



Bulletin of Spanish Studies

Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and Latin America

ISSN: 1475-3820 (Print) 1478-3428 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbhs20>

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To cite this article: Humberto R. Núñez Faraco (2016): J. L. Borges on Dreams, Nightmares and the Supernatural: A Psychoanalytic Approach, Bulletin of Spanish Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14753820.2016.1204821](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2016.1204821)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2016.1204821>



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Published online: 18 Jul 2016.



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J. L. Borges on Dreams, Nightmares and the Supernatural: A Psychoanalytic Approach

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In memory of Roberto de Zubiría, MD

Between June and August 1977 Borges delivered a series of talks at the Teatro Coliseo in Buenos Aires. These included a variety of literary, mystical and biographical topics ranging from Dante's *Commedia*, Buddhism and the Cabala, to his own experience of blindness. The second talk, entitled 'La pesadilla', provides a unique revelation of Borges' psychology through an account of his personal obsessions and fears. While it is true that the theme of dreams and the motifs he talks about were not new to his audience, the detail and intensity with which he presents the subject matter gives us a heightened glimpse of the turbulence of his inner world, one that appears to be dominated by ideas about punishment and death. My purpose here is to examine the ways in which Borges approaches the supernatural through his own experience of dreams, and to provide a general overview of how his concern with these issues gained prominence in his work from the late 1920s onwards.

What is most striking about Borges' central argument in 'La pesadilla' is his apparently candid suggestion—stated thrice—that nightmares may effectively constitute an entry into hell:

No sabemos exactamente qué sucede durante los sueños: no es imposible que durante los sueños estemos en el cielo, estemos en el infierno.

En todas ellas hay una idea [...] de origen demoníaco, la idea de un demonio que causa la pesadilla. Creo que no se trata simplemente de

una superstición: creo que puede haber—y *estoy hablando con toda ingenuidad y toda sinceridad*—, algo verdadero en este concepto.

Aquí tendríamos la posibilidad de una interpretación teológica, lo que vendría a estar de acuerdo con la etimología. Tomo cualquiera de las palabras: digamos, *incubus*, latina, o *nightmare*, sajona, o *Alp*, alemana. Todas sugieren algo sobrenatural. Pues bien, ¿y si las pesadillas fueran estrictamente sobrenaturales? ¿Si las pesadillas fueran grietas del infierno? ¿*Si en las pesadillas estuviéramos literalmente en el infierno?* ¿Por qué no? Todo es tan raro que aún eso es posible.¹

Note the distinction made here between the realms of heaven and hell to which Borges implicitly attaches a specific oneiric quality. By referring to the etymology of the word—which links dreams to the presence of demons—Borges defines the nightmare as a Satanic experience characterized by a particular type of horror ('un horror peculiar'), a feeling of dread which is itself independent from the images or situations that are dreamt:

En las pesadillas lo importante no son las imágenes. Lo importante, como Coleridge [...] descubrió, es la impresión que producen los sueños. [...] La pesadilla tiene un horror peculiar y ese horror peculiar puede expresarse mediante cualquier fábula. ('La pesadilla', 231)²

Let us consider in more detail what Borges says about his own recurrent nightmares:

Yo diría que tengo dos pesadillas que pueden llegar a confundirse. Tengo la pesadilla del laberinto y esto se debe, en parte, a un grabado en acero que vi en un libro francés *cuando era chico*. [...] Yo creía (o creo ahora haber creído) *cuando era chico*, que si tuviera una lupa lo suficientemente fuerte *podría ver, mirar* por una de las grietas del grabado, al Minotauro en el *terrible* centro del laberinto.

('La pesadilla', 225–26; my italics)

1 I quote from the revised version of the talk included in Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, 3 vols (Barcelona: Emecé Editores, 1989), III, 221–31 (pp. 222, 225–26 and 231; my italics). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the works of Borges are taken from this edition.

2 See also: 'Las pesadillas y Franz Kafka' (1935), in Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos recobrados, 1931–1955*, ed. Sara Luisa del Carril & Mercedes Rubio de Zocchi (Barcelona: Emecé, 2001), 110–14 (p. 112); *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, ed. Richard Burgin (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1998), 182. Borges' preference for poetic-philosophical rather than psychological interpretations of dreams is quite conspicuous here. While he omits any reference to the works of Sigmund Freud he does mention the psychological and anthropological studies of J. G. Frazer, Gustav Spiller and J. W. Dunne.

Borges' double allusion to his childhood—which springs directly from a free mental association—together with the question of infantile curiosity or scopophilia are relevant here.³ As is well known, Borges was afraid of mirrors in his childhood and, in particular, of *seeing* his own image in the mirror. Implicitly, his desire to see the monstrosity of the Minotaur through a magnifying glass emphasizes the motif of vision which is so prominent in relation to his obsession with mirrors. He then adds: 'Mi otra pesadilla es la del espejo. Pero no son distintas, ya que bastan dos espejos opuestos para construir un laberinto. Siempre sueño con laberintos o con espejos' (226).

At this point Borges makes a distinction that directly links his curiosity about the Minotaur with the fear of seeing his own image in the mirror:

En el sueño del espejo aparece otra visión, otro terror de mis noches, que es la idea de las *máscaras*. Siempre las máscaras me dieron miedo. Sin duda sentí en la infancia que si alguien usaba una máscara estaba *ocultando* algo horrible. A veces (éstas son mis pesadillas más terribles) me veo reflejado en un espejo, pero *me veo reflejado con una máscara*. Tengo miedo de arrancar la máscara porque tengo miedo de ver *mi verdadero rostro*, que imagino *atroz*. Ahí puede estar la lepra o el mal o algo más terrible que cualquier imaginación mía. ('La pesadilla', 226; my italics)

If we conceive the Minotaur *realistically* as a man wearing a bull's mask (as opposed to the mythological representation of a human body with a bull's head), it becomes possible to think of it as a dramatization of the issue of identity raised by Borges in the above passage ('tengo miedo de ver mi verdadero rostro, que imagino atroz'). The figure of the Minotaur in this context would then serve a specific purpose, that of *concealing* the identity of the person behind the mask. Although it seems to fulfil two separate roles (both as a projection of the self and as a menacing 'other'), within the dynamics of the unconscious the opposition self/other is not necessarily contradictory: in psychoanalytical terms, this duality can be expressing a conflict between the ego and the super-ego. Thus, the idea of monstrosity projected onto the Minotaur may reflect Borges' fantasized image of himself, an image that combines a sense of defencelessness together with horror and self-deprecation, as he himself revealed in a conversation with the critic Amelia Barili in 1985:

3 Cf. Sigmund Freud, 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes' (1915), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey & Alan Tyson, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press/Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–1974), XIV, 117–40. All references to the works of Freud are taken from this edition.

I dream of a mirror. I see myself with a *mask*, or I see in the mirror *somebody who is me but whom I do not recognize as myself*. [...] Another frequent nightmare is of being attacked by beings who are children; there are many of them, very little but strong. I try to defend myself, but the blows I give are weak.⁴

This feature of Borges' psychological make-up resurfaces in another oneiric experience. He tells us of a nightmare in which he meets someone in the street. The man in question is a friend but Borges knows neither his name nor the actual person. He finds that the man has changed; he has become a sad and sickly person, and he seems to be guilty of something: 'Yo nunca había visto su cara pero sabía que su cara no podía ser ésa. Estaba muy cambiado, muy triste. Su rostro estaba cruzado por la pesadumbre, por la enfermedad, quizá por la culpa' ('La pesadilla', 227). He also notices that the man's left hand is hidden under his coat ('del lado del corazón' ['La pesadilla', 227]) a possible hint at the presence of an unconscious, repressed emotion. Borges asks what has happened to him. Slowly, the man takes out his hand and Borges is able to see that it has turned into a bird's claw:

Entonces lo abracé, sentí que necesitaba que lo ayudara: 'Pero, mi pobre Fulano, ¿qué te ha pasado? ¡Qué cambiado estás!' Me respondió: 'Sí, estoy muy cambiado'. Lentamente fue sacando la mano. Cuando la sacó, pude ver que la mano era la garra de un pájaro. ('La pesadilla', 227)

The issue of identity is crucial in this dream: Who is the man Borges meets in the street? Why is he both a familiar person *and* a stranger? (The same ambivalence between the familiar and the unfamiliar is present at the start of the dream: 'Ocurrió, lo sé, en la calle Serrano [...] salvo que *no parecía* Serrano y Soler, el paisaje era *muy distinto*: pero yo sabía que era en la vieja calle Serrano, de Palermo' ['La pesadilla', 227; my italics].) Also, why has his face changed ('sabía que su cara no podía ser ésa'). And above all, what is he *guilty* of? If all dreams are egoistic, that is, if dreams are always connected to the dreamer's unconscious needs, fears and desires, the situation described above must ultimately represent an emotional conflict which has undergone repression (note the inner cry for help: 'sentí que

4 *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, ed. Burgin, 241; my italics. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud recognized the existence of a masochistic force that acts in opposition to the 'pleasure principle'. He observed that some dreams repeatedly bring an individual back into a traumatic situation causing much distress: 'It is clear that the greater part of what is re-experienced under the compulsion to repeat must cause the ego unpleasure, since it brings to light activities of repressed instinctual impulses. [...] The compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never [...] have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed' (*The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XVIII, 7–64 [p. 20]).

necesitaba que lo ayudara').⁵ In terms of the 'manifest' content, the horror he experiences in the dream corresponds to the real-life fear of seeing his own monstrosity reflected in the mirror. While Borges uses this example to illustrate the essential aesthetic quality of all dreams ('los sueños son la actividad estética más antigua' ['La pesadilla', 227]), we could add (with Borges) that the characters of dreams are always projections of the dreamer's emotions. As he puts it elsewhere: el poeta/soñador 'es cada uno de los hombres de su mundo ficticio'.⁶

There is one more instance in 'La pesadilla' that suggests the presence of an emotional trauma. Borges worked the content of this dream into a sonnet which he published in 1975, also with the title 'La pesadilla'. The narrative version recounted in the talk is deceptively simple. Borges dreams of an ancient Scandinavian king standing at the foot of his bed. His gaze is fixed blindly on the ceiling ('fijaba su mirada ciega en el cielorraso' ['La pesadilla', 228]). He is accompanied by a dog and carries a sword. Borges understands that this figure comes from a *remote time* and feels terror at the sight ('Yo sabía que era un rey *muy antiguo* porque su cara era una cara imposible ahora. Entonces sentí el *terror* de esa presencia' ['La pesadilla', 228; my italics]). The impression this dream made on him was so strong that when he finally awoke the image of the king remained vivid in his mind for some time, an indication of the emotional significance of the experience.

By its very nature the king is a figure of authority, a father figure. The dog, by contrast, implies submission and obedience to the king, its master. These two elements seem to symbolize a controlling father-son relationship.⁷ The sword, on the other hand, is an instrument of punishment as well as a means to reinforce the law. What is at stake here, then, is a fear of parental punishment rooted in childhood. This aspect becomes more apparent in the poetic version of the dream:

Sueño con un antiguo rey. De hierro
Es la corona y *muerta* la mirada.
Ya no hay caras así. La firme espada
Lo acatará, *leal* como su perro.
No sé si es de Nortumbria o de Noruega.

5 Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XVII, 219–56 (pp. 245–52); cf. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, IV, 267–71, 322–23 and V, 440–41.

6 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Prólogo' to *Nueve ensayos dantescos*, in *Obras completas*, III, 343–74 (p. 346). Cf. Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913): 'Creative writers externalize in the form of separate individuals the opposing instinctual impulses struggling within them' (*The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XIII, 1–161 [p. 65, n. 2]).

7 On Borges' relationship with his father, see: Julio Woscoboinik, *El secreto de Borges: indagación psicoanalítica de su obra*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1991), 54; Edwin Williamson, *Borges, A Life* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), 32–54, 230–39.

Sé que es del Norte. La cerrada y roja
 Barba le cubre el pecho. No me arroja
 Una mirada su mirada *ciega*.
 ¿De qué *apagado espejo*, de qué nave
 De los mares que fueron su aventura,
 Habrá surgido el hombre *gris y grave*
 Que me *impone* su antaño y su *amargura*?
 Sé que *me sueña* y que *me juzga*, erguido.
 El día entra en la noche. No se ha ido.⁸

The aspect that particularly attracts my attention is the actual semblance of the king. His blind, ‘dead’ gaze (‘muerta la mirada’) together with the ‘unfamiliar’ features of his face (‘ya no hay caras así’) suggest the representation of a deceased person. This is reinforced by the expressions ‘mirada ciega’, ‘apagado espejo’, ‘hombre gris y grave’ and ‘amargura’. If so, it signals the presence of a ‘dead object’ in Borges’ unconscious. It is this authoritarian though seemingly lifeless figure who effectively takes the place of the dreamer’s super-ego (‘Sé que me sueña y que me juzga, erguido’), a detail that reminds us of several characteristic stories and poems written by Borges on the subject of paternity, among them ‘Las ruinas circulares’ (*Ficciones*), ‘Los espejos’ (*El hacedor*) and ‘El Golem’ (*El otro, el mismo*).

The Colombian psychoanalyst Roberto de Zubiría explains the formation of dead objects as follows:

Los objetos de muerte [...] son una forma de alienación. No corresponden al valor experiencial y se producen cuando se niega la realidad vital de la muerte y se reemplaza por figuras fantasmales que amenazan y paralizan al individuo. [...] La negación [lleva a la persona] a mantener sus objetos muertos como vivos; de esta distorsión surgen los espantos, los fantasmas, Dráculas y demás seres imaginarios *que son mucho más amenazantes* que la misma muerte real.⁹

As de Zubiría points out, it is not an abstract fear of death that is at stake here but the unconscious *internalization* of a deceased person (such as a parent or a close family member) to whom an individual was strongly attached and whose

8 Jorge Luis Borges, ‘La pesadilla’, *Obras completas*, III, 126; my italics.

9 Roberto de Zubiría Consuegra, *Muerte y psicoanálisis: teoría de los objetos muertos* (Bogotá: Editorial Grijalbo, 1996), 31; my italics. De Zubiría places a strong emphasis on the process of internalization of dead objects (‘objetos de muerte’) as opposed to the libidinal content that might be present in certain pathological formations (such as the Oedipus complex in neurotic anxiety): ‘La presencia de un objeto de muerte en el inconsciente produce los mayores temores para cualquier ser humano; mucho más intensos que los que producen las pulsiones libidinales prohibidas’ (*Muerte y psicoanálisis*, 39).

death he or she has been unable to accept. As my reading of the poem suggests, it is the father figure that is signalled in Borges' poem; more specifically, it reflects his ambivalent emotions towards a father who is both benevolent and tyrannical.¹⁰

Borges' concern with punishment and death can also be perceived in his interpretation of a Dantean episode recounted during his talk at the Teatro Coliseo. In Canto IV of the *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil arrive at Limbo where they encounter the souls of virtuous pagans who died in ignorance of Christ (this includes unbaptized infants). Borges underscores Virgil's initial fear and hesitation¹¹ and observes the sense of unreality of the whole place: 'Cuando se acercan, lo que ven es esmalte. Ven, no el pasto, que es una cosa viva, sino una cosa *muerta*' ('La pesadilla', 29; my italics). He also pays particular attention to a 'nobile castello' surrounded by seven *walls* and a small stream, where Dante comes face to face with spirits of great authority and magnanimity. His interpretation of the central passage reads as follows:

Todos hablan lenta y suavemente, tienen rostros de gran autoridad, pero están *privados* de Dios. Ahí está la *ausencia* de Dios, ellos saben que están condenados a ese eterno castillo, a ese castillo eterno y decoroso, pero *terrible*. ('La pesadilla', 229; my italics)

In a brief passage of the original talk (which was omitted from the printed version) Borges suggests that the nightmarish feeling of this episode represents the first example of the uncanny in Western literature:

Eso lo ofrece Dante, quizá por primera vez en la literatura. Hay una palabra alemana, *unheimlich*, hay dos palabras escocesas, *eerie* y *uncanny*, que significan esa presencia de *lo sobrenatural maligno*, [...] la presencia de *lo sobrenatural satánico*, y eso lo sentimos en el *nobile castello*.¹²

More to the point, what Borges' reading of the Dantean episode tells us is that he deeply felt the horror of those illustrious pagan dwellers of the 'nobile castello', famous men of letters and wise philosophers who are tormented not

10 In this respect, see Freud, 'A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis' (1923), in *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XIX, 72–105 (pp. 81, 87–88, 90, 102). On fear of death, see also Freud's, 'The Ego and the Id' (1923), in *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XIX, 12–66 (pp. 57–58).

11 See Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milano: Mondadori, 1966–67), I, *Inferno* IV, 14–18. All references to the *Commedia* are taken from this edition.

12 The original magnetophonic recordings of the talks delivered at the Teatro Coliseo can be accessed at: <<https://archive.org/details/Borges-LasSieteNoches-1977>> (last accessed 31 March 2016).

by physical pain but by the awareness of their eternal privation from the love of God. For Dante, this solitude is ultimately a token of spiritual death in so far as it reveals the absence of Faith, Hope and Charity—the theological virtues that are essential for the salvation of the soul. For the Argentinian, on the other hand, the horror of the scene springs from the lack of divine *affection* which the souls of Limbo must endure forever (*están privados de Dios. Ahí está la ausencia de Dios*). In other words, the separation from God, or the *lack* of God's affection (God being a father figure in psychoanalytical terms), is experienced by Borges as a source of anxiety and eternal misery.¹³

The question that comes to mind, then, is whether Borges may have identified himself with those abandoned souls of Limbo. For, as he declared in 1945, during childhood he, too, had been confined for long hours in his father's library, a place where he was effectively detached from the real world and where—we might conjecture—he could have experienced moments of great solitude (both his parents were extremely authoritarian and overprotective):

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?*¹⁴

And there may be a further cause of anxiety, for Canto IV of the *Inferno* recounts the moment in which the great poets of Antiquity recognize Dante as their equal:

E più d'onore ancora assai mi fenno,
Ch'e' sì mi fecer de la loro schiera,
sì ch'io fui sesto tra cotanto senno.¹⁵

13 On the idea of God as a father figure, see Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XIII, 147–52. On separation and anxiety, see Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), in *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XX, 87–175 (pp. 137–39, 169–71). Virgil himself appears as a father figure in the *Commedia*; cf. *Purgatorio* XXVII, 52 (*Lo dolce padre mio*), *Purgatorio* XXX, 50 (*Virgilio dolcissimo patre*). Virgil frequently reciprocates Dante's affection, as in *Purgatorio* XXVII, 35 (*Or vedi, figlio*) (see Volume II of *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Petrocchi).

14 Prologue to *Evaristo Carriego*, in *Obras completas*, I, 97–172 (p. 101; my italics). The statement was originally formulated by Borges in a speech before the Sociedad Argentina de Escritores in 1945 and subsequently published in *Sur*, 129 (1945), 120–21.

15 Dante, *Inferno* IV, 100–02.

Indeed, Borges' greatest literary ambition in the 1920s had been precisely to be the Virgil of his native city, a poetic programme that effectively came to an end after the publication of his third book of verse, *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929). His profoundly Manicheistic view of the city is eloquently expressed in 'El Paseo de Julio', which concludes the collection. The striking point about the poem is that it hurls into perdition the lyrical programme he had originally begun in praise of his idealized city. As he puts it in the 1925 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*.¹⁶

In stark contrast with this heavenly vision of Buenos Aires, 'El Paseo de Julio' views the city from the other side, revealing 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.¹⁷

Borges even draws a parallel between the city's red-light district and the netherworld. Moreover, in order to frame the poem within his wider reflections on the nature of evil, he added a note (omitted from later editions) on the 'unreality' of hell, in which he briefly discusses the Christian notions of free will and predestination.¹⁸

Overall, the two collections of poems published after *Fervor de Buenos Aires* feature a heightened sense of affective dissatisfaction, an existence which day by day has become further removed from its source of joy. This went hand-in-hand with the considerable decline in the number of love poems Borges wrote after 1925 and the greater prominence of the theme of death in his last book of verse, *Cuaderno San Martín*. Despite the

16 Jorge Luis Borges, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Serrantes, 1923), n.p.; my italics.

17 *Cuaderno San Martín* Cuadernos del Plata (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1929), 50 (ll. 13–14; my italics). The link between mirrors and a phobic or fatalistic attitude towards sex is quite conspicuous in Borges' work; see, for instance, the stories 'El tintorero enmascarado Hákim de Merv' (*Obras completas*, I, 324–28 [p. 327]), 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (*Obras completas*, I, 431–43 [p. 431]), 'Emma Zunz' (*Obras completas*, I, 564–68 [p. 565]) and the poem 'Los espejos' (*Obras completas*, II, 192–93 [p. 192, sixth stanza]).

18 Cf. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Shorter Heaven and Hell*, trans. Doris H. Harley (London: Seminar Books, 1993) 86, 122–25, together with Borges' essay 'La duración del infierno' (*Obras completas*, I, 235–38). See also *Borges Oral* (Buenos Aires: Emecé/Editorial de Belgrano, 1979), 52.

occasional burst of hope, the call of love was never to return to his verse triumphantly.

Borges' poetic activity was to come to a standstill in 1929. Except for a few poems, he did not write any poetry for almost three decades. Instead, he concentrated his efforts on the essay and the short story, creating the highly artistic prose to which subsequent generations of writers in Latin America are indebted. Psychologically this had a deleterious effect on him, for it implied the impossibility of fulfilling the task to which he felt he was called, as he himself declares in the poem '*Mateo, XXV, 30*' (1953):

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.*¹⁹

By the early 1950s, however, Borges was blind. It is undeniable that this event, though circumstantial, influenced his decision to turn back to poetry. The very title *El hacedor* (1960), a miscellaneous collection marking this new direction, makes reference to the blind poet of Antiquity, Homer, with whom he must have strongly identified.²⁰ The disappearance of the visible world, nevertheless, implied the construction of a substitute realm. This Borges realized through an imaginary projection onto the mythical domain of heroic poetry. In his talk on 'La ceguera' at the Teatro Coliseo, for instance, Borges describes how the study of Anglo-Saxon meant a recuperation of his ancestral history (as is well known, Borges' paternal grandmother was of English stock): 'Yo pensaba: "estoy volviendo al idioma que hablaban mis mayores hace cincuenta generaciones [...] estoy recuperándolo"'.²¹ Although there can be an element of truth in Emir Rodríguez Monegal's assessment of the episode ('I now think that this ancient tongue, and its rough poetry, is the last stage in his escape from everyday reality: a form of conversing in a language of his own because it is dead, forgotten, elementary'),²² I think that there is also here a profound gesture of *reconciliation* toward his father (that possible 'dead object' present in the poem 'La pesadilla'). In other words, the study of Anglo-Saxon could have been an unconscious attempt to discharge the anxiety generated by the ambivalent emotions he experienced in childhood.

On the other hand, Borges often adopted an elegiac tone for the evocation of a crucial event in the life of his ancestors, most of whom suffered a tragic end.

19 *Obras completas*, II, 252, ll. 24–27; my italics.

20 See Lisa Block de Behar, *Borges, the Passion of an Endless Quotation*, trans. William Egginton, 2nd ed. (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2014), 87–93.

21 *Obras completas*, III, 276–86 (p. 280; my italics).

22 Emir Rodríguez Monegal, 'In the Labyrinth', in *The Cardinal Points of Borges*, ed. Lowell Dunham & Ivar Ivask (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 17–23 (p. 22).

In this respect, the synthesis of a human destiny has an explicit moral-existential connection in ‘Poema conjetural’, published in 1943. Here Borges conjures up the images of the mirror and the labyrinth in relation to his ancestor’s final moments as if he, too, had to confront the same fears and obsessions that had haunted him throughout his life (note the dimmed echo of childhood in line 34):

A esta ruिनosa tarde me llevaba
 el laberinto múltiple de pasos
 que mis días tejieron desde un día
 de la niñez. [...]
 En el espejo de esta noche alcanzo
 mi insospechado rostro eterno. El círculo
 se va a cerrar. Yo aguardo que así sea.²³

Seen from the inside, the labyrinthine condition of our existence cannot but reflect the uncertainty of our final destination.²⁴ From a teleological point of view, nevertheless, the notion of destiny as a movement towards final resolution has a positive value because it constitutes a process of self-understanding that unfolds through time. Yet for Borges there seems to be no progress in this movement, no repose in the attainment of a goal, and no *certain* actualization of a superior moral or existential state. As he puts it elsewhere:

Yo no sé quién soy. Tampoco qué soy. Creo que lo más terrible es no saber qué se es. La palabra ‘Borges’ no es nada, es tan sólo un símbolo. Quién soy, qué soy, quizá lo sepa en el momento de morir.²⁵

Arguably, Borges’ most acute emotional experience with regards to the problem of existence is found in the postscript to an essay entitled ‘La duración del infierno’, first published in 1929. Here Borges suggests that the notion of a never-ending suffering belongs to the literature of the uncanny (‘el espanto admirable de su invención’ [236]). What he finds intolerable about the Christian notion of hell is not the idea of punishment as such, but the fact that it plunges the sinner into a state of *eternal* damnation. This implies, as our reading of *Inferno* IV has shown, a drastic cut from any possible source of happiness, leading to the collapse of all

23 *Obras completas*, II, 245, ll.31–34, 39–41.

24 The first appearance of the word ‘laberinto’ in Borges’ poetry occurs in ‘Del infierno y del cielo’ (1942), where it is deployed as a figure of hell. In his talk on Dante’s *Commedia* at the Teatro Coliseo (*Obras completas*, III, 207–20), Borges refers to the labyrinthine structure of the *Inferno* as an image effectively used by Dante to figure the idea of moral error in which the sinful soul is *eternally* lost (219).

25 *Borges en Japón: Japón en Borges*, ed. Guillermo Gasió (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1988), 113.

affective and emotional ties. In interviews he gave towards the end of his life this issue still occupies a prominent place in his thought, as the following passage demonstrates:

[John Wilkins] ha inventado una palabra muy hermosa. Es el equivalente a ‘eternidad’ y no tiene origen en el latín. Además, nadie la ha vuelto a usar después de Wilkins: ‘Everness’. [...] Hay otra palabra, terrible: ‘Neverness’. [...] ‘Neverness’ es una palabra terrible. Amar a una mujer y que eso nunca se concrete... [...] Es terrible esta palabra. He sacado valor para pronunciarla, pero me preocupa lo que pueda suceder.²⁶

Clearly, for Borges the word ‘*Neverness*’ carries a heavily repressed *affective* meaning which leads to anxiety (‘Amar a una mujer y que eso nunca se concrete’). For him, to pronounce the word is to invoke a magical power that can threaten the emotional stability of the ego, indeed, that can annihilate its existence altogether.²⁷ This is precisely what occurs in the dream recounted by him in the postscript to ‘*La duración del infierno*’:

Soñé que salía de otro [sueño]—populoso de cataclismos y de tumultos—y que me despertaba en una pieza irreconocible. [...] Pensé con miedo ¿*dónde estoy?* Y comprendí que no lo sabía. Pensé ¿*quién soy?* Y no me pude reconocer. El miedo creció en mí. Pensé: Esta vigilia desconsolada ya es el Infierno, esta vigilia sin destino será mi eternidad. Entonces desperté de veras: temblando. (‘*La duración del infierno*’, 238)

We have travelled full circle. I began this article highlighting the way in which the 1977 talk posits the notion that nightmares constitute an entry into the realm of the supernatural, and we have now discovered the germ of the idea in an essay written almost fifty years earlier. Whatever lies at the centre of his emotional conflict (which, as we have seen, has to do with guilt and punishment), this passage shows that Borges endured these obsessions for most of his life. It also suggests that those fantastic literary creations for which he is so well known may be the product—at least to some extent—of a psychopathological mind.

Conclusion

The view generally upheld in Borges scholarship with regard to the author’s use of certain recurrent images and symbols is that they are a rhetorical

²⁶ *Borges en Japón*, ed. Gasió, 80 & 112 respectively.

²⁷ Cf. Borges’ poem ‘*El amenazado*’ (1972), *Obras completas*, II, 485. For a discussion of the three main sources of anxiety in the ego, namely, the external world, the libido of the id, and the severity of the super-ego, see Freud’s essay ‘*The Ego and the Id*’, *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XIX, 57.

tool at the service of a poetico-philosophical conception of human existence. Instead of a fully-fledged theoretical explanation of Being, Borges presents an intuitive, that is, poetical approximation to ontological and metaphysical questions which, nevertheless, bear the stamp of a genuine existential concern. What he says of the Spaniard Miguel de Unamuno (that he is ‘un sentidor de la dificultad metafísica’) applies equally well to Borges’ work.²⁸

The material examined in the present article does not contradict this view but goes somewhat further in explaining the motives that lie behind Borges’ literary practices and philosophical creeds. Clearly, the use of dreams, labyrinths and mirrors to represent the illusory or bewildering quality of existence—images that seemed to have reached their literary possibilities by the time Borges revived them—continue to strike the reader (or, at least, some readers) for their intrinsic effectiveness and for the novel and perplexing way in which Borges exploited them from an early stage in his life. As he affirms in a youthful essay:

Ya no basta decir, a fuer de todos los poetas, que los espejos se asemejan a un agua. [...] Hay que mostrar un individuo que se introduce en el cristal y que persiste en su ilusorio país, [...] y que siente el bochorno de no ser más que un simulacro que obliteran las noches y que las vislumbres permiten.²⁹

There is little doubt that Borges’ craft consists in the renewal of literary tradition or, as Aníbal González puts it, ‘en un constante acto de lectura, de desciframiento de signos’, an assessment that I do not dispute.³⁰ But does this conception of writing do justice to the inner voice, the voice of the ‘dead author’? Perhaps there is a danger that in the constant displacement of signs and meaning (a point of view very much influenced by the French cultural criticism of the 1970s) we might inadvertently remove the elements that ignite them from within? By enquiring about the *emotional* core of his writing, I have tried to show that there is a deeper way of understanding Borges’ preoccupation with the incertitude of human existence together with the images and symbols employed to represent them. These can take

28 ‘Acerca de Unamuno, poeta’ (first published in 1923), in *Inquisiciones* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1989), 109–18 (p. 113). Cf. *El diccionario de Borges: el Borges oral, el de las declaraciones y las polémicas*, ed. Carlos R. Stortini, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Miscelánea, 1989), 30: ‘Soy casi incapaz de pensamiento abstracto, lo cual quiere decir [...] que soy un poeta y tiendo a pensar por medio de imágenes, de fábulas, de metáforas, y no por medio de razonamientos’. There is a considerable bibliography on the subject. For an appraisal, see *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia, Carolyn Korsmeyer & Rodolphe Gasché (New York: Routledge, 2002).

29 ‘Después de las imágenes’ (1924), in *Inquisiciones*, 29–32 (p. 32).

30 Aníbal González, ‘“Vida” y “sueño” en Ariosto y los árabes de J. L. Borges’, *Revista Iberoamericana*, XLVI:110–111 (1980), 85–96 (p. 96).

the form of traditional literary-philosophical enquiry, as in his essays on time and eternity or the stoical final lines of the poem 'Los espejos':

Dios ha creado las noches que se arman
De sueños y las formas del espejo
Para que el hombre sienta que es reflejo
Y vanidad. Por eso nos alarman. ('Los espejos', 193)

More often than not, however, they constitute a reflection on his own existential anxieties, as in the striking final paragraph of the essay 'Nueva refutación del tiempo': 'Nuestro destino [...] no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. [...] El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges', which so effectively combines the rhetorical and the philosophical with the purely emotional and subjective.³¹ In spite of the author's occasional attempts to dismiss the central tenets of psychoanalysis, there is a radical psychological dimension weaved into the fabric of his work.³²

The writer and critic Osvaldo Ferrari—who recorded a long series of interviews with Borges in the early 1980s—sums up neatly the function of dreams in his work:

La experiencia de la vida y las alternativas de su propio destino como sujetas a la contrariedad, a la injusticia y a la desdicha, se irán resolviendo en la paulatina creación de un universo personal, signado por una original manera de mirar el mundo, de inconfundible inspiración literaria: para Borges, para su universo, la realidad serán los sueños.³³

As Ferrari points out, Borges turns reality into a dream; indeed, a dream with no stable referent—whether immanent or transcendental—on which knowledge and certainty can be grounded.³⁴ In this respect, he blurs the

31 *Obras completas*, II, 135–49 (p. 149). See also *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, ed. Burgin, 177.

32 Borges deplored psychoanalysis which he described as 'la triste mitología de nuestro tiempo' (see Jorge Luis Borges, *Obra poética, 1923–1977* [Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1981] 22). The rejection of the main tenets of psychoanalysis is a well-known psychological mechanism of defence.

33 Osvaldo Ferrari, 'Jorge Luis Borges y los sueños', *La Nación*, 7 October 1998; available at: <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/215212-jorge-luis-borges-y-los-suenos>> (last accessed 31 March 2016). Borges evades the charge of solipsism by claiming that reality is a 'shared dream'; see, for instance, his review of Hermann Broch's *Die Unbekannte Größe*, in Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos cautivos* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998), 173–74.

34 For a succinct discussion, see: María del Carmen Rodríguez, *Borges: el sueño imposible de ser* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2009), 43–51; Woscoboinik, *El secreto de Borges*, 201–17. See also Norman D. Marín Calderón, *Borges–Freud–Lacan: los senderos trifurcados del deseo* (México, D.F.: Ediciones y Gráficos Eón/Muncie: Ball State Univ., 2009).

boundaries between consciousness and the illusory world of dreams. Borges himself hints at this mechanism during his talk at the Teatro Coliseo when he comments on a passage from Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book VI, lines 893–98): 'Éneas pasa por la puerta de marfil porque entra en el mundo de los sueños, es decir, en lo que llamamos vigilia' ('La pesadilla', 224). However, it is within this illusory realm that the horror of the nightmare irrupts as a reminder of what had long been repressed. If Borges was able to momentarily forget his troubles through the medium of literature ('Para borrar o mitigar la saña / de lo real, buscaba lo soñado', he says of Cervantes),³⁵ he was nevertheless forced to face the harsh reality of the fears and obsessions that assailed him during sleep ('I have a nightmare almost every night').³⁶ This explains his frequent insomnia attacks, which may have occurred as an unconscious defence mechanism to protect him against the dreadful content of his recurrent nightmares.³⁷

Seen from this perspective, dreams can contribute to the affirmation of life. By providing us with moments of pleasurable fantasies they help maintain a certain emotional stability in our dealings with the external world.³⁸ Nightmares, on the other hand, are linked to punishment and self-destruction, and can have a negative effect on our existence.³⁹ While

35 'Un soldado de Urbina' (1958), in *El otro, el mismo, Obras completas*, II, 256, ll 5–8. Cf. 'Edgar Allan Poe' (1949), in *Textos recobrados, 1931–1955*, ed. del Carril & Rubio de Zocchi, 263–65 (p. 265). Consider also Borges' remarks in the prologue to the 1954 edition of *Historia universal de la infamia*: 'El hombre que [ejecutó este libro] era asaz desdichado, pero se entretuvo escribiéndolo' (*Obras completas*, I, 287–345 [p. 291]). The notion of literary creation as a guided dream ('la literatura no es otra cosa que un sueño dirigido', *El informe de Brodie* [1970], *Obras completas*, II, 397–456 [p. 400]) is not incompatible with the psychological premise presented here.

36 *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations*, ed. Burgin, 181.

37 Cf. Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1916–1917), *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XV, 218: 'There are some neurotic patients who are unable to sleep and who admit to us that their insomnia was originally intentional. They did not dare to sleep because they were afraid of their dreams'. In 1936, Borges wrote a poem on the subject in which he describes insomnia as a kind of hellish torment, very much along the lines of the passage in 'La duración del infierno' discussed earlier: 'Creo esta noche en la terrible inmortalidad: / Ningún hombre ha muerto en el tiempo, ninguna mujer, ningún muerto, / porque esta inevitable realidad de fierro y de barro / tiene que atravesar la indiferencia de cuantos estén dormidos o muertos [...] / y condenarlos a vigilia espantosa' ('Insomnio', in *El otro, el mismo, Obras completas*, II, 237–38, ll. 33–38; my italics).

38 Cf. Freud, 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's "Gradiva"' (1907), *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, IX, 7–95: 'Dreams are, as one might say, the psychological delusions of normal people' (62).

39 Cf. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933), *The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XXII, 5–182: 'There are people in whose lives the same reactions are perpetually being repeated uncorrected, to their own detriment, or others who seem to be pursued by a relentless fate, though closer investigation teaches us that they are unwittingly bringing this fate on themselves. In such cases we attribute a "daemonic" character to the compulsion to repeat' (106–07).

dreams ‘protect’ the ego from the misfortunes of every-day life, nightmares expose it to the gravest internalized dangers. As Borges suggests, the experience of a nightmare can literally place us at the doorsteps of hell. The examples considered above, however, show that Borges’ anxiety dreams can be traced to situations originated in childhood; these were experienced as threatening because of their transgressive character. The symbol of the labyrinth (which he describes as one of the most recurrent elements in his nightmares), illustrates the dreamer’s own predicament insofar as it represents a traumatic situation from which there seems to be no possibility of escape. As Freud observed, ‘[the ego] cannot undo its repressions’⁴⁰

40 Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, The Standard Edition*, ed. Strachey, XX, 153.

* Disclosure Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.