

“THIS IMMINENCE OF A REVELATION”:
A STUDY OF EPIPHANIES IN BORGES’S FICTION

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The term “epiphany,” from the Greek “to show,” can be translated as “bring to light” or “cause to appear.” Until recently it was used almost exclusively in its theological sense, referring to the Feast of the Epiphany, the moment in human history when God clearly and directly made himself manifest in the lives of men. However, this limited meaning overlooks the important use of epiphany in Greek literature and religion, while it also disregards the term’s widespread secular use in modern fiction to refer to other non-divine forms of revelation. It is with these that I shall be dealing, mainly. However, the religious association remains to some extent in that they are still moments of poetic intensity, comparable in imaginative power to traditional theophanies or appearances of the divine.¹

The modern extended use of the term derives principally from Joyce, who defined it as something possibly trivial and out of all proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it. And so it is in Borges. A recurring motif of epiphanic experiences or momentary visions of transcendental significance which are often based on a mixture of the trivial and the exalted permeates his fiction—though, as would be expected, counterculturally, or if this is too strong a term, then certainly as going “against the grain.”

The “imminence of a revelation” in my title, encapsulates what I consider the quintessential characteristic common to all epiphanies in

¹ See Nichols (5-7); Bidney (4).

Borges's writings: equivocal, ambivalent, and ultimately elusory, they both retain an element of the core meaning of the term, a vision of a transcendental, spiritual truth, while at the same time challenging its assumptions and undermining its significance. Whether central or marginally positioned, they are, in some way or other, revelations which are mostly ironized, shown as being either mistaken, self-fashioned or, perhaps most devastatingly, of no consequence.² Borges's epiphanies can be divided, roughly, into those that are concerned with visions of plenitude and the meaning of the universe and others, more modest in scope, based on moment in an individual's life in which he or she experiences a flash of insight as to the meaning or purpose of life.³ Among the former I would name "El Aleph," "El Zahir," "La escritura del Dios," "La biblioteca de Babel," as perhaps the best known. Given that there is a vast critical literature dealing with the visions in these stories, I shall limit my comments to a few observations regarding the presentation of epiphanies within them. In most of them, the final revelation results in the protagonist's madness or even death. In "El Aleph," a small disc of two or three centimeters in diameter, the totality of the universe, is described in one of the most glorious prose passages in all of Borges's writings. Yet unlike most traditional visions of eternity, the splendor of this revelation is undercut by its taking place in the grotesque surroundings of a cellar and by some of the sordid personal details it includes. Its effect is far from spiritually uplifting for it is followed by the pettily vindictive reaction of the "Borges" character, who emerges unchanged, denying having had the experience. Moreover, the all-encompassing plenitude implied in the name of the disc, the "aleph"⁴ (highly symbolic first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, said to incorporate all others), is severely undermined in the postdata by a long list of other well-known universal mirrors. It is further challenged as to its genuineness by rumors of an alternative "aleph," more appropriately placed in the column

2 Margarita Saona links the inevitable scepticism that accompanies all epiphanies in Borges's writings to his personal melancholy.

3 Carlos J. Alonso considers these "momentos de epifanía epistemológica del logro del conocimiento absoluto" (438) as one of the two fundamental themes in Borges's narrative.

4 In Kabbalistic terms, the "aleph" is a highly symbolic letter, positioned first in the alphabet, and said to include all others. It follows, from the Kabbalistic belief in Creation as a linguistic event, that the "aleph" embodies the universe.

of a mosque. This introduces the logically difficult concept of a plurality of infinities. Yet precisely such an idea is supported by science when another “aleph” is quoted in the story, the “aleph” of Cantor’s “new mathematics,” the set theory known as the *Mengenlehre*, which also posits a plurality of infinities. This topic is discussed by Merrell (60-62), who comments on the crucial distinction between Cantor’s “alephs” and Borges’s in that “Cantor believed them to be real, [and] never relinquished hope that the paradoxes they generated would be ultimately resolvable” while “Borges, of course, believed in the existence of no such eternal archetypes” (61). The point I wish to make in the context of this discussion is that the epiphanic vision experienced by the protagonist and which constitutes the heart of the story is trivialized by its setting, its contents, and diluted by the implication of rival claims of universal truths.

SUBJECTIVE REVELATIONS

It is interesting to re-read “Emma Zunz” from the unusual vantage point of epiphanies. In this story there are two unsignalled instances of momentary illumination: the first is when Emma receives the news of her father’s suicide and “knows,” instantly, her own destiny: to avenge her father who had been secretly and falsely accused.

His death was a watershed in her life: “era lo único que había sucedido en el mundo, y seguiría sucediendo sin fin” ... “ya era la que sería” (*El Aleph* 59).⁵ Traditionally, in fiction, fated predictions are assumed to be both powerful and correct, but this is not the case here: a second flash of insight occurs within this timeless time and has a totally unpredicted effect. During her self-enforced sexual intercourse with a sailor (this is part of her plan), almost at mid-point in the story, in a memorably alliterative and quasi-palindromic sentence, “Pensó (no pudo no pensar)” (62), the hitherto virginal Emma becomes lucidly aware of another level of reality which radically alters her attitude to her father and to what needs to be avenged. This is her mother’s sexual humiliation, and, by extension, her own. In classical literature, again, such an *aperçu* would be an instance of *peripeteia*, the reversal or turning point in a drama leading to a different or opposite outcome, but in the Borges story the two completely contradic-

5 All subsequent references to stories in *El Aleph* are to this edition.

tory revelations co-exist, and what is more, are unmarked in the development of the plot. This second epiphanic insight bears no visible effect on the execution of Emma's plan, which is carried out as originally devised though with an altered private meaning. I am not suggesting this as a new interpretation; lately critics have taken account of this complexity in the plot, but offer it as an illustration of a "low key" epiphany which is tacitly embedded in the narrative, and which contradicts conventional assumptions.

The epiphanic experience in the next two stories to be discussed is assumed to be a true revelation, but of an unexpected nature. The stories in question are "Las ruinas circulares" and "El inmortal" and what is of particular interest is that the resulting revelations turn out to be mirror images of each other.

The sorcerer in "Ruinas," the grey, "taciturn" traveller whose story it is, disembarks, unseen and unheard, at some muddy riverbank in an overgrown jungle, and makes his way to a circular temple in ruins. He has a fervent wish: to dream up another being, a son, as it were. After many a false start he is finally successful, but an overriding fear disturbs his peace of mind, and that is that his son, his creation, should find out that he is a mere simulacrum; therefore, before sending him downstream, to establish his independence and worship at another temple, he infuses in him total oblivion of his early years. Now, "[e]l propósito de su vida estaba colmado; el hombre persistió en una suerte de *éxtasis*" (*Ficciones* 64).⁶ But the ecstasy of feeling his life's work accomplished gives way, eventually, to an opposing revelation, in which the protagonist also has a vision of the meaning of his life, only in this case, it is the NON-meaning of his life that is revealed. The end of his meditations occurs swiftly, and, at first reading, quite unexpectedly, when the sorcerer understands a fire reducing the temple to ruins to be a sign of his impending death. He walks, once more, to the burning sanctuary, as he had walked to it upon his arrival, making his way through the flames, without feeling their heat or their lacerations. This is a circular repetition of what happened upon his arrival, but the difference is that this time he "understands" fully. The tripartite complexity of his reaction to this revelation is perhaps the most succinct example of com-

6 All subsequent quotations from stories in *Ficciones* ("Las ruinas circulares" and "El milagro secreto") are to this edition.

pressed multilayeredness in Borges's narrative, the contrasting sentiments expressed complementing each other with increased intensity: "con alivio, con humillación, con terror comprendió que él también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo" (66).

This is not a vision of truth in all its radiance, but in resonant bleakness, combining the relief of death with the terror of not being. The "Nadie" that opens the story, at first assumed simply to be part of a desired secrecy, in playful allusion to Homer's punning use of *Nemo*, prefigures and is the explained by the ending: he, literally, was "Nadie."

All the shadowy references in the narrative are re-contextualized, from the thrice repeated "Nadie," to the crucial information regarding the bulrushes that fail to lacerate the protagonist's flesh. At the beginning of the story this numbness is suggested as a mere bracketed conjecture — ("probablemente, sin sentir") (OC 1:451)—, yet it this deadness of feeling which provides the vital clue to the story, and to an understanding of it as a fictionalized metaphor of metaphysical idealism.

The succinctness of "Ruinas" contrasts with "El inmortal," which is one of the most intricate and densely constructed of Borges's fictions, impossible to summarize. To recall it in the proverbial nutshell, I shall quote Borges's own description: "L'histoire essentielle est l'histoire d'un homme immortel qui, par cela meme qu'il est immortel, oublie son passée" (Borges, *Oeuvres* 1:1616). In the existing critical literature it has been examined from a variety of angles, and in conjunction with other stories, particularly those concerned with labyrinths and recurring narratives. My focus is not on the core of "El inmortal" but on a so far overlooked point of contact with "Ruinas," the idea of "Nadie," non-being, present in both stories. Like the sorcerer of the former, the protagonist of "El inmortal" sets out on a journey, in this case to the city of Immortals, whose greyness reminiscent of everything in "Ruinas" for it is set in a barbaric land where the Earth is the mother of monsters and is inhabited by grey, repellent, troglodytes. The different stages of the story appear to trace and conflate various literary and invented characters into an eternal, on-going narrative, which at this point rests on one Marco Flaminio Rufo. The utter bleakness of immortality, its futility, its lack of pity, spur this present *yo* figure to seek a river whose waters will provide an antidote to immortality. In an inverted echo of the bulrushes *not* felt by the previous "hero,"

when Rufo scaled the steep bank beside the river of mortality (193), he very much feels the pain of a thorn scratching the back of his hand. This is a seemingly paradoxical epiphanic moment in which the revelation of his mortality, and therefore his own existence, his precious uniqueness, is revealed to him through pain: “el inusitado dolor me pareció muy vivo. Incrédulo, silencioso y feliz, contemplé la preciosa formación de una lenta gota de sangre. De nuevo soy mortal, me repetí” (23).

The story, as has often been argued, upturns the trope of eternity as a blissful state, and shows it, instead, in all its Swiftian horror. In both “Ruinas” and “Inmortal,” physical pain, its absence in the one, its presence in the other, is what causes the epiphanic experiences and their revelations of contrasting ontological truths.

Contrary to the fictions discussed so far, the epiphanic moment in “Biografía de Isidoro Tadeo Cruz (1829 -1874)” constitutes the very subject matter of the story, demanding more detailed discussion.⁷ This constructed biography glosses the moment in *El Martín Fierro* when “el sargento Cruz” fulfils the promise of his surname and *crosses* sides, joining his lot with that of the man he has come to hound. The interchangeable histories of Martín Fierro and Cruz suggesting a universal figure of the gaucho has received much critical attention, not least by Borges himself, in his *El “Martín Fierro”* (1953), and is not what I shall be dealing here.⁸ My concern is with the different ways in which “Biografía” expands on the original as one of its many “inagotables repeticiones, versiones, perversiones” (55). This resonant phrase is applied to Hernandez’s *Martín Fierro*, “un libro cuya materia puede ser todo para todos” (53), in allusion to the specified verse in *Corinthians*. In this discussion of epiphanies, I understand “cuya materia” to be intended as a recondite reference to the conversion of Cruz as a reflection of that of the Apostle. Whether the implied comparison of Paul and Cruz is considered humorous, ironic, and/or blasphemous, it serves to illustrate, in line with what was said earlier about Borges’s secular epiphanies: that they still maintain a vestige, or more, of a religious association.

7 This is part of an ongoing project and I discuss some of the ideas regarding “Biografía” in a paper presented in Jerusalem in 2010 at a symposium on *La fe en el mundo literario de Jorge Luis Borges*.

8 For a comprehensive discussion of this, see Klinting.

But of course, the most overt and overriding of these “inexhaustible repetitions” is the fictional reconstruction of the fictional Cruz. Unlike the boast of the traditional gaucho, “nací como nace el peje” (*Martín Fierro* 85), this new Cruz is given a family past, a mother, and more consequentially, a father. His life originates when his father, a *montonero*, enlisted in similar circumstances to *Martín Fierro*’s, is brutally killed shortly after engendering his son.

The point of the added information about a father is, I argue, to change the direction of Cruz’s epiphany, making it an atavistic return to the protagonist’s authentic self, his essence. Or, put in other words, where the gloss differs most importantly from the original is on the emphasis of the revelation, which suggests Cruz’s act of “betrayal” not as a crossing over to the other side, but primarily as a crossing back, a return to his lineage, in continuation of the life that ended when he was born. Hence the significance of the term *biografía* in the title.

There is no element of surprise to this ending; rather it has been carefully plotted into the story, with detail after detail converging on Cruz’s moment of self-recognition.

To begin with, the carefully chosen date of the year his father died and of his birth, 1829, intimating a sort of cyclical renovation. The place where the “added” father died is equally significant, this being nine leagues away from what is later revealed to be Laguna Colorada. This possibly invented “laguna” (another addition),⁹ serves as a linchpin for several strands of the story, since Cruz’s epiphany, his self-recognition, is triggered by two vague recollections, both linked to the Laguna and also to each other. The first, as already mentioned, relates to his father, born and killed near there, and the second to the gaucho *Martín Fierro*, who came from there, and is now hounded as a deserter by, amongst others, Cruz. The latter had himself become an outlaw, been forcibly conscripted and eventually made a sergeant. When Cruz learns that his victim is from, precisely, Laguna Colorada, the name evokes in him a strange, **subconscious insight**: “Cruz había olvidado ese nombre; con leve pero *inexplicable inquietud* lo reconoció” (56, my emphasis). Through this name Cruz makes the connection between

9 As far as I have been able to ascertain, Laguna Colorada is wrongly placed near Pergamino in the Province of Buenos Aires. There is a lagoon of that name in the Province of Neuquén, and, of course, in Bolivia.

the man he has come to hound, much as he had been hounded himself, with someone he knew as having been another victim of persecution, by which I mean his father. This sudden vision is the springboard that leads towards his recognition of himself as his father's son in fulfilment of his destiny. His final revelation occurs soon afterwards, in a shadowy swamp, referred to as a *pajonal*. The word is richly allusive in that in the epic poem it is the place where Cruz first meets the hounded outlaw, Martín Fierro, while in the story, in an incident which glosses the original, Cruz himself is captured in a swamp, referred to as a *fachinal*. But crucially, in the story, it evokes the fated *pajonal* near Laguna Colorada where Cruz's father was fatally wounded. There are other significant echoes, such as the cry of a crested screamer, "el grito de un chajá," heard by Cruz when he was being hounded and then, as a catalyst, heard again when he is hounding Martín Fierro (as in the original). But again, these cries are foreshadowed by "el confuso grito" (53), the cry initiating the story when Cruz's father shouts out in a nightmare, hours before he and his fellow *montoneros* are put to flight by Suárez's men.

The point I am trying to establish for now is that the more obvious similarities between the epic poem and the story are reflected in the added biography of Cruz, which effectively triangulates the relationship between the gaucho characters.

"Biografía de Isidoro Tadeo Cruz (1829-1874)" stands out in its treatment of the epiphanic theme in that it is an elaboration of the lines "Cualquier destino, por largo y complicado que sea, consta en realidad *de un solo momento*: el momento en que el hombre sabe para siempre quién es" (55, emphasis in the original).

Borges has often focused in both his poetry and fiction on that moment in which a character's personal destiny is revealed in an epiphanic flash of insight. This is the case in "Página para recordar al coronel Suárez, vencedor en Junín" (1953): "Qué importa el tiempo sucesivo si en él / hubo una plenitud, un éxtasis, una tarde" (186). More dramatically, in the earlier "Poema conjetural" (1943), Borges imagines another ancestor, Francisco Narciso de Laprida, moments before being assassinated by the *montoneros* on September 22, 1829. (The year is significant.) The conjecture of the title is Laprida's epiphanic understanding of his personal and

historical destiny: “En el espejo de esta noche alcanzo / mi insospechable rostro eterno” (180).¹⁰

There are links between the poems and the fiction. The theme of self-recognition is announced, appropriately, by Yeats’s epigraph, “I am looking for the face I had / before the world was made,” a conceit which is itself supported by a small chain of allusions to other historical figures who saw their destiny reflected in another (Alexander, Charles XII). The core of the story becomes that magic, epiphanic night (like the famous central night in the *Thousand and One Nights*), in which “el hombre sabe para siempre quién es.” It occurs roughly at the geographical centre of the story: “lo esperaba la noche en que por fin vio su propia cara, la noche en que escuchó su nombre” (55).¹¹

Both “su cara” and “su nombre” emphasize Cruz’s recognition and acceptance of his “biographical” destiny as the focal point of the story, so that his ultimate revelation “comprendió que *el otro era él*” (57) becomes a repetition, an inversion, but above all a perversion of the original, in that now, *el otro*, Martín Fierro, was like *him*, Cruz.

And yet, I would argue that Cruz’s understanding is one of many such understandings in Borges in which any sense of plenitude is undermined, even denuded of meaning. The word “comprendió” is repeated four times, but if the glorious ending suggested is read against the shadow of the revelation that heads the passage—the blanket intuition that “un destino no es mejor que otro” (56)—Cruz’s momentous biographical assertion loses some of its transcendence.

There is another aspect to the biographical element of the story entitled “Biografía de Isidoro Tadeo Cruz (1829 -1874)” which careful consideration of names and dates specified will reveal. To begin with the title, Tadeo was the name of Borges’s great-great-grandfather on the Acevedo side of his mother’s family, while Isidoro, confusingly, was the name of his grandfathers both on the Acevedo and the Suárez side of his mother’s

10 Nuñez-Farraco, in his comprehensive study of Borges and Dante, discusses the poem’s reference to the death of Buonconte da Montefeltro, in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, V: 85-13 (105). For a discussion of epiphanies in Borges as related to Dante and Joyce, and of this poem in terms of Borges’s “poetics of compression,” see Novillo Corvalán 111-13.

11 Shades of “Poema Conjetural.”

family. Unsurprisingly, Isidoro is also one of his own forenames, Jorge Francisco Isidoro Luis Borges. Cruz's invented forenames may be no more than a diversionary tactic, a playful allusion intended as a private joke. And yet it is interesting to see the many points at which the two "biografías," Cruz's and Borges's, intersect.

I shall proceed chronologically and return to 1829, the date discussed above, when Cruz's father is decapitated by "a saber from the wars in Peru and Brazil" under the command of Borges's ancestor, Coronel Suárez. The link to Suárez is later strengthened by the reference to the federalist Manuel Mesa, who recruited *montoneros* for his military support for Rosas, one of whom was, in the story, the fictional father of Cruz. The historical Mesa, who is the point of contact between Suárez and Cruz, was captured by the former in 1829 and sent to Buenos Aires to be executed, so that both he and the fictional Cruz can be seen to have suffered similar fates at the hand of Suárez's cavalry. In 1849 Cruz "helped drive a herd of stock from Francisco Xavier Acevedo's ranch to Buenos Aires": the name Xavier is a fictional addition, but Francisco is an inescapable self-reference. In 1856 Cruz is said to have fought with the forces of Eusebio Laprida who campaigned successfully against 200 Indians with only 30 men at the Laguna del Cardoso. The historical reference is correct, and Laprida is a family name. In 1868 Cruz settled in Pergamino; interestingly, this is where the Acevedos had their family estancia, which was taken away from them because Isidoro Acevedo's father had joined in a rebellion against Rosas.¹² The point of this information is that, though at opposite sides of the divide, both Cruz's family and Borges's family at one time fought as "rebels." Finally, 1874, which is the date set for the death of Cruz, though it is not mentioned in the story other than in the title. I believe this to be a wink to a few careful readers who may recognize it as the year in which Borges's paternal grandfather, Coronel Francisco Borges (Lafinur) died. Borges wrote no less than five poems in commemoration of his ancestor, but what is of interest here is that the title of last poem, "Alusión a la muerte de coronel Francisco Borges (1833-1874)" repeats vaguely, in its format, the title of the story of Cruz.

Borges frequently inscribes himself in his fiction but rarely, I suggest, as insistently as here, where his name is embedded in the title alongside

12 Mentioned in Williamson 6.

that of the protagonist. Clearly, every date and place mentioned provides a link between their two biographies, that of Cruz and that of Borges, whose lives are thus presented as curiously intertwined. Of course, the wealth of autobiographical information given may not necessarily alter the possibility of its playful nature, but given the story's emphasis on a biographical search for self, I suggest that, whether ludic or serious, there may be here an invitation to read more into it, and to see Borges's (slightly) fictionalized biography in specular relationship with that of the surface story, as another of its "inagotables repeticiones, inversiones y perversiones."

I conclude, briefly, with a story which I consider emblematic of Borges's representations of epiphany. "El milagro secreto" portrays the most moving and convincing epiphanic experience in Borges's fiction and at the same time suggests its most radically devastating denial. The bipartite structure of this last sentence encapsulates the essence of my argument, reflecting the dualism suggested by the understated paradox of the title, "milagro" and "secreto".

Reality and irreality, chronological time and subjective time, motion and motionlessness are all opposites which feature in this narrative without hierarchical differentiation. The anguished details of the nightmare haunting the protagonist, terrifying in their (sur)real exactness, are mirrored by the nightmare reality of the Nazi tanks entering Prague and the subjective horror of the dreamer is matched by the objective horror of history. Both come together when the invading regime sentences the protagonist, Jaromir Hladík, to death for his Judaic writings and, to comply with perverted Nazi punctiliousness, his execution is scheduled for ten days after his arrest. These are arguably the most intensely lived days of his life, an ironic illustration of the sentence in "El inmortal": "la muerte hace patéticos a los hombres", for in the shadow of his death sentence he feels the safety of temporary immortality, *valga la paradoja*. The meaning of Hladík's life is tied in with his literary writings, and in particular with his unfinished and chaotic autobiographical play *Los enemigos*. Significantly, in this work, time appears to be flowing chronologically but is then revealed as having stood still, the action depicted having been but a dream of the protagonist. Whatever the merits or otherwise of the play, Hladík's dying wish is a year in which to rewrite and complete what he considers to be his magnum opus, and which in his negotiation with God he describes as "ese

drama que puede justificarme y justificarte" (164). My emphasis underlines the reciprocal terms of the plea, one of the uncommented dualities of the story, supporting my particular reading of the epiphany in this story. This takes place when Hladík, in yet another dream, touches a tiny letter in an Atlas and hears from "una voz ubicua" that his wish has been granted.¹³ In a tableau scene, standing against a wall in the yard where the soldiers are preparing for the firing, Hladík has his defining epiphanic experience, extended to a full year in which the physical universe stands still allowing him to finish his drama. In a final flash of insight the miracle is completed as Hladík finds the one missing word: "Dio término a su drama; no le faltaba ya resolver sino un solo epíteto. Lo encontré." Once more, however, two contrasting narratives are made to co-exist, the one following seamlessly from the other. I shall repeat and complete the foregoing sentence: "Lo encontré; la gota de agua resbaló en su mejilla ... la cuádruple descarga lo derribó" (167).

Bearing in mind that this story illustrating the interplay of subjective and chronological time is framed by the iron-clad precision of the latter (I suggest the two-minute delay of the execution as a convincing argument for this), one may find in this return to objective reality a clear invitation to see in this fatal ending a brutal negation of the miracle and a deeply sceptical interpretation of "secret." Yet such a reading, I suggest, would be reductive, and totally out of tune with the complex aesthetics of Borges's writings. But the opposite conclusion, focused solely on the miracle and seeing the ending as the triumphal outcome of faith in God, the granted miracle making everything else irrelevant, is equally reductive.¹⁴ On the basis that the story, as has been argued, is structured precisely on the paradoxical coexistence of opposites, I suggest that a more satisfying interpretation is to see both endings in ambivalent terms, neither cancelling

13 For an authoritative discussion of the dream elements in this story, see Alazraki 352-70.

14 František Vrhel has a useful summary of the principal critical literature regarding this story, signalling in particular the interpretations by Edna Aizenberg and Daniel Balderston.

the truth value of the other but combined as a troubling “imminence of a revelation’ which refuses to express itself as a totality.

This lack of dialectical tension in the unhierarchical coexistence of opposites is “quizá” the hallmark of the treatment of epiphany in Borges’s fiction.

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