

BORGES AND MEMETICS: THE IMMORTALITY OF IDEAS



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1 - INTRODUCTION

Traditionally Borges is interpreted as having tried to repudiate, in his literary work, the importance of the individual or the self, the postulation of the entire reality and, consequently, the current forms of knowledge (Barrenechea, Blanchot, Antelo). Among the literary critics who read Borges's writings as offering opposition to traditional logic, Ana María Barrenechea, for example, shows that Borges stresses "the uncertain nature of the universe and what is problematic in human knowledge"¹. In this sense, Borges's short stories do not intend to represent reality but apparently eschew the human desire to comprehend or explain it. Borges's main issue is a corruption of causal linearity and the apparition of strange or fantastic causality, which, contrarily to the efficient causality found in realist novels, is teleological (Borges *OC* 231-323). For these and other reasons Borges is considered a critic of Cartesian reason and efficient cause, pillars of Occidental rationality. But, in our opinion, in doing this, Borges invented a very singular linguistic and hermeneutic object. He entered the literary tradition claiming attention to

¹ "la naturaleza incierta del universo y de lo problemático del conocimiento" (107).

the narrative focal problem: final causes. We would like to argue, in this paper, that his poetic narrative is very close to *memetics*, the latter being a new attempt to comprehend cultural phenomena under a scientific point of view. In his work, on many levels, ideas use the characters, the narrator, the author and even the reader to reproduce themselves. Of course, any literary piece is a vehicle for ideas, a vehicle for *memes*. But Borges writes critically and seems to have a great awareness of the independence of ideas that, according to *memetics*, is the way through which *memes* have used, albeit not intentionally, human beings to replicate themselves. His characters could then be seen as prisoners of *meme* labyrinths; the final cause of such texts, then, would not be individuals but literary ideas. The aim of this work is to point out to the astonishing parallels that one may find between the role or function of ideas in the narrative structures of Borges's texts and the *meme* research program.

The *meme* research program considers ideas as cultural unites of imitation, the *memes*, and it seeks to study cultural dynamic systems, departing from an analogy between cultural ideas and genes, since both convey information (Gatherer, Rose, Blackmore, Moritz, Dennett, Dawkins *Selfish*). *Memes*, like genes, are replicators. A replicator is an entity capable of making a copy of the information it contains and to transmit it to another vehicle (Dawkins *Selfish*) or interactor (Hull *Taking*). Like genes, *memes* may be understood taking into account: 1) the heredity process by which cultural pieces of information reproduce themselves in populations of human brains (horizontally and vertically), 2) the process which allows cultural information to vary, and 3) the selection process of cultural information, due to the limited number of brains and to the virtual infinitude of ideas, idea fragments, and idea complexes.

Memetics deals with the explanation of virtually infinite aspects of cultural life. Even though the explanation of each and everything is not within the scope of memetics, this incipient research program aims at understanding, and perhaps even molding, natural and cultural phenomena as varied as the voluminous size of the human brain and the proliferation of machines that carry and replicate information, our incapacity to stop thinking and speaking and the wide audience of watchers of TV channels; our thirst for communi-

cation and our tendency to value those who are accomplished orators, among many other things (Blackmore).

We defend in this paper that Borges, who, as far as it is known, had no awareness of genes, memes and replicators, creates a world in which ideas play as replicators, leaping from one human being to another using people's brains, books and texts as vehicles. For this reason, Borges's fantastic stories do not merely satisfy our sublimate needs, but also our cognitive ones (Scholes) ², since these tales may be seen as living creatures that may cause a strange and strong impact when one puts them side by side to the philosophy of science, evolutionary biology and memetics. In this sense, Borges's tales may be seen as going against the grain of post-structuralist assumptions.

According to Joseph Carroll (*Evolution*), post-structuralism is based on two central doctrines: textualism and indeterminacy. Textualism is the idea that language or culture constitutes or constructs the world according to its own internal principles. Indeterminacy identifies all meanings as ultimately self-contradictory. Textualism treats human beings and the world in which they live as the results of a linguistic or cultural system, and indeterminacy reduces knowledge to the spontaneous generation of internal contradictions within this system. If interpretation can never be brought to an end, it is simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, because ultimately everything is already interpretation. Textualism and indeterminacy eliminate two criteria of truth: the correspondence of propositions to their objects and the internal coherence of propositions.

We think that Borges's texts evade this post-structuralist irrationalist trap. Joseph Carroll strongly suggests that evolutionary biology could be related to literary criticism and theory. We agree with his position and go beyond it, as we affirm here that the memetic theory, by criticizing certain evolutionary psychology assertions, specially the idea that culture is on the leash of genes (Blackmore), is even a much more powerful matrix to explain human behaviors and

² Robert Scholes summarizes very clearly the idea that "fiction has always been characterized by its ability to perform two functions", and that "We may call these two functions 'sublimation and cognition' "(4-5).

institutions than one which understands literature as a response that takes on account only genes but not other replicators as the memes. We thus posit ourselves against both post-structuralists, who understand literature as a purely cultural manifestation, and several sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, who consider this artistic form to be mainly the consequence of genes and their expression. We believe that memetics does provide an alternative that embraces these fundamental cultural and biological roots of human existence.

2 – UNIVERSAL DARWINISM

In his last book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, one of the best known contemporary neo-darwinists, Richard Dawkins, unwittingly approaches Borges when he quotes a fantastic text by Mark Twain:

In 1876, Mark Twain wrote the short story “A literary nightmare”, which is about his mind having been possessed by a ridiculous fragment of an order given in verse form to a bus driver and his machine of collecting tickets, whose refrain was: “Punch in the presence of the passenjare, punch in the presence of the passenjare” (*Destecendo* 384)

Dawkins emphasizes that the only difference between this sort of possession invented by Twain and the memes is that the latter, when passed forward, do not abandon the mind of their issuing vehicles. Dreams and possessions by fantastic objects are, undeniably, Borgesian obsessions and can be understood under a memetic point of view. On the other hand, several of his tales, essays and poems have been interpreted under a post-structuralistic lens, that has read Borges’s texts as the confirmation of an irrational central thesis: the idea that all our knowledge about the world, either philosophical or scientific, is a mere text, the equivocal reflex of our own language, a cerebral and mental limited structure that restricts us to circular labyrinths (Antelo, Barrenechea, Blanchot). In our point of view, this interpretation of Borges’s work diminishes the importance of the philosophical reflections contained in many of his tales and essays.

In the article "Philosophy as literature: the case of Borges", published in 1970 in *Mind*, Agassi shows that the essayist Borges in "Nueva refutación del tiempo", actually proceeds to a mock refutation of time. By narrowing the distance between fiction and literary criticism, Borges starts from Berkeley's negation of matter, of substance and of space, believing rather that the perception of these categories is a human mind creation: to be is to be perceived³; Borges also starts from Hume's negation of a subject behind the perceptions, to deny time itself; not the perception that the mind has of time, but of time as something that exists outside human minds. Thus, Borges arrives, employing the very arguments of idealism, at a denial of the vast temporal series that idealism admits:

However, with the continuities of matter and spirit denied, with space denied, I do not know by what right we retain that continuity which is time. Outside each perception (real or conjectural), matter does not exist; neither the must time exist outside each present moment. (*Selected* 329)⁴

Time for Borges is a "delusion" (OC 765). But, this is not the only issue, however, to which we desire to call the attention. It is our intention to emphasize here the importance of the reality of the ideas in Borges's work, whether one considers his essays or his fictional work. For an idealist like Berkeley, ideas have no existence apart from the human mind. Berkeley, quoted by Borges in the same essay, says: "I do not deny that the mind is capable of imagining ideas; I deny that ideas may exist apart from the human mind" (767)⁵. It is our belief that Borges does not partake from the same opinion. He seems to wish to refute idealism showing that once the existence of matter, space, substance, the subject (the spirit) is denied, so is the

³ See the short story "*Esse est percipi*". (Borges & Casares 105-108).

⁴ "Sin embargo, negadas la materia y el espíritu, que son continuidades, negado también el espacio, no sé con qué derecho retendremos esa continuidad que es el tiempo. Fuera de cada percepción actual o conjetural no existe la materia; fuera de cada estado mental no existe el espíritu; tampoco el tiempo existirá fuera de cada instante" (OC 768).

⁵ "No niego que la mente sea capaz de imaginar ideas; niego que las ideas pueden existir fuera de la mente" (767).

existence of time. If this be true, according to Agassi, certain temporal loops could be made possible. Leibniz's principle of the identity of the indiscernibles states that in Nature there are no two real indiscernible beings. If there were such indiscernible beings, one would not matter more than the other and there would not be a reason strong enough to choose one as better over the other, that is, to value them. What is at stake, as may be seen, is not only the spatial-temporal structure, whether Euclidean or Einsteinian, but the utterly moral question of value and of choice, without which life, mainly the human one, would retain no sense whatsoever.

Similarly to Agassi, we believe that Borges's literature is far from shallow, and in opposition to a given post-modern philosophy (which presents idealist trends following the likes of Berkeley and Hume), we will try to demonstrate, starting from the importance of both teleology and ideas for Borges, that his masterpieces can be better understood under the light of new approaches of evolutionary theory (Carroll *Evolution; Biology*) and memetics.

Of fundamental importance to this approach is the investigation about the power of ideas, understood philosophically as particulars, over human beings' destinies and designs, the verticality of such ideas, that is, the capacities of memes to actually enable human beings to represent the future mentally, in a general way, open to chance and unexpected possibilities (adapted from Andacht). This is a paradigm under which every idea (and, therefore, every action in the world) brings about a final or teleological cause, but not rigidly determined. The directionality, in this sense, does not imply, necessarily, a prefixed end, but a general trend or direction which drives openly human action, mentally, by modifying continuously its own goal, so that the experience would change with time.

Borges did explicit usage of teleology. Formally, several of his tales, essays and poems present the preposition "to" or the final conjugation "it is for" (Andacht, Waizbort, Rodríguez Monegal). Maybe one of the most explicit examples of this usage is present in the essay "El arte narrativo y la magia" (OCs 226-232), in which Borges characterized fantastic literature as describing exactly what could *not* have happened according to the laws governing the so-called real world. Rodríguez Monegal stresses that Borges tries to explore

what happens with the format of the narration, for example, when time can be inverted, or leap nonstop towards the future, or what happens when two characters are the same. His intention was to “examine how narrative reality works, that is, what kind of causality rules it.” Also as maintained by Rodríguez Monegal, Borges’s analysis:

coincides with that of Aristotle in postulating a “narrative teleology”, in searching in *causality* the central mechanism that allows to differentiate the supposedly “realistic” fiction from the one he now considers “magic”, and that in posterior works he will name as fantastic (163).

It seems to us that Borges erected, whether or not consciously, one of the most extraordinary bridges ever to be built between science and literature, joining together final and efficient causes (expressed in terms of natural laws). Trips to the past or to the distant future on fabulous machines; humans who are immortal, or have an oddly long life; houses filled with mysterious spirits; individuals making pacts with the devil or with the unknown, aiming at keeping their wealth or youth for ever; flowers brought from dream to vigil; creatures that die but continue animated; people turning into beasts; souls wandering disincarnated around the subjective world of the spirits. All these situations are constructed as if they were placed in a factual and empirical world. The text is structured as if it were a laboratory developing, at the level of language, what would happen to the real if *one* of its efficient causal laws were destroyed by the impossible or highly unexpected. In the fantastic text, it is exactly what cannot happen that develops into a possibility, a law, or an additional rule, to be strictly complied with. For Borges, the definition of magic ⁶ lies exactly on adding the fantastic law to the physics laws:

⁶ According to Rodríguez Monegal, Borges would later abandon the concept of “magic” because of his relationship with magic realism, and start to use the concept of “fantastic”, which originated in the tradition of gothic literature of supernatural horror (160).

It is ruled by all of the laws of nature as well as those of imagination. To the superstitious, there is a necessary link not only between a gunshot and a corpse but between a corpse and a tortured wax image or the prophetic smashing of a mirror or spilled salt or thirteen ominous people around a table. (*Selected* 80)⁷

The natural laws of the physical world, the efficient causes, are placed side by side with the fantastic laws, the teleological causes. This provokes a shock between the real (as described by the laws of nature) and the unreal, creating a strong impact on the shape of the narration. For Borges, the fantastic narrative “should be a rigorous scheme of attentions, echoes and affinities. Every episode in a careful narrative is a premonition” (*Selected* 81).⁸

Fernando Andacht pointed out the similarities of teleological conceptions between Borges and Charles Sanders Peirce. For both authors, literary characters and even we, human beings, are vehicles of ideas, that is, memes. Andacht shows us how ideas or signs in Borges’s and Peirce’s texts motivate and mould human minds and lives. Andacht calls our attention to how both authors point in a similar way to the connection between ideas and values, using the famous theme of parricide, indicating the great cultural and moral importance to valorize *some* ideas and *not* others. Teleology, explanation by a final cause, is studied as a fundamental part of our mental constitution and it is understood not in opposition to efficient or natural causes. In Borges’s conception, theories and ideas are fundamental, but in the Borgesian text structure, teleology overhangs efficient causes.⁹

⁷“Todas las leyes naturales lo rigen, y otras imaginarias. Para el supersticioso, hay una necesaria conexión no solo entre un balazo y un muerto, sino entre un muerto y una maltratada efigie de cera o la rotura profética de un espejo o la sal que se vuelca o trece comensales terribles” (*OC* 231).

⁸ “debe ser un juego preciso de vigilancias, ecos y afinidades. Todo episodio, en un cuidadoso relato, es de proyección ulterior” (*OC* 231).

⁹ We would like to stress that Borges’s teleology is not concerned absolutely with “cosmic teleology” (Mayr). In another text, “Jorge Luis Borges, Forerunner of Memetics: An Introduction”, submitted to *Philosophy and Literature*, we considered possible relations between Borges’s teleology and evolutionary biology, with special concern to the memetic sciences.

3 - FIRST REVOLUTION OF THE MIND OR HOW THE CITY APPEARS TO BE

In "El inmortal" the protagonist, a Roman tribune of the Dioclecian emperor, after the end of a war receives from a moribund *cavalier* the information of a fabulous city of immortals. The tribune recruits more than two hundred men and they enter an infinite desert looking for the fabulous city and its wealth. But the enterprise is a disaster. As times goes by and no immortal city appears, the men give up and prepare to mutiny against the tribune/protagonist. Finally, after many other circumstances and incidences, including the fact that the protagonist drinks water from an impure river of rubble (debris) and sand, the tribune, after finding his way out of a very difficult labyrinth, ascends to the presumed immortal city.

The immortal city appears to the tribune as a vast, crazy and empty palace. Nobody was found after one day of walking through it. The sense of this structure is one of sheer disrupt: upstairs in the ceiling, doors that open to nowhere, unattainable windows are part of the construction. To us, it is at this point that the tale first breaks with the reader's expectation. This is made, obviously, by the protagonist's mediation. This kind of revolution will occur at other times in "El inmortal"'s course. It obliges the reader to reconsider information taken for granted before. An open teleology is in course. But the City, whether or not it is there, moves the protagonist's destiny.

The tribune runs away from the City and remains for many years in an aphasic troglodyte tribe, in the rubble and sand river margin, near the high walls of the City. Then, one day, he discovers that the troglodytes are in reality the immortals, the dirty river that he drunk from, the immortality river, and the City, the ignominious City that he crossed, was constructed to celebrate and justify a bizarre immortal world conception. The protagonist's previous ideas were wrong and from now on he enters the immortals' meme structure: the precise compensations system. In such a memetic system all human ideas and artifacts exist to justify or compensate each other:

Indoctrinated by a practice of centuries, the republic of immortal men had attained the perfection of tolerance and almost that of indifference. They knew that in an infinite period of time, all things hap-

pen to all men. Because of his past or future virtues, every man is worthy of all goodness, but also of all perversity, because of his infamy in the past or future. Thus, just as in games of chance the odd and even numbers tend towards equilibrium, so also wit and stolidity cancel out and correct each other (...) The most fleeting thought obeys an invisible design and can crown, or inaugurate, a secret form. I know of those who have done evil so that in future centuries good should result, or would have resulted in those already past... Seen in this manner, all our acts are just, but they are also indifferent. There are no moral or intellectual merits. (*Labyrinths* 144-145)¹⁰

The immortals' system is, like any other idea, a meme. It sustains that, given an infinite time, all the events in the world should be compensated to their opposite. In this way all opposite ideas or memes lose their *value*. In our opinion such a system could be understood as an ironic criticism for the idea that theory should create its own verification. Instead of this, it has been understood, in post-structuralist terms, as a negation of the value of all knowledge. But the immortal's system is teleological and it was constructed to escape from nature, logic and efficient cause. Due to this, maybe, the immortals are imprisoned in a labyrinth mirror of pure thought, are immune to pity, and do not show any interest in physical nor social reality. On a level Borges criticizes teleological reasoning in its supposition of a perfect accordance between ideas and reality. On the other level, he constructs the text teleologically, posing final causes together with efficient ones.

What we would like once more to draw the attention to is the importance of ideas as things themselves, and the fact that they may

¹⁰ "Adoctrinada por un ejercicio de siglos, la república de hombres inmortales había logrado la perfección de la tolerancia y casi del desdén. Sabía que en un plazo infinito le ocurren a todo hombre todas las cosas. Por sus pasadas o futuras virtudes, todo hombre es acreedor a toda bondad, pero también a toda traición, por sus infamias del pasado o del porvenir. Así como en lo juegos de azar las cifras pares y las cifras impares tienden al equilibrio, así también se anulan y se corrigen el ingenio y la estolidez (...) El pensamiento más fugaz obedece a un dibujo invisible y puede coronar, o inaugurar, una forma secreta. Sé de quienes obraran el mal para que en los siglos futuros resultara el bien, o hubiera resultado en los ya pretéritos... Encarados así, todos nuestros actos son justos, pero también son indiferentes. No hay méritos morales o intelectuales" (OC 541).

change the very course of history. In the particular case of “El inmortal”, they effectively do so. At first, it is the idea of the true and famous city of the Immortals that, even though only mentioned in the text, moves the tribune/protagonist in his adventure. Then follows the idea that the perusal of the monstrous city has contaminated all the action, since after that, the protagonist remains for years in the desert, with the aphasic troglodytes. Finally there’s the idea that the world is governed by the system of precise compensations. Of all the labyrinths the protagonist has to face, including the three dimensional one that is the monstrous city he has traversed, the system of precise compensations is the most frightening. In the first place it is a complex of irrefutable ideas, one may always advocate a parcel of time so that a given compensation may be effectively carried out. This system leads the troglodytes/immortals to a deplorable sense of themselves, to an utter lack of consideration not only with their own physical appearance but also to their own suffering and that of their companions. They seem to be out of space and time. They have no identity; they are not seen as individuals, at first, by the civilized tribune. The system acts as if it were imprisoning the immortals in the desert, as if there were no values, since, according to such a way of thinking, each action is compensated by its contrary one

Without values, there is no action. The system of precise compensations is a complex of self-contradictory memes, for it ends up by valuing the lack of values that paralyzes the immortals. The system of precise compensations has colonized their minds. It is the replicator that has commanded the construction of the city that the protagonist has traversed, built in the location of the real and famous city, not only as a corollary of the very system but as a “temple of the irrational gods who control the world, and about whom nothing is known, except that they resemble human beings” (540).¹¹

The world of pure thought, the world without values, the world without pity (one of the troglodytes/immortals falls into a well and only seventy years later a rope is thrown to him), the world without

¹¹ “templo de los dioses irracionales que manejan el mundo y de los que nada sabemos, salvo que no se parecen al hombre” (OC 540).

limits (without sense, without history) of the immortals is the highest form of nightmare, for everything is but a tedious compensation of what has already happened, or of what is yet to happen. Nothing is truly unique:

Death (or its allusion) makes men precious and pathetic. They are moving because of their phantom condition; every act they execute may be their last; there is not a face that is not on the verge of dissolving like a face in a dream. Everything among the mortals has the value of the irretrievable and the perilous. Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning or the faithful presage of others that in the future will repeat it to a vertiginous degree. There is nothing that is not as if lost in a maze of indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can happen only once, nothing is preciously precarious. The elegiac, the serious, the ceremonial, do not hold for the Immortals. (*Labyrinths* 146) ¹²

At first it seems the ruin of the dignity of any human thought. The system of precise compensations induces the immortals to a sterile endless life. Literature itself does not thrive. Borges's philosophical mastery, however, is capable of inventing incredible literary ways out of his metaphysical labyrinths. After all, according to Borges, metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature. The immortals seem to be out of time and space. Maybe they wander in a frequency of pure ideas, of abstract thought, concocting fleeting conceptions while the world changes around them. As there are no novelties, as everything is compensated, the immortals' shallow philosophy leads to the discouraging situation expressed by the protagonist in the quotation above. This protagonist, however, seems ready to dis-

¹² "La muerte (o su alusión) hace preciosos y patéticos a los hombres. Éstos conmueven por su condición de fantasmas; cada acto que ejecutan puede ser último; no hay rostro que no esté por desdibujarse como el rostro de un sueño. Todo, entre los mortales, tiene el valor de lo irrecuperable y de lo azaroso. Entre los Inmortales, en cambio, cada acto (y cada pensamiento) es el eco de otros que en el pasado lo antecedieron, sin principio visible, o el fiel presagio de otros que en el futuro lo repetirán hasta el vértigo. No hay cosa que no esté como perdida entre infatigables espejos. Nada puede ocurrir una sola vez, nada es preciosamente precario. Lo elegíaco, lo grave, lo ceremonial, no rigen para los Inmortales" (OC 541-542).

pose of his immortality in a different fashion. Perhaps after losing himself several times amidst the mirrors of the labyrinth, he ends up by discovering, among the corollaries of the system of precise compensations, one that states that if there is a sort of water that bestows immortality, there must be another sort that cancels it. This idea, imbedded in the heart of the complex of memes that is the immortals' system, changes the trajectory of the protagonist's in(action), who will then wander around the world, through a labyrinth of cities and activities in search of the water that will yield limits to his life.

Embarked on a fantastic trip, the narrator travels through the centuries across several cities (Stamford, Samarcanda, Bikanir, Bohemia, Kolozsvár, Leipzig, Aberdeen, Bombay) interacting with all sorts of individuals. Then one day, finally, he meets, as if by chance, the river that suppresses his endless anguish of living for ever. As he drinks from the waters that give him back his mortality, returning to the world of the dead and the living, his adventure is brought to a close. The manuscript, however, still continues for three paragraphs. In them, the narrator posits a problem and at the same time tries to solve it:

After a year's time, I have inspected these pages. I am certain they reflect the truth, but in the first chapters, and even in certain paragraphs of the others, I seem to perceive something false. This is perhaps produced by the abuse of circumstantial details, a procedure I learned from the poet and which contaminates everything with falsity, since those details can abound in the realities but not in their recollection... (*Labyrinths* 147)¹³

The narrator himself is aware of something false in the text. He suggests two distinct explanations for this appearance of falsity. It is noticeable that he is not simply describing what has happened to

¹³ "He revisado, al cabo de un año, estas páginas. Me consta que se ajustan a la verdad, pero en los primeros capítulos, y aun en ciertos párrafos de los otros, creo percibir algo falso. Ello es obra, tal vez, del abuso de rasgos circunstanciales, procedimiento que aprendí en los poetas y que todo contamina de falsedad, ya que esos rasgos pueden abundar en los hechos, pero no en su memoria..." (OC 542-543).

him, but making comments, suggesting ideas to explain the aspect of the narrative that he has just offered to the reader. The first of these explanations says that the appearance of falsity is “perhaps the consequence of the overuse of circumstantial traits”¹⁴, a process that the protagonist and narrator would have learnt from the poets (542-543). If this is true, then the falsity does not lie on the adventure itself, but on the language structure employed by the narrative. The second justification, “a more intimate reason”¹⁵, oppositely to that, resides on a mixture or confusion of the “events of two different men”¹⁵ (543). According to the narrator himself, the narrated history seems false because in it are mixed the actions and destinies of Homer and Rufus, the protagonist tribune. To arrive at this conclusion, the narrator must go beyond the appearances of his tale. He argues that, upon rereading his own manuscript, he notices that in some of the tribune’s speeches there are interpolations, citations, from Homer. He adds that the activities that he carried out during the period in which he was searching for the water that would reward him once with the possibility of dying (in chapter V), display his preoccupation not with that related to the martial but to “the fates of men” (*Labyrinths* 148)¹⁶, a characteristic that would appertain not to a soldier (Rufus) but to a man of letters. This seems to indicate that the protagonist has escaped from the doom of the system of precise compensations, for he cares more about human life.

The conclusion of the protagonist of the adventure is extraordinary: “I have been Homer”¹⁷ (544). Borges once more achieves here, in a literary way, Leibniz’s identity of the indiscernibles. One single immortal man is all the men who have preceded him. What is pathetic is that on his journey to find the river that would allow him to die, after many centuries, he should translate (translations are an obsession for Borges) in a barbarian idiom his own original poem. This fragmentation of the ex-immortal protagonist’s personality is in accordance, in our point of view, with Agassi’s findings related to

¹⁴ “obra, tal vez, del abuso de rasgos circunstanciales” (OC 542-543).

¹⁵ “una razón más íntima”... “suceso de dos hombres distintos” (OC 543).

¹⁶ “la suerte de los hombres” (OC 543).

¹⁷ “Yo he sido Homero” (OC 544).

the different levels of identity, all linked to space-time. But we would like to stress the dimension of the information, both biological and cultural – memetic, in our point of view – in the formation of what we call mind, identity, self. Perhaps Hume, like Berkeley, would propose that the ideas only exist as perceptions of a mind. There are no ideas outside the mind. There is evidence that Augner would agree with that. Nevertheless, in our opinion, Borges affirms the reality of all ontological categories: space, time, substances, perceptions, ideas are themselves beings. Each one is endowed with a history, that is also part of the history of the attempt of human beings to try to understand themselves rationally. All are phenomena that possess their own reality. That is why it is perhaps difficult to separate the essays from the fictions in the case of Borges. The fictions possess a reality that is not only teleological but also self – critical, charging itself from its self- directed blows.

At the end of “El inmortal” there is a prologue of 1950 where another narrator – not the protagonist and narrator of the adventure narrated in the manuscript – comments on the fantastic tale of the immortal man and affirms with hamletean echoes:

‘When the end draws near,’ wrote Cartaphilus, ‘there no longer remain any remembered images; only words remain.’ Words displaced and mutilated words, words of others, were the poor pittance left him by the hours and the centuries. (*Labyrinths* 148)¹⁸

Words, words, words borrowed from others, like poor alms from a notable experience. Ideas that had kept the protagonist moving about for so many centuries. Borges’s irony is deep, for these final words seem to disdain the very value of an idea that Borges esteems highly: literature itself. An idealist could deny literature as something that does not exist outside of human minds. Borges, however, knows that the reality of literature is, at least partly, in ideas, and not merely in human beings; thus, his desire to tell the history of literature without mentioning a single author. An absurd fiction? Or a

¹⁸“Cuando se acerca el fin, escribió Cartaphilus, ya no quedan imágenes del recuerdo; solo quedan palabras. Palabras, palabras desplazadas y mutiladas, palabras de otros, fue la pobre limosna que le dejaron las horas y los siglos” (OC 545).

literary way of saying that the literary ideas have their own history, just like any other entity?

The message in memetic language that we see in the “El inmortal” could be read as: we are interactors in a world of interactors and replicators. The (literary) memes are the replicators, the stuff of dreams we are made of. We ourselves, our bodies, may die, but the immortality of the ideas we partake from are not minor alms. As interactors in a changing time and space we are also historical entities (the type of thing we would not be if the universe violated the principle of the identity of the indiscernibles: if two beings were indiscernible, wouldn’t they be the same?). But in a world of interactors and replicators, the improbable system that governs the world of the immortals would seem much less like the system of precise compensations of the immortals than the very game of echoes, vigilance and affinities that is the core of Borges’s teleological narrative. This is a search for a sort of meaning which only ideas as values may bestow on human life. At this point we should risk saying that the elaboration of these valuable ideas would not have reached its present state if it had not followed an evolutionary pathway, that is, if it had not been subjected to an intricate mechanism of variation and selection.

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