

## Borges, the Magi and Persian Histories

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Borges provides clues and references to regional history and literature in certain stories, and the etymology of particular words may signal deeper collective meaning when paired with related, culturally significant clues. In *Ficciones* Borges distills broad readings of history and literature. In the volume's first collection, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, the reader is challenged to find meaning in the references to Goethe and the term *diván* in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" and to decipher the meaning of fire in "Las ruinas circulares." There are religious structures in that story, and in "El acercamiento a Almotásim," with references to particular literary works in footnotes that tie the story to the apocryphal encyclopaedia entry in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In that story Borges the narrator states that few place names in the entry are identifiable. The common factor in these topographical names, religious structures, historical and literary references is Persia, as is the setting of "Las ruinas circulares." It may therefore be meaningful if not necessary to undertake a reading of the

collection that views these references to Persia as central to deciphering the symbolism in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*.

Among many other difficulties, one that is particular to the reader of Borges is etymological, since to interpret meaning in his stories requires a microscopic inspection of individual words, and it is through this process that we may view the extent to which Persian culture permeates the collection. The point of refining etymology becomes evident in several major critical readings of “Las ruinas circulares.” Mac Williams states that “the fire god grants the magician’s wish with the caveat that the magician’s son be given to the fire god so that ‘alguna voz’ will glorify him in another temple” (137). In his interpretation Williams correctly correlates the story to Persia, but also misses the mark in rendering “mago” into English as “magician,” weakening the cultural connection he establishes. Jaime Alazraki interprets the word “mago” in the same way while commenting on the use of the word “unánime” in the same story: “the word is used for its etymological components (unus animus) rather than for its normative meaning in order to subtly anticipate what is literally disclosed in the last line of the story: the magician’s condition of appearance dreamt by another” (40-41). Emir Rodríguez Monegal identifies Borges’s character as a “magician from India” (Bloom 138). Donald Shaw’s interpretation is also derailed by a similar translation of the word, as he refers repeatedly to the central character of “Las ruinas circulares” as a wizard (20, 96, 121, 172).

The Avestan *maguš*, Greek plural Magi, is in its original sense far removed from the European image of a magician or wizard. In *The Gospel of Matthew*, William Barclay notes that “these Magi were men who were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. They were soothsayers and interpreters of dreams” (30). Only later did the term, according to Barclay, lose its original meaning to denote a magician or charlatan. As noted by Herodotus, the Magi were a Median caste of priests involved in ritual sacrifices (I.131) without whom such sacrifices could not take place. The seriousness of their place in Achaemenid society is noted by Simon Sebag Montefiore, paraphrasing Herodotus:

Astyages, King of Media in western Persia, dreamed that his daughter was urinating a golden stream which squirted out of the whole of his kingdom. The magi, the Persian priests, interpreted this to mean that his

grandsons would threaten his rule. Astyages married his daughter to a weak, unthreatening neighbour to the east, the King of Anshan. This marriage spawned an heir, Kourosh, who became Cyrus the Great. (57)

The historical meaning of the term *maguš* is critical to understanding various themes in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* because it is attached to the name of a historic character, Smerdis (*Ficciones* 16). The word appears several times in the collection, first in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” subsequently in “Las ruinas circulares,” and in “La lotería en Babilonia.”<sup>1</sup> According to the narrator, Smerdis is the only historical character that he and Bioy Casares are able to verify in the apocryphal encyclopaedia article about Uqbar. The two primary sources of Smerdis the Magus (and impostor) are Herodotus in the 5th century BCE, and the earlier Behistun inscription authored by Darius the Great of Persia in the 6th century BCE. Smerdis according to the oldest sources was a man named Gaumata who posed as the real Smerdis (Bardiya), younger son of Cyrus the Great, and was murdered by Darius weeks into his reign in 522 BCE. Historical depth of meaning underscores the need to consider the word “mago” in its original sense as a mobed of mobeds, i.e. a Zoroastrian high priest, rather than as an illusionist, magician or charlatan.

Borges delineates the realm of the Achaemenid empire in the following sentence in “Tlön”: “De los catorce nombres que figuran en la parte geográfica, sólo reconocimos tres —Jorasán, Armenia, Erzurum—, interpolados en el texto de un modo ambiguo” (15-16). The mention of Khorasan is of particular importance. It is the central region of an earlier story from *Historia universal de la infamia*, “El tintorero enmascarado Hákim de Merv.” The eponymous character, like Smerdis, is both historical and an impostor. The story takes place in Nishapur, an important cultural center in Khorasan, during the early Abbasid era. Nishapur is mentioned once again in “El acercamiento a Almotásim” through references to Attar of Nishapur, author of the lengthy philosophical Sufi poem, *Conference of the Birds*, on which the novel in the Borges story is purportedly based. Whereas the recycling of Nishapur may otherwise be taken for an interesting but meaningless coincidence, “Hákim de Merv” also contains a key phrase on

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1 “...sé que los magos no logran ponerse de acuerdo; sé de sus poderosos propósitos lo que puede saber de la luna el hombre no versado en astrología” (72).

which “Tlön” and its subsequent stories rely, regarding copulation and mirrors: “La tierra que habitamos es un error, una incompetente parodia. Los espejos y la paternidad son abominables, porque la multiplican y afirman” (*Historia universal de la infamia* 94). This is paraphrased in “Tlön” as follows: “Entonces Bioy Casares recordó que uno de los heresiarcas de Uqbar había declarado que los espejos y la cópula son abominables, porque multiplican el número de los hombres” (*Ficciones* 14). Borges the narrator notes his suspicion about the origin of the intriguing phrase as does the reader.

In the context of the earlier story, Hákím de Merv travels from Turkmenistan to Khorasan where he is revered as a sort of Sufi prophet before being unveiled and his fraud discovered. Borges’s reemployment of the phrase in “Tlön” is deliberate. Its initial use in relation to post-Islamic Khorasan and imposture and its subsequent revival and application to Achaemenid Persia suggest that is a symbolic reference to two separate periods of history at the same time. Moreover and in passing, Borges reveals a source of his information on Persian history in his account of Hákím: Sir Percy Sykes (*Historia universal de la infamia* 88).

Later in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* Borges narrows the place and time of origin of his magus in “Las ruinas circulares” to a particular region and era: “donde el idioma zend no está contaminado de griego” (56). Zend, also known as Avestan, is an ancient Persian language most closely associated with Zoroastrianism, related to the Old Persian of the Behistun inscription, and more closely related to Vedic Sanskrit. Borges’s description of the magus’s language is a paradox, as, according to *The Encyclopaedia Iranica*:

Notwithstanding many centuries of at times intensive contact and confrontation between the Greco-Roman/Byzantine and Iranian worlds from Achaemenid through Sasanian times and even beyond, the number of loanwords borrowed from Greek into the pre-Islamic Iranian languages is far less impressive than the number of borrowings in the other direction. Thus, no Greek loanwords seem to have been preserved in any of the Old Iranian languages known to us...<sup>2</sup>

2 <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/greece-xiii>

Avestan was probably long dead by the time of Greek incursions into Persia. Either Borges was unaware that Avestan bears no trace of Greek influence or the phrase is metaphorical, referring subtly to a later stage in the linguistic history of Persia. The second is more plausible as Borges refers to eleventh and twelfth century poets of Khorasan in the collection.

The purity of Old Persian and Avestan were not in question during the Achaemenid era. If Borges's magus is anachronistic deliberately rather than accidentally, that may clarify certain motifs in "Las ruinas circulares." First and foremost, there is the question of the purity of the magus's language. As noted there are no traces of Greek influence in ancient Persian languages such as Old Persian and Avestan. The story's religious structure is a disused temple where a long forgotten god associated with fire was venerated, suggesting that the time frame is post-Zoroastrian, i.e. Abbasid. After the fall of the Sasanid Empire, the Persian language spoken at the time began losing ground to Arabic, much like the Coptic language in Egypt. Modern Persian, dating from that era, is marked by the influence of the Arabic language, reinforcing the fact that Borges is referring to two different eras at the same moment.

In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, Ferdowsi, a poet from Khorasan, composed his epic *Shahnameh*. One of its distinguishing features is its paucity of Arabic words. Cyrus Massoudi notes that:

Ferdowsi famously used only 984 Arabic expressions throughout the entirety of this near 60,000-couplet epic poem. This has been regarded as an amazing feat given that for 300 years the Arabic language had insinuated itself into the native language of Sasanian and post-Sasanian Persia, leaving the local language as a kind of hybrid of Arabic and Pahlavi Persian. What Ferdowsi is therefore credited with is the triumphant rebirth of the Persian language, which has survived essentially intact to the present day. (154)

A well-known episode from the *Shahnameh* concerns a king's favored son, Seyavash, who must traverse a fire from which he emerges unscathed. This is mirrored in the experience of Borges's magus in "Las ruinas circulares" who discovers at the end that, unscathed by fire, he is a piece of fiction.<sup>3</sup>

3 Seyavash passes unscathed through fire as a test of his purity and innocence: "When Sudabeh heard the tumult she came out on the roof of her palace and saw the fire; muttering to herself in rage, she longed for evil to befall the prince. The world's eyes were

The author's seemingly gratuitous stress on the purity of his magus's language, his earlier emphases on Khorasan and his familiarity with Persian literature of the era suggest that Borges may have inlaid a detail from the *Shahnameh*. That matter, along with the origin of the magus in "Las ruinas circulares" at a place of linguistic purity, suggests that Borges was well acquainted with Ferdowsi's epic.

Whether Borges's Magus is of the Median caste or not, the objective of his mission is not just to interpret dreams, his own or others, but to engage in dreaming. This inversion of roles is part of the nature of the creation of the dream world in the collection. Borges reverses the subject and object in the story more than once: the role of interpreter of dreams passes from the Magus to the reader; and the dreamer himself comes to find that he is the projection of another man's dream, one who may himself have been dreamt. The obvious effect is *mise en abyme*; this while illustrating the abomination of mirrors, deflects from the philosophical point of the story, which may be the folly of solipsism or nihilism. For the dreamer is the ultimate solipsist, revelling in fantasies about interpolating fiction, i.e. dreams, upon reality. This particular point regarding solipsism seems to originate in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius": in the lengthy discussion of the eleventh volume of *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, the narrator notes that "El oncenno tomo deja entender que tres razones capitales determinaron la victoria total de ese panteísmo idealista. La primera, el repudio del solipsismo..." (*Ficciones* 30). The repudiation of solipsism, or the futility of the concept, seems to be the point of "Las ruinas circulares." Taken in this way "Las ruinas circulares" may be understood both as a piece of philosophical fiction that illuminates the absurdity of solipsism, and as an article from the apocryphal encyclopaedia. Alazraki describes the technique as follows: "The story as a rereading and a summary of another story, either an imaginary text or an actual one or both" (93).

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fixed on Kavus; men cursed him, their hearts filled with indignation. Then Seyavash wheeled, urging his horse impetuously into the fire; tongues of flame enveloped him and both his horse and helmet disappeared. Tears were in all eyes, the whole plain waited, wondering if he would re-emerge, and when they glimpsed him a shout went up, 'The young prince has escaped the fire!' He was unscathed, as if he'd ridden though water and emerged bone dry, for when God wills it, he renders fire and water equally harmless....Seyavash appeared before his father and there was no trace of fire or smoke or dust or dirt on him" (226).

Borges refers textually to an idea contemporary with his Achaemenid era Magus: Gorgias's no longer extant "On Nature of the Non Existent," only traces of which have been quoted by others, and which treats the subject of solipsism. In such a way the story draws from two separate classical traditions at the same moment: Persian and Greek, melding elements of both in the acts of a single character, the Magus. Whereas Classical Greek elements are abundant in Borges through consistent references to the Labyrinth of Crete, the Classical Persian emerges as dominant from the start of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*. The implicit reference to a lost text is redoubled through its obvious counterpart in the Avesta, not mentioned in the collection but the elephant in a room full of magi. The convergence of Classical Greece and Ancient Persia is at the heart of "Las ruinas circulares," insistent in the first sentence: "donde el idioma zend no está contaminado del griego" (*Ficciones* 56), which seems to stress that the important matter is Persian rather than Greek.

The underlying references to lost texts come to the fore in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan": first in the most evident missing first page of Yu Tsun's testimony; second, in the book held by a student on the train, the *Annals of Tacitus*. Familiarity with Tacitus would allow the reader to understand that a period of twenty years is missing from it, lost over time. The same holds true of the implicit text behind "Las ruinas circulares," the Avesta, parts of which have been lost permanently. The Pâzand, or commentaries on the Avesta, are summoned in the term "Zend." The original source of the *Shahnameh* is no longer extant. Nor is the Middle Persian model of the *Thousand and One Nights*, the *Hazar Afsaneh*, a work that Borges himself mentions in *Siete noches* (65-66).

The circular temples in "Las ruinas circulares" recall the ruins of fire temples throughout the former Persian Empire. These are not remnant of the earliest form of Zoroastrianism but tell of an earlier cult of fire which was most likely syncretized with ancient Persian monotheism. That earlier cult is more likely related to worship of Mithra, as Mithra is the deity most closely associated with fire in ancient Indo-Aryan religion. That the god of the Magus's dream is called "fuego" underscores that Borges's Magus has dreamt of Mithra, not of Ahura Mazda; therefore it cannot be assumed that the story's sole religious associations are Zoroastrian, though they most definitely are Persian. Inasmuch as it is necessary in the context of a

Borges story to strip a word of all but its most ancient meanings, a reader of Borges guided by specialists or clever enough to have understood it independently will examine the inlaid clues, including titles and names of authors. The discerning reader of “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” for example, will have opened *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and discovered that a character named Yu Tsun goes to the home of a mandarin and sits in his library discussing the future with him, a scene lifted and repeated in Borges’s story. In the same manner, the passing reference to Sir Percy Sykes in “Hákim de Merv” is of particular importance because of Sykes’s monumental undertaking, first published in 1915: *A History of Persia*. Sykes’s work recounts the murder of the impostor magus, referring to him as Bardiya except for an entry on Smerdis in his book’s index, “vide Bardiya” (2: 610). In such a way Borges may have deliberately misdirected his reader to Herodotus for answers in “Tlön” after having already revealed his primary source of information in “Hákim de Merv.” It is unlikely that Borges would mention Sykes had he not already read his history. Moreover, Sykes refers to Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* in both volumes of his history (1: 133, 2: 60-62), which reaffirms Borges’s awareness of the epic.

The earliest excavated fire temples date to the Parthian period, relatively concurrent with the time suggested in other elements of “Las ruinas circulares.” The fires that devour the temples in the story may relate to ancient Persian mythologies about great fires. But more to the point, the fire temple which is central to the story of creation out of nothing is not an article of literary fabrication but a marker of Persian history, religion, and culture. Its double is to be found in the center of “El acercamiento a Almotásim” in the figure of the Tower where the protagonist takes refuge and sleeps after a violent sectarian riot, during which he believes he has killed another man. The tower, or *dakhma* in Persian, is identified by Alazraki, clearly noting its Persian origins and the importance of it among the Parsee community of India:

The tower where the student takes shelter is a dakhma or Tower of Silence, and in those dakhmas Zoroastrians in Persia and India dispose of their dead. The Parsees (Indian Zoroastrians) believe that water, fire, and earth are pure and holy and must be protected, and thus a corpse—the impure and contaminating object—may not be buried in the earth or cast into

a stream, a pool, or the sea, nor may it be destroyed by fire. Instead they place the corpses in towers built for that purpose where the flesh is consumed by vultures. (41)

These structures in “El acercamiento” and “Las ruinas circulares” are symmetrical, antithetical, and unify themes in the stories to periods of Persian spirituality and history. Their respective functions (disposal of the dead, creation of life) relay to the reader a symbolism that is uniquely Persian. The sacredness of earth and fire are evident in “Las ruinas circulares” in the phrases “fango sagrado” and “Lo cierto es que el hombre gris besó el fango,” in the story’s first paragraph (*Ficciones* 56). Furthermore, Borges uses both the Tower of Silence and the Fire Temple as the place where his protagonists dream. Sykes’s entry on Motasim notes that “[a]lthough arrested for treachery and embezzlement, the religious fanaticism of Motasim caused him to be tried and condemned for holding Zoroastrian doctrines and for secret hostility to Islam” (2: 12). This may provide an answer about the late inclusion of “El acercamiento a Almotásim” in *Ficciones*. Above and beyond Borges’s symmetrical placement of the dakhma in juxtaposition to the fire temples of “Las ruinas circulares,” Sykes’s description of Motasim’s sympathetic adherence to Zoroastrian doctrines may impress on readers of Borges that there is another layer of meaning embedded in the title of the story.

The magus of “Las ruinas” is grey, suggesting from the start that either he is the product of a dream, or that he has crossed through fire and like the temples is now the color of ash. His first act of veneration is to kiss the mud, a mixture of the two holiest elements (water and earth) of Zoroastrianism. His incursion into the temple of Fire may determine that he is uninitiated because he is at first unaware of his role as magus and that the temple demands fire after the chanting of the Yasna, a possible indication of imposture if taken to be Zoroastrian; it is more likely another point of emphasis that the temple belongs to a cult of Mithra rather than Ahura Mazda. The god, whose name is fire, only emerges in the dream of the magus and from there he learns that it is his task to light a fire in the temple, which would suggest that the magus is not genuine because he should have known the basic elements of the religion he practices. And he is not identified in the story as a magus until after he dreams of the god,

Fire. Borges's character, in other words, is initiated and instructed and becomes a magus via the dream.

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" gives an indication that the following stories in the collection refer in one way or another to Persia, its languages, religions and cultures, as noted. The final and title story in the 1941 collection is "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan." The most apparent references in the story are to European and East Asian cultures. These mirror the characters, Yu Tsun and Stephen Albert, with subtle or not so subtle references to the *Annals of Tacitus* and *Hung Lu Meng*, the Chinese *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Pitting Roman Classicism against the Chinese, Yu Tsun the anglophile meets Stephen Albert, the camp Sinologist dressed as a Mandarin in the English countryside. Yu Tsun recounts his meeting with Stephen Albert, recalling him as a man who was like Goethe (until he kills him). When he arrives at Albert's house they sit on a divan. This is an obvious reference to Goethe's *West-östlicher Diwan* (1814-1819), the German romantic's twelve part collection of poetry composed in the manner of the Ghazals of Abbasid Persian poet Hafez. The sacerdotal appearance of Stephen Albert, his grey eyes and beard, echo the grey of the magus in "Las ruinas circulares," and like the magus, Stephen Albert is also an impostor, albeit a ridiculous one. Albert's comparison of the story's eponymous novel to the *Thousand and One Nights* further echoes a connection to Persia. This work is implicit as well in a passage in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Upon discovery of the book left behind in a pub by Herbert Ashe, the narrator describes his sensation as follows: "En una de las noches del Islam que se llama la Noche de las Noches se abren de par en par las secretas puertas del cielo y es más dulce el agua en los cántaros; si esas puertas se abrieran, no sentiría lo que en esa tarde sentí. El libro estaba redactado en inglés y lo integraban 1001 páginas" (*Ficciones* 20). The reference to the *Thousand and One Nights* is nearly too overt to qualify as an allusion. Nevertheless it is obvious that Borges alludes in the same sentences to Persian and Arabic layers in the work. Western readers may not instantly detect that Shahriyar and Shahrezad, the main characters of the *Thousand and One Nights*, are Persian names (not Arabic), and assume the tales have no pre-Islamic history or relevance to a distinct Persian culture. In *Siete noches*, Borges clarifies his understanding the origins of the work: "A fines del siglo xv se hace la primera compilación, y esa compilación procedía

de otra, persa según parece: *Hazar afsana, Los mil cuentos*” (*Siete noches* 65-66). We may assume however that *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* begins with the layering into its text of ancient Persian history. In order to properly envisage these layers of Persian history and culture embedded in the collection it is best to state clearly that they manifest in both pre- and post-Islamic forms. If taken as a repetition of themes, Yu Tsun’s murder of Stephen Albert may mirror the assassination of Smerdis the impostor, tying yet another of the story’s motifs to the only historical act implied in “Tlön.”

The collection’s references to both pre- and post-Islamic Persian history, essentially its two periods of cultural wealth, underscores the author’s evident readings, including those mentioned in his works, i.e. Percy Sykes’s *History of Persia*. Taken at face value, this may complement the work of preeminent scholars such as Shaw, Rodríguez Monegal, and Alazraki and add to the body of knowledge they painstakingly created. More contemporary interpretations of the subject, such as Mac Williams’s, demand expansion. To be most precise, a groundwork for a clear reading and understanding of the Persian elements in Borges’s stories already lay in Alazraki’s identification of the dakhma, or Tower of Silence, in “El acercamiento a Almotásim.”

Along other, more contemporary political lines, Ian Almond questionably places Borges’s within a culture of Orientalists in his reading of “Tlön”:

It may be that in writing about a secret society that takes over the world, Borges was not able to escape his Christian, unconscious fears of Europe’s Other, was not able to avoid mingling Islamic metaphors, allusion and references in with his description of reality’s invasion by Tlön. Even for a writer as sophisticated as Borges, the image of Islam as encroaching, insidious, malevolent and somehow imminently apocalyptic still appears to have had some sway. (93)

At the time of Borges’s writing it seems unlikely that such a consideration would have entered the writer’s mind. Almond’s relegation of all things Persian to a convenient pigeon hole of Islamic culture may be responsible for his misinterpreted identity of Tlön (and a misreading of the story itself in which Tlön is clearly identified as an invention). Smerdis the impostor predates Islam by one thousand years; the story is about imposture,

not about an Orientalist's fear of Muslim domination of the West. The encyclopaedic entry regarding Uqbar is false, adding intrigue to a curious conversation that Borges notes between himself and Adolfo Bioy Casares, resulting in the appearance of a book that substantiates a quote that a careful reader of Borges would recognize as line from one of his earlier stories. Almond's emphatic devotion to contemporary political issues and postmodernism predetermine a misreading of Borges's writings, because the question he poses is anachronistic and political rather than aesthetic. Avestan, Parthian, Scythian, Old Persian, and Median were all Indo-European languages and the mythologies linked to these languages are also Indo-European. Persian history does not begin with the Arab invasions but much earlier. The magus's place in Persian literary tradition descends to Borges and to us through the *Shahnameh*, the epic penned by Ferdowsi in the purest Persian, a point reiterated by the description of the magus's place of origin in "Las ruinas circulares." Therein we also view a reliable and believable source of the character: the Mobeds who come to read the stars, predict the future and interpret the dreams of the kings in the *Shahnameh*.

The careful layering of Persian history and subtle references to Indo-Aryan cults, the overt use of the term "mago" or magus in three of eight stories in the collection, and the references in the same collection to the *Thousand and One Nights* determine that the primary sources of cultural wealth in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* are Persian. The buried reference to Hafez's poetry in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," the recycling of a phrase from "Hákim de Merv," a story set in Nishapur, the footnotes in "El acercamiento a Almotásim" about the translation of Attar of Nishapur's poem, *Conference of the Birds*, and the subtle nod at the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi also reinforce this point. The repeated use of the term *magus* in the collection, after its first application to Smerdis, suggests that the word has not been removed from its cultural contexts. As the starting point of the search in "Tlön," the quotation lifted directly from an earlier Borges story set in Abbasid Persia further reinforces that the collection's predominant historic and cultural foundations are Persian. These points stated, and with regard to cultural excavations undertaken by Alazraki, we may consider that the layers of Persian literature, history, literature and religions, evident in several of Borges's stories, merit further attention and

may yield important material for new interpretations of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*.

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