



**BORGES THE POST-ORIENTALIST:
IMAGES OF ISLAM FROM THE
EDGE OF THE WEST**

Ian Almond

Averroes, closed within the orb of Islam.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "Averroes' Search"

Borges's fascination with Islam is a minutely observable phenomenon. It consists not merely in a superficial obsession with images—enraged sultans, sweeping deserts, minarets at dawn—even though this largely artificial landscape of Oriental Islam, inherited from T. E. Lawrence and Richard Burton, does play a part. There is, however, something else that pushes Borges not just toward the kinds of Islamic thinkers the West has always read (Averroes, Omar Khayam), but also toward figures such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun, and al-Baladhuri, Muslims most readers will be encountering for the first time within the pages of Borges's stories. What follows is an attempt to examine Borges's interest in Islam—not simply its sources, motivations, and implications, but also the extent to which Borges's Islamic/Arabian stories uncritically draw on a tried and tested stock of familiar Orientalisms. Is there anything different about Borges, *écrivain préféré* of Derrida and Foucault, which distinguishes his representation of Islamic culture from the standard Romantic and Late Victorian responses he appears to be familiar with? Or is Borges, for all the novelty of his Argentinian perspective (writing, as one fellow

Argentine puts it, "from the edge of the West" [Sarlo 5]), just another bemused European writing about the Oriental Other?

Islam plays no small role in the stories of Borges. When absent from the setting of the story, it nevertheless filters quietly into most of his fiction, manifesting itself solemnly at the most unexpected of moments—quotations from the Koran in the middle of debates on Argentine national identity, repeated references to the *Thousand and One Nights* almost as a standard metaphor for infinity. Sometimes such information is delivered as if Borges himself were the authority; other times it comes in an Orientalist package—care of a Captain Burton or an Ernest Renan. Definitely biased toward the esoteric and unorthodox but by no means imprisoned by such categories, Borges's Islam encompasses a wide number of its varied differences—not just geographical variations (Persia, Egypt, Spain), but also its theological differences (Ismailis, exotericists) and philosophical disputes (between commentators of Aristotle such as Averroes—*falsafiyah*—and "anti-philosophers" such as al-Ghazali). Unlike the Islams of Byron, Carlyle, and Voltaire, Borges's own attitude toward his subject matter is not so easy to box. At different times he can be the sardonic commentator on obsolete practices, the detached chronicler of distant events, the cynical observer of alien beliefs, or the warm and sympathetic reporter of a subject with which he feels personally engaged. The various tones with which Borges addresses his Islamic content differs from story to story; observed and interpreted in the correct order, the dozen stories concerning Islam that Borges wrote between 1933 and 1956 show an increasing awareness of the complexities involved in writing about a collection of metaphors such as "Islam."

Surprisingly little has been written on Borges and Islam, given the significant amount of attention the Argentine has dedicated to figures such as Khayyam and Averroes, the Koran and the *Thousand and One Nights*. Although no single monograph on Borges and the Orient exists, Djelal Kadir has probably displayed the most interest in the Islamic echoes of Borges's texts. In his 1973 essay "Borges the Heresiarch Mutakallimun," Kadir pairs Borges with al-Ghazali as two thinkers who share a belief in "ethereally mysterious archetypes sustained by enduring conviction." If al-Ghazali, in his famous objection to Avicenna (who insisted God only knew universals, not particulars) believed in a *primum mobile* who was involved in the universe at all levels, Borges also "sees the universe as a manifestation of a pantheistic deity which operates within every man, thus giving deformity not to one primary, original cause, but to each and every one of us" (Kadir 465). Kadir perceives a fear of infinity/eternity in both Borges and al-Ghazali (the latter, we will recall, objected to

Avicenna's conviction of the eternity of the world), a reading that is interesting if only because it results in an ultimately Neoplatonic interpretation of Borges's work. Quoting Borges's paraphrasing of Philipp Batz ("we are fragments of a God who destroyed Himself at the beginning of time, because he did not wish to exist" [Kadir 468]), Kadir proposes a Borges who reconstructs and renovates the fragments of a lost, broken order; it is a reading that concurs quite well with a writer who, in many ways, has made a distinguished career out of sewing together a diversity of quotations (which was, after all, Benjamin's idea of a perfect criticism). In other words, Kadir manages to link Borges together with Islam via a mystical, Neoplatonic tradition—as we shall see, such a reading will gradually acquire a significance (and an irony) all of its own.

In the beginning of "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald," Borges manages to fit over twenty names of Islamic or Arabic origin into the opening paragraph: Umar ben Ibrahim, Nizam ul-Mulk, the Brethren of Purity (the *Ikhwan al-Safa*), Alfarabi, Avicenna (*Ibn Sina*), and Hassan ben Sabbah, among others. The references rain down upon the startled reader with careful intensity. For anyone unfamiliar with the subject matter of Islamic philosophy or the Persian literary tradition—anyone who, unlike Borges, has never read Percy Sykes's *A History of Persia* or Asin Palacios's *El Islam Cristianizado*—the opening paragraph of "The Enigma" must be, at best, slightly overwhelming.

It would be easy to be cynical about such Horatian beginnings: Borges's plunge *in media res* into the world of medieval Islam could well be construed as a flexing of his Orientalist muscles, showing his readers how far he is the master of his subject by trying to jam as many references as possible into forty lines of opening text. Nevertheless, Borges also delights in forging new worlds for the reader—nothing is more characteristic in his stories than the abrupt shift in intellectual gear, where the casual narration of a boyhood memory or a dinner with friends suddenly moves into the central tenets of gnosticism or speculations on the acentric God of a Renaissance thinker. Such would be a more charitable interpretation of the flood of Islamic references we encounter in the opening paragraph of "The Enigma"—no ostentatious display of Oriental erudition, then, but rather an effective means of semantically enforcing the passage of the Western reader into Borges's "East."

Borges, however, does belong to an Orientalist tradition, in all the positive and negative senses that Said has applied to the word. His East is, to a large extent, the East of a host of European travelers and scholars—Sykes, Müller, Burton, and Renan—a mixture of the exotic and the esoteric, the scholarly and the fantastic, the orthodox

and the arcane. Just as the Romantic poet Thomas Moore was careful to annotate his poem on the pseudo-prophet al-Mokanna with a wealth of footnotes, Borges is also careful to begin his own version of the same story ("The Masked Dyer, Hakim of Merv") with a string of academic references to Baladhuri, *A History of Persia*, Ibn abi Taifur, and the fictitious Alexander Schulz. Borges may dismiss his predecessor's poetic treatment of Baladhuri as "long-winded" and full of Irish sentimentality ("The Masked Dyer" 78), yet their different approaches share this common need for an acknowledged store of (invariably European) knowledge to give credence to their narratives, regardless of whether it is Renan's *Averroes* or Pitts's *Account of the Mahometans*. In this narrow sense at least, Borges does not appear to differ greatly from the vast amount of nineteenth-century Oriental writers before him.

What we do find in the stories Borges has set in an Islamic context, however, is that each text displays a different attitude toward Islam itself. Borges's tales actually form a collection of multiple genres, where the narrator of each story confronts and relates his Islamic content in a different voice: patronizing, incomprehending, sympathetic, informative, and cynical. This means that in any of Borges's several stories concerning Islam—"The Mirror of Ink," "A Double For Mohammed," "The Enigma," "The Masked Dyer," "The Zahir," and "Averroes' Search"—a very specific set of Western metaphors for Islam is being used, one that connects the tale concerned to an equally specific genre of Oriental studies/literature. It will be worth examining these stories one by one, not just to see how many different facets lie to Borges's understanding of Islam, but also to understand how and why Borges finally breaks free of his dependence on the Orientalists and sees through the illusion of their claim to knowledge.

"The Mirror of Ink": Borges the Reader of *Kitab Alf Laylah wah Laylah*

In stories such as "The Mirror of Ink," "The Chamber of Statues," and "Tale of the Two Dreamers"—stories that, Borges claims, stem directly from his reading of the explorer Richard Burton¹—the first and probably most obvious facet of Islam in Borges's oeuvre can be seen: the array of motifs and images found in *Thousand and One Nights*. Unlike that of the Romantics, Borges's knowledge of these tales came not from Galland's French translation of them, but rather those translated by Edward William Lane.² The understanding of Islam one encounters in these stories is neither negative nor com-

plex and, like many of Borges's texts concerning Islam, they concern pride and the trespass of human limitations. Such stories hinge on the ignorance of man, the omniscience of God, and the foolishness of those who arrogantly try to reverse this situation.

Borges's Islam in these stories is safe, orthodox, and strikingly free from the esoteric. The universes of "Tale of the Two Dreamers" and "Mirror of Ink" are fundamentally moral—the unjust do not go unpunished, nor do the innocent suffer for long. Borges's stylistic tendency to repeat the familiar refrains of Arab/Muslim writers underlines the theocentric stability of their world: "but Allah alone is All-knowing and All-Powerful and All-Merciful and does not sleep" ("Tale of Two Dreamers" 111). "Allah is the Beneficent, the Unseen" ("Tale of Two Dreamers" 113). "Glory be to Him, who endureth forever, and in whose Hand are the keys of unlimited Pardon and Punishment" ("Mirror of Ink" 125).

The function of these refrains is not merely atmosphere-inducing, even if this recitation of the Names of God (*al-rahman, al-ghafur, al-batin*, etc.) clearly plays a part in the induction of an "Arabian" atmosphere for a Western reader; the world of these tales is a world in control, a world where the attributes of God are clearly delineated and where clarity, as opposed to mystery and ambiguity, appears to have the last word. Prophecies are fulfilled, imbalances are readjusted (an evil tyrant dies, an act of pride is punished), morals are supplied, and we are never allowed to forget that the worlds of these texts, rigidly deterministic, are subject to a Divine Determiner. In this particular genre of Borges's Muslim stories, what has happened are the only things that *could* have happened. For the evil ruler Yaqub the Ailing to have survived and prospered (or for the man in "The Two Dreamers" to have been beaten senselessly and rewardlessly for a crime he did not commit) would have constituted a transgression of the moral universe of these texts. Rather than mere stories, all three of these tales are examples of how the Divine engineers coincidence and contingencies to produce Justice. To this extent at least, Borges does comply with a typically European exaggeration of the role of fatalism in Islam.³

The judgementalism implicit in these stories is a direct product of their Islamic setting—indeed, it is interesting to see how ideas presented for the first time in Borges's Islamic/Arabian stories are developed later in a non-Islamic context. A good example of this is the idea of omnivisuality found in "Mirror of Ink" and "The Aleph," two stories written twelve years apart. In both texts, the idea of a divine, all-seeing eye lies within an individual's grasp. In "Mirror of Ink," the evil ruler Yaqub the Ailing forces his weary, imprisoned sorcerer to show him all things in a pool of ink, nestled in the palm of

his hand: "This man, whom I still hate, had in his palm everything seen by men now dead and everything seen by the living: the cities, the climates, the kingdoms into which the earth is divided; the treasures hidden in its bowels; the ships that ply its seas; the many instruments of war, of music, of surgery; fair women; the fixed stars and the planets" (123). The source for this idea is Kabbalistic, although Borges might have found the model for this idea of glimpsing the infinite so graphically in the finite anywhere—either from his own wide reading of esoteric writers like Boehme, or from secondhand knowledge of Sufi thinkers like Ibn 'Arabi, garnered from the works of Palacios and Smith (the infinite world of images—*alam al-mithal*—being a common motif in Sufi thought). One thing is for certain: the Godlike knowledge offered by the sorcerer's "mirror of ink," with all its foolish temptations of pride and omniscient power, is the undoing of the evil ruler, who glimpses in the infinite plethora of things the imminence of his own death.

Twelve years later, we encounter a version of the same idea again in the story "The Aleph"; only this time bereft of any moral judgment. The Aleph—a tiny sphere, barely an inch in diameter but possessing the images of all things—is located not in any romantically Oriental setting, but rather in the basement of a pedantic Buenos Aires poet, and staring into it offers the same unimaginable totality of existence as Yaqub the Ailing's pool of ink: "I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the centre of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London). . . . I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand" ("The Aleph" 20). If "Mirror of Ink" (1933) really can be seen as an early "Oriental" version of "The Aleph," then what strikes one most in the 1945 story is how the removal of the Islamic setting fundamentally shifts the focus of the story and alters the application of the same idea. Whereas in the earlier tale, the possibility of apodictic knowledge acquires a definite moral weight and punishable consequences, in "The Aleph" this familiar theme of hubris and forbidden knowledge disappears altogether. The absence of Islam removes any moral implications of the Aleph and allows other developments, belonging to a thoroughly unjust world, to take place: the pedantic poet moves on from one success to another, while his more deserving rival (the struggling protagonist) finds it difficult to win even attention, never mind acclaim, for his obscure works. More importantly, the Aleph allows the protagonist to learn how the woman he adored was wooed by his hated rival, introducing a romantic element completely absent in the Arabian version (this idea of Islam as being somehow antithetical to

romantic love persists in all of Borges's stories, as we shall see in "The Zahir" and "The Masked Dyer"). Lifted out of its Islamic context and placed in a completely secular one, the idea of the Aleph seems to provoke themes of sadness and futility, rather than any discussions of human sinfulness and pride.⁴

The landscapes of these stories are dressed abundantly with a wealth of familiar Oriental images: emirs, viziers, deserts, scimitars, turbans, and camels. In none of Borges's later stories is the Islamic Orient so *visual*, and so clearly indebted to the European genre of the Oriental tale. In "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," an essay arguing why Argentine writers need not be so preoccupied with Argentine culture, Borges cites Gibbon's (erroneous) remark that the Koran contains not a single reference to a camel.⁵ The absence of camels in the Holy Koran is proof of its "authenticity" (Borges, "Argentine" 180); it is an argument one could apply inversely to Borges's tales, whose plethora of Oriental images just as clearly underlines the non-Muslim identity of their author and push them much closer to the kind of nineteenth-century Orientalia Europeans were writing about Islamic cultures and peoples.

Of course, Borges had read too much not to be aware of this. The exaggeratedly Oriental tone and array of clichés that permeate these tales begins to have a clearer, more *encyclopedic* purpose once one understands their original setting—that is, within a book (*A Universal History of Infamy*) dedicated to presenting different slices of iniquity in the history of mankind. Nestled among tales of New York gangsters and Chinese pirates, the most important thing about Islam in these early tales is its radical difference, its colorful settings, its distinctive and morally reassuring idiosyncrasies. In *A Universal History*, Islam is just one more segment in a multicolored pie, another entry in a multicultural encyclopedia. In the circus of misdemeanors that, in many ways, *A Universal History* is, Islam offers an exotic moral interlude, the mysteriously attractive promise of a world where chance does not reign, but where every act of infamy has a calculated value, a precise significance, and a certain (though often unexpected) resolution. For in these stories, the Allah that Borges presents to us is not devoid of irony.

"A Double For Mohammed": Borges the Slanderer of the Prophet

The real Mohammed, who wrote the Koran, is no longer visible to his followers. I have been informed that at first he presided over them, but that because he strove to rule like

God he was deposed and sent away to the south. A certain community of Muslims was once instigated by evil spirits to acknowledge Mohammed as God. To allay the disturbance, Mohammed was brought up from the nether earth and shown to them, and on this occasion I also saw him. He resembled the bodily spirits who have no interior perception, and his face was very dark. I heard him utter these words: "I am your Mohammed"; and thereupon he sank down again.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "A Double For Mohammed"

If the author of "Mirror of Ink" belongs to the genre of "Turkish Tales" and *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, then the author of "A Double for Mohammed" draws on an even older tradition of Islamic representations in European thought: one that sees Mohammed as an archetypal emblem for deceit and manipulation. From Dante's infamous twenty-eighth canto, where the "false prophet" is repeatedly torn asunder and disemboweled for his crimes of heresy and factionism, to Humphry Prideaux's seventeenth-century biography of the Prophet (*The True Nature of Imposture*), Borges's brief text (barely a page in length) belongs to a very definite corpus of defamatory ideas concerning Mohammed.

Borges lifts "A Double for Mohammed" directly out of paragraphs 829 and 830 in Swedenborg's *Vera Christiana Religio*—from a chapter entitled "Mohammedans in the Spiritual World." The translation is brief but verbatim; none of Swedenborg's positive remarks concerning Islam and its believers—their respect for Jesus as "the greatest of all Prophets," their ability to "love justice and do good from a religious motive," their greater numbers, and their opposition to idolatry (Swedenborg 873)—appears to have caught Borges's interest, but simply the curious postparadisaic use of Mohammed to control Muslims in their allotted section of heaven. In this text, at least, Swedenborg's by no means uncommon understanding of Islam as a fanatical form of personality cult with neo-Christian values seems to acquire almost a freak show status for Borges. If the Islam of the Arabian stories is oriental and exotic, here it seems to border on the bizarre, ridiculous, and even grotesque—the final image of the leader of the Prophet, bobbing up out of a cloud with a black face to say his name briefly before disappearing once more below, leaves behind a bafflement augmented by the brevity of the text.

It is a piece that reveals a number of ambiguities in Borges's own attitude toward Islam—not least of all exhibiting, as we have already seen with his use of Gibbon as an "authority" on the Koran, how far Borges relies on Western sources for his material about Is-

lam. His story on Averroes begins with a quotation from Renan's work on the thinker, just as the "Zahir" ends with the observations of a fictitious Islamologist (Julius Barlach and his *Urkunde zur Geschichte der Zahirsage*). Rarely does Borges venture a remark upon his Orient without citing an "expert" of some kind on the subject, fictitious or otherwise.

More importantly, however, is how texts like "A Double" reveal in Borges a willingness to see Islam as a pool of images, an exotic reservoir of motifs and types to be tapped whenever something different is called for. In this instrumental understanding of Islam, more than anything else, Borges resembles the vast majority of Western artists (Goethe, Byron, Emerson, Joyce) who have used Islam and Islamic cultures to color and enliven their own works.⁶ The superficiality of this response should not surprise us—as early as the 1780s, Orientalists such as Sir William Jones were advocating a new poetic function of the East:

I cannot but think that our *European* poetry has sustained too long on the perpetual repetition of the same images, and incessant allusions to the same fables . . . if the principal writings of the Asiaticks, which are repositied in our public libraries, were printed . . . and if the languages of the Eastern nations were studied . . . a new and ample field would be open for speculation; we should have a more extensive insight into the history of the human mind; we should be furnished with a new set of metaphors and similitudes and a number of excellent compositions would be brought to light, which future scholars might explain and future poets might imitate. (qtd. in Sharafuddin xxvii)

The East, therefore, can offer three things in addition to seclusion from the tedium of the quotidian: novelty, self-knowledge, and development. It would be easy, of course, to paraphrase Sir William's words in blander terms: the West is bored, it doesn't know what to do; "European poetry" keeps saying the same old thing, using the same old stock of similes since Homer—rosy dawns, dark seas, loves like roses, etc. It would also be easy to overlook the essence of what Sir William is saying—in effect, that Europe should *use* the East artistically in order to develop and improve its own creative capacities. Borges's use of Islam in his early texts is consistent with Jones's directions—if Islamic settings and references abound in Borges, however, it is not out of an avid thirst for something new, but rather to expand an already diverse corpus and range of references even further. Borges does not turn to the East because his store of metaphors is exhausted, but rather to augment and enrich the encyclope-

dic tone of narration that has become characteristic of his work. Whenever we come across the sequential lists of references that, by now, are such a frequent leitmotif in Borges's stories, an Islamic or Arabian example is almost *always* present. If an array of exploits crossing centuries and continents is to be described, then a hero like Sinbad or a city like Samarkand will inevitably be mentioned (as in, for example, "The Immortal" [187]); if the idea of textual self-referentiality is to be charted in *Don Quixote* and the *Ramayana*, then the catalogue cannot be complete without an Islamic reference (*Thousand and One Nights*) to supplement the Christian and Hindu equivalents ("Partial Magic" 230); if Ezekiel and Alanus de Insulis are cited as examples of figures who have tried to translate the infinite into the finite, then a sufi mystic (Ibn 'Attar) must also be included ("Aleph" 19). Islam as a collection of references is seen as an *addi-tional*, rather than an alternative, source of images. For Borges, in other words, Islam fills gaps; it widens, renders exotic, supplies another color on a palette whose function, to be fair, is as much intellectual as it is pictorial.

One final point should also be made concerning "A Double for Mohammed": Islam is *serious*. Rather like Eco's Dominicans or Rabelais's monks, "those who do not laugh" (qtd. in Rorty 1), Islam presents itself in Borges's text as an object particularly vulnerable to satire. If the postmodern vocabulary—thanks largely to Derrida's use of terms such as *jouer* and *jouissance*—constitutes playfulness, flexibility, and self-irony, then the understanding of Islam Borges invokes in "A Double" forms the antithesis of such values: solemnity, inflexibility, and absolute self-belief. Although numerous attempts have been made to show a tradition of humor in Islam,⁷ this idea of a fundamentalism that cannot tolerate any display of irony will remain a key theme of writers such as Salman Rushdie and Orhan Pamuk, even if such writers will simultaneously draw on unorthodox subtraditions within Islam that deconstruct this "seriousness" to a large degree (Mevlana and Ibn 'Arabi, for example). Borges is no exception to this; the all-too-mockable orthodoxy of Islam that "A Double" relies on for its satirical effect will remain as a background theme in stories such as "The Enigma" and "Averroes' Search." What will differ in these stories, however, is the presence of an alternative vision of Islam, one based upon a tradition of critical inquiry—the Islam of science, experimentation, and independent thought, composed of figures such as al-Razes, Avicenna, and Averroes, an Islam in which individual thinkers will begin to encounter the limitations of their faith.

"The Masked Dyer, Hakim of Merv" (1935) and "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald": Borges the Orientalist

However indiscreet or threatening they may be, so long as their words are not in conflict with orthodox faith, Islam is tolerant of men who enjoy intimacy with God.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "The Masked Dyer"

He is an atheist, but is well able to interpret in the orthodox manner the most exacting passages of the Koran, since every cultured man is a theologian, and since, in order to be one, faith is not indispensable.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald"

In stories such as "The Masked Dyer, Hakim of Merv" and "The Enigma," Islam is no longer a source of entertainment, but an object of information. In these texts, Borges's narrator adopts a tone that is both scholarly and authoritative; it cites sources, explains references, elucidates contexts, and generally supplies a concrete cultural background for the unfamiliar reader. The doctrines of the Ismailis or the plot of the *Mantiq al-Tayr* are briefly summarized with the relaxed patience of one who feels at home in his subject. In contrast to stories about wicked sultans, magic mirrors, and desert crossings, Islam in these texts has become an academic subject for Borges—a place where one can introduce theories, supply bibliographies, and clarify obscurities.

As the need to inform has overridden the need to amuse, it comes as no surprise that both these texts are biographies. Both texts relate the story of Muslims who are on the fringes of their faith—apostasy in the case of Omar Khayyam, heresy in the case of Mokanna. "The Masked Dyer" retells the story of the ninth-century veiled prophet of Khorasan, al-Mokanna, using both real and fictitious sources, including the wonderfully titled (but sadly non-existent) collection of heresies, *The Dark Rose*. Readers turning to one of the texts Borges cites for further information about the famous pseudoprophet of Northern Iran—Sir Percy Sykes's *A History of Persia*—will be surprised to find a scant four lines on a prophet Borges has written ten pages about.

The embellishment is considerable, and essentially stylistic. Although Borges does not follow the long-winded nineteenth-century Romantic Thomas Moore in producing a twenty-thousand-line poem, he does elaborate on the original story line by introducing a number of scenes for purely atmospheric effect. One of the segments of the story begins: "At the end of the moon of Sha'ban, in the year 158,

the desert air was very clear and from the gate of a caravan halting place on the way to Merv a group of men sat gazing at the evening sky in search of the moon of Ramadan, which marks the period of continence and fasting" ("The Masked Dyer" 79). The moons of Ramadan and Sha'ban; the caravanserai in the middle of the sands; the unmarked sky of the desert at dusk all supply a captivating oddity to Borges's story, one which oscillates between moments of overt scholarliness (the examination of the Prophet's theology, the explanation of Islamic references, the reliability of the story's sources) and this almost imagistic treatment of certain episodes in an otherwise conventional story. Even as the author is dwelling so poetically on the lunar setting of the episode, he feels compelled to add an explanation for Western readers regarding the Muslim fast of Ramadan. This struggle between Borges the intellectual and Borges the imagist, between a writer who delights in plunging unfettered into the genealogies of ideas and a writer who can supply an entire landscape visually in a single sentence, is reflected in his attitude to Islam. Borges will always be torn between these two desires to present Islam as a collection of ideas or of images. If Borges's intellectual understanding of Islam comes from his own wide reading of Western Orientalists (Burton, Renan, Palacios, Margaret Smith), then his visual understanding of it comes from the *Thousand and One Nights*. Even though the story of al-Mokanna actually took place, Borges narrates it like a piece of fiction, almost like one of Scherezade's tales. Halfway through the text, as the first appearance of the masked prophet to a group of travelers is recorded, Borges gives away the indebtedness of his imagery in a chance aside: "Someone (as in the *Arabian Nights*) pressed him for the meaning of this wonder. 'They are blind,' the masked man said, 'because they have looked upon my face'" (80). In describing an episode of ninth-century Persian history, Borges makes a comparison with a collection of much later medieval Arabic texts—in Western terms, this would be akin to an Arab historian trying to explain a scene from Anglo-Saxon history with a reference to Boccaccio. For Borges, the *Thousand and One Nights* and the story of al-Mokanna obviously have one thing in common: Islam. The breadth of Borges's Oriental library is, in this sense, surprisingly narrow: on the same shelf we can find Baladhuri and *Thousand and One Nights*, the Koran and the *Mantiq al-Tayr*, fact and fiction sitting next to one another and cited together quite unproblematically.

What strikes one most forcibly about the presentation of Islam in Borges's texts, particularly after reading Thomas Moore's version of the same story, is the factual coldness and calm gloom of the tale. It is difficult to locate the exact source of this exaggerated sobriety;

academic speculations, historical asides, melancholy passages describing the prophet's city and theology, along with a noticeable absence of speech (in contrast to the long prosaic monologues found in Moore) all contribute to a definite *tristesse* that seems to linger with the reader throughout the tale. Unlike Moore and his subplot of Azim and Zelica, Borges resists the temptation to introduce a love story into the story of the prophet. Apart from the brief and somewhat ironic mention of the prophet's harem of blind women, kept for reasons of "meditation and serenity" to provide an outlet for the distracting lusts of the prophet's "divine body" ("The Masked Dyer" 82) (here Borges conforms to a very traditional Christian stereotype of "Mohammedan libertinism"), there is no real manifestation of passion or warmth in the story. Al-Mokanna is a prophet who considers "all colours abominable" (79), a sanctification of colorlessness that contributes to the gentle gloom of the overall text. Borges's description of the prophet's hometown in Turkestan is a good example of the nondescript, almost resigned tone that runs throughout "The Masked Dyer": "His home was the ancient city of Merv, whose gardens and vineyards and pastures sadly overlook the desert. Midday there, when not dimmed by the clouds of dust that choke its inhabitants and leave a greyish film on the clusters of black grapes, is white and dazzling. Hakim grew up in that weary city" (78). "[S]adly," "dimmed," "dust," "grayish," and "weary": from the colorful settings of the Arabian stories with their carpets and sunsets and mirrors, the contrast could not be starker. A profoundly ascetic understanding of Islam comes into play in this story, one that is antagonistic to life and sees the holy not as the source, but the enemy of all multiplicity. For this image of Islam, the absence of color is a fundamental leitmotif—the rich, multicolored vitality of life is inimical to Islam, it would appear, echoing the Koranic description of the world as "a sport and a distraction". Hence the sadness that permeates "The Masked Dyer"; the sadness of those who do not belong to the world, who cannot participate in its joys without compromising their own sanctity, the melancholy of those who live their lives as exiles. Islam, in other words, as a kind of unhappiness—too serious to laugh at itself, too much in flight from the world to enjoy itself. Al-Mokanna's understanding of heaven epitomizes this most strikingly: "Its darkness is never-ending, there are fountains and pools made of stone, and the happiness of this Heaven is the happiness of leave-taking, of self-denial, and of those who know they are asleep" (84). To be fair to Borges, these are images not of Islam, but of a heresy in Islam. Hakim's picture of Heaven as a grey, somewhat opiate place of melancholy and oblivion lies in stark contrast to the classic pictures of paradise (*jennet*) found in the Koran—sun-filled gardens, "chaste

nymphs" and never-ending, fully-legitimized sexual pleasure, images Borges must have been familiar with. In the passage above, however, there are some traces of this familiar Koranic description—the orthodox paradise has fountains and pools just like Hakim's heaven, whilst the "darkness" of this melancholy paradise is not too different from its Koranic versions, which almost always describe gardens set in the shade. The Islam found in "The Masked Dyer" is not simply a gnostic perversion of Islam. The fact that Borges more often than not refers to Hakim as "the Prophet" does suggest a not-so-subtle allusion to Mohammed himself, an implication that at times becomes quite explicit (Mohammed, for example, is referred to as a "more fortunate prophet" [82]). Although Borges does pay lip service to Islam's tolerance of "men who enjoy intimacy with God" (82), the overall impression of the story offers a more critical message: that fanatical personality cults which preach asceticism and denial of the world ultimately find themselves not just opposed to diversity, but to all those things that diversity accompanies—life, joy, mirth, and color. The figure and fate of al-Mokanna, for all his differences from the Prophet Mohammed, do seem to reflect on Islam itself.

In "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald," Borges employs once more the kind of informative voice we hear narrating "The Masked Dyer." A text like "The Enigma" offers three further insights into Borges's complicated relationship to Islam. Firstly, it highlights an increasing interest in the esoteric and the heretical—not so much in what Islam *is*, but rather those elements within the faith that Islam itself objects to and is uncomfortable with. Borges's decision to make Khayyam an atheist displays a tendency in Borges to transplant unusually modern or secular worldviews into classical contexts and observe the results.⁸ In this sense, Borges does reflect a tradition of Western Orientalists who have been fascinated by Islamic "outsiders"—Palacios on Ibn 'Arabi, Corbin on the Ismailis, Massignon on al-Hallaj. In most of these cases, an "outsider" in the world of Islam is invariably one who has been contaminated by Greek philosophy (thinkers commonly referred to in Arabic as *falasifa*)—be it Omar Khayyam succumbing to the influence of Plato and Pythagoras, Averroes's admiration for Aristotle or al-Mokanna's darker leanings toward the Gnostics. Borges's fascination with the ostracized Hellenophiles of Islam (Avicenna, Averroes, Omar Khayyam) almost seems to endow the *falasifa* with a heroic quality, as if they were enlightened souls struggling in a sea of ignorance. Islam, in a sense, forms a less sophisticated, at times even stifling background toward the individual's thirst for new knowledge.

A second feature of Borges's Islam that "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald" brings to light is its fragmentary status for the author, the

fact that we only see it presented in slivers of texts—abrupt quotes, random anecdotes, incomplete retellings from third-hand sources, and even (in the case of "Averroes' Search") tales with no ending whatsoever. Of course, any comment on the brevity and abruptness of Borges's texts is a familiar enough observation: one recalls the Nabokovs' remark that on first encountering Borges's writings, they felt they were standing upon a wondrous portico—until they discovered there was no house (qtd. in Barth, *Further Fridays* 181). There is nothing exclusive to Islam about Borges's fascination with fragments; in the context of his Islamic/Arabian stories, however, what the incomplete nature of texts like "The Masked Dyer" and "A Double for Mohammed" emphasize is the relative ignorance of the narrator. Whether it is fragments of stories taken from the *Thousand and One Nights* or a patched-together narrative collected from distant, scattered sources, what Borges's texts offer are peepholes onto a world completely alien and separate from our own. Of course, there has always been something essentially Romantic about the fragment. *Kubla Khan* and *Ode On A Grecian Urn* both offer glimpses of worlds that are somehow lost, and the historically frozen treatment of Islam in Borges's stories would seem to concur with this. Borges's Islam is one such lost world: fundamentally medieval in its presentation (practically all of Borges's intellectual references to Islam belong to the "Golden Age" of Islamic thought, between the tenth and fifteenth centuries), the various versions of Islam we encounter in Borges's texts are almost archaeologically resurrected for the reader from scattered fragments of different sources, as the narrator of "The Masked Dyer" openly admits. Borges's fascination with Islam is an "Eastern" development of an already extant interest in certain Jewish/Christian aspects of the Middle Ages—heresy, esotericism, infinite textuality, and elaborate theological debates. It supplies the reason why Borges's interest in Islam hardly ever ventures beyond the fifteenth century; Islam, far from a living, contemporary faith, becomes a historically isolated pool of alternative metaphors, frozen in the past without any allowance made for advancement or modernity.

The final and possibly most important point that "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald" offers us concerning Borges's relationship to Islam centers on the idea of collaboration—and the possibility that, in writing about an "indolent, solitary" Western intellectual who uses a remote Persian poet to forge his own identity, Borges may well have been writing about himself: "A miracle happens: from the lucky conjunction of a Persian astronomer who ventures into poetry and an English eccentric who explores Spanish and Oriental texts, without understanding them entirely, emerges an extraordinary poet who resembles neither of them" (78). Borges has a definite predilection

for the bookish and the misanthropic—Tlön, after all, is ushered into the world by a "dynasty of solitary men" (*Labyrinths* 43). Nevertheless Fitzgerald is by no means the only eccentric who brings together Occident and Orient to produce something quite unlike either of them. In this sense, the Islamic Orient offers the same benefits for Borges as it did for Fitzgerald: the promise of self-transformation, the possibility to write something extra-ordinary, an opus that cannot be reinscribed into any previous set of metaphors, Eastern or Western. The settings and cultures of Islam offer Borges, as they did Fitzgerald, the chance to become a different kind of writer. If Borges's Fitzgerald, who dabbles in oriental texts "without understanding them entirely" ("The Enigma" 78) really is a version of Borges himself, then the passage almost suggests that ignorance and incomplete scholarship are a necessary part of the truly creative Orientalist.⁹ Fitzgerald's translation has been famously criticized for its inaccuracies; had the Englishman's grasp of medieval Persian been more convincing, Borges seems to be suggesting, the *Rubaiyat* might not have become as famous as it did.

"Averroes' Search": Borges the Post-Orientalist

Possibly the most entertaining irony of "Averroes' Search" lies in the fact that it culminates in the very failure it attempts to relate—for Borges's story is a text explicitly concerned with failure: the failure of a group of listeners to understand the tales of a traveler, the failure of one of the greatest Islamic philosophers to grasp the meaning of Aristotle, the failure of Islam itself to glimpse the meaning of the tragic and the comic. Once again, as in the case of Omar Khayyam and al-Mokanna, Borges tells the story of a Muslim on the limits of his faith, a believer disconcerted by the existence of a foreign, radically inaccessible knowledge, present somewhere teasingly beyond the limits of his own creed. Borges enhances the pathos of the story by presenting Ibn Rushd as a solitary, troubled individual, struggling uneasily in the middle of his *Tahafut ul-Tahafut* with two apparently untranslatable words from the Greek of Aristotle. The onset of old age seems to exacerbate the philosopher's fear of being naively aware of something crucially important. Hearing of distant cities and vast deserts from a traveler who has just returned from China, Borges has the thinker shiver, as if to suppress a shudder: "The fear of the crassly infinite, of mere space, of mere matter, touched Averroes for an instant. He looked at the symmetrical garden; he felt aged, useless, unreal. Abulcasin continued" (184). Averroes is, we are told, "closed within the orb of Islam" (187). Borges's reconstruction of the great thinker, however, comes closer to a medieval precursor of Brit-

ish empiricism ("prefiguring the arguments of an as yet problematical Hume" [182]) rather than any pillar of intellectual devotion. Here Renan's reading of Averroes as a radical freethinker has obviously played a part,¹⁰ inspiring the retelling of the imagined moment when the great commentator came across the words *tragoidia* and *komoidia* in the cool of his Cordovan library, one sunny twelfth-century afternoon. Borges's Averroes can only conclude that the two words mean, respectively, "panegyrics" and "satires." Naively, he adds, "Admirable tragedies and comedies abound in the pages of the Koran" (187). The Islam that Borges feels Averroes to have been encapsulated by is as bereft of irony as it is of despair. It is a complex paradox typical of much of Borges's ambiguous treatment of Islam: that which feeds a thinker also limits him, the culture that provides the conditions for a thinker's expression also forms the upper parameters of his capabilities. For this reason the presentation of Islam in "Averroes' Search" is by no means wholly negative; the faith Averroes belongs to is perfect and complete within itself—only those who seek to complicate their lives by committing the cardinal sin of curiosity will know dissatisfaction. Clearly Averroes, for Borges, is one such soul.

A more important lesson which "Averroes' Search" offers us, however, lies in the consequences its abrupt ending bears for the Orientalist in general. The tale breaks off on an extraordinary moment of author intervention and self-reflection à la Lawrence Sterne, as Borges realizes his subject's failure is nothing less than an unconscious extension of his own. Here Borges explains why he has suddenly stopped writing:

I felt that the work was mocking me. I felt that Averroes, wanting to imagine what a drama is without ever having suspected what a theatre is, was no more absurd than I, wanting to imagine Averroes with no other sources than a few fragments from Renan, Lane and Asin Palacios. I felt, on the last page, that my narration was a symbol of the man I was as I wrote it. (188)

It is a key moment in the evolution of Borges's relationship to the Islamic Orient, a final realization of the fictitious foundations and illusory claims of the Orientalist project. Of course, the rejection of Lane, Palacios, Renan et al is by no means explicit; the dismissal of their work as "a few fragments," however, is far from complimentary. Borges seems to have stumbled upon Edward Said's main point: that whenever Westerners write about the Orient, they invariably end up writing about themselves—their fantasies, their longings, and their failures. It is a realization that triggers the interruption of the

tale—as soon as Borges understands the Orient he is trying to describe is nothing but his own, he stops writing about it.

The faint note of despair in the passage ("I felt that the work was mocking me") is striking, particularly since in all the other stories up to now Borges seems to have been completely untroubled by any doubts concerning the validity of his Orient. Happily making up fictitious references to German Orientalists as he goes along, Borges has spoken about Islam up to now with a certain tone—one of confidence and self-assurance, filling in details and idiosyncratic observations that not even the most verbose eyewitnesses could have recorded. What made Borges suddenly doubt his Orient? What spurred this sudden lapse in self-confidence, this unexpected disavowal of his sources?

We have already seen how, in writing about Fitzgerald's eccentric interest in the Orient, Borges may have been alluding to himself; perhaps, in the figure of a middle-aged thinker desperately trying to grasp something outside the limits of his culture, Borges found another opportunity to write, a little more consciously this time, about himself. It may be that the degree of autobiography frightened the narrator of "Averroes' Search," who had never quite realized how far he used his own experience to fill in the Orientalist lacunae that the "fragments" of Renan, Palacios, and Lane could not cover. What is interesting is that as long as Borges remains unaware of this situation, he is happy to continue writing about Islam: as soon as the possibility arises that he is writing about himself, Islam ceases to be "Other" and the narration stops. Islam, in a sense, comes too close for comfort. One could interpret this as a generous gesture toward Islam on Borges's part. As the author says, the original intention of the story was to narrate the frustration of a man enclosed within an orb—the orb of Islam; the story ends precisely because of the implicit arrogance of such an intention, the fact that we are all enclosed within one kind of orb or another. We have come no further than Anselm or Averroes or Paracelsus, the author of "Averroes' Search" seems to be saying. The modernity of Borges and his readers, ultimately, is just a different kind of orb.

The multiple identities that Borges reveals in his various encounters with Islam disconcert as much as they dazzle: The Oriental teller of tales, the moral admonisher, the detached, Western chronicler and historical "expert," the anti-Mohammedan satirist, the eccentric dabbler, the student of the esoteric, and finally, the Orientalist biographer who suddenly realizes the biography he is writing is nothing other than his own. Nevertheless, a certain number of recurring characteristics seem to manifest themselves throughout Borges's Islamic stories. A reliance on Western Orientalists appears to be the

most obvious of these points. Knowing little Persian or Arabic, Borges is entirely dependent on the European tradition of Orientalism for the material of his stories. His Averroes belongs to Renan, his Ibn 'Attar to Margaret Smith, his Omar Khayyam to Fitzgerald. Even when fabricating new stories and anecdotes, he feels he has to dedicate them either to existing figures of authority and experience (such as Burton), or fictitious ones (such as Alexander Schulz). Whether this renders Borges vulnerable to the same charges of ignorance and cultural blindness that Said makes against the European canon¹¹ hinges really on the question of seriousness: how seriously do texts like "The Masked Dyer" and "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald" want to be taken? Borges may well be castigated for believing Gibbon's words on the Koran instead of finding out for himself, or for citing Burton's Ibn Khaldun instead of turning to *The Muqaddimah* itself. The constant citation and obvious admiration of Burton also suggests a blindness to how racist and narrow-minded the explorer really was. The fact, however, that Borges quite literally produced his own Orientalism does demonstrate an awareness of the artificiality of such an enterprise—Borges's abrupt breaking-off of the tale in "Averroes' Search" would, in this sense, be the culmination of an increasing discomfort with Orientalism in general, a "coming clean" as it were with the impossibility of writing about that which we are not.

More worrying, however, than any tit-for-tat debate concerning Borges's political correctness is the extent to which Borges's Islam, throughout his stories, is repeatedly (and paradoxically) linked to themes of infinity and constriction. Islam is associated more closely to failure than anything else in Borges's work—the failure of a prophet to keep his followers, the failure of a poet to achieve true recognition, the failure of a thinker to grasp the truly different. Islam appears to magnetize and control the independent will, plying it to its own shape, restricting it to a limited expression, from which only an encounter with the West (be it an Aristotle or a Fitzgerald) can liberate it. Borges's fascination with Islam is fundamentally a fascination with how individuals succumb to Islam, how they fail to break free of its influence. In texts such as "Averroes' Search" or "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald," this interest in the Islamic Orient arises out of the consequences of taking a secular liberal worldview and transplanting it anachronistically into the milieu of Ibn Rushd or Omar Khayyam. Islam, rather than presenting any intrinsic interest, appears to form the archaic backdrop for an intellectual thought-experiment. It is a fact that explains Borges's interest in the more marginal aspects of the Islamic tradition—esotericism, heresy, and apostasy. Islam is interesting not so much for what it professes, but for what it prohibits; not for what it relates, but for what it resists.

And so the uses of Islam in Borges's stories remain varied: a convenient set of Eastern colors, a moral stage-set for a handful of tales, an object of satire, a model for fanaticism, a pillar of orthodoxy, and a breeder of heresies. In all of these stories, however, the *tawhid* or essential unity of Islam is ever present. In the worlds of the early Arabian stories, for example, nothing occurs out of place; initial discrepancies are resolved, crimes are punished, good faith rewarded. In "The Masked Dyer," the unity of Islam wins over the errant ways of a heretical prophet, just as it wins control of a thinker's thought trains to lead him back to orthodoxy. "The Zahir" is probably the culminating symbol of this all-encompassing idea of *tawhid*—the Zahir that ushers everything into itself, that annihilates all differences and redirects all thoughts, that becomes the sole and unifying object of everyone who looks upon it.

All of which provokes the question: what are the implications of Borges's multiple representations of Islam for Islam itself? The fact that Borges presents us with such a bewildering variety of different faces of Islam—philosophers, heretics, Persian poets, esoteric debates, Arab tales, mocked prophets—leads us to consider the ramifications this plurality of Islams has for the Islamic faith. Such a conviction of the radical complexity and depth of the word Islam is by no means exclusively Western; Aziz al-Azmeh, amongst many critics, has been one of the the most prominent figures in asserting that "there are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it" (1). For al-Azmeh, the idea of a single Islam, "generically closed, utterly exceptionalist," bereft of any notion of change or diversity, is a product of both Islamophobic *and* Islamophilic discourses. They ignore the radical diversity of Islamic traditions—British Pakistani, Kurdish Sunni, Syrian Alewite, etc—in their attempt to create "non-transmissible [Muslim] lifestyles" and the idea of a "single Islamic community" (5). It is interesting to keep this in mind while reading Borges's work, for what lies behind the myriad of images in Borges's stories is a similar conviction of Islam's radical plurality. The variety of different voices that Borges adopts in his treatment of Islamic/ Arab material reflects this disbelief in an "invariant essence of Islam" (al-Azmeh 63), and seems to suggest a much wider diversity of traditions and movements, of internal debates and dialogue, than a less sophisticated Westerner might have used (one thinks immediately of John Barth and the Muslim countries his characters are happy to call, lumped in one continuous whole, "Moorsville" [*Last Voyage* 198]). Of course, there are different positions one might take on this. Cynically, one could say that the range of Borges's Muslims and their backgrounds is aesthetically inspired out of a simple desire for color and variety, rather than any high-minded attempt to decategorize

Islam and display its different traditions and subcultures with a greater degree of sensitivity. On the other hand, while Borges is admittedly guilty of Orientalist generalizations about Islamic cultures—using the *Thousand and One Nights* to justify a landscape from central Asia, employing references to Western texts to support the Orient he constructs, etc—his work does not yield the same impression of a single, generic group of Muslims or Arabs, nor a single, generic thing called Islam, that we find in other writers such as Burton, Lawrence, and even in allegedly modern figures such as Bowles or Camus.

Nevertheless, Borges's fascination with unity and oneness—*infinite* oneness—necessitates a final point: that there lies within certain texts of Borges a fundamental fear of Islam.¹² It is a fear that is essentially claustrophobic in its overtones—the fear of the closed totality, the life-denying dogma, the thought-controlling creed. It is also, in part, a historical fear—the Christian fear of the terrible Turk at the gates of Vienna, of the Muslims reaching Tours, the fear of Islamic barbarity overrunning European civilization—fears that Borges has given voice to elsewhere in his poetry. In "Ariosto and the Arabs," for example, he writes of the Saracens who were stopped in France by Charlemagne and their dream of capturing Europe ("veiled faces / In turbans took possession of the Occident" [82]). Islam, it could be argued, still remains something of a threat in Borges's stories—if not a threat to Europe, then at least a threat to the kind of things Europe represents: sanity, intellect, pluralism, rational thought, and freedom. There are shades of this medieval Christian *Urangst* about Islam to be found in one of Borges's most famous stories, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius."

Borges' tale of a fictitious encyclopedia that gradually takes over the world and replaces our own reality has little immediately to do with Islam. Written over the centuries by a secret, pseudo-Masonic society of intellectuals, the fictitious world (Tlön) the encyclopedia purports to describe slowly begins to manifest itself with increasing frequency. A number of elements in this story, however, do seem to link the encroaching Tlön with Islamic or Arabic associations: the alleged site of Tlön is "a region of Iraq or Asia Minor" (28); the names associated with this place are either suspiciously Arabic ("Uqbar" sounds like *akhbar* or "the greatest," as in *Allah akbar*) or real-life places situated in Muslim countries (Khorasan, Erzurum); the project of Tlön is opposed to Christianity (it vows to "make no pact with the impostor Jesus Christ" [40]); moreover, when the narrator relates the moment he opens one of the encyclopedia of Tlön for the very first time, he does so with an allusion to an Islamic tradition: "On one of the nights of Islam called the Night of Nights the secret doors of heaven open wide and the water in the jars be-

comes sweeter; if those doors opened, I would not feel what I felt that afternoon. The book was written in English and contained 1,001 pages" (31). Of course, there is nothing new about Borges narrating events with the aid of extravagant allusions. The fact, however, that a kind of opening *is* taking place (the opening of Tlön onto the real world) does seem to situate the secret pages of Tlön's encyclopedia and the "secret doors" of an Islamic heaven a little closer as metaphors. The fact that the book has as many pages as the *Thousand and One Nights* would also appear to perpetuate the linking of Tlön with an Islamic Orient.

Most convincingly of all, the remark at the beginning of the story that sets the entire tale into motion—"mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men" (27)—actually belongs to a story Borges has written twenty years earlier, "The Masked Dyer." It is the veiled prophet of Khorasan, al-Mokanna, who believes "mirrors and fatherhood" to be "abominations" (83), and yet in the latter story it is attributed to one of the heresiarchs of Tlön. Borges's story of a text that gradually consumes reality begins, in other words, with a quote from an Islamic prophet and ends on an equally apocalyptic note:

The contact and the habit of Tlön have disintegrated this world. . . . Already the schools have been invaded by the (conjectural) "primitive language" of Tlön . . . already a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty—even that it is false . . . A scattered dynasty of solitary men has changed the face of the world. Their task continues. [When it is finished] English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön. (43)

R. W. Southern, in his *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, writes of how medieval authors interpreted the heresy of Islam as a sign of the end of the age, a practice of associating Islam with the Apocalypse that continued well up until Luther (27, 105). Borges, in associating the pervasive influence of Tlön with such a range of Islamic references, is perhaps continuing this tradition in a much more subtle way. Naturally, it would be ludicrous to suggest "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" is about Islam, or even an attempt to describe some imaginary Islamicization of the planet. What is interesting, however, is how the hidden genealogy of Tlön proves to be surprisingly Eastern. 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, allusions 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.

Notes

1. Borges's claim is probably fictitious: the story of "The Mirror of Ink," for example, cannot be found anywhere in the pages of the book it is allegedly lifted out of—Burton's *Lake Regions of Central Africa*.
2. Borges mentions this in the description of the "library of endless English books" he enjoyed as a child, although he very probably read Burton's famous translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* too. See Borges, "Borges on Borges."
3. One could write a book on the Western obsession with predestination in Islam—a belief subscribed to by figures as diverse as Schopenhauer, who writes about "der Fatalismus der Mohemmadaner" in the first volume of his *World as Will and Idea* (580), and Henry James in *The Bostonians*: "The Turks have a second rate religion; they are fatalists, and that keeps them down" (qtd. in Obeidat 8).
4. Kadir suggests a poststructuralist reading of "The Mirror of Ink," seeing the pool of ink in the sorcerer's hand as an analogy for Derrida's *pharmakon*, the undecidable word for writing as poison/cure found in Plato's *Phaedrus* (54–55). Borges's tale, Kadir proposes, may well be no moral fable but an "allegory of the reader" (54), one that teaches us that "to pretend to appropriate the other into our own image spells an eradication of otherness that inevitably translates into our own undoing" (54). What the consequences of this "eradication" are for Borges's own relationship to Islam, however, Kadir does not say.
5. Anyone with a reasonable knowledge of the Koran can see the inaccuracy of this statement—verse 22:36, for example, speaks of the "sacrificial camels," which are "God's waymarks."
6. For more on representations of the East in Joyce, see Almond.
7. See Akhbar, for example, on the Bektashi, or Rosenthal's *Humour in Early Islam*.
8. Borges may have obtained this idea from Terhume's 1947 biography of Fitzgerald, *The Life of Edward Fitzgerald*, where Khayyam is reported to have been "denounced by devout contemporaries as a free thinker" (217). The mini-biography of Khayyam supplied in the middle pages of this text (215–32) does bear some striking resemblances to Borges's narration of Khayyam's life—including the story of Khayyam, Nizam al-Mulk, and Hassan al-Sabbah, as well as the coincidence of Khayyam's death on the same date as the Battle of Hastings.

9. The Persian scholar R. A. Nicholson, in his introduction to Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* makes basically the same assertion—that the success of Fitzgerald's translation lay in the fact that he did not "trouble himself" with too much accuracy (28–30).
10. Another possible influence, however, on Borges's depiction of Averroes as an ultimately failed thinker, trapped by his own limitations, may well have been the thirteenth-century sufi thinker Ibn 'Arabi. Borges was familiar with Palacios's study of the Sufi, *El Islam Cristianizado*. Ibn 'Arabi had enjoyed a famous meeting with Averroes in Seville, and described a man who "doubted what he possessed in himself" (Chittick xiii).
11. Said himself, in *Orientalism*, refers fondly to Borges's image of "Orientalist erudition" in a passage on Massignon (266).
12. This happens to be the title of an interesting book on the European fear of Islam: Bobby S. Sayyid's *A Fundamental Fear*.

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