

## HISTORY AND ALLEGORY IN BORGES'S "LA ESCRITURA DEL DIOS"

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### Abstract

Like most of Borges's short stories written during the 1940s, 'La escritura del dios' displays a dense fabric of literary and historical references which are not immediately obvious to the reader. There is no question that Borges made use of several pre-Columbian elements in its composition. At the same time, it is clear that the Story's cultural and philosophical framework goes beyond the literal sense of the narrative. Now the story has traditionally been associated with Buddhist, Neoplatonic and cabalistic views of the world; less common is its interpretation from a Dantean perspective. Borges was in fact actively engaged in the reading of the *Commedia* during the time of its invention, leaving deep traces in his creative production. Both readings, the mystical and the historical, meet at a point that, to my knowledge, has not been indicated by either party. Furthermore, although these and other elucidations of the story do not necessarily exclude each other, we must be prepared to understand the story in its most indeterminate form. This is articulated as the perennial struggle of opposites and its devices form the author's wider reflections on the nature of evil.

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Obscuris vera involvens  
(Virgil, *Aeneid* VI)

La justice humaine appelait cela *oublier*.  
(Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, VIII, 4)

In the prologue to the second edition of *Historia universal de la infamia*, the collection of short stories that marks Borges's initiation as a story teller 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'.<sup>1</sup> 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; its signature, unmistakably, that of Jorge Luis Borges. I explore here some of the implications of this rhetorical strategy in relation



to the historical content of 'La escritura del dios' in order to provide an interpretation of its ethical import.

In characterizing the baroque style as self-caricature ('Barroco es aquel estilo [. . .] que linda con su propia caricatura' (ibid., p. 291), Borges is advancing a creative principle that will continue to dominate in his narrative. Through the use of irony, parody, and paradox, the reader is left with an uncomfortable, yet intriguing taste of deceit. Such a feeling generates, nevertheless, an intellectual and aesthetic pleasure which is due to its intrinsic ambiguity. Borges's technique consists, among other things, in mixing a number of ingredients that do not cancel each other but neither fuse in perfect accord. In fact, their effect is so overwhelming that they can easily deceive the reader as to the essential nature of the narrative.<sup>2</sup> This disparity produces a semantic and logical tension that is unresolvable as long as we remain within the boundaries of the text, that is, within the author's fabrication of lies and tricks. We cannot leave this fabric, however, without losing the story altogether.

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 ghosts and 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. 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 human experience. This appears to him as a unity rather than a dispersion. As one of his characters says, 'lo que me enseñaron sus hombres vale para cualquier lugar y para cualquier circunstancia' ('El etnógrafo', in *Elogio de la sombra*, OC, II, p. 368).<sup>3</sup>

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 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 labyrinthine 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 human 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 as 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 cabalistic elements in the story, incited by Borges's own declarations (*OC*, I, p. 629), have overstated their discovery of Jewish mystical sources at the expense of the story's historical relevance.<sup>5</sup> 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 necessarily 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, that is, as an expression of human suffering and injustice. 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 Dantean 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 associ-

ated with Buddhist and cabalistic views of the world.<sup>6</sup> 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 (Murillo, p. 262; Canto, pp. 15, 94). Significantly, Borges collected that same year (as an introduction to a Spanish translation of the Comedy) some of the essays he had written on Dante not long before.<sup>7</sup> 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 union does produce joy ('¡Oh dicha de entender!', *OC*, I, p. 599), 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 strict medieval 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 one. 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 Dantean fashion, he points out in the prologue to *Artificios*: 'De El Sur, [. . .] básteme prevenir que es posible leerlo como directa narración de hechos novelescos y también de otro modo' (ibid., p. 483). The literal sense (that is, the novelistic events), corresponds to Dante's 'beautiful lie' ('bella menzogna', *Conv.* II, i, 3) to which Borges alludes elsewhere with

technical accuracy as 'ficción poética', a term (*fictio*) charged with ethical meaning in medieval poetics.<sup>9</sup>

The presence of falsehood in 'La escritura del dios' is poignantly revealed by Lida Aronne Amestoy (pp. 158–168). 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' (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: 'Los hechos eran ciertos, o podían serlo, pero contados como tú los contaste, eran, de un modo manifiesto, mentiras' (*OC*, I. p. 604); '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' (*ibid.*, p. 431); 'Un hecho falso puede ser esencialmente cierto. [. . .] Se dijo, en 1914, que los alemanes habían torturado y mutilado a unos rehenes belgas; la especie, a no dudarlo, era falsa, pero compendiaba útilmente los infinitos y confusos horrores de la invasión' (*ibid.*, pp. 252–253).

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 (p. 119). She does not suggest any connection with Dante or with any particular poet. Her intention is to show the significance of the poetic in the story's structure ('La lucha del mago es la lucha del poeta por encontrar una palabra adecuada a sus necesidades expresivas', p. 136). 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' (p. 596). In *Nueve ensayos dantescos*, referring to Dante's depiction of hell as a blind prison ('cieco | carcere', *Inferno* X, 58–59), Borges remarks: '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 also Dante's description in *Inferno* XVIII, lines 1–3: 'Luogo è in Inferno, detto Malebolge, | tutto di pietra di color ferrigno, | come la *cerchia* che dintorno il volge' (my italics). 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’, exclaims Tzinacán (p. 598; cf. Massuh, pp. 121, 128). Interestingly, the first appearance of the word ‘laberinto’ in Borges’s poetry occurs in ‘Del infierno y del cielo’ (1942), where it is used as a figurative representation of hell (Rodríguez Monegal, ‘Symbols in Borges’ Work’, p. 333). Furthermore, 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. These parallels seem to indicate that the Argentinian 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 Dantesque 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’ (*Purgatorio* XXXIII, line 104; cf. *Paradiso* I, 73–81). ‘Noon’, explains Edmund Gardner, ‘has a special significance for the mystics, as representing celestial desire, or divine illumination, or eternity’.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, 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 (consider, for instance, Capaneo’s blistering pride in *Inferno* XIV, line 51: ‘“Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto”’). 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’ (line 1, my italics) to show that the journey he is about to begin concerns the whole of mankind. Then he brings in the metaphor of the dark wilderness to describe how he had succumbed to ignorance and sin having lost the straight way of virtue and justice: ‘mi ritrovai 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 | che la verace via abbandonai’ (lines 11–12; significantly, Borges highlights this passage in one of his essays on Dante (*OC*, III, pp. 347–348)). He then comes to the foot of a hill and sees the rays of the sun illuminating its summit, that is, he sees 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; on which Borges based one of his short parables included later in *El hacedor*); then a threatening lion, and finally a frightful 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; again, this verse is commented on by Borges who praises Dante's figurative merging of the visual and the auditory (*OC*, III, p. 364)).

We do not need to concern ourselves with the exact allegorical meaning of the three beasts; it is sufficient to note the striking coincidences of the passage as a whole with some of the key elements in 'La escritura del dios', specifically, the dark prison, 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 are particularly significant for they show how much attention he actually paid to the opening lines of the *Commedia*.

On the other hand, 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 (echoing Dante's luminous point in *Paradiso* XXVIII, 16), and then experiences mystical union. The episode is characterized, as I have already mentioned, 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 of 'understanding', 'imagining', and 'feeling', 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 (*Conv.* III, ii, 14). In fact, the primacy of the contemplative life was formulated by Aristotle, who in *Nicomachean Ethics* declares: 'The intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects with which the intellect deals are the highest things that can be known. [. . .] It follows that it is the activity of the intellect that constitutes complete human happiness. [. . .] Such a life as this however will be higher than the human level: not in virtue of his humanity will a man achieve it, but in virtue of something within him that is divine' (X, vii, 1177a §2; 1177b §§7–8).<sup>11</sup> And yet, Dante's insistence 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, for this is what is characteristic of human beings who are not pure intelligences but a dual compound of body



and soul. We must not forget that in the Christian view man is in a continuous process of becoming (hence the upward, though slow and laborious movement of the souls in Purgatory), and that his life on earth is a preparation for the eternal life revealed to him through the example of Christ (*Conv.* II, viii, 14–16). Accordingly, it is through the exercise of the human virtues – moral and intellectual – that man can become good and noble, for it is not pure knowledge that makes us good (as Aristotle observes in *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, xii, 1) but knowledge in conjunction with moral virtue as reflected in our actions and choices (cf. Letter to Cangrande, §16).

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 (Stefanini, 'Dante in Borges', pp. 54–55). Consider, for instance, the pilgrim's state of mind in *Paradiso* XXVII, lines 7–8: 'Oh gioia! oh ineffabile allegrezza! | oh vita intègra d'amore e di pace!'. Characteristically, in Dante the good and the true are identified in God; God in His perfection is amorous joy. Consider Beatrice's words to Dante as they reach the Empyrean heaven:

luce intellettuale, piena d'amore;  
amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;  
letizia che trascende ogni dolzore.  
(*Paradiso* XXX, 40–42)

'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.

Related to the joyful exclamation of mystical union is the ineffability topos. In 'La escritura del dios' Borges writes: '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 può chi di là sù discende' (*Par.*, I, 5–6), which he glosses in Epistole 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).<sup>12</sup> 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 com' ò il vidi!', he exclaims (*Paradiso* 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.<sup>13</sup> 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'. It is a desperate and, at the same time, consoling confession. 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.<sup>14</sup>

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 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 (cf. *Purgatorio* XXXII, 103–05; *Paradiso* 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 vision of the prophet Ezekiel as he too suffers from captivity: 'Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures. [. . .] As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful' (Ezekiel, I, 15, 18; my italics). 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 conceivable that the textual echoes found here are intentional (see also *OC*, III, p. 370). Furthermore, it is also in Ezekiel that the metaphor of the book of God – so dear to Dante – is found (compare *Paradiso* XXXIII, 85–93). 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: and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe' (Ezekiel, II, 9–10).

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' (*Paradiso* X, 7, 11). Here, in the *Paradiso*, Dante celebrates the beauty and perfection of the divine realm with an exalted

contemplation 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,  
 sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
 l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.  
 (*Paradiso* 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 not only implies a distrust of man's moral capabilities but also an acceptance of necessity and determination for, he intimates, 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 allusion to time in relation to Hindu and Maya beliefs, respectively (Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, p. 48; Balderston, 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 (compare 'La doctrina de los ciclos', *OC*, I, p. 388, where the word 'rueda' is used in this sense; consider also p. 387: 'El universo es consumido cíclicamente por el fuego que lo engendró, y resurge de la aniquilación para repetir una idéntica historia').

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 (cf. 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). For instance, 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. 354–355), in 'Una vindicación del falso Basílides' 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 necessity and 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. 215–216, my italics). In effect, for Borges the light of truth does not lie in a conjectural transcendent, nor in the mystic's intellectual vision, but in the uncertain 'here and now' of human existence. This he states clearly in the former essay: '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).

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.<sup>15</sup> 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 entendí [. . .] 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 amongst 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 entristecer 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. 395–396). 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 short story's main themes: history, circular time, destiny, hatred and destruction. In this respect, 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*'; 'los *ardientes* designios del universo', pp. 596, 599; my italics).

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

Como aquel capitán del Purgatorio  
que, huyendo a pie y ensangrentando el llano,  
fue cegado y tumbado por la muerte  
donde un oscuro río pierde el nombre,  
así habré de caer.<sup>16</sup>

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 they died include the same figures arranged in a different order (1289/1829). On the other hand, whilst the destinies of the two men are shown to be analogous it is also implied that their life was subject to a higher, universal order:

A esta ruinosa tarde me llevaba  
el laberinto múltiple de pasos  
que mis días tejieron desde un día  
de la niñez. Al fin he descubierto  
la recóndita clave de mis años,  
la suerte de Francisco de Laprida,  
la letra que faltaba, la perfecta  
forma que supo Dios desde el principio.  
En el espejo de esta noche alcanzo  
mi insospechado rostro eterno. El círculo  
se va a cerrar. Yo aguardo que así sea.  
(lines 31–38)

Seen from the inside, the labyrinthine condition of our daily life can only reflect the uncertainty of our final destination. Thus in Borges death constitutes the moment in which every human destiny is fully recognized. It is because we are mortal beings that our lives are 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 man's being in the world: it is part of a process of self-understanding which unfolds itself through temporality.<sup>17</sup> 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', *OC*, I, p. 568, my italics; first published in 1948). From this virtual defence of allegorical interpretation 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 (the characters in Borges's 'Deutsches Requiem'), 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', *OC*, I, p. 580; first published in 1946). 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 barbarity and civilization reappeared in contemporary history with a force and magnitude that threatened to demolish the political foundations of the West. Amongst 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 says; 'fueron tan atropellados y destruídos ellos y todas sus cosas, que ninguna apariencia les quedó de lo que eran antes'.<sup>18</sup> 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 amongst 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 in order 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' (ibid., 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> Amongst 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 characters, 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). The reason for such a shocking, paradoxical conclusion lies in the absurd denial of human error through the frantic sublimation of evil 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).

Man as architect of his own destiny: clearly the problem posed by Borges is an ethical one. Here, as in many of his writings, Borges explores

the question of free will and its relationship to the total scheme of the universe. 'Nuestro destino', he writes elsewhere, 'no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro' ('Nueva refutación del tiempo', *OC*, II, p. 149). In a previous essay, considering the Christian theme of eternal punishment, 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', *OC*, I, p. 238). A glance at Borges's fiction, however, shows that his interest in human destinies is rooted in the ethical without him actually making moral judgments about his characters and situations (cf. Garayalde, pp. 32–33, 46). The total 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 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 also Villari's self-induced confusion between dreams, the imagination, and reality). Nevertheless, whilst this is the case 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. In this respect, consider 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 (*ibid.*, 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. Within this space, the verbal texture acquires an ethical meaning 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). Elsewhere he says of the character in



Dostoevsky: 'Raskolnikov, para quien ha leído su historia, es un ser verdadero' ('El verdugo piadoso', *OC*, III, p. 358).<sup>21</sup>

In the latter essay, Borges contrasts 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 remarks 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 considering 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 acarrearán' (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 Dostoevsky 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' (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 (compare 'El espejo de los enigmas', in *Otras inquisiciones*, *OC*, II, p. 98: '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.'). 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 pronounce a moral indictment against the situation. To put it in a negative 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, my italics). The universe as a stage, man as actor and spectator, history as the tragic plot that man incessantly performs: 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.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the period that I have considered in this paper 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 mankind; 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.

## Notes

1. *Historia universal de la infamia*, in Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, 3 vols. (Barcelona: Emecé, 1989) I, p. 291. All further references to Borges's work are taken from this edition.

2. Donald L. Shaw, *Borges' Narrative Strategy*, Liverpool Monographs in Hispanic Studies, 11 (Leeds: Cairns, 1992), 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 misled or overlook important areas of signification'. For a recent consideration of the role of allusion in Borges's narrative, see Evelyn Fishburn, 'Hidden Pleasures in Borges's Allusions', in *Borges and Europe Revisited*, ed. by Evelyn Fishburn (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1998), pp. 49–59.

3. On Borges's syncretism, see Didier T. Jaén, *Borges' Esoteric Library: Metaphysics to Metafiction* (Lanham, MD, and London: University Press of America, 1992); Giovanna de Garayalde, *Jorge Luis Borges: Sources and Illumination* (London: The Octagon Press, 1978). On Borges's reputed erudition, see Roberto Paoli, 'Per un atlante del sapere di Borges', in *Tre Saggi su Borges* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1992), pp. 9–44 (esp. pp. 17, 27).

4. *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 69–80.

5. Consider, for instance, Saúl Sosnowski's forced comparison: 'Con pocas variantes se dan los pasos recomendados por el Rabí Dov Ber de Mezritch: Tzinacán no está en contacto con la sociedad; se concentra en el estudio de lo que considera la Sagrada Escritura; practica meditaciones especiales (*yihudim*) que lo acercan a una unión con Dios. Tzinacán pasa, además, por varias etapas de *katnuth* y *gadluth* (pequeñez y engrandecimiento) que de modo dinámico lo acercan a su meta'; in *Borges y la cábala: la búsqueda del verbo* (Buenos Aires: Hispamérica, 1976), p. 71. Borges's use of mystic symbolism is well known; see Ana María Barrenechea, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, ed. and trans. by Robert Lima (New York: New York University Press, 1965 [= *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1957)]); id., 'Borges y los símbolos', *Revista iberoamericana*, 43 (1977) 601–608; Emir Rodríguez Monegal, 'Symbols in Borges' Work', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19 (1973) 325–340; id., *Borges, hacia una lectura poética* (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1976).

6. See Jaime Alazraki, *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid: Gredos, 1968); id., *Borges and the Kabbalah and Other Essays on His Fiction and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Saúl Sosnowski, "'The God's Script" – A Kabbalistic Quest', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19 (1973) 381–394; Jaén, *Borges' Esoteric Library*, pp. 79–105, 169–172. In the preparation of this paper I have also consulted the following studies: Alicia Jurado, *Genio y figura de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1964); Luis A. Murillo, *The Cyclical Night: Irony in James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Carter Wheelock, *The Mythmaker: A Study of Motif and Symbol in the Short Stories of Jorge Luis Borges* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1969); Stelio Cro, *Jorge Luis Borges: poeta, saggista e narratore* (Milan: Mursia, 1971); Alberto C. Pérez, *Realidad y Suprarrealidad en los cuentos de J. L. Borges* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1971); Jaime Giordano, 'Forma y sentido de "La escritura del dios" de Jorge Luis Borges', *Revista*

*iberoamericana*, 38 (1972) 105–115; Lida Aronne Amestoy, *América en la encrucijada de mito y razón: introducción al cuento epifánico latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires: Fernando García Cambeiro, 1976); Roberto Paoli, *Borges: percorsi di significato* (Florence: Università degli Studi di Firenze, 1977); Ruggero Stefanini, 'Dante in Borges', *Italica* 57 (1980) 53–65 (pp. 54–55); Graciela Massuh, *Borges: una estética del silencio* (Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano, 1980); Edna Aizenberg, *El tejedor del Aleph: Biblia, Kábala y judaísmo en Borges* (Madrid: Altalena, 1986); Estela Canto, *Borges a contraluz* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1989). Further references to these works are given after quotations in the text.

7. 'Estudio preliminar', in *La Divina Comedia*, Colección Clásicos Jackson, vol. 31 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Jackson, 1949), pp. IX–XXVIII. In 1948 Borges published a series of articles on Dante, namely, 'El seudo problema de Ugolino', 'El verdugo piadoso', 'El último viaje de Ulises', 'El simurg y el águila', and 'El encuentro en un sueño'. The first three of these were included in 'Estudio preliminar' (with slight variants), but they were all recovered by the author, together with other essays, in *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (1982). 'La escritura del dios' was first published in *Sur*, 172 (1949) 7–12, and included that same year in the first edition of *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1949).

8. See 'The Kabbalah', in Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah*, pp. 54–55; also 'La Divina Comedia' and 'La cábala', in *Siete noches*, *OC*, III, pp. 207–208, 270–271. cf. Cro, p. 114: 'Questa insistenza di Borges sulla pluralità di significati della *Commedia* è un elemento critico importantissimo per comprendere fino a che punto la presenza di Dante è profonda nell'opera dell'argentino'. See also José M. Cuesta Abad, *Ficciones de una crisis poética e interpretación en Borges* (Madrid: Gredos, 1995), chapter IV: 'Malinterpretaciones dantescas: la hermenéutica creativa de Borges', pp. 181–221.

9. See Mario Pazzaglia, *Il verso e l'arte della canzone nel De vulgari eloquentia* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1967) pp. 104–105 (with bibliography); Peter Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Leiden and Cologne: Brill, 1974), chapter 1. Borges's reference is to the *Divine Comedy*; see 'Intervista con J. L. Borges', in Cro, p. 255. Cf. Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio*, ed. by G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (Florence: Le Monnier, 1964) I, p. 97. All further references are taken from this edition. On Dantean allegory, see Peter Armour, 'The Theme of Exodus in the First Two Cantos of the *Purgatorio*', in *Dante Soundings: Eight Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. by David Nolan (Dublin: Irish Academic Press; Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), pp. 59–99 (with bibliography); also *Dante e le forme dell'allegoresi*, ed. by Michelangelo Picone (Ravenna: Longo, 1987). There is, of course, an extensive bibliography on this question.

10. *Dante and the Mystics* (London: Dent, 1913), p. 300. All references to the *Divine Comedy* are taken from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67). For the notion of Dante's hell as a labyrinth, 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 (cf. p. 288 for the leftward direction of the traveler noted by Borges in his essay).

11. Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. by H. Rackham (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, repr. 1990), pp. 613, 617.

12. *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae*, ed. and trans. by Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), pp. 193 and 209, respectively.

13. Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 262.

14. Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, repr. 1974), p. 171.

15. Philip Wicksteed, *The Religion of Time and the Religion of Eternity* (London: Green, 1899), p. 28.

16. 'Poema conjetural' (lines 13–17), *OC*, II, p. 245; the alluded soldier is the Ghibelline Buonconte da Montefeltro whose tragic death is recounted by Dante in *Purgatorio* V, 85–136 (as is well known, line 14 is a direct borrowing from the Dantean episode). See Emilio Carilla, 'Un poema de Borges (El "Poema conjetural")', in *Revista hispánica moderna*, 29 (1963) 32–45; Paoli, *Borges: percorsi di significato*, pp. 96–100; id., *Borges e gli scrittori italiani* (Naples: Liguori, 1997), pp. 109–118; more generally, Zunilda Gertel, *Borges y su retorno a la poesía* (New York: University of Iowa and Las Americas Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 128–130.

17. 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). More generally, Barrenechea, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, pp. 34–49, 60–67; Rodríguez Monegal, 'Symbols in Borges' Work', pp. 331–338.

18. *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. by Angel María Garibay, 3rd edn (Mexico: Porrúa, 1975), p. 18.

19. John Elliot, *The Old World and The New: 1492–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 28–53; William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru* (New York: Random House, [1936]), pp. 697–698.

20. Aizenberg, *El tejedor del Aleph*, pp. 46–51. See also Emir Rodríguez Monegal, 'Borges y la política', *Revista iberoamericana*, 43 (1977) 269–291 (pp. 277–281); Balderston, *Out of Context*, pp. 63–65.

21. See Borges's remarks in 'Debates del Sur: moral y literatura', *Sur*, 126 (1945) 62–84 (pp. 71–72).

22. The idea is frequent in Borges's work; see, for instance, 'Avatares de la tortuga' (in *Discusión*), 'Las ruinas circulares' (in *Ficciones*), 'Del culto de los libros' (in *Otras inquisiciones*), 'Los espejos' and 'Un problema' (in *El hacedor*), 'El golem' (in *El otro, el mismo*). For a brief but pertinent discussion of the topos, see E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, repr. 1994), pp. 8–11. On the other hand, the notion of a predetermined will was advocated by Arthur Schopenhauer, whose writings exerted a strong influence on Borges; on this issue see Paoli, 'Borges e Schopenhauer', in *Tre saggi*, pp. 121–191. For the pantheistic elements in the story's outcome, see Barrenechea, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, pp. 77–97.