Modern Critical Views

JORGE LUIS BORGES

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"The Immortal"

The universal literary figure, the relationship to De Quincey, and the symbol of the labyrinth all come together in Borges' story "The Immortal" which is the perfection of his allusive method in a work that is more than ever a literature of literature. Beyond that, "The Immortal" is Borges' statement of themes which have preoccupied so many twentieth-century writers in a form which is comparable to that of Conrad, that of Joyce, that of Eliot, but is still personal, authentic. "The Immortal" is the culmination of Borges' art.

THE UNIVERSAL LITERARY FIGURE

The epigraph to "The Immortal" establishes the familiar theme in Borges' work and introduces the singleness of authorial mind which is the story's subject:

Salomon saith. *There is no new thing upon the earth*. So that as Plato had an imagination, *that all knowledge was but remembrance*; so Salomon giveth his sentence, *that all novelty is but oblivion*.

Francis Bacon: *Essays* LVIII

Four authors—Plato, Solomon, Bacon, and Borges himself—are here made to collaborate in expressing the Eternal Return in an intellectual or mental sense. This apparent plurality of minds and demonstrable unity of statement in an allusive tissue is at once the theme and the technique of the story, which uses the literary figure to reformulate definitively the principles of personality.

and time found throughout Borges. It is the same theme he treats in "Everything and Nothing," but that is a commentary and a summary; "The Immortal" is a presentation and a demonstration.

In "Everything and Nothing" Borges writes of Shakespeare: "No one was so many men as that man, who, like the Egyptian Proteus, could exhaust all the appearances of being." The pun on "no one" divulges the removed, all-knowing approach Borges is taking in order to distill the essence of his subject. The distillation, however, is a little lifeless, droning; and the monotone is relieved only by the octave shift in the last sentences when God speaks. "Everything and Nothing," like so much in El hacedor [Dreamtigers], is a summation of previous work, but sapped of almost all energy, subdued by nostalgia. More varied, more complex is "The Immortal," which treats the same subject but from the inside so that the reader's understanding develops gradually and dramatically, along with that of the character. Furthermore, at the end of "Everything and Nothing," all is solved, resolved, while at the conclusion of "The Immortal" the sense of mystery, and complex mystery at that, still lingers. The one is a rapid disclosure, the other an intricate unfolding; and the intricacy comes not from the treatment alone but from the conception, because in "The Immortal" Borges takes the possibilities of both everything and nothing more seriously. The story shows that Homer's work is nothing—nothing extraordinary, that is—and that Homer is literally everything, everyone in the story.

The paradoxical everything and nothingness of Homer is indicated elsewhere by the expressly generic title of "El hacedor," "The Maker," which Borges bestows upon him; but in "The Immortal" the two exhaustive attributes are simultaneous modes of his work and personality. The story itself is a little Odyssey, and that, of course, is tribute to the universal, mythic proportions of Homer's work which nourishes subsequent writings, but the story in no way proposes the greatness or superiority of the Homeric epic, instead showing its mere inevitability in the scheme of things:

Homer composed the Odyssey; given an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to compose the Odyssey, at least once. No one is anyone; a single immortal is all men.

The Odyssey belongs not to Homer but to History; it is nothing more or less than the story of the world. But it belongs to Language as well, for as Borges argues in "Versions of Homer," it is impossible "to know what belongs to the poet and what pertains to the idiom," and therefore the only certainty about Homer's style, his literary personality, "is the impossibility of separating what pertains to the writer from what pertains to the idiom." The logical deduction
from this is that not Homer but everyone has written, continues to write the Odyssey, and that, in the end, as Cartaphilus writes, "only words remain." The most exact indication of the universal composition of Homer is the phrase "Pope's Iliad" on the first page of "The Immortal," an indication supported by a reference to "Pope's Odyssey" which Emerson makes in the course of arguing that all literature has been written by one person. The logic is clear: if "a single man is all men," then a single author is all authors, all men ("The genius is all," says Emerson), and all men are immortal because Homer is immortal. We are all Homer. Thus this story which gives what we have always lacked and so often desired—a biography of Homer—takes away far more than it gives:

Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a wearisome way of saying that I am not.

Amplitude is a trait of the cipher.

As so often in Borges, the confirmation of being is an obliteration. But notice the peculiar absence of definite and indefinite articles in the series quoted above, and also notice the constant present tense. The added complexity in "The Immortal," one characteristically indicated by a suppression, is that character is not only multiple and sequential as it is presented in "Theme of the Traitor and Hero," in "The Circular Ruins," and even in section V of "The Immortal"; character is single and simultaneous as well: the apparent multiplicity of Types or Ideas exists in the present tense. Homer is all men now. That bloody horseman who dies at Rufus' feet in Part I is the same Rufus who undertakes an identical journey and dies in similar circumstances at the end of Part I; the Rufus speaking to Argos is Homer, who has forgotten that he is Homer, speaking to Homer, who has nearly forgotten the Odyssey he composed 1,000 years ago. The Princess of Lucinge reads Homer; Pope and his employees write Homer; Joseph Cartaphilus sells Homer; Nahum Cordovero comments on Homer. All these are aspects of Homer in a literary, mental sense.

This simultaneous multiplicity is revealed by personal pronouns in "The Immortal." The story begins, unusually for Borges, not with "I" but with "we" ("ofrecemos"), shifts to Homer's first person ("Que yo recuerde"), moves naturally between the first person plural ("Partimos") and first person singular ("devise") in the course of narration, and then in Part IV shifts subtly to another "we," one which includes the Immortals:

Neither was his own destiny interesting. His body was a submissive domestic animal, and each month the alms of a few hours of sleep, a little water and a scrap of meat were enough for him. Let nobody
wish to reduce us to ascetics. There is no more complex pleasure than thought and we gave ourselves over to it.

Finally the story ends with the first person ("A mi entender"). The confusion or expansion and contraction is partially clarified by Homer's statement: "The story I have narrated seems unreal because in it are mixed the incidents of two distinct men." But "distinct" is itself ambiguous and applies more to the grammar than to the psychology or history of the character. An analogous situation in Emerson is more illuminating. The same kind of shifts in person have been noted by Richard Poirier in Emerson's "Nature," and they show us, says Poirier, "the speaker's capacity to relinquish his particular identity and assume an ever more inclusively general one." In Borges, the grammatical shift re-enacts the myth of the Simurg, which begins with discrete "Is" and culminates in a "We," and in fact that myth, found at the end of "The Approach," with its difficult journey, its pilgrims falling by the wayside, its passage through Vertigo and Annihilation, its final revelation that all are one (The Immortal Simurg) informs Borges' later as well as his early story. The events in "The Immortal" are thus to be read in two ways: first, as the apparent particulars they are, of person, place, thing, and time; and second, as the manifestation of a single character, who writes the entire fiction (including preface, narrative, and postscript), but who is absent from the story as himself, except in so far as he is all and everywhere. Without giving his readers the benefit of an explanatory note, Borges has employed the same device Strindberg said he used in Dream Play:

In this dream play... the Author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist; on a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities, and improvisations.

The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallise, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all—that of the dreamer. For him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law. He neither condemns nor acquits, but only relates, and since on the whole, there is more pain than pleasure in the dream, a tone of melancholy, and of compassion for all living things, runs through the swaying narrative.

In what it says both about characterization and about narrative procedure, Strindberg's note is the best description of the story. There is one immortal
who is all the rest: the story's title is pointedly singular; Homer is the universal author.

Men are immortal then, like the rest of the universe: "To be immortal matters very little; except for man, all creatures are immortal since they do not know about death." As Sir Thomas Browne writes in "Religio Medici":

For as though there were a Metempsuchosis, and the soul of one man passed into another, Opinions do find, after certain Revolutions, men and minds like those that first begat them. To see our selves again, we need not look for Plato's year: every man is not only himself; there hath been many Diogenes, and as many Timons, though but few of that name: men are liv'd over again, the world is now as it was in Ages past; there was none then, but there hath been some one since that parallels him, and is, as it were, his revived self.

Emerson recognized that immortality and also stressed our suppression of it: "We hide this universality if we can, but it appears at all points." Man has repressed his immortality or he is moved to forget it, a wish Emerson also understood:

But it is not the intention of Nature that we should live by general views. We fetch fire and water, run about all day among the shops and markets, and get our clothes and shoes made and mended, and are the victims of these details; and once in a fortnight we arrive perhaps at a rational moment. If we were not thus infatuated, if we saw the real from hour to hour, we should not be here to write and to read, but should have been burned or frozen long ago. She would never get anything done, if she suffered Admirable Crichtons and universal geniuses.

Our principal antidotes to universality and immortality are death and forgetting. Because they confirm our mortality and our individual identity, death and forgetting are what make the universe bearable, real for us. On this point of forgetting I have already noted [elsewhere] Borges' story "Funes the Memorious" and I would also want to point to De Quincey, who, like Borges, feels assured "that there is no such thing as ultimate forgetting," but who nevertheless describes forgetting as a gift and an art:

that art which the great Athenian Themistocles noticed as amongst the desiderata of human life—that gift which, if in some rare cases it belongs only to the regal prerogatives of the grave, fortunately in many thousands of other cases is accorded by the treachery of
the human brain. Heavens! what a curse it were, if every chaos, which is stamped upon the mind by fairs such as that London fair of St. Bartholomew in years long past, or by the records of battles and skirmishes through the monotonous pages of history, or by the catalogues of libraries stretching over a dozen measured miles, could not be erased, but arrayed itself in endless files incapable of obliteration, as often as the eyes of our human memory happened to throw back their gaze in that direction! Heaven be praised, I have forgotten everything.

Man lives by dying, that is, by forgetting; only God or an Immortal lives by remembering all. Thus “The Immortal” proceeds by a series of deaths or equivalent lapses of memory which give to the story its seemingly disjunctive form, the “disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream,” as Strindberg says. On the other hand, these deaths and forgettings, as we shall see, are shams and illusions, and the inner reality, captured by the procedure of the story and described in the career of Homer, is one of eternal life and all encompassing memory.

Death makes men “precious and pathetic”; remove it or the knowledge of it and they are no longer precious or pathetic. Hence the curious description of “The Immortal” in the epilogue of El Aleph [The Aleph] as an “outline of an ethic for immortals.” The story proposes a system of values, indeed a way of living or reading, which are much the same thing in Borges; an ethic of supreme equality in life (notice the phrase “The republic of immortal men” in Part IV), of sublime impersonality in literature. All claims to originality or invention—of experience or writing—as well as all accusations of plagiarism and influence are destroyed: “There is no new thing upon the earth.” Books, like men, are no longer to be valued as either precious or pathetic: there is all eternity in which to write the Homeric epics, and it was inevitable that they should be written; there is all eternity to complete the ongoing work described in “The Dream of Coleridge,” and a sentiment of loss about the missing lines of “Kubla Khan” is simply misguided and misplaced in time. Freed from the values death imposes, literature can at last be seen for what it is: “in the beginning of literature was myth, and also in the end.” The ascendancy of myth, of a literary collective consciousness, in “The Immortal” may be guessed when we realize how, in contrast to other stories about literary figures like Pierre Menard or Herbert Quain, how little there is about writing or planning of a book in “The Immortal”; how little, even of criticism, for this is a story whose intention is to question the basis of most criticism and appreciation of literature which develops from a notion of limits to man’s life, from limits, which, the story argues, do not exist. It is the responsibility of literature, then, to deny
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mortality, to deny oblivion by ignoring the sleep of death and the sleep of forgetting and by emphasizing in their place the eternal dream of life and memory. Literature must be timeless memory: to be true, to be archetypally real, literature based on such a belief must deny its own novelty, and the position of the author must be that of grand remembrancer. Ironically, then, Cordovero’s attack in the Postscript on the integrity of Homer’s text is our assurance of its universal validity. The more it is nothing in itself, the more the story is everything.

“The Immortal” thus realizes a great victory over time and space and personality, but it is finally despondent and futilitarian. As “A New Refutation of Time” ended with “And yet, and yet...,” “The Immortal” leaves us with a feeling of loss rather than of gain. The implicit morality and political ethic of the story are at first noble, but then dispiriting: the “perfection of tolerance” which the Immortals have achieved leads inevitably to a perfection of disdain and inactivity. And while we can accept the eternity of literature, the necessity for seeing people as eternal shades instead of flitting realities is too much for us. We want to believe that we are, which is to say that we shall die. Therefore the story leaves us with the fundamental antinomy of Borges’ work: the achievement of metaphysical vision antagonistic to our very selves. Even Homer cannot bear the strain of his discovery and he lapses into forgetfulness and apparent death: “Again I am mortal, I repeated, again I am like all men. That night I slept until dawn.” Of course he is not mortal; all the signs contradict it: “I repeated” and the twice-repeated “Again” call upon the Eternal Return, and the ellipsis with which the succeeding paragraph begins as well as the sleep into which Homer falls signal a new beginning based on forgetting. “The Immortal,” Borges’ incarnation of the universal writer, ends by dissipating that same literary figure. And so Borges joins that great train of writers who confer immortality only to deride it and lament it, that train which includes Petronius, Swift, De Quincey, Tennyson, and Eliot.

DE QUINCEYAN IMAGERY

De Quincey is called upon to supply the scene-meaning at the very center of “The Immortal,” and as we might guess, it is a picture of disorder and meaningless reiteration. But so that we shall not miss the point, the Postscript refers us directly to De Quincey’s Writings where we read a recollection of some Piranesi etchings Coleridge once described:

Many years ago, when I was looking over Piranesi’s “Antiquities of Rome,” Coleridge, then standing by, described to me a set of plates from that artist, called his “Dreams,” and which record the
scenery of his own visions during the delirium of a fever. Some of these (I describe only from memory of Coleridge's account) represented vast Gothic halls, on the floor of which stood mighty engines and machinery, wheels, cables, catapults, &c., expressive of enormous power put forth, or resistance overcome. Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon this, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself. Follow the stairs a little farther, and you perceive them reaching an abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who should reach the extremity, except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, at least you suppose that his labours must now in some way terminate. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher, on which again Piranesi is perceived, by this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Once again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is descried; and there, again, is the delirious Piranesi, busy on his aspiring labours: and so on, until the unfinished stairs and the hopeless Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall. With the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in dreams.

This passage is definitive of what J. Hillis Miller calls "the Piranesi effect" in De Quincey, an effect we have all experienced apparently, but with less frightening overtones, in discovering a disquieting infinity on the label of a box of salt or can of cocoa. Borges' picture of the City of the Immortals is closely patterned on this passage, from the general impression of purposeless repetition to the details of the staircases which "died without reaching anywhere," and even to the conditional quality imposed because the scene is only recalled, and recalled from another's description, not actually witnessed. On this point, the reference is furtively expressive since no such Piranesi etching exists, and we do not even know who invented—De Quincey or Coleridge—the one described by De Quincey. The Postscript thus accuses the narrative of being false for plagiarizing De Quincey, who in turn is equally false. But more significantly De Quincey's image specifies the abomination at the core of life's labyrinth for Borges: at the center, or "cell" as De Quincey calls it there is no resting place, not even a destructive monster, but instead another labyrinth without plan or end. In effect, there is no center, but only "the Piranesi effect" of labyrinth within labyrinth, and "What we all dread most," Father Brown says, "is a maze with no centre." Both De Quincey and Borges collaborate in describing such a maze. The labyrinth of the Immortals should lead to death, to a termination, to eternal rest; instead it turns upon itself and centrifugally
ium of a fever. Some of which stood mighty spouts, &c., expressive of the old, expressed by the old, expressed to overcome. Creeping down a staircase; and upon the stairs themselves. Follow the man reaching an abrupt wing no step onwards except into the depths below, at least you suppose. But raise your eye, on which again on the very brink of still more aerial flight luridous Piranesi, busy with unfinished stairs and ever gloom of the hall. Self-reproduction did not calls "the Piranesi effect" in apparently, but with less infinity on the label of a re the scene is only recalled, y witnessed. On this point, Piranesi etching exists, and eyey Coleridge—the one uses the narrative of being is equally false. But more inaction at the core of life's Quincey calls it there is no instead another labyrinth but only "the Piranesi effect" read most," Father Brown and Borges collaborate in mortals should lead to death, upon itself and centrifugally

flings the searchers out into newer and newer existences. De Quincey's visual "Piranesi effect" is here made to serve the office of a horrifying, destempered "Vision of Er."

The City of the Immortals is the symbolic center of Borges' universe, and from it emanates all the anxiety undermining that world. As in "The Approach to Al-Mut'amin," Borges usually-witholds the final vision and concentrates on the way to the center, leaving the character on the very door sill of revelation, but in "The Immortal" we are conducted to this center and enter into the absolute mythic reality which Eliade tells us is associated with such places:

The center, then, is pre-eminently the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality... The road leading to the center is a difficult road... and this is verified at every level of reality: difficult convolutions of a temple (as at Borobudur); pilgrimage to sacred places (Mecca, Hardwar, Jerusalem); danger-ridden voyages of the heroic expeditions in search of the Golden Fleece, the Golden Apples, the Herb of Life; wandering in labyrinths; difficulties of the seeker for the road to the self, to the "center" of his being, and so on. The road is arduous, fraught with perils, because it is, in fact, a rite of the passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to divinity.

The Library of Babel is one representation of this reality, and the City of the Immortals is a more terrifying one still. Of its sacred nature there can be no doubt—we are told that the gods have built it, and the Immortals do live there—but instead of giving rise "to a life that is real, enduring and effective," this perverse heaven gives rise to an existence that is nightmarish, eternal, and futile, for "the gods who built it were mad." This city

is so horrible that its mere existence and perpetuation, even in the center of a hidden desert, contaminates the past and the future and in some way compromises the heavenly bodies. While it lasts, no one in the world can be valiant or happy.

The description goes beyond De Quincey's personal nightmares, and the word "horrible" can serve as our introduction to this loathsome realm, the Conradian heart of darkness. The odyssey of "The Immortal" is a Conradian journey to the center of the world, another journey to the center of Africa, where Rufus encounters the same reality as Mr. Kurtz: "The horror! The horror!" Once there, there is nothing for either Homer-Rufus or Marlow to do but to turn around and rethread the windings of their approach. The mythic structure
of "The Immortal," is thus supported by the mythological universe of Conrad, where to seek is to wander in a labyrinth—of adventure for the characters. Marlow's style for the reader—and to find is to discover the abyss—Marlow says of Kurtz: "I had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot." Conrad is actually worked into "The Immortal" by having Homer ship on the Patna, Jim's boat in Lord Jim, and the importance of Conrad to Eliot as well as to Borges serves to unite the three in their depiction of a world where, if all is not exactly desert, as in "The Immortal" and The Waste Land, everything wears "a vast and dismal aspect of disorder," a world where there is no meaning and no utterance beyond the cry for death.

The meeting of De Quincey, Chesterton, Conrad, and Borges in a common image is striking because they illuminate each other's thought. Chesterton, for example, serves to remind us that the labyrinth was originally a burying place. Looking at "a vast black bulk of the cyclopean building" in "The Point of a Pin," Father Brown says:

> It reminds one of Coppée's poem about the Pharaoh and the Pyramid. The house is supposed to be a hundred houses; and yet the whole mountain of buildings is only one man's tomb.

And Flambeau describes another labyrinth which also connects that structure with the grave:

> "Died," repeated Flambeau, "and that's about as much as we can say. You must understand that towards the end of his life he began to have those twitches of the nerves not uncommon with tyrants. He multiplied the ordinary daily and nightly guard around his castle till there seemed to more sentry-boxes than houses in the town, and doubtful characters were shot without mercy. He lived almost entirely in a little room that was in the very centre of the enormous labyrinth of all the other rooms, and even in this he erected another sort of central cabin or cupboard, lined with steel, like a safe or battleship. No one knew that under the floor of this again was a secret hole in the earth no more than large enough to hold him, so that, in his anxiety to avoid the grave he was willing to go into a place pretty much airtight."

In fact we should have guessed, on the basis of "The Cult of the Phoenix," that the City of Immortals would be a vast graveyard, a universal mausoleum. But if we did not guess, Borges puts the information in our way:
"The Immortal"

On finally disentangling myself from that nightmare, I found myself manacled and thrown into an oblong niche, no bigger than an ordinary sepulcher, shallowly excavated in the sharp slope of a mountain. . . . About a hundred irregular niches, like mine, furrowed the mountain and the valley.

The nightmare is one labyrinth ("desenredarme") and the city is another. Between them lies the grave and rebirth. We might even have known from the beginning that the labyrinth, in its oldest, Egyptian form (the form invoked by the setting of "The Immortal") is precisely a symbol of life through death, as C. N. Deedes tells us:

Above all, the Labyrinth was the centre of activities concerned with those greatest of mysteries, Life and Death. There men tried by every means known to them to overcome death and to renew life. The Labyrinth protected and concealed the dead king-god in order that his life in the after-world might be preserved. . . . The Labyrinth, as tomb and temple, fostered the development of all art and literature, activities which in those days possessed a religious and life-giving significance.

It is the peculiar virtue of Borges' story, however, to have seen the potential horror in such a resurrection symbol and to have put De Quincey's famous passage so dramatically to work. Nevertheless, we might remind ourselves that Borges did not have to rely on De Quincey's Gothic nightmare, except as the singularly fine example it is. He could have drawn, and in some ultimate way does, on Chesterton's equally fantastic architecture:

Immediately beneath and about them the lines of the Gothic building plunged outwards into the void with a sickening swiftness akin to suicide. There is that element of Titan energy in the architecture of the Middle Ages that, from whatever aspect it be seen, it always seems to be rushing away, like the strong back of some maddened horse. This church was hewn out of ancient and silent stone, bearded with old fungoids and stained with the nests of birds. And yet, when they saw it from below, it sprang like a fountain at the stars; and when they saw it, as now, from above, it poured like a cataract into a voiceless pit. For these two men on the tower were left alone with the most terrible aspect of the Gothic: the monstrous foreshortening and disproportion, the dizzy perspectives, the glimpses of great things small and small things great; a topsy-turvydom of
Here, an invocation to Cynic's essay: Homer is the poem, so that artistic

Homer has more of the peculiar antique words in his vocabulary than
that no one of our German writers, by means of reference, can
be written for the purpose of the unison a hundred Syllables. It is not to say for the purpose of the unison
his orator's years of humor, compared with his, on a homily or a
and by well, he is contrary to shape and shape, and in fact, as it is to look old or the Wdd. Well, good man, the good God
for these there be three to your door and fiction; while Wdd
Homer, thy son, is old—very old man, whose judgment
form he is, a monastic ascetic.

Homer as a monastic ascetic.

Of Homer's, next to the influence of this body, and a religious description of
or, in fact, the case of necessity, a very rare.

sail, a ring in the door, but we see you: he is now a sufferer. as
and his Odyssey, the description of Homer himself. It is our
vow, and the Odyssey, the description of Homer himself.

Omit! Like our Jacob Bryan, how pious that he was never met.

If we take him one by one, the Homer is the poem, so that artistic

Homer's words were composed by many different men. I mean a Homer who
speak of the kinds of this: Homer as a monastic ascetic. He is a very old man, the
words of Homer, who never existed and whose

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the Odyssey, the description of Homer himself. It is our
sail, a ring in the door, but we see you: he is now a sufferer. as
and his Odyssey, the description of Homer himself. It is our
vow, and the Odyssey, the description of Homer himself.

Omit! Like our Jacob Bryan, how pious that he was never met.

If we take him one by one, the Homer is the poem, so that artistic

Homer's words were composed by many different men. I mean a Homer who
speak of the kinds of this: Homer as a monastic ascetic. He is a very old man, the
words of Homer, who never existed and whose

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vow, and the Odyssey, the description of Homer himself.

Omit! Like our Jacob Bryan, how pion
Malomean institutions now run as good light on the tremendous
institutions in Borges' story and Homer's in that story. swiftness makes
the Immortal's in Borges' story and Homer's in that story. In the...

*To any reader who happens to be incautious, or not extensively
informed, it may be proper to explain that Struwwelpeter was a
creation of Deacon Swift, who was afraid of dying, and who had in imagination
seen the world end, and, through necessity, when they ought to have
been dead and buried, but suffering all the ills of utter superannuation and
decay, having a bare glimpse of Christian powers—could not have
been healed by the colossus support of Christian powers—

The Romans were essentially the leaders in civilization, according
to the possibilities existing for that leader, and his imagination—
forms involved a high civilization, promising usage, whereas

De Queen is another version of this myth, one which significantly differs
from De Queen's interpretation of Homer, but could, nonetheless, have
been suggested by it.

When you describe Homer, or when you hear described as
a lively, picturesque old boy (by the mere actions of Homer as old), full of life and animation, and movement, then
you say or you hear say what is true, and not much more than
what is true.
...
The important and the immovable. The War
able to fulfill the promise of the immovable, the immovable are the
word, but in the War, the War, and the War, are those words which come to
and provide not only an encomium for the partial condition as well, in a

These words: I have heard again my house

pretty much the same condition

and displaced works, words of others, were the poor dole let him

remembered in no longer remain. Only words remain. Words personalized when the artist, whorl, and

X-ray of the condition of our time, it is not, to fulfill the promise of the immovable, the immovable are the
word, but in the War, the War, and the War, are those words which come to
and provide not only an encomium for the partial condition as well, in a

The important and the immovable. The War
able to fulfill the promise of the immovable, the immovable are the
word, but in the War, the War, and the War, are those words which come to
and provide not only an encomium for the partial condition as well, in a
are among Borges' favorites), how can two such men create such formally
different works? The answer lies, again, in the vantage point. Eliot, at least
in *The Waste Land*, is on the order of De Quincey, and Borges works more
in the vein of Joyce, whose writings also function on the principle of the Eternal
Return. I am speaking, of course, of esthetic dispositions which tend toward
the open, aspiring, inevitably inconclusive and those which tend toward the
closed, formulated, finished work. Specifically, Eliot's view in *The Waste Land*,
as we can gather from the related "Gerontion," is from within the labyrinth:

Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues . . .

and he shows a character, who like De Quincey, "can connect/Nothing with
nothing," even though he does exist in a work which, like De Quincey's, is
busy making parallels. Borges, in contrast, leads his character to the moment
of awareness: "Everything became clear to me that day." Joyce, Eliot, Borges
are all labyrinthine; all employ the image and symbol of the labyrinth; but
only Joyce and Borges, by their use of "magic" correlation, which is an ordering
expression of the Eternal Return, create labyrinths which are complete and
decipherable; all three aim at mystification, but Eliot chooses that mystification
as a final intention. One advantage which emerges from such a comparison
is the possibility of uniting our views of Borges, Joyce, Eliot (and Yeats too,
of whom Borges writes: "like so many others, he conceived a cyclical doctrine
of history") in the study of a common theme—the Eternal Return. Such a
comparison is beyond the scope of my present interest, but it indicates once
again the synthesizing quality of Borges' work, and, by association, implies
its value.

The second group of allusions in the Postscript has less to do with the
cento-technique and more with the substance of the story. In each instance
something has been borrowed from the acknowledged source and interpolated
into "The Immortal." But it is no case of literal theft or simple annexation.
Pliny is a good example. On the surface it would seem that the allusion to
*Natural History* is referential, an allusion to informative writing which is the
source of the passage in question. In fact "source" seems to be the right word
here, for Borges does take a description from Pliny and filter it into his own
text. In Part I of "The Immortal," where Cordovero finds an interpolation from
Pliny, we read:

We left from Arisnoë and entered the scorched desert. We crossed
the land of the troglodytes, who devour snakes and lack all verbal
communication; that of
in common and nourish
who worship only Tarta
sand is black, where the
because the fervor of days
of the mountain that gave
spurge, which neutralize
a nation of cruel, savage
regions, where the earth
their bosom a famous ci
continued our journey sin
A few rash men slept with
burned them; in the deep
madness and death.

And in the section of Pliny C's
framework for the description:

In the middle of the desert they utter the half-animal
Gamphasantes and Saty

The Atlas tribe have for
their heads, they have no voice, but only right
of intercourse by speech
but live with their wom
the powers of the lower
not engage in battle, an
The Blemmyae are repe
eyes being attached to
ordinary humanity about
the Goat-Pans is that whi
The Strapfooths are people
it is to crawl instead of -
communication; that of the garamantes, who keep their females in common and nourish themselves on lions; that of the auglys, who worship only Tartarus. We wearied other deserts, where the sand is black, where the traveler must usurp the hours of night because the fervor of day is intolerable. From far off I caught sight of the mountain that gave its name to the Ocean: on its slopes grows spurge, which neutralizes poisons; on its summit live the satyrs, a nation of cruel, savage men, given to lust. That those barbarous regions, where the earth is mother of monsters, could shelter in their bosom a famous city, seemed inconceivable to all of us. We continued our journey since it would have been a dishonor to retreat. A few rash men slept with their faces exposed to the moon; fever burned them; in the depraved water of the cisterns others drank madness and death.

And in the section of Pliny Cordovero precisely directs us to we do find the mework for the description in Borges:

In the middle of the desert some place the Atlas tribe, and next to them the half-animal Goat-Pans and the Blemmyae and Gamphasantes and Satyrs and Strapfoots.

The Atlas tribe have fallen below the level of human civilization, if we can believe what is said; for they do not address one another by any names, and when they behold the rising and setting sun, they utter awful curses against it as the cause of disaster to themselves and their fields, and when they are asleep they do not have dreams like the rest of mankind. The Cave-dwellers hollow out caverns, which are their dwellings, they live on the flesh of snakes, and they have no voice, but only make squeaking noises, being entirely devoid of intercourse by speech. The Garamates do not practice marriage but live with their women promiscuously. The Augilae only worship the powers of the lower world. The Gamphasantes go naked, do not engage in battle, and hold no intercourse with any foreigner. The Blemmyae are reported to have no heads, their mouth and eyes being attached to their chests. The satyrs have nothing of ordinary humanity about them except human shape. The form of the Goat-Pans is that which is commonly shown in pictures of them. The Strapfoots are people with feet like leather thongs, whose nature it is to crawl instead of walking. The Pharusi, originally a Persian
people, are said to have accompanied Hercules on his journey to the Ladies of the West. Nothing more occurs to us to record about Aëtna.

The borrowing, however, is neither exact nor artless. Of course Borges has condensed Pliny, but then he has also blended his sources, creating a pastiche of pastiches, as in the fragment about men being burned to death by the moon, which is not found in that part of Pliny and which may have come to Borges through De Quincey:

In p. 50 of the “Annotations” upon Glanvill’s Lux Orientalis the author... having occasion to quote from the Psalms “The sun shall not burn thee by day, neither the moon by night” in order to illustrate that class of cases where an ellipsis is to be suggested by the sense rather than directly indicated, says “The word burn cannot be repeated, but some other more suitable verb is to be supplied.” A gentleman, however, who has lately returned from Upper Egypt, &c., assures me that the moon does produce an effect on the skin which may as accurately be expressed by the word “burn” as any solar effect.

Finally the most meaningful thing about the passage in Pliny is that fact, first, that the description of these monstrous peoples is fitted into a geographical sequence which suggests a journey and, second, that Homer himself is cited as an authority for the information:

Eastward of all of these there are vast uninhabited regions spreading as far as the Garamantes and Augilæ and the Cave-dweller—the most reliable opinion being that of those who place two Ethiopias beyond the African desert, and especially Homer, who tells us that the Ethiopians are divided into two sections, the eastward and the westward.

The clear implication is that Homer has made the trip, knows the land first-hand, an implication which reinforces Borges’ identification of Homer as Rufus, the man who makes the trip to the City of the Immortals. The relationship between Borges and Pliny is active: if Borges borrows from Pliny, he enriches the Pliny text by eliciting a new meaning.

The other sources are used similarly. The actual reference is not exhaustive, and if we take the trouble to consult the passage in question, we find something new in the story and often in the source as well. Skipping over the De Quincey passage, which I have already discussed, we can compare “A letter from Descartes to the ambassador Pierre Chanut” with Borges’ version:
if I had been only as wise as they say savages persuade themselves monkeys are, I should never have been known by anyone as a maker of books: for it is said that they imagine that the monkeys would be able to speak if they wished, but that they refrain from doing it so that they will not be forced to work.

I recalled that it is famous among the Ethiopians that the monkeys deliberately do not speak so that they will not be forced to work and I attributed Argus' silence to suspicion or fear.

This is the direct correspondence, but more interesting to the motto Descartes takes from Seneca's Thyestes at the end of the same letter:

And so I think the best thing I can do from now on is to abstain from writing books; and having taken for my motto:

Death lies heavy upon that man who, unusually well known to others, dies unknown to himself.

In Descartes' allusion to antiquity, and to the same figure Jonson employs and Cordovero mentions, Borges shows the centrifugal force of literature; and by noting the sense of Seneca's lines we are directed to the pathos of the conversation between Rufus and Homer who has become a dog-like creature and forgotten his own nature: there is a worse death: to be famous to all, and to die unknown to oneself. Notice, however, that neither the allusion in the Postscript nor the passage about the monkeys in the narrative directly evokes this motto. The evocative quality of this allusion is only remotely present, almost silent, as is customary in Borges. Nevertheless, if the motto serves for Descartes, it likewise can serve for Borges' story, for each of us, having forgotten that we are Homer, dies famous throughout the world but unrecognized by ourselves.

As with the first group of allusions I considered from the Postscript, the last in the second group is the most important: Cordovero directs us to Back to Methuselah, Act V, but once again while he points in the right direction, his scope is not nearly broad enough. The parallels between the Shaw play and Borges' story are close and pervasive, even though the attitude taken toward immortality in each is different. Shaw's theme, as described by Borges, is optimistic, corrective, while the one we have seen in Borges is dejected and dispiriting:

In Man and Superman he declares that heaven and hell are not places but conditions of the human spirit; in Back to Methuselah that man
ought to resolve to live 300 years so as not to die at 80 in full immaturity with a golf club in his hand, and that the physical universe began by Spirit and shall return to Spirit.

Here then is another ethic for immortals and one that brings the world back to its originating spirit as well, but Borges' story is far from the joking argument for creative evolution that Shaw's play is. Nevertheless Borges found much to his use and liking in Shaw's "cerebral capers."

Shaw's play, as his preface states, shows that "human life is continuous and immortal," and it uses the mythic image of the Wandering Jew as well as the literary unity Borges hypothesizes: "An ancient writer whose name has come down to us in several forms, such as Shakespeare, Shelley, Sheridan, and Shoddy," and it even voices the fundamental notion of art as dream when Eve tells Adam of certain of their sons who

borrow and never pay; but one gives them what they want, because they tell beautiful lies in beautiful words. They can remember their dreams. They can dream without sleeping. They have not will enough to create instead of dreaming; but the serpent said that every dream could be willed into creation by those strong enough to believe in it.

In the last act, which is commended to our attention by Cordovero, the time is A.D. 31,920, yet the matter is the same as that of Borges' antiquity, and the point is made that tomorrow is "The day that never comes." In this world beyond Bradbury, the most specific locus of comparison between the two texts is the Swifian notion, complicated by the Emersonian doctrine of compensation, that the Immortals have grown completely indifferent because in the end all things balance out. In Borges we read:

Instructed by centuries of practice, the republic of immortal men had achieved the perfection of tolerance and almost of disdain. It knew that in an infinite term all things happen to every man. On account of his past or future virtues, every man deserves all goodness, but also deserves all treachery because of his past or future infamies.

This is the intolerable ethic Borges extracts with all the irony of the defeated victor, while in Back to Methuselah we find that Shaw's immortals, like Borges', are indifferent to discomfort and pleasure, for, as they recognize: "Everything happens to everybody sooner or later if there is time enough. And with us there is eternity." But the passage we remember from Shaw's play as being most Borgesean of all is one in a completely different vein; one, nevertheless, where eras, texts, authors coalesce into one unified cultural senility:
There is a prehistoric saying that has come down to us from a famous woman teacher. She said: “Leave women; and study mathematics.” It is the only remaining fragment of a lost scripture called The Confessions of St. Augustin, the English Opium Eater. That primitive savage must have been a great woman, to say a thing that still lives after three hundred centuries.

Like the other allusions, the one to Back to Methuselah has its secret aspect too. In the third act, not the fifth, which Cordovero directs us to, we can find a solution for the apparent death of Homer which is related in the introduction of “The Immortal”: “In October the princess heard from a passenger on the Zeus that Cartaphilus had died at sea on returning to Smyrna and that they had buried him on the island of Ios.” Nowhere in the text does Borges offer an explanation for this apparent death, but if we turn to the third act of Shaw’s play we find a character quoting a report which “points out that an extraordinary number of first-rate persons . . . have died by drowning during the last two centuries.” The explanation for these drownings, which surely includes the death of Cartaphilus at sea, is given by a near-immortal archbishop who ran into bureaucratic problems trying to collect his pension at the age of ninety-seven because he looked so young. His solution was simple—pretend to die and start life all over again.

I did kill myself. It was quite easy. I left a suit of clothes by the seashore during the bathing season, with documents in the pocket to identify me. I then turned up in a strange place, pretending that I had lost my memory, and did not know my name or my age or anything about myself. Under treatment I recovered my health, but not my memory. I have had several careers since I began this routine of life and death. I have been an archbishop three times. When I persuaded the authorities to knock down all our towns and rebuild them from the foundations, or move them, I went into the artillery, and became a general. I have been a President.

Even the question of Homer’s burial is solved by this Archbishop, who, in his architectural plans, may even remind us of Borges’ Homer. When asked how he can have been President Dickenson, whose body was cremated and whose ashes lie in St. Paul’s, the Archbishop replies:

They almost always found the body. During the bathing season there are plenty of bodies. I have been cremated again and again. At first I used to attend my own funeral in disguise, because I had read about a man doing that in an old romance by an author named...
Bennett, from whom I remember borrowing five pounds in 1912. But I got tired of that. I would not cross the street now to read my last epitaph.

Here then is the sham death practiced by the Immortals so as not to arouse suspicion, and here too is the necessary loss of memory to permit the renewal of life. This death-by-water motif is further suggested by Homer's explanation that "On the fourth of October, 1921, the Patna, which was carrying me to Bombay, had to cast anchor in a port on the Eritrean coast." The Patna, "a local steamer as old as the hills," carrying "eight hundred pilgrims (more or less)," is Jim's boat in Conrad's Lord Jim, and we read there of a Captain Brierly who commits suicide by jumping overboard. Jim, on the other hand, also jumps ship in the crucial moment of his life, and Conrad has him explain: "It was as if I jumped into a well—into an everlasting deep hole." In light of Borges we read this passage somewhat differently, and are not surprised to find another character urging the following plan for Jim: "Let him creep twenty feet underground and stay there," and still another remarking: "Bury him in some sort." Of course this is what in effect happens and Jim, "the youngest human being now in existence," revives to lead a new life.

This last allusion to Conrad demands our recognition that "The Immortal" is immensely more allusive than Borges admits. The Lord Jim allusion really tells us nothing about "The Immortal" but it invokes the same theme from other writings, and thus establishes the mirror relationship in literature which the Immortals recognize in life:

Among the Immortals... each act (and each thought) is the echo of others which preceded it in the past, without apparent principle, or the faithful omen of others which will repeat it, to the point of vertigo, in the future. There is no thing that is not lost, as it were, amidst indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can occur only once, nothing is preciously precarious.

Allusion is thus the device which reflects one work in another; and despite the lack of apparent principle in repetition which the Immortals describe, allusion repeats meaningfully, ordering the chaos which is at once literature and life. Thus we have in the story major themes alluded to, as in the case of "the nightingale of the Caesars," which invokes Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn.

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown.

And we have minor works, like the reference to a novel by Ellis Cornelia Knight which Borges probably read of in the novel's title tells us about all we need to know of the military, political and social life of a patron to his friend; in the year DCC.LXIX. There are no signs except perhaps for one lamenting the cavern of despair and only old hope: your friend still lives; his youth once more snatched him from the gathering magpie fashion by Bannock a pole, and an end, to the range of life. From the basic outline of Eliot's story, and the specific reference, supplies much of the content, to it at least a single item, we have more time filling in the degrees of our own academic "industry" just important, what concerns all readers the purpose and meaning of this tale.

Borges has taken care to select allusion of "The Immortal" even if they have not reached the height of art. Hence all readers are aware of this work. Like Ulysses, like The Dead, only as a means to an end but as a means to our awareness of literature and philosophy, of the inquiring mind, but to do so in a way which has as the purpose Borges reads in Emile and which declares that every man is the universe." On the other hand, to be in touch with the secret hieroglyphically, to solve its puzzle.

In the use of allusion Borges, in the use of allusion from, he has been a master of the metaphysical and literary theory of character extraordinary in which we perceive a phase of his eminently active character and in all
which Borges probably read of in De Quincey's review of another book. The novel's title tells us about all we need to know of it: Marcus Flamininus, or a view of the military, political and social life of the Romans: in a series of letters from a patrician to his friend; in the year DCC.LXII, from the foundation of Rome to year DCC.LXIX. There are no significant parallels in the novel to Borges' story, except perhaps for one lamenting letter which reads in part: "death flies from the cavern of despair and only delights to overthrow the pompous fabrics of hope: your friend still lives, his youth and the strength of his constitution have once more snatched him from the arms of freedom." This last-minute reference, gathered magpie fashion by Borges in the course of his reading, establishes a pole, and an end, to the range of allusion I have been noting in "The Immortal." From the basic outline of Eliot's The Waste Land, which supplies the form of Borges' story, and the specific material of Shaw's Back to Methuselah, which supplies much of the content, to Miss Knight's Marcus Flamininus, which supplies at least a single item, we have the entire rank of allusion. One could spend more time filling in the degrees and undoubtedly Borges will give rise to his own academic "industry" just as Eliot and Joyce have, but what is more important, what concerns all readers of Borges and not just the detectives, is the purpose and meaning of these allusions.

Borges has taken care to see that all readers will know the allusive nature of "The Immortal" even if they do not grasp the extent of that allusiveness. Hence all readers are aware of the substantive as well as the secret quality in this work. Like Ulysses, like The Waste Land, "The Immortal" uses allusion not only as a means to an end but as an end itself. Each of the allusions contributes to our awareness of literature as universal memory, which, in not seeming to lose sight of anything, guarantees the survival of all, is, in a word, immortality. To break down the story into its constituent allusions is an inevitable desire of the inquiring mind, but to do so takes one no closer to the monistic meaning of the narrative which has as its purpose the fictional embodiment of the philosophy Borges reads in Emerson: "a faith which eliminates circumstances, and which declares that every man is all men and that there is no one who is not the universe." On the other hand to be at least aware of these borrowings is to be in touch with the secret meaning of the story, is to read it Kabbalistically, hieroglyphically, to solve its puzzle with the clues given.

In the use of allusion Borges has never pushed farther than "The Immortal." Nor has he ever written another story which so completely embodies his metaphysical and literary theories, for in this one narrative he actually creates a character of extraordinary implication and presents him a situation where we perceive a phase of his emergence and disintegration. The character, the only character, I think, in all of Borges, is the literary Over-Soul. Emerson,
in his notes to an essay on the Over-Soul, had jotted down the following observations:

There is one soul.
It is related to the world.
Art is its action thereon.
Science finds its methods.
Literature is its record.

Borges takes the first of these jottings as his premise and the last as his method. Emerson said he liked to read "for the lustres, as if one should use a fine picture in a chromatic experiment, for its rich colours." Borges seems to read that way, in preparation for his stories, and in reading him we do the same, noting the allusions—some of them—for the originals they are, and in this way we discover, with Emerson, that "It is a greater joy to see the author's author, than himself."

The author's author is first of all Borges, because of the involutions of his fictional worlds; but then the author's author is the figure Borges' essays define with tireless precision, whose spirit moves in and above Borges' work to bring it into line with all other works. It is toward an intimation of this spirit that all his works move, asking the same fantastic question we ask when, in different terms, we consider literary history and tradition:

The player is also prisoner
(the phrase is Omar's) of another table
of black nights and white days.

God moves the player, and he the piece.
What god behind God begins the plot
of dust and time and dream and agony?

Borges began by introducing his own imaginary passages into already existing books, then progressed to the fabrication of imaginary books with bits of real ones worked in, and finally created a single character who not only is responsible for this story, but for all literature: the author of authors: The Immortal. That creation represents a mastery by order and reason of infinite chaos; that it is, ironically, a destruction of all that is personal and real is only the character of his achievement and the dilemma of our irrational existence.

Borges' is the hand that points: his essence is a direction away from his own substance. To see beyond his work—really, to see through it to other writings—is the greatest necessity, and achievement, of his labor. He stands midway between the cataphysical characters of his stories and the metaphysical spirit of literature, reflecting primary light onto tertiary beings. He does this with intricate allusion, and if we are tempted to undervalue his genius because
he seems to borrow all that is his, let us remember what De Quincey wrote of Coleridge with generosity and accuracy, a statement which applies to each of these three men—Coleridge, De Quincey, Borges—in different ways, but which, in that minor variation of a perpetual gesture, constitutes their literary identity. De Quincey writes: "if he took—he gave. Constantly he fancied other men's thoughts his own; but such were the confusions of his memory that continually, and with even greater liberality, he ascribed his own thoughts to others."

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And the last as his method, let us use a fine picture seems to read that way, do the same, noting the in this way we discover, or's author, than himself." case of the involutions of the figure Borges' essays and above Borges' work, an intimation of this question we ask when, tradition:

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