of Borges' 'labyrinth of despair' over his deeply failed marriage to Elsa Astete, already referred to in the Introduction. Williamson provides his own translations; they include:

Under the moon  
the tiger of gold and shadow  
observes its claws.  
Little does it know that in the dawn  
they destroyed a man;

and 'Not to have fallen, like others of my blood, in battle. / To be in the vanity of the night / the one who counts the syllables.'

However, in view of the many illustrations of Borges' sense of doubt that are contained in his poetry, it is very surprising that, of the twenty-four papers presented at the symposium on 'Borges the Poet' at the University of Arkansas in 1983, only a few deal with this topic. The first to do so is the paper on the *haiku*, presented by María Kodama and quoted above. The second paper which deals with Borges' sense of doubt — describing it as 'the pessimistic view often found in the *Dreamtiger* poems' — was written by Joan White; it is entitled *Allegory in 'Dreamtigers'\**, and the *Theory of Reality*.

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\*According to Hurley, 'Dreamtigers' was the title given by the first American translator to the collection of poetry and fiction now known as *The Maker* [Borges, 1998a; 544].

In support of her assertion of Borges' pessimism, the author quotes from 'Adrogué' [White; 272]:

How could I lose that precise  
Order of humble and beloved things,  
As out of reach today as the roses  
That Paradise gave the first Adam? [Borges, 1970; 93].

From 'Poem about Gifts' she quotes [White; 273]:

Which of us two is writing now these lines  
About a plural I and a single gloom?  
What does it matter which word is my name  
If the curse is indivisibly the same? [Borges, 1970; 55-56].

White also draws attention to 'Susana Soca', a poem that, she believes, illustrates Borges' belief that 'the forces of the universe do not align themselves with human justice' [White; 275]. It concerns a woman who was killed in an airplane crash; in Borges' words: 'Gods who dwell far-off past prayer / Abandoned her to that tiger, Fire' [Borges, 1970; 63]. Referring to 'Mirrors' [Borges, 1970; 60-61] she writes: 'The 'horror of mirrors', Borges says, has haunted him because '[t]hey prolong this unstable world'; and she adds: 'The poem is a brilliant statement by a mind that, having contemplated the shifting nature of perception, has come to the admission that we can know nothing' [White; 275]. She quotes these lines from the last stanza of 'Mirrors' [White, 276]:

God has created nighttime, which he arms  
With dreams, and mirrors, to make clear  
To man he is a reflection and a mere  
Vanity ...

Later she writes that, to Borges, '[p]antheistically, God and the universe are one; we are at the service of a blind uncaring destiny, such as that 'tiger, Fire' that burned Susana Soca' [White; 279].

Another paper presented at the symposium in 1983 which deals with Borges' sense of doubt, *The Eye of the Mind: Borges and Wallace Stevens*, was written by Dionisio Cañas. He quotes an article by Robert Alter, who writes of Borges' 'fine skepticism not only about the world of brute matter but also about the imagination itself'. Cañas goes on to say: 'Borges writes about himself, about men and their activities as the splendor and mockery of a god, of gods' [255]; and he reminds us of the last lines of Borges' poem 'Cambridge' [2000a; 271]: 'We are our memory, / we are that chimerical museum of shifting shapes / that pile of broken mirrors.'

Another paper, *Seventeen Notes Towards Deciphering Borges*, was presented at the symposium on Borges' poetry by Miguel Enguídanos; he sums up the poet's scepticism in these words [321; tr. Mervyn R. Coke-Enguídanos]:

The poet knows that the final secret of his work lies in the sensation of having arrived always too late. Life has been for him a continual, anguished evening ... Come what may, he knows full well that his poetry is a song ... a song to the pale light lost in the evanescent past; a song to the love that might have been; to the moment which ought to have been lived as if it were the last.

The intensity of many of the poems quoted in this and the preceding chapter must raise questions about the judgement of both Sturrock and Woodall, when the latter states [xxxiii]: 'I agree with John Sturrock's assessment of Borges' poetry, that it is "thoughtful, tight-lipped, and a little dull"'. As Dyer comments in an article published in 1999, '[d]espite the necessary concession that the different



elements of Borges' work need to be viewed together in mutually supporting relation, his poetry alone would be enough to underwrite his immense reputation' [1]; and Dyer attempts to explain the reservations about Borges' poetry that some critics have expressed: 'Borges had such facility as a writer that what might seem difficult — miraculous even — in less nimble hands can seem, in his, merely facile' [2]; but it must be admitted that Dyer might have chosen a better word than 'facile'.

'The Secret Miracle' [Borges, 1998a; 157-162].

Before closing this chapter it is necessary to discuss another of Borges' fictions, because it is a different and an especially interesting demonstration of the importance of that 'most precious gift, doubt' [Borges, 1998b; 245].

It is Prague, March 1939. Jaromir Hladik, author of (inter alia) an unfinished verse drama, *The Enemies*, has been condemned to death by an officer of the Third Reich. In a cell, awaiting his death, he is appalled above all by the thought that he will be executed, not by 'being hanged, or decapitated, or having his throat slit, but ... by a firing squad' [158].

We are told that, in Hladik's nightmares, long before the day set for the execution,

[he] died hundreds of deaths — standing in courtyards whose shapes and angles ran the entire gamut of geometry, shot down by soldiers of changing faces and varying numbers ... He faced his imaginary execution with true fear, perhaps with true courage [158].

He has ten days to wait. 'Absurdly' he tries to imagine every possibility in advance, on the basis that 'to foresee any particular detail is in fact to prevent its

happening ... [N]aturally he wound up fearing that those details might be prophetic' [158]. As a last desperate distraction from reality he decides to complete his unfinished play, and prays that his execution be delayed for one year to allow him to do so.

Facing the firing squad on the appointed day, he suddenly believes that God has granted his wish; this is the 'secret miracle'. Hladik's belief leads to self-delusion on his part; in his mind 'a year would pass between the order to fire and the discharge of the rifles ... Painstakingly, motionlessly, secretly, he ... completed his play'.

Then, at 9:02 am, 'the fourfold volley felled him' [162]; but it felled him on the appointed day.

We are told that Hladik 'admired verse in drama because it does not allow the spectators to forget unreality, which is a condition of art' [159]. This story, I suggest, is about the horror that arises from the inability to forget reality, as a result of the certainty entailed by that inability — in particular, the absolute certainty of the time, the date, and the place of death, a certainty that allows no element of doubt to enter the mind. It clearly demonstrates why Borges regarded doubt as a 'precious gift'. That enemy of doubt, certainty, is demonstrated frequently by precise facts — for example, 'On the night of March 14, 1939', 'on the nineteenth' [157], 'time was rushing toward the morning of March 29' [158], and 'Hladik died on the twenty-ninth of March, at 9.02 a.m.' [162]; and, as Balderston points out [56] '[t]here are also precise references to places in Prague'.

Williamson [265] suggests that the story

reveals the depth of Borges' despair at the end of the very difficult year of 1942 ... *The Secret Miracle* articulated [his] growing anxieties about the situation in Argentina ... The disaster Borges most dreaded appeared to be at hand — a coup d'état that would create a fascist state as a preliminary to a German invasion of the Americas.

The *coup d'état* took place, carried out by officers amongst whom was Colonel Perón. As Williamson suggests, 'Conjectural Poem', published only weeks after the coup, 'was a very intimate poem, imbued with a curious, almost suicidal, pessimism' [266]. The poem is introduced as a reflection 'before he dies' of a man who was assassinated by the revolutionaries [Borges, 1972; 83-85; tr. di Giovanni]; 'The Secret Miracle' may well be another illustration of Borges' obsession with death, but it also relates to these lines of 'almost suicidal pessimism' in 'Conjectural Poem':

I see at last that I am face to face  
with my South American destiny.  
I was carried to this ruinous hour  
by the intricate labyrinth of steps  
woven by my days from a day that goes  
back to my birth ... The circle's  
about to close. I wait to let it come.

Woodall [130] points out that 'The Secret Miracle' was published in February 1943, and relates the story to 'Borges' reactions to brutalities in the European war ... Many such stories in books and films would take years to emerge'. Balderston takes up the same theme [64]:

The bonds between the dangerous developments in Europe and the dangers at home ... make the setting of Prague in 1939 a logical choice for a story on the rise of fascism, since after the Anschluss ... that city and that time were the first sites of German expansionism.

However, Monegal comments [385]:

Borges' love for Berkeleyan idealism is put to use in a fashion that produces an effective narrative. The story is not one of Borges' best and is perhaps a bit too mechanical, but it is one that readers favour.

Perhaps Monegal's mistaken belief that Borges loved Berkeleyan idealism causes him to lack appreciation of Borges' filmic technique, because 'The Secret Miracle' can be viewed as a consummate film scenario; bearing in mind the film *Orphée*, it is one that Jean Cocteau would have greatly admired. Borges had been interested in film technique since his early years, and the number of film reviews that appear in the *Total Library* is remarkable. And it is also because of that same mistaken belief, I suggest, that Monegal criticises the story as being 'a bit too mechanical', alleging that it is not one of Borges' best, despite the fact that Borges included it in his *Personal Anthology*.

According to Sturrock [41], Borges' story symbolizes the conditions of authorship,

because to go further, and show it as a particular form of bodily activity would be a dangerous concession to realism. The author, for Borges, remains someone whose body is useless.

Jason Wilson [2006; 113] describes the story as one that best captures Borges' 'futility'; but none of Borges' critics relate 'The Secret Miracle' to a horror of certainty.

In light of the fact that Borges made his statement to Barili about his 'precious gift' only one year before his death, it might be assumed that his preference for

doubt over certainty as portrayed in 'The Secret Miracle' was a function of old age; but, as I hope this chapter has demonstrated, Borges' espousal of doubt was evident throughout his life.

## CHAPTER 4

## BORGES AND HUMILITY

As the President of Dickinson College said of Borges when he welcomed him to the University of Arkansas in 1983, '[i]n order to have such depth of perspective, one must have both the humor and the humility to see oneself clearly' [Cortínez; 6].

The implications of Borges' sense of humour have already been discussed, as have those of two other major attributes — his obsession with death and his sense of doubt; it is now appropriate to address the issue of Borges and humility.

Di Giovanni illustrates Borges' humility in his essay *At Work with Borges* when he writes of 'Borges' modesty and quiet manner and his complete inability to make the smallest requests, let alone any sort of demand' [1971; 75]. Jason Wilson [2006] makes the same point: 'Borges wrote a book on Buddhism with Alicia Jurado in 1976 ... and was genuinely modest, a joker who belittled himself with almost a Buddhist giggle [8] ... My guess is that he was temperamentally a Buddhist [15]'.

In his *Autobiographical Essay* [1971; 138] Borges, tells us: 'My father was very intelligent and, like all intelligent men, very kind ... My father was such a modest man that he would have liked being invisible'; and it is no coincidence, I suggest, that — as this chapter will demonstrate — some of his most memorable fictions were published under his most unassuming title, *Et Cetera*.

Borges' humility remained with him throughout his life; only three years before his death he tells his audience in Arkansas that, of his poems, 'I think that

two or three of them are good, maybe, I should say. No, the rest is silence, as Hamlet had it ... I've written far too much' [Cortínez; 12].

As an illustration of his humility, we should note that he gave little or no thought to his being published overseas until he was approaching his seventieth birthday; and even then, as Williamson explains [377-378], it was di Giovanni who took the initiative; and this was despite the fact that, as a young man, he spent some years in Europe, latterly in the company of many writers, according to Monegal [144-149], during which time he must have become aware of the potential of the overseas market.

But none of these comments deals with the question that, I suggest, was important to Borges: Does a character's humility indicate a willingness to learn, or merely an acceptance of defeat? — in other words, is that character's humility positive or negative? Above all, if humility is the result of defeat, does it become an avenue for the character's redemption or merely for self-pity? A feature of many of the stories discussed in this chapter is the arrogance displayed by the main character, which often accounts for that character's downfall. These stories illustrate Borges' aversion to arrogance, a natural but positive concomitant to humility.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Borges was well aware that, according to *Genesis 11*, the Tower of Babel was erected by those whose arrogance caused them to build a tower 'whose top may reach unto heaven'; and it is not surprising that, according to Williamson [265; 285], Borges should have been horrified at the success of the uprising in Argentina in 1943 by the arrogant pro-Axis

*nacionalista* militants, and, in 1946, at the election by a landslide of the arrogant populist despot Perón to the presidency.

The first four of the stories discussed below are taken from *Et Cetera* [Borges, 1998a; 53-63], and they have a particularly interesting feature. In Borges' introduction to 'The Man on the Threshold' [1971; 85-90] he states: 'It should be remarked that the story has a certain ancient simplicity ... something perhaps straight out of the *Arabian Nights*' [85]. Many of the stories dealt with in this chapter gain considerable strength from Borges' practice of economy and concision — aptly labelled by Coetzee [173] 'lapidary concision'. These qualities are not necessarily symptomatic of humility; on the contrary, as anyone who has observed or participated in a military parade will appreciate, economy and concision are also of the essence in the exercise of authority. In the case of Borges, however, I suggest that many of the stories discussed in this chapter provide clear evidence that economy and concision are not confined to the exercise of authority. According to Jason Wilson [2006; 123] Julio Cortázar, a poet and one of Borges' contemporaries, stated that 'what Borges had taught him was "rigour", both economy of style and condensed thinking', and that another contemporary, Ernesto Sábato, 'defined his rambling novels against Borges's concision'.

'Ancient simplicity' is an appropriate label for the first four stories, since they are told with the economy and concision that characterise some of Borges' best fictions; however, they do not appear to have been fully appreciated by his critics. In his early essay on 'The Labyrinths of the Detective Story and



Chesterton' [2001; 112-114; tr. Eliot Weinberger], Borges makes clear his admiration for what he describes as 'an avaricious economy of means' [113]; in his Commentary on 'The Intruder' [1971; 202] he states that, having just read *Plain Tales from the Hills*, he admired Kipling's 'brevity and straightforwardness'; Fishburn has described Borges as 'our century's greatest miniaturist' [2008; 53], and di Giovanni agrees: '[W]here concision is concerned, Borges always achieved more in one or two pages than any other writer of our age' [2003; 59]. It should be noted that, during Borges' interview with Burgin in 1967, he mentions his opinion that 'The Intruder' was a better story than 'The South' — which he had previously regarded as his best — because, he says, 'it's simpler' [Borges, 1998b; 30].

A tribute which Borges paid in that interview with Burgin is significant: 'Perhaps the strength of Kafka may lie in his lack of complexity' [Borges, 1998b; 38].

'The Wizard that was Made to Wait' [Borges, 1998a; 57-60].

According to Borges [1998a; 60], this story was taken from an Arabic volume, *The Forty Mornings and the Forty Nights*.

It tells of the dean of a cathedral in Santiago de Compostela where the cathedral was built over the supposed tomb of St James the Great, and 'the town that grew up around it became the most important Christian place of pilgrimage after Jerusalem and Rome during the Middle Ages', as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us. There can be little doubt that the exalted position which the

dean enjoyed sowed the seeds of his arrogance, which he then proceeds to demonstrate.

The dean 'was greedy to learn the art of magic' [57], and went to a man named Illán, who was considered to know more about magic than anyone else. However, Illán 'feared that should he teach him as he asked, the dean would forget him afterward' [58]. But the dean vowed to do no such thing, swearing that he would be in Illán's debt forever.

Illán took him to an underground cell; but the dean's instruction had hardly begun when he learned that he had been made a bishop. Illán asked that his son should be made dean in his place, but the new bishop replied that he had reserved that position for his brother.

Subsequently the bishop was appointed archbishop, and, later, cardinal. On both occasions he rejected a plea on behalf of Illán's son, while still promising to bear that son in mind for advancement.

Then the cardinal became Pope; but when Illán repeated his plea for his son's advancement the new Pope threatened him with imprisonment, 'telling him that he knew very well that ... he was no better than a teacher of magic arts' [59].

Suddenly this Pope 'found himself in the cell under Illán's house, a poor dean ... and so ashamed of his ingratitude that he could find no words by which to beg Illán's forgiveness' [59]. Throughout, we now realise, the dean has been on trial.

In marked contrast to the dean's behaviour, Illán 'wished him a pleasant journey and sent him off most courteously' [60].

‘A Theologian in Death’ [Borges, 1998a; 53-54].

When a theologian named Melancthon dies, ‘a house was prepared for him like that in which he had lived in the world ... [H]e seated himself at the table and continued his writing.’ But the angels perceived that his writing contained ‘nothing whatever about charity ... He replied that there was nothing of the church in charity ... He said these things arrogantly’ [53].

At length, the things in his room begin to disappear; but still he goes on writing. We are told:

There was a room at the rear of the house in which ... sat men like himself, who also cast charity into exile ... [It] was confirmed by them ... that no other theologian was as wise as he ... Then he began to write something about charity; but what he wrote on the paper one day, he did not see the next; for this happens to every one when he commits any thing to paper ... from compulsion and not from freedom; it is obliterated of itself [53-54].

Consequently, Melancthon is carried out ‘to the sand dunes, where he is now a servant to demons’ [54].

In its concision this story is an archetype of Borges’ ‘ancient simplicities’; he takes no part in the story, and passes no judgement; but Melancthon’s lack of humility is obvious.

However, another aspect of this story will be addressed in Chapter 5.

‘The Chamber of Statues’ [Borges, 1998a; 54-56]

Once more we have a story which exhorts humility, and in which concision is one of the outstanding features.

The King of the Andalusians lives in a city where ‘there was a strong tower whose gate ... was neither for going in nor for coming out, but for keeping closed’ [54]; but when an ‘evil man’ comes to the throne he breaks open all the locks on the gate, despite the pleadings of his grandees [55].

He inspects the many wonders that the rooms contain — ‘figures of Arabs on their horses and camels’, a veritable chamber of statues. In addition he finds, amongst other things,

the table that belonged to Suleyman, son of David ... [A] mappa mundi figuring ... the world ... [A] marvellous mirror... which had been made for Suleyman ... [and] that hermetic powder, one drachm of which ... can change ... silver ... into gold [55-56].

But the last room in the tower is empty, and an inscription on the wall reads: ‘If any hand opens the gate of this castle, the warriors of flesh at the entrance ... shall take possession of the kingdom.’

This they do, in direct response to the evil man’s arrogance: ‘Thus it was that the Arabs spread all over the cities of Andalusia’ [56].

This, Borges tells the reader, was Night 272 in the *Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* [56].

‘The Mirror of Ink’ [Borges, 1998a; 60-62].

This story is attributed by Borges to Francis Burton’s *Lake Regions*. However, Hurley points out that the story appears nowhere in that book [1998a; 531]; furthermore, di Giovanni assures us that this is one of Borges’ ‘apocryphal’ pieces [2003; 137].

A sorcerer, Abderramen al-Masmudi, in fear of his life at the feet of Yākub the Afflicted, offers to show the Afflicted One ‘forms and appearances more marvellous than those of ... the magic lantern’. When proof is demanded of him, Abderramen draws a magic square in Yākub’s right palm, into which he pours a circle of ink, asking the Afflicted One ‘to name the figure that he wished to see’ [60].

As soon as the Afflicted One’s first wishes are granted, ever greater demands are made every day upon Abderramen. But when Yākub asks to see

the city men call Europe ... he saw for the first time the Masked One. From that time forth, that figure ... ever with a veil upon its face, crept always into the vision ... [and] there was nothing but tortures, garrotes, mutilations, the pleasure of the executioner and the cruel man [61].

Finally, Yākub ‘craved to see a death’, and Abderramen obliges. Inevitably, the condemned man in the vision before him is the Masked One.

Yākub demands to see the face of the Masked One. It is his; and he falls to the floor, dead.

The story ends with the prayer: ‘Glory to Him Who does not die, and Who holds within His hand the keys of infinite Pardon and infinite Punishment’ [62].

This story is a superb illustration of Borges’ economy and concision, and of his belief in the dangers that can arise from a lack of humility. By its nature the story might well have been found in the *Arabian Nights*, and the incantation that appears at its close confirms that possibility.

Surprisingly, Woodall, Jaén, Wheelock, Sarlo and Irwin ignore all four of these stories. Ronald Christ spends many pages discussing *A Universal History*, but he never so much as acknowledges the existence of *Et Cetera* — except perhaps by implication, when he describes *A Universal History* as ‘negligible’ [85] and ‘largely unsuccessful’ [88]; nor does he discuss ‘The Man on the Threshold’, ‘The Two Kings’ or ‘Blue Tigers’, stories which are dealt with below.

Sturrock discusses only ‘The Wizard that was Made to Wait’, referred to by him as ‘The Sorcerer Postponed’:

This ingenious, mock Arabian Nights tale embodies all the stages of a fiction ... There are two symmetrical stories ... The form the second story takes, of the amazing ascent of the dean, is prefigured in the first story by his descent into the underground room ... To isolation is added the idea of incarceration ... [T]he place into which [Borges’] makers of fiction are withdrawn is a prison cell [34-36].

In writing these words about a prison cell, Sturrock might have had Borges’ Parodi stories in mind; but, clearly, he is not aware that a prison cell is a place of humility.

Monegal deals frequently with *A Universal History*, but the only mention of *Et Cetera* comes in his note on ‘The Mirror of Ink’. He states that, because it appears in *Et Cetera*, it ‘has never been considered a legitimate Borges story’ [264], a statement that is very difficult to understand. He also suggests that the mirror of ink is an Aleph, ‘a place that contains all places and all times’ [264]; but the Aleph is a static but simultaneous depiction of ‘all places and all times’, while the mirror of ink displays the progression of images which lead to Yākub’s death.

Perhaps the most memorable feature of the story is that this progression is willed by Yākub himself.

It is unfortunate that the simplicity of ‘The Mirror of Ink’ should be overlooked by Borges’ critics; I suggest that its simplicity helps to make it one of Borges’ finest stories.

Two stories designed to exhort humility are to be found in *Artifices*, published in 1944 [Borges, 1998a; vi].

‘The Shape of the Sword’ [Borges, 1998a; 138-142].

On the face of the so-called “Englishman at La Colorada”, we are told, was ‘a vengeful scar, an ... almost perfect arc that sliced from the temple on one side of his head to his cheek on the other’ [138]. This “Englishman” has been persuaded by a visitor named Borges to tell the story of that scar.

He explains that he was not English but Irish, and had fought against the English for Ireland’s independence. One evening he and his men were joined by ‘one of our own ... a man called John Vincent Moon ... who gave the uncomfortable impression of being an invertebrate’ [139].

However, Moon was not merely a coward; he was also a traitor. The Irishman tells his visitor that he discovered Moon telephoning details of his movements to the Black and Tans, as the English invaders were called, so that they might capture this “Englishman”. So, he explains,

I chased the snitch through black corridors of nightmare and steep stairwells of vertigo ... I seized a scimitar ... and left a flourish on his face for ever — a half-moon of blood [142].

But this ‘half-moon of blood’ was the Irishman’s own ‘vengeful scar’. He declares: ‘[I]t is *I* who am John Vincent Moon. Now, despise me’ [142; italics in quoted text].

Wheelock states: ‘One may wonder ... whether this story describes one man’s inner struggle against his other self and the final victory of his cowardly side’ [173]. But the ‘cowardly side’ of Moon is not victorious; on the contrary, he displays the utmost humility, and is pleading for forgiveness.

‘The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero’ [1998a; 143-146].

Displaying the circularity in which Borges so often indulged, this story tells of research into the investigation of an earlier plot to murder ‘the young, heroic, beautiful’ Fergus Kilpatrick, who had himself been plotting the overthrow of the Irish rebels of whom he was the leader. Indeed, Kilpatrick himself had ordered the investigation into that plot to overthrow the rebels, an investigation which subsequently revealed his own guilt.

With Kilpatrick’s agreement, retribution comes in the form of his murder, which, ‘prefiguring Lincoln’s’, takes place in a theatre, while ‘scenes from *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*’ by ‘the English enemy Will Shakespeare’ are being enacted; and, by virtue of the sorrow engendered by that murder, it succeeds in Kilpatrick’s intention ‘to turn the traitor’s execution into an instrument for the emancipation’ of Ireland [145].

But the man who, a century later, undertakes the research into the plotter’s plot decides not to reveal that plot, because such a move would reveal



Kilpatrick's guilt. Ironically, however, it would also reveal Kilpatrick's lately-found humility, which, undoubtedly, prompts his confession.

However, although Borges' acknowledges what he calls 'the notorious influence of Chesterton' [143], he appears to have forgotten about an 'avaricious economy of means'; in 'The Traitor and the Hero' almost two-thirds of the story is taken up in the introduction. The last five paragraphs tell us all that we need to know, and they would have formed an 'ancient simplicity' in themselves, despite the fact that neither of these stories could have appeared in the *Arabian Nights*.

Ronald Christ [137] calls this Borges' 'esthetic of compression'. He adds that Borges' admiration for Joseph Conrad leads Borges to

describe the theme of *Lord Jim* — 'the obsession with honor and the shame of having been a coward' — in such a way as to suggest a relationship between that novel and his story *The Shape of the Sword* [245; note 16].

Christ's point seems to be valid, particularly in view of Borges' statement at the University of Arkansas: 'Conrad to me is *the* novelist. Were we to choose a single novelist ... I should choose Joseph Conrad ... I think that I will read and reread Conrad for all my life' [Cortínez; 69-70; italics in quoted text]; and, as Borges indicates in 'The Shape of the Sword', 'the shame of having been a coward' is an avenue for redemption when it is seen as the positive aspect of humility.

Monegal also writes of what he calls 'the highly dramatic inversion of roles' in these two stories: 'Borges suggests that the hero is as much a villain as the villain is a hero. They are two sides of the same character: man' [385]; but it would seem that Monegal fails to appreciate the possibility for redemption through humility which Borges sees in these stories.

Woodall writes that these two stories deal with

the startling alterations of expected reality a willed fiction can inflict on its reader ... Both represent Borges at his devious best, and both are cruel ... Both are miniaturist distillations of the more complex patterns of 'Forking Paths' and 'Death and the Compass' [130].

But neither of these stories is 'miniaturist' by the standards of the 'ancient simplicities'; nor are there 'startling alterations of expected reality' in 'The Traitor and the Hero'; indeed, it is that story's fierce inevitability that is its crux.

Jaén, having described these stories as 'variations on that paradoxical theme of the unity of contraries' [73], then adds: 'Such an abundance of correspondence tends to diminish the importance of individuality' [74]. I suggest that, on the contrary, this paradox makes the individual all the more interesting, as any novelist would confirm; more importantly for Borges, however, it makes it possible to display the positive aspect of humility.

Williamson, writing about 'The Shape of the Sword', points out that the ranch owned by 'the Englishman' is called La Colorada, 'which literally means The Red One'. He adds that

*la colorada* is also used in Argentina to refer to a woman with red hair. One can discern in these associations a conflict in Borges' psyche that equates the freedom to associate with a redhead (a *colorada* like Norah Lange) with the betrayal of a hero [264].

Williamson goes on to remind us of 'Borges' despair at the end of the very difficult year of 1942 ... and his unquenched desire to taste the 'barbarism' of the passion he held for the red-haired Norah Lange' [265, 266]. Then, writing about 'The Traitor and the Hero', Williamson states: 'It was as if Borges believed that ... he had betrayed the passion he had once felt for Norah and sacrificed the desire

for freedom that had made him a writer' [267]. However, can we accept that Borges would wear his heart on his sleeve to the extent that Williamson implies?

Strangely, Sturrock makes no mention of 'The Shape of the Sword'; but in writing about 'The Traitor and the Hero' he draws a parallel between Kilpatrick's very public execution and the *Festspiel*, 'a remarkable cultural phenomenon discovered by Borges in Switzerland, [in which takes place] vast and errant theatrical representations, which require thousands of actors and which reiterate historical episodes' [137]; but this comparison seems to add nothing to our understanding of the story.

The next three fictions are taken from *The Aleph*, published in 1949 [1998a; vi].

'The House of Asterion' [Borges, 1998a; 220-222].

Borges was an admirer of Robert Browning, famous most of all perhaps for his dramatic monologues. In an interview with Richard Burgin in 1967 he said: 'I think that many of Browning's pieces would have fared better, at least so far as the reader goes, had they been written as short stories' [Borges, 1998b; 36]. This story is an excellent example of what Borges had in mind.

With the utmost bombast the Minotaur declaims — rather than tells — of his life in the labyrinth: 'I know that I am accused of arrogance ... and perhaps, even of madness. These accusations (which I shall punish in due time) are ludicrous'. It is, I suggest, a sure sign of arrogance to *punish*, rather than *rebut*, accusations; and many more signs of the Minotaur's arrogance are to follow.

The Minotaur tells how, one afternoon, he went out into the streets; ‘but I returned before nightfall ... Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot mix with commoners, even if my modesty should wish it’; obviously, he prides himself on his so-called modesty, declaiming meanwhile that he is ‘unique’ [220].

He does not ‘lack for distractions’; he particularly enjoys playing games with a second, imaginary, Asterion. But his all-consuming arrogance tells him that, while

[e]verything exists many times, fourteen times ... there are two things in the world that apparently exist only once — on high, the intricate sun, and below, Asterion. Perhaps I have created the stars and the sun and this huge house, and no longer remember it [221].

Every nine years he receives a tribute from the citizens: ‘[N]ine men come into the house so that I can free them from all evil ... [O]ne of them predicted as he died that someday my redeemer would come ... [W]ill he be like me?’ [221-222]. Asterion’s arrogance has now reached its zenith.

But the brief final lines of measured anti-climax demolish this arrogance; with no trace of blood left on his sword, Theseus calls out to Ariadne: ‘The Minotaur scarcely defended itself’ [222].

The story is written with consummate economy and concision; it is another example of Borges’ ‘ancient simplicities’, even though it could not have appeared in the *Arabian Nights*.

Irwin sees ‘The House of Asterion’ — and, in particular, Theseus’ slaying of the Minotaur — as a ‘complex and problematic allusive background for Borges’ detective stories’ [255]. He discerns references to Lewis Carroll and to Edgar Allen Poe, and to a reversal of the ‘master/slave polarity ... when Ariadne ...

brings about the death of the Minotaur, and when Alice checkmates the Red King' [257]. He goes so far as to invoke what he interprets as 'Plato's story of human origins as the splitting of a four-armed, four-legged being into two complementary halves' [263]. Surely, Borges would have expressed 'undying gratitude' to Irwin for his insights, as di Giovanni would have confirmed.

Jaén sees the story as an example of Borges' 'development of characters ... from myth into narratives that hide the fictional ... origin of the character' [34]; but, if Jaén is correct, then this attempt by Borges to hide the fictional origin of the character was an outstanding failure. Later Jaén calls the story 'a fictional, or metafictional, hoax' [109]; but, as far as I am aware, it has made no-one laugh.

Asterion's assertions that 'men come into the house so that I can free them from all evil', and that 'one of them predicted as he died that someday my redeemer would come ... [W]ill he be like me?' [221-222] seem to deny any vestige of humility, now or in the future.

However, is it possible that, at the prospect of death, he becomes aware — for the very first time — of his arrogance? Could this be the reason that he 'scarcely defended' himself?

Sturrock, acknowledging Borges' obsession with death, discussed in Chapter 2, writes: 'Asterion ... suffers from that common disability, a death-wish' [188]; perhaps death was the only means by which Asterion could hope to lose his arrogance.

However, Jason Wilson makes an interesting suggestion [2006; 87-88]; he quotes the psychoanalyst Julio Woscoboinik, who 'asserted that Borges was

Asterión (*sic*), autistic, introverted and solitary' [87], and adds 'It's a secret wish behind the fictions to be taken for who he is behind his body armour' [88].

'The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths' [Borges, 1971; 58-59].

The first of these two labyrinths was built by the King of Babylon; it was 'so intricate that no wise man would dare enter inside, and so subtle that those who did would lose their way'. The Arabian King pays him a visit; and the King of Babylon, 'wishing to mock his guest's simplicity', invites him to enter the labyrinth; and it is only with 'the help of God' that the Arabian King finds his way out [58].

He makes no complaint; but when the King of Babylon returns his visit the Arabian King takes his guest into the desert — surely the ultimate labyrinth — and leaves him there to die of thirst and hunger. Clearly, the King of Babylon has been suitably punished for his arrogance in 'wishing to mock his guest's simplicity'.

This story is prefaced by a note stating that it is the text of the sermon preached by the local vicar in 'Ibn Hakkan'; however, it was written three years earlier. Borges confesses to the hoax in his Commentary, adding: 'How it found its way into ['Ibn Hakkan'] is now a mystery to me' [1971; 199].

The irony of this lies in the fact that 'The Two Kings' is a far more successful story than 'Ibn Hakkan'. We do not find Borges complaining of a 'hopeless' plot; instead he calls 'The Two Kings' an 'unpresuming fable ... its deliberate aim to be a page ... out of the *Arabian Nights*' [1971; 196].

Borges achieves that aim. The story barely fills one page; and, as is the case with the ‘ancient simplicities’ that appeared earlier in *Et Cetera*, it was written with consummate economy and concision.

Sadly, however, the final words in Borges’ Commentary on the story, first published in 1970, appear to indicate some disillusionment on his part:

After some twenty-five years, I am beginning to suspect that the king of Babylon, with his lust for winding ways and devious complexity, stands for civilization, while the Arabian king stands for unrelieved barbarism [1971; 196].

‘The Writing of the God’ [Borges, 1998a; 250-254].

Tzinacán, ‘priest of the Pyramid of Qaholom’, was once the man who, ‘[w]ith the deep flint blade ... opened the breast of victims’ [250]. But the Pyramid has been burnt down, and the idol to the god has been toppled; and Tzinacán has been tortured and thrown into prison, a prison that he knows he will never leave [250].

Nevertheless, the priest hopes to ‘make out the memory ... [of] one of the legends of the god’; and, while recognizing that ‘[i]n the firmament there is change ... [he seeks] something more tenacious, more invulnerable’ [251]. Then remembering that, in the cell adjoining his was a jaguar, ‘he recalled that one of the names of the god was jaguar — *tigre*’ [251; italics in quoted text].

Despite the fact that light shone on the jaguar’s back for only a few moments in each day, Tzinacán endeavors to read the message that he believes is contained in its stripes. Eventually he sees all; and, ‘understanding all, I came to understand the writing on the jaguar’; and he realises that ‘all I would have to do to become omnipotent is speak it aloud’ [253].

But he also realises that, to ‘become omnipotent’ is merely a man’s trivial joy, and that he ‘no longer matters ... [N]ow he is no one ... That is why I allow the days to forget me’ [254].

I suggest that there can be no greater humility, for a man who once opened the breast of victims with a deep flint blade, than to allow the days to forget him; having previously seen that ‘in the firmament there is change’, he abandons his search for ‘something more tenacious, more invulnerable’; he has learned the humility of defeat. As Balderston puts it [70], it is ‘Tzinacán’s acceptance of annihilation’; quoting Tzinacán [Balderston; 79]:

One who has glimpsed the universe, one who has glimpsed the burning designs of the universe, cannot think of a man, of his trivial joys or sorrows, even if that man is himself. That man *has been himself* and does not matter to him any more [tr. Balderston; italics in quoted text].

However, none of Borges’ other critics see it this way. Williamson [283] suggests that the revelation depicted in this story was that of Borges’ realisation that he must sleep with Estela Canto before she will marry him — ‘before he could complete his Dantean passage from purgatory into the paradise of love’, as Williamson puts it. But, having mentioned that the story was dedicated to ‘the beautiful Uruguayan poet Ema Risso Platero’ [300] — although Hurley’s text acknowledges no dedication — Williamson then [308] sees it as a sign of Borges’ ‘resignation [and] indifference to his fate’, after both Estela Canto and Cecilia Ingenieros had turned down his amatory advances.

Monegal thinks otherwise; he relates the story to Borges’ serious accident on Christmas Eve, 1938, after which Borges doubted for a time whether he would



ever write again: ‘From that zone between life and death in which he had lingered, Borges (like [Tzinacán]) slowly returned to the bliss of understanding’ [324]. Borges seems to confirm this when discussing the story with Amelia Barili in 1985 [Borges, 1998b; 240-247]; he tells her about the occasion ‘when, after an operation, I was forced to lie on my back ... Then I put together the idea that ... the jaguar’s spots suggest a secret writing, and the fact that I was virtually imprisoned’ [243]; but these words clearly relate only to the source of the story, and not to its intent; and Barili’s three attempts to get him to accept that the crux of the story lies in the acceptance of his circumstances, ‘when you come back to your center, and clarity dawns upon you’ [242], are all resisted by Borges.

Woodall mentions the story only in passing, but Wheelock spends five pages on it. He tells us [122]:

In my opinion, this is one of Borges’ very best stories ... Tzinacán’s mystical experience ought to be thought of as a return to the mythic ground of being, a kind of pantheism. This is only to say that it is not any particular God with whom Tzinacán is joined, but with Being, the universe.

It is a pity that Wheelock was unable to read Borges’ interview with Barili before he wrote this; he might then have appreciated Borges’ rejection of Barili’s idea that the story might relate to ‘the whole history of the cosmos’ [Borges, 1998b; 242] — and, indeed, to anything in the field of metaphysics. It is also to be regretted that he failed to appreciate Borges’ scarcely-disguised sarcasm in the Afterword, when he says that the story ‘has been judged generously’ [Borges, 1998a; 287].

‘The Man on the Threshold’ [Borges, 1971; 85-90].

In his Commentary, Borges states that he wove into this story ‘the image of an apparently helpless old man holding a secret power... [T]he same linking ... is to be found in the *Arabian Nights*’ [1971; 199-200].

The British government had sent David Alexander Glencairn out to an unnamed Muslim city in India to restore order after some ‘disturbances’ had taken place. We are told that Glencairn was

a Scotsman from an illustrious clan of warriors, and in his blood he bore a tradition of violence ... [T]he mere news of his coming was enough to quell the city. This did not deter him from putting into effect a number of forceful measures [86].

However, after a few years he suddenly disappears, and the narrator has been sent to India to discover Glencairn’s whereabouts.

But the narrator feels, ‘almost at once, the invisible presence of a conspiracy to keep Glencairn’s fate hidden’ [86]. He maintains his search, but with increasing pessimism. Then he catches ‘a glimpse of a succession of unpaved courtyards ... [where] some kind of Muslim ceremony was being held’ [87]. He finds there ‘an old, old man’ — the old man to whom, no doubt, Borges refers in his Commentary. He tells him of his quest to find Glencairn.

The old man tells him the story of a man who was lost, someone who had been sent to India to enforce the law of England, and how it was not long before that man was deceiving and oppressing the Sikhs and Muslims; therefore they kidnapped him, and brought him to judgement.

Hundreds of witnesses were found to testify to the man’s inhumanity; but, unable to find anyone to act as judge, with the defendant’s agreement they named

a madman to fill the position. After a trial lasting nineteen days, '[t]he faithless dog heard sentence passed, and the knife feasted on his throat' [90].

But, as the narrator listens to the old man, crowds of men and women pass through the courtyard where they sit. When the old man has finished his story, the narrator forces his way to the innermost courtyard. There he finds 'a naked man, crowned with yellow flowers, whom everyone kissed and caressed, with a sword in his hand. The sword was stained, for it had dealt Glencairn his death' [90].

'The Man on the Threshold' receives little attention from Borges' critics; only three of them appear to have considered it in any detail.

Wheelock admits to being confused; having stated that the old beggar recounts 'an execution that occurred years before', he adds: 'To interpret the story would be to paraphrase an ingenious sophistry that I am not sure I comprehend'; and, regarding the trial before a mad judge: 'Insanity is somehow symbolic of the enigmatic East, where it is often regarded as the blessing of God' [168-169].

As if to emphasise his lack of comprehension, Wheelock sums up the story as follows: 'But what does Glencairn represent? ... [A] kind of intellectual variability, 'war', estheticism, or idealism, that transcends rigid and contradictory points of view' [170].

Jaén states that the story is an example of Borges' 'theme of the loss of salvation ... The realization of the futile nature of fiction comes together with the realization that there is no escape from fiction' [37].

It would appear that neither of these critics remembered Borges' propensity for humour, and that they had not read Borges' Commentary on the

story. Having confessed that he had ‘placed [the story] in India so as to make its unlikeliness less obvious’ [1971; 199], he goes on to admit that ‘The Man on the Threshold’ is ‘a bit of a trick story ... What is told as having happened years and years earlier is actually taking place at that moment’ [200].

However, there cannot be many readers who do not perceive this ‘trick’; and, unfortunately, it is this failure on Borges’ part which is the main impression left on the reader.

By the standards of many of the other stories discussed in this chapter this one lacks economy; but the reader is left in no doubt about Glencairn’s lack of humility, and of the consequences of this shortcoming.

In contrast to Wheelock and Jaén, Balderston appears to accept this; pointing out the narrator’s misquotation of Juvenal [Borges, 1971; 85] — an error which ‘threatens to unravel his authority’ [Balderston; 108] — he reminds us that Juvenal’s tenth satire tells of ‘those who err when they overreach’; and, in particular, of Alexander the Great, ‘who, though he did not reach the Ganges, reached the Indus, but in the process lost all’ [Balderston; 109]. Perhaps not coincidentally, ‘Alexander’ was Glencairn’s middle name.

‘The Mirror and the Mask’ [Borges, 1998a; 451-454].

Having won the Battle of Clontarf, the victorious king demands of his poet that he ‘sing my victory and my praises ... [in an ode] which shall make us both immortal’ [451].

He makes this demand on three occasions; after hearing the first of the poet’s odes the king presents him with a mirror made of silver, and after the

second he presents him with a mask. But on both occasions the king decides that the poet's efforts, while observing all the rules of poesy, fail to make them both immortal.

Following his third attempt at flattery, however, the poet admits that he has committed 'that sin which the Holy Spirit cannot pardon' — a sin, muses the king, that 'the two of us share ... The sin of having known Beauty, which is a gift forbidden mankind' [454].

However, far from the immortality which the poet's odes had been expected to bestow upon them both, the king abdicates his throne and begins to wander like a beggar over the land 'which once was his kingdom', and the poet kills himself with a dagger — a dagger presented to him by the king [454].

Borges can have written no clearer statement of the importance of humility than 'The Mirror and the Mask', but none of Borges' critics appear to have taken any notice of it.

The last stories to be discussed in this chapter illustrate Borges' aversion to a sense of humility that is merely passive.

'Guayaquil' [Borges, 1998a; 390-396].

In South America it had been a source of perpetual wonder that, at Guayaquil in 1822, the renowned General San Martín, an Argentine, should have — apparently without protest — handed over the control of his army to General Simón Bolívar, a Venezuelan, to complete the overthrow of the Spanish invaders.

Balderston summarises the astonishment at San Martín's decision in these words [121]:

What Bolívar and San Martín said to each other during their private meeting — what we imagine they said to each other — shapes the rest of the event; without certain knowledge of their conversation, the stories that lead up to San Martín's withdrawal are infinite in variety and possibility.

We are told that a letter has been discovered which might throw light on that event, a letter that scholars agree must be assessed and interpreted with all speed.

Two candidates have been nominated for this important task. One of these, the narrator, is the Professor of Latin American History in Buenos Aires [391]; he is an Argentine, and his nomination has gained 'the more or less unanimous support of the National Academy of History'; the other is an immigrant Polish Jew named Dr Eduardo Zimmermann, now an Argentine citizen, who has published little of academic value — 'only an article ... and an essay of sorts' [391].

The story tells of the meeting in which the former withdraws his candidacy in favour of the latter, for reasons generally considered to be as lacking in transparency as those of General San Martín.

Indeed, the Professor seems almost to find comfort in his defeat; in 'at once melancholy and pompous' tones he tells us: 'Now I shall never see the peak of Higueroa ... never make my journey ... never visit the library ... I sense that now I will write no more' [390; 396].

‘Guayaquil’, published at the age of 70, is perhaps an illustration of Borges’ reluctant acceptance of his status in later life. Sturrock notes his sense of doubt:

The narrator ... is the perfectly sedentary man who will never leave the ‘private office’ in which he welcomes his more forceful opponent ... [H]e is a citizen of an ideal, abstract world where there are only words and no things [66-67].

Williamson makes the same point, but from a different perspective: ‘Borges had finally understood that [his] family’s obsession with the sword stemmed from a fear of forfeiting a status they had imagined their ancestors had conferred on them’ [364].

Taking Borges’ upbringing into account — and in particular the stories of his ancestors’ military deeds, as Williamson recommends — Borges’ sense of failure is understandable; as he wrote in his ‘Autobiographical Essay’: ‘[O]n both sides of my family, I have military forebears; this may account for my yearning after that epic destiny which my gods denied me, no doubt wisely’ [1971; 140].

Interesting as these aspects of the story are, I suggest that Borges’ views on the Professor’s withdrawal after the later meeting are more fundamental. Zimmerman was taking his appointment for granted when he arrived, the possibility of failure never having occurred to him. It was Zimmermann who had decided the time of the meeting; he had already booked his air-line ticket and had prepared a letter for the Professor to sign announcing the latter’s withdrawal; and he employed just the right amount of flattery, however obvious and irksome it was to the other. In Zimmermann’s assessment of the meeting at Guayaquil, ‘if one prevailed, it is because he possessed the stronger will’ [395].

The irony is that, while Zimmermann had learned from history, the Professor of History had failed to do the same; indeed, the Professor had demonstrated arrogance, since he had taken his appointment for granted..

‘Blue Tigers’ [Borges, 1998a; 494-503]

This is another fiction that does not meet all the requirements to qualify as an ‘ancient simplicity’; above all, it lacks economy. Borges himself seems to have appreciated this; towards the end of the story he tells the reader:

I see that I have committed a fundamental error. Led astray by the habit of that good or bad literature called psychology, I have attempted to recover — I don’t know why — the linear chronology of my find [499-500].

Perhaps, as another late story ‘August 25, 1983’ [1998a; 489-493] seems to show, Borges was by now a tired man.

A man bearing the title ‘Professor of Eastern and Western logic’, from the University of Lahore, travels to an Indian village to confirm reports of the presence of blue tigers, but all that he finds are little blue circular stones that continually and unpredictably multiply and divide themselves.

He returns to the University to find a ‘way out of this chaos’ [502]. Finally he walks to a mosque, plunges his hands into ‘the fountain of ablution’, and is relieved of his burden by a beggar with ‘sightless eyes’, who tells him: ‘I do not yet know what your gift to me is, but mine to you is an awesome one. You may keep your days and nights, and keep wisdom, habits, and the world’ [503].

Therefore, this ‘Professor of Eastern and Western logic’ must live with the arrogance that a title such as his necessarily entails. From his boyhood, Kipling



was one of Borges' favourite authors [Monegal, 18; 131; 252], and the professor's title serves to remind us of the opening line of Kipling's poem *The Ballad of East and West*: 'Oh, East is East and West is West, and never twain shall meet'. This arrogance is all that he has; and, as the beggar implies, by keeping his days and his nights, his wisdom and his habits, the professor is prepared to change nothing.

The professor's so-called 'wisdom' — his lack of humility, in other words — forms a veritable poisoned chalice; therefore, his attempt to demonstrate humility by entering the mosque is a total failure. Furthermore, his 'wisdom' fails to solve the problem of the blue stones, a privilege that is given to someone he would regard as merely an illiterate beggar; and, from his reading of Kipling if from nowhere else, Borges would have been very conscious of the importance of the caste-system in India.

It is the blind who are blessed with true wisdom, as was shown in 'The Man on the Threshold'; and, as Borges writes in his Commentary on that story, 'the same linking of seeming helplessness and real power is to be found in the *Arabian Nights*' [1971; 199-200].

Sturrock makes no comment upon 'The Man on the Threshold', nor upon 'The Two Kings' or 'Blue Tigers'.

Williamson mentions *A Universal History* many times; he does not mention 'The Man on the Threshold' or 'The Two Kings', but he spends some time discussing 'Blue Tigers'. He writes:

[Borges] had magnified and dramatized his childhood fascination with tigers into a quest for union with the Absolute ... However, to seek such a goal was to aspire to a form of being that was proper

only to God ... [But] in the very failure of the quest for union with the Absolute, there lay the seeds of a more modest form of personal salvation [435].

Williamson goes on to suggest that it was María Kodama who brought 'personal salvation' to Borges, in the form of a

ceramic figure of a blue tiger ... which he had hung on the wall next to his bed ... [a gift that] represented the exotic 'other' of the East and its associations with vernal rebirth and natural growth [435].

In Chapter 6 I shall discuss to what extent Borges was — to use his own words — 'adrift on the sea of metaphysics' [1964; 171]; with respect, that description would also appear to apply to Williamson in this context.

It seems strange that Williamson, in writing about Borges' 'quest for union with the Absolute', should have overlooked the agnosticism so apparent in Borges' writings; even María Kodama acknowledges it in her Introduction to *Borges on Mysticism* [Borges, 2010] — although she makes this puzzling addition: 'Perhaps nobody is closer to God than the agnostic' [ix]. There is also clear evidence of it in, for example, 'The Lottery in Babylon', '*Argumentum Ornithologicum*', 'Ragnarök' [1998a; 101-106; 299; 321-322], 'A History of Eternity', and in 'Ramón Llull's Thinking Machine' [2001; 123-139, 155-159], all of which were published before or during 1960. In the next decade, as Manguel tells his readers, Borges said: 'I'm the contrary of the Argentine Catholic ... They believe but are not interested; I'm interested, but I don't believe' [61-62]. Confirming this, he tells Amelia Barili in an interview: 'I cannot believe in the existence of God' [Borges, 1998b; 244] — a statement which he made only a year before his death.

There is, perhaps, even stronger evidence that Williamson misunderstood 'Blue Tigers'. He continually refers to the professor, Alexander Craigie, by name, while Borges mentions that name only once; indeed, the story is narrated in the first person. I suggest that Borges' intention in so doing was to distance himself from the professor and, therefore, from his lack of humility; but the continual use of his name, in the manner that Williamson espouses, would necessarily have brought them ever closer in the mind of the reader.

Surprisingly, Monegal makes no reference to 'The Man on the Threshold', 'The Two Kings', or to 'Blue Tigers'.

I suggest that the small number of stories which illustrate Borges' respect for humility are among his most powerful. The reader is not treated to the somewhat 'Boys' Own' exuberance of, for example, the earlier stories in *A Universal History*, nor to the often lengthy complexities encountered in many of the pieces in *The Garden* and *The Aleph*.

As Borges tells us:

Opposing my taste for the pathetic, the sententious, and the baroque, Bioy [Casares] made me feel that quietness and restraint are more desirable ... [F]ine writing is a mistake, and a mistake born out of vanity. Good writing, I firmly believe, should be done in an unobtrusive way [1971; 173; 180]

— a statement which, I suggest, is further evidence of Borges' humility.

## PART 2: THE ENIGMA OF BORGES

## CHAPTER 5

## SOME LECTURES AND FICTIONS

The writer of the fictions that were discussed in Chapters 1-4 has been shown to be witty, sceptical, or obsessed with death — and, in some cases, to exhibit more than one of these characteristics. However, those attributes in themselves are unlikely to be regarded as enigmatic; the concept of the embittered fool, for example, has been explored by many writers, not least by the author of *King Lear*. The enigmas presented by Borges' fictions are, as has been explained, the result either of Borges' deliberately misleading references — particularly in some of the fictions discussed in Chapter 1 — or of the apparent inability or unwillingness of his critics to understand Borges' intentions. Those enigmas are readily susceptible of demystification.

In this and the following chapter I shall explore a totally different enigma — the enigma that Borges himself represents.

In this chapter I shall, first, point to his apparent lack of scholarship, which is at odds with his reputation, and two of his best-known lectures will be discussed to illustrate this; secondly, some of the seminars which he presented at various universities in North America will be shown to demonstrate further weaknesses; finally, some apparently unanswerable questions raised by a few of his fictions will be outlined.

‘Nathaniel Hawthorne’ [Borges 1964; 47-65].

This essay appears in *Other Inquisitions*, and a footnote informs us that it is the text of a public lecture given by Borges in 1949. After discussing the nature and history of metaphors and allegories, he deals with a story which he says has ‘moved’ him like no other story by Hawthorne; this is ‘Wakefield’, from *Twice-Told Tales*.

It deals with

the case of an Englishman who left his wife without cause, took lodgings in the next street and there, without anyone’s suspecting it, remained hidden for twenty years ... [H]e spent all his days across from his house or watched it from the corner [53].

Hawthorne offers no explanation for the Englishman’s move, and never deals with the wife’s reaction to it. The husband appears to have occasional bouts of self-recrimination, but they do not last long. Neither husband nor wife seems to have financial difficulties in living without an income for twenty years; and when eventually the husband returns to his home, neither he nor his wife is depicted as displaying any emotion.

Monegal tells the reader that Borges loved this story [464], and in his ‘Conversation’ with Christ, Coleman and di Giovanni in 1971, Borges says that ‘Wakefield’ is ‘one of the most remarkable stories I’ve ever read’ [1998b; 132]. It is difficult to understand this opinion, or how such a story could, as Borges said, ‘move’ him — or, indeed, anyone else. Borges explains that ‘in general, situations were Hawthorne’s stimulus ... situations, not characters’ [1964; 52-53]; and he tells the reader that ‘Wakefield’ demonstrates ‘the same quality that distinguishes the stories Kafka wrote’ [1964; 57].

It seems incredible that Borges should compare Hawthorne with Kafka, particularly since 'Wakefield' is the only story of Hawthorne's that Borges discusses at any length. Kafka wrote of despair. But Borges states that Hawthorne does not deal with 'characters', only 'situations'; therefore no despair is apparent in 'Wakefield', since only characters, not situations, are able to display despair. On the contrary, the apparent reconciliation with which the story concludes might even be construed as a happy ending.

But Hawthorne understood despair, as lines that Borges himself quotes from Hawthorne's novel *The Marble Faun* make clear; referring to 'that abyss or well that opened up, according to Latin historians, in the [Roman] Forum', one character states: 'I fancy that every person takes a peep into it in moments of gloom and despondency; that is to say in his moments of deepest insight' [61-62]. This is where Hawthorne might be said to approach Kafka.

However, perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Borges' reaction to *Wakefield* is his failure to mention Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, particularly in view of the fact that in the same period that Borges prepared his lecture on Hawthorne he also wrote a Prologue on *Bartleby the Scrivener* [2001; 245-246]. In fact, Borges spends very little of this Prologue in discussing *Bartleby*, but he declares that it is written 'in a calm and evenly jocular language' [245-246]. One cannot help wondering whether Borges was reading some other story, because there is nothing 'jocular' about *Bartleby*. However, it invites comparison with 'Wakefield', because both are tales of essentially lonely men. But in Melville's case Bartleby is intent on death, and he succeeds in his aim. Borges' knowledge of John Donne's *Biathanatos* [Borges, 1964; 89-92], to be discussed in Chapter 6,

should have made him capable of identifying justifiable suicide. *Bartleby*, also, approaches the real Kafka.

Henry James appears to have understood the Hawthorne of *Twice-Told Tales* much better than Borges; in James' opinion, Hawthorne's stories 'read like a series of very pleasant, though rather dullish and decidedly formal, letters, addressed to himself by a man who, having suspicions that they might be opened in the post, should have determined to insert nothing compromising' — and this is an opinion recorded by Borges himself! [63]

Rather than compare Hawthorne to Kafka, Borges might have chosen to elaborate on his statement that Hawthorne loved his native city, Salem, 'with the sad love inspired by persons who do not love us' [48]; but this would have had the effect of contradicting Borges' statement about Hawthorne's interest being only in situations rather than characters.

Hawthorne's own comments in his Preface to *Twice-Told Tales* display an appropriately modest perspective:

The sketches are not, it is hardly necessary to say, profound; but it is rather more remarkable that they so seldom, if ever, show any design on the writer's part to make them so ... They are not the talk of a secluded man with his own mind and heart — had it been so, they could hardly have failed to be more deeply and permanently valuable [Hawthorne, 1911; vii].

Borges' lecture on Hawthorne would appear to support Woodall's views on *Other Inquisitions*: 'As a work of criticism *per se*, the book is almost useless'. In support of this — and perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Borges' lecture on Hawthorne — is the complete absence of any mention of Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*, stories from Greek mythology retold for children. Compared

with anything else that Hawthorne wrote they are amazingly vibrant and humorous. It is inconceivable that Borges had not read them, and his lecture on Hawthorne was not prepared in haste — in Monegal’s opinion Borges must have taken ‘the better part of several months to put all the information together’ [395]. Why, then, are the *Tanglewood Tales* ignored? When Borges became a professor of English and American literature seven years later, it is significant that, according to Woodall, this was a post that he ‘never filled with any true academic distinction’ [178].

As if to confirm Woodall’s statement, Borges also omitted to mention Hawthorne’s enthusiastic — if muddle-headed — involvement in the Bacon/Shakespeare controversy, even though he was well aware of it, as he demonstrates in ‘The Enigma of Shakespeare’ [Borges, 2001; 464], which is discussed below.

The mention of *Tanglewood Tales* brings to mind two more curious omissions from Borges’ writings. First; apart from fleeting references to the Homer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and ‘The House of Asterion’ [Borges, 1998a; 220-222], Borges appears to make little mention of classical Greek mythology. He deals frequently and copiously with other — particularly Arabic and Islamic — mythology, as many of the pieces dealt with in this thesis indicate. It is impossible to believe that Borges was not well acquainted with the Greek myths; indeed, as he stated in an interview with Richard Burgin, when he was only ten years old he ‘wrote an English handbook ten pages long on Greek mythology’ [Monegal, 95]; what, then, prevented him from making more use of such a wealth of material?



To put the worst case: Did Borges deliberately concentrate upon myths from cultures of which he could expect most of his readers to be ignorant?

Secondly; did Borges have no interest in children, for whom *Tanglewood Tales* was written? Children never appear in Borges' fictions; apart from the young girl in 'Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden' [1998a; 208-211], whose age we are not told, the youngest characters are Funes [1998a; 134] and Otálora [1971; 60], both being nineteen years of age. The only child in Borges' non-fiction, apart from his sister, is Borges himself, usually in the company of his grandfather, and in his grandfather's library — an environment almost guaranteed to foster loneliness; (this is not psychologising on my part, merely personal experience).

In this context we should note a remark that Borges made in an interview with Amelia Barili: 'Another frequent nightmare is of being attacked by beings who are children; there are many of them, very little but strong. I try to defend myself, but the blows I give are weak' [1998b; 241].

Another indication that Woodall's unfavourable view of the contents of *Other Inquisitions* as literary criticism is well-founded appears in Borges' comments on metaphors, to be found at the opening of this lecture. He distinguishes between what he calls 'real' and 'invented' metaphors, and suggests that 'perhaps it is a mistake to suppose that metaphors can be invented', adding that 'the real ones ... have always existed; those we can still invent are the false ones, which are not worth inventing' [47]. Remembering Borges' statement that 'I think of writing as being a kind of collaboration ... the reader does his part of the work; he is enriching the book' [2000c; 119], surely the issue is whether or not a

metaphor ‘works’ for the reader; its age is irrelevant, and the distinction which Borges draws between ‘real’ and ‘invented’ metaphors is therefore meaningless.

When W. H. Auden writes

As I walked out one evening  
Walking down Bristol Street  
The crowds upon the pavement  
Were fields of harvest wheat

it matters little whether his metaphor was ‘invented’ or not; what matters is that it is supremely effective in the mind of the reader.

As the next chapter will demonstrate, in many of his non-fictional pieces Borges often appeared to be, to use his own words, ‘adrift on the sea of metaphysics’ [1964; 171]. Borges’ lecture on Hawthorne appears to raise some difficult questions, and to be another indication of his being ‘adrift’ — whether or not in a ‘sea of metaphysics’.

‘The Enigma of Shakespeare’ [Borges, 2001; 463–473; tr. Esther Allen].

In this lecture, given in 1964, Borges is concerned to demonstrate that the idea that the man from Stratford-on-Avon called Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare’s plays is totally untenable. Borges deals only with the claims put forward on behalf of Bacon and Marlowe, and convinces himself that he has no difficulty in demolishing them.

The only reason for discussing this lecture is the following sentence: ‘I, of course, believe that the William Shakespeare honored today in East and West was the author of the works we attribute to him’ [464]. The question that must be asked, I suggest, is: Why did Borges use the words ‘of course’?

In 'From Someone to Nobody' [146-148] Borges writes:

Magnification to nothingness occurs or tends to occur in all cults; unequivocally we observe it in the case of Shakespeare. His contemporary, Ben Jonson, loves him without reaching the point of idolatry ... Dryden admits that ... [Shakespeare] is often insipid and pompous ... [and] Hazlitt said that Shakespeare was like other men in every way except in being like other men; and that intimately he was nothing, but he was everything that others were or could be'.

But metaphysics such as this do not explain the words 'of course'.

In addition to their smugness, the words indicate a refusal on Borges' part to acknowledge that there are still questions to be asked regarding the authorship of the Shakespearean canon, over and above the involvement of Bacon and Marlowe. For example, Borges fails to mention the Earls of Oxford and Essex, whose claims to authorship, which are at least equal to those of Marlowe, have been debated at some length. James Shapiro, in his recent book *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?*, states [2010; 2]:

Since 1850 or so, thousands of books and articles have been published urging that someone other than Shakespeare wrote the plays ... By 1884 the list ran to 255 items; by 1940 it had swelled to over 4,500.

Shapiro spends 80 pages discussing Bacon's claims [91-170], and almost as many discussing 'the Oxfordian movement' [173-249], outlining, among others, Freud's long-standing support for Oxford's claims [173-186; 206-214]; however, this might have been expected to bolster Borges' opinions about Shakespeare's authorship, since, as Monegal recalls [22], Borges regarded Freud 'either as a charlatan or as a madman'.

As well as Shapiro's recent book many other relevant and well-researched books have appeared in the last decade; *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (Diana Price), *'Shakespeare' by Another Name* (Mark Anderson), *The Shakespeare Conspiracies* (Brian McClinton), *Shakespeare, Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays* (Brian Vickers), *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt), and *The Truth Will Out: Unmasking the Real Shakespeare* (Brenda James and William D. Rubinstein). All these books discuss the question of Shakespearean authorship, although Greenblatt does so less overtly than the others. Whether the conclusions reached in them are acceptable is not relevant; it is enough that there was a need to write them. At the very least, they would together seem to indicate that the question of Shakespeare's authorship is not to be taken for granted.

Obviously, when he delivered his lecture, Borges could not have been aware of the books just mentioned, nor of the Oxford edition of Shakespeare's *Works* published in 1986 which 'broke new ground by acknowledging all [the] collaborations involved in creating the plays' [Shapiro; 290]. But in view of Borges' deep respect for Emerson — as shown, *inter alia*, in the Prologue on that writer's *Representative Men* [2001; 416-417] — he would have been aware that Emerson claimed that there existed an 'insuperable divide between what he knew of the man and his works'; Emerson, who 'had read nearly every important work about [Shakespeare]', stated that 'Shakespeare was a jovial actor and manager: I cannot marry this fact to his verse' [Shapiro; 112]. Borges was a fervent admirer of Walt Whitman, and would have been aware that Whitman wrote: 'We all know how much *mythus* there is in the Shakespeare question as it stands today.

Beneath a few foundations of proved facts are certainly engulfed far more distant and elusive ones, of deepest importance' [Shapiro; 114]. Yet neither Emerson nor Whitman is mentioned in Borges' lecture. This neglect on Borges' part hardly typifies the approach of a true scholar.

Shapiro estimates that, over the years, a total of more than sixty names have been put forward, either as sole or principal author; significantly, he adds: 'A complete list is pointless, for it would soon be outdated' [2].

Furthermore, Shapiro says, 'I take very seriously the fact that some brilliant writers and thinkers who matter a great deal to me — including Sigmund Freud, Henry James and Mark Twain — have doubted that Shakespeare wrote the plays' [8]. However, Shapiro admits, despite all this, even in 2010 the subject of Shakespearean authorship 'remains virtually taboo in academic circles' [4].

Could it be that, in this lecture, Borges is primarily concerned to confirm his membership of the literary Establishment? This is a sad thought — especially when it concerns the card-carrying heretic Borges as discussed in Chapter 1.

Now we turn to a consideration of three of the lectures, or discussions, which Borges conducted at various universities in the U.S.A. — those at Harvard in 1967-1968, at Columbia in 1971, and at Arkansas in 1983; these are published, respectively, as the Charles Eliot Norton lectures in *This Craft of Verse* [Borges, 2000c], in *Borges on Writing* [Borges, 1994], and in *The Morgan Lectures* — which were more correctly labelled 'Discussions', and which are contained in the first three chapters of *Borges the Poet* [Cortínez; 3-92]. I shall concentrate my attention on those presentations which deal with poetry, since Borges considered

that his poems were his major work; as he writes in his Foreword to *Selected Poems 1923-1967* [Borges, 1972; xiii]: ‘All that is personal to me, all that my friends good-naturedly tolerate in me — my like and dislikes, my hobbies, my habits — are to be found in my verse. In the long run, perhaps, I shall stand or fall by my poems’.

I suggest that there are reasons to believe that Harvard University was not entirely satisfied with Borges’ lectures. The first indication of this is the date of the three publications; *This Craft of Verse* was not published until 2000; but *Borges on Writing* was published in 1973, and the three ‘Discussions’ were published in 1986; therefore, while the second and third of these were published within two or three years of the event, the Charles Eliot Norton lectures delivered at Harvard by Borges were allowed to wait for more than thirty years. Despite the fact that, according to the editor of *This Craft of Verse*, Borges ‘had long been deemed precious capital’, the tapes were left to ‘gather dust in the quiet ever-after of a library vault’ [Borges, 2000; 144].

Information obtained from Harvard University, kindly provided by the University Library\*, is relevant; it shows that on only three occasions since the inception of the Charles Eliot Norton lectures in 1925 were they published more than 30 years after their presentation, and the lectures given during the 25 years immediately following those of Borges were published after waiting for not more than 1-4 years.

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\*[http://lms01.harvard.edu/F/LT7XUCJ6UKQKA8JEFQSQT2HPKM1XY7Y62PB N35HXBBJP6HLIQS30511?func=findc&CCL\\_TERM=WRD%3D%28charles+eliot+norton+lectures%29+and+%28WFT%3DBK+OR+WXA%3DA+AND+%28WXB%3DA+OR+WXB%3DC+OR+WXB%3DD+OR+WXB%3DM%29%29&adjacent=1](http://lms01.harvard.edu/F/LT7XUCJ6UKQKA8JEFQSQT2HPKM1XY7Y62PB N35HXBBJP6HLIQS30511?func=findc&CCL_TERM=WRD%3D%28charles+eliot+norton+lectures%29+and+%28WFT%3DBK+OR+WXA%3DA+AND+%28WXB%3DA+OR+WXB%3DC+OR+WXB%3DD+OR+WXB%3DM%29%29&adjacent=1). [Accessed March 1, 2011.]

The date on which the lectures were published is, of itself, inconclusive; but there are other aspects of this question to consider.

The second indication that his lectures were not well received is that, in di Giovanni's Introduction to *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, he writes that Borges confided to him: 'What I liked about you, di Giovanni ... was that there at Harvard you were the only person who took me seriously as a poet' [Borges, 1972; xx]. This is an astonishing remark to have made, after having been invited to Harvard as the university's Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry — 'one of the most prestigious appointments offered by that university' [Williamson, 357] — to lecture on the 'craft of verse'.

The third point worthy of consideration is the difference in the methods of presentation adopted at the three venues. At Harvard, Borges presented six formal lectures in the conventional manner; at Columbia, di Giovanni took the lead as far as possible, after Borges had given a brief opening talk; and at Arkansas — di Giovanni not being available — Borges presented himself totally as a responder to questions from his audience, without making any attempt to lecture, the introductions being left to his hosts. I suggest that these changes indicate that Borges had learned from his mistakes at Harvard; indeed, when he gave his talk on poetry at Columbia in 1971, he opened his remarks by saying: 'Of course, one of the tricks is not to lecture' [Borges 1994; 69] — despite the fact that he then went on to deliver a lecture, albeit a short one. However, as we shall see, the changes that are discernable in the later presentations did not always lead to improvements.

The fourth point, and perhaps the most important, is the quality of the lectures which Borges delivered at Harvard. Before considering this, however, it must be appreciated that Borges' time at Harvard was not a happy one. Having married Elsa Astete in the previous August [Woodall; 214], within three months Borges was, according to di Giovanni, already 'suffering from an unhappy private life and from the peculiar isolation it had forced him into' [Borges, 1972; xix]; in fact, for a short while, Borges left the apartment with which the married couple had been provided, and 'booked himself into the nearby Continental Hotel' [Williamson; 377].

As if this were not a sufficient problem, we must recall that Borges had been totally blind for over ten years; in this situation it would have been necessary to spend a considerable amount of time in preparing any lecture — time taken up in dictating the first draft, in having it reread and in amending it, and finally in learning it more or less by heart. Elsa Astete was with Borges for that very purpose, but their estrangement would have made such a lengthy process of preparation impossible; furthermore, there were six lectures to be prepared, not just one.

In his first lecture he tells his audience that he had been 'pondering' over it 'only three or four days ago', but Williamson [370] tells us that Borges had been 'putting together some ideas' for these lectures for more than eighteen months. On a number of occasions he apologises for having forgotten something in a previous lecture; thus, while referring to metaphors, he suddenly declaims in the third lecture: 'I wonder how I forgot to quote them last time!' [2000c; 53] — i.e., in his lecture entitled *The Metaphor*.



It is impossible to assess the full effect which his personal problems might have had on Borges' ability to carry out his duties at Harvard; but, for whatever reasons, I suggest that his lectures were not of the best — and this is despite the fact that it was Borges who had determined the topics for them [Williamson, 370].

He begins his first lecture, titled *The Riddle of Poetry*, by disowning the title that he had proposed: 'I can offer you only time-honored perplexities', he explains [Borges, 2000c; 2]. One such perplexity is suggested in his statement that 'the *first* reading of a poem is the true one', only to contradict himself in the same paragraph by adding that 'it might be said that poetry is a new experience every time' [6].

He goes on to quote Whistler's words 'Art happens', suggesting that Whistler means 'there is something mysterious about art' [6], and that it cannot be defined, even in part, by any influences on the artist. But if this is the case, why is Borges presenting a series of lectures on the art of writing poetry?; if poetry is a 'mystery' and merely 'happens', what purpose is served by discussing its techniques?

He then proposes that we should also take Whistler's statement 'in a new sense ... *Art happens every time we read a poem*'; then he goes on: 'Now, this may seem to clear away the time-honored notion of the classics, the idea ... of books where one may always find beauty. But I hope that I am mistaken here' [6; italics in quoted text]. This is not the stuff of a lecture; this is someone thinking out loud, and with no very clear sense of direction. As if to confirm this, Borges states that, when Plato was writing his dialogues, he was 'letting his mind wander'

[8]. This thought may well have consoled Borges by implying that he was no worse than Plato, but Plato would have been deeply insulted – and rightly so.

Later he tells the Harvard students that '[w]hen I walk into a bookstore and find a book on one of my hobbies ... I say to myself, 'What a pity I can't buy that book, for I already have a copy at home' [9]; but this adds nothing to the fount of human knowledge, and it is not at all clear what it has to do with 'the craft of verse'.

He then makes this even more irrelevant statement:

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that I have written a beautiful line ... Once I have written it, that line does me no good, because ... that line came to me from the Holy Ghost, from the subliminal self, or perhaps from some other writer ... Perhaps it is better that a poet should be nameless ... [W]e might say that we can define something only when we know nothing about it' [15-17].

How all this helps the students or his readers to understand the craft of verse is left to one's imagination. In the last paragraph of this first lecture Borges tells his audience: 'This time I am rather at sea' [19]; that, at least, was true.

It would be uncharitable to spend too much time in discussing the lectures which Borges gave at Harvard; in addition to what has already been said, some brief comments on the second and the last lectures will suffice.

*The Metaphor* is the title of the second. Borges asks his audience the following question: 'Why on earth should poets all over the world, and all through time, be using the same stock metaphors, when there are so many possible combinations?' [Borges, 2000c; 22]; but then he goes on: 'What is important about the metaphor, I should say, is the fact of its being felt by the reader or the

hearer *as* a metaphor' [2000c; 23; italics in quoted text], without, apparently, realizing that the second statement is the answer to the first.

As mentioned previously, Borges had discussed the metaphor in his lecture on Hawthorne twenty years earlier [1964; 47-65]. There he distinguishes between what he calls 'real' and 'invented' metaphors, and suggests that 'perhaps it is a mistake to suppose that metaphors can be invented', adding that 'the real ones ... have always existed; those we can still invent are the false ones, which are not worth inventing' [1964; 47]. In other words, Borges had already accepted that the fact of its being felt by the reader or the hearer as a metaphor is what is 'important' [2000c; 23], and he already knew that his complaint about the use of 'stock metaphors' was without substance. His lecture on Hawthorne, in which he had admitted as much, had been published in English in *Other Inquisitions*, and had been available to his audience for four years. Why, then, make it the basis for this lecture at Harvard? Could it be that he had nothing original to say about the use of the metaphor, except to contradict himself at the end of the lecture by telling his audience: '[W]hy not hope for this as well? — it may also be given to us to invent metaphors' [2000c; 41]?

The last of Borges' six lectures is titled *A Poet's Creed*, and he again begins by denying the title: 'My purpose was to speak about a poet's creed, but, looking into myself, I have found that I have only a faltering creed ... I think I will begin with some personal memories', adding: 'I think of myself as being essentially a reader' [97]. These 'personal memories' are of his father's library, of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*, of Judas kissing Jesus and thereby displaying loyalty to his evil destiny, of Burton's *Arabian Nights* ['the number three occurs in it very

frequently ... we need to think that the book is a large one' [100]], of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Don Quixote*, Walt Whitman, the *Nibelungleid*, Lugones, Sherlock Holmes, Robert Frost, and of *Moby Dick* ['I believe in the story — that is, I believe in it as a kind of parable though I don't exactly know what it's a parable of' [108-109]]; but these 'personal memories' do nothing to exemplify his 'creed'.

Turning to methods of writing poetry, he offers this unhelpful advice:

I disguised myself. In the beginning I tried to be a seventeenth-century Spanish writer ... Then I fell into a very common mistake: I did my best to be modern ... [But] we don't have to strive to be modern ... we are modern by the very simple fact that we live in the present [111-112].

Having begun the lecture by defining himself as 'essentially a reader' [97], he now tells his audience: 'I think of myself as a writer ... It means simply being true to my imagination' [113]. Later he makes this astonishing admission: 'When I am writing something, I try not to understand it ... I forget about my personal circumstances ... I merely try to convey what the dream is. And if the dream be a dim one ... I do not try to beautify it, or even to understand it' [118-119].

Closing the lecture, Borges adds: 'I will wonder: Why did I not say what I should have said?' [120]. This seems to be a sad but totally appropriate ending to the Charles Eliot Norton lectures of 1967-1968. Williamson [376] quotes Burgin, who was 'a young student at the neighboring Brandeis University at the time', as stating that Borges' lectures at Harvard 'were very well received'; with great respect, this statement by Burgin is difficult to reconcile with the fact that the lectures were then forgotten for over thirty years.

Moving to the presentations which Borges made at Columbia University in 1971, the second was on poetry. In it Borges embarks on a campaign to dissuade the members of his young audience from writing free verse — at least initially:

If you attempt a sonnet, for example, you believe in the illusion that you really have something before you, and that is the framework of the sonnet ... This form exists before you have written a single line of verse ... You have to be far more skillful technically to attempt free verse than to attempt what you may think of as being old-fashioned' [Borges, 1994; 70-71].

He then contradicts himself by saying that he sometimes writes in free verse and sometimes in sonnets because he hears his

inner voice saying something. From the rhythm of what I first hear, I know whether or not I am on the brink of committing a poem, be it in the sonnet form or in free verse [Borges, 1994; 72-73].

At the end of his presentation Borges invites questions; there are three, and all three of them implicitly reject his arguments in favour of the sonnet-form [1994; 74-75]. But what else could Borges expect? Budding young poets are not glad to be told that they should be 'old-fashioned' in their thinking, especially when the man who tells them this is a poet who wrote nothing but free verse throughout his youth, and resigned himself to the sonnet-form, at least in part, only because of the onset of his blindness. As Jason Wilson puts it [2006; 133], because of his blindness Borges 'had to abandon free verse as he needed mnemonic devices like metre, rhyme and assonance to remember what he was dictating or composing in his mind'.

The first sonnet that appears in *Selected Poems* was published in *The Maker* [Chess; Borges, 2000a; 103] in 1960, after Borges' sixtieth birthday; even more significantly — because both Borges and di Giovanni were both deeply involved in its preparation — no sonnets appear in *Selected Poems 1923-1967* until those included in *The Self and the Other*, published in 1964.

Di Giovanni's reminiscences in *The Lesson of the Master* are particularly relevant; after his first meeting with Borges in Cambridge, MA. in December 1967, he tells us [2003; 23-24] that

[we] made literal drafts of dozens upon dozens of Borges's sonnets, a form he increasingly favoured, since he could easily write them in his head ... But it did not keep me from wearying of those same fourteen hendecasyllable lines, the inevitability of those seven pairs of rhymes. I told him so ... I told him because I saw no one else come forward, even once, to tell him the truth.

At the University of Arkansas in 1983, where Borges was accompanied by María Kodama rather than di Giovanni, he was involved in three 'discussions' on the subject of poetry. In the first of these he denies any 'essential difference' between poetry and prose on the basis of these perplexing and contradictory arguments:

If you read something as a poem, you should react to it in a different way, no? In prose, you expect information, or arguments; in poetry, you don't. In poetry, all the time you are receiving very mysterious gifts, and you're thankful for them. Perhaps the difference is not in the text but in the reader — in the reader's mood. You may read the Bible as prose, or as poetry. So there is no essential difference between them [Cortínez; 25].

In the second discussion he tells his audience that he does not believe in 'literary movements'; but almost immediately afterwards he says: 'But

Modernism, to me, was like a good breath of air in the Spanish language ... I believe that we are all children of Modernism' [Cortínez; 41-42].

In the third discussion he says:

I love Emerson's cold poetry. He was a passionate man and a cold poet ... The only one who ever thought, while the others were merely, well, versifying different subjects ... Emerson was thinking all day long, perhaps all night long [Cortínez; 81-82].

Then, only a short time later, he again contradicts himself:

I don't think poetry should be attempted without emotion. It is in that case a mere game of words ... So I think of styles of writing as growing out of emotion ... When I write, I always begin by emotion. And then I go on to words [Cortínez; 90].

As all of these examples illustrate, Borges seems to have had some difficulty in offering coherent ideas on the subject of the reading and the writing of poetry, despite the fact that he accepted invitations from three universities to speak on those subjects.

However, it is clear from some of the earlier pieces in *The Total Library* that Borges was capable of preparing and delivering lectures that were well worth hearing; both 'German Literature in the Age of Bach' [Borges, 2001; 427-434] and 'The Concept of an Academy and the Celts' [Borges, 2001; 458-463] — the latter given in 1962, some years after blindness overtook him — demonstrate this. In the first of these he begins by referring to a book about Iceland, one chapter of which is entitled 'On the Snakes in Iceland', and which contains only the following words: 'Snakes in Iceland; there aren't any' [427]. His point is that, while the age of Bach 'was literarily quite poor ... it set the stage for the period to

come: the Enlightenment and later the classical age of German literature, the richest it has had and one of the richest in all literature' [428].

After that opening, I suggest that his audience would have given him all its attention. Having offered many other examples, he concludes: 'This conjunction of great music and a poor, almost worthless, literature leads us to suspect that every age has only one expression of itself' [434]; this may be a provocative conclusion, but that, I suggest, is what a good lecture should offer.

The first paragraph of 'The Concept of an Academy and the Celts' ends: 'Some friends of mine, when they read the title of this lecture, assumed that I was being arbitrary, but I think that this affinity is profound and that I can justify it' [458]; again, a challenging opening. He names the 'literary nation *par excellence*' as France:

One need only leaf through a dictionary to feel the intense literary vocation of the French language ... In France, a literary life exists... in a way that is more conscious than in other countries ... Here, in contrast, writers are almost invisible' [458-459].

Ireland also comes in for favourable mention:

[P]rotected by superstition and fear, the man of letters became predominant in Ireland ... If the concept of an academy is based on the organization and direction of literature, then there was no more academic country ... A literary career required more than twelve years of strict studies, which included mythology, legendary history, topography, and law [460].

Borges goes on to mention the Welsh poet Taliesin, who 'beautifully remembers having been ... a wild boar, a chief in battle, a sword in the hand of a chief, a bridge that crossed seventy rivers ... a word in a book and a book itself



[461]; and the ‘Celtic god [who] when he walks on the sea ... is walking over the meadows of his island, surrounded by deer and sheep’ [463].

He concludes:

All these facts ... explain, for example, the birth of the Academy in France, a country with Celtic roots; they explain the absence of academies in a profoundly individualistic country like England. But you may draw better conclusions than I [463].

Borges was throwing down the gauntlet, and I suggest that it would have taken a brave listener to draw ‘better conclusions’.

I further suggest that his listeners would have enjoyed every moment of both these lectures; it is a great pity that this cannot be said of the lectures at Harvard which were discussed earlier.

Incidentally, it is intriguing to find Borges naming the ‘literary nation *par excellence*’ as France [458], in view of his repeated assertion that he did most of his reading in English [Cortínez; 9; 72]; he was clearly determined not to allow his private views to undermine his public arguments.

However, there is another and very important aspect of these two lectures which, I believe, directly addresses yet another anomaly that one must raise about Borges. The anomaly is this: Why did a writer who prided himself above all on his poetry not publish any between 1927 and 1960? I suggest that the answer to this can be found if one considers a particular attribute of these two lectures, and its relevance to Borges’ best fictions. That attribute is concision. In his lectures on ‘German Literature in the Age of Bach’ and ‘The Concept of the Academy and the Celts’ his command of both subjects is very evident; he never hesitates, never merely thinks out loud, and there is not a single wasted word.

It was argued in Chapter 4 that concision is the hallmark of, perhaps, Borges' greatest work, his 'ancient simplicities'. But it is reasonable to suggest that he also saw concision as the hallmark of the sonnet-form. Borges was certainly assisted in writing his verse after his blindness by using that form, as mentioned earlier; but his love of concision might well have been another reason for its attraction. As di Giovanni wrote: '[W]here concision is concerned, Borges always achieved more in one or two pages than any other writer of our age' [2003; 59]; and, during an interview in 1967 Borges remarked that he had decided that 'The Intruder' was a better story than 'The South' — which he had previously regarded as his best — 'because it's simpler' [Borges, 1998b; 30]. When di Giovanni joined Borges in Buenos Aires in 1968 he found, as he states in *The Lesson of the Master* [2003; 23-24], 'dozens upon dozens of Borges's sonnets, a form he increasingly favoured, since he could easily write them in his head'. But di Giovanni's next comment is of special importance: '[I]t did not keep me from wearying of those same fourteen hendecasyllable lines, the inevitability of those seven pairs of rhymes. I told him so'.

This seems to imply the possibility that Borges had come to regard the sonnets, which he had hoped would signal his greatness as a poet, to be largely a failure; and there can be no better reason than this for Borges' apparent unwillingness to publish any verse between 1927 and 1960.

Having pointed to some apparently unanswerable questions that arise from a selection of Borges' lectures, it is now necessary to deal with some equally unanswerable questions created by some of his fictional pieces.

In the discussion in Chapter 1 of 'The Garden of Forking Paths', attention was drawn to the rather incredible anomaly perpetrated by Borges in making a hoax out of one of the greatest human disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — the Battle of the Somme, in 1916; and this unforgiveable demonstration of bad taste is made even more perplexing when one considers Borges' military heritage.

Many of Borges' male ancestors had achieved considerable fame on the battlefield. To summarise points from Borges' 'Autobiographical Essay' [Borges, 1971; 139-140], Manuel Isodoro Acevedo, the grandfather of Borges' mother, fought in the wars of independence against the Spanish forces in the early 1800's; Borges' great-great-uncle, Miguel Estanislao Soler, was involved in the same wars; Soler's daughter married Isodoro de Acevedo Laprida, who 'had fought in the civil war against Rosas, the tyrant who ruled Argentina' for seventeen years [Monegal; 4]; and, from the age of fifteen, Borges' paternal grandfather, Colonel Francisco Borges, had been involved in the same wars.

Borges completes this summary with these words: 'So, on both sides of my family, I have military forebears; this may account for my yearning after that epic destiny which my gods denied me' [1971; 140]. In the light of this, it is very difficult to account for the bad taste which is demonstrated in Borges' 'The Garden of Forking Paths'.

A second question is raised by the analysis of many of the fictions in Chapter 1. That analysis suggested that Borges, with Casares' enthusiastic approval, was attempting to hoodwink his readers by placing clues to his hoaxes which only a very few of those readers would perceive; but can we believe that a

humorist of Borges' ability and reputation would seriously wish his readers not to get the joke? Was Borges deluding himself or his readers?

The third of these questions arises from the discussion of 'A Theologian in Death' in Chapter 4. Borges' choice of the name 'Melancthon' cannot have been accidental, since it is a well known name in another religious context, a fact of which Borges is unlikely to have been ignorant. As the *Encyclopedia Britannica* informs us, Philipp Melancthon was a noted German scholar who collaborated closely with Martin Luther in the Protestant Revolution of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in drawing up the *Augsburg Confession*, the famous manifesto of Protestant beliefs.

But there is no evidence to show that Philipp Melancthon ever 'cast charity into exile', as does Borges' character in 'A Theologian in Death'; on the contrary, he was so concerned with charity, in the Pauline sense, that he attempted both continuously and ardently to find a position that would allow the Catholic and the Protestant believers to live together in harmony; and he was known as "the teacher of the Germans", because of his intense and active interest in the education of young people.

Borges' apparent confusion of that renowned paragon of humility, Philipp Melancthon, with the supremely arrogant theologian of Borges' fiction seems, frankly, inexplicable.

Can Borges be implying that that all religious leaders — however charitable their beliefs — are, by definition, arrogant? Can this be further evidence of Borges' contempt for the established church?

There are three more of Borges' fictions which seem to give rise to unanswerable questions; they are to be found in *The Book of Sand* [Borges, 1998a; 411-485].

'The Other' [Borges, 1998a; 411-417].

Borges, approaching the age of 70, tells us that, during a visit to Cambridge, MA, he meets — or dreams that he meets — himself when approaching the age of 20. Not surprisingly, therefore, he is able to tell his *alter ego* of 'the future that awaits' him [413] — where he will live, what he will write, the details of his future blindness — and to give him a brief lecture on the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Once again Borges refers in his preface to 'the river [that] made me think of time ... Heraclitus' ancient image' [411], and this is another example of Borges' occasional fatuity; Heraclitus' famous statement that we do not step twice into the same river is merely a restatement of the definition of a river — something that flows; if the water did not flow, it would not be a river but a pool. Heraclitus' statement may have aquatic depth, but it has no philosophical depth whatsoever.

Of course, it was always possible that the younger man was doing the dreaming; indeed, Borges concludes, '[t]he encounter was real, but the other man spoke to me in a dream, which is why he could forget me' [417]. But that idea is belied by this perceptive question from the younger man:

“If you have been me, how can you explain the fact that you've forgotten that you once encountered an elderly gentleman who in 1918 told you that he, too, was Borges?” [415]

— to which the older man has no real answer.

I suggest that all of this amounts to no more than a mildly interesting demonstration of the fact that, to use his own words, Borges may have been ‘adrift on the sea of metaphysics’ [1964; 171]. Indeed, it is possible that Borges was aware of the futility of this exercise, and conceded as much by giving that question to the younger man.

Williamson puts the story in the context of Borges’ ‘despair’ after the failure of his marriage to Elsa Astete, referred to in the Introduction; he writes [377]: ‘Only the most acute estrangement from his own past could have inspired such a story’. Jason Wilson [2006; 52] summarises the story as that of ‘two selves ... the younger one dreaming and forgetting his dream, while the ageing Borges was “tormented by memories”’.

However, Woodall [247-248] describes *The Book of Sand* as ‘patchy and ... well below par ... Most of the tales are more openly fantastic than any he had written since the 1950’s ... One such is “The Other”; and Coetzee [173] suggests that, in *The Book of Sand* ‘there is much tired writing ... they add nothing to his stature’; and Jason Wilson agrees [2006; 130].

Those comments by Woodall and Coetzee appear to be a fair verdict on this fiction.

‘The Congress’ [Borges, 1998a; 422-436].

Don Alejandro Glencoe, chairman of the Congress of the World, which comprised ‘some fifteen or twenty’ delegates [424], was, we are told,

a gentleman of dignified air, well past middle age ... He was tall, and robust-looking ... [and] spoke very little; the others did not address him directly, but ... they were speaking for his benefit and sought his

approval. A wave of his slow hand sufficed to change the subject of discussion [424-425].

Having been thwarted in his attempt to become a member of the Uruguayan Congress, don Alejandro had 'resolved to found *another* Congress — a Congress of enormously grander scope' [426; italics in quoted text]. At that Congress the chairman, for example, would 'represent ranchers ... Uruguayans, as well as founding fathers and red-bearded men and men sitting in armchairs', while the only female member, a Norwegian, would represent 'secretaries, Norwegians, or simply all beautiful women'[427].

But, to the narrator who had joined the Congress only recently, the 'real chairman' appeared to be a man named Twirl, who 'was constantly proposing new ways to expand [the Congress], and don Alejandro always went along' [428]. When Twirl recommended 'that the Congress could not do without a library of reference books' [428], the recommendation was gradually implemented; later, on the basis of Pliny the Younger's assertion that 'there was no book so bad that it didn't contain some good', Twirl suggests the almost indiscriminate purchase of thousands of other books, a suggestion which don Alejandro, after three 'thunderous' meetings, approves [433].

Subsequently, however, and without any warning, don Alejandro orders that all those books should be burned. He explains that he has realised that The Congress of the World 'is not a handful of prattling men and women ... It began the instant the world itself began, and it will go on when we are dust. There is no place it is not' [434]; but he admits that it has taken him four years to realise this.

Previously, the narrator has been dispatched by don Alejandro to the British Museum in London ‘to do research ... in search of a language worthy of the Congress of the World’ [431] – which is yet another illustration of don Alejandro’s astounding arrogance.

In London the narrator meets Beatrice, who was ‘tall and slender, her features pure and her hair bright red ... It took us but a few afternoons to become lovers’ [432]; their love ‘flows in shadow like a secret river’ [432].

At the end of one year he feels obliged to return home; but

Beatrice had no wish to see the boat off; farewells, in her view, were an emphasis, a senseless celebration of misfortune, and she hated emphases ... I am a coward; to avoid the anguish of waiting for her letters, I did not give her my address [432].

It is difficult to imagine greater futility than that conveyed by this story; don Alejandro confesses that the Congress was nothing more than ‘a handful of prattling men and women’ which has achieved nothing and can achieve nothing, and that he has wasted a great deal of time in the process; and his representative in Britain has also achieved nothing, except to waste one whole year and to demonstrate that he is a coward. That being so, why did Borges write it?

Jason Wilson [2006; 78] seems to agree: ‘The story is weak, slightly pointless, a shadow summary of his earlier fictions’. Previously Wilson states: ‘[T]he title is a pun on copulation’ [41]; but if Borges’ pun is intentional, it seems to have little relevance to the story.

Borges’ comments in the ‘Afterword’ to *The Book of Sand* appear to acknowledge this futility:



*“The Congress” is perhaps the most ambitious of this book’s fables; its subject is so vast that it merges at last into the cosmos itself and into the sum of days. The story’s murky beginning attempts to imitate the way Kafka’s stories begin; its ending attempts, no doubt unsuccessfully, to ascend to the ecstasy of Chesterton or John Bunyan. I have never merited such a revelation, but I have tried to dream of it [Borges, 1998a; 484; italics in quoted text].*

To judge by this story, Borges seems to know that, by 1975, the date of its publication, his ambitions as a writer have become merely dreams. His unavailing attempts to imitate Kafka and his failure to understand Chesterton will be discussed in Chapter 6.

‘A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain’ [Borges, 1988a; 107-111].

This is another of Borges’ fictions that raises some difficult questions. As discussed in Chapter 1, Quain appears intent on defining success as failure, and frequent instances of regression are used by Borges to illustrate this. Therefore it seems to be assumed that the reader takes it for granted that regression is necessarily a bad thing. But a Bach fugue is no less a fugue because it employs regression; on the contrary, it is applauded. Ignoring Herbert Quain — who apparently could not write good literature even if he wanted to — why, in literature [and, by implication, in life] is ‘backwards’ always necessarily bad, and ‘forwards’ always necessarily good? Could this be the question that Borges is asking of his readers?

‘Ulrikke’ [Borges, 1998a; 418-421].

For reasons that I shall discuss below, this is one of the most fascinating and enigmatic of all Borges’ fictions.

‘Ulrikke’ was not published until 1975 [Borges, 1998a; ix], and it clearly indicates that, for his later years, the widely-held perception of Borges’ sexual diffidence may be forgotten.

The story tells of a middle-aged celibate university professor from South America who meets a very attractive Norwegian girl named Ulrikke in an hotel in York. Both were destined soon to leave York, and to travel in opposite directions.

They walk together over the snow-clad moors, and the professor declares his lack of sexual diffidence; but the Norwegian tells him ‘with gentle firmness’ not to touch her [419], but to wait until they reach their hotel, where they then make love.

Williamson [397-399] reads a volume of hidden meanings into the story; he refers in particular to the fact that, as the narrator puts it, ‘there was no sword between the two of us’ in the bed, thus confirming Borges’ recently-gained freedom from his ‘impediment’, to use Williamson’s word.

His point about ‘Borges’ recently-gained freedom’ is well made; only seven years before ‘Ulrikke’ was published, Borges had told Patricia Marx and John Simon in an interview that the subject of sex ‘rarely, if at all’ showed up in his work because

I think too much about it. When I write, I try to get away from personal feelings ... The other reason may be that it’s been done to death, and I know that I can’t say anything interesting about it ... [A]fter all, my business is to weave dreams. I suppose I may be allowed to choose the material [Borges, 1998b; 81].

However, this seems to be an uneasy reply on Borges’ part; it suggests that, at the time of the interview, his overriding desire – while, perhaps, recognising

that it was a hopeless one — was to be in command of any sexual encounter in which he may become involved. This story is memorable, above all, for the fact that it is Ulrikke, and not the South American professor, who is in command and makes the important decisions.

This fiction is unusual for the proportion of dialogue which it contains; this, I suggest, implies that the story deals with real people. Bearing in mind that York, their meeting place, holds a famous exhibition of replicas of the longships which carried Viking warriors to the conquest of northern England — an exhibition that both the professor and Ulrikke had visited — York is a place that symbolises conquest; in this instance, it might be said to be the conquest of the professor.

‘Ulrikke’ is a name that has some interesting connotations. Borges’ readers will undoubtedly recall Miss Ulrica Thrane, who appeared in ‘A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain’ [Borges, 1998a; 107-111]. Borges describes her as ‘a haughty Amazon-like creature’, and her affection with Wilfred Quarles as ‘vehement’ [110]. But this story was published in 1944 [Borges, 1998a; v], and any relevance to a story published more than thirty years later is tenuous at best.

Williamson tells us [300] of a certain ‘statuesque German blonde’ by the name of Ulrike von Kühlmann, ‘a rich, much-travelled widow’, who lived in Buenos Aires for several years after the late 1940’s, and to whom Borges dedicated his ‘Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden’ [Borges, 1998b; 208-212] — although Hurley’s translation records no such dedication.

Later [398] Williamson suggests that Ulrikke is, in fact, María Kodama:

Borges made the girl Norwegian ... to symbolize the fact that the experience of mutual love with María Kodama in Iceland had fulfilled and transcended the hopes denied him in his youth.

Monegal refers frequently to *The Book of Sand*, but — surprisingly — never to ‘Ulrikke’, and the same is true of Sturrock; while Woodall agrees with Williamson that ‘Ulrikke’ is ‘clearly a tribute to María Kodama’ [249].

However, this suggestion that Ulrikke is a portrayal of María Kodama is implicitly denied by Borges himself, when the professor tells us: ‘I realized that I was not the first, and would not be the last’. No-one is likely to write those words about a woman with whom he is expecting to spend the remaining years of his life, and to whom he will dedicate three volumes of poetry — *The History of the Night*, *The Limit* and *Los conjurados* [Borges, 2000a; 391; 419; 467].

Jason Wilson [2006; 132] rejects the idea that the story refers to María Kodama, and states: ‘I would rather read ‘Ulrikke’ as a summation of an old blind man’s ideal of love in the mind, where literature ... is deeply shared ... [For] Borges ... sharing a passion for the same books is the ultimate erotic ideal’; but the only books they “share” appear to be those of de Quincey and the *Völsunga Saga* [Borges, 1998a; 419].

The epigraph to ‘Ulrikke’ is a quotation from the *Völsunga Saga*, which Williamson translates as “He takes the sword Gram and places it between them” [492], a reference to the mutual agreement between the professor and Ulrikke to call themselves Sigurd and Brunhild [Borges, 1988a; 420]; and, as Williamson [492] tells us, at Borges’ request these words appear also on the back of his gravestone in Geneva, together with an engraving of a Viking longship. I suggest that there can be no more eloquent illustration of the importance of this fiction to

its author. We must therefore seek another explanation of the obvious importance of Ulrikke.

Another interpretation suggests itself. There was one woman who, throughout Borges' life, made all the decisions, and this was his mother, Leonor Acevedo. Williamson [105] tells us that, after Borges' father's perceived failure as a writer, 'for all intents and purposes Leonor Acevedo ... had taken over as head of the family'. Woodall describes her as Borges' 'life partner' [242]; and, as Monegal puts it [444-445]:

Since Father's death, Mother had devoted herself completely to Borges ... In a sense, she was more than a mother: she was his eyes and his hands. Borges related to the external world through her; it was as if he had not left the maternal womb. Or, to be more precise, it was as if, by becoming blind, he had returned to it, for good.

Mother died in 1975, the year in which 'Ulrikke' was published. But Monegal recalls a visit he paid to her in 1971, when it became clear to him that her days were numbered. He tells us [473] that she bent down to reach the bottom draw of a cabinet, but that, 'when she tried to get up, her legs did not obey her. I rushed to her and helped her to stand. She was so thin and weighed so little ... that I shuddered'. Borges was present when that happened, and he began writing 'Ulrikke' in that same year [Williamson; 406].

The Freudians might regard this apparent Œdipus complex as an acceptable reading of the story, but it fails to explain Borges' use of the name Ulrikke; furthermore, as Monegal recalls [22], Borges regarded Freud 'either as a charlatan or as a madman'.

However, a more likely explanation presents itself. From 1968 to 1977 the Baader-Meinhof gang terrorized Germany, and the publicity which they received ensured that the whole of the western world could not help but know of them; and the famous — or infamous — Ulrike Meinhof was a co-founder of this gang. According to Stefan Aust, author of a book which became the basis of the German film *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, and someone who knew Ulrike and many other members of the gang, they declared:

We think that the organization of armed operations in the big cities of the Federal Republic is the right way to support the liberation movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the correct contribution ... to the strategy of the international socialist movement in splitting the powers of imperialism, and striking once they are split [Aust; 183].

In an interview he describes Ulrike Meinhof as

a very impressive person. She was well-educated and could get her point across very convincingly. At the same time she was quite an intolerant individual who thought she knew things better than others. If someone did not agree with her views then this person was considered *unpolitisch*, un-political.\*

It is clear from one of her many famous ‘quotes’ that Ulrike Meinhof, just as the eponymous character in Borges’ fiction, was in the habit of making the important decisions:

Protest is when I say I don't like this. Resistance is when I put an end to what I don't like. Protest is when I say I refuse to go along with this anymore. Resistance is when I make sure everybody else stops going along too.\*

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\*Retrieved through [Baader-Meinhof.com](http://Baader-Meinhof.com), on August 13, 2011.

Could it be that Borges was fascinated by Ulrike Meinhof, and was this the reason for choosing her name? If so, such a fascination would be his best-kept secret, but he would not be unique; as le Carré reminds us in his novel *A Most Wanted Man* [56], Ulrike Meinhof was proudly adopted by the city of Hamburg at a time when Hamburg was regarded as the most important city in West Germany, Berlin then being a divided city and located in East Germany.

Could it be that Borges admired Ulrike Meinhof because of the importance with which he viewed the decision-making that had been undertaken continuously by his mother? If Borges continued to follow Ulrike Meinhof's career, he would have learned that, after she and many other members of the Baader-Meinhof gang were captured and thrown into jail in 1976, they all committed suicide. Ulrike was the first to do so, and established the precedent which her loyal companions followed.

Perhaps the answer lies in the last words of the story: '[F]or the first and last time, I possessed the image of Ulrikke' [421]. The South American professor has to be satisfied with this 'image'; is Borges therefore telling us that 'Ulrikke' is another of his fantasies — in this case, a fantasy in which this woman possessed Ulrike Meinhof's renowned ability to make decisions?

Frequent reference has been made to Borges' shame at his inability to follow in the footsteps of his military ancestors — 'Not to have fallen, like others of my blood, in battle. / To be in the vanity of the night / the one who counts the syllables' [Williamson; 386]; could the choice of this name reflect his admiration — perhaps envy — for someone who, unlike Borges, was capable of taking arms against a sea of troubles and, by opposing, end them (to borrow Hamlet's words)?

In his Afterword Borges writes: “The subject of love is quite common in my poetry; not so in my prose, where the only example is “Ulrikke” [484]. But this is another fantasy; ‘Ulrikke’ is not about love, but about a one-night stand that took place in the daytime.

‘Ulrikke’ leaves us with many questions but no answers.

The anomalies which have been mentioned in this chapter do not comprise anything like a complete list; nor are they the most puzzling, as will be seen when the questions raised in the next chapter are considered.



Here, as in Chapter 5, some of Borges' non-fictional pieces will be shown to display contradictions, errors and omissions that raise questions to which there is no immediately apparent answer; and again it will be shown that the material they include is sometimes of less importance than the material which is omitted. I shall also suggest that some significant differences between his fictions and his non-fictions add further to the enigma of Borges.

Many of the non-fictional pieces to be discussed are contained in *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952* [Borges, 1964]. The word 'Other' is explained by the fact that, in 1925, Borges published a set of essays entitled *Inquisitions* which he subsequently took considerable trouble to disown, buying up as many copies as he could in order to destroy them [Borges, 1964; ix].

Woodall, summarising *Other Inquisitions*, states: 'It is in fact a rather chaotic book ... As a work of criticism *per se*, the book is almost useless' [166-167]. It will be suggested that the word 'chaotic' is sometimes very apt, and that the second part of Woodall's statement is applicable also to some of the non-fictions that are not included in *Other Inquisitions*, but in *The Total Library* [Borges, 2001] from which the remainder of the pieces will be taken.

However, we should note two points made by James E. Irby; in his Introduction to *Other Inquisitions* he states that many of its pieces demonstrate Borges' wit: 'Any theme set forth by Borges will be refuted by him somewhere else' [Borges 1964; xiv]; and, in his Introduction to *Labyrinths*, Irby states: 'The

lucidity and verbal precision of these [essays] belie the ... playfulness under which most of them were composed' [Borges, 2000b; 16].

In his Preface to *Labyrinths* André Maurois makes the same point:

Borges' form often recalls Swift's: the same gravity amid the absurd, the same precision of detail. To demonstrate an impossible discovery, he will adopt the tone of the most scrupulous scholar, mix imaginary writings in with real and erudite sources [13; tr. Sherry Mangan].

At the risk of appearing sexist, perhaps one aspect of the enigma that Borges presents is explained by Eliot Weinberger, the editor of *The Total Library*: 'Those for whom Borges is the archetype of the detached and cerebral metaphysician may be surprised to find that ... the recondite scholar was a regular contributor to the Argentine equivalent of the *Ladies Home Journal* [xi-xii].

But Ronald Christ takes *Other Inquisitions* very seriously:

From the start, then, we must be prepared to find Borges' secondary sources treated minutely rather than extensively; bent to his esthetic principles rather than explored; playfully modified in self-conscious justification ... as well as in a strained attempt at humor. Perhaps Borges' own words [in the *History of Iniquity*] best describe his method: 'falsify and distort' [73].

There are, indeed, 'strained' attempts at humour; but the accusation of falsification and distortion goes further, implying that Borges' integrity as an essayist is sometimes questionable; and I shall suggest that this may be the case. Surprisingly, Sarlo makes no mention of *Other Inquisitions* — this 'seminal book', to quote Woodall again [167] — and Williamson refers to it only in the context of its preparation for publication.

‘New Refutation of Time’ [Borges, 1964; 171-187].

This is one of the most frequently quoted of Borges’ essays; indeed, Woodall describes it as ‘Borges’ most famous essay’ [67]. I shall attempt to demonstrate that it is a rather desperate attempt at humour.

In his Prologue Borges accepts that this ‘refutation’ may be seen merely as ‘the feeble machination of an Argentine adrift on the sea of metaphysics’ [171], but this might well be an understatement. Sturrock offers a different and more appropriate translation of the phrase: ‘[A]n Argentinian strayed into metaphysics’ [7]; and Irby takes that idea even further in his translation in *The Total Library*: ‘[A]n Argentine lost in the maze of metaphysics’ [Borges, 2001a; 252].

Borges acknowledges the contradiction inherent in the title of his essay — if Time is ‘refuted’, then words like ‘old’ and ‘new’ are meaningless. But rather than abandon the project he sees the title as a ‘very subtle joke’ [172], and proceeds to write seventeen pages on the subject.

Borges dedicates the essay to an ancestor ‘who tried to reform the teaching of philosophy by purifying it from theological shadows’ [172]. Then he proceeds to quote at considerable length from Bishop Berkeley, whose ‘theological shadows’ are, perhaps, of all philosophers the most pervasive, since his purpose was to prove the existence of his God [Borges, 1964; 182].

This ancestor, Borges tells the reader, ‘like all men, was born at the wrong time’ [172]. Not only is this phrase meaningless, but if Time is a concept that can be refuted, then ‘wrong time’ invokes another contradiction. But Sturrock offers another and more acceptable translation of this phrase: ‘[T]here fell to him, as to all men, bad times in which to live’ [20].

Borges tells the reader that he disbelieves in the refutation of time, but he goes on to explain that it ‘comes to visit me at night and in the weary dawns’; and that, despite his disbelief, ‘[t]hat refutation is in all my books in one way or another’ [172].

Borges recalls a walk that he took one evening in Barracas:

I thought ... ‘This is the same as it was thirty years ago’ ... [T]hat pure representation of homogeneous facts — clear night, limpid wall ... is not merely identical to the scene ... so many years ago; it is, without similarities or repetitions, the same [179-180].

However, I suggest that this demonstrates merely that ‘the same’ can be used to mean almost anything one wishes.

Borges continues: ‘[H]aving denied matter and spirit ... and having denied space also, I do not know with what right we shall retain the continuity that is time’ [182-183]. He admits that ‘the phrase *negation of time* is ambiguous’, but argues that time

is not indivisible, because in that case it would have no beginning that would connect it to the past nor end that would connect it to the future, nor even a middle ... *Ergo*, the present does not exist, and since the past and the future do not exist either, time does not exist [185-186; italics in quoted text].

After these contradictions, affectations, and occasional poeticisms — e.g., ‘the weary dawns’ [172] and ‘I breathed the night’ [179] — he concludes: ‘Time is the substance that I am made of. Time is a river that carries me away ... The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges’ [187].

In one of the seminars given by Borges at Columbia University in 1971 the following exchange took place:

*Question:* In many of your stories and poems you seem concerned with time.

*Borges:* Well, time as given by the watch is conventional, isn't it? But real time, for example, when you are having a tooth pulled, is only too real. Or quite different, say, from the time of fear, when the sands of time run out. Yes, I have always been obsessed with time [Borges, 1994; 57].

I suggest that the words 'the time of fear, when the sands of time run out' go to the heart of the matter, so far as Borges was concerned. As I attempted to demonstrate in Chapter 2, from an early age Borges was obsessed by death — his own in particular; hence his statement that the refutation of time 'is in all my books in one way or another' [172]. I suggest that his 'New Refutation of Time' is a somewhat desperate attempt to make fun of something that he dreads.

Significantly, Monegal tells us that the original version of the essay was entitled 'Feeling in Death' [404]; and he adds, justifiably, that '[t]he whole essay lies under the sign of contradiction' [405].

I would further suggest that the essay is, by any standards — particularly those of Borges — over-written; his 'sea of metaphysics' is here a veritable ocean, with land never in sight.

'Kafka and his Precursors' [Borges, 1964; 106-108]; and 'Franz Kafka: *The Vulture*' [Borges, 2001; 501-503; tr. Eliot Weinberger].

In his lecture on Nathaniel Hawthorne [1964; 47-65], discussed in Chapter 5, Borges asserts that 'Wakefield' prefigures Franz Kafka, but Kafka modifies and refines the reading of 'Wakefield'; then he adds: 'The debt is mutual; a great

writer creates his precursors. He creates and somehow justifies them. What, for example, would Marlowe be without Shakespeare?' [57].

In the 'Precursors' Borges adds: 'I thought I recognized [Kafka's] voice, or his habits, in the texts of various literatures and various ages' [106]. In addition to Hawthorne's 'Wakefield', he lists works by Zeno of Elea, Han Yu, Kierkegaard, Robert Browning, Léon Bloy and Lord Dunsany; in his Prologue to *Bartleby the Scrivener* [Borges, 2001; 245-246; tr. Suzanne Jill Levine] Borges suggests that the story 'seems to foreshadow Kafka', thus, presumably, making Melville a precursor; and in 'A Defense of 'Bouvard and Pécuchet'' [2001; 386-389; tr. Esther Allen] Flaubert is named as yet another precursor.

Borges defines a 'precursor' in these words: 'If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous selections that I have mentioned resemble Kafka's work ... Kafka's idiosyncrasy ... is present in each of these writings, but if Kafka had not written we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist' [108]. But to state that if Kafka had not written we would not be aware of him is merely to state the blindingly obvious.

Twenty-five years later, however, Borges gave a very different definition of a 'precursor'; when Donald Yates suggested in an interview that Conrad's name should be added to the list of precursors since 'Kafka [is] helping to keep [them] alive because they remind us of Kafka', he replied: 'In the case of Conrad, I don't think he needs Kafka' [1998b; 159-160]. Borges was now suggesting that Kafka was helping to keep his 'precursors' alive; but it is not apparent that those he mentions ever needed Kafka's help.

In a ‘Conversation’ with Borges, recorded more than thirty years after the publication of ‘Precursors’, Alistair Reid starts to question him about this ‘celebrated essay’, but Borges interrupts him with: ‘I wonder what I said there, I have forgotten about it’ [Borges, 1998b; 217]. It is to be hoped that this was an unsubtle way of disowning his essay on Kafka.

In his Prologue to the collection of Kafka’s stories, ‘The Vulture’, published in 1979 [2001; 501-503], Borges tells the reader:

Kafka could only dream nightmares, which he knew that reality endlessly supplies. At the same time, he realized the possibly pathetic results of procrastination. Both things, sadness and procrastination, no doubt exhausted him [501].

But to label Kafka’s nightmares as merely ‘sadness’ is a considerable understatement; ‘despair’ is surely the only appropriate word; the reader has only to count the number of times that the word ‘never’ appears in Borges’ Prologue to appreciate this despair.

However, Borges manages to dig an even deeper hole for himself. After noting Kafka’s mysterious guilt towards his father, the Judaism that ‘affected him in a complex way’, and the likely effect on Kafka’s consciousness of approaching death, Borges waves these considerations aside; they are, he tells the reader, ‘beside the point; in reality, as Whistler said, ‘Art happens” [502]. To quote Whistler — a Victorian portrait and landscape artist — in the context of Kafka is surprising, to say the least. In Borges’ first lecture at Harvard University, he quoted this same statement of Whistler’s as suggesting that ‘there is something mysterious about art’ [Borges, 2000c; 6]; one shudders to imagine how Kafka

would have reacted if someone had told him ‘Art happens’, mysteriously or otherwise.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Borges compares Kafka with Zeno of Elea, drawing a similarity between, on the one hand, the failure by Achilles and the tortoise to reach their agreed finishing post and, on the other hand, the inconclusiveness of Kafka’s novels. But this comparison has no standing; the former is merely the result of a fundamental logical error, as demonstrated in Chapter 1; while the latter results from Kafka’s conviction that failure is inevitable — hence his despair.

Sarlo, in discussing Borges’ affinity with Kafka and Zeno, writes:

The question, which perhaps cannot be answered, is whether paradox upholds the power of logic against the power of common sense, or, on the contrary, shows up the hollow nature of our reasoning, while pointing at the same time to the unavoidable conclusion that reality can be grasped neither through perception nor through the formal structure of logic [58].

With the greatest respect, I suggest that Sarlo’s question cannot be answered because it is meaningless. Her statement is an example of Borges’ domineering influence over his critics, and of their frequent descent into his sea of metaphysics.

Borges adds: ‘What ... would Marlowe be without Shakespeare?’ [57]. His answer is that Shakespeare ‘creates and somehow justifies’ Marlowe. This might mean that we would pay much less attention to Marlowe — and, presumably, to other Elizabethan dramatists — if Shakespeare had never written his plays; but this is hardly a ground-breaking observation. It might even mean that Marlowe would be ignored if it were not for Shakespeare; but this is pure speculation on



Borges' part. As Woodall suggests, neither interpretation has a place in an essay of literary criticism.

Borges' admiration for Kafka is unquestionable; at a workshop attended by Borges in 1983 to celebrate the centenary of Kafka's birth, Peter Beicken spoke of Borges' 'early reception of and fascination with Kafka' [Borges, 1998b; 213]. Borges confirmed this by stating: 'I played being close to Kafka ... but I went on being Borges, I couldn't do it. But now and then, when a page of mine comes out as it should, then I imitate Kafka, really' [Borges, 1998b; 217]. Borges' early fascination with Kafka was reconfirmed, also in 1983, at the University of Arkansas: 'That I think is the quality of things good: they may have existed forever. That I should say is the measure of Kafka ... You think of him as having been there forever' [Cortínez; 74].

That being so, perhaps we must doubt Borges' understanding of his literary hero.

There are other reasons for raising such a doubt. In his Prologue on *Bartleby the Scrivener*, referred to in Chapter 5, Borges writes that its 'calm and evenly jocular language ... seems to foreshadow Kafka' [245-246]; but I know of no-one else who has described Kafka's literary style as 'evenly jocular'.

In Borges' review of 'Citizen Kane', in *An Overwhelming Film* [2001; 258-259; tr. Suzanne Jill Levine], he labels Kafka a 'nihilist'; but that is precisely what Kafka was not. Despair is totally different to nihilism; nihilism necessarily implies action, albeit destructive; despair necessarily implies the abandonment of action. Thus suicide, for example, is not an option for Kafka.

In *The Judgement* [Kafka; 77-88; trs Willa and Edwin Muir] a father tells his son: ‘An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being! — And therefore take note: I sentence you to death by drowning!’ [87]; whereupon the son drowns himself. But there is no despair on the part of the son or the father.

While on the subject of suicide, and in view of the parallel that Borges justifiably draws between Conrad and Kafka, mentioned earlier, it is interesting that the fugitive in Conrad’s story *The Secret Sharer* makes the same distinction that is implicit in Kafka: ‘I didn’t mean to drown myself. I meant to swim till I sank — but that’s not the same thing’ [Conrad, 1947; 108]. Similarly, in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, the narrator is told by his friend Stein:

The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up ... In the destructive element immerse ... That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream — and so — *ewig* — *usque ad finem* [Conrad, 2001; 263-264; Conrad’s italics].

In the same context we might note a significant omission from Borges’ list of ‘precursors’. When Goethe published his famous *Sorrows of the Young Werther*, it is believed to have caused many suicides; but perhaps Borges appreciated that this made Goethe ineligible as a ‘precursor’ to Kafka.

Borges states in ‘Our Poor Individualism’ [2001; 309-310; tr. Esther Allen] that ‘Kafka’s [subject is] the unbearable tragic solitude of the individual who lacks even the lowliest place in the order of the universe’ [310]. But Kafka’s despair is not merely about ‘tragic solitude’; it is his reaction to the inevitability of failure.

It is this assumption of the total inevitability of failure that characterizes Kafka. In *The Castle* Kafka makes it clear that K.'s ambition will inevitably be rewarded with failure. In *The Trial* any statement of the charge made against Joseph K. would have been superfluous; his crime is self-evident; Joseph K. lived — and, for that, the penalty is death. As Kafka saw it, since we all commit the crime of living we shall all suffer the punishment of death; and, as Joseph K. discovered, there was no possibility of acquittal [Kafka, 1964; 197]. *The Trial* begins on the day of Joseph K.'s birthday; the day before his next birthday becomes his deathday [279], his execution being courteously carried out at night by two men with whom, eventually, he walked to his death '[i]n complete harmony' [283].

Many of Kafka's short stories confirm this assumption of failure. One of them, 'The Judgement', has been dealt with earlier. In 'The Penal Colony' [Kafka, 1983; 140-167; trs Willa and Edwin Muir] the officer gives a lovingly detailed explanation of the execution machine, and tells his visitor: 'Guilt is never to be doubted' [145]; and when that officer has condemned himself to death and carried out his own execution, Kafka tells the reader: 'It was as it had been in life; no sign was visible of the promised redemption' [166].

'The Next Village' [Kafka, 1983; 404; trs Willa and Edwin Muir] contains only these words:

My grandfather used to say: 'Life is astoundingly short. To me, looking back over it, life seems so foreshortened that I scarcely understand, for instance, how a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that — not to mention accidents — even the span of a normal happy life may fall far short of the time needed for such a journey'.

At this level Kafka has no precursors, and Borges demonstrates his failure to understand Kafka by suggesting that he has. Furthermore, Kafka appears to have no successors; Samuel Beckett might be considered a successor, but I suggest that Beckett's music-hall humour disqualifies him, because it ranks equally with the despair that he demonstrates.

Borges ends his Prologue on Kafka's collection *The Vulture* with: 'The elaboration, in Kafka, is less admirable than the invocation ... Thus the superiority of his short stories to his novels' [2001; 503]. But in making this comparison Borges has failed to appreciate that the lack of 'elaboration' in Kafka's novels — i.e., his difficulty, sometimes, in finding an ending — is inevitable; failure is its own end. In the short stories Kafka is concentrating on specific individuals; but in the novels he is dealing with the world at large. Borges seems to have forgotten his preface to his own translation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* published in 1938, where he claims that Kafka's novels were deliberately unfinished 'because Kafka wanted to emphasize the infinite number of obstacles their protagonists had to face' [Monegal; 312].

Borges appears to have taken insufficient care in preparing these two items; despite what was once described as Borges' 'early reception of and fascination with Kafka' [Borges, 1998b; 213], despite his having translated Kafka [Borges, 2001; 248, 535; Williamson; 311-312] and having been 'steeped ... in the novels of Kafka' [Woodall; xxvi], the understanding of that author he claims to possess appears to be lacking. Borges' description of Kafka's subject as being 'the unbearable, tragic solitude of the individual who lacks even the lowliest place in the order of the universe' [2001; 310, tr. Esther Allen] seems to ignore the fact

that, for Kafka, ‘solitude’ is the necessary preliminary to that individual’s punishment by death.

As I attempted to demonstrate in Chapter 2, Borges was obsessed with death; but that is totally different to Kafka’s belief that death is our only salvation. Perhaps Manguel explained the problem as well as anyone: ‘Borges ... believed, against all odds, that our moral duty was to be happy’ [2006; 72]; and that is the last thing that could be said about Kafka.

‘On Chesterton’ [Borges, 1964; 82-85].

In one of his ‘Discussions’ at the University of Arkansas in 1983 Borges mentions Chesterton, and adds the words ‘whom I unconditionally admire’ [Cortínez; 45; tr. Mauricio Roberto Rosales]. But, despite Borges’ unconditional admiration for Chesterton, this is another of the essays in *Other Inquisitions* that supports Woodall’s negative assessment of their value as works of criticism.

Having made clear his scant opinion of Catholicism — ‘a collection of Hebrew imaginings that had been subjected to Plato and Aristotle’ [84] — Borges proceeds to compare Chesterton first with Kafka and then with John Bunyan. He recalls Kafka’s short story ‘Before the Law’, which tells of a man who sits on a stool ‘for days and years’ [Kafka, 1983; 3; trs Willa and Edwin Muir], waiting to be admitted to the Law by the doorkeeper. The man grows old; and as he dies, the doorkeeper tells him that the gate was made only for him, and that now it was to be shut.

Borges then reminds us of a very different incident in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, of the man who forces his way into the castle despite the many warriors

standing guard. Borges concludes as follows: ‘Chesterton devoted his life to the writing of the second parable, but something within him always tended to write the first’ [85].

He makes the point even more strongly in ‘About Oscar Wilde’: ‘[T]he powerful work of Chesterton, the prototype of physical and moral sanity, is always on the verge of becoming a nightmare’ [Borges, 1964; 81]. But there is no nightmare; Borges held that the Father Brown stories were the key to Chesterton [1964; 84], and, for Father Brown, evil is inevitably a precursor of good.

I suggest that Borges’ comments cannot be substantiated. Father Brown was essentially interested in demystification, and many incidents in the stories support this view. What to everyone else appeared to be impossible, he showed to be quite the opposite. He would have been amused — to put it mildly — at some of the ideas expressed in Borges’ essays; for example, in ‘The Flower of Coleridge’ Borges quotes:

If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke — Ay! — what then?

Borges adds that he finds ‘that imagining ... perfect’ [1964; 10-11].

And Father Brown would have been similarly amused to find these words in ‘Partial Enchantments of the ‘Quixote’:

Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of the *Quixote*, and Hamlet is a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious [1964; 46].

But who is disquieted by Hamlet watching the play within the play? Hamlet chose the piece that the players were to enact, and he wrote the speech by which he sought to confirm Claudius' guilt; and it was Hamlet who exclaimed 'the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' [Act II, Sc. II]. The audience would be watching Claudius' disquiet without concerning itself with anything else.

In 'From Someone to Nobody' Borges writes:

Hazlitt ... said that Shakespeare was like other men in every way except in being like other men; and that intimately he was nothing, but he was everything that others were, or could be [1964; 148];

but it does not occur to Borges to chastise Hazlitt for such muddled thinking.

In his non-fiction Borges never appears to be intent on the process of demystification; indeed, as the previous quotations demonstrate, the very opposite is often the case. But Borges needed to read again only the first and one of the most memorable of the Father Brown stories, 'The Blue Cross' [1981; 9-23], to understand that the priest he admired was never given to mystification; Chesterton tells us: '[O]nly a man who knows nothing of reason talks of reasoning without strong, undisputed first principles' [12], and that 'reason is always reasonable, even in the last limbo, in the lost borderland of things' [20]; and, when asked why he had been so sure, at their first meeting, that Flambeau wasn't a priest, Father Brown replied that Flambeau had 'attacked reason ... It's bad theology' [23].

On the basis of the essays mentioned above, the priest would have agreed entirely with Borges' assessment of himself as 'an Argentine adrift on the sea of metaphysics' [1964; 171].

Borges also appears to lose sight of Chesterton's gentle sense of humour, which is apparent throughout the latter's work. In just one of the Father Brown stories, 'The Actor and the Alibi' [1981; 512-526], we find three examples; first:

Mandeville was sufficiently British to explain [his problem] by murmuring that all foreigners were mad; but the thought of his good fortune in inhabiting the only sane island of the planet did not suffice to soothe him [512].

Secondly, Mandeville's 'problem of getting a foreign actress out of a locked room [was] a new version of the conjuring trick of the Vanishing Lady' [513]; and thirdly, Father Brown's 'calm' statement that '[b]reaking looking-glasses with your feet is a very unusual prelude to suicide' [515].

In light of Borges' statement to Amelia Barili, quoted in Chapter 5, relating his recurring nightmares involving children, the following examples of Father Brown's delight in the company of children take on added significance. In 'The Chief Mourner of Marne' we are told that the priest, while visiting a friend who had a large family, was 'sitting on the floor with a serious expression, and attempting to pin the somewhat florid hat belonging to a wax doll on to the head of a teddy bear' [572]; and, in 'The Pursuit of Mr Blue', Father Brown was

hopping about on the sands with a crowd of poor children ... excitedly waving a very little wooden spade ... [and] solemnly spending penny after penny in order to play vicarious games of golf, football, cricket, conducted by clockwork figures [648].



Borges' theory about Chesterton's 'nightmare' also appears to ignore the number of occasions on which Father Brown willingly allows a malefactor his freedom. The most memorable example of this is that of Flambeau: '[M]y friend told me that he knew exactly why I stole; and I have never stolen since' [588]. In 'The Hammer of God' the priest tells the murderer: 'I say I know all this; but no one else shall know it' [131]; and in 'The Red Moon of Meru' he relates: 'I persuaded the thief to let me put [the jewel] back. I told him what I'd guessed and showed him there was still time for repentance' [564]. These are just a few of many similar occasions; and it should be noted that Borges held that the Father Brown stories 'were the key to Chesterton' [Borges, 1964; 84]. The title of another of Chesterton's books, *Four Faultless Felons*, makes the same point as these quotations from the Father Brown stories.

But occasions such as those just quoted are not confined to the Father Brown stories. At the end of *The Man Who was Thursday*, with all the seeming problems resolved, Chesterton delights in telling us that

Syme could only feel an unnatural buoyancy in his body and a crystal simplicity in his mind ... [while he watched] the girl with the gold-red hair, cutting lilac before breakfast, with the great unconscious gravity of a girl [1986; 184].

Chesterton introduces *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* with these words:

The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning, and will probably do it till the end ... For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun [1946a; 9];

and in *The Club of Queer Trades* — accurately described in the publisher's blurb as 'Six classic crime stories where no crimes are committed' — he tells the reader

at the end of the dinner attended by the members of the Club: 'We had only a confused sense of everything having been put right, the sense men will have when they come into the presence of God' [1946b; 125].

At the end of *The Return of Don Quixote* [1963], a book that Borges must surely have read if only because of its intriguing title, we find three couples contemplating married bliss; in particular, the shy librarian, Michael Herne — who had once sat on the top shelf in his library for 24 hours reading books on medieval history, being totally unaware that the ladder he had used to get there had been taken away [30-32] — plighting his troth to the dynamic Rosamund Sauverne, the woman 'who stood crowned in his dreams' [222].

There is no evidence of a 'nightmare' in any of these books. The only story that Borges quotes in support of his assertion that Chesterton was given to nightmares is the absurd *How I Found the Superman*; but then, and in apparent amazement, Borges accepts that 'this teratological fantasy [was] a joke' [Borges, 1964; 84].

Borges states that Chesterton 'tends inevitably to revert to atrocious observations' [1998b; 83]; the word 'inevitably' can hardly be substantiated; and, on the evidence of the examples discussed above, Borges' statement would itself appear to be an atrocious observation.

However, it is unlikely that Borges would have overlooked those rare but uncompromisingly scathing remarks made by Father Brown about Schopenhauer, Borges' favourite philosopher and the author of *The World as Will and Idea*:

But remember what the lot of the philosopher is! Remember what sort of conduct those highbrows often present to the highest! All about the Will to Power [etc] ... damned nonsense and more than damned nonsense—nonsense that can damn [1981; 526].

Could it be that Borges was seeking retribution for Chesterton's denunciation of Schopenhauer when he denounced Chesterton's faith as 'a collection of Hebrew imaginings that had been subjected to Plato and Aristotle' [1964; 84]? If so, it would be a disappointing gesture.

However that may be, and despite earlier repeated affirmations, Borges' admiration for Chesterton faded with time; as early as 1968 he told Rita Guibert:

Shaw has a classical inspiration that we don't find in Chesterton. It's a pity that Chesterton's flavour should fade, but I think it likely that ... in time Chesterton will only figure in histories of literature, and Shaw in literature itself [1998b; 59].

Monegal suggests that, in this and other attempts 'to discover the actual writer under the mask', Borges was underlining

the contradiction between the ardent believer who joyously proclaimed his Catholic faith and the nightmares in which this same faith is coded ... [and] the paradoxical nature of all lives, the realization that to portray a man is to reduce the multiplicity of his traits to a composite (and unfaithful) sum of the traits we favor [422].

This is ironical in the extreme; nothing could be more 'paradoxical' than Borges' composite — and unfaithful — sum of the traits in Chesterton that he does not favour. Borges' statement in 1968 to an audience of students at Harvard University that to be 'in a Chestertonian mood [is] one of the very best moods to be in' [2000c; 17] is yet another indication of this paradox.

In his interview with Burgin in 1967 Borges described *Alice in Wonderland* as ‘a nightmare book’ [Borges, 1998b; 34]; perhaps it would assist our understanding of this statement, and of the essay on Chesterton, if Borges had taken the trouble to define the word ‘nightmare’.

Borges’ essay on Chesterton raises another aspect of the enigma of Borges; how could he have been such an admirer of the Father Brown stories, and for so many years, and yet appear to have misunderstood their author’s intentions so completely?

‘The Labyrinths of the Detective Story and Chesterton’ [Borges, 2001; 112-114; tr. Eliot Weinberger].

The detective short story, Borges tells the reader, ‘is of a strict problematic nature’ [112]. He presents its ‘code’, as he calls it, under six headings:

- A) A discretionary limit of six characters;
- B) The declaration of all the terms of the problem;
- C) An avaricious economy of means;
- D) The priority of how over who;
- E) A reticence concerning death;
- F) A solution that is both necessary and marvelous.

This analysis he derives from Chesterton’s Father Brown stories [113-114].

I have already submitted evidence that Borges’ analysis of the Father Brown stories is flawed, and I would further submit that a seventh ‘law’ for writing detective stories should be added: ‘Detective stories should, primarily, be about detectives’ — and that this should be ranked first of the seven.

Detective stories are not to be confused with so-called police-procedural stories, such as those written by J. D. Robb and Michael Connelly; in these the proposed seventh ‘law’ would not be relevant.

Both Chesterton and Conan Doyle — as well as the majority of writers of detective fiction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century — tell stories that are primarily about their respective detectives; indeed, the books in which many of them appear could be said to form an edited version of the biographies of those detectives.

There are many differences between Father Brown and Sherlock Holmes; in particular, the latter’s habit — especially in the earlier stories — of holding lengthy discussions of his methods with his colleague, Dr Watson. Conan Doyle’s primary interest was in these methods; unlike Chesterton, Doyle was a trained scientist, a doctor who had qualified at Edinburgh University, the centre of medical learning in his time. But none of these differences, and none of the circumstances of the plot, prevent both authors from maintaining a continual and overriding interest in their detectives.

Enough has been said of Father Brown’s habits and methods in the earlier discussion of ‘On Chesterton’. Meanwhile ‘The Resident Patient’ [Doyle, 1976; 158-178] provides a good example of Holmes’ habits and methods. Two of its earlier pages are given over entirely to a discussion of those methods, regularly punctuated by expostulations of disbelief by Watson and the police detective, Inspector Lanner, which afford Holmes even more opportunities to explain his methods. Holmes’ explanation of the crime does not commence until the final page, but that has never seemed to worry the vast number of Doyle’s devoted readers.

Ironically, it is one of Holmes' failures that best illustrates Doyle's concentration on his methods. In 'The Yellow Face' [Doyle; 35-54] the detective, in true Auguste Dupin style, 'solves' the crime without leaving Baker Street — only later to discover that there was no crime to be solved. It may be wondered whether Borges had read Doyle's 'The Greek Interpreter', in which Holmes tells of his brother: 'If the art of the detective began and ended in reasoning from an armchair ... [my brother] would be the greatest criminal agent that ever lived ... What is to me a means of livelihood is to him the merest hobby of a dilettante' [180-181].

When Doyle decided to write no more detective stories he was obliged to invent Moriarty to eliminate Holmes in 'The Final Problem' [236-255]; but Doyle's readers would not allow him to eliminate Holmes, and insisted on his 'return'. This would appear to be clear evidence of the overriding importance to the reader of the detective in detective stories. It should be remembered that, in *This Craft of Verse*, Borges states: 'I think of writing as being a kind of collaboration ... the reader does his part of the work; he is enriching the book' [2000c; 119]; and in one of his 'Discussions' at the University of Arkansas in 1983 Borges went further: '[T]he author is an invention of the reader's, a superstition of the reader's' [Cortínez; 62; tr. Mauricio Roberto Rosales].

In his 'Autobiographical Essay' Borges tells the reader that Edgar Allan Poe was one of the authors whom he discovered in his father's library [1971; 140]; he describes Poe as a 'great secret man', includes Poe's *The Purloined Letter* in his anthology of detective stories, and argues in an article in *Sur* in 1942 that Poe had created the detective story [Monegal; 377-378; 382]. However, I suggest that,

as an essential preliminary to his creating the detective story, it was first necessary to create Auguste Dupin, whose surprising methods are the very essence of Poe's 'analytic' detective stories.

In this context there is a certain irony in some of Borges' remarks in *This Craft of Verse* [2000c]; there he calls Holmes and Watson 'dear friends of mine' [94], and states: 'I am sure that I believe in Mr. Sherlock Holmes' [103].

Georges Simenon is widely recognized as one of the greatest writers of crime fiction in the last century. Admittedly, his 'Maigret' stories are novellas rather than short stories, but Simenon's readers are constantly watching Maigret, and the identification of the criminal becomes of secondary importance. Readers are always kept aware of Maigret's methods; but, unlike Holmes, Maigret usually takes his methods for granted. It is Simenon who draws them to the reader's attention, occasionally with the assistance of Judge Coméliau, who is an unflinching critic of those methods. It is no coincidence that the title of every Maigret story commences with the detective's name. This was good marketing on Simenon's part, but it also serves to illustrate the fact that the stories are primarily about the detective. It is interesting to note that Borges included one of Simenon's stories in an anthology called *The Best Detective Stories*, but it was not one of the Maigret series [Monegal; 378].

Many other examples of the primary importance of the detective may be quoted — the stories about Hercule Poirot (written by Agatha Christie), Miss Marple (Agatha Christie), Nero Wolfe (Rex Stout), Kate Fansler (Amanda Cross), Inspector Dover (Joyce Porter), Inspector Lynley (Elizabeth George), Philo Vance (S. S. Van Dine), The Saint (Leslie Charteris), Lord Peter Wimsey (Dorothy L.

Sayers), and Ellery Queen (Ellery Queen, alias Manfred B. Lee and Frederic Dannay — both also pseudonyms); and there are many more illustrious detectives, in particular Poe's Auguste Dupin and Borges' own Don Isidro Parodi, a detective who is even more 'analytic' than Dupin, since he is confined to a prison cell. But none makes the case better than Chesterton's Father Brown.

Many of Borges' essays demonstrate that he was well versed in detective literature; Manguel [37] tells the reader that Borges 'loved detective novels ... He once observed ... that detective fiction was closer to the Aristotelian notion of a literary work than any other genre'; and Donald Yates [1971; 29] writes of Borges'

inordinate fondness for ... detective fiction ... [H]e has produced ... the don Isidro Parodi detective stories, an extravagant detective tale entitled *Dos fantasias memorables*, two anthologies of detective short stories, as well as a successful detective novel series (*El Séptimo Circulo*).

Why, then, should Borges ignore the importance of the detective? To do so in an essay on the 'labyrinths' of the detective story is equivalent to writing an essay on *Macbeth* without mentioning Macbeth. Or could it be that he was reluctant to admit an inability to emulate authors such as Doyle, Chesterton and Christie?

It must be said that *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*, with its less-than-subtle title, contains some of the most boring detective stories in the canon, despite the fact that the authors, Borges and Bioy Casares, appear to have enjoyed themselves immensely while writing them. The stories are a strong reminder of Woodall's remark about the two conspirators' spending most of their time 'laughing over the typewriter' [123]; and it is easy to imagine that they created



much laughter within the Borges-Casares circle of friends — but, I suggest, nowhere else. Not surprisingly, Borges confessed over forty years later that ‘I have on occasion attempted the detective genre, and I’m not very proud of what I have done’ [Borges, 2001; 498; tr. Esther Allen].

Again, Borges’ second essay on Chesterton appears to raise questions which have no immediate answer.

‘The *Biathanatos*’ [Borges, 1964; 89-92].

This is an essay on the book by John Donne, in which ‘the apparent thesis’, according to Borges, is: ‘As not every murderer is an assassin, not every self-murderer is guilty of mortal sin’ [89]. According to Borges, Donne’s ‘underlying aim is to indicate that Christ committed suicide ... [T]he Father ... created the earth and the heavens as a stage for the Son’s future death’ [92].

But Borges’ essay cannot be said to be a discussion of this idea; he merely offers examples of similarly noteworthy ‘suicides’, ending with his reminiscing about one Philipp Batz who, in 1876, ‘published his book *Philosophy of the Redemption*, [and who] that same year killed himself’ [92].

This essay might well be dismissed as merely superficial were it not for an extraordinary footnote by Borges [89]. At the opening of the essay he describes Donne as a ‘great poet’; and, as an illustration of Donne’s greatness, he gives in that footnote three lines from one of the early Elegies, *To his Mistress Going to Bed* [Donne; 120-122]:

Licence my roaving hands, and let them go,  
Before, behind, above, below.  
O my America! My new-found land ...

These lines may demonstrate that the young John Donne was adept at exploring the female body, but they do not demonstrate his greatness as a poet. More importantly, they are not truly representative of Donne, in whom —to quote C. A. Patrides — ‘the frequent harshness ... the intentionally *bent* sounds, pierced realms no poet had yet ventured to explore’ [Donne; xxvi; Patrides’ italics].

Borges must have been aware of Donne’s entry into the Protestant church, following the abandonment of his licentious youth. Since the *Biathanatos* was written after that development, why does Borges not quote a later and more appropriate example of the poet’s work? Above all, Borges must have been acquainted with Donne’s *Divine Poems*. Not only must they rank with the greatest poetry in the English language, but one of them, *At the round earth’s imagined corners* [Donne; 343-344], is directly relevant to Donne’s thesis in the *Biathanatos*:

... All whom warre, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,  
Despair, law, chance hath slaine ...  
Shall behold God, and never taste death’s woe ...

It is clear from this that Donne believed that, for the suicide — whether ‘justified’ or not — despair did not deny the sinner salvation.

How does one explain this apparent neglect on Borges’ part? One might conclude that Borges knew less of Donne’s poetry than his essay implies, until one notes his quotation from one of the last of Donne’s poems, *Hymn to God, my God, in my sickness*, in a footnote to ‘The Creation and P. H. Gosse’ [1964; 22].

Perhaps Borges was trying to be funny; if so, his semi-erotic joke was, at best, in poor taste. Certainly the quotation that he employs appears to raise questions that have no obvious answers.

However, Jason Wilson makes an interesting and very relevant point [2006; 101]; after mentioning the death of Borges' father in 1938 he adds:

Borges barely alludes to this death, his grief far too private for words, though he was there. Apparently, his father died by refusing food and medicine, a passive suicide. Borges told Sábato in 1975 that he approved of suicide.

'Joyce's Latest Novel' [Borges, 2001; 195; tr. Eliot Weinberger].

This brief book review, published in 1939, raises some more astounding questions.

The 'latest novel' is *Finnegans Wake*. Borges describes it as a 'complex verbal labyrinth', which is perhaps an understatement. But he also tells of his 'essential bewilderment and my useless and partial glances at the text'; he then adds that it is 'a concatenation of puns committed in a dreamlike English that is difficult not to categorize as frustrated and incompetent. I don't think that I am exaggerating'.

'Happily', as Harry Levin writes, 'an Irish wake is apt to rise above its melancholy occasion' [1974; 113]; and on page 190 of *Finnegans Wake* Joyce confirms this, exploding with: 'O hell, here comes our funeral! O pest, I'll miss the post!' [Joyce; 1975]. It is, I suggest, nothing less than amazing that Borges, whom di Giovanni has justly described as 'one of the great comic writers of our time' [2003; 48], did not recognise that, whatever else it might be, *Finnegans Wake* is one of the greatest comic works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Illustrations of this appear throughout the book. In one of its most memorable paragraphs, on pages 557-558 — boasting not a single full-stop — Joyce invites his readers to inspect a parade of assonantal nouns, of which this is a sample:

fornicopulation ... correlations ... denudation ... retrogradation ...  
 titillation ... mitigation ... alimentation ... transubstantiation ...  
 attestation ... festination ... obsecration ... coagulation ...  
 confabulation ... regurgitation ... eructation ... dilatation ...  
 delectation ... obliteration ... extinuation ... amputation ...

On page 104 we find these memorable puns on Holy Writ: ‘In the name of Annah the Allmaziful, the Everliving, the bringer of Plurabilities, haloed be her eve, her singtime sung, her till be run, unhemmed as it is uneven!’; and, on page 137 we read of ‘gullible’s travels’, ‘philanthropicks’, and ‘for inkstands’.

On page 154 he tells us of his amazing discovery that ‘you cannot wake a silken nouse out of a hoarse oar’; and on page 241 we learn of

Mr Heer Assessor Neelson, of sorestate hearing, diseased, formarly with Adenoiks ... live with howthold of nummer seven, wideawake, woundabout, wokinbetts, weeklings ... got a darlingt babyboy bucktooth, the thick of a gobstick, coming on ever so nerses nursely, gracies to goodess, at 81.

On page 326 we read:

[C]omesend round that wine and lift your horn, sayd he, to show you’re a skolar for, winter you likes it or not, we brought your summer with us ... here is the ninethest pork of a man whisk swimmies in Dybblin water ...

and on page 399: ‘*Grand goosegreasing we had entirely with an allnight eiderdown bed picnic to follow*’ [Joyce’s italics].

Then, on page 558: ‘niece by nice by neat by natty, whilst amongst revery’s happy gardens ... they were never happier, huhu, than when they were miserable, haha’. Those words are especially relevant, because *Finnegans Wake* is perhaps best summed up by these words on page 259:

Loud, heap miseries upon us yet entwine our arts with laughters low!  
Ha he hi ho hu.  
Mummm

Jokes appear on every page of *Finnegans Wake*, and sometimes in every line. It is sad, therefore, to recall Borges’ statement, made three years before his death, that Joyce’s novel contains ‘far too many puns ... It makes for labor’ [Cortínez; 26-27]. One cannot help but wonder if Joyce knew of Henry Brooke Adams’ saying: ‘Chaos was the law of nature; order was the dream of man’, because, in *Finnegans Wake*, the chaos engendered by Joyce’s wit never ends. And this is literally true, the last words on the final page leading straight into the opening words on the first page: ‘A way a lone a last a loved a long the [628] riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s ... brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs [3]’.

In contrast, Borges’ comments on *Ulysses* display a real understanding of Joyce and his inheritance [Borges, 2001; 12]:

The Irish have always been famous for being the iconoclasts of the British Isles ... [T]hey made deep incursions into the territory of English letters, pruning all rhetorical exuberance with frank impiety.

There could not be a more comprehensive assessment of *Finnegans Wake* than that contained in the words ‘iconoclasm’ and ‘frank impiety’; why, then, did Borges not approach Joyce’s later book with the same understanding?

Perhaps one of the great ironies of *Finnegans Wake* is that Joyce was obliged to use the English language to make these ‘deep incursions into the territory of English letters’; it is not surprising, therefore, that Joyce strove to make the English language seem as un-English as possible. Even before the book is opened one of the rules of the English language is seen to be deliberately ignored; the mandatory apostrophe in its title is omitted.

It would not have taken much of Borges’ time to identify a close communion with *Finnegans Wake* which dated from his childhood. Ian Pindar points out that Joyce arrived at ‘his own view of history’ by considering ‘some rather obscure sources, in particular ... Giambattista Vico ... [who] divides human history into four recurring cycles ... [and in] the *Wake* each cycle is announced by a thunderbolt’ [Pindar; 114]; then, in note 410, Pindar adds: ‘There are ten thunderbolts, each containing 100 letters, except the last, which has 101. So there are 1001 letters in total, like *The Thousand and One Nights*, another important source for *Finnegans Wake*’ [148].

Margot Norris [1990; 161-184], in her paper on *Finnegans Wake*, offers this very relevant reminder:

The title of *Finnegans Wake* is taken from a popular song, the ballad of Tim Finnegan, the hod carrier with ‘a tipplin’ way’, who falls from a ladder while drunk ... ‘So they carried him home his corpse to wake’. A fight breaks out during the wake — ‘Twas woman to woman and man to man’ — and, in the process a noggin of whisky is thrown and strikes the bier, scattering over the corpse and waking him from the dead: ‘Bedad he revives, see how he rises /

And Timothy rising from the bed, / Says, 'Whirl your liquor round  
like blazes / Thanam o'n dhoul, do ye think I'm dead?' [182].

If Borges assumed that he could appreciate all that Joyce had to offer in *Finnegans Wake* by 'useless and partial glances at the text', then he seems to have been guilty of the arrogance which — as suggested in Chapter 4 — he purported to despise.

However, there are some mitigating circumstances. First, unless a reader is able to 'hear' the Irish accent in which *Finnegans Wake* was written, it can be difficult to discern all the comic nuances; and there is no reason to believe that Borges possessed this ability. Secondly, Borges may not have been familiar with the Irish practice of making a wake into a celebration; he was born into a society that, instead, espoused the 'death-vigil', as Hurley points out in his remarks on Argentina's 'cadaver cultists' [Borges, 1998a; 542], and as a reading of, for example, 'Deathwatch on the Southside' and 'The Aleph' will confirm. Similarly, Borges might not have known of the ballad of Tim Finnegan, although this would be familiar to most, if not all, of Joyce's Irish readers.

In his collection of poems *In Praise of Darkness*, published thirty years after *Finnegans Wake*, Borges addresses two poems to James Joyce. The first, 'James Joyce' [Borges, 2000a; 273; tr. Stephen Kessler], reminds the reader of *Ulysses*: 'In one day of mankind are all the days / of time ... The story of the world is told from dawn / to darkness'; but in 'Invocation to Joyce' [2000a; 287-289; tr. Charles Tomlinson] Borges implies some affinity with the author of *Finnegans Wake*:

Down the vast slopes of night  
 we searched (I remember it still) for the words  
 of the moon, of death, of the morning ...  
 We invented the lack of punctuation,  
 the leaving out of capital letters ...

When welcoming Borges to the University of Arkansas the President of Dickinson College quoted 'Invocation to Joyce', describing it as Borges' 'words of appreciation' to Joyce — upon which Borges was heard to whisper: 'That's right' [Cortínez; 6].

Is the 'Invocation' an implicit apology for Borges' first unfortunate reaction to *Finnegans Wake*? But, when Borges spoke at the University of Arkansas in 1983 he seemed still to be uncertain; when asked: 'I wonder what you make of *Finnegans Wake* and all that simultaneity', he replied: 'I think Virginia Woolf said that *Ulysses* was a glorious defeat. I say the same thing about *Finnegans Wake*. It is a defeat. But there are such wonderful lines ... They don't make for a novel but for a poem ... Far too many puns ... It makes for labor. I think of Joyce as being essentially a poet, not a novelist' [Cortínez; 26-27].

Before leaving the topic of Borges' relationship with Joyce, another of the anomalies which he presents must be mentioned. In 1925, according to Williamson [128], Borges published a translation of the last page of *Ulysses*, which is the end of Molly Bloom's sixty-page and thunderously erotic soliloquy [Joyce, 2000; 932-933]. However, this translation was made by a young man for whom sexual diffidence had become a byword, a diffidence which his father was 'at a loss to understand' [Williamson, 65], and which becomes even more evident after reading 'The Cult of the Phoenix' and 'Emma Zunz', as Monegal perceives [100]. Williamson [128] explains this by telling us that Borges had just found in



Norah Lange ‘an alternative source of inspiration that might inject new energy into his writing’; I do not find this attempt to explain the conundrum entirely convincing — but, who knows?

More questions are raised by other pieces in *Other Inquisitions* [Borges, 1964]. In ‘The Wall and the Books’ [3-5] the ‘wall’ under discussion is known today as the Great Wall of China; the ‘books’ are those written by Confucius, and destroyed at the command of the so-called First Emperor.

Borges tells the reader that ‘the man who ordered the building of the almost infinite Chinese Wall was the first Emperor ... who also decreed the burning of all the books that had been written before his time ... [T]he rigorous abolition of history, or rather, of the past’ [3].

However, a minimal amount of research would have informed Borges that the First Emperor did not order the building of the Great Wall of China. As the Sinologist Julia Lovell points out [2006; 51-52], for him, as for many other Chinese Emperors, building walls — as well as roads, canals and palace complexes — had become a very successful public relations exercise. In fact, the First Emperor ordered the building of what is now known as the Long Wall; this was, to some extent, a precursor to the Great Wall, but it was considerably shorter. Furthermore, the Long Wall is about 2,000 years old [Lovell; 15], whereas the Great Wall was constructed only about 500 years ago [Lovell; 215].

But Borges’ error over the Great Wall would be insignificant were it not for the metaphysics that the essay engenders, not only in Borges but also in many of his critics.

For example, Borges ends the essay with the following words:

The tenacious wall ... is the shadow of a Caesar who ordered the most reverent of nations to burn its past; and that idea ... is probably what we find so touching ... We could generalize, and infer that *all* forms possess virtue in themselves and not in conjectural 'content'. That would support the theory ... that [the] imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality [5; italics in quoted text].

Monegal describes this essay as one of the best in *Other Inquisitions* because it 'recognize[s] behind the variety of fables or metaphors a common unity'; and he goes on to say that Borges was '[r]elentless in his pursuit of the invisible mechanism which controlled the world and writing' [421]. With great respect, it would seem from this remark that Monegal might also have become adrift in the sea of metaphysics.

Perhaps the essay is yet another example of an attempt at humour. If so, it fails; and the idea that Borges meant the essay to be taken seriously (which is not to deny any humour) is reinforced by his earlier determination to destroy other essays in the earlier *Inquisitions*.

Why did Borges write this essay? Why choose it for inclusion in *Other Inquisitions*? And why give it pride of place, since it is one of the last to be written but is the first item in the book?

Other essays in the same book also raise difficult questions. In 'Forms of a Legend' [149-153] Borges tells the reader that, at the conclusion of Oscar Wilde's famous story, 'the happy prince dies ... without having discovered sorrow' [153]. But on the second page of that story we read: 'The eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears'; on the next page, Oscar Wilde tells his readers 'the happy Prince

looked so sad that the little Swallow was sorry'; and on the sixth page, the Prince tells the Swallow: '[M]ore marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery' [Wilde, 1948; 285-291]. One would assume that Borges had not read Wilde's story until one remembers that he had translated it into Spanish, and had seen his translation published when he was only ten years old [Woodall; 21]. Since he knew the story so well, how did Borges manage to make such an obviously erroneous statement about it?

In 'From Allegories to Novels' [154-157], Borges writes that, '[t]o vindicate the allegory, Chesterton ... [denies] that language is the only way to express reality', and he quotes Chesterton's famous passage:

Man knows that there are in the soul tints more bewildering, more numberless, and more nameless than the colours of an autumn forest ... Yet he seriously believes that these things can every one of them ... be accurately represented by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals [155].

But this is obviously a misreading on Borges' part; Chesterton is not vindicating the allegory; after all, even allegories are conveyed by an 'arbitrary system of grunts and squeals'. Chesterton is telling us something of much greater importance — that some things cannot be conveyed in language.

In 'For Bernard Shaw' [163-166] Borges tells the reader: 'The biography of Bernard Shaw by Frank Harris contains an admirable letter written by Shaw, in which he says: 'I understand everything and everyone, and am nobody and nothing'; and Borges proceeds to compare Shaw with (inter alia) God and Johannes Scotus, as having 'educated almost innumerable persons, or dramatis personae' [165]. Clearly, Borges has missed the point of Shaw's wit; his

comparison should have been with Socrates, who, according to Plato's *Apologia*, declaimed (rather than claimed) that he was the wisest man in the world because he knew that he knew nothing.

Many of the pieces discussed in this chapter appear to be attempts at profundity on Borges' part. In considering all the anomalies that have been mentioned, we are reminded of Ronald Christ's statement about *Other Inquisitions*, quoted more fully earlier in this chapter:

We must be prepared to find Borges' secondary sources ... bent to his esthetic principles rather than explored; playfully modified in self-conscious justification ... as well as in a strained attempt at humor. Perhaps Borges' own words best describe his method: 'falsify and distort' [73].

But concepts such as falsification and distortion do not seem adequate to answer the questions that have been raised in this chapter, nor does the suggestion that Borges' essays are a 'strained attempt at humour'. It appears that Borges' readers must face this question: How many more distortions, falsifications, omissions or whatever, are they likely to discover in the more obscure of Borges' non-fictions?

## SUMMARY

In the Introduction emphasis was placed on the fact that Borges wrote primarily for Argentine readers. Borges stated in 'Our Poor Individualism' [2001; 309-310; tr. Esther Allen] that '[t]he Argentine can only conceive of personal relations'; and, commenting on his story 'Men Fought' in his 'Autobiographical Essay' of 1971 — some years after he had been 'discovered' in Europe and the USA — he wrote: 'In it I was trying to tell a purely Argentine story in an Argentine way. This story I have been retelling with small variations ever since' [1971; 160-161]. Emphasis was also placed on Borges' military origins, since his inability to follow in his forebears' footsteps might account for much of his humility; and on Borges' special relationship with di Giovanni, because this allows us to place a special reliance on di Giovanni's opinions of Borges' work.

In Chapter 1 my aim was to demonstrate that Borges' widely acknowledged wit had penetrated his fictions more deeply than has perhaps been appreciated; and that some of the fictions which have been taken very seriously by his critics are, in fact, glorious hoaxes. Consequently, well-known stories such as 'Forking Paths', 'Pierre Menard', 'Death and the Compass', 'Three Versions of Judas', 'The Theologians', 'The Aleph' and 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' are shown not to be the deeply philosophical tracts they are usually assumed to be. Borges sums it all up when he tells his audience at a seminar at Columbia University that, in his stories: 'I'm doing it for the sheer fun of it' [1994; 65]; and the American poet, Richard Howard, confirms this when he writes: '[W]e share our century with the greatest confidence man in literature' [di Giovanni, 2003; 112].

By contrast, Chapter 2 addressed those poems and fictions of Borges which make evident his sometimes overwhelming obsession with death, an obsession to which he gave expression from an early age. 'Deaths of Buenos Aires', 'Limits (or Goodbyes)', 'Recoleta Cemetery', 'Remorse for Any Death', 'The Dagger', and 'Inscription on Any Tomb' are typical of the titles which he gave to many of his poems; and perhaps one of the most memorable is Borges' contemplation on Dürer's famous etching, 'Knight, Death, and the Devil'. Many of Borges' fictions illustrate the same obsession; these include titles such as 'The End' and 'The Immortal'. And it appears that Borges' obsession was not unique in his native country; Hurley quotes 'a modern guidebook' which says: 'Argentines are "cadaver cultists"'.

In Chapter 3 I attempted to investigate and illustrate the many aspects of what Borges called 'that most precious gift, doubt' [1998b; 245], as displayed in both his poems and his fictions. Borges made that confession less than a year before his death, but this same sentiment was present throughout his life; more than sixty years earlier he had published one of the most memorable of his early poems, 'The Boast of Quietness', which contains the line: 'I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away he doesn't expect to arrive'. At the age of 71 he tells us that, having begun reading Schopenhauer, the philosopher of pessimism, 'were I to choose a single philosopher, I would choose him'. He once described the word 'neverness' as 'a beautiful word, a word that's a poem in itself, full of hopelessness, sadness, and despair'. On another occasion he observed: 'Well, nowadays if an adventure is attempted, we know that it will end in failure'.

He states that '[t]hroughout my boyhood, I thought that to be loved would have amounted to an injustice. I did not feel that I deserved any particular love ... that I was a kind of fake'. He advises some university students: 'You have to begin with unhappiness. That should be a tool for the poet'. Indeed, one critic states that Borges' view of life was 'pure Joseph Conrad: gloom, pessimism, fatalism', and a close friend of his called him 'the ultimate skeptic'.

Other poems contain the following lines: 'I have got near to happiness and have stood in the shadow of suffering ... / I believe deeply that this is all and that I will neither see nor accomplish new things'; 'The world is like something useless, thrown away'; 'Glory / is among the guises of oblivion'; 'I have committed the worst sin of all / That a man can commit. I have not been / Happy'; and 'I am deeply wrought / by the shame of being sad among so much beauty / and the disgrace of unfulfilled hopes'.

Furthermore, many of his fictions provide evidence of this strong sense of doubt, including such well-known titles as 'The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim', 'The Lottery in Babylon', 'The Library of Babel', 'The Secret Miracle', 'Funes, His Memory', 'Averroës' Search' and 'A Weary Man's Utopia'; while 'The Secret Miracle' illustrates Borges' horror at the possibility of ultimate certainty.

However, despite all the evidence of its importance to Borges, most of his critics pay little attention to this 'supreme gift' of doubt.

Chapter 4 dealt, in part, with what I have labelled Borges' 'ancient simplicities'; fictions such as 'Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths' [1998a; 263-264] and 'The Mirror of Ink' [1998a; 60-62] are, I suggest, amongst his greatest writings, because in them he demonstrates both the concision at which he always

aimed, as well as his sense of humility — which, I suggest, he derived in part from his ‘precious gift’ of doubt. But other fictions illustrate the importance to Borges of this sense of humility; for example: ‘The Shape of the Sword’, ‘The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero’, ‘The House of Asterion’, ‘The Two Kings and Their Two Labyrinths’, ‘The Writing of the God’, and ‘Blue Tigers’. Some of these may lack characteristics to be found in Borges’ ‘ancient simplicities’, but they are amongst his finest stories. Again, however, Borges’ critics seem disinclined to appreciate the importance of this sense of humility, and therefore both the importance and the quality of the fictions that illustrate it.

However, while the pieces discussed in Part 1 of the thesis are of considerable interest — for one or many reasons — the pieces which are discussed in Part 2 make sad reading.

Borges’ lecture on Hawthorne [1964; 47-65], despite its lengthy preparation, is based on a misinterpretation of the story that Borges surprisingly considers to be Hawthorne’s most significant, and omits any mention of what is perhaps that author’s best work; instead Borges offers a pointless discussion on the metaphor.

That lecture also serves to remind us that Borges’ writings include few references to the vast body of Greek classical mythology, favouring instead Islamic and Arabic myths; did Borges deliberately concentrate upon myths from cultures of which he could expect most of his readers to be ignorant?

When Borges became a professor of English and American literature it is significant that, according to Woodall, this was a post that he ‘never filled with



any true academic distinction' [178]. His lecture on 'The Enigma of Shakespeare' [2001; 463-473; tr. Esther Allen] exemplifies this, containing as it does a refusal on Borges' part to acknowledge that there are still questions to be asked regarding the authorship of the Shakespearean canon; indeed, it has been estimated that, over the years, a total of more than sixty names have been put forward either as the sole or principal author of those works.

Borges' lectures at Harvard, published under the title *This Craft of Verse* [2000c], were allowed to wait for more than thirty years before being published, and there are other reasons for believing that Harvard University may have regretted asking Borges to give those lectures, principal amongst these reasons being their poor quality and lack of preparation.

I suggest that it is impossible that Borges' use of the names 'Melancthon' and 'Ulrikke' should have been accidental; neither is Spanish and neither is common; indeed, for very different reasons they are both especially significant names in Western history; what, then, was Borges purpose in choosing to use them?

Similarly, it is impossible that Borges should have misread Chesterton as comprehensively as his essay 'On Chesterton' [1964; 82-85] implies, especially when one bears in mind Manguel's statement that together they read Chesterton's stories 'over many nights and on which [Borges] commented with wonderful perspicacity and wit' [26]. The essay cannot be taken seriously; but if it was an attempt at a hoax, the attempt fails miserably. Similarly, the 'New Refutation of Time' [1964; 171-187] appears to be a morass of metaphysics masquerading as philosophical thinking.

The essay and the Prologue on Kafka [1964; 106-108; and 2001; 501-503] appear to demonstrate a complete failure on Borges' part to understand his cherished predecessor's acceptance of the supreme irony that death is our *raison d'être*; and in his essay on 'The Labyrinths of the Detective Story' [2001; 112-114], Borges seems to demonstrate an astonishing degree of ignorance about the detective novel — a branch of literature of which he was an avid reader and an enthusiastic writer.

In 'The *Biathanatos*' [1964; 89-92] Borges uses a totally inappropriate example of Donne's poetry to demonstrate that poet's achievements, despite being fully aware of considerably more appropriate examples.

In 'The Wall and the Books' [1964; 3-5], apart from the factual error it contains, we find a pointless exercise being given considerable prominence; and in 'Forms of a Legend' [1964; 146-153] we find a total denial of facts with which Borges had been well acquainted since childhood.

In 'From Allegories to Novels' [1964; 154-157] Borges appears to have misread his revered Chesterton once again; and in 'For Bernard Shaw' [1964; 163-166] he again seems to have misunderstood his subject.

Borges is quoted as saying: 'I am quite simply a man who uses perplexity for literary purposes' [Yates, 1971; 28]; but what 'literary purposes' had he in mind? How could Borges, a writer of such brilliant pieces of fiction, come to write these second-rate pieces that appear to characterise so much of his non-fiction?

It is interesting that di Giovanni, in his book *The Lesson of the Master*, makes no mention whatever of Borges' non-fictions — in marked contrast to his

consuming interest in Borges' fictions and poems; did di Giovanni fear that his comments might offend the Master?

But nothing mentioned in this résumé appears to match Borges' virtual refusal to read Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. It is, I suggest, nothing less than amazing that Borges, justly described by di Giovanni as 'one of the great comic writers of our time' [2003; 48], did not recognise that, whatever else it might be, *Finnegans Wake* is one of the greatest comic works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bearing in mind those comments on *Finnegans Wake*, perhaps the greatest irony was this: It was primarily because of his sense of humour, which Borges was never able to abandon for very long, that he denied himself the opportunity to achieve his life-long ambition — to emulate Franz Kafka. At 84 years of age, three years before his death, he told a seminar in New York: 'I played being close to Kafka ... but I went on being Borges, I couldn't do it' [1998b; 217]. Those words might well be used as his epitaph.

It seems that we face three dichotomies in attempting to reconcile the enigma of Borges:

First: Some of the non-fictions that have been discussed appear to be a dour mess of failed attempts at humour. Yet Borges was the man whose sense of humour was notorious, who wrote many hoaxes, some of them discussed in Chapter 1, who collaborated in planning a novel 'that would provoke a nervous breakdown ... by introducing pens with nibs on both sides [and] sugar bowls that didn't release sugar' [Jason Wilson; 2006; 60], and whose inventive powers — as di Giovanni once put it — 'skyrocket into sheer clowning' [1971; 70]. But this was

the man who made no attempt, at least initially, to understand one of the greatest comedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Finnegans Wake*; and this was the man who, in ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’, made one of the most tragic events in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe the subject of a hoax.

And this dichotomy takes on yet another dimension; it was necessary for Borges to forget his great sense of humour, at least temporarily, for him to write what I have suggested are his best fictions discussed in Chapter 4.

Secondly: Borges’ amateur metaphysics, which are displayed in some of the other non-fictions that have been discussed, are indicative of a philosophy that has been ‘travelling earnestly in circles, getting nowhere’ [Sturrock; 21]. But we should also recall Borges’ statement that ‘The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility — they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy’ [Borges; 1998a; 74].

Thirdly: As will be evident from many of the discussions in Part 2, Borges was a purveyor of muddled thinking; despite this, he had a life-long ambition to be a second Franz Kafka — to follow in the footsteps of a writer whose thought-processes were of frightening clarity.

Jason Wilson [2006; 7] quotes Victoria Ocampo’s not-surprising off-the-cuff comment in *La Nación* that ‘Borges did not deserve the talent he had. There’s a flaw, she hints, between his staggering intelligence, his wit and his behaviour’.

Jorge Luis Borges presents no mere enigma, but a paradox; indeed, a paradox worthy of Zeno.

Part 1 of this thesis dealt with some of the many problems raised by Borges' critics, and suggested solutions; while Part 2, having pointed out the many questionable statements that Borges made or implied about himself, despaired of solutions.

However, one more facet of Borges' work should be mentioned. Strictly speaking, it is outside the scope of this thesis as defined in the Introduction; it is therefore considered in a Postscript.

## POSTSCRIPT

While Borges' prose gives rise to many problems, his poetry gives rise to no problems whatsoever. Many of his poems have been quoted in this thesis, and from them it will be evident that, unlike his prose, they display no contradictions, never challenge the detective skills of his readers, never attempt to be clever, and never contain hoaxes. On the contrary, Borges' poems are unfailingly honest, clear and uncompromising, despite the fact that so many writers have been involved in their translation. Furthermore, as the quoted examples show, his later poems display none of the tiredness that is evident in some of his later prose — which is as it should be, for one who saw his poetry as being of primary importance.

Borges published many more books of verse than prose, even though, after 1929, he published no poetry for thirty years; indeed, he told his audience at the University of Arkansas that poetry 'is the only sincere thing in me'; and Jason Wilson tells us that Jean-Pierre Bernès, who was at his death-bed, called Borges 'before all else a poet'. Despite this, however, the number of pages which most of his critics have devoted to Borges' poetry is only a small fraction of the number which they have devoted to his fiction.

We should also keep in mind the following conversation, which took place in 1970:

'What I liked about you, di Giovanni, was that there at Harvard you were the only person who took me seriously as a poet'.  
'But I see you as a poet, Borges'.  
'Yes. I see myself as a poet'.

In time, perhaps, more of us will come to see Borges as a poet.

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