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MODERN GREEK STUDIES  
(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)

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The University of Sydney

THE PROBLEM OF TIME IN THE  
CRITICAL WRITINGS OF JORGE-LUIS BORGES

INTRODUCTION

Time is one of those master words appearing at constant intervals in the work of Borges; for him it is one of the key metaphors which “Pueden ser todo para todos, como el Apóstol” (1989: 153). In *Historia de la eternidad*, Borges called it “Un tembloroso y exigente problema, acaso el más vital de la metafísica” (1980: 315).

In order to unravel this pervasive and fundamental metaphysical problem for his own narratological purposes, Borges explores far and wide the extensive literature on time. One has to remember that Borges, as Eco puts it, “appears to have read everything (and even more, given that he has reviewed nonexistent books)” (1990: 156).

This vast, rather encyclopedic knowledge allows Borges to investigate the problems he cares for most, including time, not in order to dominate them but rather “to sketch an idea, to trace a plan of work; in short, to trim the question” (1967: 198). The question, which often coincides with the plan of work, and his solution are usually engendered in Borges’ fiction. It is not by accident that Borges remarked that he did not use Berkeley or Schopenhauer because he believed in their philosophical theories, but only because they offered such rich literary material:

I thought, above all, of the literary possibilities of idealist philosophy, shall we say, more than of its intrinsic merit. This does not mean necessarily that I believe in the philosophy of Berkeley or Schopenhauer... I believe I was thinking more of the alchemy of unreality of the material world as a subject usable by literature. (Borges, qtd. in Jaén 12)

Fiction and not philosophy is Borges’ ultimate aim. “Dos tendencias he descubierto, al corregir las pruebas,” Borges said about *Otras inquisiciones*, “en los misceláneos trabajos de este volumen. Una, a estimar las ideas religiosas o filosóficas por su valor estético y aun

por lo que encierran de singular y de maravilloso” (1989: 153). He is not interested in solving the metaphysical problems posited by so many different philosophical schools, but rather in re-elaborating them for the construction of an allusive, labyrinthine, magical fiction.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, before venturing into the analysis of Borges’ fiction, one should explore the intricate palimpsest on which it supports itself, and indeed investigate Borges’ journey through the realm of philosophy and religion, together with the strategies he deploys to prepare, to “trim”, the vast knowledge of the universe for his own narrative purpose. This is precisely what I propose to do in this article with particular reference to the notion of time.

### BORGES’ “ABDUCTION”

I would like to start by following the analytical indication provided by Eco in his “Abduction in Uqbar”. In this essay, Eco borrows and subsequently adapts for his own critical needs a theory elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce for whom there are three possible modes of reasoning: “deduction”, “induction” and “abduction”. Whereas the meaning of deduction is apparent, those of “induction” and “abduction” need further consideration. Both deal with the solving of problems but whereas in the former the solution is attained after X number of tests, providing those tests have given the same results, the latter is chance-based, providing that chance is subsequently proven tenable. While in the case of “induction”, risk is represented by the relative volatility of the process (let us say that the experiment is based on 8 tests which produce the same result; should one stop there or continue? And what if test 9 yields a different result?), in the case of “abduction” risk is represented by “gambling” on the possibility that an idea, or the result of an experiment, although taken out of its original context, can still serve to validate a further theory. “Abduction”, as its very name suggests, implies an act of borrowing, of “hijacking” someone else’s axiom or idea for one’s own purpose.

It seems to me that the strategy deployed by Borges in inquiring about metaphysical problems – and time is one of them – belongs to the “abduction” type. In fact, it appears to match well what Borges says about the philosophy of Berkeley and Schopenhauer. In Borges’ experience this procedure involves borrowing ideas and concepts from others and subsequently using and adapting them in accordance with the needs arising as a consequence of a particular theoretical context.

It is on this premise that I propose to interpret Borges’ analysis of time as an act of “abduction” insofar as, and not unlike the scientist, Borges elaborates first a hypothesis – and his critical work, especially *Otras inquisiciones*, is paved with hypotheses – which he then puts to the test in his fictive work.

## HISTORIA DE LA ETERNIDAD

Following a chronological order, I shall begin my discussion of Borges' essays on time with what is the first comprehensive study conducted by Borges on this subject, *Historia de la eternidad*, first published in 1936. For the purpose of my study, I have consulted the Bruguera edition of Borges' *Prosa completa* (1980). In this edition, the original text of *Historia de la eternidad* is completed and partly rectified by the insertion of two later pieces: "El tiempo circular" (1943), and "La metáfora" (1952). The reason for these two additions is explained by the sense of uneasiness which came over Borges when he was asked to re-publish his old account on time.

Borges' self-censoring process is the combination of stylistic and formal considerations and philosophical adjustments. His re-working of *Historia de la eternidad* is due less to the former than the latter. In this particular instance, Borges felt that the essay did not convey his current philosophical position with regard to time. In 1953, in the preface introducing *Historia de la eternidad* in the new Emece edition of his completed work, Borges wrote:

Poco diré de la singular "historia de la eternidad" que da nombre a estas páginas. En el principio hablo de la filosofía platónica; en un trabajo que aspiraba al rigor cronológico, más razonable hubiera sido partir de los hexámetros de Parménides ("no ha sido nunca ni será, porque es"). No sé cómo pude comparar a 'inmóviles piezas de museo' las formas de Platón y cómo no entendí, leyendo a Schopenhauer y al Erígena, que éstas son vivas, poderosas y orgánicas. El movimiento, ocupación de sitios distintos en instantes distintos, es incocebible sin tiempo; asimismo lo es la inmovilidad, ocupación de un mismo lugar en distintos puntos del tiempo. ¿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? (1980: 313)

In this paragraph, Borges posits three fundamental considerations as to his reading of time. The first refers to Parmenides' proposition "no ha sido nunca ni será, porque es", the second concerns the relationship between time and movement, the third is a definition, in the form of a rhetorical question, of eternity.

Let us start by focusing on the first and the third considerations. It is interesting to note the fact that they have been separated even though they express a similar notion. If in fact eternity, as Borges will reiterate four pages later, is the coexistence of the past, the present and the future, it is a state or a condition which, instead of distinguishing between the before, the now and the after, embraces them comprehensively in an infinite and



eternal “here”. I have used an adverb indicating space, “here”, in place of an adverb of time due to the impossibility of finding a grammatical signpost for “eternity”. As we have seen, I cannot use the word “present” nor its adverb “now” or its adjective “actual”, and neither does Parmenides, in that the present is, like the past and the future, fully absorbed and integrated in eternity. I could have used the noun “moment” as in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>2</sup> But the “moment” Zarathustra speaks of is still very much correlated with a presentness, “the present moment”, in which the past and the future meet. This moment is therefore a point of departure and its meaning does not comprehend, or at least it struggles to convey, the notion of an infinite and timeless simultaneity of times.

Moreover, the present is precisely that moment which continuously transforms itself into the past and the future according to the direction we give to the arrow of time. This notion of transformation is foreign to eternity which, as Borges emphasises, is free of the intolerable oppression of time progression (“intolerable opresión de lo sucesivo”). What we attain is a time divested of time, or rather a time which ignores the passing of time. Borges calls it “eternity” and to eternity he opposes a time proceeding in a succession of instants in which a beginning is replaced by a middle and the middle by an end and so on in a process of time separation and categorisation in which individual instants are deemed to be different from each other.

The opposition between eternity and time is not the only feature of Borges’ preliminary discussion of time. His definition of eternity is indeed loaded with a series of implications embracing both the philosophical and the literary sphere. Borges says that eternity has been yearned for passionately by many poets, and that it is a splendid artifice which, albeit momentarily, has the faculty of freeing one from the unbearable oppression of time. Borges appears to allude here, and rather explicitly, to an affinity between eternity and art. The allusion is rendered even more tangible when he introduces a further distinction between time and eternity by remarking that “[E] tiempo: misterio metafísico, natural, que debe preceder a la eternidad, que es hija de los hombres” (1980: 315). Eternity is a human construct (let us remember the “artificio espléndido” of a few pages before), which, if I may sketch a preliminary, provisional hypothesis, finds its ideal inscription in art whose purpose is to provide an ephemeral but vital solace to the grinding pace of life. If this is true, then Borges not only counterposes two philosophical notions, eternity and time, but he also details a human cosmogony originating in the artificial production of art. This cosmogony might very well form a couplet in which to the universe created by God, the origin of things and the realm of time, is opposed the world conceived by humans and dominated by eternity.

The hypothesis illustrated above is fascinating but it holds only to a certain extent. It would be difficult to maintain it when considering, as Borges does, the essence of God,

one of whose attributes is eternity: “La eternidad quedó como atributo de la ilimitada mente de Dios” (1980: 236). It would thus be incorrect to construct an opposition between human eternity and temporal divinity. And yet that “la eternidad, que es hija de los hombres” continues to resonate in our ears characterising itself, at least for the moment, as a plain and rather peculiar contradiction.

But the chiasmic confrontation of antonymic propositions is one of the favourite strategies employed by Borges in his epistemological analysis, which consequently attains that unique digressive trait better defined by its frequent detours. In fully embracing the “abduction” technique, Borges attempts to explore all the possible interpretations of time before attempting his own interpretation. In the first ten pages of *Historia de la eternidad*, he relates the introspection on time and eternity of Plato, Plotinus, Bradley, Augustine, Parmenides, Unamuno, Russell, Irenaeus (to name only a few), and differentiates time from eternity by qualifying the first diachronically and the second synchronically. He also says, articulating Augustine’s thought, that God created time but is beyond time, in eternity, and that humans created eternity but suffer the imposition of time.

Borges goes on to elucidate what looks like a rather labyrinthine proposition. First of all, he hints that God is the gradually perfected creation of humans; a symbol, an archetype, whose main purpose is to legitimate the very notion of eternity. These hints gradually take the form of explicit remarks such as the following:

Hombres remotos, hombres barbados y mitrados la concibieron [eternity], públicamente para confundir herejías y para vindicar la distinción de las tres personas en una, secretamente para restañar de algún modo el curso de las horas. (1980: 328–329)

Eternity is thus re-appropriated by men who in turn become the creators of God, or at least of some of His attributes. The fusion/confusion “men-God” will reappear as a common theme in many other essays by Borges in which other religions, not only the Christian, will function as examples (see, for instance, “El enigma de Edward Fitzgerald”, “De alguien a nadie”, and “Formas de una leyenda” in *Otras inquisiciones* and “Avatares de la tortuga” in *Discusión* [1957]).

In Borges, eternity and creation appear to belong to the same semantic field whether he speaks of God or of humans. In fact, one senses that Borges considers humans and God to be similar, if not the same, in that both are creators of enduring, as well as artificial, works of art. “Todas las cosas son artificiales, porque la Naturaleza es el arte de Dios” (1989: 94), Borges, quoting Thomas Browne, is quick to note and to emphasise.

In Borges, the distinction human/God is very fine, almost blurred. We may think of the short story “La escritura del Dios” (1949), where a Mayan priest achieved union with

the divine by decoding the words of God inscribed on the skin of a jaguar. Humans can indeed aspire to become God through a hermeneutic process, which, in Borges, is often correlated with the intellectual, as well as spiritual, capacity of solving a riddle. It is again the abduction strategy that operates here, providing the hermeneutist with the right answer, which, however, and most interestingly, will not be tested in reality. The powerful insight gained by the priest in “La escritura del Dios” will remain confined to himself, in eternity, within the artifice of fiction.

In associating humans and God, Borges mitigates the apparent contradiction encapsulating eternity, which consequently, whether a creation of humans or an attribute of God, becomes less strident. It becomes of secondary importance to establish whether eternity is an attribute of God elaborated by humans, and whether indeed God Himself is a human creation; it remains true that eternity is experienced as a constituent of art, which, in turn, is an artifice, the main function of which is to arrest linear time (“para restañar de algún modo el curso de las horas”).

The humans Borges speaks of, the ones begetting eternity, belong to a special category of people. They are “Hombres remotos, hombres barbados y mitrados” who, by virtue of their beard and their attire, are a special breed and thus not to be confused with the illiterate, violent, poor multitude. They belong to that restricted and privileged group of creators, those happy few who can aspire to ascend to and become one with God. It would not be difficult to imagine that, for Borges, great artists can be considered an integral part of this elitist and special circle of people who are beyond the wretchedness of reality and time and close to the eternity of God, qua their constructed eternity. They are perhaps the inhabitants of the magical library, the ultimate labyrinth which protects them from the violent reality filled with “amateur hooligans” (Borges, qtd. in Monegal 98). But if, on the one hand, this labyrinth and its intricate corridors offer protection and solace, on the other, they can become a claustrophobic prison (see for example “La casa de Asterión” [1947]). Art, and Borges’ rather hesitant and somewhat ambiguous view of it appears to reiterate this, is at one and the same time an alternative to real life but also a bitter exile from it.

Towards the end of the original version of *Historia de la eternidad*, Borges relates a personal experience of eternity with the intention of illustrating the theoretical discussion preceding it. This is the famous “Sentirse en muerte”. Borges here describes himself walking in one of Buenos Aires’ suburbs, Barracas, and experiencing the strange sensation of being dead, or partaking of eternity. In finding himself in Barracas, an area characterised by its modest dwellings and unsealed roads, Borges has the impression of being taken back thirty years.

And yet Borges knows that what he is experiencing is not merely a journey back in time, but a more complex occurrence which goes beyond time:

No creí, no, haber remontado las presuntivas aguas del Tiempo; más bien me sospeché poseedor del sentido reticente o ausente de la incocebible palabra *eternidad*. Sólo después alcancé a definir esa imaginación. La escribo, ahora, así: Esa pura representación de hechos homogéneos – noche en serenidad, parecía límpida, olor provinciano de la madreSelva, barro fundamental – no es meramente idéntica a la que hubo en esa esquina hace tanto años; es, sin parecidos ni repeticiones, la misma. El tiempo, si podemos intuir esa identidad, es una delusión: la indiferencia e inseparabilidad de un momento de su aparente ayer y otro de su aparente hoy bastan para desintegrarlo. (1980: 332)

Borges is hinting here at the futility of retrieving the past insofar as the existence of time itself is questioned. Not only does he counterpose his notion of eternity with that of time, but in stressing the odours of a particular street, its colours and the shape of the houses, an experience that he does not link to a similar one he had in the past, Borges contrasts the subjectivity of time and the universality of eternity. The street in Barracas, as Borges sees it, is not similar to the one which was there thirty years ago, it is indeed the same one. Time is not repeating itself in eternity; on the contrary, it is disintegrated in eternity. Together with the disintegration of time, Borges also dissipates the subjectivity of the individual, its uniqueness which is embedded in time.

#### ETERNITY AND ITS METAPHOR

A rather specious position on time, one might argue. Borges is aware of the complexity of his hypothesis which, without articulating its metaphysical and religious foundations, could be considered extravagant. It is interesting to note that in *Historia de la eternidad* Borges does not attempt to philosophically and comprehensively elucidate his theory. He is even prepared to concede the oddity of his view which, he admits, is intellectually (read rationally) untenable. Borges contents himself here with a rather romantic ending whereby eternity, being rebuffed intellectually, is accepted as a moment of pure and ecstatic emotion which is not even damaged by reducing it to the state of imagination:

Pero ni siquiera tenemos la seguridad de nuestra pobreza, puesto que el tiempo fácilmente refutable en lo sensitivo, no lo es también en lo intelectual, de cuya esencia parece inseparable el concepto de sucesión. Quede, pues, en anécdota emocional la vislumbrada idea y en la confesa irresolución de esta hoja el momento verdadero de éxtasis y la insinuación posible de eternidad de que esa noche no me fue avara. (1980: 332)

If, on the one hand, the conclusion is artistically suggestive, on the other, it is philosophically disappointing, especially in view of the romantic opposition between reason and emotion which does less than justice to the rich theological and philosophical discussion which preceded and introduced it. Incidentally, it echoes, as we shall see briefly, the ending of “Nueva refutación del tiempo” where Borges points again to the difference between temporal progression, engendered in reality, and alternative times, inscribed in art and philosophy.

The unconvincing closure of *Historia de la eternidad* is probably one of the reasons why Borges agreed to re-publish the volume only after the inclusion of other chapters, and why it has not been translated into English.<sup>3</sup> Borges’ ambivalent attitude to *Historia de la eternidad* clearly indicates a disaffection mixed with a kind of respect for a book which can still be regarded as the text prefiguring and introducing his successive attempts to grapple with the notion of time. “La metáfora”, “El tiempo circular” and “Nueva refutación del tiempo” would indeed be incomplete if not supported and announced by this first study.

And yet Borges’ uneasiness over *Historia de la eternidad* is not so much caused by the opposition between emotion and reason as by a philosophical inadequacy. Borges, one has to remember, is first of all a novelist and a poet. His interest in philosophy and religion has enriched and even shaped his writings which, however, remain fiction. The ‘literary’ conclusion to *Historia de la eternidad* could not disappoint Borges in that it is a very artistically charged conclusion (it is no accident that “Sentirse en muerte” will re-appear in “Nueva refutación del tiempo”). He was mainly concerned by the way in which this conclusion relates to its terms of reference. In other words, the archetype “eternity” is still very much a raw entity which therefore the metaphor of “Sentirse en muerte” struggles to convey, not because the metaphor is weak, but rather owing to its referential vagueness. Borges feels that the notion of eternity has not been fully elucidated, which means brought into the concreteness of a real and tangible symbol. Indeed, he has probably participated in confusing it by equivocating about Plato’s notion of archetypes. That is why Borges feels compelled to introduce further explications which he provides through the analysis of metaphor, circular time and the eternal recurrence. Only when he has managed to construct a durable and solid referential image, does he then proceed to put next to it an illustrative metaphor. The metaphor follows the referent and only by having a visible and unequivocal referent/symbol could Borges free himself and his fiction from the arbitrariness of the sign.

Am I perhaps proposing to read Borges as a realist writer? Certainly not. And yet, in Borges there is a realist connotation which, however, has less to do with the relationship between language and object-referent than with the ontological couplet metaphor - referent/symbol. The difference, using a comparison favoured by Borges, is that between

realists and Platonists, or nominalists and Aristotelians, where “Los últimos sienten que las clases, los órdenes y los géneros son realidades; los primeros, que son generalizaciones; para éstos, el lenguaje no es otra cosa que un aproximativo juego de símbolos; para aquéllos es el mapa del universo. El platónico sabe que el universo es de algún modo un cosmos, un orden; ese orden, para el aristotélico, puede ser un error o una ficción de nuestro conocimiento parcial” (1989: 96). Borges goes on to say that:

A través de las latitudes y de las épocas, los dos antagonistas inmortales cambian de dialecto y de nombre: uno es Parménides, Platón, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Bradley; el otro, Heráclito, Aristóteles, Locke, Hume, William James. (1989: 96)

And what about Borges himself? Where does he place himself, among the realists or the nominalists? The more immediate answer would be to put him in the rubric of the nominalists, and Borges himself appears to indicate this answer when he says that nowadays we are, even without knowing it, all nominalists. And yet one cannot avoid reflecting upon some of the characteristics attributed to the realists, especially the language-symbol equation and the predominance of order over indeterminacy. It is undisputable that Borges' language is highly symbolic and, moreover, that his fiction tends to set up a geometrical, although labyrinthine, order which opposes the disorderly permutability decreed by chance. In doing so, he erects a cosmos in which generalisations are rejected and metaphors are included with the purpose of elucidating the living existence of genres and classes. Perhaps Borges was at one and the same time a realist and a nominalist, just as he was a writer, the “other” Borges, and at the same time a person, the historical Borges; a human being constantly divided and torn by an irreconcilable duality.

#### “EL TIEMPO CIRCULAR” AND “LA METÁFORA”

In 1943, Borges wrote an essay, “El tiempo circular”, which had the purpose of amending the original version of *Historia de la eternidad*. Borges was concerned with the way in which he had interpreted Plato's archetypes, that is, as static, immobile entities comparable to museum pieces. It is the lack of movement implied in the earlier remark that does not satisfy Borges any longer. But by movement he does not mean an entity travelling in space, but rather in time. In 1943, Borges cannot understand why in 1936 he had come to think of Plato's archetypes as unchangeable, forever fixed, crystallised in time. By contrast, he sees them now as dynamic notions changing in time. But in changing, they remain the same. What kind of change is this then, if at the end of the equation the figure showing on the paper has not altered? The change is inscribed in

metaphor, in the mantle enveloping the archetypes which, therefore, presents itself differently without intervening to change its intrinsic meaning. That the archetypes are fixed in number is demonstrated by the finitude of time which, due to its circularity, does not allow for an infinite transformation, which could only be engendered by the non-intersecting and linear succession of instants. If time is circular, as Borges appears to believe, then repetition is inevitable; but we are not confronting the repetition of the same, rather of the similar or the analogous. In order to understand the difference between sameness and similarity, it is necessary to question their meaning, especially in Borges.

For Borges, sameness is equated with identical whereas similarity is understood as the same appearing under different forms. It is no accident that “El tiempo circular” is preceded by “La metáfora” in which, by relating a score of identical symbols represented through different images, Borges elucidates his notion of metaphor in relation to circular time.

The notion of sameness is correlated with that of a frozen time, and even with a circularity of time where repetition comes about both in form and in content. On the contrary, the notion of similarity is linked with a dynamic time which repeats itself only in content but not in form. Borges is careful to emphasise the difference between oppositional interpretations of circular time, and he is also careful to indicate, although subtly, where he stands in relation to them.

Borges relates three major schools of thought as far as the notion of circular time is concerned: Plato's, Nietzsche's and Seneca's, Shelley's, Bacon's and Vico's, Schopenhauer's, Emerson's and Marcus Aurelius'. In the third school of thought, the one that Borges calls “El menos pavoroso y melodramático, pero también el único imaginable” (1980: 367), one can discern the poetic and philosophical message resonating in “La metáfora”. Speaking of Marcus Aurelius, Borges remarks that the former “Afirma la analogía, no la identidad, de los muchos destinos individuales” (1980: 368), a qualification that, as we have seen, goes a long way toward clarifying Borges' own understanding of metaphor and fiction. But what about time? Is circular time tantamount to eternity, are they similar or complementary? The question is not rhetorical, especially if one thinks that “El tiempo circular” is an integral part of *Historia de la eternidad*.

At first glance, it seems that “El tiempo circular” not only ignores the notion of eternity, but refutes it by replacing the atemporality of eternity with a temporal construction which, although cyclical and to a certain extent repetitive, maintains the existence of the past, the present and the future. Their existence is confirmed and legitimated by the presence of a metaphor whose metamorphism is determined by the passage of time. Indeed, what would happen to the analogous if it were to be immersed in eternity? It would be an infinite figure comprising all possible and infinite potential metaphors whose

visual apprehension could be grasped in one and only one sight. It would be the “Aleph” in which “Millones de actos deleitables o atroces ... ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposicón y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fué simultáneo” (1957: 164). But if the circularity of time denies the very essence of infinitude, it follows that eternity and its image cannot be infinite. The fact is that circular time, at least for the third school, is infinite inasmuch as it repeats itself differently. It is true that there is nothing new as far as the content is concerned, but everything is new as far as the form is concerned, and the form carries the content, it speaks it. It follows that as long as we are interested in listening or looking, or even interpreting for the sake of interpreting, infinitude will prevail over finitude.

The attribute of eternity is to be atemporal, in other words, it refutes the notion of a beginning, of an end and a now; the attribute of circular time (I am still referring to the third school of thought) is its presentness. In Marcus Aurelius:

Aunque los años de tu vida fueron tres mil o diez veces tres mil, recuerda que ninguno pierde otra vida que la que vive ahora ni vive otra que la que pierde. El término más largo y el más breve son, pues, iguales. El presente es de todos; morir es perder el presente, que es un lapso brevísimo. Nadie pierde el pasado ni el porvenir, pues a nadie pueden quitarle lo que no tiene. Recuerda que todas las cosas giran y vuelven a girar por las mismas órbitas y que para el espectador es igual verla un siglo o dos o infinitamente. (1980: 367–368)

In Schopenhauer:

La forma de aparición de la voluntad es sólo el presente, no el pasado ni el porvenir: éstos no existen más que para el concepto y por el encadenamiento de la conciencia, sometida al principio de razón. Nadie ha vivido en el pasado, nadie vivirá en el futuro; el presente es la forma de toda vida. (1980: 368)

Both eternity and circular time reject the notion of linear time, of a beginning and an end, but whereas eternity denies the present as well, circular time appears to be grounded in the present. And yet what is the present that Marcus Aurelius and Schopenhauer speak of if not an amalgam of past, present and future? This present is not an actual moment, the present moment, rather an archetypal present which envelopes all the past years and those to come, infinitely. In this sense, the meaning of infinitude and eternity are very similar, if not synonymous. Circular time is therefore placed by Borges next to eternity, not merely to reiterate a notion already expressed, but rather to invest the notion of eternity with a



dynamic attribute that it did not have in the first version of *Historia de la eternidad*. The simultaneity of circular time and eternity is opposed to the linearity of calendrical time and rescued from a static crystallisation by virtue of its everchanging appearance. So the nightingale singing is always the same, but in the first instance it is singing for Ruth and in the second for Keats; death is always the same, even though it is experienced by different people who, ultimately, are always the same person thinking of dying different deaths.

### “NUEVA REFUTACIÓN DEL TIEMPO”

The publication of “El tiempo circular” and “la metáfora” are interpolated, and to a certain extent corroborated, by the essay “Nueva refutación del tiempo” whose two versions were published in 1944 and 1946. This essay, together with *Historia de la eternidad*, is Borges’ major theoretical introspection in time. The affinity between “Nueva refutación del tiempo” and *Historia de la eternidad*, although implicit, is evident in that both negate the existence of time intended as a linear succession of instants. What differentiates the two studies is the strategy deployed by Borges to expound his theory. In fact, “Nueva refutación del tiempo” could be considered an attempt to clarify what Borges calls the pathetic stance taken in *Historia de la eternidad*, especially in the segment “Sentirse en muerte”:

Esa refutación está de algún modo en todos mis libros: la prefiguran los poemas *Inscripción en cualquier sepulcro* y *El truco*, de mi *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923); la declaran dos artículos de *Inquisiciones* (1925), la página 46 de *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), el relato *Sentirse en muerte* de mi *Historia de la eternidad* (1936), la nota de la página 24 de *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1942). Ninguno de los textos que he enumerado me satisface, ni siquiera el penúltimo de la serie, menos demostrativo y razonado que adivinatorio y patético. (1960: 237)<sup>4</sup>

Borges is here busy revising and correcting, but it would be more appropriate to say intensifying, his notion of time. As far as we know, he was already working on this project the year before, in 1943, when he wrote “El tiempo circular”. But strangely enough he does not mention this undertaking, and indeed his reference to *Historia de la eternidad* is restricted to the brief comment on “Sentirse en muerte” which, to be fair, will re-appear in its entirety at the end of essay “A” of “Nueva refutación del tiempo”, the one published in 1944. If, on the one hand, the dialogue between *Historia de la eternidad* and “Nueva refutación del tiempo” is obvious, on the other, we cannot speak of a mere continuation of approach and style. The impression is that here Borges sets out to elucidate once and for all his understanding of time, and he does it by also drawing on his previous,

unsatisfactory, accounts. But in doing so, and most interestingly, he once again admits that his refutation of time is still the result of a poetic self which, contrary to the rational and day-self, inhabits the night. The difficulty in discerning a clear and tangible point of arrival in all of Borges' discussions on time resides precisely in the continuous shifting between his rational self and his narrative self; a shifting which is also the cause of the inherently ambiguous and hesitant nature of Borges' fiction.<sup>5</sup>

But what is this refutation about, and how does Borges carry it out?

As we remember the idea of refuting time pervades all of Borges' books, and yet it seems a rather capricious, or better, nocturnal idea which, exposed to the rationality and objectivity of daylight, seems to vanish. Borges himself does not believe it, but at the same time he cannot avoid listening to those voices which come to visit him at night "with the illusory force of an axiom." It is basically to give the right of existence to these nocturnal phantoms that Borges decides to write the refutation of time.

"Nueva refutación del tiempo" pays homage to the obscure and evocative powers of night, to the twilight zone so coveted by poets and writers. The dichotomy between the day and the night Borges is represented powerfully in the last words of "Nueva refutación del tiempo":

Nuestro destino ... no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebató, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges. (1989: 149)

The person speaking here is definitely the daytime Borges, and yet the allusions to the other Borges are many and explicit. Time is real, the world is real, but behind this undeniable truth, behind this undeniable archetype, there is a crowd of metaphors challenging, provoking, complicating the horrible irreversibility of time and reality.

Borges sets out to refute time by drawing on the idealist's thesis formulating the non-existence of space. If we live in a world divested of spirit and matter, asks Borges, in a sphere which is only visible as long as "I" see or think it, and vanishes in the moment that "I" turn my back on it, or, according to Berkeley, in a world whose tangibility is only a grandiose prop erected by God, how can this world contemplate the notion of succession?

Borges' main purpose still hinges upon the negation of time succession, and also upon the distinction between linear time and eternity/circular time. It is important to stress this distinction for it announces and clarifies a further distinction; that between time and

narrative time. To say, as Borges does, “Yo [deny], la existencia de un solo tiempo, en el que se eslabonan todos los hechos” (1989: 140), means to subvert the notion of a horizontal time with a beginning, a middle and an end, but it does not mean to oppose a new perception of time based on the principle of eternity or circular time. For Berkeley, God is the supreme thinker, the archetypal dreamer Borges would call him, but in Borgesian terms God is also beyond temporality. The world is dependent on God; in the moment that he decides to stop thinking, or dreaming, the world will vanish and with it eternity. The disappearance of eternity will decree the end of its opposite, or double, linear time. And yet, as long as God continues to think of us and the world, His mind will produce reality and eternal, circular time; He will produce Borges who is at once the tiger and the body mangled by the tiger.

To a linear time, which Borges attempts to invalidate, is opposed an atemporal or eternal entity whose identity is not to be found in the juxtaposition of past, present and future, but rather in the state of pure creative rapture, like the one illustrated in “Sentirse en muerte”. As becomes clear, Borges’ refutation of time is based on an artistic attitude to life which makes use of a philosophical paradigm, like the idealist one, to support a personal view interested in carving out a viable existence to be conducted within the realm of art. Borges’ entire life is organised around a constructed world in which its author, a bookish, introspective, withdrawn person coveting real action and real blood, can experience reality by rejecting it.<sup>6</sup>

It is not by accident that Borges’ crusade against linear time systematically avoids direct confrontation with the “enemy”, privileging instead the apology of its adversary. Borges restricts his refutation of time to an almost *a priori* and rather literal acceptance of the idealist theory without entering into a detailed description of what time really is. His negation of time, namely of past, present and future, is conducted by quoting a series of texts but failing to support those same quotations with pertinent and solid reasoning. What we have is a sentence promulgated without trial:

Éste [Sextus Empiricus] niega el pasado, que ya fue, y el futuro, que no es aún, y arguye que el presente es divisible o indivisible. No es indivisible, pues en tal caso no tendría principio que lo vinculara al pasado ni fin que lo vinculara al futuro, ni siquiera medio porque no tiene medio lo que carece de principio y de fin; tampoco es divisible, pues en tal caso constaría de una parte que fue y de otra que no es. *Ergo*, no existe, pero como tampoco existen el pasado y el porvenir, el tiempo no existe. (1989: 148)

In the death sentence passed by Borges on time, one not only senses a predetermined partisan judgement, but one can also find some striking contradictions, the logical effect

of which would demand the refutation of Borges' refutation of time. In *Otras Inquisiciones*, Borges denies the existence of the present and in the same essay, by quoting once again the same passage from Schopenhauer ("Nadie ha vivido en el pasado, nadie vivirá en el futuro; el presente es la forma de toda vida"), he resuscitates the present as the only form of life. In reinstating the present, Borges, through Schopenhauer, has to re-admit time to life:

El tiempo es como un círculo que girara infinitamente: el arco que desciende es el pasado, el que asciende es el porvenir; arriba, hay un punto indivisible que toca la tangente y es el ahora. (1989: 148)

This example from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* is corroborated by many other examples quoted by Borges on the same page. The message resonating is clear, but paradoxically contradicts what was stated before with regard to the past, the present and the future. Borges concludes his essay on the refutation of time by saying that a) every instant is autonomous; b) time concatenations are untenable; c) time is real. Propositions 'a' and 'b' are complementary and reaffirm Borges' strenuous opposition to linear time.

The same tendency toward the uniqueness of the moment, which is often characterised by the presentness of time, is shown by Borges in *Historia de la eternidad* (let us remember the quotations from Marcus Aurelius and Schopenhauer), in many other essays included in *Otras inquisiciones* and in many of his short stories, the first which comes to mind being "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" (1939). Indeed "Pierre Menard" could not be better introduced and explained than by the following remark: "Sospecho, sin embargo, que el número de variaciones circunstanciales no es infinito: podemos postular, en la mente de un individuo (o de dos individuos que se ignoran, pero en quienes se opera el mismo proceso), dos momentos iguales" (1989: 141). Hence the circularity of time, hence the eternal recurrence of analogical and even identical circumstances. Borges takes this consideration further when he asks himself whether identical moments are also the same. "¿No basta *un solo término repetido* para desbaratar y confundir la serie del tiempo? ¿Los fervorosos que se entregan a una línea de Shakespeare no son, literalmente, Shakespeare?" (1989: 141) This is precisely the problem. If, on the one hand, he is tempted to negate the series of time, as he does in parts of "Nueva refutación del tiempo", on the other, he tends to reinstate this seriality through the uniqueness of the moment which, in essence, legitimates the existence of a past independent of a present and of a future and so on. The identical recurrence, and therefore the refutation of time as the construct of a succession of instants, could be satisfactorily accepted by embracing whole-heartedly the Nietzschean notion of eternal recurrence. But we have seen that Borges is more than prudent, in fact

somewhat dismissive, of Nietzsche's theory, preferring to it the analogy of circular time professed by Marcus Aurelius *et al.* But what to make then of "Sentirse en Muerte"? The problem is open. It appears as if Borges were divided between two notions of circular time, the identical and the analogical return. Whereas with the former we attain the disintegration of time, with the second we reach the notion of eternity intended as the repetition of similar events, unique and autonomous in their own right but, at the same time, partaking of all the events of the past and the future. The fact remains that, whether opting for one or the other circularity, Borges does away with the notion of a time progressing linearly, with a succession of instants determining an inescapable and fixed beginning, middle and end. It probably does not matter if Borges could not renounce either the identical or the analogical recurrence, and possibly he was even comfortable switching from one notion to the other.

This already ambivalent discussion of time is complicated further by Borges' admission that linear time, the time of mortality, is real. "Nueva refutación del tiempo" not only ends up by refuting the promises announced in the title, but it also constructs a realm in which calendrical time and circular time and eternity coexist, although uneasily, by virtue of the acceptance of and resignation to an irreducible doubleness inscribed in the opposition reality/art.

It is in this fluctuating and uncertain landscape that the fictive Borges loses himself in the meandering course of circular, parallel and forking time only to be met, at the other end of the trajectory, by the historical Borges and by his "accommodating" mortality.

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## NOTES

- 1 On this point, see also Arturo Echavarría, "Tiempo, Lenguaje y Identidad Personal: *Los Teólogos de Jorge-Luis Borges*" (26).
- 2 "Behold this gateway ... it has two aspects. Two paths come together here: no one has ever reached their end. This long lane behind us: it goes on for an eternity. And that long lane ahead of us – that is another eternity. They are in opposition to one another, these paths; they abut on one another: and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is written above it: "Moment" (178).
- 3 On this point, see Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge-Luis Borges* (11–13).
- 4 I have based the presupposition of my study on this passage which appears in the Spanish text of *Otras inquisiciones* published by Emece in 1960 but not in the one republished in 1989. In the 1989 edition, the "second last" of the volumes cited is not "Sentirse en Muerte" but *Evaristo Carriego*. The English translation of *Otras inquisiciones* follows the 1960 edition. I have not succeeded in ascertaining the reason for such discrepancy. I have thus adopted the 1960 Spanish as my points of reference for the ensuing discussion.
- 5 On Borges' hesitation, see Sylvia Molloy's *Signs of Borges* (1–26).
- 6 It has to be stressed that Borges' alleged detachment from reality is far from being accepted. Some studies read Borges' fiction as a direct reaction to his social and political environment. See, amongst others, Daniel Balderston's *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the representation of Reality in Borges* and Beatriz Sarlo's *Jorge-Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*.