Borges and Dante: A Critical Issue Revisited

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Abstract

This thesis examines the presence of Dante Alighieri in the creative work of Jorge Luis Borges. Its aim, however, is not to produce an extensive study of references and allusions to Dante in Borges; rather, it seeks to define the nature of the encounter in its deeper literary and psychological implications. In this respect, three central themes in Borges's reception of the Dantesque poem are explored, namely, poetic language, ethics, and love.

The main text of the thesis first presents a general appraisal of Borges's reading of Dante and the ways in which this is manifest in his writing. Next, it examines the issue of poetic language, which is introduced as the fundamental link in Borges's reception of the *Commedia*. In order to show the relevance of the topic in Borges, the chapter begins by exploring some of the complexities of his thought with regard to the problem of literary language and the ways in which elements of that thought coincide with some of the most fundamental linguistic and poetic concerns in Dante. These two sections—which describe (1) the prominence of the issue in Borges and (2) Dante's position on the matter—are followed by a final section which discusses Borges's critique of rhetorical language in the short story ‘El Aleph’. Following the same method of inquiry, chapter 2 explores the rather neglected problem of ethics in Borges. It begins by looking at the ways in which Borges tackled the question in his early work, which is succeeded by a brief discussion of the issue in Dante. The chapter concludes by showing how Borges's encounter with the moral allegory of the *Commedia* resulted in a figurative representation of the Nazi Holocaust in the short story ‘La escritura del dios’. The third and final chapter considers the theme of love, first by exploring the subject in Borges's early lyrics, then by presenting an outline of the dynamics of love in Dante, and finally by analyzing the psychology of the erotic theme in Borges's reading of the Italian poet. This is characterized by the figure of the dead woman on whom the problem of time and mortality is reflected, but it includes elements of the tradition of ‘courtly love’ poetry. In a manner more specifically connected with the *Commedia*, Borges eliminates the symbolic element of Beatrice and highlights the role of forgetfulness in the amorous affair. In this respect, what distinguishes his narrative is the inversion of Dantesque themes, as in the short stories ‘El Aleph’ and ‘El Zahir’. In the latter, I also show Borges's playful reworking of the theme of lovesickness in connection with specific medieval and Renaissance sources.
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Declaration

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Abbreviations

\textit{Commedia} = \textit{La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata}, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966-67)


\textit{DVE} = \textit{De vulgari eloquentia}, ed. by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo (Padova: Antenore, 1968)

\textit{FB} = \textit{Fervor de Buenos Aires} (Buenos Aires: Serrantes, 1923)

\textit{IA} = \textit{El idioma de los argentinos} (Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1928)

\textit{Inq.} = \textit{Inquisiciones} (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925)

\textit{Mon.} = \textit{Monarchia}, ed. by Pier Giorgio Ricci (Milan: Mondadori, 1965)


\textit{TC} = \textit{Textos cautivos} (Madrid: Alianza, 1998)

\textit{TE} = \textit{El tamaño de mi esperanza} (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1926)


\textit{VN} = \textit{Vita Nuova}, ed. by Michele Barbi (Florence: Bemporad, 1932)
Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the presence of Dante in the creative work of Jorge Luis Borges. Although the subject has received careful attention from Borges scholars, I believe that there are some important aspects here which have not been explored in sufficient depth. My aim, however, is not to produce a compilation of textual references and allusions to Dante in Borges. Rather it seeks to define the precise nature of the encounter in its deeper literary and psychological dimension. In this respect, I examine three topics which play a deciding role in Borges's reception of the Dantean poem, namely, poetic language, ethics, and love. While Borges's reading of Dante is informed by a specific Borgesian problematic, I also hope to illustrate how certain problems were actually articulated by Dante in his work. This dual perspective is necessary in order to perceive Borges's understanding of Dantean themes as well as the divergence that this appropriation entails.

It is true that Dante is only one presence among others in Borges. This is partly due to the rich variety of his readings which embrace world literature to go beyond the national and linguistic boundaries of the Western literary tradition. Indeed, one of his characteristic intellectual attitudes consisted in his reception of literature as a universal asset, one which allows the writer to locate his activity within a wide cultural framework. The Argentinian writer—he argues in a polemical essay against the cultural politics of the Peronista movement in the 1940s—has a legitimate access to a multiplicity of traditions; therefore, he should not confine himself to local or nationalistic themes. This attitude, which may seem paradoxical with respect to the aesthetic tenets he held in the late 1920s, reflects Borges's European kinship, a consequence not only of his family background (his grandmother was English), but also of his school years in Switzerland. At the same time, the existence of a large library in the Borges household consolidated, from a very early age, his enthusiasm for books of all kinds, books in which he encountered the enchanting world of a collective literary imagination:

The writers whose literary influence I consciously assimilated were Stevenson, Chesterton, Kipling and Shaw, authors I read when I was still a young boy growing up in Buenos Aires and spending a considerable amount of my time in my father's library which contained a remarkable collection of English books. [...] This is perhaps where I first experienced
literature as an adventure into an endless variety of styles. The library was like a single mind with many tongues.¹

Dante, then, is only one of several influences at work on Borges. It is registered in his essays on the Commedia, and in a chapter in Siete Noches (originally a series of lectures on literary themes delivered in 1977).² Scattered references to Dante can be found throughout many of the interviews granted by the author after gaining international renown in the late 1950s. However, due to their spontaneous and usually autobiographical nature, these do not constitute a systematic reflection from which a poetic theory can be construed. Nevertheless, in the above-mentioned essays, Borges makes a display of scholarly erudition by referring to no fewer than thirty sources, including early commentators of the Commedia as well as later writers and critics of Dante. Years later, when he was asked the question: ‘Does he mean as much to you as your favourite English [...] and American poets?’, his reply was unequivocal: ‘Were I to save a whole book [...] I would save the Divine Comedy. [...] I think of Dante as being the writer, as being the poet’.³ Now if the Commedia played such an important role in Borges's literary fruition, and if he invested so much energy in the study of Dante scholarship, it is reasonable to suppose that it also left deep traces in his creative work.

This question raises a chronological problem which has to a certain extent been clarified by Borges himself. Despite the fact that he referred his reading of the Commedia to a rather late period of his life (the late 1930s),⁴ Borges's first allusions to Dante in a critical context can be found in the essays he wrote during the previous decade, after his return to Argentina. Nevertheless, these do not provide evidence of a substantial knowledge of Dante. For the most part, they are limited to the mention of the Italian poet or to general remarks which do not imply a thorough engagement with his work. Given this, however, I have been particularly susceptible to those issues which indicate a coincidence with Dantine themes. It is true that in a comparative study of this kind one is inclined to overemphasize such parallels. In general, I have tried to distinguish the cases in which there is an agreement of thought between Borges and Dante (without this implying a direct influence) from those in which a certain word or image suggest a more intimate connection. In this respect, there is an instance in Borges's early lyrics that seems to indicate his familiarity with canto V of the Inferno. Indeed, through a close textual analysis, I have been able to determine a
clear echo of the famous episode of Francesca da Rimini in the poem 'Llamarada', which was composed by Borges as early as 1919. This in itself does not mean that he was already entirely acquainted with the *Commedia* at that time. Given the immense popularity of the episode (especially among the English romantic poets Borges read from an early age), it is not surprising that he would have known about it in his youth. Furthermore, the fact that in his later essays on Dante Borges remains attached to the romantic interest in the figures of Paolo and Francesca, as well as those of Beatrice, Ulysses and Ugolino, suggests that his reading of Dante may well have been mediated (at least in its beginning) by nineteenth-century writers (as indeed his essays show), and that this initial contact left a lasting impression on him. Hence, if my interpretation of 'Llamarada' is correct (and if Borges's early references to Dante were seriously intended), we must conclude that by 1919 Borges was familiar with a few Dantean episodes (which he may have read in a selection of Dantean passages in English translation), and that his later declarations regarding his poetic encounter with Dante refer to a systematic reading of the *Commedia*. This does not preclude a previous (albeit partial) knowledge of Dante and his poetic work.5

One way of assessing the presence of Dante in Borges's fiction is by looking at the issues to which he gives prominence in the essays. These include: (1) the idea of a work of art which contains the totality of being (‘He fantaseado una obra mágica, una lámina que también fuera un microcosmo; el poema de Dante es esa lámina de ámbito universal’, *OC* III, p. 343); (2) the connection between rhetoric and an authentic movement of thought and feeling (‘La precisión que acabo de indicar no es un artificio retórico; es afirmación de la probidad, de la plenitud, con que cada incidente del poema ha sido imaginado’, p. 344); (3) the role of the imagination and its relationship to the poet as artificer (‘El poeta es cada uno de los hombres de su mundo ficticio’, p. 346); (4) the association between art and reality (‘De Ugolino debemos decir que es una textura verbal’, pp. 352-53); (5) the question of free will and moral responsibility (‘Dante comprende y no perdona. […] Sintió (no comprendió) que los actos del hombre son necesarios y que asimismo es necesaria la eternidad, de bienaventuranza o de perdición, que éstos le acarrean’, p. 359); and (6) the nature and significance of Dante's love for Beatrice (‘La realidad, para él, era que primero la vida y después la muerte le habían arrebatado a Beatriz’, p. 374). These are, in a nutshell, the issues I propose to develop in the body of the thesis.
With regard to Borges's critical assessment of the *Commedia*, several points emerge from the essays. In the first instance, these are marked by an aesthetic evaluation of the literary work, one which stresses the reader's emotional response to the poetic (as opposed to doctrinal or philosophical) essence of the text. Indeed the imprint left by critics and commentators such as De Sanctis, Croce and Momigliano in the appreciation of Dante's poetry is clearly perceptible in Borges's appraisal, although Anglo-American criticism also exerted an important influence on him, particularly that of Thomas Carlyle and T. B. Macaulay. Among the English translations acknowledged by him is the one by Longfellow. This includes, at the end of each *cantica*, an appendix under the title ‘Illustrations’, a real treasure of literary selections from world literature. Several of Borges's references and interpretations of the *Commedia* can be found there, not to mention the section on the cabbala to which the short stories ‘El Aleph’ and ‘La escritura del dios’ are linked.

As it has been noted by Roberto Paoli, it is possible to question whether Borges had a direct access to all his references (‘Borges e Dante’, p. 195). The rather imprecise nature of his indications (there are few quotations and their source is not always specified), and the scarce availability of some of the works he mentions (particularly with respect to the early ones), suggests that he may actually have had at hand a smaller number of commentaries. It is true, however, that this circumstance may have been determined by external factors (such as editorial criteria), a feature that is not exclusive of the essays on Dante. Be that as it may, it is striking to note that in the chapter in *Siete Noches* mentioned above (written almost three decades later) Borges's former erudite pose has completely vanished. The themes do not differ substantially from the earlier essays (some of them actually reappear in identical form), yet there is no question here about a radical change in authorial stance, which is one of greater modesty and simplicity.

Considering the essays as a whole, whether in the 1949 version or in their final arrangement included in the *Obras completas*, one cannot say that Borges achieves a comprehensive analysis of the manifold complexities of the *Commedia*. This would have required the development of literary, philosophical and theological issues for which he may not have had the appropriate space. However, in dealing with Borges's critical work, it is always necessary to bear in mind the readership for which it was intended. The fact is that the essays on Dante were addressed to the general public and, in this, Borges was certainly fulfilling a pedagogic role. It is nevertheless
improbable that he would have had the interest to produce a extensive study of the poem. Borges may have been a reader of great poetic sensibility and intellectual curiosity, but he was neither an Italianist nor a medievalist, and his approach to Dante is always imaginative, not academic. In doing so, it is clear that he followed a very personal view of the work and that this was dictated by his literary and emotional sensibility to particular aspects of the poem.8

With regard to his poetic and narrative production, Borges's reading of Dante and its imprint thereof is more complex. Among the compositions which are directly based on Dantean themes are the poems 'Inferno, I, 32' and 'Paradiso, XXXI, 108', and the short stories 'El Aleph', 'El Zahir', and 'La escritura del dios', in which Borges intertwines allusions to Dante with other literary, mystical, and philosophical elements. There are, of course, other ways in which the reading of the Commedia manifests itself in Borges. In 'La intrusa', a short story dealing with jealousy and uncontrolled eroticism, he makes use of the narrative technique employed by Dante in the episode of Francesca da Rimini (Inferno V, 73-142), thus having one of his characters speak for himself as well as for the other (in this case two rival brothers in love of the same woman). Elsewhere, in 'Poema conjetural', he makes a direct reference to Purgatorio V, 94-102, including a literal translation of line 99: 'fuggendo a piede e sanguinando il piano' ('huyendo a pie y ensangrentando el llano', OC, II, p. 245, line 14); a strategy to which he turns to in the poem 'El Ángel' (from La Cifra, 1981), where he inserts the last verse of the Commedia ('l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle', Par. XXXIII, 145), in order to incorporate in his composition the entire moral problematic of the Dantean poem: 'Que el hombre no sea indigno del Ángel | cuya espada lo guarda | desde que lo engendró aquel Amor | que mueve el sol y las estrellas | hasta el Último Día en que retumbe | el trueno en la trompeta' (OC, III, p. 320, lines 1-6). In yet another occurrence, the historical character Petrus Damiani (mentioned by Dante in Par. XXI, 121-23), becomes the pretext for a short story in which Borges toys with the ideas of time and identity, whilst, in contrast, 'La espera' portrays the psychotic delirium of a traitor who, like the sinful souls of the Inferno, is unable to escape his own moral blindness.9

There is a further instance in which we can speak of a Dantean presence in Borges. Allegory—whether by this we mean the simple alternativism of poet's allegory or the more complex species of historical-symbolic or even typological allegory—may not be Dante's invention, but is unquestionably one of his favourite modes of
representation in the *Commedia*. Although Borges privileges the poetic features of the poem (as opposed to the doctrinal thought conveyed in allegorical form), there is no question that he used allegory as a means of constructing a higher level of meaning in his own stories. Like Dante, Borges expresses throughout his work a concern about the truth of man's earthly condition, particularly in the ways in which literature can manifest or conceal such truth. However, his solution to the problem, perhaps in a typically modern fashion, tends to be negative. Rather than the affirmation of being, what we often find in Borges is doubt and disbelief. Thus truth in Borges's fiction is turned into appearance and illusion, a cognitive state man is incapable of overcoming. In many of his short stories this results in a radical scepticism that permeates all aspects of being. Of course, the roots of his conception are deep and include a variety of classical, Christian and Neoplatonic elements with which Borges had a keen preoccupation during the 1930s and 40s: Marcus Aurelius, Plotinus, and St Augustine among others.

The theme of the journey in search of truth that characterizes the *Commedia* is not absent from Borges's narrative. Although it would be vain to relate this motif to his reading of the *Commedia* alone, it is certain that he found in Dante's Ulysses a powerful representation of the poet's quest for knowledge and experience as well as a projection of his own creative anxiety. More specifically, in ‘El último viaje de Ulises’, Borges observes that Dante's real challenge at this stage of the work (*Inferno* XXVI) consisted in the completion of the *Commedia*, one which awaited public diffusion and a likely political and religious condemnation. Dante, burdened with uncertainty, compared his bold enterprise (the writing of the poem rather than the pilgrim's journey) with that of Ulysses's tragic expedition: ‘La acción de Ulises es indudablemente el viaje de Ulises, porque Ulises no es otra cosa que el sujeto de quien se predica esa acción, pero la acción o empresa de Dante no es el viaje de Dante, sino la ejecución de su libro’ (*OC*, III, p. 355; my italics). It is an imaginative approach to the episode, one which perceives at the heart of the narrative the pressing issue of literary fulfilment. Borges must have been very sensitive to this question, for he concludes one of the few poems he wrote during this period with a strong indictment against his own poetic achievements:

En vano te hemos prodigado el océano,
En vano el sol, que vieron los maravillados ojos de Whitman:
Has gastado los años y te han gastado,
Y todavía no has escrito el poema.¹⁰

Indeed what is most characteristic of Borges's reading of Dante is the deep psychological and (auto)biographical import with which he instils the work, a feature which is particularly noticeable in his approach to the figure of Beatrice. It is true that in the *Vita nuova* Dante recounts the story of his love for a real woman. However, by stressing the reality of Beatrice, Dante breaks with the conventions of allegorical writing and, at the same time, transcends the egocentric dynamics of the so-called 'courtly love' poetry. The reappearance of Beatrice in the *Commedia*, on the other hand, is linked to an allegorical interpretation of the pilgrim's journey. In his essays on Dante, Borges ignores this progression without noticing the import of the reality of Beatrice in the *libello*. His view is determined by a nostalgic, almost novelettish approach to the story, as if Beatrice's withdrawal of her salute constituted the only significant event in Dante's 'book of memory'; and then he goes on to affirm the essentially unfulfilled nature of Dante's love for her in the *Commedia*, one which contrasts, in his view, with the passionate love between Paolo and Francesca. In order to appease his sadness, Borges concludes in one of the essays, Dante conceived the intricate structure of the poem. In this way, he was able to dream a final reunion with his beloved. This excessive romantic view of Beatrice has autobiographical overtones, as I show in my interpretation of the short stories 'El Aleph' and 'El Zahir'.

On the other hand, just as Borges highlights the reader's aesthetic response to the *Commedia* he also questions his capacity to appreciate the religious dimension of the work: 'The fact that I am not a Christian makes my judgment of Dante to be simply an aesthetic one' (*Borges, the Poet*, p. 86). Now there is no question that Dante held in high regard the formal aspects of his craft. At the same time, he firmly believed in literature as a spiritual aid in man's struggle for moral and intellectual improvement, as the episode of Casella in *Purgatorio* II, and indeed the whole composition, shows. To follow Dante in his pilgrimage is not to amuse ourselves with a series of adventure stories, as Borges suggests elsewhere.¹¹ Rather it is to learn about the human condition in the here and now of our existence. Thus the problem that emerges from Borges's appreciation of the *Commedia* has literary as well as ethical repercussions. How he tackles this delicate issue within his work is a task that has been largely ignored by Borges scholarship.
In the first chapter I aim to provide an overview of Borges's conception of poetic language and his coincidence with Dante's thought on the subject. I do not claim, however, that there is a direct connection between Borges and Dante on this issue, particularly in his early criticism, which shows no substantial knowledge of Dante's theory of poetry. What we do find is a common concern for certain aspects of language in relation to the creative process. This parallelism, nevertheless, prepared the ground for Borges's later reception of Dante as the poet. In the following two chapters I explore the issues of ethics and love along the lines stated above.

I develop each theme in a threefold sequence, first by looking at the prominence of the issue in Borges (especially in his early work), then by presenting an outline of Dante's position on the matter, and finally by showing the outcome of the encounter as it manifests itself in Borges's creative production during the 1940s, the decade in which he was actively involved in the reading of the *Commedia*. By proceeding in this way I hope to offer a relatively wide view of the way in which these topics appear in Borges's work and, at the same time, submit a general perspective from which the reader can gauge the significance of the issue in Dante's thought. The aim of the latter is to reveal the ways in which Borges responds to the Dantine problematic by developing and transforming the issues in question.

My approach is eclectic in so far as I do not apply a particular theoretical framework that would guide (and determine) the results of my investigation. Instead, I confer great importance to the literary and philosophical spirit in which the texts were produced and the problems they tried to solve in their own account.

Notes
Three of these essays were included (with slight variants) in ‘Estudio preliminar’, an introduction to a Spanish translation of the Commedia published the following year (La Divina Comedia, Colección Clásicos Jackson, vol 31 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jackson, 1949), pp. ix-xxviii), but they were all recovered by the author, together with new material, in Nueve ensayos dantescos (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982). This includes: ‘El noble castillo del canto cuarto’, first published in La Nación, 22 April 1951, sect. 2, p. 1; ‘Dante y los visionarios anglo-sajones’, first published in Ars, 78 (1957) [151-54]; as well as ‘Purgatorio, I, 13’, and ‘La última sonrisa de Beatriz’, which were first published in the 1982 edition of the essays. In this final version Boges left out some technical considerations which were more suitable for the 1949 introduction to the Divine Comedy.

Borges, the Poet, ed. by Carlos Cortínez (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1986), pp. 86-87.


This includes a discussion of specific passages from the following cantos: Inf. IV; V; XXVI; XXXIII; Purg. I; XXX; Par. X; XIX; XXXI. Scattered references to the Vita
nuova, the Convivio, and the Epistle to Cangrande (especially in the initial sections of the 1949 version) are also made. The nonacademic trait of the essays is of course well known; see, for instance, Joaquín Arce, ‘Borges, lector de la “Divina Comedia”’, in Jorge Luis Borges, Nueve ensayos dantescos (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982), pp. 78-79. Borges’s well-known tendency to transgress the conventions of literary genre explains the freedom with which he deals with these issues. Cf. Giuseppe Mazzotta’s introduction to Critical Essays on Dante, ed. by Giuseppe Mazzotta (Boston MA: Hall, 1991), pp. xxi-xxii: ‘In our century the dividing line between academic and nonacademic critics (Ungaretti, Eliot, Mandelstam, Borges, Penn Warren, and others) is fairly sharp. [...] Nonacademic readers clearly tend to be daring in their insights and thereby force on us new perceptions of the complexities of the poem. [...] The essays by Ungaretti and Borges are particularly striking because they point toward other, elusive, unpredictable directions. These two essays are, above all, readings—in the strong sense of the word, the sense that academicians do not really understand—and not commentaries or erudite glosses, though Borges manifestly plays with the genre of glossing the text’ (my italics). See also María Rosa Menocal, Writing in Dante’s Cult of Truth: From Borges to Boccaccio (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 137: ‘Borges has deftly inverted the usual order of poetic obligation, for now the precursor owes a debt to the epigone, for the latter has caused the former to be read anew’.


11 Cf. Rosalba Campara, America Latina: l’identità e la maschera (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1982), p. 120: ‘Quando ho cominciato a leggere la Divina Commedia, l’ho fatto un po’ per senso del dovere, [...] e poi, dopo una o due pagine, mi dimenticai completamente del dovere e continuai a leggere molto interessato dall’amicizia di Dante e Virgilio e dalle loro avventure’. As is well known, for Borges enchantment constitutes the psychological basis of reading: ‘La letteratura è una forma della
Chapter 1
Poetic Language

(i)

It is only natural for a poet to inquire about language given that this is the essential medium of his or her art. In ordinary language speech serves to convey ideas, attitudes, and intentions in relation to the world of experience in which we live. However, since this kind of verbal expression has a direct reference to purpose and fact, it is not primarily concerned with the creation of linguistic models and rules nor with the artistic unity of meaning and form. In poetic language, on the other hand, words stop being subservient to pragmatic ends and become the equal of feeling and thought, with which they conform a whole. The poet, furthermore, has at his or her disposal a number of elements which help to create an objective set of rules around which the poetic activity can be organized. Poetry, in the classical sense of the word, is a skill. It is a knowledge of the rules that govern language in its capacity to represent an aspect of reality.

A poem, however, cannot consist in a mere display of technical dexterity nor in an arbitrary process of selection and combination. Rather, technique stands to be informed and energised by an inner sense which alone determines the excellence of the work of art as a concrete manifestation of poetic insight. The unity of word, thought, and emotion achieved by the poet implies a correspondence between the object of representation and the inner sense, and as such it is indivisible. This kind of experience is intuitive, as opposed to the logical form of rational discourse. In the aesthetic experience, the unity of the poetic expression belongs to a contemplative mood, in the sense that an image is immediately present to the imagination in its form and substance; but a rational overview of poetry, such as that of the critic, proceeds by analysis, for this is the way in which understanding operates.

The intuitive and the analytical have each their own field of action but this does not preclude their collaboration in the artistic process. On the contrary, these two activities work together throughout a poet's life, sometimes causing deep changes in his or her poetic principles. Such is the case of Borges, who began his artistic career as a leading figure among the poets of the ultraist movement in Spain, who wrote
passionate proclamations in defence of their literary faith and vehemently attacked those he considered its enemies, but who very soon, following the dictates of his critical judgment, departed from the movement in quite a different direction. Indeed the series poems and essays which he published after his return to Argentina in the 1920s show a process in which his creative and analytical faculties reflect each other, a process in which, furthermore, he did not hesitate to condemn the fallacy of the poetic principles that he had previously advocated. During this period his concern with language and rhetoric can be placed at the core of his intellectual preoccupations. Given that I cannot do justice here to the complexities of his ideas about language in general and poetic expression in particular, I will focus on what I believe constitutes the point of intersection between his own literary faith and Dante's work. This can be described as a search for poetic truth, in the sense that a genuine poetic expression should establish a necessary link between feeling and representation (form and content). My aim in this chapter is to show that at the heart of Borges's reception of the Commedia lies his admiration for Dante's masterly handling of language as well as for his absolute fidelity to the transparency of the word, that is, his capacity to create an aesthetic emotion in a perfect verbal equation. It is in this respect that Dante was for Borges a poet of truth, that is, not as a Christian poet and philosopher but simply as the maker of images. This distinction is fundamental for the appreciation of the satirical elements in ‘El Aleph’, with which I conclude this chapter.

As a poet, Dante was well aware that his craft required a high command of language and form. He was therefore very critical of those poets who, in his view, did not follow or were not able to implement a consistent set of rules in their literary practice. Although the circumstances in which Dante lived differ entirely from Borges's, at the root of their activity as poets lies a common interest in language and rhetoric. My initial discussion will therefore circle around this question, even though, it must be said, Borges does not explicitly address the issue in Dantean terms (he does not mention, for instance, Dante's treatise on the vernacular, the De vulgari eloquentia, nor does he make reference to other commonly discussed passages, such as chapter XXV of the Vita nuova and cantos XXIV-XXVI of the Purgatorio). What is important to note, however, is that there is a coincidence of concerns which prepared the ground for Borges's recognition of Dante as the poet.
In his first outburst of literary activity, Borges's attention to linguistic matters placed a strong emphasis on the actual language of the Argentinians, and, in particular, to the colloquialisms of the people of Buenos Aires. His purpose was to elaborate both a critique and a defence of the vernacular in its capacity to supply the poet with a valuable linguistic form. Thus, in ‘El idioma de los argentinos’ (1927), he begins by declaring the artistic poverty of the Argentinian marginal dialects, those that belong either to the ‘arrabal’ (the poor suburb area) or to the lower stratum of the city (such as the lunfardo, the dialect spoken by delinquents). These, he asserts, cannot furnish the poet with a fertile ground where he can sow the seeds of a rich and enduring poetic language. At the same time, he rejects the adoption of standard Castilian together with the stylistic precepts of Spanish grammarians, although, in his poetic practice, Borges does not rule out their applicability. In general, however, this cannot constitute the basis of an authentic national poetic art.

He then turns his attention to other linguistic manifestations and finds in the oral tradition of his native city a firm basis upon which a genuine poetic emotion can be built (note the shift in Borges's discourse from a national language to a specifically urban, centralized idiom). Furthermore, in contrast with the artificiality of language and thought which, in his view, dominates the contemporary literary scene, Borges discovers in the literary language of the (idealized) nineteenth-century Argentinian criollo the existence of an ingrained spirit which not only integrated but also dignified the dialect of its time: ‘Mejor lo hicieron nuestros mayores. El tono de su escritura fué el de su voz. [...] Fueron argentinos con dignidad: su decirse criollos no fué una arrogancia orillera ni un malhumor. Escribieron el dialecto usual de sus días: ni recaer en españoles ni degenerar en malevos fué su apetencia’ (IA, pp. 176-77). This historical perspective seems to indicate his desire to preserve an Argentinian national character (against the overwhelming cosmopolitism of the city of Buenos Aires) through the affirmation of a unified literary language. Although Borges does not refer to his own work, his first collections of poetry give credit to such a project.

Borges is, nevertheless, conscious of the limitations of literary language. The written word is in effect an agonizing word, in the sense that writing can hardly transmit the wealth of extra-linguistic elements (such as the speaker's gestures, emphasis, and tone) that accompany the oral word:
Nosotros, los que procuramos la paradoja de comunicarnos con los demás con solas palabras—y esas acostadas en un papel—sabemos bien las vergüenzas de nuestro idioma. Nosotros, los renunciadores a ese gran diálogo auxiliar de miradas, de miradas y de sonrisas, que es la mitad de una conversación y más de la mitad de su encanto, hemos padecido en pobreza propia lo balbuciente que es. (*IA*, pp. 181-82)

To the expressive limitations imposed by the written word, Borges adds an intellectual consideration. He observes that the Spanish-speaking-world has not produced a literature of philosophical intensity, although he does acknowledge the eminence of poetic thought both in Cervantes and Quevedo. Here Borges seems to blame the lack of philosophical depth in Hispanic literature to an endemic dependence on rhetoric. An excessive concern with style and adornment leads to the devaluation of thought. In the same way, the absence of a mature conception of human life manifests itself in empty rhetoric. By calling attention to the emotional transparency of the vernacular Borges proclaims his trust in the realization of a literary-metaphysical project in Argentina which will express its own spiritual faith:

Que alguien se a firme venturoso en lengua española, que el pavor metafísico de gran estilo se piense en español, tiene su algo y también su mucho de atrevimiento. Siempre metieron muerte en ese lenguaje, siempre desenganos, consejos, remordimientos, escrúpulos, precauciones, cuando no retruécanos y *calembours*, que también son muerte. [...] Pero nosotros quisiéramos un español dócil y venturoso, que se llevara bien con la apasionada condición de nuestros ponientes y con la infinitud de dulzura de nuestros barrios y con el poderío de nuestros veranos y nuestras lluvias y con nuestra pública fe. (*IA*, pp. 182-83)

On the other hand, language is already a limited tool, for it can only provide a partial description of the world. Language fulfils a social need but proves inadequate for the understanding of metaphysical questions: the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified evades the essence of things, and the quest for an original and radical language (the perpetual search of the Romantic poet) is never fulfilled. Although Borges is deeply conscious of this problem—to the point of subverting, in a striking image, the Biblical account of the origin of human language—he nevertheless affirms the poet's urge to reach a level of linguistic transparency in which the poetic emotion may reveal a higher order of existence. In other words, Borges asserts his belief in the capacity of poetic language to light up
man's inner world; but it is the poet's responsibility to discover by himself this dimension of truth:

Sabemos que no el desocupado jardínero Adán, sino el Diablo—esa pifiadora culebra, ese inventor de la equivocación y de la aventura, ese carozo del azar, ese eclipse de ángel—fue el que bautizó las cosas del mundo. Sabemos que el lenguaje es como la Luna y tiene su hemisferio de sombra. Demasiado bien lo sabemos, pero quisieramos volverlo tan limpio como ese porvenir que es la posesión mejor de la patria. [...] Escriba cada uno su intimidad y ya la tendremos. Digan el pecho y la imaginación lo que en ellos hay, que no otra astucia filológica se precisa. (IA, pp. 182-83; my italics)

Ironically, Borges's poetic activity was to come to a standstill two years later, in 1929. Except for a few compositions, he did not publish any poetry until almost three decades later. In effect, by the mid 1930s his optimism in the transcendental possibilities of the vernacular had completely vanished. The bulk of his literary production during the years 1930–60 was directed towards the essay and the short story, creating, in particular, the highly artistic prose to which the subsequent generation of writers in Latin America are indebted. Psychologically, nevertheless, this had a negative effect on him for it implied the impossibility of fulfilling the task for which he felt he was called, as he himself declares in the poem ‘Mateo, XXV, 30’.

By the early 1950s, however, Borges had become blind. It is undeniable that this event, though circumstantial, influenced his decision to write poetry again. The very title El hacedor, the miscellaneous collection which marks his return to poetry, makes reference to the blind poet of Antiquity, Homer, with whom (as with blind Milton) he must have felt a strong identification. With blindness, the notion of memory, which plays a fundamental role throughout Borges's work, acquires a new and vital dimension.

The disappearance of the visual world implied the construction of a substitute realm. This is realized in the plenitude of time, that is, not in the immediate perception of consciousness but in an imagined projection into the mythical realm of heroic poetry. In ‘La ceguera’, for instance, Borges describes how the study of the Anglo-Saxon meant a recuperation of his ancestral history: ‘Yo pensaba: “estoy volviendo al idioma que hablaban mis mayores hace cincuenta generaciones; [...] estoy recuperándolo”’ (OC, III, p. 280). Elsewhere Borges says, with Emerson, that ‘all
words are metaphors—or fossil poetry’, by which he suggests the presence of an archaic poetic symbolism in language. If so, words constitute a kind of collective poetic memory embedded in an original form. In the degree to which metaphor is at the heart of human discourse and indeed constitutes the means of primitive awareness and articulation, poetry becomes the space where man recognizes himself as part of a tradition which is actualized in and through the temporality of language. Man's capacity to share images and memories engenders poetry: ‘La imagen que un solo hombre puede formar es la que no toca a ninguno’ (‘La busca de Averroes’, OC, I, p. 586). This idea is central to Borges's poetics and its evolution can be traced throughout his entire career. At the heart of it lies the conviction that language is a tradition and, hence, that the poetic activity resides not in an arbitrary innovation but in the manifestation of a common reality for which the poet has simply been an effective medium: ‘Un idioma es una tradición, un modo de sentir la realidad, no un arbitrario repertorio de símbolos’ (prologue to El oro de los tigres (1972), OC, II, p. 459).¹⁰

On the other hand, several of the compositions included in El hacedor disclose an antagonism between language and reality. In ‘Dreamtigers’, for instance, Borges uses the image of the dream to typify the artistic imagination. Nevertheless, when confronted with nature, such a power proves to be illusory and inadequate to engender the living dimension of its object. What the artist's imagination produces is nothing more than a distorted image, a hybrid form that never corresponds to the real thing. ‘El otro tigre’, ‘El Golem’, and ‘Una rosa amarilla’ (which includes an explicit reference to Homer and Dante) convey a similar view. Here the poet relates the ontological to the linguistic perspective:

Marino vio la rosa como Adán pudo verla en el Paraiso, y sintió que ella estaba en su eternidad y no en sus palabras, y que podemos mencionar o aludir pero no expresar y que los altos y soberbios volúmenes que formaban en un ángulo de la sala una penumbra de oro no eran (como su vanidad soñó) un espejo del mundo, sino otra cosa más agregada al mundo. (OC, II, p. 173; Borges's italics). ¹¹

The poet's vanity culminates in delusion: reality, whether archetypal or substantial, cancels the artistic representation; the library fails to contain the world and the whole cosmos seems to dissolve in nothingness as language proves incapable of representing
being in its unity and simplicity. Nature represents the multiple image-giving realm which the artist's creation can never attain. By raising an insuperable distance between language and being, the poet realizes the triviality of both art and imagination. During this period of his creative life, Borges adopts a critical view of poetry and its expressive possibilities. Indeed, he seems to enact the role of the outcast minstrel who refuses to renounce what he can no longer sing. This ambivalence between optimism and scepticism—which is never entirely resolved in Borges's work—constitutes one of the dynamic centres of his creative production.

With regard to the question of artistic expression, then, his attitude suffered a considerable modification. Indeed his increasing philosophical scepticism (particularly with respect to the capacity of language to penetrate the core of reality), eventually distanced him—at least in this respect—from his initial allegiance to the aesthetic tenets of Benedetto Croce, who nevertheless continued to be one of his favourite authors in matters of literary criticism and, of course, a crucial reference in his evaluation of Dante's poetry. At any rate, Borges's early discussion of the aesthetic phenomenon, where he affirms the equivalence between art and expression, is to be understood within the framework of the metaphoric: ‘El arte es expresión y sólo expresión, postularé aquí. De eso puede inferirse inmediatamente que lo no expresivo, vale decir, lo no imaginable o no generador de imágenes, es inartístico’. In his early production, Borges placed a strong emphasis on this issue because, in essence, he conceived the metaphor as the bridge that could bring together the otherwise insuperable distance between the inherent frigidity of language and the poet's wealth of 'spiritual' emotion:

Buscarle ausencias al idioma es como buscar espacio en el cielo. [...] El lenguaje—gran fijación de la constancia humana en la fatal movilidad de las cosas—es la discola forzosidad de todo escritor. Práctico, inliterario, mucho más apto para organizar que para conmover, no ha recabado aún su adecuación a la urgencia poética y necesita troquelarse en figuras. (‘Examen de metáforas’, Inq., p. 67)

Given the need to communicate his feeling (‘la urgencia poética’), the metaphor acquires in Borges an almost sacramental value because it is the sensible medium through which an inner experience can be captured and revealed. In other words, the creation of metaphors, and poetic language in general, must be based on a ‘spiritual’
(as opposed to a purely intellectual) perception of the world; its value resides not in its ‘audacity’ but in its capacity to generate poetic emotion:

La poesía no es para mí la expresión de aquél azoramiento ante las cosas, de aquel asombro del Ser que todos hemos sentido tras de un suceso excepcional o sencillamente después de una disputa metafísica, sino la síntesis de una emoción cualquiera, que si es clara y precisa, no ha nunca menester vocablos inhábiles y borrosos como misterio, enigma y otros semejantes. El asombro e inquietud que esas palabras dicen es lo contrario del pleno adentramiento espiritual que la poesía supone. (‘Ejecución de tres palabras’, Inq. pp. 155-56; my italics)

[Todo escritor] sabe que la imagen fracasada goza de mejor nombre ahora, que es el de audaz. Sabe que los fracasos perseverantes de la expresión, siempre que blasonen misterio, siempre que finja un método su locura, pueden componer nombradia. (‘La simulación de la imagen’, IA, pp. 91-92)

This link inevitably brings up a long-standing dispute with respect to one of the most crucial figures in the history of Spanish poetry, namely, Góngora, in whom Borges sees the embodiment of decadent literature: for him, falsehood and simulation are the sole substance of his verse. The latter became the target of several of his most original essays on poetic language published during the 1920s. Indeed throughout his work (but especially in his early critical production) Borges uses the terms ‘true’ and ‘false’ to qualify the expressive and intellectual order achieved by a writer. For him, the highest form of poetic expression requires the abandonment of falsehood that accompanies rhetorical language when used for its own sake:

El culteranismo pecó: se alimentó de sombras, de reflejos, de huellas, de palabras, de ecos, de ausencias, de apariciones. Habló—sin creer en ellos—del fénix, de las divinidades clásicas, de los ángeles. Fué simulacro virtuosisimo de poesia: se engalanó de muertes. (‘El culteranismo’, IA, p. 74)

This notion of poetry as sheer artificiality and embellishment, then, contrasts with Borges’s greater belief in the simplicity of a true poetic expression. This implies an equivalence between being and language: the greater the unity of feeling and representation, the greater its plenitude in the order of being. Although this idea finds
It is possible to distinguish in this passage two interrelated aspects. On the one hand, the young writer sustains his conviction that the poetic word should always be an expression of an inner reality. At the same time, he perceives the poetic activity as the affirmation of feeling and thought through the shaping force of the spirit, that is, he sees the poet as breathing meaning into the world by way of the word. Through the poet's eyes the world acquires a spiritual dimension. Things cease to be mere objects of perception and become alive, charged with an emotional significance that surpasses the bare materiality that informs them (note the metaphorical description of the outskirt: 'como a una novia'). Poetry, then, is a testimony of spiritual being in the full awareness of its historical existence.

Borges's literary activity can be characterized, as the critic Guillermo Sucre has pointed out, as the search for the word, the key or symbol that will cipher the universe and lend a meaning to his work (Borges, el poeta, pp. 80-81). Indeed, despite his scepticism and anti-religious stance, there is in Borges a conspicuous interest in the mystical and, in particular, in the revelation of divine truth. Nevertheless, if the term 'mystical thinker' applies to Borges, as some critics suggest, it becomes necessary to define the precise meaning of the designation. Borges's interest in religion, as well as his fascination for metaphysical questions, is dependent on an aesthetic—not a pious—perception of the world. His peculiar view of theology and metaphysics as expression of the fantastic, that is, as extraordinary manifestations of an essentially creative mood, produces in him the intuition that the mystical corresponds to a sublime, aesthetic perception of the world. Borges toys with these ideas not as a philosopher or theologian, but as an imaginative writer whose primary concern lies in the capacity of
language to capture the basic nature of being. Paradoxically, his growing awareness of the impossibility to carry out such a task strengthened his intellectual curiosity for such endeavours.\textsuperscript{15}

(ii)

The subject matter of Dante's earliest poems was not new, for he inherited it from the Provençal troubadours via the Sicilian school of poetry which had flourished during the first half of the thirteenth century. Together with the thematic development of the Siculo-Tuscan tradition, Dante's contribution towards the formation of a refined language was enormous. There is, however, another aspect which preoccupied Dante from the outset, namely, the relationship between rhetoric and truth. In this respect, his earliest remarks on poetic language are in chapter XXV of the \textit{Vita nuova}, which in itself constitutes a digression from the central narrative of the \textit{libello}. Here Dante offers his first thoughts on literary history and criticism, and presents a justification of figurative language on the basis of its proper understanding as sanctioned by the classical \textit{auctores}. The main point of his discussion is to indicate that tropes should always be susceptible to deconstruction, that is, to being explained in plain language ('aprire per prosa', \textit{VN} XXV, 8); otherwise they become ostentatious and gratuitous.

But it is in the \textit{De vulgari eloquentia} that Dante explores in greater depth the formal and linguistic issues that pertain to his art. In this respect, the first question he sets out to solve is that of the multiplicity of vernacular forms with respect to an archetypal Italian language (\textit{DVE} I, x-xix). Dante's main concern is the regularization of the vernacular parlance, one which would meet the highest demands of a truly lofty poetic art (a question with which he deals in the second book of the treatise) and, at the same time, could be subject to the rules of grammar on which Latin was grounded. Within this framework, Dante confronts a series of ethical and political issues which are linked to the literary-philosophical project of his work as a whole. In particular, he sees in the realization of the \textit{vulgare illustre} a sign and guarantee of political order, one which will contribute towards the spiritual progress of mankind. In other words, the regularization of the vernacular in Dante's linguistic scheme is in a fundamental sense an answer to the Fall.

The starting point of Dante's theory of language is therefore theological. Following the Creation, it was God's will to give man the power of speech. This view of
language as a gift means that it is something divine, at least in man's original state of
grace. Hence Dante's account of the *primiloquium* as an expression of complete joy.
Adam's first utterance praised the glory of the Creator, and in that very first word the
plenitude of Being was celebrated: 'Et cum nullum gaudium sit extra Deum, sed
totum in Deo, et ipse Deus totus sit gaudium, consequens est quod primus loquens
primo et ante omnia dixisset “Deus”' (*DVE* I, iv, 4). The first word named God in
whom man rejoiced himself. Having a divine essence, man's original language could
exalt the totality of being in a joyful act of human understanding.

The original language, however, was lost with the construction of Babel. Only the
people of Israel were able to keep the sacred language (that is, Hebrew, the language
of the Messiah). It is at this point of his acount that Dante introduces a notion which is
fundamental to his perception of the vernacular, for, he says, every language of ours,
except the language given to Adam, has been in a state of flux ever since then. Dante
compares the contaminated forms of language that resulted from the confusion of
Babel with the very essence of man, who, he affirms, is a most unstable and
changeable creature (*DVE* I, ix, 6). Language, then, reflects man's ontological
condition. With this observation, I think, Dante rounds off his discussion, for he had
begun the treatise with an empirical observation whose analysis required a precise
definition (*DVE* I, i, 2). It is with the actual state of the vernacular that he had
proposed to deal in his work; and it is within the conception of a post-Babelic age that
his observations on the nature of the linguistic sign acquire their full significance.

Thus Dante asserts that (1) language is a communicative tool shaped by man's reason,
(2) language is an exclusively human activity (it is superfluous to angels, who are
pure intelligences, and useless to animals, who are moved by natural instinct only),
and (3) both the sensory and the rational come together in the linguistic sign (*DVE* I,
ii-iii). With the analogy between language and the unstable character of man, which
he also compares to that of the variability of manners and customs, Dante stresses the
contingency of the vernacular in so far as it is not subject to the rules of grammar
(which would render it unalterable) but, on the contrary, is entirely dependent on the
human will according to variations of time and space (*DVE* I, ix, 6; compare *Conv*. I,
v, 7-9). If in the *Convivio* Dante could affirm the superiority of Latin on the basis of
its greater formal perfection ('più bello, più virtuoso e più nobile', *Conv*. I, v, 14), he
now vindicates the superiority of the vernacular on the grounds that it is 'natural' to
the human race and, therefore, has a ontological precedence over Latin (*DVE* I, i, 4).
Consequently, not only does the vernacular have deeper historical roots but, as he stresses in the *Convivio*, it is also loved by mankind with greater intensity (*Conv. I, x, 6*). Like Borges, Dante declares his faith in the vernacular: the parlance that is closer to the heart of men (Dante uses the expression ‘humana corda’ in *DVE I, xvii, 4*) should be better equipped to express the genuine spirit of the Italian nation.

On the other hand, there is a certain discrepancy between the notion of language as grace and Dante's remark on the rationality of the linguistic sign as a natural product of the human will. If it is the inner constitution of human nature which inevitably alters language, and if language is a communicative tool which is shaped by man's will, surely this variability would apply to the language of the Israelites as well. Dante does not tackle this difficulty in the treatise; he will do so in Canto XXVI of the *Paradiso*, where he adopts the view that the original language was Adam's own creation and, by re-examining the question in relation to the doctrine of original sin, he is able to affirm that all languages, including Hebrew, were subject to change after man's expulsion from the garden of Eden (*Par. XXVI, 124-38*).

However, the biblical exposition in the first book of the *De vulgari eloquentia* was necessary in order to introduce a principle which only later will be manifest, namely, the idea that the *vulgare illustre* can provide the cohesion that will remedy the otherwise increasing moral fragmentation of the Italian nation. Thus it seems to me that his emphasis on the arbitrary aspect of language (its dependence on the human will) was essential for his linguistic project, and that the belief in an original language, so far removed from the distortions of all the vernaculars, could not offer much hope in the restoration of a new existential order. Dante proposes not a recovery of Adamic language, which is impossible, but a purification of language on the basis of man's rational capacity to achieve order and thus reach a certain degree of intelligibility, both historical and ontological.

Following this general outlook, Dante takes up a comparative approach in which he considers the various Italian vernaculars from the point of view of their beauty and form (*DVE I, x-xv*). Through this procedure he is forced to conclude that no region or city of Italy can claim to possess the respectable and illustrious vernacular he is searching for. However, having demonstrated the stylistic achievements of the vernacular in verse (which, nevertheless, contrast sharply with the actual dialects of their respective regions), he goes on to declare, by way of an antithesis, that the *vulgare illustre* is the ideal type by which all the vernaculars of Italy are weighed,
measured and compared (DVE I, xvi, 6). Dante applies here a logical reasoning which has its roots in Aristotelian metaphysics: ‘In omni genere rerum unum esse oportet quo generis illius omnia comparentur et ponderentur, et a quo omnium aliorum mensuram accipiamus’ (DVE I, xvi, 2). This passage is echoed in the Monarchia, where Dante refers to what is best as that which is one. He furthermore declares that the one is the root of what is good whilst the many is the cause of all evil, and adds: ‘Hinc videri potest quod peccare nichil est aliud quam progresi ab uno spreto ad multa’. This notion allows him to posit, in the De vulgari eloquentia, the necessary existence of an illustrious, cardinal, aulic, and curial vernacular of Italy (DVE I, xvi, 6), in accord with the principle of unity and simplicity that characterizes being in its perfection (DVE I, xvi, 2-3). Indeed, by referring to the vulgare illustre as the ideal type against which all the Italian dialects must be compared, weighed, and measured, Dante is implicitly making an analogy between the illustrious vernacular and the supreme good, for God is said to be one and simple above everything else. Now if such attributes can be predicated of the vulgare illustre, surely it can play an effective role in the spiritual restoration of the nation, gathering together the multiplicity of the vernaculars into a concerted Italian language.

The illustrious vernacular, says Dante, has the power of articulating the mind and mores of the Italian people (DVE I, xvii, 4). This does not imply on his part a total reliance in the capabilities of language (cf. Conv. III, iv, 4, 9). But, in essence, Dante believes in the ability of the vernacular to make intelligible the hidden depths of mankind and, from the seclusion of the self, to bring forth the light of truth that will lead the way towards its historical understanding (ibid., §2). Language, then, becomes the form of humanity, that is, it exhibits the various instances of the human being in the here and now of its existence.

The second book of the De vulgari eloquentia deals with the formal and stylistic aspects of poetic composition. Having defined the vulgare illustre as the loftiest type of vernacular, Dante goes on to define the ways in which it can be used, the subject matter which is most suited to it, the metrical form and vocabulary which are appropriate to its excellence, and its rules of construction. Dante provides a number of examples to illustrate this, but he also pronounces, in classical vein, a strict caution to those poets who may want to venture in regions which are beyond their technical and intellectual capabilities (DVE II, iv, 9-11). Mere imitation (at least in the superficial sense of reproducing the lexical and stylistic features of a literary model) is not
enough to produce poetry of moral and intellectual depth. For our purpose, the main
point that arises from this book resides in the role Dante assigns to poetic form, one
which must be intimately linked to the subject matter of every composition. Rather
than constituting something extraneous to it (in the manner of mere ornamentation)
form is the sensible manifestation of feeling and thought under the aspect of spiritual
intelligibility, it is the means through which inner life reveals itself. In other words, form is
at the service of understanding, it helps to perceive the object of representation in its intrinsic mode of existence. It is therefore a means of historical affirmation, for poetry ultimately articulates man's response to the world in which he lives. Dante's poetry is everywhere historical-ontological in character.

By writing a poem engulfed by the providential design of salvation Dante carries
his theory of the vernacular to its logical conclusion. Here language becomes a
reflection of being in all its possible manifestations. Through language man expresses
his spiritual constitution thus making manifest his participation in good and evil
(consider, for instance, the concerted melodies in which the souls of purgatory are
united, in contrast to the 'aspre lingue' (Inf., XI, 73) so frequently encountered by the
pilgrim in the fetid darkness of hell). Through the mirror of language the soul
becomes visible both to itself and to others. The pilgrim's journey which the
Commedia recounts shows how language allows man to know himself and thus to
locate his place in the universe.

(iii)

The shortest of Borges's essays on Dante refers to the verse 'Dolce color d'oriental
zaffiro' (Purg. I, 13). His point of departure is the description of the metaphoric
process: '[La metáfora] consta, por lo general de dos términos. Momentáneamente,
uno se convierte en el otro' (OC, III, p. 364). The purpose of the composition,
however, is not to examine a particular aspect of Dante's imagery in the technical or
hermeneutical sense normally applied in Dante scholarship. Rather Borges's fleeting
(and strictly imaginative) remark on the cited verse ('Dante, en el verso precitado,
sugiere el color del Oriente por un zafiro en cuyo nombre está el oriente. Insinúa así
un juego recíproco que bien puede ser infinito', ibid.), makes of it a rather whimsical
piece of interpretation, for he then turns his attention to Byron, Browning, and Milton.
Not a single word about the pilgrim's spiritual renewal with which the Purgatorio
begins, of which the tone and colour of the verse are representative. Nevertheless, the reader who is aware of Borges's interest in the metaphor and who has followed his discussions on the use and abuse of literary language will not fail to note his poetic intention. It is against this background that the composition needs to be seen. The importance of figurative language in Borges's early discussions on poetry, the absolute role of metaphor in his early ultraist period, and his many attacks on Góngora and on what he considered to be aesthetically meretricious, account for what is only implicit in the essay, namely, that the excellence of poetic expression requires the abandonment of falsehood that accompanies rhetorical language when used for its own sake; an idea that coincides with Dante's critique of some of his contemporaries as far as their abuse of figurative language and lack of poetic insight is concerned, that is, when their expression does not obey an inward movement of feeling and thought (what he calls ‘dittar dentro’, Purg. XXIV, 54). In a footnote, Borges compares the Dantean image with the opening lines of the Soledades (which includes a similar artifice: ‘en campo de zafiros pasce (sic) estrellas’ (line 6)), and observes: ‘El verso del Purgatorio es delicado; el de las Soledades es deliberadamente ruidoso’ (p. 364).

Borges's dislike of Góngora's image has a long history. One of his earliest attacks is found in his essay ‘El culteranismo’, where he states with vehemence the poet's utter artificiality and lack of sensibility:

También, para ejemplo de metáforas que enigmatizan, es costumbre transcribir el principio de la Soledad primera, la de los campos. [...] Sin embargo, aquí lo de menos es la metáfora; lo que importa son las palabras onordas—las palabras de clima de majestad—exhibidas por el autor. Propiamente, no hay comparaciones ahí; no hay sino la apariencia sintáctica de la imagen, su simulación. [...] Una cosa es presentar a la inteligencia un mundo verdadero o fingido, y otra es fiarlo todo a la connotación visual o reverencial de vocablos arbitrariamente enlazados. (IA, pp. 71-72)

In her study on Borges's poetics, the Italian scholar Giulia Poggi presents an excellent viewpoint from which the implicit problematic in the essay acquires its full meaning. Given that her statement synthesises the issue at stake (even though her analysis is not immediately concerned with Borges's essay), I will cite the passage in its entirety, for it also constitutes, in my opinion, the best comment on the poetic complexities of its narrative counterpart: ‘El Aleph’:
In effetti, ciò che più a Borges dispiace di Góngora non è tanto la fede nella metafora (cui, abbiamo visto, lo stesso scrittore si affida come a un dato inevitabile della conoscenza), quanto il volere ignorare la sua radice magica e religiosa, non l'avventurarsi nella sintassi quanto il discostarsi, così facendo, dalla pregnanza rivelatrice, e quindi mistica, della parola. È interessante notare, a questo proposito, come, proprio a partire dai saggi giovanili, Borges rimproveri a Góngora di non sapere cogliere l'incontaminata magia di fenomeni che come l'alba, il tramonto, o l'inizio delle stagioni, sono religiosi ed estetici al tempo stesso; scomponendo con un'inutile successione sintattica il sorgere improvviso del sole [...] o descrivendo nelle Soledades un'improbabile primavera, Góngora rifiuta, infatti, l'approccio mistico all'universo cui il suo critico anela e, anziché rispettare la promessa di eternità racchiusa in certi istanti, inventa nuovi, artificiali istanti formali. Qui riposa, per Borges, lo scarto nascosto che separa Góngora dalla metafora primordiale, la finzione che sta all'origine della sua inconsistente oscurità: "aura" inutile che sopravvive al proprio mistero. Poeta in un primo tempo delle false certezze retoriche e di un'indebita fiducia nei confronti della sintassi il cordovese diventa ben presto, per il giovane critico, il sintomo di una perdita orfica, di una mancanza di religiosità, di uno smarrimento etico: elementi tutti che lo avrebbero, paradossalmente, spinto a ostentare la parola per colmare l'ignoranza della sua essenza rivelatrice.26

Indeed it is in the short story ‘El Aleph’ (1945) where we find Borges's most bitter critique of rhetorical language. Carlos Argentino Daneri is a mediocre poet who nevertheless believes himself to be a great writer. As critics have noted, the name is a pun on Dante Alighieri.27 In this respect, the Florentine recalls other names, such as that of Guido Cavalcanti (who, nevertheless, is absent from the Commedia), and Arnaut Daniel, the famous troubadour to whom Dante pays homage with the verse ‘fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno’ (Purg. XXVI, 117). Both Cavalcanti and Arnaut wrote highly sophisticated poetry of love, and both play an important role in Dante's evaluation of his own poetic language.28 On the other hand, the pun recalls the more familiar Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, of whom Borges says:

Ricordo un'affermazione di Momigliano nella sua formidabile Storia della letteratura italiana; egli dice che il peggiore difetto di D'Annunzio — autore che io non ammiro — è che tutte le sue pagine sono pezzi d'antologia. È certo un errore, perché uno scrittore deve cercare di produrre pagine che non siano [...] particolarmente spettacolari e brillanti, ma che si
In effect, D’Annunzio’s love of nature and sensuality, as well as his exuberant aestheticism, are clearly discernible both in Daneri’s work and in his psychological features.29

The names of two contemporary Spanish American poets can also be perceived in the pun: Neruda (whose collection of poems Residencia en la tierra and Canto general are echoed in Daneri’s poem La Tierra), and, most importantly, Rubén Darío, the leader of the Modernist school of poetry which was so much criticized by Borges in his early essays.30 A more general description, as Alicia Jurado puts it, is that Carlos Argentino represents ‘la caricatura de un escritor nacional’.31 Thus Daneri embodies a complex web of literary references as well as the figure of the poet who is also a rival and an enemy. Furthermore, there is an element of parodic self-representation in both male characters, Daneri and the narrator himself (Borges’s persona). Borges was very critical of his early ultraist period and he dedicated much of his reflections on literature to defending his deviation from the movement.

It is a frequent practice of Borges to confront his identity and thought under the guise of real or fictional characters, a trick he also attributes, as a cynical gesture, to Pierre Menard: ‘Su hábito resignado o irónico de propagar ideas que eran el estricto reverso de las preferidas por él’ (OC, I, p. 449). Such a view allows us to interpret Borges’s statement ‘yo creo que el Aleph de la calle Garay era un falso Aleph’ (p. 627) as a critique of Daneri’s poetry: if the name Carlos Argentino Daneri is a corruption of Dante Alighieri, then we can take it to mean ‘Daneri is a false Dante’, and hence ‘Daneri is a false poet’. Through the Aleph Daneri beholds the universe; however the analogy between the Aleph and his literary work is limited to his pretensions to emulate an all-encompassing poem which, nevertheless, ‘parecía dilatar hasta lo infinito las posibilidades de la cacofonia y el caos’ (p. 622; the term ‘cacofonia’ anticipates Borges’s negative appreciation of the Soledades cited above).32

Thus the poem is firmly grounded in an antagonistic context in which one poet mocks another by showing the falseness and inefficacy of his opponent’s art while simultaneously indicating the superiority of his own talent, a skill that is dependent on the successful manipulation of rhetorical language. Indeed there is something of a
magician's apparel in Daneri's ridiculous trope: ‘Esta vez pude coronar mi bonete con la más roja de las plumas; mi turbante, con el más califa de los rubíes’ (p. 627); an image that is reminiscent of Borges's later comparison between Góngora and Dante (OC, III, p. 364). This seems to show that literature is an art of deception, an impression that is quite frankly acknowledged by the narrator in his attempt to describe the vision of the Aleph: ‘Quizá los dioses no me negarían el hallazgo de una imagen equivalente, pero este informe quedaría contaminado de literatura, de falsedad’ (p. 625). However, the dichotomy truth/falsehood proves to be irrelevant when confronted with the psychological aspect of its credibility. What matters, implies Borges, is the writer's ability to create well-made fictions independently of their truth value. In other words, the artist has to persuade us of the reality of his representation and we should be proud deservers of its enchantment.

The theme of the visionary ecstasy occupies the central description in the narrative of ‘El Aleph’. Significantly, the moment of rapture is preceded by the fearful thought that the narrator might have fallen in the hands of an evil maniac. Indeed, the notion of ekstasis (displacement) is linked to another medical concept, mania (mental alienation). It is at this stage that the character encounters what he perceives as a real threat to his life, a danger which he links to poisoning or to the effects of a drug (he had drunk a glass of cognac Daneri had offered him minutes before). The mention of a drug (Borges uses the words ‘veneno’ and ‘narcótico’) is particularly interesting for its many literary associations, both modern and ancient. In the Odyssey, a work which is explicitly conjured in Daneri's poem ('He visto, como el griego, las urbes de los hombres', p. 619; cf. Od. I, 1), the use of drugs is ambivalent. Circe uses them for magical purposes, whilst Helen mixes a drug with wine in order to remove grief and anger, thus obliterating all painful memories caused by telling stories. Just as drugs can be good or poisonous, discourse can be either genuine and beneficial or simply deceitful. Thus the sophist Gorgias, speaking of Helen, described the power of persuasive language as a kind of drug. Plato, on the other hand, refers to artistic (mimetic) productions as deceptive images that have a ‘realistic’ effect on the mind of the spectator through the artist's skilled, though bewitching, handling of form, proportion and colour (Republic X, 602c7-602d4). Furthermore, in Ion, he asserts that the rhapsodist, when reciting Homer, is enraptured in a divine possession (ekstasis) and no longer in his senses, a state he transmits to the audience. The origin of such a power, Socrates would make his interlocutor believe, lies not in the rhapsodist's full
control of the audience's response to poetic delivery (a knowledge the sophist would claim for himself) but in an external and inexplicable source: the Muse (Ion, 533d-534e).\textsuperscript{36} Borges, too, acknowledges the power of words to enchant and deceive like a drug acting on the senses and distorting the perception of things. Thus in ‘El Aleph’, through the reference to a drug, he may be giving the attentive reader a wink: as a fiction writer he is saying: ‘Caution! Storyteller at work’. In addition, it emphasizes the falsity (in the postscript he uses the words ‘artificios’ and ‘meros instrumentos de óptica’ (p. 627) of Daneri’s Muse: the Aleph.

On the other hand, the fact that the author of ‘El Aleph’ hardly gives any substantial information about the deceased heroine emphasizes her frivolous existence, as her collection of photographs attests. Indeed Beatriz and Carlos Argentino have a common feature: vanity. Even the narrator, at the beginning of the story, believes he possesses everlasting youth (‘Cambiara el universo pero no yo, pensé con melancólica vanidad’, p. 617), a gesture of self-assertion that seems to challenge the theme of human fragility with which Dante the pilgrim comes across at every stage of his journey through hell and purgatory. In effect, Borges seems to suggest that vanity is a form of blindness (both Beatriz and Daneri are pejoratively called ‘niños’, thus indicating their childish egocentric tendencies, as well as their bourgeois affiliation). In the poem ‘El ciego’ we find remote echoes from ‘El Aleph’. Expressions such as ‘vana devoción’, ‘biblioteca ilegible’, ‘piano inútil’, and ‘torpes colores’ find their equivalent in ‘vanas bibliotecas’, ‘vanos atriles’, ‘voces inutiles’, ‘una cosa gris’, and ‘formas amarillas’.\textsuperscript{37}

Beatriz’s psychological characteristics are shared by her cousin’s eccentric personality. Thus whilst she is described by way of an oxymoron (‘Había en su andar (si el oximoron es tolerable) una como graciosa torpeza, un principio de éxtasis’, p. 618), Daneri is said to be ‘autoritario, pero también ineficaz; [...] su actividad mental es continua, apasionada, versátil y del todo insignificante’ (p. 618). This contradictory, imperfect quality impregnates the whole story. Consider, in addition to the examples given above, the adjectives in ‘imperiosa agonía’, ‘bagatela inmortal’, ‘inservibles analogías’, ‘ociosos escrúpulos’, ‘admiración rencorosa’, ‘maligna felicidad’, ‘temerosa memoria’, ‘palabras insustanciales’, ‘conjunto infinito’, ‘instante gigantesco’. There is a continuous semantic tension qualifying (in a negative way) perception and thought. This constitutive peculiarity of the story effectively links its parts to a common feature, that of the dual essence of being. At a psychological level,
this duality is manifested in terms of love and hate, at a social level it is expressed in terms of success and failure, whilst at the rhetorical level it manifests the opposition between truth and falsehood.

The relationship between ethics and poetics, however, had already been formulated by Borges in his early verse. Take, for instance, the poem ‘Jactancia de quietud’ (from *Luna de enfrente*, 1925), where he writes: ‘Seguro de mi vida y de mi muerte, miro los ambiciosos y quisiera entenderlos’ (line 3). Later on he adds:

Más silencioso que mi sombra, cruzo el tropel de su levantada codicia.
Ellos son imprescindibles, únicos, merecedores del mañana.
Mi nombre es alguien y cualquiera.
Su verso es un requerimiento de ajena admiración.
Yo solicito de mi verso que no me contradiga, y es mucho
Que no sea persistencia de hermosura, pero sí de certeza espiritual.

(lines 12-17)\(^{38}\)

That Daneri should join the ranks of the greedy should not come as a surprise. Compare line 15 above with what Borges says about his rival's work: ‘Comprendí que el trabajo del poeta no estaba en la poesía; estaba en la invención de razones para que la poesía fuera admirable’ (pp. 619-20; my italics). In addition, he recalls a few lines from a satiric poem by Daneri which ends with the apostrophe: ‘¡Olvidaron, cuitados, el factor HERMOSURA! (p. 620), which contrasts sharply with line 17 above.

Memory, glory, and fame constitute Daneri's highest aspirations. Yet, far from achieving an illustrious style, he can only produce a poem which is characterized by linguistic arbitrariness, cacophony, extravagance, and metrical clumsiness. The word fame, here synonymous with Daneri's 'gloria intachable' (p. 618), is itself ambivalent. Because it possesses antithetical meanings, fame can be good or bad, depending on the adjective we attach to it.\(^{39}\) But even in a positive sense, fame is something that depends on a collective judgement and, as such, it is arbitrary and controllable. This circumstance poses the question of the relationship between the writer and his audience. Clearly, a poem is vain if it does not reach a worthy ear, as Dante declares in the *congedo* of his famous *canzone* ‘Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore’ (*VN* XIX, 4-14). However, Dante suggests, a poem cannot be worthy in the first place if it is not composed by a noble poet, and this means simplicity and humility on his part.
Lacking a sense of modesty, Daneri believes himself to be a great poet. Borges, a seemingly less arrogant writer though contemplating literary ambitions as well, ridicules his rival. Although Daneri looks down on Borges throughout the story, in the end it is the latter who conveys to the reader his radical condemnation of a pseudo-literature that aspires to universal recognition. The point is that technical skill should not serve as a disguise for the author's lack of intellectual and poetic competence. On the more realistic side of the story, therefore, we can perceive in the title (aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet) the struggle to obtain a worthy place in the literary competition. ‘Falso Aleph’, then, characterizes an undeserved winner. Indeed the falsity of Daneri's poetry is emphasized throughout the story, and it implicitly calls for a reconstruction of a genuine poetic expression in the Argentinian letters.

This point brings us back to the question of an implicit ethics in the story. Daneri has been working for many years on the composition of an all-embracing poem he appropriately entitles ‘La Tierra’: ‘Se proponía versificar toda la redondez del planeta’ (p. 620). Note the similarity with that other modernist, Pierre Menard, and his never accomplished task:

No hay ejercicio intelectual que no sea finalmente inútil. [...] En la literatura, esa caducidad final es aun más notoria. El Quijote—me dijo Menard—fue ante todo un libro agradable; ahora es una ocasión de brindis patrióticos, de soberbia gramatical, de obscenas ediciones de lujo. La gloria es una incomprensión y quizá la peor. (OC, I, pp. 449-50)

Despite this, Menard ‘resolvió adelantarse a la vanidad que aguarda todas las fatigas del hombre; acometió una empresa complejísima y de antemano fútil’ (p. 450). Why would Menard defy the limits of human possibilities by rewriting the adventures of the most famous lunatic? The answer, of course, is that he himself is a madman. Not only that: apart from being a megalomaniac, Menard is a liar and a shameless plagiarist. It is clear that he and Daneri share more than a literary ambition: they are both vain counterfeiters. Like Menard's unfinished work, Daneri's poem is similar to a part removed from the whole (hence Borges's pun on his initial cantos which, he says, were first issued as ‘trozos argentinos’ by a publisher sarcastically called Editorial Procusto).

As far as Daneri's technique is concerned, we could say that the poet's solitary work, combined with his creative method, would guarantee his success: ‘Primero
abria las compuertas de la imaginación; luego hacía uso de la lima’ (p. 619). Borges secretly laughs at his intentions: ‘Tan ineptas me parecieron esas ideas, tan pomposa y tan vasta su exposición, que las relacioné inmediatamente con la literatura’ (p. 618). What literature is he referring to? Perhaps he means the kind of writing that deliberately arises from a far-fetched complexity such as surrealism, Italian futurism, or the ultraist movement itself. Estela Canto supports this view when she writes:

Guillermo [de Torre] estaba intensamente interesado en todos los ultraismos y cubismos, en Dalí en Stravinsky y sus distorsiones, en el dadaísmo y el surrealismo. Su cuñado [Borges] consideraba que todo esto era una chachara bastante tonta y esnob. (Borges a contraluz, p. 87)

At any rate, in the hands of Carlos Argentino literature acquires a negative value not only because of its vain triumphs but also for its dubious use of language and its intellectual pretensions.

Borges’s criticism and dislike of the moderns is equally applied to his precursors whenever their poetry fails to transmit the emotion demanded by a genuine poetic sensibility. Thus in the poem ‘Baltasar Gracían’ (1964) we find echoes of Daneri’s poetic limitations as well as a renewed attack on poetry as a purely intellectual game. The poem begins and ends with the same words (‘Laberintos, retruécanos, emblemas’), suggesting that Gracían’s intellectual stubbornness, that is, his dogmatism and lack of lyrical sensibility, effectively reached a dead end. Furthermore, in Gracían the poet’s garden (a metaphor for figures of speech) is replaced by degenerate rhetoric: ‘No hubo música en su alma; sólo un vano | Herbario de metáforas y argucias’ (lines 5-6).42 Later, adopting a religious representation, the poet asks himself what Gracían might have perceived on his death: ‘Qué sucedió cuando el inexorable | Sol de Dios, La Verdad, mostró su fuego?’ (lines 29-30). In the final stanza Borges conjectures that the Spanish poet failed to see the truth and, deceived by his own blindness, keeps wondering among scattered memories in search for worthless trifles.43 If the mystical trope (‘el inexorable Sol de Dios’) stands for the Aleph, then what is said of Gracían is applicable to Daneri’s insensitive poetry. Elsewhere, in the poem ‘A un poeta menor de la antología’, Borges opposes the negative connotations of glory and fame with the relieving and redemptive aspects of forgetfulness: ‘Y habrá suerte mejor que la ceniza | de que está hecho el olvido?’; he asks assertively, and adds: ‘Sobre otros arrojaron los dioses | la inexorable luz de la
gloria' (OC, II, p. 249, lines 13-16). A mirror effect can clearly be perceived in the above lines. Whilst Borges condemns Gracían's harsh imagery ('Gallinas de los campos celestiales', line 16), he praises Theocritus's lyrical voice through the very metaphor of the lyric poet: the nightingale. By the same token he suggests that the true poet, the one who carries music in his soul, is, unlike Gracían, a humble mortal but a more profound poet. Simplicity of expression and humility of character must be intimately correlated in the poet who wishes to speak to the heart of men (compare the verses from 'Jactancia de quietud' quoted above).

From this general perspective, and by way of a positive contrast, 'El Aleph' is a tribute to Dante's poetry of truth. Compare Borges's remark on Daneri's poem with what he says about Dante in the prologue to his essays:

En su escritura habían colaborado la aplicación, la resignación y el azar; las virtudes que Daneri les atribuía eran posteriores. (p. 619)

A todos es notorio que los poetas proceden por hipérboles: para Petrarca, o para Góngora, todo cabello de mujer es oro y toda agua es cristal; ese mecánico y grosero alfabeto de símbolos desvirtúa el rigor de las palabras y parece fundado en la indiferencia de la observación imperfecta. Dante se prohibe ese error; en su libro no hay palabra injustificada. (OC, III, pp. 343-44)

In confronting Daneri's poetic style Borges is implicitly asking by what criteria should one judge and appreciate literature, for in his work there is an absence of clearly defined rules by which to guide the creative process. Daneri's literary technique betrays a deceptive aim. If the expression 'literary heresiarch' is meaningful then it should be applied to him, for he holds principles contrary to the tradition that he wishes to perpetuate.

Looking back to Borges's ultraist period, the poet's autobiographical projections in 'El Aleph' appear at a deeper level of signification. Compare Daneri's enthusiastic comments on the pretentious initial verses of his poem: 'Nada diré de la rima rara ni de la ilustración que me permite ¡sin pedantismo! Acumular en cuatro versos tres alusiones eruditas que abarcan treinta siglos de apretada literatura' (p. 619), with Borges's pompous proclamation of the ultraist doctrine: 'El ultraísmo no es otra cosa que la espléndida síntesis de la literatura antigua', and it will become clear to what
extent Carlos Argentino represents a mocking, self-reflexive image of those youthful years.  

However, the satirical aspect of the story must be read not only as self-caricature but also as a diatribe against the concrete cultural reality faced by the author since his return to Argentina. Indeed Borges's disparity with the literary environment in his country reached a frustrating climax in 1942, when his short story ‘El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan’, which he had presented for the Premio Nacional de Literatura, failed to win recognition. In the story's postscript the narrator of ‘El Aleph’ declares: ‘Carlos Argentino Daneri recibió el Segundo Premio Nacional de Literatura. [...] Increíblemente, mi obra Los naipes del tahur no logró un solo voto. ¡Una vez más, triunfaron la incomprendición y la envidia!’ (pp. 626-27). In this respect, the use of parody in ‘El Aleph’ can be seen not only as an emotional response to the question of literary fulfillment but also as a radical instrument of cultural negation, for the story itself constitutes Borges's rebuttal of a cultural ideology that refuses to acknowledge the significance of his work in the Argentinian letters. Not surprisingly, the paragraph where the winner of the literary prize is disclosed is also one of the most sarcastic. Here Borges puts into practice several rhetorical means of deprecation. To perceive this, one needs only to look at an earlier essay: ‘Arte de injuriar’.  

Whilst the portrayal of a writer whose merit is denied reflects Borges's isolation from the literary scene, the mention of Los naipes del tahur provides the story with a clue towards its poetic principle. Indeed, in the latter essay Borges compares the mocker with the gambler in that both assume a set of rules by which meaning is conferred:  

El burlador procede con desvelo, efectivamente, pero con un desvelo de tahur que admite las ficciones de la baraja, su corruptible cielo constelado de personas bicéfalas. Tres reyes mandan en el poker y no significan nada en el truco. El polemista no es menos convencional. (p. 419)

The content of the rules may change, but not their organizing principle. Hence, different modes of signification will abide by contrasting rules and may suppose distinct expectations. If we draw an analogy with literature we can infer that (1) there is a set of rules governing the writer's creative process, (2) these rules must be recognizable by others, and (3) literature demands (or produces) a specific
psychological attitude that may or may not be distinct from other types of verbal manifestations.

Borges deals with various aspects of this general proposition throughout his work. By mocking the pretentious aspirations of his character, he presents in ‘El Aleph’ what he sees as a negative poetic principle. Daneri's literary technique lacks a method (other than calculated artificiality) and a true dialogue with the reader and his tradition; in short, it is mere diction deprived of poetic insight (these correspond to points 1 and 2 above; the psychological aspect involved in the poetic experience is related to its credibility, in the sense that I have already indicated with reference to Plato and the sophists).

In the 1969 prologue to Fervor de Buenos Aires Borges declares: ‘Aquel muchacho que en 1923 lo escribió ya era esencialmente [...] el señor que ahora se resigna o corrige. Somos el mismo’ (OC, I, p. 13).\(^5^0\) There, he instils the intimate character of his native city with a poetic essence that exceeds its own poverty. Through various images and metaphors he explores his subject-matter with a joyous vision that transcends the precariousness of the old, peripheral neighbourhood. Far from merely describing it, he recovers a ‘mythical space’: ‘Nos echamos a caminar por las calles | como por una recuperada heredad’ (‘Barrio reconquistado’); ‘He repetido antiguos caminos | como si recobrara un verso olvidado’ (‘La vuelta’); ‘Grato es vivir en la amistad oscura | de un zaguán, de una parra y de un aljibe’ (‘Un patio’).\(^5^1\) It is this jocund insight that Daneri's poetry lacks. In comparison, we can assume a true Aleph to be a reflection of the sheer plainness of temporality.

I have now reached a point from which it is possible to interpret the poetics of ‘El Aleph’ positively, for the concluding part of ‘Historia de la eternidad’ (Borges's self-quotation from El idioma de los argentinos) constitutes a veritable ecstatic vision.

After considering a few classical views on the problem of time, Borges gives his own: this, he says, ‘es una pobre eternidad ya sin Dios, y aun sin otro poseedor y sin arquetipos’ (OC, I, p. 365). Here, the ‘infinite’ Aleph is turned into simplicity (he uses the word ‘sencillez’ (p. 366)), a revelation (‘me sentí percibidor abstracto del mundo’) not of a chaotic multiplicity, but of a tranquil sameness:

Esa pura representación de hechos homogéneos – noche en serenidad, parecita limpida, olor provinciano de la madreselva, barro fundamental – no es meramente idéntica a la que hubo hace tantos años; es, sin parecidos ni repeticiones, la misma. (p. 367)
In contrast with the poetics of falsehood of ‘El Aleph’, here Borges affirms an image of truth and permanence. Thus in ‘Arte poética’ he asserts: ‘El arte es como ese espejo que nos revela nuestra propia cara’ (OC, II, p. 221). Contrary to this view of poetry as sincerity of feeling and thought, the fiction writer abides by a creative principle whereby irony, cunning, and deception play a major role in inducing a specific psychological and intellectual effect.

Notes

1 César Fernández Moreno, Esquema de Borges (Buenos Aires: Perrot, 1957), pp. 15, 24: ‘Amado Alonso ha propuesto a Borges como ejemplo de conducta literaria: “responsabilidad, sinceridad y exactitud”. El mismo Borges se titula “hombre desgarrado hasta el escándalo por sucesivas y contrarias lealtades”. [...] Pero la nota final de su poesía es esa de modestia, casi de pesimismo acerca de su propia obra, que en Borges se escucha con tanta frecuencia’.


3 Cf. ‘La supersticiosa ética del lector’ (1930), *OC*, 1, pp. 202-205. It is significant that the prominence of Quevedo during this period diminishes in the late 30s and 40s, the decade of his encounter with Dante. Notwithstanding his later critical distance, Borges maintained the greatness of the Spaniard, whose poetry, he says, transcends the particular in order to embrace the universe: ‘Como Joyce, como Goethe, como Shakespeare, como Dante, como ningún otro escritor, Francisco de Quevedo es menos un hombre que una dilatada y compleja literatura’ (‘Quevedo’, *OC*, II, p. 44). But see his later declarations in Rosalba Campra, *America Latina: l'identità e la maschera*, pp. 118-19: ‘Quevedo è un autore che sembra meno interessato al tema che tratta che al proprio stile e all’effetto che questo stile può provocare nel lettore. Questo è un errore. Lo stile non deve frapporsi fra il lettore e l’opera. Lo stile perfetto dovrebbe essere uno stile diafano, trasparente. [...] Invece Quevedo scrive in modo tale che si è obbligati a pensare a lui, con riflessioni tipo “come è ben scritta questa frase”’.
^ Cf. ‘El tamaño de mi esperanza’, TE, pp. 7-8: ‘No se ha engendrado en estas tierras ni un místico ni un metafísico; ni un sentidoro ni un entendedor de la vida! [...] Nuestra realidad vital es grandiosa y nuestra realidad pensada es mendiga’.


^ Cf. ‘La rosa’, FB (no page numbers), lines 12-13: ‘La ardiente y ciega rosa que no canto, | la rosa inalcanzable’. See also ‘Elementos de preceptiva’, in Sur, 7 (1933): ‘La rosa es sin porqué, leemos en el libro primero del Cherubinischer Wandersmann de Silesius. Yo afirmo lo contrario, yo afirmo que es imprescindible una tenaz conspiración de porqués para que la rosa sea la rosa’ (p. 160).

^ See the narratives ‘Parábola del palacio’ (in El hacedor); also ‘El espejo y la máscara’, and ‘Undr’ (in El libro de arena) in which Borges toys with the idea of the bard's magical power which is capable of substituting the world by the word. Cf.


14 Cf. Allen W. Phillips, ‘Borges y su concepto de la metáfora’, pp. 49-50: ‘En su evolución de escritor, Borges parte de una actitud barroca y artificiosa, valiéndose precisamente de las palabras ilustres y prestigiosas que él mismo suele identificar con las metáforas innecesarias. Poco a poco, sin embargo, va creándose, mediante una depuración constante y una esmerada vigilancia, un estilo despojado de toda retórica falsa y las tecniquerías de años atrás. Ha llegado, sencillamente, a un modo de escribir que pudiéramos llamar el esencialismo verbal’.


16 ‘And, since there is no joy outside God, but all joy is in God, and since God Himself is joy itself, it follows that the first man to speak should first and before all have said “God”’, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. by Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9.

17 On the role of the vernacular poets in forging the Italian language, cf. *DVE* I, xix, 1; also *Purg.* XI, 97-99; XXVI, 117.

18 ‘In any kind of thing there needs to be one instance with which all others can be compared, against which they can be weighed, and from which we derive the standard by which all others are measured’ (trans. by Botterill, p. 39).

19 ‘Hence it can be seen that to sin is nothing other than to spurn unity and move towards plurality’, *Mon.* I, XV, 3, in Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, ed. and trans. by Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 41.


21 Umberto Cosmo, *Guida a Dante* (Turin: De Silva, 1947), p. 186: ‘La lingua fu a Dante strumento possente a raggiungere il fine che si proponeva. I criteri linguistici del *De Vulgari Eloquentia* sorpassati, la parola sempre propria a rappresentare la cosa nella sua interezza e nella sua luce’.


23 But cf. ‘La fede poetica di Dante’, p. 80: ‘Qui Dante è uscito dalla tristezza, dall’orrore dell’inferno. [...] Nel verso ci dice che si era appena purificato da tutta quella irreparabile tristezza e da quel terribile fumo’.

24 Cf. ‘La fede poetica di Dante’, p. 81-82: ‘Anche Sant’Agostino ha scritto le sue confessioni; ma quelle confessioni, proprio per la loro splendida retorica, non ci sono tanto vicine quanto lo è Dante, poiché la retorica dell’aficano si frappone tra quello che egli vuol dire e quello che sentiamo. [...] La retorica dovrebbe essere un ponte, una strada, ma in genere è una muraglia, un ostacolo. [...] Direi che Dante ci
permette di conoscerlo, ci pertette un rapporto di intimità, e perfino in un modo più personale di quanto sarebbe potuto accadere ai suoi contemporanei’.


Cf. D’Annunzio’s autobiographical novel *Il Piacere*, as well as the ambitious programme of his most important lyrical works, the *Laudi del cielo del mare della terra e degli eroi*, and *Alcyone*.


32 Cf. ‘Ramón Gómez de la Serna’, *Inq.*, pp. 124-26: ‘Qué signo puede recoger en su abreviatura el sentido de la tarea de Ramón? Yo pondría sobre ella el signo *Alef* que en la matemática nueva es el señalador del *infinito guarismo que abarca los demás*. […] Quiero manifestar por ello la *convicción de entereza*, la abarrotada plenitud que la informa: plenitud tanto más difícil cuanto que la obra de Ramón es una serie de puntuales atisbos, esto es, de oro nativo, *no de metal amartillado en láminas por la tesonera retórica*. Ramón ha *inventariado el mundo*, incluyendo en sus páginas no los sucesos ejemplares de la aventura humana, según es uso de poesía, sino la ansiosa descripción de *cada una de las cosas cuyo agrupamiento es el mundo*. Tal plenitud no está en la concordia ni en simplificaciones de síntesis y se asemeja más al *cosmorama* o al atlas que a una *visión total* del vivir como la rebuscada por los teólogos y los levantadores de sistemas’. See Borges, *Oeuvres complètes*, Series Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, nos. 400, 456, ed. by Jean Pierre Bernès, 2 vols ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1993-99) I, pp. 1601-602.


Encomium to Helen, ed. and trans. by D. M. MacDowell (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1982), § 14.


Cf. ‘Eduardo Wilde’, IA, p. 159: ‘No quiero insinuar que la veracidad literaria es una ficción; quiero evidenciar lo difícil que es y lo acertado de nuestra gratitud a quienes la alcanzan’. Borges's general dissatisfaction with the literary environment in his country is manifest from his early production. Consider, for instance, his remark in ‘La supersticiosa ética del lector’ (1930), which anticipates his critique of Daneri's vain rhetoric, or, as he calls it there, ‘las habilidades aparentes del escritor. [...] La vanidad del estilo’ (OC, I, pp. 202-203).


44 The question of the authenticity of Gracián’s lines is immaterial for my present discussion.

45 Cf. Thiem, ‘The Poetics of Total Vision’, pp. 98-103; Menocal, Writing in Dante’s Cult of Truth, pp. 159-60; Took, L’Eterno Piacer, p. 86: ‘The Commedia is prodigiously imaginative in conception and execution, but imagination is at every point constrained by the underlying movement of thought and conscience. There is no lie to distract and deceive us, no artful falsehood to tempt us in its luxuriance’.


47 For the circumstances surrounding the Premio Nacional de Literatura, see Jurado, Genio y figura, pp. 42-44; Rodríguez Monegal, A Literary Biography, p. 417; John King, Sur: A Study of the Argentine Literary Journal and its Role in the Development

48 OC, I, pp. 419-23. Compare his remark about ‘el doctor Lugones’ (p. 420), with the rhetorical strategy used in ‘El Aleph’, pp. 626-27. The violent antagonism that dominated the Argentinian cultural scene can be gauged by the language of some of its surrogates; for an extreme example of market-place rhetoric, see Alfredo Arfini, Borges, pobre ciego balbuciente (Rosario: Ruiz, 1968).

This was the projected title of a prose book he intended to write during his ultraist period; see De Torre, ‘Para la prehistoria ultraísta de Borges’, p. 36. Cf. ‘Torres Villarroel’, in Inq., p. 9: ‘He logrado los hechos anteriores en su autobiografía, documento insatisfactorio, ajeno de franqueza espiritual y que como todos sus libros, tiene mucho de naipe de tahur y casi nada de intimidad de corazón’ (my italics); ‘Menoscabo y grandeza de Quevedo’, ibid., p. 44: ‘El poeta no puede prescindir enteramente de esas palabras que parecen decir la intimidad más honda, ni reducirse a sólo barajarlas’ (my italics).

50 Cf. Running, Borges’s Ultraist Movement, pp. 41, 60-61; Alazraki, Borges and the Kabbalah, pp. 124-36.

Chapter 2
Ethics and Related Topics

(i)

The unity of the poetic expression considered in the first chapter does not imply a detachment from other aspects of the human life. Pure contemplation belongs to the mystical and the devotional, and it entails a degree of self-sacrifice in the supreme object of love. The aesthetic experience, on the other hand, far from requiring the negation of the individual, asserts his existence by demanding the intensification of all his faculties, sensitive, intellectual and rational. This type of encounter is integral inasmuch as it solicits the subject's actual experiences, moral values, and intellectual capabilities. Thus the aesthetic mood allows the individual to give free rein to his faculties and this, in turn, enables him to consider the object from different angles (he can, for instance, abandon himself to the sound of words, concentrate his attention on the meaning of a line, or reflect upon the significance of the poem as a whole). This kind of relationship with the work of art engenders pleasure. At the same time, together with the sensuous and intellectual appreciation of the object, the aesthetic experience bears an ethical import. This is particularly true of the literary work because by representing human actions and emotions the poet recreates, even despite himself, an attitude towards life.

The connection between language and poetry examined earlier on showed that the poetic expression should agree with a state of inner truth. From this point of view, the writer has a double responsibility: (1) to be consistent with the tradition within which he asserts his own voice, and (2) to be in possession of the means that will guarantee an intrinsic value of the literary work. These aspects are in part related to the ethics of the creative process and as such they depend on the writer's technical and intellectual capabilities. But the alliance between literature and ethics (i.e. the domain in which historical or imaginary characters respond to a given set of situations in accordance with an inner principle of action) seems to be grounded not on technical or intellectual considerations but on reason, for only the latter can produce a principle by which to measure the artistic representation from the point of view of the human aspirations and volitions.
As a result a further relationship is established between poetry and truth. Historically, the contention that literature can convey knowledge about man and his world (as opposed to mere delight) has been challenged from many angles. This issue, which began with the pre-Socratic philosophers and is already implicit in archaic Greek poetry, constitutes a thorny question in the history of Western literary criticism. It is not my intention to revive this debate, which falls outside the scope of my thesis. For my present purpose it will be enough to show that the literary work carries an inevitable reference to the real world against which the actions of fictional characters can be gauged and recognized.

Whereas Borges modified his initial views on the expressive capabilities of language, the view of poetry as the revelation of a human destiny permeates his literary production and can be perceived as the fundamental source of poetic inspiration throughout his work. Thus he asserts right from the beginning of his career the necessary bond between poetry and the disclosure (Borges uses the words 'confesión' and 'revelación') of a human destiny: ‘Toda literatura es autobiográfica. Todo es poético en cuanto nos confiesa un destino’ (‘Profesiôn de fe literaria’, TE, p. 146); ‘Hay cosas que por lo sólo implicar destinos, ya son poéticas’ (ibid., p. 150); ‘Toda poesía es plena confesión de un yo, de un carácter, de una aventura humana. El destino así revelado puede ser fingido, arquetípico, [...] o personal’ (ibid., p. 152); ‘La finalidad permanente de la literatura es la presentación de destinos’ (‘La felicidad escrita’, LA, p. 45).

The task of revealing a human destiny—which is a classical epic theme modelled on the Homeric poems—acquires in Borges an unmistakably ethical significance. Adopting an elegiac tone, he often reserves the space of poetry for the evocation of a crucial event in the life of his ancestors. Moreover, his entire work can be seen as the materialization of the idea that man is determined by destiny. Like death, destiny is unavoidable. As he puts it in one of the short stories included in El Aleph: ‘Cualquier destino, por largo y complicado que sea, consta en realidad de un solo momento: el momento en que el hombre sabe para siempre quién es’. As far as his narrative technique is concerned, the idea of an absolute disclosure provides the basis for the depiction of a character's life at one stroke (‘la reducción de la vida entera de un hombre a dos o tres escenas’, OC, I, p. 289), a conception that agrees exactly with Dante's biographical technique in the Commedia. Borges is well aware of this, as the following passage from his early writing shows: ‘Confesión de Juicio Final, resumen
de un vivir, alegato para lo eterno son los versos de veras y no pensaron otra cosa el salmista y Jorge Manrique y el Dante y Browning y Unamuno y Whitman.¹

Equally significant is his realization that in narrative, speech constitutes the essential manifestation of being, that is, language is the true mirror of the soul: ‘Saber cómo habla un personaje es saber quién es, [...] descubrir una entonación, una voz, una sintaxis peculiar, es haber descubierto un destino’.² Here the word ‘destino’ is a synonym of existence, and language the medium through which an individual’s basic nature manifests itself, and this not simply in the ordinary sense attached to the verbal utterance (that is, as an indicator of social status, cultural background, and so on) but, more importantly, as the expression of character. The fact is that Borges did not elaborate to a great extend this idea (whose germ is found in his essay on Hernández’s Martin Fierro: ‘En esa relación su carácter’), simply because the kind of writing that he developed during the following decades favoured abstract thought as opposed to dramatic or imitative dialogue (it is not unlikely that his dislike for the psychological and his distance from literary realism may have played a role here).³ This narrative principle is best perceived in the short story ‘Hombre de la esquina rosada’, where he condenses in a single sentence the correspondence between language and character that instils the whole narrative: ‘El hombre era parecido a la voz’ (OC, I, p. 330). On this expression, Amado Alonso remarks:

La voz alcanza un rango de entidad viviente; [...] el impulso proviene de la conmoción causada en el alma del relator por aquella voz tan expresiva de cualidades vitales – poder, autoridad, resolución – que se le impone imaginativa y emocionalmente como un ser vivo. No es, pues, simplemente el conocido recurso de la animación y personificación de lo inanimado e impersonal, sino el ver en la voz el asiento de ciertas cualidades vitales exaltadas hasta el mito. Se encuentra a la voz tan exactamente expresiva de ciertos valores que luego la imaginación la ve idéntica con ellos.⁴

On the other hand, Borges's preoccupation with ethics is speculative and it is not to be confused with pragmatic morals. To the realm of philosophical ethics (which he largely owes to Arthur Schopenhauer) Borges opposes the kind of morality that is determined by social, political, or religious institutions. These he attacks for being at the service of group interests which, in his view, have nothing to do with the
substance of poetry. It is against this ideological background that some of his remarks on morally didactic literature should be understood.\(^6\)

The confusion between pragmatic morals and ethics has led to a gross underestimation of the ethical issue in Borges. It is true that he himself contributed to such a (nominal) confusion, as when he declares about Hawthorne that his concern with ethics ruined the philosophical depth of his work (‘Una parábola [...] que estuvo a punto de ser magistral y que no lo es, pues la ha dañado la preocupación de la ética, es la que se titula *Earth's Holocaust*, OC, II, p. 56). Clearly, what he means here by ‘ethics’ is Christian morals.\(^7\) Now the fact that Borges does not make moral judgments in his stories does not imply that his writing lacks an ethical dimension, let alone that good and evil are absent from his work, as some critics have maintained. Thus Alicia Jurado, with bold simplicity, declares: ‘No encontramos en su obra ningún juicio ético, explícito ni implícito. [...] El escritor Borges presenta sus personajes sin demostrar simpatía por ninguno ni preocuparse por el problema del bien y del mal’.\(^8\) An alternative means of displaying an ethical stance (and, hence, an optimistic or pessimistic view of humanity) is by representing mankind both in its insignificance and in its greatness. After all, the task of the poet is to create thoughts and emotions which spring directly from the situations which he describes. Indeed by showing the effects of evil an author can elaborate a philosophical reflection on the cruelty of life in general and the injustice of the human nature in particular. This aspect of the literary work is endorsed by Borges in his study of Carriego, where he observes:

La lacra sustancial de *La canción del barrio* es la insistencia sobre lo definido por Shaw: *mera mortalidad o infortunio*. [...] Sus páginas publican desgracias; tienen la sola gravedad del destino bruto, no menos incomprensible por su escritor que por quien los lee. *No les asombra el mal, no nos conducen a esa meditación de su origen.*\(^9\)

Borges, therefore, is far from endorsing a divorce between literature and ethics; what he does reject is the adoption of sectarian moral views which have nothing to do with the intrinsic value of a literary text. Yet every work of literature carries within itself an ethical perception of life. In Borges's view, this should be inferred from the interplay between character and situation exhibited in the text.\(^10\) As he puts it in his study of Hernández's *Martín Fierro*: ‘Inferir la ética del *Martín Fierro*, no de los
destinos que presenta, sino de los mecánicos dicharachos hereditarios que estorban su decurso, o de las moralidades foráneas que lo epilogan, es una distracción que sólo la reverencia de lo tradicional pudo recomendar’ (OC, I, p. 195). Let us consider, then, the way in which the ethical issue manifests itself in Borges's early work.

Apart from the general meaning of the word ‘destino’ as the manifestation of the joy and suffering that accompany man's being in the world (‘la trémula esperanza, el milagro implacable del dolor y el asombro del goce’),11 the idea of destiny in Borges has a specific tragic implication, that of fate. With regard to the former, he writes: ‘Lo que afirmo es nuestra codicia de almas, de destinos, de idiosincrasias, codicia tan sabedora de lo que busca, que si las vidas fabulosas no le dan abasto, indaga amorosamente las del autor’ (‘Profesiôn de fe literaria’, TE, p. 147; see ‘Las calles’, FB (no page numbers), lines 13-18). Besides their existential import, these passages are characterized by an implicit kinship between art and reality. This alliance reappears in one of the essays included in El idioma de los argentinos, where he observes: ‘La presentaciôn [...] de un destino que se realiza en felicidad es tal vez el goce más raro [...] que puede ministrar-nos el arte. Queremos ser felices y el aludir a felicidades o el entreverlas, ya es una deferencia a nuestra esperanza’. However, the idealism of the assertion becomes evident when, in an attempt to bridge the gap between the two worlds, he declares: ‘Parece desalentador afirmar que la felicidad no es menos huidiza en los libros que en el vivir, pero mi observaciôn lo comprueba’ (‘La felicidad escrita’, IA, p. 45). Nevertheless, the divorce between inner life and actual experience (the distance between books and reality) far from implying a negation of the external world betrays a keen interest in it, even if, at this stage, the order of existence is entirely mediated by the ‘pleasurable exorcism’ of the library. Literature, then, founds an imaginary perception of reality. Within this realm life itself is filtered and elevated.12

Indeed in the prologue to the second edition of Evariste Carriego, Borges admitted quite frankly having spent his youth within the idyllic order of an enclosed garden, far removed from the world and its dangers: ‘Yo creí, durante años, haberme criado en un suburbio de Buenos Aires, un suburbio de calles aventuradas y de ocasos visibles. Lo cierto es que me crié en un jardín, detrás de una verja con lanzas, y en una biblioteca de ilimitados libros ingleses. [...] Qué había, mientras tanto, del otro lado de la verja con lanzas? Qué destinos vernáculos y violentos fueron cumpliéndose a unos pasos de mí, en el turbio almacén o en el azaroso baldío? [...] A esas preguntas quiso contestar
este libro, menos documental que imaginativo’ (OC, I, p. 101). ‘Imaginativo’ is a key word here, for it reveals an implicit analogy between Borges’s exploration of his romanticized neighbourhood (epitomized in the theme of the wanderer, which is so forcefully present in his early lyrics), and the fantastic delirium that led Alonso Quijano to abandon the books of his library in order to challenge the world and its perils. Although Borges stayed away from that tumultuous realm (the primordial domain known to Carriego), he nevertheless felt the need to acknowledge and justify the reality that surrounded him. In effect, his entire work can be seen as a multiform response to this urge.

In the first instance, this is marked by an ambiguous concern with Argentine’s political history since Independence. This is embodied in the figure of Juan Manuel de Rosas, the ‘omnipotent’, as he is sometimes identified. Borges meditates on the fate of the dictator in one of the poems included in Fervor de Buenos Aires, where he writes:

Famosamente infame
ese nombre fue desolación en las calles,
idolátrico amor entre el gauchaje
y horror de puñaladas en la historia.

(‘Rosas’, FB, lines 17-20)

Out of their context, these lines could be read as a strict condemnation of the despot, and yet when they are considered within the entire frame of the composition the poet’s intention becomes problematic. This is because the poem has an underlying motif, one that is latent in the opening lines:

En el ámbito desamorado
de la sala taciturnamente rendida
cuyo reloj austero derrama
un tiempo ya sin aventuras ni asombro.

(lines 1-4)

Indeed the centrality of the notion of time is highlighted by the position Borges assigns to it in the middle of the poem (line 23). Here, after declaring the opprobrium of Rosas (lines 17-20), he embarks on a metaphysical conjecture in which the crimes
committed under the dictator’s regime evaporate in the overwhelming infinity of universal history:

Hoy el olvido borra su censo de muertes,  
pues que son parciales los crímenes  
si los cotejamos con la fechoría del Tiempo,  
esa inmortalidad infatigable  
que anonada con silenciosa culpa las razas  
y en cuya herida siempre abierta  
que el último dios habrá de restañar el último día  
cabe toda la sangre derramada. [...]  
Ya Dios lo habrá olvidado.

(lines 21-28, 40)

It is difficult to read these lines without experiencing a certain discomfort with the argument as a whole, for even if we accept the major premise (the crimes committed by a man are ‘partial’ compared to the totality of evil occurrences perpetrated throughout history), the conclusion itself (Rosas has been redeemed by oblivion) seems to be more a justification than a solution to the problem. Rather than facing an ethical problem, Borges evades it entirely, for he has transposed the issue of moral responsibility from the individual, historical agent (which is the only possible subject of an ethical judgement) to an abstract notion, one which is void of ethical content. More generally, it is clear that such a reasoning cannot be of assistance in the handling of the concrete ethical problems which mankind as a whole has to confront at every stage in its historical development. Instead of calling for deliberation and moral action, Borges’s argument invites to apathy and conformism.

So, what is left of Rosas whose name is sympathetically uttered at the outset (‘Alguien en queja de cariño | pronunció el nombre familiarmente horredo’ lines 7-8; note that the word ‘cariño’ seems to preclude an unfavourable outcome for the tyrant)?

No sé si Rosas  
fué solo un ávido puñal como nuestros abuelos decían;  
creo que fué como tú y yo  
un accidente intercalado en los hechos
que viviô en la cotidiana zozobra
e inquietó para felicidades y penas
la incertidumbre de otros ánimos. [...] 
Y es antes una misericordia benévola
que un renoroso ensañamiento e injuria
el reanimar su obliteration decisiva
con limosnas de odio.

(lines 29-35, 41-44)

Borges seldom achieved such altruistic heights as this. Having absolved Rosas by the
grace of total annihilation (‘su obliteration decisiva’), he then recovers the
unperishable essence of his humanity, that which persists in every generation and is
endured by every human being (‘fué como tú y yo’). This astonishing revision of
Christian caritas, this superb view of human redemption through the suffering and
misery of our petty existence, would be hindered if our acts were not governed by the
ruthless law of causality (‘un accidente intercalado en los hechos’). Thus Borges
completes his sketch of human life with a deterministic view of moral action. And yet
it is more than that since by asserting Rosas’s impunity he has cleared his family name
from the stain of an infamous kinship.¹⁵

Notwithstanding, the poem is enticing for its perception of the inherent frailty of
man, for its recognition that hatred can only perpetuate injustice, and for its
preoccupation with the transient character of life. Some of these motifs reappear in
other compositions, although the general mood of the collection is unquestionably one
of affirmation and celebration. A small number of the poems, however, deal with the
problem of mortality (see ‘La Recoleta’, ‘Remordimiento por cualquier defunción’,
‘Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro’, and ‘Inscripción sepulcral’). There Borges
reiterates his view of death as total annihilation of the self (in the sense that it is
devoid of a teleological dimension), but in general the poems lack a sufficient depth
of thought. Rather, they are closer to the intuitive expression of existence as perceived
by a sensitive (though still immature) writer.

In the two subsequent books of verse, Luna de enfrente and Cuaderno San Martín,
Borges’s concern with ethical problems is more pointed and this is reflected in his
treatment of the theme of mortality. Take, for instance, the verses he wrote in memory
of his grandfather, Francisco Borges. There are two poems dedicated to him. The first
one, published in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, is little more than an exaltation of his ancestor's military accomplishments and an appeal for his everlasting glory:

> En el combate de La Verde  
> desbarató tanto valor la muerte.  
> Si esta vida contigo fué acerada  
> y el corazón, airada muchedumbre  
> se te agolpó en el pecho,  
> ruego al justo destino  
> aliste para tí toda la dicha  
> y que toda la inmortalidad sea contigo.  
>  
> (*Inscripción sepulcral*, lines 6-13)<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, in ‘Al coronel Francisco Borges’, included in *Luna de enfrente*, the elegiac tone of the composition does not deter the poet from questioning the purpose of a life squandered by military campaigns. In effect, the opening lines exemplify with poetic economy the ultimate futility of a heroic self-sacrifice in which man is nothing more than a mere puppet of destiny:

> Porque ése (*sic*) fué tu vida:  
> una cosa que arrastran las batallas.  
> El honor, la tristeza, la soledad  
> y el inútil coraje.  
>  
> (lines 1-4)<sup>17</sup>

However, Borges's most vehement charge against his country's violent history is directed towards the provincial *caudillo* Juan Facundo Quiroga. In the poems ‘Los llanos’ and ‘El general Quiroga va en coche al muere’, Borges alludes to the institutional barbarity of the period, that is, its subjection to the law of terror and murder:

> Por este llano urgió su imperio hecho de lanzas Juan Facundo Quiroga.  
> Imperio forajido, imperio misérremo.  
> Imperio cuyos vivos atambores fueron cascos de potros redoblando ciudades humilladas  
> Y cuyas encarnizadas banderas fueron los cuervos que una vez muerta la pelea se abaten.
Imperio que rubricaron facones criollos encrueliciéndose en las gargantas,
Imperio cuyos únicos palacios fueron las desgarradas y ávidas llamas.
Imperio errante. Imperio lastimero. [...] 
Es triste que el recuerdo incluya todo
Y más aún si es bochornoso el recuerdo.

('Los llanos', lines 6-12, 22-23)

The harsh tone of the poem contrasts sharply with Borges's benevolent treatment of the theme in 'Rosas'. In particular, it is striking how the earlier motif of redemption through oblivion is reversed in order to seal the poet's utter reprehension of Quiroga and his followers. Here memory attends the universal throne of justice in assurance of eternal damnation. This view is more pungent in ‘El general Quiroga va en coche al muere’, where Borges dramatizes the caudillo's insolent march to death and his subsequent entry into hell:

Ir en coche a la muerte ¡qué cosa más oronda!
El general Quiroga quiso entrar al infierno
llevando seis o siete degollados de escolta. [...] 
Muerte de mala muerte se lo llevó al riojano
y una de puñaladas lo mentó a Juan Manuel.

Luego (ya bien repuesto) penetró como un taita
en el infierno negro que Dios le hubo marcado,
y a sus órdenes iban, rotas y desangradas,
las ánimas en pena de fletes y cristianos.

(lines 9-11, 22-27)

Implicit in the overtly Christian setting of the poem are the questions of freedom and moral responsibility. Thus Quiroga is depicted as a haughty personality who deliberately challenged destiny in order to assert the supremacy of his will. This is reflected in Borges's wording in line 10 ('Quiroga quiso entrar al infierno'), as well as in his description of the caudillo's obstinate character:

Esa cordobesada bochinchera y ladina
(meditaba Quiroga) qué ha de poder con mi alma?
Aqui estoy afianzado y metido en la vida
Como la estaca pampa bien metida en la pampa.

(lines 12-15)

Although Borges follows Sarmiento in his portrayal of the caudillo, his emphasis on the stubborn self-sufficiency of the latter is interesting because of its psychological scope—one which is rare in him. Years later Borges reconsidered his views on Rosas and Quiroga in a parable which he entitled ‘Diálogo de muertos’ (from El hacedor, 1960). What I find most remarkable about the composition is the ethical roundness with which he instils the figure of Quiroga, whilst Rosas is presented as the very embodiment of insolence and disdain. In effect, the episode relates Rosas’s arrival to an undefined realm after his death. Here he is received with apprehension by a group of souls. Among the latter is Quiroga, who comes to the forefront. The scene is delineated in truly Dantesque terms:

Un grupo de hombres, de mujeres y de criaturas lo esperaba con ansiedad; a muchos les rayaba la garganta una línea roja, otros no tenían cabeza y andaban con recelo y vacilación, como quien camina en la sombra. Fueron cercando al forastero y, desde el fondo, alguno vociferó una mala palabra, pero un terror antiguo los detenía y no se atrevieron a más. A todos se adelantó un militar de piel cetrina y ojos como tizones; la melena revuelta y la barba lóbrega parecían comerle la cara. Diez o doce heridas mortales le surcaban el cuerpo como las rayas en la piel de los tigres. (OC, II, p. 169)

In this passage Borges describes the conjectural moment in which the dictator meets the spectres of his victims. The scene is dominated by the ruinous condition of the souls who are still possessed by the fear and anguish that ruled over their lives. This is followed by a dialogue between the two protagonists. The contrast between Quiroga and Rosas is made evident from the start. Whilst Rosas makes use of a refined but cynical language in order to exhibit his scorn of the defeated enemy, Quiroga expresses himself in a plain style, one which betrays the absence of hatred and deceitfulness:

—¡Qué aflicción ver a un guerrero tan espectable derribado por las armas de la perfidia! —dijo en tono rotundo—. ¡Pero también qué intima satisfacción haber ordenado que los victimarios purgaran sus fechorias en el patibulo, en la Plaza de la Victoria!  


—Si habla de Santos Pérez y de los Reinafé, sepá que ya les he agradecido —dijo con lenta gravedad el ensangrentado.

El otro lo miró como recelando una burla o una amenaza, pero Quiroga prosiguió:

—Rosas, usted no me entendió nunca. (Ibid.)

As if he could now understand things clearly and impartially, Quiroga tries to explain to Rosas the basic difference between them, but Rosas will not listen. As the dialogue unfolds itself, we perceive that Quiroga has undergone an inner process of change and that he has finally overcome the moral limitations which debased his life. In other words, he has reached the point in which he recognizes himself as part of a universal order which he must help to sustain rather than to destroy. Thus, although he is still proud of being a man of courage, he now perceives the fruitlessness of violence and the need to build up a peaceful society. This he states clearly: ‘Ahora voy a que me borren, a que me den otra cara y otro destino, porque la historia se harta de los violentos’ (my italics). Rosas, on the other hand, replies with supreme arrogance: ‘A mí me basta ser el que soy [...] y no quiero ser otro’ (p. 170).22

Rosas' self-centred expression is reminiscent of the most staunchy characters depicted by Dante in hell. Consider, for instance, Capaneo's blistering pride in Inferno XIV: ‘Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto’ (line 51). This echo may well be intentional given Borges's familiarity with the Commedia at the time, to which, moreover, he alludes in related compositions (take, for instance, ‘Poema conjetural’). What is important, nevertheless, is to recognize in Borges's palinode of the historical figures both a change and an enrichment of his own ethical attitudes vis-à-vis his youthful years. And perhaps it is not far-fetched to suggest that in the ethical transfiguration of Quiroga Borges is also representing the dialectical conflict between the arms and the letters that haunted him throughout his life. As he puts it in his study of the Argentinian tango: ‘De mí confesaré que no suelo oír El Marne o Don Juan sin recordar con precisión un pasado apócrifo, a la vez estoico y orgiástico, en el que he desafiado y peleado para caer al fin, silencioso, en un oscuro duelo a cuchillo’ (‘El tango pendenciero’, OC, 1, p. 162). Borges, then, could be expressing his desire to transcend the circumstances that made him the man that he is; to free himself from his obsession with courage, knife-fights, and violent deaths.

There is, however, an earlier occurrence of the theme of moral transfiguration in the work of Borges. I refer to ‘Hombre de la esquina rosada’, a story which is directly
linked to the author's first narrative attempts to recreate the legendary bravery of the 
compadre. Thematically, the composition is related to traditional oral stories about 
cuchilleros (knife-fighters) such as the ones popularized by the nineteenth-century 
folletinista Eduardo Gutiérrez. Borges expressed an overt admiration for this prolific 
writer, whose direct and often unpolished style has—he suggests—both the virtue and 
the burden of actualizing the sheer crudeness of reality ('Su prosa es de una 
incomparable trivialidad. La salva un solo hecho, un hecho que la inmortalidad suele 
preferir: se parece a la vida'). Although Borges disproved the realistic features of 
the story, there is a more fundamental way in which his reading of Gutiérrez may be 
present in the narrative. I refer to the latter's depiction of character and his interest in 
the forces that determine human actions. Gutiérrez often directs the reader's attention 
towards this problem without himself providing a justification or even a solution to 
the question, and Borges would no doubt have applauded this.

Nevertheless, I am not presenting this as a case of direct influence but simply as a 
literary stimulus which is latent in the background, for in the events related in the 
story Borges offers a particular view of courage which is at odds with the traditional 
image of manliness created in gaucho literature. The writer and critic Ricardo Piglia 
puts it very well when he observes that ‘la obra de Borges es una especie de diálogo 
muy sutil con las líneas centrales de la literatura argentina del siglo XIX. [...] Borges 
trabaja muy explicitamente la idea de cerrar la gauchesca, escribirle “El fin’’. In 
effect, here Borges puts into practice some of the stylistic devices which are 
characteristic of Hernández's Martin Fierro (such as first person narrative and the 
adoption of local idiom), clearly with the purpose of actualizing the creative principle 
which, in his view, animates his precursor's poem: ‘La relación del destino de Martín 
Fierro, en su propia boca’. Within this multiple literary and oral texture, Borges 
discovers not only the elements from which he can develop a new narrative technique 
but also the material basis for the expression of character ('la narración del paisano, 
el hombre que se muestra al contar', OC, I, p. 197; my italics). These two aspects 
constitute the literary challenge that he set out to solve in the story.

To turn to the theme of moral transfiguration noted above, then, the episode that is 
of interest for our study consists in the refusal of one of its protagonists, Rosendo 
Juárez, to fulfil the requirements that the ritual of bravery imposes on him. Rather 
than accepting his rival's instigation to fight—an act which would prove his allegiance 
to the religion of courage—Rosendo rejects the trial altogether. Now what in the eyes
of his followers is seen as an act of cowardice and humiliation implies a stronger
defiance on Rosendo's part for, in doing so, he actually opposes the entire moral code
on which his actions had so far been based. The dynamic tension of the story,
therefore, consists in the interplay between Rosendo's inexplicable denial to comply
with such forces, and the narrator's utter dependence on the consummation of a ritual
in which he places the sole justification of his otherwise miserable existence. Whilst
one man asserts his free will, the other cannot relinquish his sense of pride and the
violent ethics in which his identity is based:

Pensé que yo era apenas otro yuyo de esas orillas, criado entre las flores de sapo y las
osamentas. Qué iba a salir de esa basura sino nosotros, gritones pero blandos para el castigo,
boca y atropellada no más? Sentí después que no, que el barrio cuanto más aporriao, más
obligación de ser guapo. (OC, I, p. 332)

There are, therefore, two contrasting ethical perspectives in the story, one which is
outspoken and another which is repressed. Whilst the narrative gives us one point of
view, the other one is suggested exclusively through the character's actions. Thus,
although we do not hear Rosendo's reply to his opponent, we feel that the idea of him
being a coward belongs to the narrator rather than to him. We may even think that the
latter is deliberately misrepresenting Rosendo's attitude (there are a few signs that
indicate the protagonists' mutual enmity: 'una palmada suya en el montón que yo
tataba de sentir como una amistá'; 'vos siempre has de servir de estorbo', pp. 330,
332; my italics), and that his outwardly daring conduct conceals a weak and
perfidious character (this can be reckoned by his inability to face the challenger,
Francisco Real, when he enters the salón; again, the image that he conveys of himself
is that of being an insignificant man: 'me hizo a un lado, como despidiéndose de un
estorbo', p. 330). Hence the derisive way in which the narrator depicts the hero's
inaction:

Qué le pasaba mientras tanto a Rosendo, que no lo sacaba pisotiando a ese balaquero? Seguía
callado, sin alzarle los ojos. El cigarro no sé si lo escupió o si se le cayó de la cara. Al fin
pudo acertar con unas palabras, pero tan despacio que a los de la otra punta del salón no nos
alcanzó lo que dijo. (p. 331; my italics)
Clearly there is a double representation here. On the one hand, the subjective evaluation of the scene which belongs to the narrator's perception; on the other, the silent action that is actually taking place in front of him. This ambiguity creates in the reader an effect which is similar to that of a spectator watching a silent film. In other words, we are enticed to imagine the situation and from it to recreate not only Rosendo's voice and gestures, but also his real character ('la verdadera condición de Rosendo', p. 329). If we do so, we will find that there is no evidence to support the idea of him being a coward. If we initially believe in the narrator's version, this is only because we lack a third point of reference—the authorial voice—from which to establish the truth of the narrative. In a film this viewpoint would be supplied by the representation itself, and this is what the story invites us to do here: to provide the narrative with what is not said, to fill in the gap.

From this perspective Rosendo's response can be seen as a bold affirmation of moral autonomy over and above the stereotyped expectations of his group. It is, furthermore, a recognition of the futility of courage for its own sake and a forceful rejection of its brutality: 'Con las dos manos recibió Rosendo el cuchillo y lo filió como si no lo reconociera. Se empiñó de golpe hacia atrás y voló el cuchillo derecho y fue a perderse ajuela' (p. 331; my italics). This explicit gesture of estrangement says it all. The decisiveness with which the knife is launched through the window functions as the protagonist's final renunciation to the guapo archetype and initiates his anti-heroic conversion away from its diabolic domain: 'No lo volví a ver más' (p. 332).

As far as his narrative technique is concerned, Borges accomplished in this episode one of the main features of his later fiction, namely, the creation of parallel levels of meaning within a single verbal texture. In the story with which I am concerned here, this duplicity suggests a harsh critique of the hero-worshipping approach to the guapo figure in popular culture and its deep-rooted idiosyncrasy. Thus, far from restating the simple-minded tribute to the religion of courage that the early versions of the story portray, 'Hombre de la esquina rosada' betrays a grisly distrust in the capacity of the guapo or compadre to transcend the primitive condition on which his actions are based: 'Era la policia. Quien más, quien menos, todos tendrían su razón para no buscar ese trato' (p. 334). Taking the argument a step further, then, the story can be read as a ratification of the well-known distinction between civilization and barbarity which has so clearly characterized Argentinian social politics since its formulation by
Sarmiento. Unless the nation is capable of assuming nobler ideals and work towards the construction of an ordered realm, Borges seems to suggest, the possibility of attaining social and political maturity will never crystallize. Within the opposing views of moral choice voiced by Borges in the story, Rosendo Juárez emerges as the prototype of the civilized man who renounces the egocentric principles of primitive being in order to embrace the positivist standard of law and justice on which peace and progress can be built.  

Having reached this point, it will be useful to turn to Dante in order to see the way in which the concepts of political order and moral responsibility appear in his work. This will prepare the philosophical ground for Borges's reception of the moral issue in the Commedia during the following decade, particularly as it is reflected in the short story 'La escritura del dios'. Before that, however, a brief remark on the collection of short stories that precede the composition of 'Hombre de la esquina rosada'. I refer to Historia universal de la infamia, a series of narrative 'exercises' (as Borges defines them in the prologue to the first edition), illustrating the life of a few legendary villains in world history. Borges drew the material of the stories from a wide variety of sources but gave them an extraordinary cohesion through the elaboration of a very personal and mature style. However, whilst their significance in the development of his narrative technique cannot be overstated, their characterization is disappointing. This is surprising given the biographical nature of the compositions, which is most suitable for this kind of treatment. Borges himself declared not to have a 'psychological' interest in his characters ('No son, no tratan de ser, psicológicos', OC, I, p. 289), but, as I have already pointed out, the depiction of personality does not exclude the delineation of character from other perceptive angles. Borges's solution, however, was to eliminate the existence of the psychic realm altogether and, with it, the expression of feeling and emotion. Consequently, his stories of universal infamy are refined literary artifacts entirely devoid of human depth (I am speaking of characterization, not of humanitarianism). Indeed, if Borges could lament Carriego's occasional appeal to his reader's sympathy ('Carriego apela solamente a nuestra piedad', OC, I, p. 135), we can equally reproach Borges for appealing to the aesthetic sensitivity of his reader (his capacity to enjoy literature from a purely artistic point of view) at the expense of moral and philosophical understanding. As he admits in the 1954 prologue to Historia universal de la infamia: '[Este libro] no es otra cosa que apariencia, que una superficie de imágenes; por eso mismo puede acaso agradar' (OC,
In effect Borges puts into practice the aesthetic principles sustained by José Ortega y Gasset in his famous study of 1925: ‘Alegrarse o sufrir con los destinos humanos que, tal vez, la obra de arte nos refiere o presenta, es cosa muy diferente del verdadero goce estético. Más aún: esa ocupación con lo humano de la obra es, en principio, incompatible con la estricta fruición estética’. With their emphasis on pure form, on the one hand, and the emotional detachment with which their subject matter is treated, on the other, Borges's stories of infamy, far from risking the rejection of a bourgeois readership, are the very embodiment of the social attitude which they represent (from this perspective they are the antithesis of Gutiérrez's writing, whose formal spontaneity and lack of embellishment were designed to arouse an immediate emotional response from its audience). By establishing the narrative in the sphere of phenomenal appearance Borges evades the complexities of characterization. This allows him to transform his protagonists into accidental forms which are incapable of substantiating an ulterior social or historical significance. Thus history is reduced to a mechanical sequence of causes and effects. Causality becomes not only the logical structure of the narrative but also the ordering principle of reality: it is the expression of the world's soul. As he observes elsewhere: ‘El menor de los hechos presupone el inconcebible universo e, inversamente, [...] el universo necesita del menor de los hechos’. This imaginative application of Schopenhauerian philosophy is stated by the author from the outset:

En 1517 el P. Bartolomé de las Casas tuvo mucha lástima de los indios que se extenuaban en los laboriosos infiernos de las minas de oro antillanas, y propuso al emperador Carlos V la importación de negros. [...] A esa curiosa variación de un filántropo debemos infinitos hechos: los blues de Handy, el éxito logrado en Paris por el pintor doctor oriental D. Pedro Figari, la buena prosa cimarrona del también oriental D. Vicente Rossi, el tamaño mitológico de Abraham Lincoln, los quinientos mil muertos de la Guerra de Secesión, los tres mil trescientos millones gastados en pensiones militares, la estatua del imaginario Falucho, la admisión del verbo linchar en la decimotercera edición del Diccionario de la Academia, el impetuoso film Aleluya, la fornida carga a la bayoneta llevada por Soler al frente de sus Pardos y Morenos en el Cerrito, la gracia de la señorita de Tal, el moreno que asesinó Martín Fierro, la deplorable rumba El Manisero, el napoleónismo arrestado y encalabozado de Toussaint Louverture, la cruz y la serpiente en Haití, la sangre de las cabras degolladas por el machete del papaloi, la habanera madre del tango, el candombe.
Además: la culpable y magnífica existencia del atroz redentor Lazarus Morell. (*OC*, I, p. 295)

Within the domain of empirical causation displayed here Borges allows little room for voluntary action, for although it could be argued that las Casas' appeal to the Spanish Crown exemplifies the power of the will over natural causation, it is obvious that within the narrative's logic this action would itself be subject to causal explanation. But is all that happens in history inevitable? Are the actions of men simply the result of external forces in which moral responsibility and self-determination play no part? Although I cannot give an answer to questions of such a magnitude, the fact is that man has the capacity to take decisions that affect his own life as much as that of society as a whole. As I have already shown, this principle lies at the heart of Borges's thinking in 'Hombre de la esquina rosada', and it is therefore important to recognize the ideological posture that separates this story from the previous ones. And yet it is significant that at the same time that he was composing tales of infamy, he was also working on a literary translation (which he published in the same journal just a few months later) about the horrors of the National-Socialist regime in Germany. The piece was written by the German expatriate Heinrich Mann; its title: 'Escenas de la crueldad Nazi'.

(ii)

Throughout his work, Dante is concerned with the questions 'What is virtue?', 'What is nobility?', 'How can we achieve happiness?' Indeed, his entire literary production is permeated by the search for man's true goal in life. Thus, although the *Vita nuova* refers happiness to the affective faculty of man, it nevertheless affirms the need for a rational principle which will guide human love towards an ennobling order of existence. This, I think, is the core of the *Vita nuova's* moral significance. The critical moment in this search for happiness occurs in chapter XVIII, in which the poet questions the purpose of his endeavour in relation to an inner state of truth: "'Noi ti preghiamo che tu ne dici ove sta questa tua beatitudine'. Ed io, rispondendo lei, dissi cotanto: "In quelle parole che lodano la donna mia'" (*VN* XVIII, 6). From this perspective the rhetorical speechlessness with which the *libello* ends bears witness to the poet's search for a new kind of moral-affective understanding ('intelligenza nova',
VXLI, 10, line 3). Hence the dramatic shift in Dante's concern, from the 'passionate' appraisal of his early lyrics to the more 'temperate' love of Philosophy professed in the *Convivio.*

In the latter Dante develops the notions of virtue and nobility from the standpoint of Aristotelian ethics. His main aim is to show that man, even though engaged in a certain set of socio-political circumstances, is capable of leading a good life. This is conceived in terms of the natural end of the human activity. In the exercise of his rational faculty man can achieve his own perfection, which consists in the realization of the practical and speculative potentialities with which he is endowed ('Onde diciamo uomo virtuoso, che vive in vita contemplativa o attiva, alla quale è ordinato naturalmente', *Conv. I, v, 11*). Of course, human beings do not live in isolation. Human existence is by necessity a collective enterprise and it is in relation to his community that a man can be said to lead a good or bad life. This circumstance originates a series of actions which, determined by rational principles, guide man towards his practical end. Following Aristotle, Dante calls the latter moral virtues (such as justice, courage, temperance, liberality, and so on), stressing the fact that their application is something that lies within human reach: 'Dove è da sapere che propiissimi nostri frutti sono le morali vertudi, però che da ogni canto sono in nostra podestade' (*Conv. IV, xvii, 3*).

Dante's, we must remember, is everywhere a moral programme resting on the notion of free will, God's most cherished gift to mankind (*Par. V, 19-24*), as that whereby we are, in some degree at least, in a position to choose our historical and ultimately eternal destiny. Dante, however, does not use the term 'free will' in the *Convivio*; he uses instead the word *volontade*, a power of the soul by virtue of which man is held responsible for his actions in so far as it is subject to the judgment of reason (*Conv. I, xii, 9; IV, ix, 7*). The power to assent to or to refrain from our natural tendencies and appetitions—as far as they involve awareness and deliberation—is always within us, and it is through this capacity that we are capable of self-determination.

The moral virtues, then, refer to a particular operation of the mind in which certain choices and decisions are made in view of a practical goal. Considered as a whole, they order our active life. By active life Dante understands man's application of reason in the conduct of practical affairs. If this capacity is exercised properly (which
depends both on the acquisition of good habits and moderation), it becomes a source of happiness in man's social and political existence (Conv. IV, xvii, 7-8).

On the other hand, through the operation of pure reason man is capable of actualizing the highest aspects of his mind, for although the moral virtues are essential for man's well-being (which, of course, results in a full understanding of his existence in so far as it is determined by a temporal order) they have no bearing in matters of a purely speculative kind. This is the object of the contemplative life. Hence, with respect to his yearning for pure understanding, it is only with the practice of philosophy and theology that man can satisfy his rational impulse, which consists in a movement towards the possession of what is true in the order of being.

The distinction between the active and the contemplative life has at its basis a twofold division of the operation of the mind. These two faculties are designated by Aristotle, for analytical purposes, as ‘scientific’ and ‘deliberative’. Whereas practical thinking refers to choice, speculative thought consists in the attainment of truth. Now in matters of right conduct the good of the will must be in accordance with the true of the intellect. Hence the need for an intellectual virtue (namely, prudence) to guide man's actions and choices towards their proper end (Conv. IV, xvii, 8).

Although the exercise of the intellectual virtues gives rise to a higher (though still imperfect) degree of beatitude, neither the practical nor the speculative can yield the supreme happiness, which consists in the vision of God pure and simple. This beatitude is perfect because it consists in the attainment of man's absolute end in which the desire for the supreme good is satisfied—but this man cannot have in this life:

Veramente l'uso del nostro animo è doppio, cioè pratico e speculativo. [...] Quello del pratico si è operare per noi virtuosamente, cioè onestamente, con prudenza, con temperanza, con forza e con giustizia; quello de lo speculativo si è non operare per noi, ma considerare l'opere di Dio e della natura. E questo come quell'altro è nostra beatitudine e somma felicitade, si come vedere si può. [...] Di questi usi l'uno è più pieno di beatitudine che l'altro; si come è lo speculativo, lo quale sanza mistura alcuna è uso de la nostra nobilissima parte, la quale, per lo radicale amore che detto è, massimamente è amabile, si com'è lo 'ntelletto. E questa parte in questa vida perfettamente lo suo uso avere non puote–lo quale averà in Dio che è sommo intelligibile–, se non in quanto considera lui e mira lui per li suoi effetti. (Conv. IV, xxii, 11, 13)
Although Dante places the contemplative life above the active life, it is important to bear in mind the fact that the human intellect is unable by its own means to have a direct knowledge of the supreme mode of the divine existence. We must therefore look at an earlier passage in the third book of the *Convivio* where Dante tackles the question of how wisdom can nevertheless make man happy. Indeed, against this assertion it could be argued that if man's natural desire is to know, and if knowledge of God is incomplete, it follows that man cannot be happy not being able to fulfil such a desire in its entirety (*Conv. III, xv, 7*). Dante replies, with Aristotle, that it is the intrinsic capacity of the thing which desires what determines its own natural desire. In every being the aim of desire is to reach a point of satisfaction which is in accordance with its capacity to possess the object. To go beyond this limit is to violate the natural order, for it would imply a movement without rest or purpose (ibid., §§ 8-9). With regard to the knowledge of the first cause, then, human desire is proportionate to its capacity to know God in accordance with the limits imposed by natural reason. Therefore, man does not desire to know what is beyond the natural capacity of his understanding:

E però l'umano desiderio è misurato in questa vita a quella scienza che qui avere si può, e quello punto non passa se non per errore, lo quale è di fuori di naturale intenzione. […] Onde, con ciò sia cosa che conoscere di Dio, e di certe altre cose, quello esso è, non sia possibile alla nostra natura, quello da noi naturalmente non è desiderato di sapere. (*Conv. III, xv, 9-10*)

This passage—which is really necessitated by the need to keep the *Convivio*'s practical viability on course—reveals Dante's most personal thoughts about the end of human life. By the science which 'can be gained here' he means theology—together with its handmaid, metaphysics (*Conv. II, xiv, 8*)—of which our intellect can only grasp certain things by way of negation ('cose negando', *Conv. III, xv, 6*). But as an auxiliary aid to reach its final goal mankind possesses a great gift, namely, ethics ('moralitade') which, though it occupies a secondary position within the hierarchy of the sciences (secondary, that is, only with respect to theology), is nevertheless the most desirable of human perfections and, hence, the one which can yield the highest degree of happiness man can achieve as a rational creature on earth: ‘Dove è da sapere che la moralitade è bellezza della Filosofia. […] E quinci nasce quella
felicitade la quale diffinisce Aristotile nel primo dell’Etica, dicendo che è operazione secondo virtù in vita perfetta’ (Conv. III, xv, 11-12). Hence with respect to its object, the contemplative life is superior to the active life for it deals with those things which are above man and the material world, that is, with the ultimate truth which man cannot attain on earth. On the other hand, with respect to man's practical end, the active life is not only an immediate consequence of his being immersed in a concrete political community but also something whose realization depends entirely on his good will. From this point of view, then, the active life carries with it a human urgency which gives it a certain prominence over the sphere of the contemplative life. Dante's equation can therefore be stated thus: the active life is perfect with respect to man's practical end, but it is imperfect with respect to the last end which is gained in eternal life; on the other hand, the contemplative life is perfect with respect to its supreme object of contemplation, but it is imperfect in so far as it is inaccessible to the human intellect in its entirety, for God, eternity, and the first substance cannot be comprehended in themselves but only through their effects.

Hence the need for both an imperial and a papal power to direct man's actions towards the acquisition of the good, which is twofold: first, as a mortal being the good of man consists in the attainment of virtue. Although this can only be realized through the observance of justice and political order, its complete fulfilment lies within human reach. Second, as an incorruptible substance the good of man consists in his preparation for eternal life. For this purpose man has been instructed—through Christian doctrine and revelation—in the practice and strengthening of the theological virtues (which, properly speaking, depend on God's grace). This duality is brought to a sharp focus in the doctrine of the two ends advanced in the Monarchia. Given man's twofold constitution it follows that there must be a corresponding goal for each part, for every substance is ordained to a specific end according to its own nature. Man's existence, therefore, consists in attaining not one but two goals, each of them being circumscribed to its own sphere of action: (1) as a corruptible substance, man's proper operation consists in living in accordance with reason and virtue; (2) as an eternal substance, man's goal consists in the enjoyment of the vision of God. For the attainment of the first goal man has at his disposal the teachings of philosophy, which must be accompanied by the practice of the moral and intellectual virtues; for the fulfilment of the second goal he is guided by the teachings of the Scriptures, which is complemented by the actualization of the theological virtues (Mon., III, xvi, 8).
In the _Convivio_, however, Dante may appear to have paid little attention to the fundamental role assigned by the church to the theological virtues (as the way to eternal happiness) in favour of natural reason. Thus, for instance, in IV, xxii, 18, he mentions the moral and intellectual virtues as the sole guides to the supreme happiness whereas Christian orthodoxy would emphasize the virtues of faith, hope, and love as the proper way towards God and salvation. And yet his many Scriptural quotations show the actual importance he attaches to Christian doctrine. Indeed, it is one thing to assert the absolute self-sufficiency of the intellect, and another to consider certain philosophical questions from a rational perspective only. Dante's intention in Book IV is to provide an ethical basis for his conception of nobility. For this purpose he makes use of the philosophical principles on which the science of ethics is grounded. This is not to say that he ignores the role of the church in leading man towards the attainment of a happy life. It is because the church deals with our ultimate happiness that he keeps it apart from his enquiry into justice and morality which, properly speaking, pertain to the realm of the human actions within the civic order—indeed, one cannot fail to notice the political motive which lurks behind the final chapters of the vernacular treatise.

Thus Dante's earlier claim that to live a good human life is to live according to virtue (rather than in pure speculation) shows that his main concern is not contemplation but action—which, of course, is a form of service of God—for this is what is characteristic of human beings who are not pure intelligences but frail and unstable entities in need of guidance and support:

Ove è da sapere che 'l primo e lo più nobile rampollo che germogli di questo seme, per essere fruttifero, si è l'appetito dell'animo. [...] E se questo non è bene culto e sostenuto diritto per buona consuetudine, poco vale la sementa, e meglio sarebbe non essere seminato. E però vuole santo Augustino, e ancora Aristotile nel secondo dell'Etica, che l'uomo s'ausi a ben fare e a rifrenare le sue passioni, acciò che questo tallo che detto è, per buona consuetudine induri e rifermisi nella sua rettitudine, si che possa fruttificare, e del suo frutto uscire la dolcezza dell'umana felicitade. (_Conv._ IV, xxi, 13-14)

This, of course, is the theme of the _Purgatorio_ where Dante brings together both the cognitive and affective faculties of man in order to conform a total view of the human existence in its movement into God. As the author of the Epistle to Cangrande
explains, the aim of the *Commedia* is 'to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and bring them to a state of happiness' (‘removere viventes in hac vita de statu miseriae, et perducere ad statum felicitatis’, § 15; see also § 8). We must not forget that in the Christian view man is in a continuous process of becoming and that his life on earth is a preparation for the eternal life revealed to him through the example of Christ (*Conv.* II, viii, 14). Hence the upward, albeit slow and laborious progress of the souls into God which he will depict in purgatory; hence the permanent lures (moral and intellectual) Dante the pilgrim is compelled to overcome before he can reach Beatrice at the summit of the mountain.\(^{40}\)

Within the overall structure of the *Commedia*, the thematic relevance of moral and political philosophy in Dante's thought is highlighted by the central position he allocated to the questions of moral responsibility, free will, and the need of the two powers (religious and political). These issues are considered in canto XVI of the *Purgatorio* which, in numerical terms, stands at the centre of the poem. The narrative is set in the third circle of the mountain of Purgatory where the sin of wrath is purged. The scene is dominated by a dense smoke which blinds the sinners, a symbolical punishment or *contrappasso* for the loss of reason and self-control to which the wrathful were subjected during their life. The image, however, enables Dante to introduce a more general theme, namely, the state of neglect in which man has fallen with regard to the principle of action and rational self-determination that should rule his existence on earth. Let us look in some detail at how this comes to be.

As Dante and Virgil lose their way in the polluted darkness of the circle they are approached by a penitent soul who asks about the pilgrim's living presence in the realm of the afterlife. The character, Marco Lombardo, is a representative of the old Italian nobility, a man of moral virtue and worldly experience. Marco's allusions to a bygone age prompts Dante's inquiry as to the reason why injustice and corruption now dominate the world. In the first part of his speech, Marco refutes the thesis of astrological determinism. It is true, he concedes, that the celestial spheres are the cause of certain corporeal states, but these do not determine man by necessity as to his subsequent actions and decisions. On the contrary, the rational soul has been endowed with a power through which man can discern the goodness or evil of his choices and actions (Dante uses the word 'lume' to refer to the effect of practical reason, an image that contrasts sharply with the metaphorical darkness of the circle), and a will which,
if well bred by good habit and restraint, can overcome the inclinations of sensual desiring:

“Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia;  
non dico tutti, ma, posto ch’i’ l dica,  
lume v’è dato a bene e a malizia,  
e libero voler; che, se fatica  
ze le prime battaglie col ciel dura,  
poi vince tutto, se ben si notrica”.

(lines 73-78)

There is a greater power than that of the stars: it is the omnipotence of the Creator who, nevertheless, has given man the capacity of self-determination through the exercise of reason:

“A maggior forza e a miglior natura  
liberi soggiacete; e quella crea  
la mente in voi, che ’l ciel non ha in sua cura.  
Però, se ’l mondo presente disvia,  
in voi è la cagione, in voi si cheggia”.

(lines 79-83)

The cause of evil, then, is not in the heavens but within man himself. By misusing his freedom man creates a new, post-lapsarian mode of existence for which only he is held responsible.41

In order to illustrate this, Marco gives a psychological description of how the soul is naturally inclined towards everything that gives it pleasure. This outward tendency of the appetite is activated from the moment of its creation by a disposition towards the enjoyment of small, inoffensive goods but soon turns into an insatiable desire for riches and material possession. Deceived by false values, man's craving goes from one material good to another and will not stop unless his greed is contained. This brief explanation of how the will is moved by the perception of external objects (which runs parallel to the theory of psychological determinism later expanded by Virgil in canto XVIII) serves as a bridge to the second point in Marco's discourse in which he
states the need for a temporal power independent from the church to reinforce the law and impose order.

As canto XVI of the Purgatorio comes to a close, the thick cloud of smoke that surrounds the circle begins to disperse and a dim splendour of the sun is visible once again. Likewise, within the pilgrim's mind, Marco's discourse has shed some light on the cause of the world's confusion by (1) dissipating false moral assumptions based on astrological determinism and (2) showing how the absence of the emperor as the legitimate head of the political body has given way to the Pope's abuse of power.

Although the indictment of the church is strong in Marco's speech (he considers the church's alienation of the secular world as a severe loss of its spiritual mission), the political issue—the need of the two powers in order to keep a control of their respective domain (lines 110-12)—is reducible to the ethical problem, which lies in a fundamental misdirection of the will; the corruption of the church being a symptom of this.42

In the absence of a political institution to implement the law, canto XVI denounces the contemporary state of moral chaos as a direct consequence of man's inability to exercise his capacity for self-determination without the adequate means of external coercion. It is a rather pessimistic account and one that contrasts with Dante's affirmation of the power of the will against the lures of the appetite. Within Marco's discourse, this ambivalence depends on whether we consider the problem of moral responsibility either from the point of view of the individual agent or from that of the society as a whole. Given that human beings differ from one another in their capacity to act in accordance with the moral law, the existence of a governing body becomes necessary in order to safeguard the well-being of the community and guide it towards its proper goal (Purg. XVI, 94-96). But is the reliance in personal responsibility—aided by civic and religious institutions—in itself enough to save mankind from falling in the depths of sin? Are we, on our own account and by our own moral strength, capable of defeating our 'love of the world' (our ingrained pride and self-interest), in order to reach a nobler order of existence? Are we, furthermore, capable of performing good actions for the sake of the good in itself, that is, for the joy of doing and loving what is right in accordance with an inner principle of action, rather than through the imposition of law from the outside? If one looks at the Convivio, it is possible to discern in Dante's thought a certain optimism regarding man's capacity to overcome the fragile and gloomy state of human life on earth. To the congenial
inability of mankind to do what is right (the Fall as man's radical negation of moral
good), Dante seems to oppose a total confidence in man's capacity to restore the
natural goodness of his ontological condition. And yet he did not finish the treatise. I
am not in a position to speculate on the causes for his decision to abandon the project,
but it is not difficult to see that at the heart of the Commedia lies the assumption (and
this is stated at the beginning of the poem, in the allegory of cantos I and II of the
Inferno which outline the general meaning of the narrative) that without divine
intervention, that is, without the assistance of grace, Dante the pilgrim (and, by
extension, all human beings) would be unable to reverse the state of servitude which
impedes his progress towards the realization of true happiness in communion with
God. This implies a revision of his earlier trust in man's rational capacity to fulfil his
destiny: legalism and scientific knowledge are insufficient tools for the spiritual
salvation of mankind.43

‘Nothing in the Catholic faith is more certain’, writes Gerald Bonner, ‘than the fact
that not all men are to be saved’ (St Augustine of Hippo, p. 379). Dante reminds us of
this reality—the dire consequence of man's misuse of freedom—through the harsh
inscription which he places at the entrance of the Inferno, the eternal prison from
which there is no hope of salvation:

Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
se non eterne, e io eterno duro.
Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate.

(Inf. III, 7-9)

This circumstance raises various problems, for how can the human will be liberated
from the bondage of sin if it has lost the righteousness with which man was created?
How can mankind be blamed for its depravity if this is consequence of an inherited
sin which rules out the possibility of return to a primal state of innocence and grace?
Furthermore, how do we reconcile the severity of divine justice with God's
benevolence, for surely He must desire the rehabilitation of mankind so that it can
fulfil the end for which it was conceived. These questions are related to the
fundamental Christian notion that lies behind the Commedia, namely, the idea that
God's intervention was necessary in order to repair the injury perpetrated by Adam
and bring to fruition the providential design of the universe: ‘to bring this world back to the ways that He had predestined it to follow ab eterno’.44

Dante deals with this issue in canto VII of the Paradiso, where he expresses the basic belief in the mystery of the Incarnation for the salvation of mankind. According to Christian doctrine, Adam's fall reduced human nature to a feeble entity incapable of raising itself above moral evil, for it was the whole of humanity which acted in him. Mankind, then, participates in, and indeed perpetuates, Adam's sin. Having lost the original uprightness it enjoyed in Eden, human nature is by force unable to overcome its own weakness, for in falling away from God man injured the soul's affective and intellectual capacity with which he was created:

"Per non soffrire a la virtù che vole
freno a suo prode, quell' uom che non nacque,
dannando sé, dannò tutta sua prole;
onde l'umana specie inferma giacque
giù per secoli molti in grande errore,
fin ch'al Verbo di Dio discender piaque".  
(Par. VII, 25-30)

Deprived of moral freedom and cut off from the light of truth man cannot escape error. Only the power of divine grace through revelation in Christ can heal fallen man. By his death upon the Cross and by resurrecting from the dead, the Son of God showed the path that leads to Heaven (‘Quivi è la sapienza e la possanza | ch'apri le strade tra 'l cielo e la terra’, Par. XXIII, 37-38). Man, therefore, can collaborate in the providential development of history by following Christ's example and building on earth a fraternal bond in the love of God. To the death of mankind in Adam's sin Dante opposes a firm belief on the promise of eternal life through participation in the Body of Christ. Dante's general conception of grace, as Kenelm Foster observes, may not be entirely consistent with Christian doctrine; but it nevertheless stands as one of the main pillars on which the pilgrim's journey is secured.45 In effect the entire poem re-enacts the gradual and painstaking approach of the pilgrim from the confusion of the earthly city—the kingdom of cupiditas and self-rule—to the triumphant vision of Christ in the celestial garden (Par. XXIII, 19-87). Here lies the moral force of the Commedia, Dante's prophetic song. It is the assertion of the spiritual transformation of
the world (man's return to God) through the love and understanding of divine truth as quickened by grace.

(iii)

In the prologue to the second edition of *Historia universal de la infamia*, the collection of short stories that marks Borges's beginning as a storyteller in the 1930s, the author remarks: ‘[Estas páginas] son el irresponsable juego de un tímido que no se animó a escribir cuentos y que se distrajo en falsear y tergiversar […] ajenas historias’ (*OC*, I, p. 291). Indeed the series of short stories that would burst from his pen during the following decade conspicuously displays the originality of an author who had, paradoxically, made this very technique his own and who, furthermore, exploited it as a literary theme in its own right. Falsehood and deception were no longer a timid game but a fully perfected and mastered craftsmanship.

Deceived by appearances, not a few of Borges's critics have been trapped in the storyteller's net. Yet it is necessary to dwell in this created world of textual mirrors, for it is the gradual understanding of his skill that ultimately liberates a higher level of meaning in the text. On the other hand, the rich variety of Borges's literary sources is something that has been overemphasized. Less attention has been given to the fact that in the Argentinian writer it is not so much the concrete erudite detail that matters as the manifestation of an idea or event in various parallel occurrences. Borges is in his own way a fine comparatist for he constantly points out coincidences and similarities, whether cultural, historical, or philosophical in kind. Thus he blurs the conceptual parameters of the Western mentality not simply to produce an aesthetic effect but in order to reflect upon the totality of the human experience.

The narrative events described in ‘La escritura del dios’ take place during the aftermath of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Tzinacán, a captive Quiché Maya priest, suffers the consequences of hatred and persecution which threaten to exterminate his whole nation. His temple and religious images have been destroyed whilst enduring the tortures of the greedy Spaniards. He, who was once the despotic ruler of a sacrificial people, must now face his own death. In the darkness of an adjacent dungeon the regular movements of a jaguar slowly measure the passing of time. At noon the cell is illuminated as the trap door is opened in order to provide the prisoner with food. Cut off from the outside world, he directs his attention towards the
discovery of a magic formula which will liberate his people. Thus memory and revelation emerge as the only possible way towards salvation. In the nothingness of the cell, however, knowledge has been dispersed and a piecemeal reconstruction of the world becomes impossible. Even the wild beast (in whose spotted skin Tzinacán believes the secret writing to be encoded) is as elusive as the outside realm. Thus the search for salvation is turned into an apocalyptic finale for which the prisoner can find no hope of redemption. As the character emerges from the horrors of a virtually inextricable dream he is able to experience the vision of divine truth through mystical union. Paradoxically, the possession of absolute knowledge only serves to neutralize his will by plunging him into a desired state of eternal oblivion. Hence the story ends with a radical view of universal justice bringing in full circle the inevitable forces that rule man's destiny.

In his study of the cultural and historical features present in ‘La escritura del dios’, Daniel Balderston has neatly reconstructed several of the story's pre-Columbian elements. In order to support his argument, Balderston suggests that Borges was acquainted with several historical sources and that he undertook the composition of the story with the literary material readily available to him. He shows, for instance, the passages from the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Quiché Indians, which are echoed in Tzinacán's vision, and provides invaluable information on the historical circumstances that surround the anecdotal make-up of the story. However, he does not tackle the question posed by the existence of other textual references which clearly are there but which fall outside his specific field of interest. In fact, he goes so far as to dismiss any interpretation which does not take into account ‘the cultural system of the protagonist’ (p. 162, n. 25).

If, on the one hand, Balderston allows the literal meaning to take precedence over the symbolical one, on the other some enthusiastic interpreters of the cabbalistic elements in the story, incited by Borges's own declarations, have overstated their discovery of Jewish mystical sources at the expense of the story's historical relevance. Both readings meet at a point that, to my knowledge, has not been indicated by either party. I will refer to this juncture later on. What I would like to emphasize here is the fact that these and other elucidations of the story should not exclude each other. They are adequate or possible representations in so far as they are conceived as part of a whole. In order to perceive the latter, however, we must be prepared to understand the story in its most indeterminate form. This is articulated in
the story as the perennial struggle of opposites and it derives from the author's wider reflections on the nature of evil.

The fact that Borges's first poetic compositions alluding to Dantian themes bear upon the question of evil and punishment shows that he recognised this as one of the major motifs in Dante's *Commedia*. Now ‘La escritura del dios’ is a story which has traditionally been associated with Oriental and cabalistic views of the world. Less common is the reading of the story from a Dantean perspective. There are, however, several elements in it which have a Dantean connection and which help to set the story within a wider ethical domain. In the first instance, the theme of the visionary ecstasy links the story with ‘El Aleph’, a short story with clear Dantean associations. Borges seems to have worked on the corresponding drafts contemporaneously, that is, during the summer of 1945, although ‘La escritura del dios’ was published four years later, in 1949. Significantly, Borges collected that same year (as an introduction to a Spanish translation of the *Divine Comedy*) some of the essays he had written on Dante not long before. The two stories, then, are characterized by an ecstatic vision at the climax of the narrative. This takes place in a symbolical underworld and in both cases it leads to a desired state of oblivion. However, the two episodes are distinguished by a notorious feature: the egotistic images that frustrate the expected joyfulness of ecstasy in ‘El Aleph’ become, in Tzinacán's rapture, the hidden (but now recovered) images of his people's sacred book. Personal history is replaced by the mythical memory of a nation. This mystical vision does produce joy, alas only to plunge us immediately into total abandonment.

There are, of course, other elements in ‘La escritura del dios’ that can be related to Borges's reading of Dante, such as the ineffability topos and the image of the wheel to which I will come back shortly. More fundamental, however, is the possibility of considering the story as an actual piece of allegorical writing. It is true that certain critics, conditioned by an excessive distrust of the critical imagination, deny the presence of allegory in Borges's work (Jurado, pp. 59-60). Of course, Borges's stories are not allegorical in the scholastic understanding of the term. Rather, the term allegory is meant here in a loose way, namely, as a compositional procedure where the intended sense is other than the literal (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, VIII. vi. 44). It is, however, undeniable that several of Borges's writings display a variety of levels of meaning in the fashion of an allegorical text. He himself expressed a keen interest in Biblical exegesis, both in its Christian and Jewish modes. Thus he frequently
insinuates the existence of a symbolical meaning in his work. What he says of ‘La lotería de Babilonia’, namely, that it is not entirely innocent of symbolism (OC, I, p. 429), applies, in one way or another, to all the stories in the collection. Similarly, and in Dantinean fashion, he points out that the short story ‘El Sur’ can be read ‘como directa narración de hechos novelescos y también de otro modo’ (id., p. 483). The literal sense (the events that make up the narrative), corresponds to Dante’s ‘beautiful lie’ (‘bella menzogna’, Conv. II, i, 4) to which Borges alludes elsewhere with technical accuracy as ‘ficción poética’, a term charged with ethical meaning in medieval poetics.53

The presence of falsehood in ‘La escritura del dios’ is poignantly revealed by Lida Aronne Amestoy (Introducción al cuento epifánico, pp. 158-68). However, her particular ideological view does not allow her to acknowledge the fact that it is precisely through falsehood and deception that Borges establishes the fundamental narrative principle of his fiction, one that compels the reader to go beyond the literal meaning of the story. Jaime Giordano, on the other hand, says of Borges’s work: ‘La ficción cubre una necesidad: presentarnos como verdadero lo falso’ (‘Forma y sentido’, p. 114). Unquestionably the intertwining of truth and falsehood plays an essential role in Borges’s fiction but it is also necessary to distinguish the truth value of the narrative from the rhetorical principle that animates it. I would therefore argue the reverse: fiction presents truth under the robe of falsehood. Consider, in general, the following passages: ‘Un hecho falso puede ser esencialmente cierto’; ‘Nos demoró una vasta polémica sobre la ejecución de una novela en primera persona, cuyo narrador omitiera o desfigurara los hechos e incurriera en diversas contradicciones, que permitieran a unos pocos lectores—a muy pocos lectores—la adivinación de una realidad atroz o banal’; ‘Creeré haber fabricado un cuento fantástico y habré historiado un hecho real’; ‘Los hechos eran ciertos, o podían serlo, pero contados como tú los contaste, eran, de un modo manifiesto, mentiras’ (OC, I, pp. 252, 431, 575, 604, respectively).

In her study on Borges’s poetics, Graciela Massuh observes that the opening phrase of ‘La escritura del dios’ (‘La cárcel es profunda y de piedra’) is hendecasyllabic (Una estética del silencio, p. 119). She does not suggest any connection with Dante or with any particular poet. Her intention is to show the significance of linguistic expression in the story’s poetic structure (‘La lucha del mago es la lucha del poeta por encontrar una palabra adecuada a sus necesidades expresivas’ (p. 136); a remark that
fits in very well within the context of ‘El Aleph’ and which will become an explicit theme in Borges's later work. Can we nevertheless propose a textual allusion to Dante in the cited passage? Let us consider the whole description: ‘La cárcel es profunda y de piedra; su forma la de un hemisferio casi perfecto, si bien el piso […] es algo menor que un círculo máximo, hecho que agrava de algún modo los sentimientos de opresión y vastedad’ (OC, I, p. 596). In *Nueve ensayos dantescos*, referring to Dante's depiction of hell as a blind prison (*Inf.* X, 58-59), Borges comments: ‘El infierno dantesco magnifica la noción de una cárcel’ (OC, III, p. 347). Here ‘magnifica’ transmits the notion of ‘vastedad’, just as the idea of ‘cárcel’ corresponds to the feeling of ‘opresión’. Consider, in addition, Dante's description in *Inferno* XVIII, 1-3: ‘Luogo è in Inferno, detto Malebolge, | tutto di pietra di color ferrigno, | come la cerchia che dintorno il volge’ (my italics), which is strikingly similar to Borges's version. A substitute metaphor for the notion of prison is the labyrinth: ‘Del incansable laberinto de sueños yo regresé como a mi casa a la dura prisión’, says Tzinacán (p. 598). Interestingly, the first appearance of the word in Borges's poetry occurs in ‘Del infierno y del cielo’ (1942), where it is used as a figurative representation of hell. In a later essay on the *Commedia* Borges alludes to the labyrinthine structure of the *Inferno* (OC, III, p. 219), an image that is effectively used by Dante to convey the idea of moral and existential error in which the sinful soul lies. In this respect, there is a further point of contact between the ideas of imprisonment and forgetfulness that so forcefully dominate the story's pathos, and the eternal abandonment to which the infernal souls are confined in Dante's hell, the place from which there is no hope of redemption: ‘Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate’ (*Inf.* III, 9). In particular, the state of prostration in which Tzinacán awaits death and his later unwillingness to redeem his people from domination, suggests Borges's pessimistic view with regard to the real possibilities of man's moral improvement on earth.

These parallels seem to indicate that Borges had in mind a Dantesque picture of hell for his own story. Note also the periphrasis ‘En la hora sin sombra’ (p. 596), of clear Dantean cut. Borges's reference to this particular time of the day is not gratuitous. In the *Convivio*, Dante says of noon that it is the most noble and virtuous time of the day (*Conv.* IV, xxiii, 15); whilst in the *Commedia* the pilgrim's ascent to heaven takes place precisely at noon: ‘teneva il sole il cerchio di merigge’ (*Purg.* XXXIII, 104; see *Par.* I, 73-81). ‘Noon’, explains Edmund Gardner, ‘has a special
significance for the mystics, as representing celestial desire, or divine illumination, or eternity'. Compare, in addition, Tzinacán's words: 'Un resplandor me despertó. En la tiniebla superior se cerría un círculo de luz. Vi la cara y las manos del carcelero' (p. 598), with Dante's ineffable understanding of Christ's nature in the closing canto of the Paradiso (note Borges's implicit identification of the redeemer with the executioner, which is typical of this period):

Veder voleva come si convenne
l'ìmago al cerchio e come vi s'indova;
ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.

(Par. XXXIII, 137-41; my italics)

In sharp contrast with this realm of light and grace, the metaphorical link blindness/prison refers us to the idea of man's ignorance in the world and his subjection to sin. This state is portrayed by Dante through the inflexible forces that rule in hell. These, however, are not imposed on man from the outside; rather they spring from the very vicious state ('malizia') in which he satisfies his own wickedness. In his natural condition on earth, therefore, man is inevitably destined to suffer from his own bestial impulses by perpetrating injustice on himself first and on others by extension. In Dante, sin always entails a form of self-enslavement.

At the beginning of the Commedia we encounter the moral allegory in which Dante the pilgrim recalls how he lost the true way of life. He says, 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita' (Inf. I, 1; my italics) to show that the journey he is about to begin concerns the whole of mankind. Then he brings in the image of the dark wilderness to describe how he had succumbed to sin having lost the straight way of virtue and justice: 'mi ritrovar per una selva oscura, ché la diritta via era smarrita' (lines 2-3). A few lines later, Dante uses the metaphor of sleep in order to describe the state of moral confusion in which the pilgrim had fearfully dwelled: 'tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto ché la verace via era smarrita' (Inf. I, 11-12). He then comes to the foot of a hill and sees the rays of the sun illuminating its summit, that is, he discerns the way of truth that leads to salvation. As he begins to climb the mountain, three beasts appear blocking his way: first a leopard covered with a spotted skin ('una lonza
leggiera e presta molto, che di pel macolato era coverta' (lines 32-33); then a threatening lion, and finally a she-wolf, which so dismays him that he is forced to turn back towards the dark wood: 'mi ripigneva là dove 'l sol tace' (line 60).\(^\text{57}\)

We do not need to concern ourselves with the exact allegorical meaning of the three beasts. For our purpose it is sufficient to bear in mind that they represent the sinful disposition in which fallen man finds himself, as Charles Singleton observes in his commentary to the *Inferno* (p. 10). Note the striking coincidences of the passage as a whole with some of the key elements in ‘La escritura del dios’: the dark prison in which Tzinacán lies impotent, the themes of evil and salvation, the presence of the beast, the sun rays which for a few moments illuminate the cell, and Tzinacán's awesome dream. Borges's references elsewhere to lines 11, 32 and 60 of this canto are particularly significant for they show how much attention he actually paid to the opening lines of the *Commedia*.

As I have already mentioned, the infernal setting of the story contrasts sharply with the moment of contemplative bliss granted to the captive priest: Tzinacán wakes up from a nightmare, sees a circle of light (‘un círculo de luz’, p. 598, echoing Dante's luminous point in Par. XXVIII, 16), and then experiences mystical union. The episode is characterized by several Dantean and medieval topoi, namely, (1) the unsurpassable delight of intellectual vision, (2) the ineffability topos, and (3) the figure of the wheel.

With regard to the first element, Borges writes: ‘¡Oh dicha de entender, mayor que la de imaginar o la de sentir!’ (p. 599). With the notions ‘entender’, ‘imaginar’, and ‘sentir’, Borges alludes to the three faculties attributed by Antiquity to the human soul: intellective, sensitive, and vegetative. These are mentioned by Dante, for whom the intellective potency participates in the divine nature: ‘E quella anima che tutte queste potenze comprende, [ed] è perfettissima di tutte l’altre, è l’anima umana, la quale colla nobilitade della potenza ultima, cioè ragione, participa della divina natura a guisa di sempiterna Intelligenza’ (Conv. III, ii, 14). Later on in the treatise Dante argues that the highest degree of joy man can achieve on earth resides in his use of reason, which is the noblest part of the soul in as much as it comes closer to understanding the divine essence: ‘E quello che massimamente è dilettoso a noi, quello è nostra felicitade e nostra beatitudine, oltre la quale *nullo diletto è maggiore*’ (Conv. IV, xxii, 9; my italics).\(^\text{58}\)
On the other hand, the rhetorical exclamation of delight ('Oh dicha') serves to enhance, both in Dante and in Borges's story, the sheer intensity of the visionary moment. Consider, for instance, the pilgrim's state of mind in Paradiso XXVII: 'Oh gioia! oh ineffabile allegrezza! | oh vita intèegra d'amore e di pace!' (lines 7-8).

Characteristically, in Dante the good and the true are identified in God; God in His perfection is amorous joy. Thus Beatrice's words to Dante as they reach the Empyrean heaven:

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"luce intellettiual, piena d'amore;
amo di vero ben, pien di letizia;
letizia che trascende ogne dolzore".
(Par. XXX, 40-42)
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'Un dios, reflexioné, sólo debe decir una palabra y en esa palabra la plenitud', writes Borges in 'La escritura del dios' (p. 598). That word in Dante's poetry is love. He knew the word all the way through and with it he uttered the plenitude of being (compare Dante's account of the primiloquium as an expression of complete joy in the DVE I, iv, 4).

Related to the joyful exclamation of mystical union is the ineffability topos: 'Entonces ocurrió lo que no puedo olvidar ni comunicar' (p. 598, my italics). In this respect, the distinction between memory and language is typical of Dante. In the Paradiso, the notion of ineffability is linked to a certain incapacity of the mind to recollect and express in its entirety what is essentially described as a transcendental experience: 'e vidi cose che ridire | né sa né puô chi di là sù discende' (Par. I, 5-6), which he glosses in Epistle to Cangrande: 'Nescit quia oblitus, nequit quia, si recordatur et contentum tenet, sermo tamen deficit' ('Knowledge he has not, because he has forgotten; power he has not, because even if he remembers, and retains it thereafter, nevertheless speech fails him') (§29).

On several occasions Dante appeals for words, courage, and inspiration in order to gather and give full utterance to his vision: 'dammi virtù a dir come io il vidi!' (Par. XXX, 99). However, where language fails him, that is, when the poet's imagination can no longer locate a 'referential stability', memory, too, proves unfathomable, as in lines 55-66 of the final canto.

Here Dante compares his fading memory with the scattered leaves of the Sybil (lines 65-66), thus reversing the metaphor of the book of memory that marks the beginning
of the *Vita nuova*. Whilst the poet's autobiographical account arises from memory, forgetfulness announces its end. Gathering (the writing of the self) may be lost to dispersion. Still Dante makes an effort to recount his most sublime vision, until, in line 142, he reaches the limits of his power: ‘A l’alta fantasia qui mancò possa’. Thus writing comes to an end, and it does so because the only thing left to the poet is to complete his steps of pilgrimage as a 'living man' on earth. Nevertheless, without memory the poet-pilgrim could never have realized his journey of ascent and return. To return to earth means to have completed the demands that memory imposed on him in order to represent his truth, a prophetic vision now guarded for future generations in the scribe's finished 'book of memory'. The challenge of the *Commedia*, therefore, is for the poet to go all the way to the end of the journey, to reach fulfilment in the final unitary gaze and to communicate that experience to men (compare *Purg.* XXXII, 103-105; *Par. XVII*, 127-32).

Between the ineffability topos and the exclamation of mystical union stands the divine symbol. Tzinacán sees ‘una Rueda altísima [que estaba] en todas partes, a un tiempo’ (p. 598). In the Judeo-Christian tradition the image of the wheel appears in the book of the prophet Ezekiel: ‘Now as I beheld the living creatures, *behold one wheel upon the earth* by the living creatures, with his four faces. [...] As for their rings, they were *so high* that they were dreadful’. In ‘El Aleph’ Borges mentions the prophet in close association with the above passage as one of his presumed sources for the short story (*OC*, I, p. 623), and it is obvious that the textual echoes found here are intentional. Furthermore, it is also in Ezekiel that the metaphor of the book of God—so dear to Dante—is found. Indeed what else if not this very metaphor can be the literary motif behind Borges's short story:

And when I looked, behold, a hand was sent unto me; and, lo, a roll of a book was therein; and he spread it before me; and it was written within and without. (*Ezekiel*, II, 9-10)

Nel suo profondo vidi che s’interna,
legato con amore in un volume,
ciò che per l’universo si squaderna:
*sustanze e accidenti e lor costume*
*quasi conflati insieme*, per tal modo
che ciò ch'io dico è un semplice lume.
La forma universal di questo nodo
credo ch'io vidi, perché più di largo,
dicendo questo, mi sento ch'io godo.

(Par. XXXIII, 85-93; my italics)

Vi infinitos procesos que formaban una sola felicidad y, entendiéndolo todo, alcancé
también a entender la escritura del tigre. (p. 599)

But I would like to return to the image of the wheel for, in the *Commedia*, Dante
uses the word on several occasions. For instance, he speaks of ‘l’alte rote’ in an
apostrophe to the reader, where the poet invites us to admire the celestial creation due
to God's unique art, ‘l’arte | di quel maestro’ (Par. X, 7, 10-11, respectively). Here, in
the *Paradiso*, Dante celebrates the beauty and perfection of the divine realm with an
exaltation of the circular movements which accompany the eternal dance of the
blissful souls. More fundamental in relation to our story is the classical
representation of Fortune with a whirling wheel. Dante makes use of the image in
*Inferno* VII (‘volve sua spera e beata si gode’, line 96), where he discusses the notion
of fortune in relation to man's destiny. However, it is at the highest point of the poem
where Dante brings back the geometrical figure to our attention. Dante does so just
before concluding the *cantica* in order to convey the state of existential fulfilment
reached by the pilgrim at the end of his journey, the moment in which the two powers
of his soul—intellect and will—are fused in perfect accord with God's will:

ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,
si come rota ch'igualmente è moss,
l’amor che move il sole e l’altra stelle.

(Par. XXXIII, 143-45)

Returning to Borges, it is unquestionable that the most striking feature of the short
story's outcome is the prisoner's losing of self in eternal oblivion. Despite his power to
reverse the order of events and liberate his nation, Tzinacán submits himself to fate
and destruction. In fact, his refusal to exercise his power implies an acceptance of
necessity and determination for, he implies, no human will can overturn the secret
designs of the universe. Unlike Dante's prophetic ascent to the Empyrean heaven, Tzinacán's vision is a failed attempt to gather his nation's memory in a triumphant culmination. Rather, as oblivion seals the past, the narrator's will is blind to the future: ‘Pero yo sé que nunca diré esas palabras, porque ya no me acuerdo de Tzinacán’ (p. 599).

Time, therefore, is the pivotal centre of the story. It is the unavoidable point of reference of memory, the carrier of oblivion, the vehicle of salvation and condemnation. With respect to the wheel, both Alazraki and Balderston indicate the image's connection with time in relation to Hindu and Maya beliefs, respectively (Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, p. 48; Balderston, *Out of Context*, pp. 76-78; see also Wheelock, *The Mythmaker*, p. 127 n. 8). In particular, the fact that the symbol is a wheel denotes a circular conception of time as opposed to the Judeo-Christian notion of linear time.65

With the image of an infinite wheel made of water and fire (that is, the recurrent conflict of opposites) Borges found a happy representation for his conception of time. This notion is one he had been concerned with since his early writings (Barrenechea, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, pp. 98-120). What is characteristic of his thought is the dichotomy time/eternity (to which he also refers to as oblivion versus plenitude, or as multiplicity versus identity): ‘El tiempo es un problema para nosotros, un tembloroso y exigente problema, acaso el más vital de la metafísica; la eternidad, un juego o una fatigada esperanza’ (*OC*, I, p. 353). Thus, whilst in ‘Historia de la eternidad’ he clearly mocks the Christian and Neoplatonic notion of eternity (which he evokes with the words ‘plenitud’ and ‘simultaneidad’, *OC*, I, pp. 354-55), in ‘Una vindicación del falso Basíldes’ he prefers to advance a defensive interpretation of the Gnostic view of creation. In it, he argues, the world is released from the burden of finality: ‘Admirable idea: el mundo imaginado como un proceso esencialmente fútil. […] Qué mejor don de ser insignificantes podemos esperar, qué mayor gloria para un Dios que la de ser absuelto del mundo?’ (*OC*, I, pp. 215-16; my italics). In effect, for Borges the light of truth does not flow from a conjectural transcendent; rather it lies in the uncertain ‘here and now’ of human existence.

Borges's position with regard to the problem of time during this period exemplifies the rejection of the ‘religion of Eternity’ which our civilization has so vehemently advocated since the nineteenth century.66 Thus if we deem Borges's earlier essays on time as the story's analytical antecedent, the story as a whole, and its paradoxical
conclusion in particular, can be thought of as being an ironical comment on Neoplatonism and Christian philosophy. By 1953, however, Borges had revised some of his radical views. He may still consider oblivion as a compensation for the harshness of life, but he is also willing to concede a meaningful human dimension to the philosophical endeavours that seek to comprehend the real in the absolute: ‘No sé cómo pude comparar a “inmóviles piezas de museo” las formas de Platón y cómo no entendi […] que éstas son vivas, poderosas y orgánicas. […] Cómo pude no sentir que la eternidad, anhelada con amor por tantos poetas, es un artificio espléndido que nos libra, siquiera de manera fugaz, de la intolerable opresión de lo sucesivo?’ (OC, I, p. 351; my italics). Dante, of course, is pre-eminent among the ‘poets of eternity’.

On the other hand, his increasing concern with the domestic and European political events of the 1930s and 40s gave a dramatic colouring to his creative activity. Indeed, the irony of the story points in a different and more urgent direction if considered in the light of the following passage: ‘Marco Aurelio afirma la analogía, no la identidad, de los muchos destinos individuales. Afirma que cualquier lapso […] contiene íntegramente la historia’. Contrary to our expectations, Borges concludes this essay on circular time with a radical political statement: ‘En tiempos de auge la conjetura de que la existencia del hombre es una cantidad constante, invariable, puede enristecer o irritar: en tiempos que declinan (como éstos), es la promesa de que ningún oprobio, ninguna calamidad, ningún dictador podrá empobrecernos’ (‘El tiempo circular’, OC, I, pp. 395-96). This passage, written in 1943, shows Borges's concern both with contemporary history and with the ethical problems which the recurrence of evil presented to mankind. Note the parallel with the story's main themes: history, circular time, destiny, hatred and destruction. Consider also the end of the passage from 1944 quoted above (‘Las ruidosas catástrofes generales […] son un solo dolor, ilusoriamente multiplicado en muchos espejos’). From this perspective, I would argue, Tzinacán stands for all those who have been the victims of violence and persecution, his nation is a symbol of all the nations whose memories have been consumed by the flames of fire (‘La pirámide de Qaholom, que Pedro de Alvarado incendió’, p. 596; ‘los ardientes designios del universo’, p. 599; my italics).

Borges had already suggested the idea of a recurrent, universal strife in the verses:

Como aquel capitan del Purgatorio
que, huyendo a pie y ensangrentando el llano,
Borges implies in these lines the circularity of history, whereby an event is prefigured in an antecedent. Indeed the author's fascination with historical coincidences finds here a kind of chronological mirror effect, for the dates in which the two men died include the same figures arranged in a different order (1289/1829). More fundamentally, whilst their destinies are shown to be analogous it is also implied that their life was subject to a higher, universal order:

Seen from the inside, the labyrinthine condition of our daily life can only reflect the uncertainty of our final destination. However, death constitutes the moment in which every human destiny is fully recognized. Without mortality the idea of destiny would be superfluous. It is because we are mortal beings that our life is tied to a sense of completion. Hence the idea of destiny as a movement towards final resolution has a positive value because it is perceived as the definitive disclosure of existence: it is part of a process of self-understanding which unfolds itself through temporality. And yet there is no progression in this movement, no repose in the attainment of a central goal, no realization, furthermore, of a superior moral and existential state. Here the encounter with death can only mean the recognition of an endless and futile repetition.
In fact, the image of the circle suggested in line 37 becomes the frozen emblem of
eternity.

I have reached a point from which it is possible to suggest an allegorical
interpretation of ‘La escritura del dios’. In order to do this I would like to turn my
attention to one of Borges’s most subtle passages:

La historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta.
Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero
también era el ultraje que había padecido; sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o
dos nombres propios. (‘Emma Zunz’ (1948), OC, I, p. 568; my italics)

From this virtual defence of allegorical writing the story of Tzinacán acquires an
unsuspected dimension. Circumstances, implies the author, are apparent and
ephemeral; what matters is that which lies beyond the word, the event in its moral and
historical significance. Like the Nazi officer, Otto Dietrich Zur Linde, and like his
victim, David Jerusalem, Tzinacán and Pedro de Alvarado are mere symbols in the
tortuous web of history:

A través de los siglos y latitudes, cambian los nombres, los dialectos, las caras, pero no los
eternos antagonistas. También la historia de los pueblos registra una continuidad secreta.
(‘Deutsches Requiem’ (1946), OC, I, p. 580)

[Schopenhauer compara] la historia a un calidoscopio, en el que cambian las figuras, no los
pedacitos de vidrio, a una eterna y confusa tragicomedia en la que cambian los papeles y
máscaras, pero no los actores. (‘Nathaniel Hawthorne’ (1949), OC, II, p. 679)

La batalla es eterna y puede prescindir de la pompa
de visibles ejércitos con clarines;
Junín son dos civiles que en una esquina maldicen a un tirano,
o un hombre oscuro que se muere en la cárcel.
(‘Página para recordar al coronel Suárez, vencedor en Junín’ (1953), OC, II, p. 251)

Borges found in the chronicled events that led to the destruction of the pre-Columbian
civilization a figurative antecedent of the perennial antagonism of mankind. More
specifically, a conflict between civilization and barbarity reappeared in contemporary history with a force and magnitude that threatened to demolish the political foundations of the West. Among its victims was a whole nation, one that stands at the dawn of Western civilization to which it had given a mythical birth.

‘Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O house of Israel, saith the Lord: it is a mighty nation, a nation whose language thou knowest not, neither understandest what they say’ (Jeremiah, V, 15). The prophet's words are cited by Bernardino de Sahagún as if he, too, had wanted to show the 'secret continuity' of history: ‘Esto a la letra ha acontecido a estos indios con los españoles', he remarks, ‘fueron tan atrapados y destruidos ellos y todas sus cosas, que ninguna apariencia les quedó de lo que eran antes’. Indeed, it is striking to note the early chronicler's efforts to draw a parallel between the vanquished Indians of the New World and the Jews. The comparison, however, was not exclusive to Sahagún; rather it became a commonplace among the historians of the Mexican nation. True, the grandeur of their cities was likened to Troy and Rome; however, this was done not only in order to prove the rational disposition of the Indians but also to trace a spiritual lineage that could go back to the mythical foundations of the Roman empire. As far as the Church is concerned this meant a single origin: ‘Es certísimo que estas gentes todas son nuestros hermanos, procedentes del tronco de Adán como nosotros’ (id., p. 20). These and other biblical links were posited by the friars: similarities in language, coincidences in rites and symbols, the alleged diffusion of the Gospel among the Indians in earlier times, and so on. The construction of a New Jerusalem was on its way.

It is difficult to imagine that in compiling the material for the story Borges would have missed the analogy with contemporary events (not least the proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948). In effect, Borges was deeply concerned about the rise of Fascism and anti-Semitism both in Europe and in his own country, a movement which he repudiated through articles and short stories between 1937 and 1946. Among the latter is ‘Deutsches Requiem’, a story that deals with the horrors of the Nazi regime as portrayed in the psychotic deliria of one of its members. As I have already suggested, there are elements in its narrative that can be compared to ‘La escritura del dios’.

Consider, for instance, the character's situation: both Tzinacán and Zur Linde are imprisoned and await their death; in gathering their autobiographical account (both stories are first person narratives) their life oscillates between memory and oblivion; furthermore, in both stories there is a change of fortune whereby the protagonists from
being executioners become victims. These thematic coincidences are reflected in key words, such as ‘prisión’, ‘muerte’, ‘sombra’, and ‘castigo’. Even more striking is the motif of renunciation at the end of both stories. Compare Tzinacán's submissiveness (‘Qué le importa la nación de aquel otro, si él, ahora es nadie’ (p. 599)), with the moral abandonment to which the defeated Nazi officer accedes (‘Qué importa que Inglaterra sea el martillo y nosotros el yunque? [...] Si la victoria y la injusticia y la infelicidad no son para Alemania, que sean para otras naciones. Que el cielo exista, aunque nuestro lugar sea el infierno’ (p. 581)). Consider also the following passage: ‘El nazismo adolece de irrealidad, como los infiernos de Erigena. Es inhabitable; los hombres sólo pueden morir por él, mentir por él, matar y ensangrentar por él’ (‘Anotación al 23 de agosto de 1944’, OC, II, p. 106). The reason for such a shocking, paradoxical conclusion lies in the absurd denial of human error whereby every single event and its consequent are ultimately determined or willed by the agent: ‘No hay consuelo más hábil’, asserts the German officer, ‘que el pensamiento de que hemos elegido nuestras desdichas; esa teología individual nos revela un orden secreto y prodigiosamente nos confunde con la divinidad’ (p. 578; my italics).

Man as architect of his own destiny: clearly the problem posed by Borges is an ethical one. Here, as in other writings of the period, Borges explores the question of free will and its relationship to the total scheme of the universe. In a previous work, considering the Christian theme of eternal damnation, he sarcastically comments: ‘Tu destino es cosa de veras, […] condenación eterna y salvación eterna están en tu minuto; esa responsabilidad es tu honor’ (‘La duración del infierno’ (1929), OC, I, p. 238). A glance at Borges's work, however, shows that his interest in human destiny is rooted in the ethical without him actually making moral judgments about his characters and situations. The emotional detachment of the author from his subject matter, an attitude which he, in turn, conveys to the reader, gives us the impression that it is the sheer event, without any ulterior significance, that is intended. Consider, for instance, the following passage: ‘[Villari] no juzgó inverosímiles o excesivas las penas infernales y no pensó que Dante lo hubiera condenado al último círculo, donde los dientes de Ugolino roen sin fin la nuca de Ruggieri’ (‘La espera’, OC, I, p. 610). Here Borges reveals how the character (a traitor) whilst reading the corresponding cantos of the Inferno, fails or is unwilling to recognize his own condition in the antecedent. The event is wrapped in its contingency and has no power to signify beyond the letter (note Villari's self-induced confusion between dreams, imagination,
and reality). Nevertheless, whilst this is true for the character, the author is presenting a situation that has already been judged by Dante within the moral design of the Commedia, and it therefore carries with it an ethical situation that the reader is invited to confront. Consider, in addition, what the author says in his discussion of the famous passage: ‘Negar o afirmar el monstruoso delito de Ugolino es menos tremendo que vislumbrarlo’ (‘El falso problema de Ugolino’, OC, III, p. 353). Thus the author reveals a narrative technique whereby an ethical question can be posed without the reader being fully aware of its real dimensions. This ambiguity generates, as he says, a confusion between reality and art (p. 351). Yet we must not be deceived by the purely ‘verbal texture’ of the composition. If, on the one hand, Villari is no less an invention of Borges's than Ugolino a dream of Dante's (‘De Ugolino debemos decir que es una textura verbal’, p. 352), this artificial constitution is inherent in the character only in so far as he is a fictional representation of reality. However, this one-dimensional aspect of the narrative constitutes the starting point from which a series of lines can trace, so to speak, not only a surface image but also a living organism:

Un libro es más que una estructura verbal; [...] es el diálogo que entabla con su lector y la entonación que impone a su voz y las cambiantes y durables imágenes que deja en su memoria. [...] El libro no es un ente incomunicado: es una relación, es un eje de innumerables relaciones.4

Within this space, the verbal texture acquires an ethical import charged with the possibilities of its real dimensions. As Borges himself puts it: ‘Más ardua que la empresa de Napoleón fue la de Raskolnikov’ (‘Deutsches Requiem’, p. 578).


In the latter essay, Borges considers the notions of free will and necessity. Although his discussion focuses on the episode of Francesca da Rimini in the fifth canto of the Inferno, his remark can be useful in order to understand the ethical paradox posed by Tzinacán's inaction. The question tackled by Borges is this: Dante listens with sympathy to Francesca's account, yet he condemns her to hell: ‘Cómo atenuar esa discordia, cómo justificarla?’ (p. 357). After exploring some critical solutions to the problem he gives his own: ‘[Dante] sintió (no comprendió) que los
actos del hombre son necesarios y que asimismo es necesaria la eternidad, de bienaventuranza o de perdición, que éstos le acarrean’ (p. 359). This is preceded by a short analysis in which he argues that all human action is already part of, and dependent on an infinite series of events. Causality, viewed as a sovereign and merciless chain, rules man's behaviour and makes his decisions inevitable:

Quien ha leído la novela de Dostoievsky ha sido, en cierto modo, Raskolnikov y sabe que su “crimen” no es libre, pues una red inevitable de circunstancias lo prefijó y lo impuso. [...] La ficción jurídica el asesino bien puede merecer la pena de muerte, no el desventurado que asesinó, urgido por su historia pretérita y quizá [...] por la historia del universo. Madame de Staël ha compendiado estos razonamientos en una sentencia famosa: Tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner’ (p. 358).

Earlier in the essay Borges had made a reference to the analogy between dreams and dramatic representations (p. 357); now he implicitly resorts to the topos that compares man to a character in a novel or to an actor in a stage, where his actions, serious or comic, have already been determined by the poet's will. Elsewhere, he observes: ‘Como los hechos referidos por la Escritura son verdaderos, [...] debemos admitir que los hombres, al ejecutarlos, representaron ciegamente un drama secreto, determinado y premeditado por Dios’ (‘El espejo de los enigmas’, OC, II, p. 98). It is possible to recognize in these lines Borges's own reading of history as exemplified in ‘La escritura del dios’. To be sure, there is a sense of tragic pity in Tzinacán's outcome, yet neither he nor the author pronounces a moral indictment against the situation. To put it in a contrasting Dantean perspective, the story does not blame or condemn, nor does it absolve. Consider Tzinacán's words: ‘Quien ha entrevisto los ardientes designios del universo [...] no puede pensar en un hombre, en sus triviales dichas o desventuras, aunque ese hombre sea él’ (p. 599). The universe as a stage, man as executor of an alien will, history as the tragic plot that is incessantly performed: such seems to be the analogy implicit at the end of the story, such is the illusive reality of the human condition depicted by Borges in his work as a whole.

Throughout the period that I have considered here Borges affirmed and demonstrated that the writer, like the ancient poet, has an ethical function to perform. Literature can and should relate to the actual world for this is the realm given to us; whatever lies beyond it we cannot know with certainty for, as he says, ‘la máquina del
mundo es harto compleja para la simplicidad de los hombres’ (‘Infierno, I, 32’, OC, II, p. 185). In the absence of a positive theological faith Borges resorts to oblivion as the possible carrier of human redemption.77

Notes
2 ‘Las copias acriolladas’, TE, p. 78 (my italics). See Roberto Paoli, Percorsi di significato (Florence: Università degli Studi di Firenze, 1977), pp. 101-107. Although the synthesis of a human destiny in its crucial moment of revelation has an explicit Dantean connection in ‘Poema conjetural’ (1943), Borges's link with Dante is already present at this stage, a fact that lends support to my conjecture that he must have been familiar at least with the most famous episodes of the Commedia at a much earlier date than what has so far been recognized by scholars. Of course, this is not to say that he owes the idea to Dante but simply that he recognized this as a fundamental narrative principle, Dante being among its greatest models.
4 I quote from ‘El Martin Fierro’, in Discusión (Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1932), p. 57. By ‘imitative’ I refer to the use of direct speech in which the dialect and expression of a social type are simulated for realistic purposes. See Borges's prologue to José Hernández's Martin Fierro (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1962), p. 9, where he attributes to Bartolomé Hidalgo ‘el descubrimiento del sencillo artificio de mostrar gauchos que se esmeran en hablar como tales, para diversión de lectores cultos’. Cf. Aspectos de la literatura gauchesca, p. 8. On the other hand, in the prologue to the first edition of Historia universal de la infamia Borges is categorical in disclaiming a ‘psychological’ design in his stories, by which he means a realistic portrayal of personality. Clearly, this does not preclude the manifestation of character as the expression of man's inner nature in the sense that the Greek term ethos is applied in literary studies. On this issue, see Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, trans. by Eric F. J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1969) I, pp. 242-55; S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's

5 ‘Borges, narrador’, in Sur, 14 (1935) 105-15 (p. 111); also in Jorge Luis Borges, ed. by Jaime Alazraki, El escritor y la crítica, no. 88 (Madrid: Taurus, 1976), pp. 46-55 (p. 52; my italics). Several of the stories published by Borges during this period (under various pseudonyms) were not included by the author in the edition of his Obras completas. Cf. RM, pp. 49-181 (see, in particular, the excellent editorial notes at the beginning of each section).

6 See, for instance, ‘Nathaniel Hawthorne’ (1949), OC, II, p. 57: ‘Hawthorne, aquí, se ha dejado arrastrar por la doctrina cristiana, y específicamente calvinista, de la depravación ingénita de los hombres y no parece haber notado que su parábola de una ilusoria destrucción de todas las cosas es capaz de un sentido filosófico y no sólo moral’ (p. 57); ‘[Hawthorne] hizo o procuró hacer del arte una función de la conciencia’ (p. 59); ‘En Hawthorne, siempre la visión germinal era verdadera; lo falso [...] son las moralidades que agregaba en el último párrafo o los personajes que ideaba, que armaba, para representarla’ (p. 59). Cf. ‘Una vindicación de Mark Twain’, in Sur, 14 (1935) 40-46 (pp. 45-46): ‘Si no me engaño, las novelas son buenas en razón directa del interés que la unicidad de los caracteres inspira al autor y en razón inversa de los propósitos intelectuales o sentimentales que lo dirigen. En Kim, la “política” es evidente. [...] A Ricardo Güiraldes le adivinamos un propósito partidario. [...] Mark Twain, en cambio, es divinamente imparcial. Huckleberry Finn no quiere otra cosa que copiar unos hombres y su destino’. For the relationship between literature and ethics, see Butcher, Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry, pp. 215-39, which provides an interesting parallel with Borges's own attitude towards the problem.


7 Cf. Borges’s remark in Fernando Sorrentino, Siete conversaciones con Jorge Luis Borges (Buenos Aires: Casa Pardo, 1973), p. 74: ‘Lo que menos me ha interesado en
La divina comedia (sic) es el valor religioso. Es decir, me han interesado los personajes, me han interesado sus destinos, pero todo el concepto religioso, la idea de premios y de castigos, es una idea que no he entendido nunca. [...] La parte ética de La divina comedia es la parte precisamente que no me ha interesado nunca'.


9 Evaristo Carriego, OC, I, pp. 134-35 (italics added). Cf. Schopenhauer, The World as Will, II, pp. 171-72: 'The astonishment that urges us to philosophize [...] springs from the sight of the evil and wickedness in the world. [...] As nothing can come out of nothing, they too must have their germ in the origin or the kernel of the world itself' (italics added). Although the influence of Schopenhauer permeates Borges's work, I think that there is also a strong Manichaen element in his thought, particularly during the 30s and 40s. The point that signals his adherence to Manichaen duality can be detected in the dramatic verses on human depravity conveyed in 'El Paseo de Julio' (from Cuaderno San Martín).

10 Cf. George Santayana, The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory (London: Black, 1896), Part III, §44, p. 175 (with regard to plot in drama): 'Plot, giving by its nature a certain picture of human experience, involves and suggests the ethos of its actors' (my italics). See the interesting discussion on literature and ethics in 'Debates del Sur: moral y literatura', Surt, 126 (1945) 62-84; Borges's reply to the question posed there is most revealing since, as he suggests, there is no literary work which does not imply an ethical stance: 'Vedar la ética es arbitrariamente empobrecer la literatura. La puritánica doctrina del arte por el arte nos privaría de los trágicos griegos, de Lucrecio, de Virgilio, de Juvenal, de las Escrituras, de San Agustín, de Dante, de Montaigne, de Shakespeare, de Quevedo, de Browne, de Swift, de Voltaire, de Johnson, de Blake, de Hugo, de Emerson, de Whitman, de Baudelaire, de Ibsen, de
Butler, de Nietzsche, de Chesterton, de Shaw; *casi del universo*, pp. 71-72 (my italics).

11 ‘Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro’, lines 8-9, included in *FB* (no page numbers).

12 Gerardo Mario Goloboff, *Leer Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huemul, 1978), p. 11, cites the following remark: ‘Cuando supe que esta distancia sin término era la pampa y que los hombres que la trabajaban eran gauchos, como los personajes de Eduardo Gutiérrez, ellos *me parecieron decorados por un cierto prestigio*’ (my italics). This relation is stated differently in the poem ‘El truco’, where he writes: ‘Cuarenta naipes han desplazado la vida. | Amuletos de cartón pintado | conjuran en *placentero exorcismo* | la maciza realidad primordial | de goce y sufrimiento carnales’ (*FB*, lines 1-5; my italics).


literaria’, where he acknowledges his emotional attachment to Rosas's period:

‘Cometí algunas composiciones rememorativas de la época rosista, que por predilección de mis lecturas y por miedosa tradición familiar, es una patria vieja de mi sentir’ (TE, p. 145; my italics). In the essay entitled ‘El tamaño de mi esperanza’, however, Borges denounces the spiritual poverty to which Rosas's egotism lead: ‘Nuestro mayor varón sigue siendo don Juan Manuel: gran ejemplar de la fortaleza del individuo, gran certidumbre de saberse vivir, pero incapaz de erigir algo espiritual, y tiranizado al fin más que nadie por su propia tiranía y su oficinismo’ (TE, p. 8).

These contrasting views betray Borges's ambivalent position with regard to Rosas. For a critique of his attitude vis-à-vis the social and political reality in Spanish America, see the collection of essays included in Contra Borges, ed. by Juan Fló (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1978).

This poem was excluded by Borges from later editions of his poetic work and should not be confused with the verses he dedicated, under the same title, to Isidoro Suárez. For Borges's mystification of his family lineage, see Rafael Olea Franco, El otro Borges. El primer Borges (Buenos Aires: El Colegio de Mexico; Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, 1993), pp. 251-60; see also the editorial note in RM, pp. 64-65.

All quotations are taken from Tommaso Scarano, Varianti a stampa nella poesia del primo Borges, Collana di testi e studi ispanici, II, 6 (Agnano Pisano and Pisa: Giardini Editori e Stampatori in Pisa, 1987), p. 132.

Ibid., p. 135.


Borges published an initial version of the composition in *La Biblioteca*, 9 (1957) 44-45.

Cf. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will*, II, p. 508: ‘During life, man's will is without freedom; on the basis of his unalterable character, his conduct takes place with necessity in the chain of motives. Now everyone carries in his memory very many things which he has done, about which he is not satisfied with himself. If he were to go on living, he would go on acting in the same way by virtue of the unalterability of his character. Accordingly, he must cease to be what he is, in order to be able to arise out of the germ of his true nature as a new and different being. Death, therefore, loosens those bonds; the will again becomes free. [...] To die willingly, to die gladly, to die cheerfully, is the prerogative of the resigned, of him who gives up and denies the will-to-live. For he alone wishes to die actually and not merely apparently, and consequently needs and desires no continuance of his person. He willingly gives up the existence that we know; what comes to him instead of it is in our eyes nothing, because our existence in reference to that one is nothing’ (italics in the original). For the notion of character, cf. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will*, I, pp. 286-307.


‘Eduardo Gutiérrez, escritor realista’ (1937), *TC*, pp. 41 and 42, respectively. Apart from praising Gutiérrez’s vivid depiction of legendary delinquents, Borges also commends his inventiveness, particularly with respect to the creation of pure dramatic action (commenting on one of his knife-fights, for instance, he remarks: ‘Parece imaginada para el cinematógrafo’, ibid., p. 40). Borges acknowledged to have been
influenced by Sternberg's gangster films as well as by Stevenson and Chesterton. He does not mention Gutiérrez in this regard; see his 1935 prologue to Historia universal de la infamia, OC, I, p. 289; also ‘Commentaries’, in Di Giovanni, ed., The Aleph and Other Stories, pp. 265, 282.


29 See Donald L. Shaw, Borges' Narrative Strategy, Liverpool Monographs in Hispanic Studies, 11 (Leeds: Cairns, 1992), pp. 25-28. Cf. ‘El Martín Fierro’, p. 56: ‘La verdadera ética del criollo está en el relato: la que presume que la sangre vertida no es demasiado memorable, y que a los hombres les ocurre matar’. Cf. OC, I, p. 195. Clearly an ethical code based on such myopic view of human values cannot go very far in the edification of human fellowship. Borges's attack on the moral baseness of the compadre is already present in his critique of language in ‘El idioma de los argentinos’, where he explicitly condemns the ‘lunfardo’ as the dialect of criminals: ‘Jerigonza ocultadiza de los ladrones. [...] Tecnología de la furca (sic) y de la ganzúa. [...] Lengua especializada en la infamia y sin palabras de intención general’, IA, p. 167. See also ‘Eduardo Wilde’, in IA, p. 159. Moreover, Borges is careful in avoiding the attribution of an epic character to gaucho literature and, more specifically, to Hernández's Martín Fierro: ‘La estrafalaria y cándida necesidad de que el Martín Fierro sea épico ha pretendido comprimir, siquiera de un modo simbólico, la historia secular de la patria [...] en las andanzas de un cuchillero de mil ochocientos setenta’ (‘La poesía gauchesca’, OC, I, pp. 193-94). Cf. Borges's remark on the ‘heroic’ brutality of the Argentinian gaucho in his prologue to Domingo F. Sarmiento, Recuerdos de provincia (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1944), pp. 9-14 (p. 13): ‘Tendríamos, pues, a hombres de pobrisima vida, a gauchos y orilleros de las regiones ribereñas del Plata y del Paraná, creando, sin saberlo, una religión, con su mitología y sus mártires, la dura y ciega religión del coraje, de estar listo a matar y a morir. Esa religión es vieja como el mundo, pero habría sido redescubierta, y vivida, en estas repúblicas por
pastores, matarifes, troperos, prófugos y rufianes'. Borges concludes this prologue with the following remark: ‘Wenceslao Suárez y su anónimo contrincante y otros que la mitología ha olvidado o ha incorporado a ellos, profesaron sin duda esa fe viril, que bien puede no ser una vanidad sino la conciencia de que en cualquier hombre está Dios’ (my italics; also in OC, I, p. 168). This passage illustrates how Borges's quest for pure form can result in an absurd mystification of criminality. Generally, it is the coexistence of both realms, the aesthetic and the moral, that instils his views with such paradoxical solutions (see, for instance, ‘El puñal’, in Evaristo Carriego, OC, I, p. 156).

30 See Borges's prologue to Domingo F. Sarmiento, Recuerdos de provincia (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1944), pp. 9-14 (p. 11): ‘He hablado de crueldad; el examen de este libro demuestra que la crueldad no fué el mayor mal de esa época sombría. El mayor mal fué la estupidez, la dirigida y fomentada barbarie, la pedagogía del odio, el régimen embrutecedor de divisas, vivas y mueras. Como ha dicho Lugones: “Es eso lo que no puede perdonarse a Rosas: la esterilidad en un país que a los cien ha progresado como vemos”’. This is, indeed, the view expressed by the author in ‘Historia de Rosendo Juárez’, a tale in which Borges rewrites the incident from Rosendo's point of view: ‘Sucedió entonces lo que nadie quiere entender. En ese botarate provocador me vi como en un espejo y me dio vergüenza. No sentí miedo. [...] Para zafarme de esa vida, me corrió a la República Oriental, donde me puse de carrero. Desde mi vuelta me he afincado aquí. San Telmo ha sido siempre un barrio de orden’ (in El informe de Brodie, OC, II, pp. 415-16; my italics; see ‘Commentaries’, in Di Giovanni, ed., ‘The Aleph’ and Other Stories, p. 282). In fact, Borges had already presented his readership with a cynical view of violence in the story ‘La última bala’ (1934), which he published under a pseudonym in Revista Multicolor de los Sábados. In this hilarious tale, Borges conceives a duel in which the victorious hero, after eluding his adversary's shots, withdraws from the scene without taking revenge. The story, which bears many similarities with ‘Hombre de la esquina rosada’, ends with the following remark: ‘¡Extraño duelo, sin palabras ni sangre, en que el vencedor no había sacado el cuchillo!’ (RM, p. 119). Consider also his biting comment in the prologue to the second edition of Historia universal de la infamia ([‘Hombre de la Esquina Rosada’] ha logrado un éxito singular y un poco misterioso’, OC, I, p. 291), which suggests that the violent theme of the story and its seeming glorification of the guapo figure (‘lo que nadie quiere entender’, in Rosendo's version
cited above), succeeded in gaining an enormous popular acclaim, a fact that is symptomatic of the social atmosphere of the time. Cf. ‘Un misterio parcial’, in Historia del tango, OC, I, p. 162: ‘Nuestro pasado militar es copioso, pero lo indiscutible es que el argentino, en trance de pensarse valiente, no se identifica con él [...] sino con las vastas figuras genéricas del Gaucho y del Compadre. [...] El gaucho y el compadre son imaginados como rebeldes; el argentino, a diferencia de los americanos del Norte y de casi todos los europeos, no se identifica con el Estado. [...] Lo cierto es que el argentino es un individuo, no un ciudadano. Aforismos como el de Hegel “El Estado es la realidad de la idea moral” le parecen bromas siniestras’. See ‘Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw’, OC, II, pp. 125-27 (p. 127): ‘Los temas fundamentales de Shaw son la filosofía y la ética: es natural e inevitable que no sea valorado en este país. [...] El argentino siente que el universo no es otra cosa que una manifestación del azar. [...] La filosofía no le interesa. La ética tampoco: lo social se reduce, para él, a un conflicto de individuos o de clases o de naciones, en el que todo es lícito, salvo ser escarnecido o vencido’. See also ‘Nuestro pobre individualismo’ (1946), OC, II, pp. 658-59; ‘Nuestras imposibilidades’, in Sur, 4 (1931) 131-34. The short story ‘El indigno’, in El informe de Brodie, OC, II, pp. 407-11, also hints at this problem.


La deshumanización del arte. Ideas sobre la novela (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1925), p. 18 (my italics). Cf. Santayana, The Sense of Beauty, Part I, §§ 4, 11: ‘We may measure the degree of happiness and civilization which any race has attained by the proportion of its energy which is devoted to free and generous pursuits, to the
adornment of life and the culture of the imagination. [...] The aesthetic evil is merely relative. [...] No form in itself gives pain. [...] Beauty is therefore a positive value that is intrinsic; it is a pleasure. These two circumstances sufficiently separate the sphere of aesthetics from that of ethics. Moral values are generally negative, and always remote. Morality has to do with the avoidance of evil and the pursuit of good: aesthetics only with enjoyment (pp. 27, 50; my italics). For a critique of Borges's aestheticism during this period, see Fló, ‘Vindicación o vindicta de Borges’, in Contra Borges, pp. 17-28; more generally, Barrenechea, Borges the Labyrinth Maker, p. 79.

33 OC, I, p. 179. The idea is restated, from a nominal point of view, in ‘La escritura del dios’: ‘No hay proposición que no implique el universo entero; decir el tigre es decir los tigres que lo engendraron, los ciervos y tortugas que devoró, el pasto de que se alimentaron los ciervos, la tierra que fue madre del pasto, el cielo que dio luz a la tierra’, pp. 597-98. See Alberto Ribas-Casasayas, ‘Signos mágicos y de lo absoluto: aproximación a términos y conceptos de filosofía del lenguaje en tres cuentos de Jorge Luis Borges’, in Neophilologus, 84 (2000) 555-74. As noted above, the notion of strict necessity in natural phenomena was advocated by Schopenhauer; on this issue see Paoli, ‘Borges e Schopenhauer’, in Tre saggi su Borges (Rome: Bulzoni, 1992), pp. 121-91. For a survey of the notion of causality in Borges's fiction, see Alazraki, La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges, pp. 113-21.

34 See RM, pp. 348-67.


37 At this point, Dante draws a sarcastic parallel with the miser (‘l'avaro maladetto’), which he contrasts a few lines later with the serene state of the blessed (‘E questa è la ragione per che li Santi non hanno tra loro invidia, però che ciascuno aggiunge lo fine del suo desiderio, lo quale desiderio è colla bontà della natura misurato’, *Conv.* III, xv, 10; italics in the original), a remark that reminds us of his constant reference to the concrete facts of existence within a moral and ontological order. The idea that all creatures are directed to a specific end—in which natural love is appeased—is fundamental in scholastic thought.


45 *The Mind in Love*, p. 9: 'The theory of grace, if theory it can be called, is the weak point in Dantine theology' (cf. nn. 12 and 13, ad loc). For the notion of grace and its relation to free will, cf. Andrea Ciotti's entry in *Enciclopedia dantesca*, 6 vols (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1970-78) III, pp. 274-77, s.v. 'Grazia'.

46 Cf. Donald L. Shaw, *Borges' Narrative Strategy*, p. 17: 'In the period before *Ficciones* began to take shape, Borges had not evolved the kind of narrative strategies which later allowed him to half-conceal in a tale a deep theme or several levels of possible meaning in such a way that even critics would frequently be mislead or overlook important areas of signification'. See also Ana Maria Barrenechea, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, ed. and trans. by Robert Lima (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 73-76. See also Jamel Eddine Bencheikh, 'A propos des sources arabes d’un texte de J. L. Borgès: *Le Teinturer Masqué: Hakim de Merv*', in *Cahiers Algériens de Littérature Comparée*, 1 (1966) 3-10; Andrew Martin, 'The Mask of the Prophet: Napoleon, Borges, Verne', in *Comparative Literature*, 40 (1988) 318-34, who is very close to formulating a poetics of falsehood and deception in Borges's fiction.


54 See Rodriguez Monegal, ‘Symbols in Borges' Work’, pp. 331-38; Barrenechea, Borges the Labyrinth Maker, pp. 34-49, 60-67. In her analysis of the short story, Massuh (pp. 121, 128) makes a connection with Borges’s ‘La casa de Asterión’, as well as with the poem ‘Laberinto’. For the notion of the labyrinth as a symbol of man’s anxiety vis-à-vis time and mortality, see José Ríos Patrón, ‘El laberinto de Borges’, in Sur, 233 (1955) 75-79 (esp. pp. 78-79). See also Victoria Ocampo’s acute observations in De Francesca a Beatrice (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Fundación Sur, 1983 [first published in 1924]), p 68. For the notion of hell as a labyrinth in Dante's Commedia, see Penelope Reed Doob, The idea of the Labyrinth: From Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 271-306.

55 Years later, in conversation with Willis Barnstone, he remarked: ‘Dante was wrong about hell, wrong about the meaning of that inscription on the gate of the Inferno in the first lines of Canto 3: LASCIA TE OGNI SPERANZA, VOI CH’ENTRATE. [...] Hell doesn't begin down there. There is no entry to the afterlife. Hell begins here, and
here is where we should abandon all hope. Then we have the possibility, the hope, of some momentary happiness', in Willis Barnstone, *With Borges on an Ordinary Evening in Buenos Aires: A Memoir* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 31. Cf. *OC*, III, p. 345: '[Dante] escribió que el sujeto de su *Comedia* es, literalmente, el estado de las almas después de la muerte y alegóricamente, el hombre en cuanto por sus méritos o deméritos, se hace acreedor a los *castigos* o a las recompensas divinas’ (my italics).


57 This verse is commented on by Borges, who praises Dante's figurative merging of the visual and the auditory (*OC*, III, pp. 348, 364). Significantly, Borges based one of the short parables included later in *El hacedor* on line 32 quoted above. On *Inf.* I, 11-12, see *OC*, III, pp. 347-48; see also ‘Posdata’ in ‘La duración del infierno’, where he links the notions of sleep, destiny and hell (*OC*, I, p. 238).

58 In the first version of the story (Sur, 172 (1949) 7-12), Borges used the word ‘obrar’ instead of ‘imaginár’ (p. 11), a term which seems to highlight the distinction between the active and the contemplative life discussed by Dante in the third and fourth books of the *Convivio*. This variant does not affect my argument here. For the notion of intellectual vision, cf. Nardi, *Dante e la cultura medievale*, pp. 365-67. On intellectual delight, cf. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, X, vii, 1177a §2: ‘The intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects with which the intellect deals are the highest things that can be known’; ibid., 1177b §7: ‘It follows that it is the activity of the intellect that constitutes complete human happiness’. Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 26, a. 2: ‘Beatitude [...] signifies the perfect good of an intellectual nature. Hence it is that each thing is set on its own completion, and an intellectual nature desires to be happy. This reaches its peak in that intellectual activity whereby in a manner it holds all things. Hence the happiness of each and every intelligent creature consists in an activity of mind’ (*Summa Theologiae*, 61 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964-81), V, p. 181; my italics); ibid., IIª, IIªe, 175, a. 4: ‘The divine essence cannot be seen by any knowing faculty of man other than the intellect’ (vol. XLV, p. 109). Cf. *Summa Theol.*, I, 79, aa. 1-4; IIª, IIªe, 180, a. 7. For a study of the main issues, see Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, pp. 103-12; id., *Aquinas on Mind*, pp. 31-57.


Ezekiel, I, 15, 18; cited from The Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version (Oxford: University Press, 1865); my italics. Cf. Dictionary of Borges, s.v. 'Ezekiel', p. 85. The prophet's vision is recalled in Purg. XXIX, 91-108, just before Beatrice's appearance in canto XXX, an episode with which Borges deals in one of his Dantean essays.

In Nueve ensayos dantescos, referring to Dante's cosmology, Borges explains: ‘El Demiurgo, o Artifice, del Timeo, libro mencionado por Dante (Convivio, III, 5; Paraiso, IV, 49), juzgó que el movimiento más perfecto era la rotación, y el cuerpo más perfecto, la esfera’ (OC, III, p. 345). For the image of the circle in Dante and the Middle Ages, cf. Giovanni Busnelli, Il concetto e l'ordine del Paradiso dantesco, 2 vols (Città di Castello: Lapi, 1911-12) I, pp. 165-207; Peter Dronke, Fabula: Explorations into the uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism (Leiden and Cologne: Brill, 1974), pp. 144-53. For the image of the wheel and the idea of circular motion, see Nardi, Nel mondo di Dante, pp. 337-50.

Cf. ‘La doctrina de los ciclos’, OC, I, p. 388, where the word ‘rueda’ is used in this sense; see also p. 387: ‘El universo es consumido cíclicamente por el fuego que lo engendró, y resurge de la aniquilación para repetir una idéntica historia’. Cf. ‘Los teólogos’, in El Aleph, OC, I, pp. 550-56; Schopenhauer, The World as Will, p. 279: ‘We can compare time to an endlessly revolving sphere’. On the other hand, Borges's most memorable statement on the problem of ontological time shows the impossibility of evading the reality of our concrete existence: ‘Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino [...] no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El
tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges’ ('Nueva refutación del tiempo', OC, II, p. 149).


72 Cf. 'Nota sobre la paz', in Sur, 129 (1945) 9-10: ‘Quiero declarar que para mí un solo hecho justifica este momento trágico; ese hecho jubiloso que nadie ignora y que justiprecian muy pocos es la victoria de Inglaterra. Decir que ha vencido Inglaterra es
decir que la cultura occidental ha vencido, es decir que Roma ha vencido; también es
decir que ha vencido la secreta porción de divinidad que hay en el alma de todo
hombre, aun del verdugo destrozado por la victoria. No fabrico una paradoja; la
psicología del germanófilo es la del defensor del gangster, del Mal; todos sabemos
que durante la guerra los legítimos triunfos alemanes le interesaron menos que la
noción de un arma secreta o que el satisfactorio incendio de Londres'. Cf. ‘El desafío’
(1952): ‘El hombre siempre es artifex de su propia desdicha, como el Ulises del
canto XXVI del Infierno’ (my italics). On man's capacity for self-determination, see
Arthur Schopenhauer, Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays, trans.
p. 181, s.v. Parerga und Paralipomena). See also Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of
Poetry, p. 355-56: ‘The fate that overtakes the [tragic] hero is no alien thing, but his
own self recoiling upon him for good or evil. “Man's character”, as Heraclitus said,
“is his destiny”. [...] Man is the master of his own destiny: Nowhere is his spiritual
freedom more vigorously asserted’ (my italics).
73 Cf. Bell-Villada, Borges and His Fiction, pp. 175-78. On the nightmareish quality
of the story, consider Momigliano's note on the opening lines of Inferno XXXIII: ‘Il
racconto comincia con un sogno, e questo dà uno sfondo fantastico alla tragedia, e
sembra allontanarla nello spazio e ingrandirla. Al sogno segue la realtà, senza
trapassi: ma la realtà è già ingrandita dal sogno, e lo spavento di questo e lo spavento
del vero si riversano l'uno nell'altro in una atmosfera d'incubo che ha insieme
l'ineluttabilità del sogno e la precisione del vero', in Dante Alighieri, La Divina
Commedia, ed. by A. Momigliano (Florence: Sansoni, 1951), p. 251; my italics.
74 ‘Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw’, OC, II, pp. 125-27 (p. 125). In the original
version of the essay on Dante Borges actually uses the expression ‘organismo verbal’;
see ‘Estudio preliminar’, p. xxiii. Cf. Charles Segal, Language and Desire in Seneca's
to Gérard Genette and Philippe Hamon): ‘A literary personage is always a
construction in language of a network of relations and associations. It is an element in
a text, or in other words a signifier analogous functionally to other signifying
elements in the text. On the other hand, a literary character is not only a signifier, not
only an abstract narrative function; he is also a signified, the “reality” that the work
creates and describes. We inevitably endow a character with a three-dimensional life
of thoughts and feelings like our own, through our sympathetic identification with

The contention that there is no moral transgression unless the will is absolutely free to choose good and evil has its origins in the Pelagian opposition to Manichaean fatalism and its denial of human responsibility. For an account of the ensuing controversy between Augustine and Pelagius (whose views on the capacity of the human will attach a diverging role to divine grace), see Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 312-93 (see pp. 317, 383-84 on the issue of free will); see also Burnaby, *Amor Dei*, pp. 58, 184-200. Borges's position, it is clear, follows a Manichaeian view of the world. For his scorn of the Christian notion of free will, cf. ‘Anotaciones’ (on the poem ‘Paseo de Julio’, in *Cuaderno San Martín*): ‘Añado a título de espantosa curiosidad, que una de las razones invocadas para la duración eterna de los infernales castigos, es el libre albedrio. Se nos concedes el derecho atroz de perdernos, de insistir en el mal, de rechazar las operaciones de la gracia, de ser alimento del fuego que no se acaba, de hacer fracasar a Dios en nuestro destino y del *detestabile cum cacodaemonibus consortium*’ (quoted from Scarano, *Varianti a stampa*, p. 158).


Cf. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will*, II, pp. 463-509. See also his observations in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, pp. 271-75. For the pantheistic elements in the story's outcome, see Barrenechea, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, pp. 77-97; Alazraki, *La
Chapter 3
The Theme of Love

(i)

The issue of love in Borges's work as a whole is not particularly prominent. Indeed both the erotic theme as well as the female figure are conspicuously absent from a writing that is characterized by all sorts of intellectual curiosities which effectively conceal the author's emotional rapport with the other sex. This act of concealment is intentional on Borges's part and it does betray a psychological complexity which begins to manifest itself from the 1920s onwards. This is not to say that the Argentinian author has obliterated the affective dimension from his creative drive. Of course, this is more likely to express itself within the intimate space of the lyrical voice. Thus the fact that Borges's poetic activity suffered a prolonged interruption may account for his lack of popularity as a love-poet. However, when he did resume the verse form it was not to pluck the seductive string of the troubadour's lute but rather to sing of heroes of arms and courage whilst, on the other hand, he also gave a poetic expression to the literary and philosophical topics which had always captivated him.

Nevertheless, a glance at his earlier verse reveals a mind of great passion and amorous intensity. Indeed Borges's first collection of poems, namely, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, constitutes a vast song of love and desire; love, that is, in its primordial manifestation as the soul's movement towards its object of affection. This, in the early Borges, means the poet's spiritual communion with his surroundings: ‘Mi patria—Buenos Aires—no es el dilatado mito geográfico que esas dos palabras señalan; es mi casa, los barrios amigables, y juntamente con estas calles y retiros, que son querida devoción de mi tiempo, lo que en ellas supe de amor, de pena y de dudas’. Thus the erotic theme makes part of a wider domain, that of the poet's affective experience of his native city: love, landscape, the streets and houses of the suburb, dusk, time and the poet's memory make part of a single poetic and existential process.

Within this general framework, the theme of human love makes its appearance in a refined, though frequently melancholic, ethos. Above all, love is experienced by the poet as a radical spiritual adventure as opposed to a mere physical urge for carnal
satisfaction. Indeed, there is in the poems of this period a sense of ideal drive towards
the contemplation of the beloved's beauty, a beauty that transcends the material world
and which, alas, places her beyond the reach of any form of egotistic possession.
Thus, in the short sequence of poems entitled ‘Sábados’, he writes: ‘Siempre la
multitud de tu hermosura | en claro esparcimiento sobre mi alma’ ([I], lines 13-14);
and later: ‘A despecho de tu desamor | tu hermosura | prodiga su milagro por el
tiempo. Está en ti la ventura | como la primavera en la hoja nueva’ ([III], lines 1-4);
and also ‘Sobrevive a la tarde | la blancura gloriosa de tu carne’ ([IV], lines 9-10; my
italics). In these lines, the angelic beauty of the beloved is encountered as a source of
spiritual joy, even as a miracle which brings forth life and renewal despite her
indifference towards the poet-lover. The sequence ends with a tender synthesis of
beauty and love: ‘Tú | que ayer solo (sic) eras toda la hermosura | eres también todo el
amor, ahora’.

The contemplative mood, on the other hand, is made evident in ‘Trofeo’ (note in
the following lines the double simile and its rich imagery of light and sound, a
reflection of the poet's blissful state of mind):

Como viandante que recorre la costa
maravillado de la muchedumbre del mar,
albriciado de luz y pródigo espacio
o como quien escucha y torna a escuchar un acorde
cuya vehemencia le socava el alma deseosa,
yo fui el espectador de tu hermosura
a lo largo de una sumisa jornada.
(lines 1-7)

However, the contemplation of the beloved is more often effected at a distance,
removed and cut off from its past moment of tangible joy. Dislocated from its real
source, the image of the beloved appears blurred and mutilated. Ruined like a broken
mirror it can only rescue from oblivion the mere fragments of a lost age. Thus
tormented by the beloved's disdain he exclaims in ‘Ausencia’: ‘Habré de levantar la
vida inmensa | que aún ahora es tu espejo: | piedra por piedra habré de reconstruirla’
(lines 1-3). Here the contemplative mood is accompanied by nostalgic recollections of
the past: ‘Tardes que fueron nichos de tu imagen, | músicas donde siempre me
aguardabas’ (lines 9-10). With a similar feeling of an irrecoverable loss, he writes in ‘Despedida’: ‘Definitiva como una estatua | entristecerá tu ausencia otros campos’ (lines 15-16; note, however, that this poem deals with the separation of the lovers before a long journey, not with unrequited or unfulfilled love).

But it is in a poem collected in his second book of verse where we find the most fervent expression of a contemplative mood striving to reach the unknown, transcendental essence of the beloved who, furthermore, is now seen in the angelical purity of her heavenly abode (quite in consonance with the woman-angel motif of troubadour and stilnovistic poetry):

Ni la intimidad de tu frente clara como una fiesta
ni la privanza de tu cuerpo, aun misterioso y tâcito y de niña,
ni la sucesión de tu vida situándose en palabras o acallamiento
serán favor tan persuasivo de ideas
como el mirar tu sueño implicado
en la vigilia de mis ávidos brazos.
Virgen milagrosamente otra vez por la virtud absolutoria del sueño,
quiesta y resplandeciente como una dicha en la selección del recuerdo
me darás esa orilla de tu vida que tú misma no tienes.
Arrojado a quietud,
divisaré esa playa última de tu ser
y te veré por vez primera quizás,
como Dios ha de verte,
desbaratada la ficción del Tiempo
sin el amor, sin mí. ³

The poem is characterized by the polarity between time (‘la sucesión de tu vida’) and eternity (‘Arrojado a quietud’, ‘desbaratada la ficción del tiempo’), thus anticipating the ecstatic moment of ‘El Aleph’ which, nevertheless, is to overturn the angelic nature of the beloved. However, despite the poem’s sense of amorous affinity, of a passion that finds repose in the quietness of sleep, the final verses betray the poet’s emotional isolation. The love that manifests itself through the temporality of existence is only capable of producing images and transitory promises, fragments of being that will dissolve in oblivion. Hence the momentary union of the lovers proves to be deceptive and illusory.
Does the poet, then, cross the threshold of time in order to reach a higher level of meaning, as it has been suggested by Robert Lima? Does contemplation lead him to a happier and fuller state of existence? I do not find here, nor anywhere else, an indication of this. To be sure, Borges distrusts and, indeed, shows the falsity of worldly passion. Eros, as a purely carnal drive, can only re-enact the primary solitude and existential confusion in which the lovers dwell. But the crossing of the border (if indeed there is such a movement) from time into eternity does not produce the expected joy of mystical transcendence. On the contrary, it confirms the poet's radical distance from his beloved ('sin el amor, sin mí').

This view of human love as a failed attempt to fill the ontological gap that separates the lovers from each other instills most of Borges's poems of the period. Thus what distinguishes his love poems is a deep sense of loss, grief, and absence. Consider the following verses from Fervor de Buenos Aires: ‘Tu ausencia ciñe el alma | como cuerda que abarca una garganta’ (‘Ausencia’, lines 21-22); ‘Te traigo vanamente | mi corazón final para la fiesta’ (‘Sábados’, [II], lines 10-11); ‘En tí está la delicia | como está la crueldad en las espadas’ (ibid., [III], lines 10-11); ‘Nuestras dos soledades en la sala severa | se buscan como ciegos. [...] En nuestro amor no hay alzazara, | hay una pena parecida al alma’ (ibid., [IV], lines 5-6, 11-12); ‘Entre mi amor y yo han de levantarse | trescientas noches como trescientas paredes | y el mar será un milenio entre nosotros’ (‘Despedida’, lines 1-3).

Of course, the theme of love cannot be deprived of sporadic moments of joy, and this acquires in Borges's poems a genuine taste of spiritual excitement. I have already shown this in relation to the contemplation of the beloved's beauty. On the other hand, with regard to the affective in general, he writes: ‘Atendido de amor y rica esperanza. [...] Paraje que arraigó una tradición de amor en el alma’ (‘Villa Urquiza’, lines 1, 14); and of human love in particular: ‘Nada importa que el alma | ande sola y desnuda como el viento | si el universo de un glorioso beso | aún abarca mi vida’ (‘Forjadura’, lines 12-15; my italics). Consider also, linked to the notion of memory, the following verses: ‘Benjuí de tu presencia | que iré quemando luego en el recuerdo | y miradas felices | de bordear tu vivir’ (‘Sábados’, [I], lines 1-4). And yet happiness proves to be ephemeral:

y en gradual soledad
al volver por la calle cuyos rostros aún te conocen,
Whilst memory keeps alive the absent image of the beloved, forgetfulness appears as a sombre reminder of time's destructive power. The happiness that love once brought with it ends in empty memories consumed by time: ‘El tiempo arrancará con dura mano las calles enzarzadas en mi pecho. No habrá sino recuerdos’ (‘Despedida’, lines 4-6).

In the passages I have considered so far the sexual element as such is absent. Rather what we encounter is the expression of inner feeling, the joy and sorrow of an emotion that springs from the poet's spiritual essence, an adventure that is experienced in its ultimate ontological meaning as an attempt to break the primordial isolation of the self from its object of love. There is, however, among his earlier poems a striking exception, all the more remarkable because it constitutes, to my knowledge, Borges's first direct allusion to a Dantean episode. The poem, entitled ‘Llamarada’, was compiled by the author in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* but excluded from later editions of his poetic work (written in 1919, the poem really belongs to Borges's ultraist period in Spain where it was first published with slight variants under the title ‘La llama’). It begins, as several of the compositions in the collection, with a brush-stroke description of the landscape which, as the poem unwinds itself, becomes a symbol of the poet's state of mind:

Bajo la dolorida sombra del cielo – ante los austeros mástiles que se alzan sobre las aguas sin ruido – y las luces pobres del puerto que en amplia inmóvil procesión, anilladas de rojo en la penumbra lo ciñen, – una llamarada ondula en el aire pardo y pesado a ras de la tierra – en el derrumbamiento de las cosas visibles, – en la angustiosa espera de la tormenta cercana.

The poet then turns his attention to the blaze in the seashore, to which he lends a voice:
Yo, latente bajo todas las máscaras, – nunca apagada y eternamente acechando, – [...] encarno la grande fatiga, la sed de no ser de todo cuanto en esta tierra poluta vibra, y sufriendo vive.

As the poem unfolds its meaning we realize that it re-enacts the drama of erotic passion in which man is driven by the blind forces of carnal desire (stylistically, note the sound effect produced by the repetition of the consonant ‘r’ in the last stanza):

Te siento y paso. – Sigo a lo largo de la tarde lenta – y medito el significado de tu roja palabra – y veo que en verdad eres símbolo – de nosotros que inevitablemente sufrimos – unidos al gris yugo del día – o al enjoyado yugo de la noche – y ansiamos como tú la alta serenidad y el desdén claro de la felina noche...

Espoleados – deseando deslumbrarnos y perdernos en las culminaciones carnales – en la crucifixión de cuerpos tremantes. [...] – Y la llama se hunde en el gran crepúsculo enfermo – que en girones desgarran los grises vientos.

The language and imagery used here by Borges are of an amazing intensity, one that is absent from the sentimentality of his love poems. Particularly striking is the metaphor of the crucifixion—an image of clear ultraista cut—which conveys the idea that the lustful union of the bodies (‘deseando deslumbrarnos y perdernos en las culminaciones carnales – en la crucifixión de cuerpos tremantes’) is in essence an act of self-destruction and, as the Dantine reference implies, carries with it both perdition and spiritual ruin (this idea is clearly stated in the third stanza: ‘en esta tierra poluta’).

Indeed, the idea that love can become a negative, compelling force pervades the most famous canto of the Commedia, that of Francesca da Rimini (compare Inf. V, 38-39: ‘i peccator carnali, | che la ragion sommettono al talento’; line 106: ‘Amor condusse noi ad una morte’; and line 136: ‘la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante’). Now the adjective ‘tremantes’ is, to my knowledge, hapax legomenon in Borges's work; therefore, its use in this context cannot be casual. Borges must have had this verse in mind when he used the word in his own composition. But this is not all. The phrase ‘los grises vientos’ and the tempestuous scene of the poem are also significant for this is precisely what characterizes the symbolical setting of the second circle of hell where Paolo and Francesca have been confined for their sexual transgression (compare Inf. V, 28-30: ‘lo venni in luogo d’ogn e luce muto, | che mugghia come fa
mar per tempesta, | se da contrari venti è combattuto’); also, the darkness of the air in
Borges's poem, ‘en el aire pardo y pesado’, echoes ‘l’aura nera’ and ‘l’aere perso’ of
the Dantean episode (lines 51 and 89). In addition, the verb ‘espleados’ finds its
exact correlative in the Italian word ‘menare’ which appears in lines 32, 43, and 78 of
the same canto. In the first two instances, Dante uses the verb to describe the way in
which the infernal storm sweeps and drives the sinful souls: ‘La bufera infernal, che
mai non resta, | mena li spirì con la sua rapina’; ‘così quel fiato li spiriti mali | di qua,
di là, di giù, di sù li mena; | nulla speranza li conforta mai, | non che di posa, ma di
minor pena’ (Inf. V, 31-32 and 42-45, respectively); whilst in line 78 it is used in
order to describe the power of love which carries away the wretched souls of Paolo
and Francesca: ‘per quello amor che i mena’. Finally, the fury of the last verse in
Borges's poem (‘que en girones desgarran los grises vientos’) echoes the noun
‘rapina’ used by Dante in line 32 above, as well as the ruinous condition in which
Dante portrays the tragic end of all the souls which are blinded by the passion of
desire: ‘Quando giungon davanti a la ruina, | quivi le strida, il compianto, il lamento’
(lines 34-35). Thus agony (‘la dolorida sombra’, ‘Y la llama se hunde en el gran
crepusculo enfermo’), enslavement (‘uncidos al gris yugo del día – o al enjoyado
yugo de la noche’), violence (‘que en girones desgarran los grises vientos’), suffering
and death (‘en la crucifixión de cuerpos tremantes’) embody the author's view of the
erotic passion which is driven by carnal desire.8

On the other hand, Borges's sexual metaphor of the crucifixion contrasts sharply
not only with the redemptive aspect of Christ's death (whose sacrifice is in essence an
act of love for the salvation of mankind), but also with Dante's love for Beatrice
through which he was able to transcend the limits of worldly passion in order to reach
a higher order of spiritual being. Here the Dantean echo is unmistakably that of

Purgatorio XXX:

donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto
vestita di color di fiamma viva.
E lo spirito mio, che già cotanto
tempo era stato ch’a la sua presenza
non era di stupor, tremando, affranto,
sanza de li occhi aver più conoscenza,
per occultà virtù che da lei mosse,
Now there is no evidence in the corpus of the poem to support the idea that Borges had this second passage in mind when he wrote it, especially if he was not (as it is generally accepted by Borges scholarship) particularly familiar with the Dantean poem as a whole during the early years of his literary activity. However, the image of the flame is there, as well as what I consider to be the key word in Borges's poem, namely, 'tremantes', which I have identified in my reading as a direct reference to *Inferno* V, 136.

Of course, the metaphor of fire as passionate love is an ancient one. Dante himself borrows line 48 from Virgil (*Aeneid* IV, 23: ‘adgnosco veteris vestigia flammae’), an author greatly admired by the Argentinian who had studied the Latin poets during his school days in Switzerland not long before. And yet the reader who is familiar with Borges's essays on Dante (albeit written three decades later) will know the importance Borges attaches to *Purgatorio* XXX in which he places the central event of the entire *Commedia*, namely, Dante's encounter with Beatrice in the Garden of Eden: ‘Yo tengo para mi que [Dante] edificó la triple arquitectura de su poema para intercalar ese encuentro’ (*OC*, III, p. 371). In the same essay, Borges paraphrases lines 32-48 cited above: ‘El carro se detiene y una mujer velada aparece; su traje es del color de una llama viva. No por la vista, sino por el estupor de su espíritu y por el temor de su sangre, Dante comprende que es Beatriz. En el umbral de la gloria siente el amor que tantas veces lo había traspasado en Florencia’ (p. 369). Given the importance of the episode in Borges's later work, it may be useful to see in what ways the cited lines of the *Purgatorio* are related to our reading of the poem.
If we restrict the interpretation of the passage to its affective dimension, the importance of Dantes's borrowing (‘conosco i segni de l’antica fiamma’) lies in the moral corrective he applies to Virgil's line. The character who speaks in the Latin verse is Dido, who thus unveils her emerging passion for Eneas against which she will not be able to keep her vows of chastity (cf. *Aen.* IV, 28-29, 552). This encounter proves to be fatal for, not being able to accept her lover's abandonment, she aroused her nation's hatred towards the Dardans and in an act of mad desperation commits suicide after throwing herself on the pyre (*Aen.* IV, 584-665). Hence Dido is placed by Dante in the second circle of hell together with Francesca and all those whose fierce passion has stained the earth with blood (‘noi che tignemmo il mondo di sanguigno’, *Inf.* V, 90). The point is that, whereas Dante's love for Beatrice is meant to represent an understanding of love that is based on moral self-improvement (note that Beatrice's rebuke is still to come), Dido's ardour for Eneas turned out to be a negative and destructive one. Her case illustrates how an essentially beneficent impulse can nevertheless be poisonous if it is abused. Turned against its proper end, Eros becomes a demonic force eager for blood and vengeance. This kind of love is, properly speaking, a destructive, self-enslaving force, and it opposes every form of spiritual growth in and through the various manifestations of the human affections; which brings us back to Borges's images of the yoke and the crucifixion.

It is characteristic of Borges's early poetic language to make use of unusual, contrasting elements in order to achieve a highly emotional response from the reader. It is this tension, I think, which gives the metaphor of the crucifixion its striking appeal, for it fuses both the sacred and the profane, body and soul, salvation and condemnation (note the anticipation of the religious conceit in the first stanza of the poem where the poet depicts the lights of the town as forming a ‘static procession’ (‘inmóvil procesión’), thus evoking the devotional celebrations of the Holy Week; in fact, the use of religious imagery is quite frequent in Borges's early poetry). Now what attracts my attention about this composition is its intrinsic ambiguity: to be sure, the poem constitutes a deep moral reflection on the nature of human existence which is subject to the blind forces of desire; and yet it betrays a dreadful fascination with these very instinctual impulses: ‘latente bajo todas las máscaras, – nunca apagada y eternamente acechando, – encaro la grande fatiga, la sed de no ser de todo cuanto en esta tierra poluta vibra, y sufriendo vive’ (my italics). What an effective image this is
for the occult forces of desire which lie behind all human actions. What a dramatic confession, furthermore, of the poet's longing for amorous fulfilment.

In ‘Himno del mar’, an ultraist poem from the same period as ‘Llamarada’ but not included in Fervor de Buenos Aires, Borges is far more explicit about his sexual drive. This time the poet compares his burning passion with the boundless vigour of the sea:

Yo he ansiado un himno del Mar con ritmos amplios como las olas que gritan;
Del Mar cuando el sol en sus aguas cual bandera escarlata flamea;
Del Mar cuando besa los pechos dorados de virgenes playas que aguardan sedientas. [...] 
Oh instante de plenitud magnífica. [...] 
Oh mar! oh mito! oh sol! oh largo lecho! [...] 
Ambos con una sed intensa de estrellas; 
Ambos con esperanza y desengaños; 
Ambos, aire, luz, fuerza, obscuridades; 
Ambos con nuestro vasto deseo y ambos con nuestra grande miseria!

[My italics]

Note the reappearance of the metaphor of desire in the words ‘sedientas’ and ‘sed’, as well as the various erotic images that permeate its language. On these lines, Carlos Meneses remarks: ‘Camuflado en la pintura marinera late apasionada el ansia sexual’. True, and yet it is more than that for it is possible to detect in this poem an antagonism between Borges's ideal perception of the poetic activity, on the one hand, and his recognition that writing cannot replace the real object of desire, on the other. Neither language nor the intellectual constructions of the mind can account for the essential impulse of life; they can only offer changing metaphors of that other vast poem, the one that is not meant to be read but to be enjoyed. Indeed, in a prose composition published just a few weeks later, he says: ‘Qué me importa la metafísica ni el mundo? [...] Sólo tú existes, Dicha de mi alma victoriosa’. Here, within the context of an intense erotic encounter, Borges resorts to some of the striking images of ‘Llamarada’: ‘Ahora mi paladar es rojo yugo que unce la llama roja de tu lengua. [...] Ahora tu cuerpo, deliciosamente, como una estrella, tiembla en mis brazos’ (my italics). Note the substitution of the image of the cross (implied in the metaphor of the crucifixion in the poem ‘Llamarada’) by that of the star, although in both instances
the notion of tremor (‘tiembla’) is retained as the key psycho-physiological term used by the poet to describe the erotic experience. Furthermore, the destructive implications of sexual love which characterize the former are absent from the latter composition. Here the ambiguity of the metaphor of the crucifixion is resolutely bent on its positive aspect, that is, as a unique redeeming force instilled in human nature. Elsewhere, writing about carnal love, he states: ‘[el placer] es lo único esencial [...] que nadie logrará jamás encerrar en una urdimbre del arte’. This dichotomy, then, is not between the arms and the letters (as it will be in later years) but between the fulfilment of the erotic drive and its artistic sublimation. Note, however, that there is no justification on Borges’s part of pure carnality; on the contrary, his eroticism clearly opposes any form of sexual deceit (of which prostitution constitutes the most fraudulent case). His position on this issue is unambiguous: ‘Aquí [en el lupanar] fracasan todas las religiones. La concepción judaica fracasa, ya que al árbol del Génesis lo han talado a golpes de falo y Adán y Eva se ven aquí reducidos a su actuación más lamentable de mercancía y comprador. La concepción hedónica fracasa, ya que al placer lo han mutilado, robándole las tiaras prestigiosas de la visión romántica y subrayado su tonalidad de fatalismo duro’ (ibid., p. 112).

Borges’s uneasy dealings with sex are well known and I do not need to stress this issue here. However, it is worth noticing that the writings considered above follow that critical period in the author's life in which he is thought to have been initiated in the pleasures of the flesh. It was his own father who appears to have arranged his meeting with a prostitute during the family's stay in Switzerland. The encounter, however, was a failure and it only served to accentuate his discomfort with the matter.

Borges's dislike for this kind of experience is eloquently expressed in ‘El Paseo de Julio’, the poem which, ironically, concludes the last book of verse he wrote before drastically turning his creative activity in another direction, that of fiction. The striking point about it is that it plunges in the depths of perdition the lyrical programme he had initiated—in the heights of a mystical enthusiasm—in praise of his beloved city. As he puts it in the prologue to the first edition of Fervor de Buenos Aires: ‘Mis versos quieren ensalzar la actual visión porteña, la sorpresa y la maravilla de los lugares que asumen mis caminatas. Semejante a los latinos, que al atravesar un soto murmuraban “Numen Inest”. Aquí se oculta la divinidad, habla mi verso para declarar el asombro de las calles endiosadas por la esperanza o el recuerdo. Sitio por
donde discurrió nuestra vida, se introduce poco a poco en santuario’ (FB; italics added). In sharp contrast with this sublime vision of Buenos Aires, ‘El Paseo de Julio’ reveals the other side of the city and its people, that is, its share of malice and corruption: ‘Barrio con lucidez de pesadilla al pie de los otros, | tus espejos curvos denuncian el lado de la fealdad de las caras’ (lines 13-14). Borges actually draws a parallel between the dark life of the city's red-light district and the nether world. Furthermore, as to leave no doubts about the intentionality of his allusion, he adds a note (expunged from later editions) on the notion of the ‘irreality’ of hell. In it, he briefly discusses the Christian concepts of predestination and free will, thus framing the poem, and, indeed, the whole collection, within his wider reflections on the nature of evil (this theme is also considered in the essay ‘La duración del infierno’ (1929), later included in Discusión).

In the two collections of poems that follow Fervor de Buenos, namely, Luna de enfrente and Cuaderno San Martín, there is an increased sense of affective dissatisfaction, of an existence which is day by day further removed from its source of joy (this may explain the considerable decline in the number of love poems that he produced after Fervor de Buenos Aires, whilst, on the other hand, the theme of death acquires a greater predominance in his last book of verse). Thus he writes: ‘Anda de estrella en estrella | un pájaro por el cielo. | Mi querer, de pena en pena’ (‘Soleares’, in Luna de enfrente, stanza 8); ‘Este lugar es semejante a la dicha; | i (sic) yo no soy feliz’ (‘Por los viales de Nîmes’, ibid., lines 12-13); ‘Pobre de amor yo fui’ (‘Casi juicio final’, ibid., line 16) ‘Son forasteros en mi carne los besos y único el viento es abrazador de mi tronco. | Ya no sabe amor de mi sombra’ (‘La vuelta a Buenos Aires’, ibid., lines 12-13); ‘Vida sin tarea de amor y voz en que el amor está prometiendo, | qué decir de esa vida sino que espera | y que somos los atentos a su esperanza | y de esa voz sino que viene del porvenir’ (‘A la doctrina de pasión de tu voz’, in Cuaderno San Martín, lines 15-18). Despite the occasional outbursts of hope, however, Eros will not come back triumphantly to his verse. By 1940 the literary expectations he had nurtured upon his return to Buenos Aires had vanished, and his sense of affective desolation, of a city that somehow had betrayed him, is bitterly felt. In that year, he wrote the following lines: ‘El tiempo que a los hombres | Trae el amor o el oro, a mi apenas me deja | Esta rosa apagada, esta vana madeja | De calles que repiten los pretéritos nombres | De mi sangre’. This is one of the few poems Borges is known to have composed after his tacit renunciation of the lyrical vein. It was published in 1943
with occasion of the second edition of his poetic work. Together with it he included two love poems in English (written earlier in 1934), which can be seen as Borges's final love testament. These poems restate some of his earlier ideas and, at the same time, anticipate some of the erotic themes that will appear later in his fiction.

The first poem begins with a strange nightmareish feeling. Like a traveller through the dark depths of hell, the poet comes out again to the timid brightness of dawn. He has spent the night out with some bohemian friends, but all he is left with is the unbearable taste of disgust. In its metaphoric description, night itself acquires a diabolic meaning and becomes the figure of the fruitless pleasures that inhabit it:

The useless dawn finds me in a deserted street-corner; I have outlived the night.

Nights are proud waves: darkblue topheavy waves laden with all hues of deep spoil, laden with things unlikely and desirable.

Nights have a habit of mysterious gifts and refusals, of things half given away, half withheld, of joys with a dark hemisphere. [...] 

The surge, that night, left me the customary shreds and odd ends: some hated friends to chat with, music for dreams, and the smoking of bitter ashes. The things my hungry heart has no use for.  

Although he does not say so, it seems to me that the events recounted by the poet take place at one of those ill reputed dwellings for which the city of Buenos Aires had become popular during the first decades of the century and which, furthermore, were not unfrequent meeting points for bohemian writers. Such adventure, to which he initially yielded, has only denied him the possibility of affective fulfilment. This place cannot offer him the kind of joy he is searching for. If we recall the final line of ‘Llamarada’, we will notice the reappearance of a very effective term used there by Borges to describe the tormented state of mind in which the poet can find no consolation. I refer to the word ‘shreds’, the English equivalent of ‘girones’ (= ‘jirones’). In this sense, the ‘customary shreds and odd ends’ (which are the result of man's craving in the world) oppose a harmonic and integral mode of existence. What we find in this poem, therefore, is a corroboration of Borges's rejection of carnal love as a deceptive force whose allurements he resists at all costs.

The second half of the poem, however, makes a surprising revelation. Among the despicable memories of that night, the narrator brings to the forefront the haunting
image of a woman. Although he is captivated by her beauty he knows she has now forgotten him. All he has got are ephemeral and illusive fragments, mere reflections of her non-being. Precious as they may be, these ‘illustrious toys’ hide her real essence from him. What the poet wants is to transcend the world of appearance and get to know that other side she kept concealed from him:

The big wave brought you.
Words, any words, your laughter; and you so lazily and incessantly beautiful. We talked and you have forgotten the words.
The shattering dawn finds me in a deserted street of my city.
Your profile turned away, the sounds that go to make your name, the lilt of your laughter: these are illustrious toys you have left me. […]

Your dark rich life…
I must get at you, somehow: I put away those illustrious toys you have left me, I want your hidden look, your real smile — that lonely, mocking smile your cool mirror knows.

The fascination with this woman, who emerges from the perils of the night like the queen of the world of darkness (Proserpine, whose dual image is insinuated in the metaphor ‘dark hemisphere’, in the first part of the poem), betrays once more Borges's dichotomy vis-à-vis his own sexual impulses. Thus her portrayal is wrapped in ambiguity. Like classical representations of female beauty (take, for instance, Pandora, Helen of Troy, or the goddess Aphrodite), she is presented as a glamorous woman who, nevertheless, conceals treachery and deceit (consider the following expressions: ‘and you so lazily and incessantly beautiful’, ‘the lilt of your laughter’, ‘Your dark rich life’, ‘your hidden look’, ‘that lonely, mocking smile your cool mirror knows’). On the other hand, and this is even more paradoxical, the poem includes an allusion to what in effect constitutes the antithesis of the classical female figure: Beatrice. Here the Dantean reference is unmistakably wedded in the words ‘Your profile turned away, the sounds that go to make your name, the lilt of your laughter’, which allude to Dante's separation from his beloved in the Heaven of the Empyrean: ‘e quella, si lontana | come parea, sorrisse e riguardommi; | poi si tornò a l’eterna fontana’ (Par. XXXI, 91-93). Borges was undoubtedly sensitive to these lines, which he later characterized as ‘los versos más patéticos que la literatura ha alcanzado’.
Following the nineteenth-century French writer Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam, he conceives Dante's passionate need to be reunited with his (ungrateful) beloved as the primary creative impulse behind the *Commedia*: ‘Yo sospecho que Dante edificó el mejor libro que la literatura ha alcanzado para intercalar algunos encuentros con la irrecuperable Beatriz. Mejor dicho, los círculos del castigo y el Purgatorio austral y los nueve círculos concéntricos y Francesca y la sirena y el Grifo y Bertrand de Born son intercalaciones; *una sonrisa y una voz, que él sabe perdidas, son lo fundamental*’ (*OC*, III, pp. 372-73; my italics). Note that Borges adds here an element that is absent from the lines in question (he substitutes Beatrice's gaze for her voice), a gesture which, perhaps in an involuntary slip of his pen, echoes the phrase ‘the *sounds* that go to make your name’ of his own poem. More to the point, what the Dantean allusion does is to introduce an element of conflict within the general frame of the poem. In particular, it creates a twofold image of the woman who, from this perspective, appears as being both angel and devil.

The issue becomes even more intricate when one considers the fact that the poem had a dedicatee. It is striking that Borges could dedicate a piece with such ambiguous connotations to a woman with whom, presumably, he was in love. Furthermore, in his dedication to the first edition of *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935) Borges inserts a stanza from the second of the poems. As opposed to the former, this is a composition of heroic nostalgia, a prayer in which the poet offers the most sacred and intimate treasures of his being. The dedicatee of the prose collection is the same woman for whom the lyrics were written, one for whom Borges professes the highest admiration and, indeed, the most vehement idealization (very much in the hyperbolic style of the *stilnovisti*). The dedication runs as follows: ‘I inscribe this book to I. J.: English, innumerable and an Angel. Also: I offer her that kernel of myself that I have saved, somehow — the central heart that deals not in words, traffics not with dreams and is untouched by time, by joy, by adversities’.* These lines are written in a truly romantic vein, even in their portrayal of the self-exiled poet who refuses to give up his hope of return to a state of innocence in which he may regain the essential language of the first man. Hence whilst the woman-angel is unambiguously located in a celestial realm, Borges's self-quotation recovers the paradisiacal allusion hidden in ‘Prose poems for I. J.’, in which he sees the most pathetic example of the primordial separation of the lovers. The secret nuance here is,
of course, Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden hinted at rather timidly in the passage from 'Casa Elena' quoted above. As in earlier compositions (take, for instance, 'Antelación de amor' and 'Ausencia') these poems show Borges's affective need to go beyond the contingencies of human interactions in order to reach a deeper level of union in the knowledge and understanding of the lovers. The question is: was this search for knowledge conditioned by an ontological concern in the nature of the basic isolation of the human existence, or was it ultimately determined by the psychological make-up of the poet?

The answer to this problem, I think, must be given in Borges's work as a whole. If his concern for the unknown essence of the beloved has a profound philosophical motive, it would be reasonable to find in his work a thematic development that would account for his interest. Now it is undeniable that one of Borges's major themes is that of 'the other', but this acquires in his work a very specific meaning: 'the other', in Borges, means the opponent (whether in a physical or intellectual sense) in an almost exclusively male context, and it usually serves to represent the final (that is, eschatological) identity of the rivals. On the other hand, in the few short stories dealing with erotic themes, it is death, illusion, and forgetfulness that triumph over the erotic passion. However, we will find no philosophical explanations of the female 'other' in them. Even in interviews the author proved to be evasive on the question of love. In one of his last declarations he said: 'El amor me preocupa demasiado en la vida real. Por eso no aparece en mis cuentos: no quiero pensar en él cuando escribo' (Stortini, El diccionario de Borges, s.v. 'amor', p. 20); and in 1982 he made the following remark: 'el amor es un mal necesario' (ibid.; the context of the quotation alludes to Borges's sexual initiation in Geneva mentioned above). On the other hand, referring to the religion of love created by twelfth-century troubadour poetry, he remarks: 'enamorarse es crear una religión cuyo dios es falible' (OC, III, p. 371). These thoughts clearly reflect a psychological rather than an ontological concern for the female figure.

The theme of love in Borges's work, therefore, has a deep emotional import. In particular, the lyrical side of the writer shows an obsessive preoccupation with the inevitable separation of the lovers and, eventually, with the unavoidable dissolution of the erotic affair. This issue, I think, was so close to his existential anxiety that he preferred to hide it from his writing (in fact, many of his later allusions to love and
sex are intertwined within such a dense fabric of literary references that they actually become inaccessible to the common reader). It is because of this intense emotional apprehension that his essays on Dante dealing with the subject of love (probably the only critical instances in which the author considers the theme at some length) stress the biographical significance of the poet's love for Beatrice. What is more important, Borges projects his own experience of love in his interpretation and re-elaboration of certain Dantean episodes. In this respect, what distinguishes his narrative is the inversion of Dantean themes. Consider, for instance, the short story 'El Aleph': love becomes a dreadful, negative force; the angelic woman is transformed into a vain, hateful creature whose abode is no longer heaven but hell; and the revelation of a human destiny culminating in the final joyous vision of cosmic love is turned into the obsessive images of a frantic lover who must appeal to forgetfulness as the only cure for his disturbance. This tension of opposites characterizes, on a large scale, the development of Borges's love lyrics from the heights of his youthful fervour to the pitch-black depths of later years.

(ii)

The notion of love in Dante is a complex one. It springs from his early lyrics (which were conceived within the psycho-philosophical framework of the stilnovisti, particularly under the influence of Cavalcanti) and gradually develops the idea of love as self-actualization on the moral and ontological plane which ends in the spirituality of the Commedia. Thus the story of the Vita nuova is related to the lover's perception of the basic nature of human love, a movement that goes from the external (love as a matter of acquisition) to the inner core of feeling and thought (love as a matter of disposition), a centre that manifests itself as total joy in the sheer celebration of the beloved's spiritual goodness. This means not only the proclamation of the praise style but also the affirmation of a will that seeks to overcome its own limitations through the gradual recognition of the beloved's transcendental essence.

The lyrics of the Vita nuova begin with a sonnet addressed to Dante's fellow love-poets. It is preceded by a prose section (chapters II-III) in which the narrator tells us of his encounter with Beatrice and of the immediate effect love exerted on him. From that moment on, he says, 'Amore segnoreggio la mia anima' (VII, 7). Thus Beatrice is called his beatitude ('beatitudo', VII, 5), and 'donna de la salute' (VIII, 4),
where the term ‘salute’ is an anticipation of the lady’s beneficial effects that will appear later on in the *libello*. What is most striking about this is the way in which Dante blends the most heterogeneous sources (Biblical and secular) in order to produce a work of extraordinary coherence, both stylistic and conceptual.

Indeed one of the characteristics of the *Vita nuova* is its syncretism, one that combines its elements in order to clarify its meaning and which is always at the service of understanding. In this respect, Dante establishes a dialogue with his poetic tradition in order to assert the power of reason as his guiding affective principle:

E avvegna che la sua imagine, la quale continuatamente meco stava, fosse baldanza d’Amore a segnoreggiare me, tuttavia era di si nobilissima vertu, che nulla volta sofferse che Amore mi reggesse sanza lo fedele consiglio de la ragione in quelle cose là ove cotale consiglio fosse utile a udire. (VN II, 9)

Later, in the *Commedia*, he will make of the antagonism between reason and passion the subject matter of *Inferno* V, where the poet objects to the compelling sensuality of chivalric love (‘Galeotto fu ’l libro e chi lo scrisse’, line 137). The fact is that the young Dante found himself immersed in a lyrical movement whose exclusive concern was that of vernacular love poetry, a literary practice which had its roots in the troubadours. Thus his first compositions constitute an attempt to define his position vis-à-vis the literary legacy in which he was initiated as a love poet.

Now the poetry of the troubadours is characterized by a few key elements. In the first place it is the expression of an erotic passion. Love is the dynamic force in the troubadour’s writing. Hence desire is frankly acknowledged as the longing for carnal possession and enjoyment of the love object. The troubadour conception of love, however, distinguishes between two kinds of love. On the one hand, the love that is lustful betrays a condition which is to be avoided, namely, immoderation. The courtly lover should aim at moderation (‘mezura’), a quality which is highly praised by the ethical code of the troubadours. Moderation and the esteem of moral and social values (‘cortezia’), on the other hand, are the product of perfect love (‘fin’amor’), a love that does not seek carnal satisfaction for its own sake because it takes pleasure in the intrinsic goodness of the beloved. For the troubadour this kind of love is the source of all virtues.
Secondly, the notion of pure love leads to an exaltation of the beloved. In his appreciation of moral value the lover always feels inferior to the beloved. This condition proves to be beneficial in so far as the lover, in his enthusiasm for the virtuous lady, grows in moral character himself. Thus love becomes an ennobling force transmitted to the lover by virtue of the beloved's moral worth. We may enquire, however, about the effects of unrequited love. Can this still be a source of goodness or does it lead to destructive anguish? If the solution to this problem is positive this would imply that the love of the troubadour is the manifestation of a transcendental drive, which clearly contradicts its secular mode of existence. On the other hand, if unrequited love does lead to destructive anguish this would confirm that the real motive behind the lover's deeds is egotistic and that what is sought after is in effect the satisfaction of carnal desire. In other words, the troubadour notion of love as an ennobling force carries with it a contradiction which the system of 'courtly love' could not resolve within itself. As Cercamon puts it:

\[
\text{Per lei serai o fals o fis,} \\
\text{O dreichurers o ples d'enjan,} \\
\text{O totz villa o totz cortes.}^{28}
\]

Thirdly, 'courtly love' is essentially adulterous. True love, it was held, can only exist outside the contractual bondage of marriage, a view that must have been inevitably true for a social elite which placed political and material interests at the forefront of its marital links. Given that his love is unsuited to reach permanent union the troubadour represents his existence as being radically separated from the beloved.\(^{29}\) This circumstance gives rise to one of the most striking paradoxes of human desire, one that is not exclusive to 'courtly love' poetry. Cercamon expressed it thus:

\[
\text{Ni res tan grieu no-s covertis} \\
\text{Com fai cho q'ieu vauc desziran;} \\
\text{Ni tal enveia no-m fai res} \\
\text{Con fai cho q'ieu non puosc haver.}^{30}
\]
Desire, then, becomes a vain and never ending strife for physical enjoyment, a movement that can never find repose because what is sought after is in essence unattainable and beyond the reach of any form of material possession.

These complexities were brought to a sharp focus in an astonishing and influential treatise composed in northern France at the end of the twelfth century: the *De amore* by Andreas Capellanus. Andreas begins his treatise with a psycho-physiological description of love:

> Love is a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other and by common desire to carry out all of love's precepts in the other's embrace. That love is suffering is easy to see, for before the love becomes equally balanced on both sides there is no torment greater, since the lover is always in fear that his love may not gain its desire and that he is wasting his efforts. [...] That this suffering is inborn I shall show you clearly, because if you will look at the truth and distinguish carefully you will see that it does not arise out of any action; only from the reflection of the mind upon what it sees does this suffering come. For when a man sees a woman fit for love and shaped according to his taste, he begins at once to lust after her in his heart; then the more he thinks about her the more he burns with love, until he comes to a fuller meditation. Presently he begins to think about the fashioning of the woman and to differentiate her limbs, to think about what she does, and to pry into the secrets of her body, and he desires to put each part of it to the fullest use.31

What characterizes this passage—written very much in an Ovidian vein—is not only Andreas' emphasis on the lover's desire for carnal satisfaction but also the fact that he refers to a kind of passion that is inseparable from fear. Such a love can never fulfil either party, for the lovers' permanent condition is that of anguish and distress. Although admittedly love is the source and requisite of every good action (*De amore* I, vi, A. 50), Andreas seems to promote the view that it is only within the legitimacy of marital love that a couple can achieve a true and lasting happiness (ibid., I, vi. 369). Indeed there is in the *De amore* an implicit defence of moral virtues which strives to surpass the troubadour's sensual delight in physical beauty (ibid., I, vi. 9). These contrasting elements make of the *De amore* a puzzling treatise. In fact, in the third and last book of his work, Andreas retracts from his previous defence of 'courtly love' by unveiling the moral truth about the system of values he had initially proclaimed. Thus, if he first affirmed that love is the source of every good action
because it is a good in itself (ibid., I, 6, 305), he now states, even with misogynous
vehemence, that the love of man for woman is the source of all evils, and
categorically denies any inherent goodness in the flesh (ibid., III, 33).

Bearing these general remarks in mind let us now look at the *Vita nuova*. The ‘little
book’, as Dante calls it, is in fact the first of its kind in the Italian vernacular in that it
blends both verse (the collection of poems occasioned by the poet's love for Beatrice)
and prose (the narrative passages in which the author explains the meaning and poetic
structure of the lyrics and supplies the ideological material necessary for its
interpretation). Being concerned with the genesis and transfiguration of the poet's
love, the *Vita nuova* announces itself as a fragment of personal history (the ‘book of
memory’ motif, *VN* I). As such, it is a first person narrative entirely determined by the
tension between the guiding principles of recollection and transcendence. Indeed,
through the image of Beatrice, the *libello* constitutes a lyrical movement towards self-
understanding, both in literary and existential terms. In the latter case, Beatrice
represents the poet's way towards happiness, a progress of which the lyrics constitute
the various stages reached by Dante in his early creative period. In literary terms, on
the other hand, Beatrice embodies the essence of the lyrics themselves, that is,
Beatrice is identical with love, love being the transcendental subject matter of the
poems. Thus there is an equivalence between Beatrice and the lyrics: the latter
constitute an attempt to capture the various aspects of the beloved who, in turn,
appears as the materialization of the power of love through the poet's emotion. Hence
the various modes in which Dante relates himself to Beatrice designate parallel stages
in Dante's lyrical development.

It seems to me that the *Commedia* 's *peregrinatio* begins with the *libello*'s search
for poetic truth, one that, at this point in Dante's thought, lies entirely within Beatrice's
power. As I have already mentioned, the *Vita nuova* points from the beginning in two
directions. If, on the one hand, the vernacular tradition of love poetry provides a
framework within which the *libello* announces its theme (‘D'allora innanzi dico che
Amore segnoreggio la mia anima’, *VN* II, 7), on the other the manifestation of such a
love evolves along a subtle Scriptural analogy which neutralizes the effects of its
secular import by transposing and redefining Beatrice's significance (in this respect,
the prose of the *Vita nuova* plays a fundamental role, although we need to be cautious
in making connections and inferences between the lyrics and the prose sections: the
latter were composed at a later stage and provide an exegetical standpoint which may
Indeed the *Vita nuova* surrounds the figure of Beatrice in a kind of enigmatic fascination: while, as a mortal being, she constitutes the very embodiment of love (love as the concrete manifestation of beauty and goodness), at the same time her analogy with Christ (VN XXIV), and her beatific ascension to heaven (the ‘Beatrice beata’ motif of chapter XXVIII, which validates her affinity with the Virgin Mary), transform her material presence into sheer spirituality, thus actualizing (through a complete reformulation of its erotic import) the lady's angelic nature anticipated in the Italian lyric of the *duecento*. These two issues, (1) the literary-moral and (2) the spiritual-visionary, lie at the very heart of the poetic claims of the *libello*. In both cases the question of the reality of Beatrice constitutes the ontological principle whereby Dante is able to surpass the mere fictitiousness of his poetic representation in order to construct a higher level of meaning and truth (‘sentenzia’, VN I).

In order to appreciate Dante's literary development from the conventional abstractions of thirteenth century vernacular poetry to the doctrine of love which Beatrice and her lyrics represent it is necessary to consider the rhetorical tradition of love poetry from which the *Vita nuova* develops. One of the distinctive features of erotic literature, both in the vernacular forms known to Dante as well as in classical Latin sources, is the representation of love as a sovereign god, one which demands a kind of religious devotion and obedience from its subjects. In this respect the use of personification in the *Vita nuova* illustrates Dante's literary development from the conventions of ‘courtly love’ poetry to a radically internal source of poetic inspiration. More specifically, the de-substantiation of Amore and its gradual absorption in the figure of Beatrice shows to what extent a redefinition of love is in operation in the new argument presented in the *libello* as an analytical introduction to Dante's first great *canzone* in praise of Beatrice: ‘Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore’.

Before we look at the poetics of praise that inaugurates the new stage in Dante's lyrics, it will be helpful to sketch the nature of the poetic crisis mentioned above, namely, Beatrice's withdrawal of her greeting (VN X, 2). This is examined in chapter XII. Amid a dream and in a mood of grief, Amore (wearing the rags of a beggar) urges Dante to abandon the stratagem which has caused Beatrice's rejection and that now places him outside the sphere of her beatific influence: ‘Fili mi, tempus est ut pretermictantur simulacra nostra’ (VN XII, 3). Having lost the true source of his
beatitude, his love for Beatrice is now unrequited and unfulfilled; it is, so to speak, displaced from the centre of an authentic and harmonious mode of existence (note Dante's use of the image of the circle in VN XII, 4). Indeed, when the poet refers to his existential condition the prevailing emotions are those of fear and grief ('e sol s'accordano in cherer pietate, | tremando di paura, che è nel core', VN XIII, 8, lines 7-8). Beatitude, on the other hand, lies entirely within Beatrice's realm. It is not until chapter XIX that the call of love is satisfied as the result of a renewed state of intellectual contemplation from which the poetry of praise emanates like the unpolluted waters of a clear stream ('uno rivo chiaro molto', VN XIX, 1). What the act of praise achieves in 'Donne ch'avete', then, is a lyrical expression resulting from the very appropriation of love: 'Io dico che pensando il suo valore, | Amor si dolce mi si fa sentire, | che s'io allora non perdessi ardire, | farei parlando innamorar la gente' (VN XIX, 5, lines 5-8).

It is because of this shift in perspective that Dante can claim a new spiritual dimension for his beloved, in open confrontation with Guido Guinizelli's final stanza of 'Al cor gentil'. And yet, as a paradigm of beauty and moral perfection, she remains an earthly woman ('ella è quanto de ben pò far natura', VN XIX, 11, Line 49). As far as the treatment of the donna-angelo motif is concerned, therefore, the canzone dwells in the tradition of the stilnuovo as modelled by Guinizelli. With the new argument introduced in chapter XVIII, Love as a corporeal manifestation vanishes from the Vita nuova and in its place we perceive that a new poetic conception emerges from the lyrics. If, on the one hand, Dante can still exploit the psycho-physiological theories of his time in order to produce a metaphoric description of the erotic process (VN XX, 3-5), on the other the dramatic representation of Amore of chapters III, IX, XII, XIV, and XXIV, is substituted by a refined lyricism in which a more abstract nature of love is suggested. Dante's suppression of personification after chapter XXIV implies the dissolution of the religion of love (a cult which in itself constitutes a remnant of pagan belief in medieval culture) and the emergence of a qualitatively distinct ethical notion. In the first place, his love for Beatrice is good and rational; hence it does not reflect the characteristic features that the doctrine of 'courtly love' attributes to the amorous affair. Secondly, it is voluntary and does not depend on the feudal code of obedience. Finally, the love of Beatrice implies an absolute faith in salvation and spiritual
redemption. These three issues, namely, reason, free will and grace, constitute the pillars upon which Dante will base the dynamics of love in the Commedia.

In order to approach the latter, it may be useful to recall Dante's imaginary encounter with Guinizzelli in Purgatorio XXVI, for his place among the lechers (together with the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel) clearly indicates Dante's moral critique of the 'courtly love' tradition. If, on the one hand, Dante unreservedly acknowledges his predecessor’s pre-eminence among the Italian vernacular poets (lines 97-99), on the other he has him confess his own sexual transgression:

"Nostro peccato fu ermafrodito;  
ma perché non servammo umana legge,  
seguendo come bestie l’appetito,  
in obbrobrio di noi, per noi si legge,  
quando partincì, il nome di coleï  
che s’imbestiò ne le ’mbestiate schegge".  
(lines 82-87)

These lines constitute an appraisal of the poet's moral weakness in so far as he was subject to the rule of animal instinct and sensual desire (cf. Conv. II, vii, 3-4). Such impulses can be depicted as blind forces, and before we hear Guinizzelli's self-accusation we learn that Dante the pilgrim is led through purgatory in order that he may see the light of moral truth: 'Quinci su vo per non esser più cieco; | donna è di sopra che m’acquista grazia' (lines 58-59). In effect, Dante draws a line between him and his predecessor ('e sanza udire e dir pensoso andai | lunga fiata rimirando lui, | né, per lo foco, in là più m’appressai’, lines 100-102). However, we should not take Dante's moral censure of Guinizzelli as an attack on the poet's character only: Dante's target is not so much the man as his work.\(^{39}\) Furthermore, the fact that Arnaut is mentioned here as the best of all vernacular love poets (line 117), suggests that Dante's literary critique looks back to the troubadour tradition both as the root and shaping force in Italian love lyrics up to him. In short, both Guinizzelli and Arnaut are present in the purgatory for sustaining a life of sexual incontinence ('la passada folor', Purg. XXVI, 143); however, they are also master poets, and it is precisely their artistic excellence that singles them out from the rest (whilst Dante acknowledges Guinizzelli’s pre-eminence, the latter gives credit to Arnaut's superiority). As far as
Dante is concerned, this chain of illustrious poets serves as a pretext to establish the superior and, indeed, far-reaching spiritual dimension of his own poetry.

As we have seen, the precepts of ‘courtly love’ violate the limits demanded by marital law, an issue alluded to by Dante just before his encounter with Guinizzelli, in *Purgatorio* XXV: ‘Indi al cantar tornavano; indi donne | gridavano e mariti che fuor casti | come virtute e matrimonio imponne’ (lines 133-35). In this respect, the episode of Paolo and Francesca earlier in *Inferno* V illustrates the courtly lover’s antagonism between moral restraint and amorous passion: ‘i peccator carnali, | che la ragion sommettono al talento’ (*Inf*. V, 38-39). Moreover, Francesca’s refined exculpation cannot but highlight Dante’s view that love poetry itself had been indulgent in the handling of a potentially misleading moral principle, one that was implicit in the doctrine of the ‘noble heart’:

“Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende,
prese costui de la bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e ’l modo anch’io offende.
Amor, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona,
mi prese del costui piacer si forte,
che, come vedi, ancor non m’abbandona.
Amor condusse noi ad una morte”.

(*Inf*. V, 100-106)

Indeed, in his doctrinal *canzone* ‘Al cor gentil rempaia sempre amore’, Guinizzelli had established the inherent goodness of every amorous passion that springs from a ‘noble heart’, a conception fully endorsed by Dante in chapter XX of the *Vita nuova*: ‘Amore e ’l cor gentil sono una cosa, | si come il saggio in suo dittare pone’, the sonnet which confirms the elaboration of Dante’s praise style under the influence and authority of Guinizzelli as its master. Now it seems to me that in the Francesca episode Dante is inquiring about the ultimate validity of this doctrine, and he does so by confronting it against a rational theory of love, specifically that unfolded in the love discourses of *Purgatorio* XVI-XVIII. In this first dialogue with a contemporary character, Dante challenges the moral foundations of the secular world in which he was initiated as a love poet, and shows the rhetorical fallacy upon which its assumptions rested. In literary terms, *Inferno* V shows the extent to which the refined
language of the stilnovisti, the language of ‘sweet and pleasing verses’ (‘rime dolce e leggiadre’) with which Dante so carefully models the encounter, could conceal the harsh reality that lies behind an uncontrolled, self-centred eroticism. Hence the shocking contrast between Francesca’s adorned verbal expression and the crude and isolated existence the lovers endure in hell. This, I think, is the rhetorical manoeuvre that the episode discloses, namely, the realization that poetic language can construct a false structure of moral existence.\(^{40}\) The ruin of Paolo and Francesca exemplifies the delusion of a philosophy of love that places its legitimacy in the subjectivity of the ‘noble heart’. The danger of the doctrine lies in its captivating self-sufficiency and in its ability to mislead the moral judgment, for it is not based on the recognition of a supreme moral order but on an egotistical axiom of human conduct, one which can lead to the negation of the outside world in its vain search for sensual enjoyment—hence the surrender of moral responsibility to the contingent circumstances of the lovers’ transgression: ‘Galeotto fu ’l libro e chi lo scrisse: | quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante’, (lines 137-38). From this perspective, nothing can be more harmful to the soul than the illusion that it can become its own ruler, for this is the root of every sin and the cause of man’s contempt towards God.\(^{41}\)

Like Francesca, Dante had experienced the inevitability of love and its power to rule over the individual by neutralising its free will: ‘Però nel cerchio de la sua palestra | liber arbitrio già mai non fu franco, | si che consiglio invan vi si balestra’.\(^{42}\) Now, in the Commedia, he rectifies that view by denouncing the spiritual death to which this excessive sensualism leads to. To be sure, love in itself is a good thing: the entire dynamics of the Commedia depend on this premise. But, as he states later on in the poem, not every manifestation of love spings from a laudable motive,

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{"però che forse appar la sua materia} \\
&\text{sempre esser buona, ma non ciascun segno} \\
&\text{è buono, ancor che buona sia la cera".} \\
&\text{(Purg. XVIII, 37-39)}
\end{align*}
\]

In order to understand this central metaphor two points need to be made: (1) love, generally, is referred to by Dante as an inherent force in every form of existence towards its full realization. This dynamic factor derives from the Creator and, as such, it is essentially good (Purg. XVII, 94; compare Par. VII, 142-44). Like all creatures
in the universe, therefore, man is moved naturally towards a good end. (2) This positive inclination, nevertheless, is obscured by the egocentric make-up inherent in him. As a sentient being subject to fierce passions and emotions, man can easily be trapped in a boundless desire both for material possession and sensual enjoyment, thus sacrificing the nobler and more urgent needs of the spirit (Purg. XVII, 95-96; compare Conv. IV, xii, 15-16). This human tendency to confuse the means for the end is stated in Purgatorio XVI, the canto that introduces the theme of free will placing it at the heart of the entire poem. Although Dante develops the fundamental relationship between his theory of love and ethics in the following two cantos, the basic problem is already expressed here:

“Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia
prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla
che piangendo e ridendo paragoleggia,
l’anima semplicetta che sa nulla,
salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,
volontier torna a ciò che la trastulla.
Di picciol bene in pria sente sapore;
quivi s’inganna, e dietro ad esso corre,
se guida o fren non torce suo amore”.
(lines 85-93)

Although Dante's primary concern in canto XVI is to enquire about the origin of evil, his argument turns to the question of greed as the most conspicuous example of misconceived loving. The excessive pursuit of material gain and the delight in ephemeral pleasures (tendencies which, for Dante, are due to man's fallen condition) must therefore be rectified with the enforcement of the law. At the same time, he grounds the principle of human conduct on man's capacity for self-determination, denouncing the error of those who blame the influence of the stars as the cause of all evils (Purg. XVI, 70-81; compare Par. IV, 61-63). Dante's main assertion rests in his absolute conviction that the faculty of reason allows man to discern the good from the bad and thus to control his sensitive appetite by directing his actions towards suitable ends.
Having dealt with the issue of celestial influence, Dante goes on to reject (in
*Purgatorio* XVIII) other forms of moral determinism. Note, however, that it is not a
question of denying the actual existence of forces which can constrain the will; rather
it is because the agent is vulnerable to such influences that the inclination of the will
needs to be checked by the practical reason, ‘la virtù che consiglia’ (*Purg.* XVIII, 62).
If man's appetitive faculty was positively directed towards the highest good it would
be in perfect accord with the true of the intellect—such is the condition of the blissful
souls depicted by Dante in paradise. But this is not normally the case. On the contrary,
man's will is of its own nature attracted to all kinds of objects which it apprehends as
goods in themselves (‘L’animo, ch’è creato ad amar presto, | ad ogne cosa è mobile
che piace’, lines 19-20), without it being able to measure their relative value with
respect to the ultimate end. The freedom of the will, then, resides in its capacity to
consent to or to refute the judgment of the practical reason with respect to the
desirability of a particular object. Hence the merit of an action performed in
accordance with the appraisal of the intellect, for it shows not to be dependent on the
appetite (which determines it by necessity) but on a principle of right conduct alone:

“Onde, poniam che di necessitate
surga ogne amor che dentro a voi s’accende,
di riterarlo è in voi la podestate”.

(*Purg.* XVIII, 70-72)

If it is possible at all to speak of affective determinism in Dante, this would have to
be acknowledged as an entirely benign type of influence. This is implied in man's
innate tendency towards the good referred to in *Purgatorio* XVII (‘amore naturale’,
line 94), an inclination which is developed by means of a biological simile in
*Purgatorio* XVIII, 55-60:

“Però, là onde vegna lo ’ntelletto
de le prime notizie, omo non sape,
e de’ primi appetibili l’affetto,
che sono in voi si come studio in ape
di far lo mele; e questa prima voglia
merto di lode o di biasmo non cape”.
Now an instinct is by definition something which acts independently from deliberation; hence it determines a choice or action without the intervention of practical reason. For Dante, as for Christian psychology in general, this primary drive towards the good (to which every creature is propelled) is a consequence of the goodness of the Creator who rejoices in the making of each individual soul:

"Lo motor primo a lui si volge lieto
sovra tant’ arte di natura, e spira
spirito novo, di vertù repleto”.

(Purg. XXV, 70-72)44

The notion of an inherent goodness in man's ontological structure is fundamental in Christian ethics: ‘God, as it is written, made man upright, and consequently with a good will’.45 Thus man's happiness on earth depends on an accord between the natural impulse towards God and the will's attraction towards lesser goods. Natural love constitutes a guide infused by divine grace into the soul (compare Par. XXXII, 64-66), but it is the task of each individual agent to bring to completion his existence by actualizing the ‘seed of happiness’ which God has implanted in him (Conv. IV, xx, 9). Therefore, the basic postulate of human action remains within the sphere of moral responsibility. Man is capable of enjoying a perfect life only in so far as he can implement the principle of free choice. As Dante states in the Monarchia, there is freedom of choice where the judgment of reason controls the appetite and is in no way pre-empted by desire (Mon. I, xii, 4). Free will, then, is God's greatest gift to mankind, ‘quia per ipsum hic felicitamur ut homines, per ipsum alibi felicitamur ut dii’. 46

The link between willing and loving in the central cantos of the Commedia is now clear: The man of good will not only acts in accordance with an inner call of love but is also prone to measure the particular objects of desire against the ultimate object of desiring. By turning towards God and submitting himself to His rule man is freed both from the servitude of cupidity and from the blinding lure of his own pride. To have a ‘straight love’ (‘amor [...] diritto’, Par. XXVI, 62-63) means never to loose sight of the ultimate end towards which human existence must be directed. Thus it is man's capacity to respond to the call of God which renders meaningful his use of freedom:
‘A maggior forza e a miglior natura | liberi soggiacete’ (Purg. XVI, 79-80). Only a crooked turn of the will can deprive man from the freedom that he enjoys in the love of God. Such is the journey of redemption that the Commedia exemplifies, from a fearful and confused state of worldly existence to the joyous realization of spiritual being to which the pilgrim is finally lead.

As the pilgrim ascends to paradise, Dante employs a nautical image in order to depict the way in which all creatures move towards their final goal in perfect harmony with the universal order of love which the divine realm represents:

“Le cose tutte quante
hanno ordine tra loro, e questo è forma
che l’universo a Dio fa simigliante.
Qui veggion l’alte creature l’orma
de l’eterno valore, il qual è fine
al quale è fatta la toccata norma.
Ne l’ordine ch’io dico sono accline
tutte nature, per diversi sorti,
più al principio loro e men vicine;
onde si muovono a diversi porti
per lo gran mar de l’essere, e ciascuna
con istinto a lei dato che la porti”.

(Par. I, 103-14)

The metaphor of God as a great sea of love in which all creatures find their right destination synthesizes with poetic effectiveness Dante’s understanding of Christian teleology. Just as the souls in paradise enjoy the vision of God independently of their position in the celestial hierarchy (a position which they joyfully accept as their own), in the same way man must recognize his proper place in the universe and direct his existence towards the attainment of the last end. This implies a direct relationship between him and the Creator. The person who refuses God’s call altogether condemns himself to a sterile life, for the ultimate justification of his existence lies beyond the vain exaltation of his self-centred image. Such is the condition of the damned souls in hell who wrecked their lives by creating false idols and deceptive goals. By glorifying their pride and imposing their own rule they turned against the law of God. Hence Dante’s depiction of hell as a ‘blind prison’ (Inf. X, 58-59); an image which brings us
back to the basic idea that sin constitutes the negation of the freedom which man can enjoy through a positive response to the love of God. The three realms of the *Commedia*, then, exemplify the various ways in which man either distances himself or comes near to the fulfilment of his essential ontological constitution. This manifests itself as loving; it is indeed the love of God.

(iii)

With the composition of ‘Prose poems for I. J.’, the theme of love in Borges acquires an ambiguous connotation. This is clear in his treatment of the female figure which dominates the first of the two poems. Here the object of love is surrounded not so much by an aura of mystery as by an impenetrable enigma of duplicity and concealment. This circumstance is reflected in the astral image with which the night is described (sharing the woman's essential quality of darkness and unknowing) as well as in the mirror motif with which the poem ends:

Nights have a habit of mysterious gifts and refusals, of things half given away, half withheld, of joys with a *dark hemisphere*. [...]    
Your *dark rich life*...  
I must get at you, somehow: I put away those illustrious toys you have left me, I want your *hidden* look, your real smile —that lonely, mocking smile your cool mirror knows. [My italics]

I have already shown how the central emotional theme of the poem (‘Your profile turned away, the sounds that go to make your name, the lilt of your laughter’) suggests a link with *Paradiso* XXXI, 91-93, the lines in which Borges sees the most moving literary description of the separation of the lover from his beloved. As in many other instances, what Borges achieves in this composition is a juxtaposition of readings, one which, I think, is not the product of calculation but a natural response of his creative mind to all sorts of literary and psychological associations; and here, undoubtedly, memory plays a fundamental role. In fact, the importance of memory in Borges's literary fruition was recognized by the poet himself from a very early age: ‘Debo confesar [...] que releo con muy recordativo placer’ (‘La fruición literaria’, *IA*, p. 102). Years later, writing about the influence of Dante in *Moby Dick*, he says:
'Melville tuvo que recordar la Comedia en este punto, aunque prefiero pensar que la leyó, que la asimiló de tal modo que pudo olvidarla literalmente; que la Comedia debió ser parte de él y que luego redescubrió lo que había leído hacía ya muchos años' ('La Divina Comedia', OC, III, p. 219). It is this multiple resonance that renders his writing so rich in interpretative possibilities.

In 1919 Borges came across a novel which left a deep impression on him. The book was a French novel by a socialist thinker whose name is hardly present in Borges's work. This fact is in itself significant, given that the theme of the book must have been very close to the emotional and intellectual concerns of the young writer. Indeed, as we have already seen, the year 1919 stands at the centre of a highly intense period in Borges's life. Emotionally, it is important because it follows the year in which he is thought to have experienced a humiliating encounter with a prostitute in Geneva. On the other hand, it signals the end of his study years in Switzerland and his journey to Spain, where he was to promote the literary tenets of the ultraist movement. This was his first public commitment as a man of letters. Now the rejection of his early ideological tenets may in part account for his silence with regard to the French novelist and of the work which so much agitated him. I believe, however, that it was because of the highly emotional import of his reading (which may have to do with a repression of the sexual issue) that he, perhaps involuntarily, preferred to delete it from his mental library. He did not succeed in doing so, for the book remained firmly inscribed in his memory and, inevitably, manifested itself in his creative writing. The novel bears the significant title L'Enfer, and it was written by a dominant intellectual figure of the time, Henri Barbusse. As Borges's biographic sketch of the French author reveals, his appreciation of this work was both literary and philosophical, and it shows in germ some of the motifs which he will develop later on in his fiction. However, the crucial and, in many ways, disturbing element of the novel (its explicit sexual content) is omitted. This is what he says about L'Enfer:

Barbusse ensayó la escritura de una obra clásica, de una obra intemporal. Quiso fijar los actos esenciales del hombre, libres de las diversas coloraciones del espacio y del tiempo. Quiso exponer el Libro general que late bajo todos los libros. Ni el argumento —los diálogos en prosa poética y las escenas lúbricas o mortales que la rendija de un tabique de hotel concede al narrador—, ni el estilo, más o menos derivado de Hugo, permitieron la buena ejecución de aquel propósito platónico: del todo inaccesible, por lo demás. Desde 1919 no relee ese libro;
Borges highlights the epic scope in Barbusse's novel, its ambition to capture a universal view of man in a hypostatic, timeless dimension. This element, I think, is fundamental for the appreciation of Borges's mature work, for although as a writer he opted for other kinds of expression, as a reader he privileged the epic form, and this left clear traces in his writing (consider, for instance, the role that authors such as Homer, Virgil, and Milton, as well as the Saga cycles of Scandinavian literature, play both in his poetry and in his prose). What is striking, however, is the way in which the above excerpt anticipates Borges's critique of a total writing as exemplified later in Carlos Argentino Daneri's all-embracing poem 'La Tierra'. But this is not all. A closer inspection of L'Enfer reveals far more than what is possible to perceive in Borges's condensed note.

Barbusse's novel takes place within the dark room of an old, second rate hotel in Paris. In this rather claustrophobic setting (in which vision is taken to its extreme act of transgression) the novel carries the reader to the centre of a theatrical stage where the drama of the human relations is enacted in its sheer nakedness. It is a complex reading, one that shows both the misery and sublimity of the human existence in its attempt to break the primordial isolation of the self through the power of love, a movement which is never accomplished either because of the uncontrollable nature of the human passions or because of man's radical negation of the transcendental in which his craving for love may finally be appeased. As one of its characters says: 'We are divinely alone, and the heavens have fallen upon us' (p. 261).

One of the most striking features of L'Enfer is Barbusse's description of sensual love. This is characterized by him as a brutal force leading the lovers to the moment of union, after which they are left in a state of emptiness and confusion. Consider the following passages:

C'est vrai qu'ils sont là et qu'ils n'ont rien qui les unit. Il y a du vide entre eux. On a beau parler, agir, se révolter, se lever furieusement, se débattre et menacer, l'isolement vous dompte. Je vois qu'ils n'ont rien qui les unit, rien. [...] Il n'y a pas au monde deux êtres qui parlent le même langage. [...] Quand on écoute, on n'entend guère; quand on entend, on ne
comprend guère. [...] ils tombent chacun, ils ne savent où, la bouche et les bras entr’ouverts. Jouir ensemble, quelle désunion! (pp. 148–51)

Elle avoue ce que taisait le virginal silence; elle montre son brutal amour. [...] On dirait deux damnés occupés à horriblement souffrir, dans un silence haletant d’où va s’élever un cri. [...] J’ai vu l’être multiple et monstrueux qu’ils font. On dirait qu’ils cherchent à humilier, à sacrifier tout ce qui était beau en eux. [...] Puis, ce sont des bruits inarticulés qu’elle laisse tomber en un sorte d’éclat de rire. [...] Et après, comme les autres, comme toujours, comme eux-mêmes le feront souvent dans l’étrange avenir, ils se relèvent lourdement et disent:
“Qu’avons-nous fait!” Ils ne savent pas ce qu’ils ont fait. (pp. 361-65)

And yet, despite all this, the consumation of carnal love can still be a purifying force amidst the dark and thick delusions of human life:

L’amour! Cette fois, il n’y a pas eu pour pousser l’un sur l’autre ces deux êtres, de stimulant équivoque. [...] S’ils ont violé des souvenirs et des vertus, c’est par la force même de leur amour, et leur ardeur a tout purifié comme une bûcher. Ils furent innocents dans le crime et dans la laideur. Ils n’ont pas, ceux-là, de regret, de remords; ils continuent à triompher. Ils ne savent pas ce qu’ils ont fait; ils croient qu’ils se sont unis. (p. 365-66; my italics)

This view of eroticism is in accord with Borges’s representation of sexual love in ‘Llamarada’. In my analysis of the poem (which itself dates from 1919), I relate several of its elements to the Paolo and Francesca episode in Inferno V. In addition, I identify the presence of the word ‘tremantes’ as a direct reference to line 136 of that canto. On the other hand, in L’Enfer Barbusse uses the same term frequently to describe the lovers’ physical and emotional state in sexual union, and in one occasion he actually reinforces the idea with a simile which is not entirely remote from Borges’s image, especially if we consider the biblical link between the tree of paradise and the cross. Thus Borges’s metaphor (‘en la crucifixión de cuerpos tremantes’) can be closely related to Barbusse’s simile (‘trembling like two entwined trees’). In fact, in the textual context of the latter there is an echo of the metaphor of the crucifixion, although not in the sense Borges gives it in his poem: whilst in Borges’s poem the image refers to the physical union of the lovers, in Barbusse it describes the voyeur’s intensely masochistic participation in the act he witnesses. Although the metaphor of the crucifixion reappears in the novel, Barbusse does not link the terms in the way
Borges does (note, however, the simile of the lovers like two tall whirling flames in the second quotation):

... Mon immobilité prolongée me broyait les muscles des reins et des épaules, mais je m’aplatissais contre le mur, collant mes yeux au trou; je me crucifiais pour jouir du cruel et solennel spectacle. Je l’embrassais, cette vision, de toute ma figure, je l’étreignais de tout mon corps. Et le mur semblait me rendre les battements de mon cœur.

... Les deux êtres enserrés l’un par l’autre tremblaient comme deux arbres mêlés. (pp. 96-97; my italics, ellipsis in the original)

Ils s’embrassèrent violemment. Ils tourbillonnaient; on eût dit deux flammes hautes.

Sa figure brûlant la sienne, il lui cria:
— Je t’aime. Je te veux... Ah! Pendant mes nuits d’insomnie et de désir, étendu, les bras grands ouverts devant ton image, comme ma solitude était crucifiée! (p. 360; my italics)

In Barbusse's novel, mirrors act as counterparts to the duplicity of human beings revealing their true moral and existential condition (‘Je me devine dans la glace plus que je ne me vois. Je vois ma faiblesse et ma captivité’, p. 15). More specifically, with regard to the female figure, the mirror becomes the woman's secret accomplice in the intimacy of her chamber. This notion is undoubtedly implied in Borges's use of the mirror in the first of the two ‘Prose poems for I. J.’ mentioned above. Note the thematic and lexical coincidence between Borges's lines

The big wave brought you.
Words, any words, your laughter; and you so lazily and incessantly beautiful. We talked and you have forgotten the words.
The shattering dawn finds me in a deserted street of my city.
Your profile turned away, the sounds that go to make your name, the lilt of your laughter:
these are illustrious toys you have left me. [...] 
Your dark rich life...
I must get at you, somehow: I put away those illustrious toys you have left me, I want your hidden look, your real smile —that lonely, mocking smile your cool mirror knows.

and Barbusse's passage:
Elle se sourit à la glace, de deux façons différentes, et même elle prend une pose désapprouvée, un instant. Elle invente mille petits mouvements inutiles et utiles... Elle découvre des gestes de coquetterie qui, comme les gestes de pudeur, revêtent une sort de beauté austère d'être accomplis dans la solitude. [...] Je ne la reconnaissais plus, tandis qu'elle surgit de l'ombre avec ce masque de soleil; ma je n'ai jamais vu un mystère de si près... Je reste là, tout enveloppé de sa lumière, tout palpitant d'elle, tout bouleversé par sa présence nue, comme si j'avais ignoré jusque là ce que c'est qu'une femme.

Ainsi que tout à l'heure, elle sourit avant que ses yeux ne se soient détachés de moi, et je sens la valeur extraordinaire de ce sourire et la richesse de cette figure...

Elle s'en va... Je l'admire, je la respecte, je l'adore; j'ai pour elle une sort d'amour que rien de réel n'abîmera, et qui n'a aucune raison ni d'espérer, ni de finir. Non, en vérité, je ne savais pas ce que c'était qu'une femme. (pp. 50-51; my italics)

In both excerpts, then, the woman smiles at herself in the mirror with a posture that suggests not only her coquettishness but also her cunning:

Elle découvre des gestes de coquetterie qui, comme les gestes de pudeur, revêtent une sort de beauté austère d'être accomplis dans la solitude.

...that lonely, mocking smile your cool mirror knows.

Both passages enhance the woman's beauty with expressions that help to create a mystifying aura around her:

... je sens la valeur extraordinaire de ce sourire et la richesse de cette figure...

Elle s'en va... Je l'admire, je la respecte, je l'adore

... your laughter; and you so lazily and incessantly beautiful. [...] Your dark rich life.

In both instances, furthermore, the interplay between light and darkness is fundamental. In Barbusse, the moment of revelation is accompanied by the radiance of the woman's face as if she had literally emerged from the darkness of hell:
In Borges's poem, on the other hand, the moment of revelation is not fulfilled. Rather it is suspended in a hopeless awareness that the narrator's gaze will never meet the woman's eyes in the reflection of her mirror. Hence, as he finds himself alone in the increasing brightness of the morning, her memory remains engulfed in the darkness of unknowing. It is true, nevertheless, that in both cases her existence remains entirely separate from the narrator's. In Barbusse's novel, furthermore, the only certainty about her destiny is death:

C'est ainsi que je l'aperçus dans mon dernier coup d'œil — sans bien comprendre, car on ne comprend jamais tout un départ. Je ne la reverrais plus. Tant de grâces allaient se flétrir et se dissiper; tant de beauté, de douce faiblesse, tant de bonheur, étaient perdus. Elle s'ensuyait lentement, vers l'incertaine vie, puis vers la mort certaine. (pp. 52-53)

Latter on, in a more pungent remark, he declares: 'L'humanité, c'est le désir du nouveau sur la peur de la morte' (p. 326).

In this respect, the theme of mortality in Barbusse's novel presents a tragic counterpart to the satirical portrayal of human vanity which will appear later in 'El Aleph' and in 'El Zahir'. Here Borges exploits once more the motif of the smile as a token of duplicity, but the bitter irony that pervades the poems of 1934 is turned into mockery and disdain. This shift in attitude is significant because it implies a certain emotional detachment of the author from his writing in a way that he was not able to do in his early work. Rather than confronting his emotions in a direct way, Borges is now aware (and in full control) of the relieving possibilities that caricature and fictionality can offer him. Years later he expressed this dichotomy in the paradoxical closing line of 'Borges y yo' (‘No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página’, OC, II, p. 186), but the idea is already present in an early essay on Whitman.51

Returning to Barbusse, perhaps the most important link between L'Enfer and 'El Aleph' is the motif of total vision and its implications on the literary act (a theme which, incidentally, refers us back to the essay on Whitman). It is difficult to
determine with precision whether Borges was aware of this connection when he wrote the short story. As I have already suggested, it is more likely that Barbusse's novel exerted an unconscious influence on his writing, and that it was due to the combined forces of his memory and imagination that it came out in the story. And yet how are we to explain the puzzling words with which Daneri completes the fourth verse of his poem ('Pero el voyage que narro, es... autour de ma chambre', p. 619; Borges's italics)? Perhaps this is Borges's humoristic way of acknowledging his indebtedness to Barbusse's novel, whose poetic prose does indeed take place, from beginning to end, within the walls of a hotel room (it is true that the expression is reminiscent of the voyages imaginaires so much in vogue in eighteenth-century literature, but I do not see how these connect with the explicit voyeuristic allusion in the story, which must derive from Barbusse). Thus, although there are several other references weaved in the narrative of 'El Aleph', the link with L'Enfer can contribute to our understanding of its emotional dimension, as much as it gives a definite existential import to some of his early love lyrics.

The passage which attracts my attention in the French novel is the description of a small opening near the ceiling of the protagonist's room. This apparently trivial incident opens up an entirely new cognitive dimension to him. Overwhelmed by the possibility of transgressing the hidden secrets of mankind, he succumbs to the power that the satanic vision offers him:

En haut, près du plafond, au-dessus de la porte condamnée, il y a une lumière scintillante. [...] La cloison est trouée là, et par ce trou, la lumière de la chambre voisine vient dans la nuit de la mienne. Je monte sur mon lit. Je m'y dresse, les mains au mur, j'atteins le trou avec ma figure. [...] Une ouverture se présente à mes yeux, large comme la main, mais invisible d’en bas, à cause des moulures. Je regarde... je vois... La chambre voisine s’offre à moi, toute nue. [...] Je domine et je possède cette chambre... Mon regard y entre. J’y suis présent. Tous ceux qui y seront, y seront, sans le savoir, avec moi. [...] Je ne m’arrête pas à la pensée du sacrilège; le spectacle de l’humanité enfermée entre les murs de ses chambres me semble tout d’un coup trop désirable pour que je puisse le refuser. Je l’attends, et, déjà, j’en ai besoin. (pp. 17-19)
Later on, he refers to the voyeuristic experience as a grandiose, joyful vision (‘la vision si grande et si heureuse’, p. 55), a spectacle that allows him a complete view over humanity unveiling its true essence with such intensity that it threatens to annihilate his own impulses (there is here, as well as in Borges's short story, a biblical echo from Luke, IV, 5: ‘And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time’):

Je n’ai pas besoin d’une femme. Si je suis troublé au contact des amours, c’est à cause d’une grande pensée et non pas d’un instinct.

[...] Que m’importe la rapide et grossière extase, la comédie sexuelle! J’ai vue sur l’humanité, sur les hommes et les femmes, et je sais ce qu’ils font. (p. 107)

Il n’y a pas de feu mystérieux. J’ai volé la vérité. J’ai vu des choses sacrées, des choses tragiques, des choses pures, et j’ai eu raison; j’ai vu des choses honteuses, et j’ai eu raison. Et par là j’ai été dans le royaume de vérité, si on peut employer à l’égard de la vérité, sans la souiller, l’expression dont se sert le mensonge et le blasphème religieux. (pp. 410-11)

The parallel with Borges's short story hardly needs to be highlighted. The Aleph, it will be recalled, consists of a luminous point in which every object and living creature of the universe can be seen all at once. In order to behold the Aleph, the viewer must go down to the darkness of the basement. There he must lie on the floor and rest his head on a pillow (a pun on the dreamy quality of the scene, but also an echo of Barbusse's novel and its sexual setting). He must then look up and spot the Aleph, which is located in the upper steps of the stairs. All this resembles very much the discovery of the hole shining like a twinkling light in Barbusse's novel. Furthermore, the voyeuristic implications of the vision are clearly stated in the story: ‘Tarumba habrá quedado de tanto curiosear donde no te llaman’, exclaims impudently Daneri. Note also the erotic connotation in expressions such as ‘altivo cuerpo’, ‘cartas obscenas’, ‘lo que deliciosamente había sido Beatriz’ and, especially, ‘el engranaje del amor’ (p. 626), clearly a variation of the metaphor of the crucifixion used by Borges in his poem of 1919, the year in which he read L’Enfer. Also, compare the above lines with the narrator's exclamation after seeing the Aleph: ‘mis ojos habían visto ese objeto secreto y conjetural, cuyo nombre usurpan los hombres, pero que ningún hombre ha mirado: el inconcebible universo’ (p. 626; my italics).
I have already mentioned Barbusse's blunt depiction of sexuality and its impact on the young Borges. Now the vision of the Aleph reveals the truth about the woman with whom the protagonist had been hopelessly in love, and what he understands then is that she could never have been worth of his affection because of her illicit relationship with another man. In other words, the woman's previous experience of sex made it impossible for him to conceive a fulfilling relationship with her. This issue must undoubtedly be related to the myth of the unblemished woman, which has always been very strong in the Hispanic world. As Estela Canto puts it: ‘Él sabía que yo no era una de las niñas asomadas a balcones rosados y celestes que pintaba su hermana Norah’ (Borges a contraluz, p. 98; compare p. 116). Perhaps this conflict is at the base not only of his relationship with Estela Canto but also of that first sexual encounter arranged by his father in Geneva. At any rate, it constitutes the emotional core of the story, and the suggestion that there are autobiographical overtones in it renders its composition far more personal than what is generally conceded by critics.\(^{53}\)

Of all the short stories written by Borges, ‘El Aleph’ stands out as one of the most suggestive in terms of its literary and psychological interpretations. Estela Canto refers its composition back to 1945, a story which she links with ‘El Zahir’ and ‘La escritura del dios’ (Borges a contraluz, pp. 15, 94). Now regardless of whether or not the author acknowledged any biographical content in the story, it is a fact that at the time of its composition Borges was going through a difficult period in his relationship with the dedicatee. Thus she gives us an important key both to the literary and psychological aspects in the story when she says:

El amor de Borges era romántico, exaltado, tenía una especie de pureza juvenil. Al parecer, se entregaba completamente, suplicando no ser rechazado, convirtiendo a la mujer en un ídolo inalcanzable, al cual no se atrevía a aspirar. (p. 81)

Me repetía que él era Dante, que yo era Beatrice y que habría de liberarlo del infierno. (p. 95)

As we will see, Canto's description matches very well Borges's psychology of love in his contemporary essays on Dante (‘enamorarse es crear una religión cuyo dios es falible’, OC, III, p. 371), and confirms the sense of despair and fatalism with which the erotic theme is portrayed in ‘El Zahir’ as well as in some of his later lyrics.
The characters in ‘El Aleph’, then, have an allusive nature and play a symbolic role: ‘Borges’, the nostalgic and thoughtful persona, reflects the conflictive empirical author who identifies himself (outside the story) as Dante Alighieri. Similarly, Estela canto is referred to as the heavenly Beatrice, whose poetic image paradoxically suggests that of Beatriz Viterbo. Indeed, Viterbo is the name of an Italian city in Lazio. Dante alludes to it twice in the *Inferno*, both times with negative connotations (*Inf.* XII, 120; XIV, 79-80). The latter case is particularly significant for the appreciation of Borges's pun in the characterization of his own heroine. Here Dante compares the Phlegethon (one of the imaginary rivers of hell in classical mythology) with the Bulicame, a hot sulphurous spring near Viterbo (‘Quale del Bulicame esce ruscello | che parton poi tra lor le peccatrici’). The point is that, as Paget Toynbee explains, ‘the hot-spring of Bulicame was a resort of prostitutes’. Thus through the Dantean allusion weaved in her surname Beatriz is made to personify sexual evil and corruption.

On the other hand, she is presented as a glamorous woman, and this quality likens her to classical representations of female beauty as something enchanting and deceitful. As we have already seen, Borges explicitly refers to Homer in the initial verse of Daneri's poem: ‘He visto, como el griego, las urbes de los hombres’ (p. 619), and it is feasible that through Beatriz's second Christian name, Elena, he may be insinuating a parallel with Helen of Troy, the Greek legendary figure who is made to embody a series of oppositions, specifically, physical beauty (love) and moral evil (hate). Of course, one cannot dismiss here the distant but more personal echo of a name which we have already encountered. I refer to Casa Elena, the brothel against which Borges wrote a diatribe during his youthful days in Spain. In ‘El Aleph’, the narrator bitterly remarks that ‘Beatriz siempre se había distraído con Alvaro’ (p. 622), which, from this perspective, amounts to calling her a prostitute (cf. *Dictionary of Borges*, s.v. ‘Lafmur, Alvaro’, p. 136).

Beatriz's unworthy affection is also indicated by her indifference towards gifts from ‘Borges’, a fact aggravated by the revelation of her obscene letters to her cousin. As the narrator says: ‘Había en ella negligencias, distracciones, desdenes, verdaderas crueldades, que tal vez reclamaban una explicación patológica’ (p. 623). Like the mythical figure of Pandora—to whom each god on Olympus gave a gift—Beatriz embodies a paradoxical nature that Borges chose to symbolize in her own name. For him, the lover incarnates both heaven (Beatriz) and hell (Viterbo). Pietro Pucci notes
what he calls an ‘oxymoronic quality’ in Pandora, for she is simultaneously ‘pleasant and dangerous, an excess and a loss’. Similarly, Beatriz is an all-inclusive notion: she represents love and death, praise and condemnation, pride and shame. In his study on spirit symbolism, Carl Gustav Jung explains the nature of such seemingly incompatible representations:

Logic says *tertium non datur*, meaning that we cannot envisage the opposites in their oneness. In other words, while the abolition of an obstinate antinomy can be no more than a postulate for us, this is by no means so for the unconscious, whose contents are without exception paradoxical or antinomical by nature, not excluding the category of being.  

This applies to all poetic and symbolic expressions. In Borges's own words:

As is often the case in Borges's narrative, the author of ‘El Aleph’ veils his emotions from the sight of the reader. It is as if writing constitutes a dangerous attempt to expose the self to an inner truth, an exercise that necessarily requires an act of concealment under the letter.  

If it is true that our literary preferences are determined by our education and upbringing (factors that also help to shape our emotional responses), our psychological make up, in turn, may also influence our appreciation of literature. Based on this assumption, one can render Borges's essays on Dante as *Ensayos borgeanos*, for his analysis reflects his own literary and emotional world. Alicia Jurado, for instance, sees in ‘El Aleph’ the realization of an affective need, and comes close to considering Borges's reading of Dante as an actual projection of his inner feelings:

Es imposible no pensar que Beatriz, innecesaria al cuento, quizá es necesaria al narrador. El mismo Borges, en un ensayo, imagina que Dante escribió la *Divina Comedia* con el solo fin de encontrarse en ella con Beatriz, de quien estuvo privado en la vida real, y no cuesta conjugar que su homónima porvenir, tan desdénosa como la florentina, cumpla un propósito análogo. (*Genio y figura*, p. 65; my italics)
The recovery of Beatrice meant for Dante an increase of the spiritual dimension. To stress, with Borges, the biographical element of the *Commedia* diminishes the ethical-spiritual import of the work whilst, on the other hand, emphasizes the sentimental realism typical of the Romantic view:

Enamorarse es crear una religión cuyo dios es falible. Que Dante profesó por Beatriz una adoración idolátrica es una verdad que no cabe contradecir; que ella una vez se burló de él y otra lo desairó son hechos que registra la *Vita nuova*. Hay quien mantiene que esos hechos son imágenes de otros; ello, de ser así, reforzaría aún más nuestra certidumbre de un amor desdichado y supersticioso. Dante, muerta Beatriz, perdida para siempre Beatriz, jugó con la ficción de encontrarla, para mitigar su tristeza; yo tengo para mí que edificó la triple arquitectura de su poema para intercalar ese encuentro.

Infinitamente existió Beatriz para Dante. Dante, muy poco, tal vez nada, para Beatriz; todos nosotros propendemos por piedad, por veneración, a olvidar esa lastimosa discordia inolvidable para Dante. Leo y releo los azares de su ilusorio encuentro y pienso en dos amantes que el Alighieri soñó en el huracán del segundo círculo y que son emblemas oscuros, aunque él no lo entendiera o no lo quisiera, de esa dicha que no logró. (*OC*, III, p. 371)

To be sure, Dante expressed in his poetry a deep concern for the vicissitudes of the human affections, but it is naïve to see in the lyrics for Beatrice, let alone in the doctrinal complexities of the *Commedia*, an imaginary creation where he could finally be united with the beloved's corporeality. As far as Dante's philosophy of love is concerned, such a reading misses the ethical conception he proposes *vis-à-vis* ‘courtly love’ poetry, and neglects the dynamics of love which he champions in the *Commedia*. These are meant to direct the various forms of human love towards a transcendent spirituality. Thus it is through self-knowledge and moral improvement that Dante the pilgrim is able to reach Beatrice at the summit of the mountain of Purgatory. It is true that this is the only place in the poem where Dante registered his name (see *Purg.* XXX, 55). In a psychological reading, this could perhaps sustain Borges's interpretation of the episode as bearing a deeper unconscious motive (note his allusion to the metaphors of the unconscious: ‘esos hechos son imágenes de otros’; and later, ‘emblemas oscuros’). Reversing Borges's reading, then, it may be be plausible to say that he wrote ‘El Aleph’ in order to expurgate his troubled emotions. Compare the following excerpts: ‘Beatriz querida, Beatriz perdida para siempre, soy
yo, soy Borges’ (‘El Aleph’, p. 624); ‘Dante, muerta Beatriz, perdida para siempre Beatriz’ (OC, III, p. 371). Consider, also, his words in a letter to Estela Canto: ‘I shall abound no longer in self-pity. [...] Estela, Estela Canto, when you read this I shall be finishing the story I promised you’ (in Borges a contraluz, p. 143). Expressions, such as ‘piedad’, ‘veneración’, and ‘olvido’, which permeate the story, appear later in the essay. Compare, for instance, ‘Sentí infinita veneración, infinita lástima’ (p. 626); with ‘todos nosotros propendemos por piedad, por veneración, a olvidar esa lastimosa discordia inolvidable para Dante’ (OC, III, p. 371). Furthermore, Borges’s emphasis on what he perceives as a feverish distortion in Dante's encounter with Beatrice on the mountain of Purgatory can stem only from a deliberate confusion between the literal and the allegorical sense which so clearly marks the episode:

Negado para siempre por Beatriz, soñó con Beatriz, pero la soñó severísima, pero la soñó inaccesible, pero la soñó en un carro tirado por un león que era un pájaro y que era todo pájaro o todo león cuando los ojos de Beatriz lo esperaban. [...] Tales hechos pueden prefigurar una pesadilla. (Ibid.)

Borges is, of course, aware of this (he even refers to some allegorical passages a few lines earlier). As far as Dante and Beatrice is concerned, however, he chose to ignore the symbolism conveyed in the poem. Thus he disregards the allegorical meaning because he is interested in the literal sense, perhaps the one that coincides with his own erotic experience (‘esa dicha que no logró’). Indeed, the final words of the essay betray his longing for a fulfilling relationship: ‘con espantoso amor, con ansiedad, con admiración, con envidia’ (my italics).50

Years later, questioned about the Dantean allusions braided in ‘El Aleph’, the author denied any symbolical meaning in the story, whilst on the other hand he asserted the historical reality of its characters: ‘Beatriz Viterbo really existed and I was very much and hopelessly in love with her. I wrote my story after her death. Carlos Argentino Daneri is a friend of mine, still living’.61 Here we have Borges's satirical humour at its best. Indeed, while pretending to disclose the truth about his narrative, he actually reinforces the parallel with his literary model: like Beatrice Portinari, Beatriz Viterbo ‘really existed’; like Dante, he was ‘hopelessly in love with her’; like the Vita nuova, his story is intended as a tribute ‘after her death’; like Guido Cavalcanti (Dante's 'primo amico' to whom the Vita nuova is dedicated), Daneri is a
real ‘friend’ who, presumably, shares not only her memory but also his literary dream. Perhaps the irony is a reminder of the writer's lies and tricks (I refer to falsehood as the essential ingredient of his narrative, without this implying a moral censure), as well as his ultimate evasiveness. As Borges puts it in a lyrical tone: ‘Poco a poco voy cediéndole todo, aunque me consta su perversa costumbre de falsear y magnificar’ (‘Borges y yo’, OC, II, p. 186).^^

In fact, two years after the publication of ‘El Aleph’ Borges returned to the theme of the dead woman. As Rodríguez Monegal points out, ‘El Zahir’ is the story of an erotic obsession projected in a magical object:

In ‘The Zahir’ Borges uses the cabbalistic superstition of a magical coin to weave the story of a man who becomes obsessed with a twenty-cent Argentine coin he received at a bar. The coin is a symbol of Clementina. To be obsessed by it is a way of saying he is obsessed by her. [...] But Borges being Borges, he has to disguise the erotic fixation with his erudite, cabbalistic narrative. [...] If in ‘The Zahir’ the erudite allusions distract the reader from the story's secret center, [...] in ‘The Aleph’ the obsession is plainly presented: what is displaced is the model the story is based on. (A Literary Biography, pp. 413-14)

Although not everybody would agree with the rather succinct way in which the critic dismisses the complex web of literary allusions that make up the story, I think that he is right in seeing this as a basic narrative technique whereby Borges effectively ‘distracts’ the reader's attention from its hidden centre. And yet the interest of the story lies precisely in this enigmatic literary texture, as well as in the way Borges plays with the poetic tradition of love-madness in order to produce his own version of it. True, there are deep psychological elements in it but, again, these are more interesting when they are confronted with the intertextual aspect of his writing. The irony here consists in the realization that what is said about Borges's ‘erudite’ allusions (that they only help to distract the readers attention) applies to the author himself: through the playful (re)construction of his stories Borges endeavoured to escape the fears and obsessions which haunted his existence. As he puts it in the story, ‘la ejecución de esa fruslería (en cuyo decurso intercalé, seudoeruditamente, algún verso de la Fáñismál) me permitió olvidar la moneda’ (p. 592).^^

Borges's fascination with the multiplicity of meaning inherent in poetic language, as well as his frequent recourse to symbolism and allegory, has been a recurrent
theme in this study. As I have already expressed, Borges himself suggests on various occasions the existence of various levels of meaning in his short stories. ‘El Zahir’ is no exception. In fact, the very title of the composition alludes to this. Like the literal sense in Christian exegesis, the term *zahir* is used in Islamic hermeneutics to refer to the outward interpretation of the Koran. Together with the exoteric meaning, the Koran has a deeper inward meaning, one which is not manifested but invisible (*batin*). However, the relationship between the visible and the invisible is reciprocal, since God Himself is both *az-Zahir* and *al-Batin*, He is the Manifest and the Hidden.64 These make part of the modes of the divine Presence to which Borges refers in the story: ‘*Zahir*, en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible; en tal sentido es uno de los noventa y nueve nombres de Dios’ (p. 593). In Sufi mysticism, furthermore, every manifestation in the sensible world is a reflection of an invisible reality. For the mystic, every external event (*zahir*) constitutes a symbolic expression charged with spiritual significance (*batin*).65 This gives rise to a series of conceptual oppositions which are the characteristic mark of Sufi language. Borges was undoubtedly acquainted with some of its representatives, particularly with the work of Attar, whose allegorical poem *The Conference of Birds* (*Mantiq al-Tayr*) left a deep impression on him. Its influence can be clearly perceived in ‘El Zahir’ (particularly in the narrator's bewilderment, which alludes to one of the stages attained by the wayfarers in Attar's poem), although in the story Borges actually refers to the *Book of the Secrets* or *Asrar-Nama*. Here, in the opening verses in praise of God, Attar expresses the paradox of the divine Essence which is hidden in its visibility, manifest in its concealment: ‘Un (Dieu) Apparent qui est Caché par sa manifestation un (Dieu) caché qui est plus manifeste que la lumière’ (line 11); and again, in lines 42-44:

Le monde est plein de Toi et Tu n’es pas le monde tout s’infond en Toi et Tu n’es point au centre Immutablement Tu es caché Tu es manifeste jamais Tu n’es au dedans jamais Tu n’es au dehors Ton silence est causé par Ta Loquacité Ton abscondité est causée par Ta visibilité.66

For the Sufi, furthermore, the Unity of God cannot be comprehended by the human intellect:
Toute image (sensible) qui est perceptible dans le monde est une porte fermée dont le sensible (hess) est la clef.

Clef et porte seront annihilées dans la Mer en effet jamais image sensible n’a subsisté.

Celui qui comme image a appréhendé la non-image comme les Hommes a renoncé à cette iconolâtrie.

Si tu conçois la non-image et le non-signe tu as la (vraie) vie.

Autrement tu n’es qu’une dépouille pleine de morgue tu n’as pas la vie ne t’approche pas.

Si tu demandes ce qu’est ce sensible si ton oreille est propre à l’entendre je dirai la vérité.

Tout est sans valeur tout est éphémère tout est rien tous (les phénomènes) sont les maillons d’un même Talisman.

Tout ce que tu as appréhendé et vu est mythe tout ce que tu as entendu dans le monde est un écho.

L’imagination l’illusion la raison (discursive) la perception sont une étape chacune d’elles est limitée dans sa propre station mais.

Quand aussi tu auras dépassé cette étape tu réaliseras qu’elles sont leurre.

(Asrâr-Nâma, lines 1129-38; pp. 107-108)

The doctrine that inspires the religious and ethical conception of the Sufis is the desire of union with God through love. Indeed the importance of the doctrine of mystical love in Sufism cannot be overstated. It is through the increasing experience of love that the mystic can progress from the prison of the self unto God. Only by destroying the idolatry of the self can he get closer to God's will, only through the power of divine love can he attain the true essence of being. Hence the link between the religious and the ethical; in the words of Nicholson:

_Fanâ_ [the passing away of consciousness in mystical union] is described as a process wherein the soul is stripped of all its desires, affections, and interests, so that in ceasing to will for itself it becomes an object of the Divine will, that is, the beloved of God; and that which loves it and which it loves is now its inward and real self, not the self that has “passed away”.

As we have seen, both in ‘El Aleph’ and in ‘El Zahir’ the image of the dead woman stands as a reminder of the world's vanity and of the transient condition of human life.
Time will inevitably bring forth change and oblivion, the protagonist of ‘El Aleph’ seems to imply as he recalls that the day Beatriz died coincided with a new publicity advertisement in the Plaza Constitución. Borges's critique of human vanity is more plainly stated in ‘El Zahir’. The story begins as a kind of parodic obituary full of sardonic humour. Teodelina Villar, a fashion model appropriately raised to the standard of an ‘evil goddess’ (note the pun in her name), falls in disgrace (that is, public scandal and financial ruin). Rather than accepting the discomforts of her fate, she opts for a more radical solution—suicide:

Apart from Borges’s extraordinary sense of humour (note the pervading play with the double meaning of words), the passage abounds in Dantean resonances. I will explore these later on. What I would like to point out first, however, is the contrast between the spiritual heights that the story evokes (both in its title and in its various references) and the sheer wittiness that it displays. In other words, against the story’s literary background the author sets up a concrete cultural reality that seems to negate it entirely. From this perspective, ‘El Zahir’ is a masterpiece of Spanish American satirical writing providing a contrast in moral values between the two worlds that the narrator confronts, that of literature and that of actual life (I dissent from Estela Canto's assessment of the story as being ‘uno de los cuentos menos logrados de
Borges', *Borges a contraluz*, p. 191; a similar negative view of the story is held by Bell-Villada, *Borges and His Fiction*, pp. 202, 219, 228 and *passim*).

In his study on Borges's work, John M. Cohen characterizes ‘El Zahir’ as ‘a story of mystical obsession’ 70 I would disagree with him in two respects: (1) the story is only figuratively related to a mystical obsession; the real obsession is sexual love; (2) the nature of the story is not tragic, as the critic's subsequent interpretation proposes (pp. 80-81), but comic, both in its social critique (the satirical portrayal of the Argentinian bourgeoisie) as well as in the caricaturesque treatment with which the author represents his own emotions. This is not to say that the story lacks a serious side to it; but the mood in which it is presented and its mystical background are meant to create a sense of mockery and disdain, rather than a metaphysical terror before ‘the pit of nothingness’ (ibid., p. 81). To take Borges's fiction too solemnly—particularly during this period—can be misleading because we may leave out the intense sarcasm that ignites it from within.

On the other hand, the meaning of the story is not pre-empted by its social content. It can also be read in a lower key as a statement about the author's difficulties in his sentimental relationships and the effect these had on him. In this respect the story is both *zahir* and *batin*, in the sense that the literal meaning conceals a more personal design. This is stated through symbols and metaphors, such as the twenty-cent coin and the enigmatic but fictitious verse which the narrator ascribes to the *Asrar Nama*, 'el Zahir es la sombra de la Rosa y la rasgadura del Velo' (p. 594). Indeed the transfer of meaning through the displacement and substitution of the linguistic sign is suggested by the author himself: 'Me distrajo la tarea de componer un relato fantástico. Éste encierra dos o tres perífrasis enigmáticas —en lugar de sangre pone agua de la espada; en lugar de oro, lecho de la serpiente— y está escrito en primera persona' (p. 592). Here the displacement of the signifier ('en lugar de') constitutes the model for the mechanics of the unconscious which is at work in the story.71

The fact that Borges chose an Islamic background for his story should not come as a surprise. Indeed, Borges's passion for the *Arabian Nights* is well known, and it is precisely in the exotic lure of its narrative that he encountered from an early age some of the finest erotic stories of world literature. These remained among his favourite readings all his life. As Rodriguez Monegal points out, Burton's translation with its 'detailed footnotes on sexual mores' must have impressed the young Borges (*A Literary Biography*, p. 119). Actually, one of the things that must have touched him
most is the frankness with which the Oriental world deals with sex as well as the religious reverence that it attaches to sexual union, making of it a symbol of the unity of God. From this perspective, the physical rapture of orgasm is analogous to the experience of the Divine in mystical ecstasy.

Borges's enigmatic expression ('el Zahir es la sombra de la Rosa y la rasgadura del Velo') includes two terms widely used in Sufi imagery. The rose is a universal symbol of beauty; notwithstanding, few literary traditions have used the image of the rose so extensively as the Persian. Here the rose—an emblem of creation—is made to represent the beauty of God. Borges himself used the image of the rose as the title for one of his later collection of poems, *La rosa profunda*. Its final poem, 'The Unending Rose', pays tribute to such a tradition. Outside the mystical context, however, the rose has more sensual implications. Thus it can represent feminine beauty or, more generally, become an expression of human love and desire. Within this temporal dimension the rose acquires an ephemeral quality, for it no longer signifies the eternal glory of God but the vicissitudes and inevitable delusions of love.

In the European poetic tradition, on the other hand, the symbol of the rose has a long history. However, it is particularly associated with the *Roman de la Rose*, an allegorical love-poem which exerted great influence in the subsequent vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages. In the *Roman*, the rose-bud represents the love of the maiden (C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 129). It is towards the possession of the rose that the lover's attention is directed. In this sense the rose is a substitute for carnal desire, although, as Alan Gunn explains, its poetic possibilities are not confined to the purely sexual: 'The rose is the richest of all symbols: in Guillaume's allegory, it signifies the beloved, the vision of her beauty, the possession of her love, the mirror of her eyes which inspires and promises that love, L'Amant own vision of love; in Jean's allegory it has these and other, not necessarily conflicting, values'.

More complex and personal in meaning is the first noun of the coupling, 'sombra'. In one of the poems in *La rosa profunda* we find the word denoting something mysterious and esoteric. Thus after presenting a catalogue of personal objects and memories, the poet says in an incisive tone: 'Ciertamente son talismanes, pero de nada sirven contra la sombra que no puedo nombrar, contra la sombra que no debo nombrar', ('Talismanes', line 17). The exclusion of a sentimental relationship from the list seems to imply that what is not named is precisely sexual love (the reference to Cecilia Ingenieros in line 8 lacks any erotic connotation, and so is the word ‘amor’
in line 16, which seems to allude either to love of friendship or to filial and maternal love). This view is corroborated in ‘El amenazado’, a prose poem included in another collection (El oro de los tigres, OC, II, p. 485). Here he uses the word ‘talismanes’ in exactly the same sense (that is, as a collection of personal objects and memories which cannot offer, or substitute, something essential which is not possessed); however, the erotic anxiety concealed in the former poem is disclosed with an amazing pathological intensity:

Es el amor. Tendré que ocultarme o que huir.
Crecen los muros de su cárcel, como en un sueño atroz. La hermosa máscara ha cambiado, pero como siempre es la única. De qué me servirán mis talismanes: el ejercicio de las letras, la vaga erudición, el aprendizaje de las palabras que usó el áspero Norte para cantar sus mares y sus espadas, la serena amistad, las galerías de la Biblioteca, las cosas comunes, los hábitos, el joven amor de mi madré, la sombra militar de mis muertos, la noche intemporal, el sabor del sueño?

Estar contigo o no estar contigo es la medida de mi tiempo.
Ya el cántaro se quiebra sobre la fuente, ya el hombre se levanta a la voz del ave, ya se han oscurecido los que miran por las ventanas, pero la sombra no ha traído la paz.
Es, ya lo sé, el amor: la ansiedad y el alivio de oír tu voz, la espera y la memoria, el horror de vivir en lo sucesivo.

Es el amor con sus mitologías, con sus pequeñas magias inútiles.
Hay una esquina por la que no me atrevo a pasar.
Ya los ejércitos me cercan, las hordas.
(Esta habitación es irreal; ella no la ha visto.)
El nombre de una mujer me delata.
Me duele una mujer en todo el cuerpo.

The poem circles around one basic idea: love is an enslaving obsession against which the poet feels totally defenceless. The various names that the object of love assumes conceal a single power: behind the beloved’s image lie hidden the irrational forces of desire which the poet is unable to control (‘la hermosa máscara ha cambiado, pero como siempre es la única’). The importance of the poem, however, resides not in its conception of love—the idea of love as a demonic force is a literary commonplace—but in its overt admission that everything else in the poet’s life is an artificial construct which he has in vain erected in order to protect himself against its lure (hence the
word ‘talismanes’). Stylistically, Borges criticized this composition for its lack of ambiguity and overt intimacy: ‘Hay un poema, creo que se llama “El amenazado”, que taché de mis libros porque era demasiado intimo. [...] La poesía necesita algo fabuloso, algo ambiguo, y le faltaba a ese poema. Era una especie de interjección que no podía permitirme en público’. Indeed, the poem is quite unusual in its emotional disclosure. In a more characteristic way, Borges would have favoured the use of periphrastic expressions and other rhetorical subterfuges to refer to his erotic obsessions. And yet the composition is unmistakably Borgesian in its nightmareish feeling and in its expression of an archaic terror that crosses the boundaries of the self. But to return to our present purpose, note the recurrence of the act of naming with regard to the unveiling of an affective fixation: ‘El nombre de una mujer me delata’. Thus, the erotic connotation of the phrase ‘la sombra que no puedo nombrar, [...] la sombra que no debo nombrar’, cited above, is fully revealed. ‘Sombra’ and ‘nombre’ are in fact the same thing, for to disclose the enigma is to utter the word that identifies the object of desire. This connection is already at work in his early lyrics. In ‘Llamarada’, for instance, the expression ‘la dolorida sombra’ is linked to the emotional setting of the composition, while in a poem from Luna de enfrente his lack of affective satisfaction is expressed in the verse ‘Ya no sabe amor de mi sombra’ (‘La vuelta a Buenos Aires’). There are, furthermore, two passages in Borges's fiction that substantiate this assumption. In El libro de arena, one of his later collection of stories, Borges includes two narratives that deal explicitly with sex. In ‘Ulrica’, sexual intercourse is described as a timeless experience: ‘Secular en la sombra fluyó el amor’ (OC, III, p. 19). The point, however, is that he uses the word ‘sombra’ not simply to create a particular sound effect (note the repetition of the consonant ‘s’) but as a figurative means to represent the ineffability of the moment. The second illustration, from ‘El Congreso’, is much more eloquent. Here the apex of enjoyment is defined in mystical terms as a kind of identity in difference (the parallel with the story of the simurg in Attar's poem is inevitable; note also the presence of other mystical terms, such as ‘dicha’, ‘claridades’, and ‘contemplándola’):

Oh noches, oh compartida y tibia tiniebla, oh el amor que fluye en la sombra como un río secreto, oh aquel momento de la dicha en que cada uno es los dos, oh la inocencia y el candor de la dicha, oh la unión en la que nos perdíamos para perdernos luego en el sueño, oh las primeras claridades del día y yo contemplándola. (‘El Congreso’, p. 29)
Once more, the word ‘sombra’ carries the metaphorical implication of the earlier passage. But even more interesting are the words which precede the scene: ‘De su boca nació la palabra que yo no me atrevía a decir’ (ibid.). That word is sex, as we have just seen, and it unequivocally reveals the essence of what cannot be uttered in ‘Talismanes’. These textual echoes, furthermore, support the general interpretation of ‘El Zahir’ as a story about a sexual obsession and, in particular, help to perceive the erotic nuance hidden in the phrase ‘la sombra de la Rosa’.

The expression ‘la rasgadura del Velo’ is equally charged with erotic significance. The image of the veil is found extensively in Sufi discourse to refer to man's ignorance of the Divine Essence. Knowledge of God is a process of unveiling. Here the act of unveiling means to remove the veil of appearance of the phenomenal world in order to gain access to a higher, spiritual order. Unveiling, then, is concerned with the knowledge of what is hidden to the eye. The Koran states it thus: ‘We have unveiled you, and today your eye is sharp’ (50: 22). This action of unveiling, explains Carl Ernst, ‘still retains the sense of someone ripping-off a veil’. The paradox is that in a society where veils play such a crucial role in women's clothing, the action of unveiling cannot be divorced from its erotic, if not voyeuristic, insinuation.

‘Unveiling’, says Ernst, ‘has the connotation of breaking the barrier of seclusion, of sudden admittance to intimacy’ (ibid.). Borges must have been very sensitive to the proper sense of the metaphor and to the fact that mystical gnosis can be expressed through the most sensual of all images: the unveiling of the beloved in a loving encounter (compare Purg. XXXI, 145).

Thus in ‘El Zahir’ the ripping-off of the veil (‘la rasgadura del Velo’) represents the narrator's desire to remove all barriers between him and his beloved (physical as well as psychological). Indeed the erotic symbolism conveyed in the action of removing an obstacle is made evident in ‘Ulrica’. Here, borrowing an image from the Völsung Saga, he writes: ‘No había una espada entre los dos’ (p. 19). In its original context the sword placed between the lovers is a symbol of chastity (‘He took the sword Gram and laid it naked between them’). Borges retains the sign but gives it a negative twist (‘no había’), thereby signifying the consumation of love as well as the breaking off of his protagonist's virginity (as he puts it elsewhere: ‘esa casi mágica indicación de poderío erótico: caprichos de hembra que tuvo la daga’, OC, I, p. 128). The fact that this story may be the expression of an erotic phantasy, as Osvaldo Sabino has
acutely shown, emphasizes the degree of sexual repression that is at work in the writing of ‘El Zahir’, where such a cathartic mechanism is fiercely truncated. This is clearly stated in the story: ‘Pronto, quizá demasiado pronto, esa vigilia tendrá fin: las estrellas le han dicho que ya se ha forjado la espada que la tronchará para siempre. [...] La aparición de Sigurd corta bruscamente la historia’ (p. 592; my italics). Here the protagonist is referring to the death of Fafnir, who is killed by Sigurd, but one cannot separate the allusion from the fact that in the Icelandic Saga the same sword will stand as a sexual prohibition whose violation is punished with death (‘He said that it had been decreed him that he should accept thus his bridal night, in respect to his wife, or else receive his death’, ibid., p. 104). In other words, the mention of the sword in ‘El Zahir’ points towards a sexual fear associated with death. Ironically, in several of Borges's stories this kind of death is perceived as the ultimate liberation of the spirit: ‘Alguna vez [...] el predestinado acero del héroe —Sigurd o San Jorge o Tristán— penetrará en la sordida cueva y lo acometerá, lo herirá de muerte y lo salvará’. This implicit link confirms the story's sense of fatalism which the narrator feels impotent to escape (just as the Saga constitutes the unfolding of a curse through the intrigues of love and greed). Returning to ‘Ulrica’, if we transpose the phrase ‘No había una espada entre los dos’ to its original context, we must to conclude that the consumation of love in Borges's reworking of the episode resulted in the narrator's death. Perhaps this is the meaning of the ambiguous words at the end of the story: ‘y poseí por primera y última vez la imagen de Ulrica’ (p. 19; my italics).

It is now time to consider the way in which the story's main theme is articulated. By doing so, the Dantean link will also become clear. As we have seen, both ‘El Zahir’ and ‘El Aleph’ are centred on the theme of the dead woman. In both cases, this is the starting point of the narrative as well as the event that triggers the hero's subsequent actions. Both stories, furthermore, deal with an obsession which threatens to destroy the character's mental stability. In ‘El Aleph’, the risk of madness is mitigated by the effect of forgetfulness which eventually liberates the victim (Borges's persona) from its fatal chains. Likewise, in ‘El Zahir’, the protagonist hopes to find some kind of alleviation from his disease, initially by consulting a psychiatrist (p. 592), and finally by seeking oblivion through self-annihilation (Borges was actually consulting a psychoanalyst at the time; see Canto, Borges a contraluz, p. 112).

‘El Aleph’, however, is structurally a more complex story because it mixes in its narrative a wider variety of elements. It begins with the motif of the dead woman
whose memory the poet will keep alive for posterity (thus creating a parodic rendering of the *Vita nuova*), but it soon becomes an ironic comment on certain writers and cultural institutions which the author wishes to confront directly. There is no question that in the vision motif Borges makes use of Dantecan imagery and rhetoric, but the initial parodic intention is eventually subsumed under the story's satirical portrayal of what is considered to be the prototype of a successful Argentine writer, Carlos Argentino Daneri.

In ‘El Zahir’, on the other hand, Borges achieved a greater intensity by focusing the development of the narrative on the character's obsession with the coin. Apart from the initial presentation of the dead woman, everything in the story circles around this basic idea. The coin, however, is a symbol and what matters is the way in which the protagonist reacts to its influence. In this respect, the story represents a humorous reworking of an ancient theme, one which enjoys a long literary tradition, both serious and comic. I refer to the psycho-physiological condition known in medieval and renaissance treatises as *amor heroicus*. Geoffrey Chaucer, in his *Knight’s Tale* describes its symptoms thus:

```
Whan that Arcite to Thebes comen was,
Ful ofte a day he swelte and seyde ‘Alas!’
For seen his lady shal he nevere mo.
And shortly to concluden al his wo,
So muche sorwe hadde nevere creature
That is, or shal, whil that the world may dure.
His slep, his mete, his drinke, is him biraft,
That lene he wex and drye as is a shaft;
His eyen holwe, and grisly to biholde,
His hewe falow and pale as asshen colde,
And solitarie he was and evere allone,
And waillinge al the night, makinge his mone;
And if he herde song or instrument,
Thanne wolde he wepe, he mighte nat be stent.
So feble eek were his spiritz, and so lowe,
And chaunged so, that no man koude knowe
His speche nor his vois, though men it herde.
And in his geere for al the world he ferde,
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The physiology of love depicted by Chaucer in these lines is typical of the medical treatises of the time, which emphasize the lovers' loss of apetite, loss of flesh, fever, and so forth. Psychologically, lovesickness is characterized by sadness, insomnia, restlessness, and an excessive thought of the beloved, to the point of forgetting the outside world:

Lovers could not be expected to act quite rationally. They might lapse suddenly into a kind of coma, totally abstracted from the world. “Many times,” wrote Folquet de Marseille, “people speak to me and I don’t know what they say; they greet me and I hear nothing.” In the same way, Lancelot in the Roman de la charrette “totally forgets himself and he knows not whether he is alive or dead, forgetting even his own name.”

This condition, it was observed, leads to a state in which the lover, overwhelmed by grief and uncertainty, eventually desires his own death: ‘Many lovers commit suicide. Others have a gentler but no less tragic end; they waste away and die’ (Babb, The Elizabethan Malady, p. 137). Love, then, was seen as a kind of mental alienation which could lead to self-destruction. Now Chaucer's passage is conceived in terms that would have been familiar to his audience. In fact, the material he used for his stories was traditional and not of his own invention. The modern reader, on the other hand, is less prone to recognize the literary and medical background that lies behind it, partly because the technical language that supports it has lost its meaning (since it has been replaced by other forms of scientific representation), and partly because the literary and artistic tradition that sustains it has, to a great extent, been forgotten or ignored. Berges was well aware of this rupture with tradition but he nevertheless—or precisely because of it—chose to use elements not only from the classical tradition but also from world literature at large. How deeply he delved in the specific
problematics of all his sources is a different matter. What is important for my argument at this stage is the fact that he was interested in and acquainted with a great variety of literary traditions—which is attested by the many essays and book reviews written during his life time—and that he used this material in his creative writing.

I have chosen to illustrate the theme of lovesickness with a passage from Chaucer because of Borges's keen appraisal of his language as well as his literary technique and psychological depth. In doing so, I am not necessarily presenting it as the only model Borges could have turned to for the writing of ‘El Zahir’. He was, however, well-versed with *The Canterbury Tales*, particularly with the *Knight's Tale*, and the characterization of Arcite's 'maladye' was therefore known to him. Of course, the theme of love permeates Chaucer's *œuvre*. Take, for instance, the opening lines of *The Book of the Duchess*, with which Borges's story shares (in a satirical key) the theme of the deceased woman and the lover's grief:

\begin{quote}
    And I ne may, ne nyght ne morwe,
    Slepe, and thys melancolye
    And drede I have for to dye.
    Defaulte of slepe and hevynesse
    Hath slain my spirite of quyknesse,
    That I have loste al lustyhede;
    Such fantasies ben in myn hede,
    So I not what is best too doo.
\end{quote}

(lines 22-29)

There is, however, another English author for whom Borges professed a great esteem, Robert Burton, and it is in the pages of this indefatigable compiler that Borges may well have found the basic inspiration for the satirical version of love melancholy in his story. There are in fact several elements, both biographic and stylistic, that bring together the two writers: both were bookish and rather solitary men who would gladly have exchanged (as they did) the world for a book; both had an unusual taste for the eccentric and unorthodox; both were fascinated with all sorts of readings but, at the same time, regreted having spent their life in seclusion; thus both felt a nostalgia for real experience, for love and life in its concrete expression. In both authors, furthermore, there is a sense of frustration and lack of achievement; and yet both
ravished in endless catalogues and encyclopedic knowledge, and somehow nurtured a view of themselves as spectators of the world. Finally, there is a perceptible irreverence in both of them towards literary history: in the case of Burton, this is due to his certitude that the writer stands above his predecessors in virtue of his privileged position at the end of a temporal string (‘hee that comes last is commonly best’, ‘Democritus Junior to the Reader’, vol. 1, p. 11); in Borges to his conviction that in the universal order of literary discourse past and present are relative notions because of their interaction in the creative (and interpretative) process.89 Note in the following passage the thematic as well as stylistic affinities with Borges's story:

_Heroicall Love_, which is proper to men and women, is a frequent cause of melancholy, and deserves much rather to bee called burning lust. [...] Avicenna [...] calleth this passion *Ilishi*, and defines it _to be a disease or melancholy vexation, or anguish of minde, in which a man continually meditates of the beauty, gesture, manners of his Mistris, and troubles himselfe about it_. [...] For continuall cogitation is not the _genus_, but a symptome of love, wee continually thiene of that which wee hate and abhorre, as well as that which we love, and many things we covet and desire, without all hope of attaining. _Carolus à Lorme_ in his questions makes a doubt [...] whether this heroicall love be a disease: _Julius Pollux Onomast_ [...] determines it; They that are in love are likewise sicke. [...] _Arnoldus [Villanovanus]_ will have it improperly so called, & a malady rather of the body, then (sic) minde, _Tully_ in his _Tusculanes_ defines it a furious disease of the minde, _Plato_ madnesse it selfe, _Ficinus_ his _Commentator [...]_ a species of madnesse, _for many have runne mad for women, [...]_ but _Rhasis a melancholy passion_, and most Physitians make it a species, or kinde of melancholy (as will appeare by the Symptômes) and treat of it apart.90

En aquel libro estaba declarado mi mal. Según el prólogo, el autor se propuso “reunir en un solo volumen [...] todos los documentos que se refieren a la superstición del Zahir, incluso cuatro piezas pertenecientes al archivo de Habicht y el manuscrito original del informe de Philip Meadows Taylor”. La creencia en el Zahir es islámica y data, al parecer, del siglo XVIII. (Barlach impugna los pasajes que Zotenberg atribuye a Abulfeda.) _Zahir_, en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible; en tal sentido, es uno de los noventa y nueve nombres de Dios; la plebe, en tierras musulmanas, lo dice de “los seres o cosas que tienen la terrible virtud de ser inolvidables y cuya imagen acaba por enloquecer a la gente”. El primer testimonio incontrovertido es el del persa Lutf Ali Azur. En las puntuales páginas de la enciclopedia biográfica titulada _Templio del fuego_, ese polígrafo y derviche ha narrado que en un colegio de Shiraz hubo un astrolabio de cobre, “construido de tal suerte que quien lo miraba una vez no
The book to which Borges refers at the beginning of the quote is of course apocryphal, but the allusion to an all-inclusive treatise dealing with the narrator’s disease (‘En aquel libro estaba declarado mi mal’) could well be Burton’s study of love melancholy, with its obsessive concern with creating a total inventory of the subject. In this respect, Borges’s own narrative pattern seems to owe a great deal to Burton’s technique of amplification through enumeration. Comparing the two texts, furthermore, one cannot fail to notice the presence of common key elements in their description: vision, excessive meditation, and madness.91

It is not difficult to see why Borges enjoyed so much the reading of Burton, whose fine prose is indeed celebrated as being quite unique in English literature. Above all, I think, it is his extraordinary sense of humor and irony that render his writing so fascinating and entertaining. Ovid nods compared to this witty Elizabethan bachelor:

Yet for all this, among so many irksome, absurd, troublesome symptômes, inconveniences, phantastical fits and passions which are usually incident to such persons, there bee some good and gracefull qualities in Lovers, which this affection causeth. As it makes wise men fooles, so many times it makes fooles become wise, it makes base fellowes become generous, cowards courageous, […] clowns, civill; cruel, gentle; wicked prophanes persons, to become
religious; slovens, neat; churles, mercifull; and dumbe dogs, eloquent. [...] There is no man so pusillanimous, so very a dastard, whom love would not incense, make of a divine temper, and an heroicall spirit. (pp. 182-83; italics in the original)

Let us leave aside the Ovidian theme of the lover's vituperation as a cure for lovesickness and concentrate first on the malady itself. We have already seen how, in the poem 'El amenazado', Borges describes his experience of love as a paralysing physical and mental disease: 'como en un sueño atroz'; 'La ansiedad'; 'el horror de vivir en lo sucesivo'; 'Ya los ejércitos me cercan, las hordas'; 'Me duele una mujer en todo el cuerpo'. In 'El Zahir', on the other hand, Borges refers to physical pain twice, and this insistence on pathology does convey the impression that the narrator wants to get rid of something which effectively tortures him. In the first instance, the allusion to suffering is coupled with the name of the dead woman ('la desdenosa imagen de Teodelina, el dolor físico'); whilst the second reference suggests the complete suppression of pain together with the destruction of the character's self ('Tanto valdría mantener que es terrible el dolor de un anestesiado a quien le abren el cráneo', pp. 594-95), which the author disguises in the form of a mystical revelation. Other allusions in the story to the traditional symptoms of lovesickness mentioned above include the following: 'un principio de fiebre' (p. 590), 'Insomne, poseido, casi feliz', 'demoniaco influjo', 'tenaces cavilaciones', 'la moneda que tanto me inquietaba', 'quería alejarme de su órbita' (p. 591), 'tomé una pastilla de veronal y dormí tranquilo', 'olvidar la moneda', 'procuré pensar en otra moneda, pero no pude', 'no logré cambiar de idea fija' (p. 592), 'opté por consultar a un psiquiatra. [...] Le dije que el insomnio me atormentaba' (pp. 592-93), 'todos continuaron pensando en él, hasta el fin de sus días' (p. 593) 'Cómo las postrarán a las enfermeras que le dan de comer en la boca', 'Tendrán que alimentarme y vestirme', 'no sabré quién fue Borges', 'Otros soñarán que estoy loco y yo con el Zahir', 'Cuando todos los hombres de la tierra piensan, día y noche, En el Zahir', 'En las horas desiertas de la noche aun puedo caminar por las calles' (p. 595).

We have already seen Capellanus's definition of love as an immoderate passion which takes control of the lover's mind. Such condition results from an excessive cogitation on the physical qualities of the other sex. The basic requirement for the arousal of desire, however, is vision. Only through the sense of sight is physical beauty perceived, and only through this initial contact can love cling to the lover's
heart. The idea is a literary commonplace but Andreas is so firmly set on it that he even disputes the possibility that the blind can experience love.\textsuperscript{93} This emphasis on vision is crucial for the appreciation of Borges's erotomaniac allusions in the story. It is implicit, as we have seen, in the image of the veil (‘la rasgadura del Velo’), as much as it determines the narrator's fixation with the coin he is unable to forget (‘lo miré un instante; salí a la calle, tal vez con un principio de fiebre’, p. 590). Also, whilst the word \textit{zahir} frankly discloses the visual connotations of the story (‘Zahir, en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible’), the insistence on Teodelina's physical appearance (an image which is sarcastically raised to the point of idolatry: ‘aunque no todas las \textit{efigies} apoyaran esa hipótesis’, p. 589), together with her public ‘theophanies’ (‘se mostraba en lugares ortodoxos’, p. 589; my italics) help to reinforce the traditional link between love and sight which is at work in the story.\textsuperscript{94}

Borges's mention of a psychiatrist, and the later reference to madness, confirm the character's syndrome. In medieval literature love melancholy was frequently described as an illness that could affect the lover's sense of personality, thus forgetting himself as well as the world that surrounds him (such as Chaucer's depiction of Arcite in lines 511-18 cited above). The irony of the situation in Borges's story, however, consists in the implicit bourgeois attitude of the character (Borges's satirical persona), for the truth of the matter is that psychoanalysis, as a therapeutical treatment, can only be afforded by the well-off.\textsuperscript{95} This circumstance, which may be universal, has created its own social type, precisely in the same way as love melancholy, in medieval and renaissance poetry, was seen primarily as a ‘noble’ disease suited to the refined sensibility of the aristocracy.\textsuperscript{96} In this respect Borges's mention of a decadent sentimentalism in Argentina (‘Confesaré que, movido por la más sincera de las pasiones argentinas, el esnobismo, yo estaba enamorado de ella y que su muerte me afectó hasta las lágrimas?’, p. 590), ridicules a society which emulates not only the latest Parisian fashion but also the hollow \textit{ethos} of a foreign bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{97}

The idea of love as a human disposition which brings joy and sorrow is, of course, a universal theme. Yet it is probably true that no other literature in Western history has been so engaged in its artistic and philosophical representation as the one that flourished in the courts of France and Italy during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Now it was the merit of the so-called \textit{stilnovisti} to introduce some fundamental changes to the conception of ‘courtly love’ poetry. One of these consisted in the poet's radical introspection in an attempt to define the very process of love. The master of
this new type of poetry was Guido Cavalcanti, in whose hands love poetry became a kind of psychology of the erotic emotion. In him the object of poetic contemplation is not so much the lady as the genesis and manifestation of her effects in the lover's subjectivity. Although there are moments of intense, though ineffable fascination with the transcendental essence of the beloved, Cavalcanti's poetry is seldom joyful or ecstatic in the way in which Dante, or Guinizzelli before him, celebrated the beauty of the angelic woman.

Far from achieving the heights of mystical devotion achieved by Dante in the *Vita nuova*, Cavalcanti endeavoured to represent the psychological turmoil of the process of love. His greatest philosophical achievement is the *canzone* 'Donna me prega'. Love, he argues, arises from the sight of a corporeal shape ('veduta forma', line 21) which, after being impressed in the memory and the imagination, is apprehended by the possible intellect. Since the possible intellect—being exclusively concerned with universals—is divorced from the passions of the sensitive soul, it follows that love cannot take hold in it (lines 24-28). Love, therefore, is a passion of the sensitive soul only and, as such, it exerts a jurisdiction that is independent from the dominion of the intellect. Sensual love, nevertheless, can become an irrational potency capable of controlling or misdirecting the intellectual faculties (lines 29-34). For Cavalcanti, this overpowering effect of love is due to its celestial origin, the heaven of Mars, which exerts a malign and obscure influence upon the sensitive soul (lines 17-18). Now the aspect that interests me most in connection with Borges's short story is given in the poem's central stanza, where Cavalcanti makes reference to the compelling vigour of sensual love. This, he says, can result in 'death' (in a metaphorical sense, that is, as the extinction of moral virtue) when it substitutes in man the commanding force of reason. The underlying notion is that love can subjugate the righteousness of practical reason and cancel the freedom of the will:

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Di sua potenza segue spesso morte,
se forte - la vertù fosse impedita,
la quale aita - la contraria via:
non perché oppost' a naturale sia;
ma quanto che da buonperfetto tort'è
per sorte, - non pò dire om ch'aggia vita,
ché stabilita - non ha segoria.
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I have already referred to the inevitability of sensual love and its bearing on Borges's early poetry. The idea, of course, is traditional, and it was used not only as a figurative means to express the psychological intensity of the erotic drive as it takes possession of the lover's 'heart' (an image that constitutes a literary commonplace among the poets of the Duecento), but also literally as the suspension of the body's vital impulses. We have already seen how lovesickness was considered to be a condition that could bring disastrous consequences to the sufferer, and it was from this perspective that the question was examined by medieval doctors. Naturally, apart from describing the symptoms of passionate love and its physiology, they aimed to discover a remedy for the affliction. In this respect, the general consent was that the cure of the malady could be obtained by occupying the mind in a purposeful activity; this, in turn, would bring about oblivion thus restoring the patient's health.

This is how Dino del Garbo, a Florentine physician active during the first decades of the thirteenth century, interpreted Cavalcanti's reference to death and forgetfulness in lines 35 and 42 of the canzone d'amore. In his extensive commentary on the poem, Dino says:

For this passion can alter the body so much that it often causes death which is the most terrible of things. But the way love causes death is stated by Guido in, se forte la vertu fosse impedita, by which he means that love kills when it is so vehement that it impedes the work of the vegetative or vital virtues of the soul, which conserve life and its operation in the human body. [...] We see that love often produces this effect, namely that of causing the death of the person who vehemently perseveres in it. We also note that he who can forget his love can return to his natural disposition, whence the doctors of medicine say that the best cure of this passion is to distract the man from thinking about his beloved so that he will forget it.

We do not need to concern ourselves with the accuracy of Dino's interpretation. The fact is that in highlighting the beneficial role of forgetfulness in the cure of the malady he was following a common belief among the medical doctors of his time. The point that interests me most, however, is the striking coincidence with Borges's mention of forgetfulness in relation to its curative power both in 'El Zahir' and in 'El
Aleph’. In the latter story, after the initial shock of total vision—an experience which threatens to destroy the protagonist's mental balance—he declares: ‘Felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido’ (p. 626). Here Borges refers to the salutary effects of oblivion in relation to the character's overwhelming encounter with the Aleph, but at the end of the story he comes back to the idea specifically in connection with his obsession with Beatriz: ‘Nuestra mente es porosa para el olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz’ (p. 628). There is no question, then, that in ‘El Aleph’ time and oblivion exercise a favourable outcome in the cure of the narrator's affective fixation. In ‘El Zahir’, on the other hand, the interaction between memory and forgetfulness becomes the dynamic centre of the story. Just as memory epitomizes the lover's obsession with the beloved, oblivion represents its possible cure: ‘Hasta fines de junio me distrajo la tarea de componer un relato fantástico. [...] La ejecución de esa fruslería [...] me permitió olvidar la moneda. Noches hubo en que me creí tan seguro de poder olvidarla que voluntariamente la recordaba’ (p. 592; my italics). Note that Borges introduces here a third element, namely, occupation (‘me distrajo la tarea’), thus reinforcing the link between the story's underlying motif and its therapeutic treatment as prescribed by ancient and medieval doctors (see, for instance, Ovid, *Remedia Amoris*, lines 135-44). Now the expression ‘me distrajo’ calls to mind the passage from Dino's commentary where the same word is used (‘et propterea medici ponunt quod maxima cura istius passionis, scilicet, amoris est ut homo distrahitur a cogitatione illius quod amat, et obliviscatur eius’; my italics). Burton, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, also refers to the occupation of the mind as one of the best treatments for lovesickness (‘Labour, slender and sparing diet, with continuait businesse, are the best & most ordinary meanes to prevent it’, III, p. 202). Furthermore, in the Second Partition—dealing with the cures for melancholy—he cites Rhasis, one of the leading medical authorities in the Middle Ages, in a statement that reproduces Dino's advise: ‘And for this disease in particular, there can be no better cure, then continuall businesse, as Rhasis holds, to have some employment or other, which may set their minde aworke, and distract their cogitations’ (II, p. 68; see also pp. 81, 90 and passim). Borges's choice of word, then, must be an allusion to Burton, for there is no reason to believe that he had a direct knowledge of the Latin source. Indeed his annotations in the manuscript of ‘El Aleph’ reveal that he had in mind this particular section of the *Anatomy* in the preparation of the short story (Del
Río Parra, ‘El manuscrito de “El Aleph”’, p. 31). But this is a question of sources and
does not invalidate the argument as a whole. What is important is to recognize his
playful rewriting of a traditional literary theme.

In fact, this is already present in ‘El club de los mendigos’, a tale written by Borges
in 1933. Consider the following passage:

There are several elements in this passage that indicate Borges's familiarity with the
medieval love romance (the motif of the beggar, for instance, is reminiscent of
Béroul's version of the legend of Tristan and Iseult, one of the most renowned love
romances of the Middle Ages), as well as with the phenomenology of love in courtly
lyrics. Burton's depiction of love madness is also manifest (take, for instance, the
following passage: ‘For such men ordinarily as are thoroughly possessed with this
humor, become insensati & insani, for it is amor insanus, as the Poet calls it, beside
themselves’, The Anatomy of Melancholy, III, p. 197). Note also the motif of sight
and, especially, the greeting. There are expressions here that suggest a direct imitation
of Dantean and Cavalcantian lyrics (‘ella pasa; [...] yo la miro, la saludo y me alejo.
Ella sonríe, tal vez de compasión, cuando me ve aparecer'; compare Vita nuova, chs. XXI and XXVI); however, from the evidence of the text alone it is not possible to determine this with greater precision.

Returning to ‘El Zahir’, although I have found no confirmation of Borges's acquaintance with the canzone d’amore, it is a fact that the story belongs to a period in which the author declared to have been immersed in Dante scholarship, and he must therefore have had an idea of the complexities of the issue in Dante's contemporaries. The fact that he did not develop such questions in his writing does reveal the nature of his interest in Dante, which is rather fragmentary and eccentric. Nevertheless, with regard to the theme of love in ‘El Zahir’ the Dantean connection is unmistakable. I will therefore proceed to show its main features.

As I have already suggested, the main key for the appreciation of the Dantean element in the story lies in its parodic inversion. As in ‘El Aleph’, Borges makes use here of several motifs and expressions that he borrows directly from the Italian poet and turns them into mockery. In the writing of ‘El Zahir’, he actually weaved phrases and expressions from the Vita nuova and also inserted a few allusions to the Commedia. Particularly obvious is the motif of the dead woman, Teodelina Villar, who, like Beatriz Viterbo, stands as the antithesis of the Florentine counterpart. There is also an implicit identification between the character (Borges's persona) and the poetic ‘I’ in Dante's work. Of course, Borges is not alone in parodying Dante, whose mystical and moralising attitude was subject to derision in his own day (notably in the poetry of Cecco Angiolieri). Although there are strong satirical elements in the story, as far as the theme of love is concerned Borges's appraisal is entirely dominated by a projection of his superstitious emotions, Beatrice being for him the epitome of the ungrateful beloved who refuses to condescend to the lover's request. Thus he found in caricature the best way of dealing with a problem that, in his view, had affected Dante as much as it overwhelmed his own existence (compare the statements: ‘Dante profesó por Beatriz una adoración idolátrica [...] un amor desdichado y supersticioso’, OC, III, p. 371; ‘En aquel libro estaba declarado mi mal [...] la superstición del Zahir’, OC, I, p. 593; my italics).

In this respect, Estela Canto relates a significant anecdote in her relationship with the author. According to her, it was during a walk in the summer of 1945 that Borges asked her to marry him. That evening he recited verses from various poets, especially Dante. More specifically, she recalls how Borges made fun of Beatrice as she exhorts
Virgil to go in aid of the bewildered pilgrim (*Inf.* II, 58-74), assuring him of her most devoted praises back in heaven:

Recitaba versos — la tirada de Beatrice cuando ruega a Virgilio que acompañe a Dante en su viaje a través del infierno. [...] Y hacía comentarios burlones sobre Beatrice, que adula a Virgilio para lograr sus propósitos. (*Borges a contraluz*, p. 97)

In this way Borges was preparing the lyrical ground for his petition. But there is a double edge to it. On the one hand, by invoking the initial setting of the *Commedia* he may have appealed for his beloved's 'grace' (thus creating a parallel between him and the pilgrim); but on the other he was anticipating his failure, not only through his cynical portrayal of Beatrice but also because for him Dante's love for Beatrice was in essence a symbol of unrequited love, a circumstance that he was implicitly re-enacting at that moment.

I have already alluded to Borges's pun in the name of the story's dead heroine, Teodelina Villar. In fact, her original Christian name—as it was published in *Los anales de Buenos Aires* in 1947—was Clementina, a choice which is equally ironical (derived from the Latin *clemens*, it implies mercy and clemency). More specifically, it is a literary reference to the lady's refusal in 'courtly love' poetry and, therefore, it hints at the inherent cruelty of love (this is Borges's comical use of the principle 'Nomina sunt consequentia rerum', a common gloss on medieval civil law employed by Dante in the *Vita nuova*). Teodelina, on the other hand, prompts more complex associations. Deriving from the Greek θεός, θεά (god/goddess), it makes reference both to the religion of love created by the troubadours as well as to the woman-angel motif to which the *stilnovisti* were so much devoted. The second half, however, reinforces the story's theme of love-madness, since it suggests the Latin terms delirium (folly, silliness = stultitia, 'estolidez', an expression used by Borges in his sardonic description of the woman), and dementia (insanity). Again, with regard to her surname Borges's handling of the art of vituperation is evident. From the Latin *vilis*, Villar indicates something cheap or worthless, while it also transmits the idea of moral degradation implicit in its Spanish equivalent (note his use of the word in the poem 'Carnicería': 'Más vil que un lupanar' (*FB*, line 1). In short, Borges's choice of name entails a burlesque treatment of the cult of the beloved in troubadour and stilnovistic poetry. However, there is also an element of self-mockery in it, for this is
the way in which the author himself mystified the object of love ('Borges se acercaba a las mujeres como si fueran diosas', Canto, Borges a contraluz, p. 17; see also p. 81).104

In the Vita nuova, Dante makes use of various devices in order to construct a transcendental account of his lady. Etymology is one of them. Thus by establishing a correspondence between her name and her effects he distinguishes her singularity precisely as a beatrice, that is, as a carrier of beatitude and salvation: 'la quale fu chiamata da molti Beatrice li quali non sapeano che si chiamare' (VN II, 1; compare II, 6; V, 1). Also, because of her miraculous curative powers, Beatrice is called ‘donna de la salute’ (VN III, 4; compare XXVI, 4), a term (‘salute’) which contrasts sharply not only with the malignant influence exerted by the coin in Borges's story but also with the idea of insanity conveyed in Teodelina's name. Note, in addition, the reversal of Beatrice's supreme moral quality, humility. Recalling her first appearance in the streets of her city, Dante says: ‘Apparve vestita di nobilissimo colore, umile e onesto, sanguigno, cinta e ornata a la guisa che a la sua giovanissima etade si convenia’ (VN II, 3). Indeed, the most famous sonnet of the Vita nuova, Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare, transcends the individuality of the poet's voice in order to become a choral affirmation in praise of the lady's angelical essence. Consider, for instance, lines 5-8:

Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,
   benignamente d'umiltà vestuta;
   e par che sia una cosa venuta
   da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.

In contrast, Teodelina emerges as a hateful, frivolous and silly woman. If anything, her public manifestations (‘se mostraba’) could only reinforce her lack of moral and intellectual virtue:

Teodelina Villar se mostraba en lugares ortodoxos. [...] Su vida era ejemplar y, sin embargo, la roia sin tregua una desesperación interior. Ensayaba continuas metamorfosis, como para huir de sí misma. [...] En alguna etapa de la confusa noche del seis, Teodelina Villar fue mágicamente la que fue hace veinte años; sus rasgos recobraron la autoridad que dan la
sobería, el dinero, la juventud, la conciencia de coronar una jerarquía, la falta de imaginación, las limitaciones, la estolidez. (pp. 589-90)

As we have already seen, Dante's early lyrics reflect the literary conventions in which he was initiated as a ‘fedele d'amore’. This is particularly noticeable in the initial chapters of the Vita nuova, where he exploits some of the traditional motifs of love poetry known to the stilnovisti. In particular, the idea of love as an irresistible passion which takes control of the lover made its way into the Vita nuova. In chapter II, for instance, at the sight of Beatrice he exclaims: ‘Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi’; and, a few lines later, refers to the power of love which from that moment on took control of his soul: ‘D'allora innanzi dico che Amore segnoreggiò la mia anima’ (VN II, 4, 7; my italics). And yet the emerging passion of his soul is far from becoming the sensual emotion of the troubadours or the compelling force of Cavalcanti, who could write:

ché solo Amor mi sforza,
contra cui non val forza — né misura.\(^{105}\)

His love for Beatrice is of a different kind:

E avvegna che la sua imagine, la quale continuamente meco stava, fosse baldanza d'Amore a segnoreggiare me, tuttavia era di si nobilissima vertù, che nulla volta sofferse che Amore mi reggesse sanza lo fedele consiglio de la ragione. (VN II, 9)

The devastation caused by the lady's proximity is a frequent theme of the stilnovisti. One of its effects is the lover's tremor, of which Dante makes extensive use in the Vita nuova as well as at the crucial encounter with Beatrice in Purgatorio XXX, 32-48. Borges was very keen on this episode, and his essays on Dante show that he paid close attention to the corresponding incidents in the Vita nuova (‘el amor que tantas veces lo había traspasado en Florencia’, OC, III, p. 369). Indeed nine years after his first encounter, at the apex of his youth, Beatrice's influence becomes so strong that the lover begins to show the physical signs of a disease:
Later on, Dante recalls an incident in which the presence of Beatrice debilitated his vital spirits in such a degree that he felt close to death:

Allora fuor si distrutti li miei spiriti per la forza che Amore prese veggendosi in tanta propinquitade a la gentilissima donna, che non ne rimasero in vita piú che li spiriti del viso. [...] Allora io, riposato alquanto, e resurrresiti li morti spiriti miei, [...] dissí a questo mio amico queste parole: “Io tenni li piedi in quella parte de la vita di là da la quale non si puote ire piú per intendimento di ritornare”. (VN XIV, 5, 8)

These passages show a close connection with the theme of lovesickness in Borges's story. In addition, it is clear that his dead heroine represents, like Beatriz Viterbo in ‘El Aleph’, the negative counterpart of Dante's Beatrice. The sarcastic allusions to the religion of love braided in her name as well as the pun on her physical and moral virtues show that this is the case. The characteristic mark of the Vita nuova, however, is the theme of mortality. The death of Beatrice constitutes the central event of the composition, not only with regard to the her beatific ascension to heaven (‘Lo segnore de la giustizia chiamoe questa gentilissima a gloriare sotto la insegna di quella regina benedetta virgo Maria, lo cui nome fue in grandissima reverenzia ne le parole di questa Beatrice beata’, VN XXVIII, 1—a passage which certainly lends credibility to the hagiographic interpretations of the libello), but also in relation to the consequent desolation of the city and its inhabitants. In this respect, Borges inserts in the story a few parodid references to the events that follow Beatrice's death. Thus the first thing to notice about Teodelina is precisely her contempt for death. I have already noted Borges's play on words suggesting her suicide: ‘cometió el solecismo’, which I interpret as ‘committed suicide’, a rendering that would surely have been applauded by Xul Solar, Borges's eccentric friend and contriver of new linguistic forms. This idea (which is reinforced by the adjective ‘siniestro’), is reiterated in the next paragraph with the phrase: ‘Rígida entre las flores la dejé, perfeccionando su desdén por la muerte’ (p. 590; my italics), implying that she did not care to take her own
Now Teodelina’s death, in Borges’s rewriting of the *Vita nuova*, also constitutes the dividing line of the narrative. It is after her death that the catastrophic events in the protagonist’s life take place, recalling the apocalyptic phenomena accompanying Beatrice’s death as it was foreseen by Dante in a dream-vision:

Cosi cominciando ad errare la mia fantasia, venni a quello ch’io *non sapea ove io mi fosse*; e vedere mi parea donne andare scapigliate *piangendo* per via, maravigliosamente triste; e pareami vedere lo sole oscurare, si che le stelle si mostravano di colore ch’elle mi faceano giudicare che piangessero; e pareami che li uccelli volando per l’aria cadessero morti, e che fossero grandissimi tremuoti. E maravigliandomi in cotale fantasia, e paventando assai, imaginai alcuno amico che mi venisse a dire: “Or non sai? la tua mirabile donna è partita di questo secolo”. Allora cominciai a *piangere* molto pietosamente; e non solamente *piangea* ne la imaginazione, ma piangea con li occhi, bagnandoli di vere *lagrime*. […] Allora mi parea che lo cuore, ove era tanto amore, mi dicesse: “Vero è che *morta giace la nostra donna*”. E per questo mi parea andare per *vedere lo corpo* ne lo quale era stata quella nobilissima e beata anima; e fue si forte la erronea fantasia, che mi mostrò questa donna morta: e pareami che donne la covrissero, cioè la sua testa, con uno bianco *velo*; e pareami che *la sua faccia* avesse tanto aspetto *d’umiltate*, che parea che dicesse: “Io sono a vedere lo principio de la *pace*”.

*(VN XXIII, 5-6, 8; my italics)*

I have transcribed this long passage because it displays several of the motifs used by Borges in ‘El Zahir’. Some of these, like pity (‘pietà’) and weeping (‘piangere’, ‘lagrimando’) are so frequent in the *Vita nuova* that it is unnecessary to indicate a specific instance. This circumstance demands a methodological shift in my analysis. Indeed, I have so far considered the thematic elements of the story from a general literary perspective. However, in order to give a clear account of the diversity of Dantean elements Borges weaved in the texture of the story, I will now adopt a schematic procedure. This will allow me to identify the allusions to Dante with more precision and also to make a brief textual commentary where applicable. The following list includes words and expressions borrowed from the *Vita nuova* and the *Commedia*.

1. Allusions to Dante in the characterization of the dead heroine:
‘Se mostraba en lugares ortodoxos’ (p. 589): ‘Io dico ch’ella si mostrava si gentile’ (VN XXVI, 3); ‘Mostrasi si piacente a chi la mira’ (VN XXVI, 7, line 9); ‘Là ove tante donne mostravano le loro bellezze’ (VN XIV, 2); ‘Lo die che Beatrice si mosterrà’ (VN XXIV, 4). Consider also Dante's extensive use of the verb ‘apparve’ in VN II-III. Generally, a reference to the lady's epiphany, a commonplace in the poetry of the stilnovisti.

‘Su vida era ejemplar’ (p. 589): ‘Per essempio di lei biełtà si prova’ (VT XIX, 11, line 50), Dante's most famous canzone in the Vita nuova. Cf. Conv. III, xv, 13. Generally, a reference to the lady's moral goodness as praised by the stilnovisti.

‘La desdenosa imagen de Teodelina’ (p. 594): ‘E avvegna che la sua imagine, la quale continuatamente meco stava, fosse baldanza d’Amore a segnoreggiare me, tuttavia era di si nobilissima vertù’ (VN II, 9). ‘E pareami che la sua faccia avesse tanto aspetto d’umilitade, che parea che dicesse: “Io sono a vedere lo principio de la pace”’. (VN XXIII, 8). Consider also Dante's reference to the semblance of Christ: ‘Quella imagine benedetta’ (VN XL, 1), and Par. XXXI 104, 108 (‘la Veronica’, ‘la semblanza vostra’: the true image of Christ). In El hacedor Borges included a prose poem on this motif: ‘Perdimos esos rasgos, […] como se pierde para siempre una imagen en el calidoscopio. […] El perfil de un judío en el subterráneo es tal vez el de Cristo; las manos que nos dan unas monedas en una ventanilla tal vez repiten las que unos soldados, un día, clavaron en la cruz’ (‘Paradiso, XXXI, 108’, OC, II, p. 178). Note the contrast between the divine and the profane (‘el subterráneo’, ‘unas monedas’, ‘una ventanilla’). In ‘El Zahir’ this antithesis is implicit in the final expression (‘quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios’), which is the reverse of the opening phrase (‘el Zahir es una moneda común’). There is a pun of words here on the idea of a coin as a common object, on the one hand, and the true semblance of God, on the other. The Greek word for semblance is εἰκών (a likeness, image, or portrait), as Attilio Momigliano indicates (La Divina Commedia, p. 830 ad loc); but the term ‘común’ recalls the word κοινὴ, which is dative feminine of κοινός, the Greek term for ‘common’, or ‘shared in common’. There is a clear sound echo here (koine-eikon), very similar to the kind of word games exploited by the troubadours and the stilnovisti (such as ‘Eva-Ave’ and ‘amor-morte’). Borges was Greekless, but these two terms must have been known to him given their relevance in biblical
language and religious art. In addition, the implicit allusion to Christ's semblance links the story's concluding words with the final vision of the *Commedia* where Dante designs a poetic representation of the mystery of the Incarnation:

> Quella circulazion che si concetta
> pareva in te come lume reflesso,
> da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,
> dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso,
> *mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:*
> per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.

*(Par. XXXIII, 127-32; my italics)*

Note also the echo of line 131 in Borges's pun: ‘aunque no todas las efigies’ (p. 589). Borges must have been very sensitive to the fact that the pilgrim's final vision is a contemplation of a human face (‘la nostra effige’, line 131; see also line 109), thus creating a striking parallel with the culmination of the allegorical quest in Attar's *The Conference of Birds* (see ‘El Simurgh y el águila’, *OC*, III, p. 366-68). For a brief consideration of the final identity between the wayfarer and the divinity in Borges, see Barrenechea, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, pp. 66-67).

‘La roia sin tregua’ (p. 589): ‘Che frutti infamia al traditor ch’i’ rodo’ (*Inf.* XXXIII, 8), one of Borges's favourite episodes of the *Commedia*. Cf. ‘La espera’, *OC*, I, p. 610: ‘[Villari] no juzgó inverosímiles o excesivas las penas infernales y no pensó que Dante lo hubiera condenado al último círculo, donde los dientes de Ugolino roen sin fin la nuca de Ruggieri’.

‘La sonrisa, la tez, el sesgo de los ojos’ (p. 590): ‘Per grazia fa noi grazia che disvela | a lui la bocca tua, si che discerna | la seconda belleza che tu cele’ (*Purg.* XXXI, 136-38); ‘Così lo santo riso | a sé traelì con l’antica rete!’ (*Purg.* XXXII, 5-6); cf. *VN* XIX, 11-12: ‘Color di perle ha quasi’, ‘De li occhi suoi, come ch’ella li mova, | escono spiriti d’amore’ (lines 47, 51-52); *VN* XXI, 8: ‘Lo suo mirabile riso’. In Dante, and the *stilnovisti* generally, the lady's eyes and smile are a reference to her spiritual beauty. As is well known, the motif is also present in ‘El Aleph’: ‘Beatriz [...]


‘La que fue hace veinte años’ (p. 590): ‘L’alta virtù che già m’avea trafitto | prima ch’io fuor di püerizia fosse’ (Purg. XXX, 41- 42); a reference to Dante’s first encounter with Beatrice at the age of nine (cf. VN II-III). In his note on Purg. XXX, 34-36, Momigliano says: ‘Sono passati dieci anni dalla morte di Beatrice’ (La Divina Commedia, p. 512). Cf. ‘La hermana de Eloisa’, pp. 51-52, 57.

’Sus rasgos recobraron la autoridad” (p. 590): a reference to Beatrice’s rebuke in cantos XXX-XXXI of the Purgatorio, an episode highlighted by Borges in one of his essays. Cf. ‘La hermana de Eloisa’, pp. 57, 70: ‘Cuando se quitó el sombrero, que era de color verde oscuro, como los zapatos y el traje, me fue dado valorar su severa belleza, quizá menos notable por la gracia que por la autoridad’ (my italics). In her first appearance to Dante in the mountain of Purgatory, Beatrice wears a green mantle and an olive crown: ‘sovra candido vel cinta d’uliva | donna m’apparve, sotto verde manto’ (Purg. XXX, 31-32).

(2) Other allusions to Dante embedded in the narrative:

‘Aún me es dado recordar, y acaso referir, lo ocurrido’ (p. 589): ‘E vidi cose che ridire | né sa né puô chi di là sù discende’ (Par. I, 5-6); ‘Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio | che ’l parlar mostra, ch’a tal vista cede, e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio’ (Par. XXXIII, 55-57); cf. Conv. III, iv, 4, 9; Epistle to Cangrande, §29. The ineffability topos is a common feature in the three stories which most clearly allude to Dantean themes. See ‘El Aleph’ (p. 624) and ‘La escritura del dios’ (p. 598).

‘Su muerte me afectó hasta las lágrimas” (p. 590): ‘Allora cominciai a piangere molto pietosamente; e non solamente piangea ne la imaginazione, ma piangea con li occhi, bagnandoli di vere lagrime’ (VN XXIII, 6); cf. VN XXX-XXXI.

‘Ebrio de una piedad casi impersonal’ (p. 590): the Vita nuova abounds in references to pity; see, in particular, VN XXXI-XXXVIII. Consider also Inf. V, lines 72 (‘pietà

‘Las calles y las plazas desiertas’ (p. 591): ‘Quomodo sedet sola civitas’ (VN XXVIII, 1); ‘In questa desolata cittade’ (VN XXX, 1). A reference to the citizens’ affective devastation following Beatrice’s death.

‘Habia errado en circulo’ (p. 591): ‘Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferente partes; tu autem non sic’, VN XII, 4 (cf. Conv. IV, xvi, 7-8).

Whilst in the Vita nuova Dante uses the image of the circle to convey the idea of perfect love, in a later poem he propounds the Cavalcantian view of carnal love as a passion which subjects the practical reason to the thrust of sensual desire: ‘Però nel cerchio de la sua palestra | liber arbitrio già mai non fu franco, | si che consiglio invan vi si balestra’ (sonnet CXI, in Rime, Contini, ed., p. 195; my italics); cf. Foster and Boyd, Dante’s Lyric Poetry, II, p. 323; on the defeating power of passionate love see Dante’s canzone CXVI, ‘Amor, da che convien pur ch’io mi doglia’ (also known as the ‘montanina’), in Rime, pp. 207-10, together with Foster and Boyd, Dante’s Lyric Poetry, II, pp. 330-31, 338-39. In ‘El Zahir’, on the other hand, Borges uses the image to express the idea of fatality, which we can enunciate thus: just as the perfection of the circle is determined a priori by rational principles, so life is tied by necessity to the gravitational point around which it must constantly rotate. Note that the ‘almacén’ where the protagonist obtains the Zahir lies at the centre of the movement; cf. Canto, Borges a contraluz, p. 192: ‘Yo vivía entonces en la esquina de Chile y Tacuari, y es en un bar de Chile y Tacuari donde le dan la fantástica moneda’. It is also in an ‘almacén’ where the hero of the short story ‘El Sur’ is compelled to meet his death in a knife-fight; compare the prologue to the second edition of Evaristo Carriego (1955), where Borges writes: ‘Qué destinos vernáculos y violentos fueron cumpliéndose a unos pasos de mi, en el turbio almacén o en el azaroso baldio?’ (OC, I, p. 101; my italics). The sense of inescapable futility that permeates this passage must be seen within Borges’s deterministic conception of human action. Consider also, with wider implications for our interpretation of the story, Schopenhauer’s philosophical observation on sexuality as the fundamental driving force of the will, a remark which was certainly known to Borges; cf. IA, pp. 80-81; Schopenhauer, The World as Will, II, pp. 510-16.
‘Me dirigi al oeste y al sur’ (p. 591); ‘Giunti all’occidente’ (Inf. XXVI, 113); ‘Sempre acquistando dal lato mancino’ (Inf. XXVI, 126); a reference to Ulysses's tragic journey beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The episode was Borges's favourite (see ‘La Divina Comedia’, OC, III, p. 217). In his commentary, Momigliano observes: ‘Progredendo sempre verso sud-ovest’ (La Divina Commedia, p. 201 ad loc). The protagonist's labyrinthine trajectory at this point in Borges's story evokes the motif of descent into hell (‘Fui, en subterrâneo, a Constituciôn y de Constituciôn a San Juan y Boedo. Bajé, impensadamente, en Urquiza; me dirigi al oeste y al sur; barajé, con desorden estudioso, unas cuantas esquinas y en una calle que me pareciô igual a todas [...]’ (pp. 591-92; my italics). Cf. ‘La Divina Comedia’, OC, III p. 219. The link between Ulysses's journey and the idea of the labyrinth is not gratuitous. Indeed in his essay on the Ulysses episode, Borges notes that the word ‘folle’ used by Dante to qualify Ulysses's enterprise (Inf. XXVI, 125), echoes the pilgrim's apprehension at the beginning of the journey: ‘El adjetivo es aplicado por Dante, en la selva oscura, a la tremenda invitacion de Virgilio (temo che la venuta non sia folle) […] su repetición es deliberada’ (‘El ultimo viaje de Ulises’, in OC, III, p. 355). The reference to the dark forest is implicitly an allusion to the labyrinthine and perilous ways of human life, just as in ‘El Zahir’ the city becomes a symbol for the circuitous structure of the protagonist's conflict: ‘Habia errado en circulo’ (p. 591). Note here the pun on the word ‘errado’, meaning both ‘to roam about’ and also ‘to err’. Now this is precisely the point raised by Borges in his interpretation of the Dantean passage, where he argues: ‘Dante [...] habria simbolizado en tales pasajes un conflicto mental; yo sugiero que tambiên lo simbolizô [...] en la trágica fábula de Ulises, y que a esa carga emocional ésta debe su tremenda virtud. Dante fue Ulises y de algún modo pudo temer el castigo de Ulises’ (p. 356; my italics); compare Momigliano, La Divina Commedia, p. 196. The identification between Dante and Ulysses is crucial for the understanding of Borges's allusion in the short story because it suggests a more complex correspondence, that between the character (Borges's persona) and the Dante-Ulysses model. In other instances, the appropriation of a Dantian term or situation seems to entail a simpler analogy (Beatrice-Teodelina or Dante-Borges), but here the parallel is ambiguous, for both Dante (the pilgrim) and Ulysses carried out a journey beyond the human limits. Only one of them was able to fulfil his aim. Similarly, in writing the story Borges may have wondered whether he would be able
to overcome his fears and reach fulfilment (‘la peregrinación de Dante, que lleva a la visión beatifica’), or whether he would perish in the intent (‘la sacrilega aventura de Ulises, que desemboca en el Infierno’, ibid., p. 355). In parenthesis, note the frustrated erotic expectation revealed in the poem ‘Elegía’ (dated 1963), with its striking identification Borges-Ulysses: ‘Oh destino el de Borges, | haber navegado por los diversos mares del mundo [...] y no haber visto nada o casi nada | sino el rostro de una muchacha de Buenos Aires, | un rostro que no quiere que lo recuerde’ (OC, II, p. 311, lines 1-2, 17-19; my italics). At the same time, within the context of ‘El Zahir’, Ulysses's transgression and its consequent punishment is reminiscent of Sigurd's obligation to maintain his oath of chastity. This implicit parallel reinforces the bond between sex and death noted above. Just as man (in the figure of Ulysses) is compelled to accept the limits of knowledge and action (‘diverir del mondo esperto, | e de li vizi umani e del valore’, Inf. XXVI, 98-99), so Borges seems to be intimidated by the catastrophic possibilities of trespassing the boundaries of the forbidden: ‘El hombre siempre es artífice de su propia desdicha, como el Ulises del canto XXVI del Infierno’. Courage is the key term here: ‘La palabra hombre, en todas las lenguas que sé, connota capacidad sexual y capacidad belicosa, y la palabra virtus, que en latín quiere decir coraje, procede de vir, que es varón’ (‘El tango pendenciero’, in Historia del tango, OC, I, p. 160).

In view of the latter assertion, one only needs to tie up a few lose ends to realize the enormous sexual import hidden in such a seemingly unrelated story as ‘La otra muerte’, where an apparent obsession with human bravery (‘capacidad belicosa’) is actually concealing a preoccupation with sexual impotence (‘capacidad sexual ’). Note the play on words between Damiani's epistle on God's omnipotence and the character's lack of courage, that is, his virtual impotence: to deny God's absolute power on the basis of logical reasoning, argues Damiani, is to assert his actual ‘impotence’ (‘divina virtus in temporem quibusque momentis impotens ostendatur’), a fine example of the metaphorics of the unconscious that characterizes the way in which the sexual issue manifests itself in Borges (I am of course deliberately misreading Damiani's statement).

The link between Damiani's epistle and Borges's sexual nuance in ‘La otra muerte’ has been noted by Evelyn Fishburn, who observes:
The argument springs from a statement by St. Jerome that virginity cannot be restored once lost through intercourse, an opinion Damiani refutes maintaining that God can make a woman a virgin again if she so dedicates herself to the spiritual life as to wipe out the memory of her previous actions. [...] The reward for pursuing the reference to its origin is to find a playful link between the desirability of heroic machismo and virginity.\textsuperscript{112}

I think, however, that it is possible to explore the sexual component of the allusion in its deeper psychological implication. This is not to deny the actual burden that male chauvinism may have meant to Borges.\textsuperscript{113} Nevertheless, if he intended a comment of this kind it is not clear why he would have chosen such an obscure and oblique means, which inevitably cancels its efficacy. Rather, the very inaccessibility of the source, and the story's immediate concern with the problem of identity raised by Dante in \textit{Paradiso} XXI, 121-23, suggest that the issue at stake is more personal. Indeed the desire ‘to wipe out the memory’ of the past, which is noted by the scholar with regard to Damiani’s solution to the \textit{quaestio}, constitutes a fundamental clue for the understanding of the psychological aspects which are involved here, as her textual analysis goes on to reveal: ‘In a (later) poem by Borges entitled ‘Emerson’, we find that thoughts attributed to him repeat Borges’s own often expressed regrets, and subtly tie in with ‘La otra muerte’: ‘Por todo el continente anda mi nombre; \textit{No he vivido. Quisiera ser otro hombre}'.\textsuperscript{114} In ‘La otra muerte’, Borges alludes to the possibility of altering memory (rather than reversing past events), but what is interesting to note is the link between the author's imaginary ‘amendment’ of the past (a veritable extension of the metaphor of the ‘book of memory’, which now includes its own palinode), and the sexual restrain that he imposes on his character:

\begin{quote}
Dios, que no puede cambiar el pasado, pero sí las imágenes del pasado, cambió la imagen de la muerte en la de un desfallecimiento, y la sombra del entrerriano volvió a su tierra. [...] Vivió en la soledad, \textit{sin una mujer}, sin amigos. (p. 574; my italics).
\end{quote}

Now the issue of celibacy is at the heart of Damiani’s solution to the problem of lost virginity. This involves the notions of sin and repentance through which man (this includes both sexes) is capable of moral improvement. Damiani’s basic idea is that the practice of virtue can rectify vice and restore the purity of the soul. This kind of spiritual regeneration is seen as the fulfilment of man's moral merit:
Un tal ritorno a Dio, per quel che concerne la qualità dei meriti, è appunto un tornare illibata
da parte d'una che era caduta, un rifarsi vergine da prostituta. Perciò lo stesso sposo le parla
di nuovo: “E non mi sovverrò più di tutti i tuoi peccati”. Invero, per una sposa carnale
l’amplesso del marito è corruzione della carne, il patto d’amore un sacrificio della castità; il
più delle volte essa s’affida vergine al talamo nuziale, ma ne ritorna violata. Al contrario,
quella cui s’unisce lo sposo celeste, è tosto detera di tutte le sue turpi macchie, riconquista il
fiore d’una olezzante castità: esso, traendola fuori dal prostibulo, la rifà vergine, di corrotta
che era le rende l’integrità. Perciò noi sappiamo che moltissime persone dell’uno e dell’altro
sesso, dopo gli abominevoli allettamenti del piacere, son pervenuti a tanta purità di vita
spirituale, da avanzare non solo quelli che vivon casti e pudichi, ma perfino superare i non
spregiuvol meriti di molte vergini. A costoro, senza dubbio, non è resa soltanto la ricompensa
del precedente merito, ma insieme alla remissione della colpa s’accrescerà anche il cumulo
d’una maggiore mercede.\(^\text{115}\)

Borges's allusion to Damiani's treatise implicitly corroborates his early views on
carnal love, but the link between courage (or lack of courage) and sexual impotence
(or chastity) adds a private nuance that is otherwise concealed in his work. Here we
are no longer in the public space of literature: this is solitary writing venturing
through the forbidden zone of memory and the unconscious. Nevertheless, it is not my
intention to reduce the story's significance to its psychological aspect. Borges's
statement: ‘Sospecho que en mi relato hay falsos recuerdos. Sospecho que Pedro
Damián (si existió) no se llamó Pedro Damián’ (p. 575), indicates that there are other
biographic and textual allusions in it. Indeed, a poem in Cuaderno San Martin
(namely, ‘Isidoro Acevedo’, OC, I, pp. 86-87) gives the clue to this enigma and
provides a different angle for the understanding of its compositional basis.

A final observation on this section. I have referred to the Cavalcantian notion of
love as an obscure passion capable of subjugating the power of practical reason. As I
have noted, Dante maintained at a certain stage (though not in the Vita nuova or in the
Commedia) the inevitability of love and its power to rule over the individual by
neutralising his free will. On the other hand, in ‘El Zahir’ Borges refers to the coin as
a symbol of free will (‘una moneda simboliza nuestro libre albedrío’), but then makes
a parenthetical remark in which he implicitly reverts the equation: ‘(No sospecha yo
que esos “pensamientos” eran un artificio contra el Zahir y una primera forma de su
demoniaco influjo’, p. 591).\(^\text{116}\) In effect, the obsession with the coin becomes so
strong that it destroys the character's freedom of action, reducing him—and its victims—to a sort of vegetative entity devoid of any sense of personality. We have seen how, in the prose poem ‘El amenazado’, Borges describes the process of love as a an imprisonment of the self (‘Crecen los muros de su cárcel’), and it is clear that in the short story the protagonist experiences the same ordeal. This parallel is reinforced by the feeling of persecution that characterizes both instances. Whilst in the former the sense of oppression is reflected in the narrator's psychotic behaviour (‘Tendré que ocultarme o que huir; [...] Ya los ejércitos me cercan’), in ‘El Zahir’ the idea is explicit: ‘la imagen de un objeto cualquiera solía perseguirme’ (p. 593). I am not suggesting that the problem of human freedom raised by Borges in ‘El Zahir’ implies a direct reference to the issue of self-determination in Dante, although his essay on Francesca da Rimini (‘El verdugo piadoso’, published in 1948) indicates that the question of moral responsibility was central to his emotional and intellectual concerns. However, Borges's discussion of the episode does not take in consideration the connection between love and free will as it was actually understood and debated by Dante and his contemporaries. This affects his interpretation of the canto, which attributes to Dante a deterministic view of moral action that is entirely at odds with the doctrine of free will maintained in the Commedia. Borges is aware of the eccentricity of his argument, and he gets round the problem by adding a parenthetical remark which eliminates the possibility of further discussion: ‘[Dante] sintió (no comprendió) que los actos del hombre son necesarios’ (OC, III, p. 359). It is true that for the medieval spirit the theme of destiny is linked to the notion of celestial influence. Although Dante deals with the idea of astrological determinism in Purgatorio XVI, 67-84, there is a controverted passage in the Paradiso which may lend support to Borges's conjecture:

“S’elli intende tornare a queste ruote
l’onor de la influenza e ’l biasmo, forse
in alcun vero suo arco percuote”.

(Par. IV, 58-60)

In these obscure lines, then, Dante seems to concede some truth to the idea that the stars can influence human life, but his intention is clearly detached from a negative or deterministic viewpoint, as the following terzina indicates:
As a matter of fact, Borges's whimsical interpretation is reminiscent of Schopenhauer, who sees in the Christian doctrine of predestination an illustration of man's primogenial belief in the strict necessity of every natural event. Indeed, Schopenhauer goes so far as to cite the opening terzina of Paradiso IV as Dante's tacit acknowledgement of moral determinism (see Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will, p. 52). On these lines, Bruno Nardi expresses the following view:

Nevertheless, putting aside Borges's 'misreading' of the moral issue in the Commedia, what is interesting is the thematic coincidence between the essay and the short story with regard to the problem of moral determinism. This is echoed in the notion of an external influence which takes control over the individual, in 'El Zahir' through the coin's overwhelming power ('su demoniaco influjo'); and in the essay through the reference to the doctrine of celestial influence in canto XVI of the Purgatorio ('si los actos dependieran del influjo estelar, quedaria anulado nuestro albedrio', p. 359; my italics). In the former, Borges puts into practice this premise and its conclusion, except that he substitutes the inevitability of astral influence by the defeating power of love, which is the dominant drive of the story. But it would be risky to advance further in this direction, for there is no evidence that Borges was developing in the story the problematics of love and free will within a specific Dantesque context. To conclude this chapter: Sufi literature transformed the language and imagery of Arab erotic poetry into a rich and highly symbolical vocabulary of mystical aspiration. A similar process of consecration of the language of human love took
effect in the Judeo-Christian literary tradition long before the troubadours were to create their own religion of love. Like the troubadours, Borges inverted the equation: he used mystical and symbolical elements in order to construct narratives about love and unfulfilled desire.

Notes

1 Prologue to FB (no page numbers). See also ‘Buenos Aires’, in Inq., pp. 79-83.
3 ‘Antelacion de amor’, from Luna de enfrente (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925). I have been unable to consult this edition. All quotations are taken from Tommaso Scarano, Varianti a stampa nella poesia del primo Borges, Collana di testi e studi ispanici, II, 6 (Agnano Pisano and Pisa: Giardini Editori e Stampatori in Pisa, 1987), pp. 114-15.
7 FB (no page numbers); I follow the layout of the poem used for this edition. For the poet's use of sky imagery, see Linda S. Maier, ‘El aprendizaje poético de Borges’, in Actas del X Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas, ed. by Antonio Vilanova, 4 vols (Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias, 1992) III, pp. 763-70.
8 Cf. ‘El truco’, in FB: ‘Amuletos de cartón pintado | conjuran en placentero exorcismo | la maciza realidad primordial | de goce y sufrimiento carnales’ (my italics). The image of sensual passion as a deadly crucifixion of the bodies—hence as the negation of the freedom of the will—is used very effectively by Victoria Ocampo in her description of the Dantean episode; see De Francesca a Beatrice (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Fundación Sur, 1983 [first published in 1924]), p. 37: ‘Los seres llamados a sufrir este destino no van nunca, doquiera que se encuentren, unidos, sino crucificados el uno contra el otro’. For the notion of the death of the soul which is
enslaved by the pleasure-seeking avidness of the senses, see St Augustine,
*Confessions*, X. pars. 41-54.

Cf. *VN* II, 4; XI, 2; XIV, 4; XV, 4; XXIV, 10, where Dante repeatedly uses the
words ‘tremare’ and ‘tremore’ in relation to the phenomenology of love. As I suggest
in the introduction, Borges's initial contact with the *Commedia* may have been limited
to the most famous episodes of the poem, especially those perceived by the Romantics
as being representative of a heroic individuality (above all, in the characters of
Francesca and Ulysses), of which Borges would have known through his early
acquaintance with nineteenth-century Anglo-American poets: Blake, Carlyle,
Longfellow, Tennyson, among others. At the same time, the Romantics exalted the
biographical import of the poem in relation to the affective significance of Beatrice,
an experience of love which acquires its most passionate manifestation precisely in
*Purgatorio* XXX; cf. Matthew Arnold, *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. by R. H.

Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine

First published in *Grecia*, 37 (1919); now in *Textos recobrados*, pp. 24-26.

12 *Poesia juvenil de J. L. Borges* (Barcelona and Palma de Mallorca: José de Olañeta,

13 ‘Paréntesis pasional’, first published in *Grecia* 38 (1920); now in *Textos
recobrados*, pp. 27-29. The image of the star as metaphor of the sexual union
reappears in the poem ‘Los llanos’ (1924): ‘y la estrella ardorosa que trazan el varón y
la mujer en juntándose’ (Scarano, *Varianti a stampa*, p. 135).

14 ‘Casa Elena (hacia una estética del lupanar en España)’, first published in *Ultra*, 17
(1921); now in *Textos recobrados*, pp. 112-13. See Meneses, *Poesia juvenil*, p. 23;
Emir Rodriguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York:

15 See Rodriguez Monegal, pp. 113, 349; Estela Canto, *Borges a contraluz* (Madrid:
Espasa-Calpe, 1989), pp. 114-17; Julio Woscoboinik, *El secreto de Borges:
indagación psicoanalítica de su obra*, 2nd edn. (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor
diccionario de Borges: el Borges oral, el de las declaraciones y las polémicas*, 2nd
‘La intrusa’, included in *El informe de Brodie*, also hints at this problem; see Borges's
remark in ‘Commentaries’, in Di Giovanni, ed., ‘The Aleph’ and Other Stories (London: Cape, 1971), pp. 278-79: ‘We are allowed to hear only what the elder brother says; it is he who takes all the decisions, even the last one. I made them brothers for the sake of likelihood and, of course, to avoid unsavory implications’.

However, it was Borges's own mother who seems to have suggested the final words of the story, thus penalizing the transgression (her husband's illicit affairs in Geneva) which is implicit in the original conflict: ‘I was stuck at the end of the story, unsure of the words Cristián would say. My mother, who from the outset thoroughly disliked the tale, at that point gave me the words I needed without hesitation’ (ibid., my italics). Although this can be seen as an extraordinary case of psychological collaboration in literary creation, the fact is that Borges had actually written a previous version of the story many years before. This was published in Revista Multicolor de los Sábados, 11 (1933), under the title ‘Hermanos enemigos’, but its original draft may be as early as 1920 (see Irma Zangara's commentary in RM, pp. 105-10). In this first account, the love of a woman arouses the jealousy of two hostile brothers in whom the desire of possession re-enacts a deeper fratricidal inclination: ‘Sin haberse dirigido jamás una amenaza, ambos conocían sus intenciones homicidas y toda la violencia de sus pasiones. [...] Tortura de amor, de odio, de sospechas, cada uno de aquellos hombres pensaba menos en su propio deseo que en el placer hipotético que obtendría el otro’ (p. 112; my italics). In the end, the woman who is made responsible for unsettling the brother's coexistence is locked up and burnt alive. The fact that Borges reelaborated the story so many years later is indicative of its emotional import. See Sylvie Davidson, ‘Borges and Italian Literature’, in Italian Quarterly, 27 (1986) 43-47 (pp. 46-47). In ‘Emma Zunz’, on the other hand, the protagonist's utter rejection of sexuality (‘la cosa horrible que a ella ahora le hacían’, OC, I, p. 566) is only appeased by the symbolic death of the father figure. More specifically, Emma's act of revenge is twofold in the sense that as she sets out to vindicate her father's ruin she discovers her own hatred towards him. At this point, her act of vengeance has a double motivation. From that moment, the story re-enacts an original conflict; Loewenthal and Emanuel Zunz become the same person. For a psychoanalytic reading of the story, see Raúl Páramo Ortega, ‘Intento de interpretación psicoanalítica de un cuento de J. L. Borges: “Emma Zunz”’, in Iberoromania, 3 (1975) 39-46; Woscoboinik, El secreto de Borges, pp. 127-47.
There is a striking echo between the erotic imagery in several of the poems written by Borges at this time and a passage in _El Caudillo_, the novel published by his father in 1921. Note in the following excerpt the images of the flame, the mask and the cross, as well as the comparison with the sea and the impetus of sexual desire: ‘Si buscas la belleza, yo soy la perfección del espejismo que persigues.—Una sola curva de mi cuerpo, vaso sagrado, arca de los destinos de la raza, refuta el saber de *tu vetusta filosofía* y es la estética misma de las academias, *soy creación de lo infinito y de lo eterno*. […] Bálsamo soy, y soy ternura, mis brazos abiertos para ti mi prometido *son cruz de redención salvate en ellos*… Las fuerzas vitales de su juventud contenidas por un temperamento soñador é idealista, respondieron al llamado. Como *las olas barren las arenas* su ser sintióse barrido por alta y pasional marea. […] El corazón *ardió en llama* tan intensa que á su lado lo demás palidecía. El amor mismo que él creyó tan profundo y duradero era una sombra incolora, un fugitivo tembloroso ante el sacudimiento del deseo.—Ya no estaba como antes atado por preferencias ó prejuicios á este ó aquel afecto, á esta ó aquella mujer.—Lo que antes fuera individual y limitara su elección, se apartaba, era secundario, perdía realidad ante la enorme realidad del sexo. […] Hallóse trasformado, estaba libre, perfectamente libre de toda orientación determinada, de toda vana disputa, era solo el hombre *invasido y arrollado por la pasión única de la hombria*.—Lina, Marisabel y todas cuantas deseara ó poseyera, nada le importaban, había cesado de amarlas ó quizás las amaba á todas.—Su cuerpo solo existía tenso en la busca de *la mujer que se esconde detrás de todas las mujeres cuando la careta multiforme desaparece*, Jorge Guillermo Borges Haslam, _El Caudillo_ ([Palma de Mallorca], 1921), pp. 188-89; my italics (I have kept the original accentuation). This parallel suggests an ambiguous attempt on Borges's part to assert his masculinity (by imitating his father's rhetoric) whilst, at the same time, he uses the same imagery to oppose the father figure and pronounce his own views on sex. Interestingly, the image of the mask reappears in the poem ‘El amenazado’, which I briefly discuss later on in this chapter.

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16 Cuaderno San Martín (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1929). I have been unable to consult this edition. All quotations are taken from Scarano, _Varianti a stampa_, p. 151.


21 The expression ‘illustrious toys’ pertains to a now forgotten author, Joseph Beaumont, Psyche, or Love’s Mystery, in XXIV Cantos: Displaying the Intercourse betwixt Christ, and the Soul, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: University Press, 1702 [first published in 1648]), Canto II, ‘Lust Conquered’, par. 189; line 4: ‘Of all this vain World’s most illustrious Toys’ (I am grateful to Professor Jason Wilson for calling this to my attention). This is the typical case in which an expression which seems natural in its original context acquires an eccentric character when it is adapted to a new one. The implications of the allusion, in view of the primary text, are quite extraordinary, for Borges is virtually admitting, in an utterly private tone, his zeal for chastity (see, in particular, pars. 187, 194, 205 of the same canto). Cf. Rodriguez Monegal, A Literary Biography, p. 186: ‘Sex is not explicitly presented in most of [Borges's] work because it is presented in a different manner: “weaving through dreams a sexual strife”. [...] This attitude reveals the method of his writing. Just as sex is woven in the texture of his dreams, so it is woven in the texture of the quotations he uses to mask his private voice’. See also Gordon Brotherston’s remark, in Jorge Luis Borges, Ficciones, ed. by Gordon Brotherston and Peter Hulme (London: Harrap, 1976), pp. 24-26.


24 Historia universal de la infamia (Buenos Aires: Editorial Tor, 1935), p. 7. Apart from this general dedication, one of the stories in the collection, ‘El tintotero enmascarado Hákim de Merv’, is specifically dedicated to Angélica Ocampo. Perhaps her Christian name explains the enigma surrounding the identity of the angelic
woman to whom the collection is dedicated (note that this story is precisely about concealment).

The theme of the essential isolation of the human existence is epitomized in the radical loss of innocence and grace ensuing from the Fall. Borges develops this idea in the poem ‘El jardín botánico’, included in FB (expunged from the edition of his Obras completas). See also the story ‘Renacen en el Siglo XV Adán y Eva’, in RM, pp. 123-30. For the archetypal status of the biblical couple, see the poem ‘Inferno, V, 129’: ‘Son Paolo y Francesca y también la reina y su amante y todos los amantes que han sido des de aquel Adán y su Eva en el pasto del Paraíso’ (lines 15-19).

Consider, in addition, the final verses in ‘Adam cast forth’: ‘Y, sin embargo, es mucho haber amado, haber sido feliz, haber tocado El viviente Jardín, siquiera un día’ (OC, II, p. 312). Cf. St Augustine, De civitate Dei, XIV, 10.

For a study of these themes in Borges’s fiction, see Lima, ‘Coitus Interruptus’; Osvaldo R. Sabino, Borges: una imagen del amor y de la muerte (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1987).


‘Through her I shall be false or faithful, loyal or full of deceit, totally villain or totally courtly’, cited by Lazar, ‘Fin’amor’, p. 66.


‘Nothing is so difficult to obtain as that which I now desire, and there is nothing that I desire more than that which I cannot obtain’, quoted by Lazar, ‘Fin’amor’, pp. 74-75.

procedens ex visione et immoderata cogitatione formae alterius sexus, ob quam aliquis super omnia cupit alterius potiri amplexibus et omnia de utriusque voluntate in ipsius amplexu amoris praeccepta compleri. Quod amor sit passio, facile est videre. Nam, antequam amor sit ex utraque parte libratus, nulla est angustia maior, quia semper timet amans, ne amor optatum capere non possit effectum, nec in vanum suos labores emittat. [...] Quod autem illa passio sit innata, manifesta tibi ratione ostendo, quia passio illa ex nulla oritur actione subtiliter veritate inspecta; sed ex sola cogitatione, quam concipit animus ex eo, quod vidit, passio illa precedit. Nam quum aliquis videt aliquam aptam amori et suo formatam arbitrio, statim eam incipit concupiscere corde; postea vero, quotiens de ipsa cogitat, totiens eius magis ardescit amore, quousque ad cogitationem devenit pleniorem. Postmodum mulieris incipit cogitare facturas et eius distinguere membra suosque actus imaginari ac cuiusque corporis secreta rimari ac cuiusque membri officio desiderat perpotiri’, Andreae Capellani Regii Francorum, De amore libri tres, ed by E. Trojel (Munich: Eidos Verlag, repr. 1964), pp. 3-5). For a detailed analysis of the doctrines of ‘courtly love’ as portrayed in Capellanus’ treatise, see D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 391-448.


37 For the sensual element in the donna dello schermo episodes, see Giovanni Pascoli, La mirabile visione: Abbozzo d’una storia della Divina Commedia (Messina: Muglia, 1902), p. 34. Pascoli (p. 52) links Amore’s accusation of infidelity on Dante’s part with the kind of error which Beatrice (mutatis mutandis) will impugn on him later in Purg. XXX, 131: ‘imagini di ben seguendo false’; consider also Dante’s subsequent admission of immoderate sensuality: “Le presenti cose | col falso lor piacer volser miei passi, | tosto che ’l vostro viso si nascose” (Purg. XXXI, 34-36). See also Pietrobono, Il poema sacro, I, pp. 42-59. For the image of the circle in VN XII, 4, see J. E. Shaw, Essays on the Vita Nuova, pp. 77-108; Jefferson Butler Fletcher, The Religion of Beauty in Woman and Other Essays on Platonic Love in Poetry and Society (New York: Macmillan, 1911), pp. 53-66.

38 Vincent Moleta, Guinizzelli in Dante (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1980); but see De Robertis, Il libro della “Vita Nuova”, pp. 116-17, 133-35; Mario


41 This is a quintessentially Augustinian theme, cf. De civitate Dei, XIV, chs. 4, 11, 13; Confessiones, II, vi, 14; De libero arbitrio, I, iii, 6; vi, 14-15; xvi, 34; III, xxv, 76. On St. Augustine’s doctrine of love, see Burnaby, Amor Dei; Oliver O’Donovan, The Problem of Sel-Love in St. Augustine (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980); Hannah Arendt, Love and Saint Augustine, ed. by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). On Dante and St. Augustine, see Giuseppe Mazzotta, Dante, Poet of the Desert, pp. 147-91.


Referring to the content of *L'Enfer*, Rodríguez Monegal points out what above all must have impressed the young and inexperienced Borges of those years: "The reading of *Hell* must have had a great influence on Georgie's view of the adult world. With the exception of the book on Balkan sex life, *Hell* was probably the first book he came across that dealt explicitly with sex" (*A Literary Biography*, p. 119).

Nevertheless, given the critic's thorough knowledge of Borges's work, it is startling that he failed to notice the thematic coincidences between *L'Enfer* and 'El Aleph'.


The opposition between the lyrical and the epic in Borges's creative drive is noted by César Fernández Moreno, *Esquema de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Perrot, 1957), p. 15.


This is not to deny Borges's imitation of Dantean passages, such as *Par.* XVII, 16-18; *Par.* XXII, 128-35, 153; *Par.* XXVIII, 16-18, and *Par.* XXX, 61-63. See Momigliano's note on space, infinity and total vision, in *La Divina Commedia*, pp. 750-52 ad loc. In addition, cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* I, 14, a. 3 (resp.); IIa IIae, 172, a. 1. Consider also the following excerpt from Pier Damiani's *De divina omnipotentia*, on which Borges based one of the stories of the collection (again, the Dantean link is explicit: "El tratado *De Omnipotentia* [...] a cuyo estudio me llevaron dos versos del canto XXI del *Paradiso*, *OC*, I, p. 574): "Deum omnipotentem sic omnia saecula in aeternae sapientiae suae thesauro concludes. [...] Sic omnia, in praesentiae suae constituta conspectu, uno ac simplici contemplatur intuitu, ut sibi numquam penitus vel praeterita transeant vel futura succedant. [...] Intra semetipsum omnium cursus temporum claudit; et sicut intra se sine transitu cohibet omnia tempora, ita nihilominus *intra se sine spaciis universa continet loca* ('Dio omnipotente racchiude tutti i secoli nel tesoro della sua eterna sapienza. [...] Egli contempla tutte le cose con un solo e semplice sguardo, in quanto si trovano alla sua presenza, di guisa che per lui non trascorreran giammai le cose passate né subentrano quelle future. [...] Egli racchiude in sé il corso di tutti i tempi; e come in sé aduna tutti i tempi senza mutare
con essi, così del pari contiene in sé tutti i luoghi senza differenze spaziali’), in S. Pier Damiani, *De divina omnipotentia e altri opuscoli*, Edizione Nazionale dei Classici del Pensiero Italiano, no. 5, ed. by Paolo Brezzi, trans. by Bruno Nardi (Florence: Vallecchi, 1943), ch. VII, pp. 82-85 (= Migne, *PL* vol. 145, col. 604, ch. VI, par. 622); see also chs. VIII-IX. Note Damiani’s explicit mention of God’s gaze contemplating not only all time but also all space, an idea which Borges develops in the story: ‘Todos los lugares de la tierra están en el Aleph. [...] En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones de actos; [...] ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo. [...] El espacio cósmico estaba allí. [...] Cada cosa [...] era infinitas cosas, porque yo claramente la veía desde todos los puntos del universo’ (pp. 623-25; my italics). For some illustrations of ecstatic vision in mystical literature, see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lectures XVI and XVII. In his study on Borges, John M. Cohen refers to Jacob Boehme’s mystical illumination—which is cited by James—as the source for the vision in ‘El Aleph’; see Jorge Luis Borges (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 81. The motif, however, was not new in Borges, as Rodolfo A. Borello shows in his study of the short story; see Rodolfo A. Borello, ‘Situación, prehistoria y fuentes medievales: “El Aleph” de Borges’, in *Boletín de la Academia Argentina de Letras*, 57 (1992) 31-48 (esp. pp. 36-41). See also Borges’s remark on Ramón Gómez de la Serna, in *Inq.*, pp. 124-26. To complicate things further, Borges may also have had in mind modern mathematical and scientific formulations of the concepts of time and space, such as Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and its implications on the notion of the so-called ‘fourth dimension’. Charles Howard Hinton, an enthusiastic supporter of the idea, held: ‘We should have to imagine some stupendous whole, wherein all that has ever come into being or will come, co-exists—which, passing slowly on, leaves in this flickering consciousness of ours, limited to a narrow space and a single moment, a tumultuous record of changes and vicissitudes that are but to us and to us alone’ (quoted in Ardaser S.Wadia, *Fate and Free-Will*, 2nd edn. (London and Toronto: Dent, 1931), p. viii; my italics). The echo of such theories is quite plausible since Borges borrowed from Hinton several ideas for the composition of ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’; see Charles H. Hinton, *An Episode of Flatland: Or How a Plane Folk Discovered the Third Dimension. To Which is Added An Outline of The History of Unæa* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1907); cf. Edwin Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many*


me hubiera matado por segunda vez, porque ya estoy libre de ella y estoy libre del recuerdo de ella... Quizás escribamos así como una suerte de catarsis, de purificación, uno quizá escribe los temas para olvidarlos’ (ellipsis in the original). Cf. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Borges por él mismo, 2nd edn. (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1991), pp. 112-17; Sucre, Borges, el poeta, pp. 9, 15-16; Jaime Alazraki, ‘Borges o el difícil oficio de la intimidad: reflexiones sobre su poesía más reciente’, in Revista iberoamericana, 43 (1977) 449-63; id., Borges and the Kabbalah, pp. xii, 124-35.

59 Even the commentary by Momigliano shows traces of this. In his long note on Purg. XXX, 55-57, which he distinguishes as one of the greatest achievements of Italian love poetry, he remarks: ‘Tutto questo è insieme storia poetica e storia di vita: perché i rimproveri di Beatrice e la confessione di Dante [...] hanno particolari ed accenti che non possono essere senza un fondamento di realtà’. Momigliano proceeds to make a distinction which in effect serves to characterize Borges’s handling of the theme of love: ‘La poesía e l’autobiografía sono, in generale, due cose diverse: ma nella lirica, [...] e particolarmente nella lirica d’amore, la situazione è spesso evidentemente la trasfigurazione della realtà’ (La Divina Commedia, p. 515; my italics). To be sure, Dante instilled the writing of the Commedia with the crudeness that his bitter political experience had taught him (ibid., pp. 16-17; 272-73), but it is venturous to apply this biographical principle to the figure of Beatrice, because her poetic role becomes subservient to a romantic sentimentality that is foreign to the transcendental spirit of the poem; cf. Ettore Caccia, ‘I commenti danteschi del novecento’, in Umberto Bosco, ed., Dante nella critica d'oggi: risultati e prospettive (Florence: Le Monnier, 1965), pp. 298-13 (esp. pp. 307-308).

60 This is how the essay ends in OC as well as in the first edition of Nueve ensayos dantescos (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1982), p. 153. It should be noted, however, that the sentence in the original version avoids the ambiguity of which I profit here: ‘[...] con envidia habrá forjado Dante ese verso’ (La Nación, 3 October 1948; included in the first edition of Otras inquisiciones (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952), pp. 116-20). For a different appraisal of the Dantean issue in Borges, see Menocal, Writing in Dante’s Cult of Truth, pp. 132-38.

For other instances of falsehood in Borges, see Rodolfo E. Braceli, *Don Borges*, saque su cuchillo porque he venido a matarlo (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1979), pp. 131-35 and passim.

The idea of literature as a pastime (which somehow helps to liberate the mind from the oppression of existence) is a frequent theme in Borges, particularly during the 30s and 40s. The beneficial aspects of this psychological process can be gauged by the author's own declarations in the prologue to the second edition of *Historia universal de la infamia*, where, referring to the book, he says: ‘El hombre que lo ejecutó era asaz desdichado, pero se entretuvo escribiéndolo’ (OC, I, p. 291). Consider also his words in a letter to Estela Canto: ‘Hasta el día de hoy he engendrado fantasmas; unos, mis cuentos, quizá me han ayudado a vivir; otros, mis obsesiones, me han dado muerte’, Canto, *Borges a contraluz*, p. 141. For the biographic import of the story, see ibid., pp. 191-93: ‘El Zahir fue escrito en momentos muy dramáticos para Borges. Viene después de *El Aleph* y, de alguna manera, se percibe el conflicto que el autor está viviendo. Yo todavía no le había “dejado”, pero él presentía que esto iba a ocurrir. [...] Yo vivía entonces en la esquina de Chile y Tacuari, y es en un bar de Chile y Tacuari donde le dan la fantástica moneda. En ese “boliche” solía hacer tiempo por las mañanas con su sempiterno vaso de leche o un ocasional vasito de caña de durazno si se sentía especialmente tímido. [...] No se atrevía muchas veces a cruzar la calle, subir al ascensor y llamar a la puerta de mi casa. [...] Lo cierto es que él, muchas veces, necesitaba este preámbulo antes de presentarse. [...] Fue en ese café donde le dieron de vuelta una moneda brillante de 20 centavos, recién acunada, que él convirtió en el zahir. Me la mostró en la palma de la mano, admirado de su flamante fulgor’. ‘El Zahir’ was first published in *Los anales de Buenos Aires*, 17 (1947) 30-37.


Borges alludes to the sacredness of the erotic when he states at the end of the story: ‘quizá detrás de la moneda esté Dios’ (p. 595). Cf. ‘El Congreso’, *OC*, III, p. 31: ‘Los místicos invocan una rosa, un beso, un pájaro que es todos los pájaros, un sol que es todas las estrellas y el sol, un cántaro de vino o el acto sexual’. See also ‘Los traductores de las 1001 noches’, in *Historia de la eternidad, OC*, I, p. 401: ‘Las antiguas historias amorosas del repertorio [...] no son obscenas, como no lo es ninguna producción de la literatura preislámica. Son apasionadas y tristes, y uno de los motivos que prefieren es la muerte de amor, *esa muerte que un juicio de los*

73 The Mirror of Love: A Reinterpretation of “The Romance of the Rose” (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1952), p. 452 n.6; see also pp. 302-305. Commenting on the meaning of the rose in the Roman de la Rose, Nicola Zingarelli makes the following observation: ‘L’idea che sorge subito qui nel lettore è che nella rosa si rappresenti, senza altro, cosa che è più bello tacer che dire. [...] La rosa è la donna desiderata’ (‘L’allegoria del “Roman de la Rose”, in Studi dedicati a Francesco Torraca nel XXXVI anniversario della sua laurea (Naples: Perrella, 1912), pp. 495-524 (pp. 518-19; my italics)). Another feature common to ‘El Zahir’ and the Roman de la rose is the pictured wall motif, which is a frequent device in medieval poetry. It was used, among others, by Chaucer. See John Lydgate, The Assembly of Gods: or The Accord of Reason and Sensuality in the Fear of Death, ed. with an introduction by Oscar Lovell Triggs (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896), p. Ivii.

74 Cf. Canto, Borges a contraluz, p. 17: ‘La actitud de Borges hacia el sexo era de terror pánico, como si temiera la revelación que en él podía hallar’ (my italics).

75 Cited by Woscoboinik, El secreto de Borges, p. 192. Cf. Rodríguez Monegal, A Literary Biography, pp. 185-86.

76 For Estela Canto the rose has a plain sexual meaning, but she does not develop the relation any further (Borges a contraluz, p. 193).


78 The chastity of the lovers is attested by Brynhild herself after Sigurd’s death: ‘He proved, when he came to me, how he kept his oaths, for he laid between us two the sharp-edged sword that was tempered with poison’, The Saga of the Völsungs, trans. by George K. Anderson (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London and


Cf. David Worcester, *The Art of Satire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1940), pp. 42-43: ‘We do not find a parody printed side by side with its original. It is the reader's part to supply knowledge of the model. He must hold up the model, and the author will furnish him with the distorted reflection of it. Herein lies the strength of burlesque, and its weakness. [...] Just as invective dies when the social occasion that countenanced it passes, so burlesque withers away when the knowledge that supports it is forgotten’.

Consider his remark in “‘The Canterbury Tales. A New Rendering”, de Frank Ernest Hill’ (1937): ‘El inglés de 1387 coincide, en general, con el de hoy, pero no en las intenciones precisas de las palabras. De ahí el peligro de que los lectores actuales,
extraviados por esa identidad superficial, deformen sutilmente el viejo poema’ (TC, pp. 170-71). See also ‘De las alegorías a las novelas’, OC, II, pp. 122-24 (p. 124).


See ‘Kafka y sus precursores’, OC, II, pp. 88-90. Cf. T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 37-44 (p. 39): ‘Whoever has approved this idea of order [...] will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past’. For a study of the issue in connection with Borges's reading of Dante, see Thiem, ‘Borges, Dante, and the Poetics of Total Vision’.


Daniel Balderston, in *El precursor velado* (pp. 159-60), observes that Borges's passage on the fictitious Persian writer Lutf Ali Azur echoes an episode in R. L. Stevenson's 'The Rajah's Diamond'. This coincidence shows how Borges effectively combined a great variety of sources but it does not invalidate my argument, which rests on the identification of the Zahir with an erotic fixation. Once Borges had elaborated this basic pattern, he was free to include (or invent) as many allusions as he may have wished, this being part of the fundamental narrative strategy of falsehood and deception to which I have already referred to. Another example of direct borrowing in the short story is the passage on the ‘abstract’ value of money (pp. 590-91), which mimics Schopenhauer's reflections on the subject in *Parerga and Paralipomena* (indicated by Juan José Barrientos, see Roberto Paoli, *Tre saggi*, pp. 188-89). On the other hand, let it be noted that a persian astrolabe also makes part of the objects listed by Borges in the vision of the Aleph (p. 626), a minute but nevertheless sustaining evidence of the story's interconnection. Indeed, a recent article on the manuscript of ‘El Aleph’ shows that Burton's *Anatomy* was among Borges intended sources for that story, and it is not far fetched to assume its influence in ‘El Zahir’ as well; cf. Elena del Rio Parra, ‘El manuscrito de “El Aleph”: la forma del universo y otros esbozos textuales’, in *Insula* 631-632 (1999) 30-32. With regard to
the vision motif in ‘El Aleph’, consider the story's similarities with the following satirical passage in Burton's preface: ‘Charon in Lucian, as he wittily faignes, was conducted by Mercury to such a place, where he might see all the World at once, after hee had sufficiently viewed and looked about, Mercury would needs knowe of him what he had observed: He told him, that hee saw a vast multitude and a promiscuous, [...] hee could discerne Citties like so many Hives of Bees. [...] In conclusion hee condemned them all, for Mad-men, Fooles, Idiots, Asses’ (‘Democritus Junior to the Reader’, in The Anatomy of Melancholy, I, p. 32; italics in the original). We could keep adding references to a conjectural list of sources in ‘El Aleph’ without ever reaching the end. This is due to the spontaneous synchretism of Borges's imagination, whereby he was able to combine elements from various literary and philosophical traditions in an all-inclusive form. The basic model for such a writing is the Chinese box effect, whereby an allusion refers to (or is contained within) a previous source. Some of his compositions, such as ‘La biblioteca de Babel’, are virtual allegories of this mode of writing, whose indisputable master in modern times is Robert Burton. For a study of intertextuality in Borges, see Antoine Compagnon, La second main: ou le travail de la citation (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979), pp. 35-36, 370-87 and passim; Alazraki, ‘El texto como palimpsesto: lectura intertextual de Borges’, in La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges, pp. 428-56; Michel Lafon, Borges ou la réécriture (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990).


93 ‘Blindness is a bar to love, because a blind man cannot see anything upon which his mind can reflect immoderately, and so love cannot arise in him’ (The Art of Courtly Love, trans. by John Jay Parry, p. 33). Cf. Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer, p. 401: ‘The blind cannot form a phantasy to cherish in the memory’.

94 For the derivation of the word eros from vision, see The Anatomy of Melancholy, III, p. 66. See also Babb, The Elizabethan Malady, p. 132: ‘Falling in love [...] is a rude and painful shock which throws into confusion all the normal processes of body and mind. The infection enters through the eyes and produces a swift and violent reaction’. Cf. Nardi, Dante e la cultura medievale, p. 111.

95 See Borges's pejorative remark on Freud in ‘Valéry como simbolo’, OC, II, p. 65. I use the terms ‘psychiatry’ and ‘psychoanalysis’ as equivalent in order to reverse Borges's intentional disregard for the latter; the autobiographical implications in the
story are nevertheless clear. Cf. Borges a contraluz, p. 112: ‘Hacía varios meses que estaba visitando a un “psicólogo”—no usó la palabra “psicoanalista”’.

Burton states it thus: ‘Heroicall or love melancholy [is causeth by] this comelinesse and beauty which proceeds from women. The part affected in men is the liver, and therefore called Heroicall, because commonly Gallants, Noblemen and the most generous spirits are possessed with it’ (The Anatomy of Melancholy, III, p. 39). Cf. Valency, In Praise of Love, p. 154: ‘Love was the occupational disease of the leisure class’.

Borges's dislike of foreign elements in Argentinian culture can be seen in his attacks on the lyrical sentimentality of the tango. Consider, for instance, the following remark which blames the Italian immigrants for its moral and artistic decadence: ‘La milonga y el tango de los origenes podían ser tontos o, a lo menos, atolondrados, pero eran valerosos y alegres; el tango posterior es un resentido que deplora con lujo sentimental las desdichas propias y festeja con desvergüenza las desdichas ajenas.


For an illustration of European and Arab medical thought during the Middle Ages, see Nardi, ‘L’amore e i medici medievali’; Burton, in his Anatomy of Melancholy, Part III, also provides a good synopsis.

‘Nam adeo potest haec passio corpus alterare quod multotiens inducit mortem quae est ultimum terribilium. [...] Secundum quem autem modum amor inducat mortem
declarat auctor cum dicit et subdit, Se forte la vertu fosse impedita, quasi dicat quod amor tunc interficit quando est adeo vehemens quod propter ipsum impedientur opera virtutis vegetativae vel virtutis vitalis quae conservat vitam et operationes eius in corpore humano. [...] Modo videmus ad sensum quod amor hoc multotiens facit, scilicet, quod quando aliquis vehementer perseverat in ipso, et videmus etiam quod quando quis obliviscitur eius, ex oblivione sola redit ille homo ad dispositionem suam naturalem, et propterea medici ponunt quod maxima cura istius passionis, scilicet, amoris est ut homo distrahitur a cogitatione illius quod amat, et obliviscatur eius', quoted from Bird, The Canzone d'Amore, pp. 167-68 (English text on pp. 123-27).


103 Note the ambiguity of the utterance: from the narrator's point of view, Beatriz represents Borges's ungrateful beloved; however, as a non-fictional authorial statement, the phrase constitutes a conscious remark ('yo mismo') on the poetics of the composition, that is, it discloses the mechanism of a creative procedure that is based on the partial rewriting of a literary model. Hence the terms 'falseando' and 'perdiendo' are not simply an indication of a psychological process related to the fragility of memory, but also the fundamental principles that make up the story's narrative technique.

104 Cf. Frederick Goldin, The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 87: ‘To place all our hopes in an idealized human being; to turn our life into service to another person whom we have nominated to justify us; to seek in her for the image of our future perfection—such a personal submission is full of peril, because it is based on a lie, projecting onto the lady an ideality that her flesh and blood must betray’.


106 In his study of 'El Aleph', Daniel Devoto has traced the expression in Rudyard Kipling's The Phantom Rickshaw ('Aleph et Alexis', p. 283, n. 2). The expression in Kipling's narrative ('who may have committed such a solecism'), has of course a humorous effect (though in the literal sense), and it actually links the passage with an incident that recurs obsessively in the story: "I'm sure it's all a mistake—a hideous mistake; and we'll be good friends again some day" (The Phantom Rickshaw and Other Stories (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1922), pp. 12 and 7, respectively; my italics). In fact, the striking thematic coincidence with Borges's story (the former also being a
narrative about love and madness) leaves no doubt as to the accuracy of Devoto's finding. In addition, the end of Kipling's story suggests a parallel with the theme of love and death as it appears in 'Ulrica', whilst it supports a psychological reading of 'El Zahir' in which the heroine's death accounts for the author's need to liberate himself from his haunting obsessions: 'Pity me, at least on the score of my “delusion,” for I know you will never believe what I have written here. Yet as surely as ever a man was done to death by the Powers of Darkness I am that man. In Justice, too, pity her. For as surely as ever woman was killed by man, I killed Mrs. Wessington. And the last portion of my punishment is even now upon me' (pp. 39-40; my italics). Note how the deeper emotional meaning of the allusion is disguised by Borges under the apparent playfulness of the new context, a further example of the way in which parody and satire conceal in Borges a deeper psychological motive.

A similar parodic allusion to the episode is found in Jorge Luis Borges and Luisa Mercedes Levinson, 'La hermana de Eloísa', in La hermana de Eloísa (Buenos Aires: Ene Editorial, 1955), p. 64: 'En la estación, el hambre pudo más, y me invité a una milanesa a caballo y dos medios litros'; cf. Inf. XXXII, 125-27: 'ch’io vidi due ghiacciati in una buca, sì che l’un capo all’altro era cappello; e come ‘l pan per fame si manduca'; Inf. XXXIII, 75: ‘poscia, più che ‘l dolor, poté ‘l digiuno’.


'El desafío', first published in La Nación, 28 December 1952, and included in Historia del tango under the subtitle 'El culto del coraje'; now in OC, I, p. 168; my italics. For a study of the figure of Ulisses in Borges's work, see Kajo Niggestich, 'Ulises – descifrador – Golem: tres arquetipos en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges', in Iberoromania, 3 (1975) 51-69 (pp. 54-62).


Hidden Pleasures in Borges's Allusions, p. 57 (italics in the original); see Dictionary of Borges, s.v. ‘Damiani, Pier’, pp. 68-69, which also highlights Damiani's defence of celibacy, an important element in Borges's psychology.


Fishburn, ‘Hidden Pleasures in Borges's Allusions’, p. 58; italics in the original (note also the last sentence of the poem, which dramatizes the conflict inherent in the story). Cf. Bell-Villada, Borges and His Fiction, pp. 199-201.

Reversio plane ista ad Dominum quantum ad qualitatem pertinet meritorum, hoc est de corrupta integra fieri, de prostituta virginem reparari. Cur rursus idem sponsus eloquitur: “Et omnium peccatorum tuorum iam memor non ero”. Carnali siquidem sponsae complexus viri corruptio carnis; foedus amoris, dispendium castitatis; virginem se plerumque thalamis nuptialibus tradit, sed violata recedit. Et contra, cui caelestis sponsus adhaeserit, protinus omnes abluit maculas turpitudinis et ad florem revocat redholentissimae castitatis; de prostibulo virginem, de corruptione reddit integritatem. Unde est, quod plerosque novimus utriusque sexus homines post abominables voluptatis illecebras, ad tantam religiosae vitae pervenisse mundician ut, non modo castos atque pudicos quoslibet in sanctitate praecederent, sed et non contemnenda multarum virginum merita superarent. Quibus non iam sola prioris meriti mensura rependitur sed, procul dubio, cum remissione reatus etiam cumulus superadditae mercedis augetur’, De div. omnip., ed. by Paolo Brezzi, trans. by Bruno Nardi, pp. 68-69 (= Migne, PL, vol. 145, cols. 600-601, ch. III, par. 618).

Canto, Borges a contraluz, p. 196: ‘En El Zahir están presentes las dos tendencias que lucharon en su vida hasta el fin: por un lado, Teodelina Villar, ese mundo al que está atado, del que se burla, pero que se le impone; por el otro, el de la libertad’ (see also p. 17).
Still, it should be noted that the philosopher's emphatic assertion of natural causation ultimately leads to a transcendent view of the human character. In general, by stressing the empirical axiom of causality, Borges diminishes the consequence of this fundamental aspect of Schopenhauer's idealism.

Conclusion

It is difficult to speak of a fundamental theme in Borges's work. He loved the work of the English Romantic poets but was also keen on Germanic and Scandinavian epic. He admired Cervantes and Quevedo but he could also write about Jewish and Sufi mysticism with the same ease that he could refer to the literary tradition of his own country. He was fascinated by all kinds of religious beliefs but maintained that theology and metaphysics, far from constituting in themselves a firm and indisputable point of scientific arrival, are no more than a species of fantastical literature. He undermined the capacity of the human mind to reach the essence of the world, and yet he resisted the temptation to yield to chaos and nothingness.

Clearly there was in Borges a desire to enlist his creative activity within a literary tradition that would go beyond the framework of his own time. Although several fundamental differences separate the one poet from the other, the mature Borges found in Dante the epitome of genuine poetic expression. Notwithstanding, the presence of Dante in the work of Borges cannot be characterized as simple and straightforward. It is, on the contrary, complex and multiform, for it is intertwined with a series of literary, philosophical and emotional concerns which preceded his encounter with the Italian poet. This is perhaps the most conspicuous (and troublesome) feature that the student of Borges must be prepared to confront. The fact that in the short stories which most clearly deal with Dantean issues Borges effectively combines elements from distant traditions (a feature also of his essays) illustrates the way in which his creative imagination was able to relate the most heterogeneous sources in order to produce new and unexpected results. Indeed, in the interplay between intellect and imagination which is required in every act of artistic creation, it was the latter which played a leading role in Borges's writing. This explains the frequently eccentric (that is, nonacademic) character of his aesthetic sensibility, as in the following remark: ‘Las mil y una noches que Dante no conoció pero que sin embargo ahí están’ (‘La Divina Comedia’, OC, III, p. 211).

Although Borges's reading of Dante is imbued with a rich variety of literary elements (a circumstance that manifests itself in the manifold texture of his compositions), his response to the Commedia is not exclusively literary in character. In particular, Borges's reception (and subsequent inversion) of the theme of love is
intensely personal, and it reveals deep psychological motives. What is most striking about this is the way in which he intertwines in his writing a number of references and allusions which are so obscure that they become inaccessible to the common reader. In this way, I think, Borges was able to create a private space in which he could give free rein to his emotions, thus relieving himself from the burden of his most intimate obsessions.

Parallel to the creation of a secluded zone in which the author could project his personality, Borges discovered in irony and caricature an effective means of controlling the social and political reality that surrounded him. It is frequently taken for granted, among Borges scholars, that his writing is detached from practical concerns. It is true that the fascination with artistic form plays an important role in his compositions. And yet, beneath the apparent playfulness of his prose there is often an intense satirical mood that is clearly intended as a social or political critique. By suggesting the existence of an idea or situation in an indirect way Borges succeeded in creating pleasurable narratives that could also be read in an ethical key. The challenge that awaits the Borges reader lies in deciphering the subtle texture of his writing. It lies in discovering the ethical writer in Borges.
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