

## BORGES'S READING OF DANTE AND SWEDENBORG: MYSTICISM AND THE REAL

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Hay un curioso género literario que independientemente se ha dado en diversas épocas y naciones: la guía del muerto en las regiones ultraterrenas. *El Cielo y el Infierno* de Swedenborg, las escrituras gnósticas, el *Bardo Thödol* de los tibetanos (título que, según Evans-Wentz, debe traducirse “Liberación por Audición en el Plano de la Posmuerte”) y el *Libro egipcio de los Muertos* no agotan los ejemplos posibles. Las simpatías y diferencias de los dos últimos han merecido la atención de los eruditos; bástenos aquí repetir que para el manual tibetano el otro mundo es tan ilusorio como éste y para el egipcio es real y objetivo.

Jorge Luis Borges, *El libro de los seres imaginarios*

Emmanuel Swedenborg writes at the beginning of his book *Heaven and Hell* (1758): “it has been granted me to be with angels and to talk with them person to person. I have also been enabled to see what is in heaven and in hell, a process that has been going on for thirteen years” (§2). He writes later in the work: “I have been allowed to talk with some people who lived more than two thousand years ago, people whose lives are described in history books and are therefore familiar” (§480). He repeatedly claims that “I can bear witness from all my experiences of what happens in heaven and in hell” (§482), and begins many paragraphs with statements such as “Angels have told me that...” (§184, 222, 302, 310, 480). The reader of today, just as the contemporary reader of Swedenborg such

as Kant, is immediately presented with questions of the nature of the real, and the ontological dimension of such experiences. Borges read Swedenborg throughout his life, and wrote extensively about him; indeed the strong presence of Swedenborg in Borges's work constitutes a curious absence in the scholarship. His reading of Swedenborg also presents some perplexing questions concerning the relationship between the real and the fantastic.

Borges, as is well documented, subverts genre distinctions between realism and fantasy, declaring in countless interviews, prologues and essays that the joy of literature is the appeal to the imagination, that history is memory and that a literary experience is as real as any other experience. Furthermore, he famously equates metaphysics with the fantastic, claiming, for example, in a review of the English theologian Leslie Weatherhead: "¿qué son las prodigios de Wells o de Poe [...] confrontados con la invención de Dios? [...] ¿Quién es el unicornio ante la Trinidad?" (OC 1: 280). However, in his reading of the ill-defined tradition of mystical writing, Borges appears to betray this disdain for genre distinction, and adheres with an odd rigor to a categorical assessment of real versus fictional, fantastic versus genuine, authentic versus inauthentic. Borges wrote passionately about Dante and about Swedenborg, both of whom depicted Heaven and the angelic denizens therein. He pursues, as we shall see, a line of enquiry in which he asserts that Dante's visions were purely aesthetic, purely artistic, and did not hail from genuine experience, while Swedenborg's visions *were* genuine, authentic and experiential.

In this article I will appraise Borges's abiding admiration of both visionary writers and his critical response to them, and will evaluate the complex and at times paradoxical criteria that Borges employs in his assessment of the authentic in opposition to the imaginal. My hypotheses can be summed up in three statements. Borges's writings lead to the erasure of fact and fiction; however, Borges himself retreats into the very realist-fantasy division that he was at pains to dispel in his fictions and essays when evaluating mysticism and mystical vision. Similarly, for Borges originality is not prized. He does, however, place great emphasis on originality in relation to mystical vision. Lastly, his assessment of putative authenticity is itself an aesthetic judgment based upon his own iconoclasm and mistrust of doctrine. This is the touchstone for his emphatic distinction.

Borges's manifest love for Dante's *Divine Comedy* is crystallized in his laudatory lecture in *Siete noches*: "La *Comedia* es un libro que todos debemos leer. No hacerlo es privarnos del mejor don que la literatura puede darnos, es entregarnos a un extraño ascetismo. ¿Por qué negarnos la felicidad de leer la *Comedia*?" (OC 3: 217). There is much to say about Borges's appreciation of Dante, and while Borges scholarship has approached numerous elements, one central feature prevalent in most of Borges's writings of Dante has been curiously overlooked. This is Borges's strident affirmation that Dante was not a visionary, but that he *was* a visionary poet. Borges explains: "No creo que Dante fuera un visionario. Una visión es breve. Es imposible una visión tan larga como la de la *Comedia*. La visión fue voluntaria: debemos abandonarnos a ella y leerla, con fe poética. Dijo Coleridge que la fe poética es una voluntaria suspensión de la incredulidad" (OC 3: 211).<sup>1</sup>

Firstly, therefore, Borges asserts that the vision was not a vision in the mystical sense, because, rather than being spontaneous and unbidden (i.e. grace of the divine), it was voluntary. Secondly, Dante was not a visionary because of the length of this vision, which, Borges maintains, would be unsustainable. Thirdly, Dante was not a visionary because the vision itself was inspired by poetic faith, and was therefore culturally conditioned within established theological and artistic frameworks. Furthermore, argues Borges elsewhere, Dante wrote in verse, and there is no possible way that he could have experienced the various circles of the *Divine Comedy* in such an aesthetic language. "En el caso de Dante, que también nos ofrece una descripción del Infierno, del Purgatorio y del Paraíso, entendemos que se trata de una ficción literaria. No podemos creer realmente que todo lo que relata se refiere a una vivencia personal. Además, ahí está el verso que lo ata: él no pudo haber experimentado el verso" (OC 4: 202).

1 This affirmation is reiterated elsewhere. He tells Roberto Alifano: "Dante reveals to us in his narrative that at thirty-five (*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*) a vision comes to him. I don't believe that Dante was a visionary; a vision is something more fleeting, something more ethereal. A vision as prolonged as *The Divine Comedy* is impossible. I think that his vision was voluntary. His vision was the result of his poetic faith—but that would be a theme in itself, a very interesting one which should be pursued" (Alifano 95). He tells Willis Barnstone: "It is very clear to me that when Dante had his dream of hell and his dream of purgatory, he was imagining things" (Barnstone 95); and he writes in the last of the *Nueve ensayos dantescos*: "Retengamos un hecho incontrovertible, un solo hecho humildísimo: la escena ha sido *imaginada* por Dante" (OC 3: 372).

The whole poetic cycle is thus, for Borges, resolutely and beautifully a literary fiction, a poetic text, an *artifice*. At face value this assertion does not seem too problematic, indeed it attunes perfectly to Borges's love of fantasy and fiction in all their guises. However, complications begin to emerge when assessing Borges's discussion of Swedenborg.

The most extensive appraisal of Swedenborg in Borges's works is his biographical essay on Swedenborg.<sup>2</sup> This text abounds in highly revealing passages in which Borges affirms the authentic, non-fictional, genuine experiences of Swedenborg, and in which he emphasizes precisely the opposite of what he maintains about Dante, that Swedenborg *was* a visionary.

En una epístola famosa dirigida a Cangrande Della Scala, Dante Alighieri advierte que su *Comedia*, como la Sagrada Escritura, puede leerse de cuatro modos distintos y que el literal no es más que Uno de ellos [...] Pasajes como *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate* fortalecen esa convicción topográfica, realizada por el arte. Nada más diverso de los destinos ultraterrenos de Swedenborg. (OC 4: 156)

The *Divine Comedy*, he asserts, is the pinnacle of artistic expression, and the fact that Dante outlines modes of reading (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical), testifies to this artifice. The mystical works of Swedenborg, however, are wholly free from artifice, being the direct account of genuine experience of a man “que recorrió este mundo y los otros, lúcido y laborioso. [...] ese escandinavo sanguíneo, que fue mucho más lejos que Érico el Rojo” (4: 152). Significantly, Borges maintains that the literal reading of the *Divine Comedy* would impoverish the text, as the reader would fail to appreciate the allegorical, moral and mystical levels of meaning.<sup>3</sup> It would also betray a stultifying credulity on behalf of the reader. To illustrate this,

2 Borges's 1972 essay “Swedenborg, testigo de lo invisible” was published as prologue to a Spanish edition of *The Essential Swedenborg* by Sig Synnøstvedt: *Swedenborg, testigo de lo invisible* (1982), translated into English by Richard Howard and Cesar Rennert as “Testimony to the Invisible” in the homonymous volume of essays edited by James F. Lawrence (1995). The original prologue is also found in the section *Prólogos, con un prólogo de prólogos* (OC 4: 152-160), entitled, “Emmanuel Swedenborg: *Mystical Works*”. Eliot Weinberger's English translation of this prologue/essay appears in *The Total Library* 449-57.

3 Aside, however, from the opening couplet of the cycle: “*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura*. Es decir, a los treinta y cinco años ‘me encontré en mitad de una selva oscura’ que puede ser alegórica, pero en la cual creemos físicamente” (OC 3: 211).

Borges makes reference on more than one occasion to the observation that the Heaven of Dante would correspond to no heaven putatively encountered after death. “Paul Claudel ha observado que los espectáculos que nos aguardan después de la agonía no serán verosímilmente los nueve círculos infernales, las terrazas del Purgatorio o los cielos concéntricos. Dante, sin duda, habría estado de acuerdo con él; ideó su topografía de la muerte como un artificio exigido por la escolástica y por la forma de su poema” (OC 3: 342).<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, he maintains, it would be difficult to read the works of Swedenborg in any manner *other than the literal*. This is because, for Borges, Swedenborg’s writings were the genuine expression of experience, and were not written with any attempt at parable, symbol or allegory. He emphasizes Swedenborg’s dry and meticulous Latin prose as being wholly free from flowery literary technique, especially metaphor: “A diferencia de otros místicos, prescindió de la metáfora, de la exaltación y de la vaga y fogosa hipérbole” (OC 4: 154).<sup>5</sup> He examines the objective of such a studious and prosaic language, suggesting that it was the product of an almost mimetic reproduction of his visionary experiences.

La explicación es obvia. El empleo de cualquier vocablo presupone una experiencia compartida, de la que el vocablo es el símbolo. Si nos hablan del sabor del café, es porque ya lo hemos probado, si nos hablan del color amarillo, es porque ya hemos visto limones, oro, trigo y puestas del sol. Para sugerir la inefable unión del alma del hombre con la divinidad, los sufíes del Islam se vieron obligados a recurrir a analogías prodigiosas, a

4 Borges also derives this observation from Flaubert: “Por eso me parece justo lo que ha dicho Flaubert diciendo que Dante al morir debe haberse asombrado al ver que el Infierno, el Purgatorio o el Paraíso —vamos a suponer que le tocó la última región— no correspondía a su imaginación. Yo creo que Dante no creía, al escribir el poema, haber hecho otra cosa sino haber encontrado símbolos adecuados para expresar de un modo sensible los estados de ánimo del pecador, del penitente y del justo” (*Borges profesor* 193).

5 The literary style of Swedenborg intrigues his readers. Henry James Sr. (father of William and Henry) labels him “insipid with veracity” (qtd. in Johnson 2003), which is echoed in his friend Emerson’s comments that Swedenborg “remained entirely devoid of the whole apparatus of poetic expression” (Emerson 54). This is then further iterated in William James: “But why should he be so prolix and so toneless—so without emphasis?” (qtd. in Johnson 2003). W. B. Yeats comments: “And all this happened to a man without egotism, without drama, without a sense of the picturesque, and who wrote a dry language, lacking fire and emotion” (“Swedenborg” 299). Kathleen Raine, meanwhile, calls his writing “stilted and voluminous” (54). Borges is part of a long tradition of critical reception of Swedenborg’s language.

imágenes de rosas, de embriaguez o de amor carnal; Swedenborg pudo renunciar a tales artificios retóricos porque su tema no era el éxtasis del alma arrebatada y enajenada, sino la puntual descripción de regiones ultraterrenas, pero precisas. Con el fin de que imaginemos, o empecemos a imaginar, la ínfima hondura del Infierno, Milton nos habla de *No light, but rather darkness visible*; Swedenborg prefiere el rigor y —¿por qué no decirlo?— las eventuales prolijidades del explorador o del geógrafo que registra reinos desconocidos. (OC 4: 154)

64 Borges admires the intellectual capacity, determinism and exploratory drive of Swedenborg—the very qualities that had furnished his abilities to write tables of mining and metallurgy, design aircraft and submarines, and create “un método personal para fijar las longitudes y un tratado sobre el diámetro de la luna” (OC 4: 153).<sup>6</sup> These accounts of Heaven and Hell, Borges maintains, were subject to the same degree of rational scrutiny that Swedenborg employed in his assessment of the natural world, and consequently were unadulterated by religious dogma. Similarly, Borges emphatically defends Swedenborg against the reader’s incredulity, stressing that any of the arguments commonly employed to discredit Swedenborg—deceit or madness—are invalid. Swedenborg was not attempting to proselytize, because, Borges asserts, “[a] la manera de Emerson (*Arguments convince nobody*) y de Walt Whitman, creía que los argumentos no persuaden a nadie y que basta enunciar una verdad para que los interlocutores la acepten” (OC 4: 155). Had he been mad, he argues, “no deberíamos a su pluma tenaz la ulterior redacción de miles de metódicas páginas, que representan una labor de casi treinta años y que nada tienen que ver con el frenesí” (OC 4: 155). Herein lies a puzzling feature of Borges’s admiration of Swedenborg. Who, we may ask, is this reader that Borges so stridently conceptualizes and answers? Why would he seek to defend Swedenborg (and himself) against the charge of “la deliberada impostura de quien ha escrito esas cosas extrañas” (OC 4: 154) if, having included Swedenborg in *El libro de los seres imaginarios*, he had already established his fantastical nature? To address this question, it is

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6 Yeats also notes the similarity in style between Swedenborg’s scientific journals and his visionary journals: “He considered heaven and hell and God, the angels, the whole destiny of man, as if he were sitting before a large table in a Government office putting little pieces of mineral ore into small square boxes for an assistant to pack away in drawers” (“Swedenborg” 299).

first necessary to qualify the statement made earlier that the distinction between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, is not present in Borges as writer or reader.

While we may assert, as Borges repeatedly does himself, that his admiration of philosophical and theological discourses lay in their aesthetic value, this should not impoverish the aesthetic as mere elegance or literary finery. In the work of Borges the aesthetic—as related to *poesis* and imagination—is a pathway to knowledge. Like Lezama Lima's vision of poetry, in which there is a *gnosis* in the aesthetic, or Blake's "Imagination" or "imaginative energy," which is the true path to the divine, or Corbin's *mundus imaginalis*, in which the secret nature of the divine is revealed, Borges places a strong epistemological value to the imagination, the dreamworld, and the aesthetic.<sup>7</sup> The aesthetic is neither simply linguistic nor simply the sonorous play of words. Arguments themselves can be the index of aesthetic brilliance, typified by Schopenhauer's elegant philosophy. Borges professes an admiration for Blake, emphasizing that "Blake asimismo afirmará que no bastan la inteligencia y la rectitud y que la salvación del hombre exige un tercer requisito: ser un artista" (OC 4: 158). Such a sentiment is strikingly akin to Borges's own *ars poetica*, exemplified in his calm belief in the persistence of literature: "I don't think of life as being pitted against literature. I believe that art is a part of life" (Barnstone 96). Borges's relationship to imagination, to fantasy and to the dreamworld is perhaps the most striking feature of his poetics, is discussed in the majority of his interviews, and is illustrated in so many of his tales. Yet to approach the dreamworld epistemologically is an intriguing endeavor which reveals Borges's kinship with, amongst others, Blake, Corbin and Jung. Kathleen Raine, indeed, whose essay appears alongside Borges's in Lawrence's *Testimony to the Invisible*, emphasizes this path of wisdom: "The ultimate knowledge, according to Blake and Swedenborg, is that the universe is contained in mind—a view to be found also in the Gnostic writings, in the Vedas, and in other spiritually profound cosmologies of the East, but long forgotten in the West with its preoccupation with externality" (Raine 62).

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7 See Mualem.

Blake, it should be remembered, explicitly equated the imaginal world with the eternal, with the space-time the discarnate soul enters after death: “This world of the Imagination is the world of Eternity; it is the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite and Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite & Temporal” (qtd. in Raine 70). Innumerable passages from Borges testify to the power of dreams to grant the dreamer knowledge of further dimensions, landscapes and times. Borges often alludes to the poetic question of Coleridge’s flower retrieved from the dreamworld, and he contemplates whether Chuang Tzu experienced being a butterfly in his dream or whether the butterfly experienced being Chuang Tzu. Most well known are the multiple layers of dream creation in “Las ruinas circulares.” It is therefore striking to note that Swedenborg’s initiation into the heavenly realm lay in his troubled dreams. As is so clear from a reading of any of Borges’s work, the distinctions between fiction and reality, history and myth, fact and artifice, are hazy: “I suppose there is no difference between fact and fiction [...] What is the past but all memory? What is the past but memories that have become myth?” (Barnstone 117), or, to borrow an expression from Lezama Lima: “no hay nada más real que la imaginación” (133). Furthermore, and considering the imagination epistemologically, the question of authenticity of experience is problematic. Borges discusses the tale “El Congreso” in the afterword to *El libro de arena*, suggesting that “el fin quiere elevarse, sin duda en vano, a los éxtasis de Chesterton o de John Bunyan. No he merecido nunca semejante revelación, pero he procurado soñarla” (OC 3: 72). This is paradoxical if we follow the very fluidity of fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, present in Borges. If he has dreamt one up then he *has* been worthy of such a revelation. Upon what principles could a distinction be based, if we judge imagination to be itself experiential? Borges repeatedly emphasizes that dreaming and artistic-poetic-creativity are aspects of the same process:

The essential difference between the waking experience and the sleeping or dreaming experience must lie in the fact that the dreaming experience is something that can be begotten by you, created by you, evolved out of you ... not necessarily in sleep. When you’re thinking out a poem, there is little difference between the fact of being asleep and that of being awake, no? And so they stand for the same thing. If you’re thinking, if you’re in-



venting, or if you're dreaming, then the dream may correspond to vision or to sleep. That hardly matters. (Barnstone 29)

Surely one of the most abiding sensations delivered to the reader of Borges is that reality is fictional and fiction is real. Is he not declaring at every stage, therefore, that we really are in no position to judge so firmly between an event of the imagination and one of empirical experience? Borges, for example, makes no distinction between the experience of reading and the experience of travelling. That is to say, the textual and the meta-textual are epistemologically no different. He declares to Richard Burgin:

I think of reading a book as no less an experience than traveling or falling in love. I think that reading Berkeley or Shaw or Emerson, those are quite as real experiences to me as seeing London, for example. Of course, I saw London through Dickens and through Chesterton and through Stevenson, no? Many people are apt to think of real life on the one side, that means toothache, headache, traveling and so on, and then you have on the other side, you have imaginary life and fancy and that means the arts. But I don't think that that distinction holds water. I think that everything is a part of life. (Burgin 14)

Bioy Casares and Borges dined together regularly, while discussing literature, poetry and metaphysics. One conversation could be recorded by Borges in a recollection; another could be recorded at the beginning of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." It would be a step into a rigid binary pattern of thinking to attempt to distinguish between a factual and a fictional conversation between these two. Both are fantastic, both are textual, both are factual and fictional at the same time. "I don't see how things can be unreal," Borges opined. "I don't see any valid reason why Hamlet, for example, should be less real than Lloyd George" (Burgin 77), "or why Macbeth should be less real than today's newspaper" (85). It is abidingly evident, therefore, that in all matters of human expression, and in whichever system he was contemplating—whether fantastical, poetical, mythological, theological, philosophical, or political—experience is experience whether it derives from physical or imaginal travel. Memory is creative and thus a fiction, and yet the experience of fiction is tangible and real. Why, therefore, does Borges draw such a firm distinction between the *real* experiences of Swedenborg and the *unreal* or *fictional* experiences of Dante? In order to address this question, it is important to focus on Borges's assess-

ment of other writers of mystical vision and eschatology, and in particular, on the presence of doctrine that Borges could perceive looming over them.

Borges reviewed Leslie Weatherhead's *After Death*, and he damns Weatherhead for being a mediocre and almost non-existent writer, for being "estimulado por lecturas piadosas" and for making unconvincing "conjeturas semiteosóficas" (OC 1: 281). Weatherhead's poor writing status betrays an aesthetic poverty that is not only clearly indicative of a wholly unappealing metaphysical vision, but is, furthermore, inauthentic, derivative, and, importantly, non-experiential. At the beginning of his pugnacious review, Borges reasserts the famous declaration of the narrator of "Tlön," that metaphysics is but another branch of fantastic literature. Here he embellishes this with a mention of his own book of fantastic literature, and his guilty omission of the masters of the fantastic genre: "Parménides, Platón, Juan Escoto Erígena, Alberto Magno, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Francis Bradley" (1: 280). He then, as if to confirm his agnostic credentials, compares the fantastic with the religious, mocking the theological discourse that Weatherhead presents:

En efecto, ¿qué son los prodigios de Wells o de Edgar Allan Poe —una flor que nos llega del porvenir, un muerto sometido a la hipnosis— **confrontados** con la invención de Dios, con la teoría laboriosa de un ser que de algún modo es tres y que solitariamente perdura *fuera del tiempo*? ¿Qué es la piedra bezoar ante la armonía preestablecida, quién es el unicornio ante la Trinidad, quién es Lucio Apuleyo ante los multiplicadores de Buddhas del Gran Vehículo, qué son todas las noches de Shahrazad junto a un argumento de Berkeley? He venerado la gradual invención de Dios; también el Infierno y el Cielo (una remuneración inmortal, un castigo inmortal) son admirables y curiosos designios de la imaginación de los hombres. (1: 280)

A beautiful conundrum is thus established. Heaven and Hell derive from imagination, and yet they are nevertheless real. Herein lie his motives for including Swedenborg's angels and devils in *El libro de los seres imaginarios* yet all the while proclaiming the *authenticity* of Swedenborg's visions.<sup>8</sup>

8 One might assume that Borges could well have included a passage from Swedenborg in his *Extraordinary Tales* (1967, first published as *Cuentos breves y extraordinarios* in 1955). As it is, he and Bioy Casares include a brief text from "The False Swedenborg" of 1873. I've not been able to locate this source. It might well be one of their many invented texts.

How *real* are the angels, and can we detect in Borges any attempt—however futile it may be—to separate an empirical angel somehow extrinsic to human imagination from an intrinsic, imaginative angel? Borges's sister, Norah, a painter whose impact on Borges's writing career has now been fairly deeply studied, painted angels (indeed, one of her angel paintings hung in the parlor of Borges's apartment on Maipú [Burgin 100]), and allegedly maintained conversations with angels as a child. Borges develops a strikingly Jungian approach to angels, in that they *are* creatures of the imagination, but that consequently they *are* real. They develop the particular substance of Jung's archetypal beings, in that they belong to the psyche, but that the realm of the psyche extends into transpersonal, timeless dimensions, beyond the control of the individual ego, and therefore operational, as it were, extrinsic to the individual.<sup>9</sup> For Borges, angels, for example, are one more creation of the imagination, but whose persistence in the human imagination grants them some undefined ontological status. A 1926 essay entitled "A History of Angels" describes this perspective.

Here we arrive at the near miracle that is the true motive for this writing: what we might call the survival of the angel. The human imagination has pictured a horde of monsters (tritons, hippogriffs, chimeras, sea serpents, unicorns, devils, dragons, werewolves, cyclops, fauns, basilisks, demigods, leviathans, and a legion of others) and all have disappeared, except angels. Today, what line of poetry would dare allude to the phoenix or make itself the promenade of a centaur? None; but no poetry, however modern, is unhappy to be a nest of angels and to shine brightly with them. I always imagine them at nightfall, in the dusk of a slum or a vacant lot, in that long, quiet moment when things are gradually left alone, with their backs to the sunset, and when colors are like memories or premonitions of other colors. We must not be too prodigal with our angels; they are the last divinities we harbour, and they might fly away. (*The Total Library* 19)<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to note that all the monsters he mentions in this passage later appear in *El libro de los seres imaginarios*, yet he awards a different de-

9 Philemon, for example, was both "real" and "imaginative" for Jung. The distinction is, ultimately, irrelevant. It must also be noted that Borges was a sympathetic reader of Jung: "I've always been a great reader of Jung" (Burgin, *Conversations* 109). He also makes reference to Jung in "Nathaniel Hawthorne" (*Otras inquisiciones* 2: 62), and to Jung's *Psychologie und alchemie* in "Kafka y sus precursores" (2: 88) and in *El libro de los seres imaginarios*.

10 In Spanish, it is in *El tamaño de mi esperanza*.

gree of compassion to angels, derived perhaps from his sister's relationship with them. The hard-lined Kantian logic present in the 1922 essay "La nadería de la personalidad" ("The nothingness of the personality", *The Total Library* 3-10), appears to be able to dismiss angels as creatures of the imagination, yet unlike Kant, this approach would nevertheless permit such imaginary beings to be more real than simple illusions and, furthermore, to be worthy of philosophical speculation.

And yet the paradox runs deeper: he praises Swedenborg's visions yet derides Weatherhead's on the assumption that the former's are genuine while the latter's are merely conforming to dogmatic theology. Borges's assertion of authenticity is itself a clear reflection of his own "free-thinking" or "agnostic" (both terms which he regularly employs) position. His mistrust of Christian doctrine was such that Carlos Cortínez observes it even manifesting in a distrust of the treasured dreamworld, when Borges's mother claims that her dead father had returned to her in a dream to assure her of the existence of God.<sup>11</sup> He unpicks the nature of vision of Swedenborg, and opens (though does not explore) a thorny question that arises regularly in the nebulous scholarship of mysticism: are experiences unique to the individual or are they universal? Are experiences exceptional or culturally conditioned? Or, put in a different way, did Teresa de Ávila encounter Christ, or did she encounter the same "source" or "power" that non-Christian mystics might encounter, but that she interpreted this power as Christ? Yeats, for example, attributes a strong cultural influence upon Swedenborg's own appreciation of the angelic realm: "Swedenborg because he belongs to an eighteenth century not yet touched by the romantic revival feels horror amid rocky uninhabited places, and so believes that the evil are in such places while the good are amid smooth grass and garden walks and the clear sunlight of Claude Lorraine" (*Visions* 303), and he maintains that

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11 "En la entrevista con Carlos Cortínez encontramos, por desgracia, muy sintetizada, aquella famosa conversación que tuvieron Borges con su madre acerca de Dios. 'No recuerdo cómo la conversación derivó hacia las creencias religiosas de cada cual. Entonces ella me declaró su fe con una simplicidad no exenta de dramatismo... me contó un sueño que ella tuvo cuando murió su padre: él se le acercaba, muy fatigado, y le aseguraba, de un modo que no ha podido olvidar, que Dios existe ... Dos o tres veces fue interrumpido por su hijo que oponía razones de su escepticismo. Era paradójico oír a Borges desconfiar de la seriedad de los sueños, para no dejarse convencer por la belleza del relato de su madre. En una de esas, ella sin molestarse pero con la superioridad del creyente lo hizo callar: —¡Deja Georgie, tú no piensas en estas cosas...!'” (Romero 492).

Blake's outlandish mythologies derived from the absence of established doctrine.<sup>12</sup> Raine addresses this perennial question when considering the influence of Swedenborg on Blake: "it may be that we also have to conclude that those gifted with the clear vision of the imaginal world are in essential agreement because describing the same reality" (Raine 67). Borges brushes aside the implications of specific doctrinal mystical experiences: "Swedenborg, como Spinoza o Francis Bacon, fue un pensador por cuenta propia y que cometió un incómodo error cuando resolvió ajustar sus ideas al marco de los dos Testamentos" (OC 4: 155).<sup>13</sup> Quite clearly, for Borges, the aesthetic power of Swedenborg lay in an authentic experience unmediated by doctrine aside from in a few infelicitous moments and despite its Christian clothing, whereas the "mediocre" Weatherhead simply reproduced established dogma. In a similar fashion, Barnstone asks Borges about the Spanish mystics, and about his own mystical experiences:

BARNSTONE: You've been immersed in the writings of the Gnostics, the mystics, in the Kabbalah, the *Book of Splendor*.

BORGES: I've done my best, but I am very ignorant.

BARNSTONE: You have been interested in the mystics.

12 "He was a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand. Had he been a Catholic of Dante's time he would have been well content with Mary and the angels; or had he been a scholar of our time he would have taken his symbols where Wagner took his, from Norse mythology" (174). Borges, it must be recalled, was often reserved about Blake's complex mythologies, claiming: "La obra de Blake es una obra de lectura extraordinariamente difícil, ya que Blake había creado un sistema teológico, pero para exponerlo, se le ocurrió inventar una mitología sobre cuyo sentido no están de acuerdo los comentaristas" (*Borges profesor* 204). He also at one stage calls Blake "generally long-winded and ponderous" (Barnstone 26), and he states that one would need a dictionary of Blake to understand Blake.

13 This is, indeed, a pervasive question. Robert Moss suggests that Swedenborg's religious upbringing was contributory towards his visions: "These encounters [with the dead] also gave him a firsthand understanding of the conditions of the afterlife. Previously, his religious faith had convinced him that the spirit survives physical death. Now he could begin to study *how* it survives" (188). Colin Wilson, meanwhile, pursues a line similar to that of Yeats and Borges: "[Swedenborg] lived in a religious age; his father was a bishop; he had studied the Bible since childhood. It was, therefore, natural that his visions expressed themselves in terms of the Bible. If he had been brought up on the works of Shakespeare or Dante, no doubt his ideas would have expressed themselves in the form of gigantic commentaries on Shakespeare's tragedies or the *Divine Comedy*. The chief obstacle to the modern understanding of Swedenborg is that few of us can take the Bible for granted in the way that our great-grandfathers did. This is a sad reflection on the modern age" (100).

BORGES: At the same time I am no mystic myself.

BARNSTONE: I imagine that you would consider the voyage of the mystics a true experience but a secular one. Could you comment on the mystical experience in other writing, in Fray Luis de León...

BORGES: I wonder if Fray Luis de León had any mystical experience. I should say not. When I talk of mystics, I think of Swedenborg, Angelus Silesius, and the Persians also. Not the Spaniards. I don't think they had any mystical experiences.

BARNSTONE: John of the Cross?

BORGES: I think that Saint John of the Cross was following the pattern of the Song of Songs. And that's that. I suppose he never had any actual experience. In my life I only had two mystical experiences and I can't tell them because what happened is not to be put in words, since words, after all, stand for a shared experience. And if you have not had the experience you can't share it—as if you were to talk about the taste of coffee and had never tried coffee. Twice in my life I had a feeling, a feeling rather agreeable than otherwise. It was astonishing, astounding. I was overwhelmed, taken aback. I had the feeling of living not in time but outside time. It may have been a minute or so, it may have been longer... Somehow the feeling came over me that I was living beyond time, and I did my best to capture it, but it came and went. I wrote poems about it, but they are normal poems and do not tell the experience. I cannot tell it to you, since I cannot retell it to myself, but I had that experience, and I had it twice over, and maybe it will be granted me to have it one more time before I die. (Barnstone 10-11)

Again, his dismissal of “the Spaniards” lies in his sense of their doctrinal adherence. While Borges admires John of the Cross's poetic craft, he nevertheless perceives the same sense of inauthenticity of experience that he does in *Weatherhead*. John of the Cross was merely “following the pattern of the Song of Songs” in the same fashion that *Weatherhead* was merely parroting “*conjeturas semiteosóficas*” (1: 281). Borges's own mystical experiences, as he describes, were unique and personal, purportedly uninspired by textual sources, and consequently inexpressible. Here lies the nub of the paradox. While we are all the products of our influences, and while he repeatedly maintains that all great literature is merely the rearticulation of a few perennial symbols, nevertheless for Borges the mystical experience *by necessity* must be somehow free of influence in order to shine with authenticity. It is my hypothesis that this opinion of authenticity is a smokescreen, and that what really is at stake is not a metaphysical

judgment about the true substance and structure of Heaven, nor of the ontology of angelic beings. Rather, it is Borges's inveterate iconoclasm, his mistrust of doctrine, and his love of heterodoxy, heretics, heresy and heresiarchs.

Doctrine, and its constellation as dogma, was for Borges a denial of individual will and creative liberty. Political doctrine merely entertains people, or, in the case of Juan Domingo and Evita Perón, only entertains the ignorant.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Nazism, its appeal can lead them to outrageous acts of brutality.<sup>15</sup> Philosophical doctrine, he argues, "is really mere guesswork" (Barnstone 111). Theological doctrine, especially if allied to blind faith, naturally and reasonably, leads to great intolerance.<sup>16</sup> Borges even declares that his abiding love for Dante and for the *Divine Comedy* derives from its aesthetics *in spite of* the theology: "Lo que menos me ha interesado en *La divina comedia* es el valor religioso. Es decir, me han interesado los personajes [...] sus destinos, pero todo el concepto religioso, la idea de premios y de castigos, es una idea que no he entendido nunca" (Sorrentino 144). Swedenborg, conversely in Borges's view, underwent journeys into imaginal landscapes of heavens and hells and was so untouched by the pressure of doctrinal adherence that he risked being branded a heretic.

While observing the doctrinal geometry of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, it becomes clear that a central thrust of Borges's veneration for Dante lies, conversely, in his subtle heterodox, even heretical, dimensions. In the *Nueve ensayos dantescos*, Borges elaborates the degree to which Dante pushes the boundaries of orthodoxy to an alarming degree. There are many facets to this reading of Dante, and many areas that Borges investigates are common to exegetic commentaries on the *Comedy*; other areas

14 See "L'Illusion Comique" (*Borges total* 409-11).

15 Recall the oft-quoted statement of the narrator of Tlön: "Hace diez años bastaba cualquier simetría con apariencia de orden —el materialismo dialéctico, el antisemitismo, el nazismo— para embelesar a los hombres. ¿Cómo no someterse a Tlön, a la minuciosa y vasta evidencia de un planeta ordenado? Inútil responder que la realidad también está ordenada" (OC 1: 442).

16 "No church—whether Catholic or Protestant—has ever been tolerant, nor is there any reason for them to be tolerant. If I believe I am in possession of the truth there is no reason for me to be tolerant of those who are risking their own salvation by holding erroneous beliefs. On the contrary, it's my duty to persecute them" (Burgin, *Jorge Luis Borges* 73-74).

are pertinent, so it would appear, only to Borges. Firstly, Borges identifies in almost every passage that he composed on Dante the essential motivation behind Dante's vast poetic cycle: the union not with the godhead but with Beatrice.

Retengamos un hecho incontrovertible, un solo hecho humildísimo: la escena ha sido *imaginada* por Dante. Para nosotros, es muy real; para él, lo fue menos. (La realidad, para él, era que primero la vida y después la muerte le habían arrebatado a Beatriz). Ausente para siempre de Beatriz, solo y quizá humillado, imaginó la escena para imaginar que estaba con ella. Desdichadamente para él, felizmente para los siglos que lo leerían, la conciencia de que el encuentro era imaginario deformó la visión. De ahí las circunstancias atroces, tanto más infernales, claro está, por ocurrir en el empíreo la desaparición de Beatriz, el anciano que toma su lugar, su brusca elevación a la Rosa, la fugacidad de la sonrisa y de la mirada, el desvío eterno del rostro. En las palabras se trasluce el horror: *come pareo* se refiere a *lontana* pero contamina a *sonrire* y así Longfellow pudo traducir en su versión de 1867:

*Thus I implored; and she, so far away,  
Smiled as it seemed, and looked once more at me...*

También *eterna* parece contaminar a *si tornò*. (OC 3: 372)<sup>17</sup>

This immediately evokes a pathetic quality to the cycle that betrays Dante's earthly, human love over the love of the divine.

17 "Enamorarse es crear una religión cuyo dios es falible. Que Dante profesó por Beatriz una adoración idolátrica es una verdad que no cabe contradecir; que ella una vez se burló de él y otra lo desairó son hechos que registra la *Vita nuova*. Hay quien mantiene que esos hechos son imágenes de otros; ello, a ser así, reforzaría aún más nuestra certidumbre de un amor desdichado y supersticioso. Dante, muerta Beatriz, perdida para siempre Beatriz, jugó con la ficción de encontrarla, para mitigar su tristeza; yo tengo para mí que edificó la triple arquitectura de su poema para intercalar ese encuentro. Le ocurrió entonces lo que suele ocurrir en los sueños, manchándolo de tristes estorbos. Tal fue el caso de Dante. Negado para siempre por Beatriz, soñó con Beatriz, pero la soñó severísima, pero la soñó inaccesible, pero la soñó en un carro tirado por un león que era un pájaro y que era todo pájaro o todo león cuando los ojos de Beatriz lo esperaban (*Purgatorio* XXXI, 121). Tales hechos pueden prefigurar una pesadilla; ésta se fija y se dilata en el otro canto. Beatriz desaparece; un águila, una zorra y un dragón atacan el carro; las ruedas y el timón se cubren de plumas; el carro, entonces, echa siete cabezas (*Transformato così'l dificio santo / mise fuor teste...*); un gigante y una ramera usurpan el lugar de Beatriz" (OC 3: 369).



Secondly, this aspect cannot be separated from the equally pathetic envy and regret that Borges identifies in Dante's portrayal of the lovers Paola and Francesco:

Infinitamente existió Beatriz para Dante; Dante, muy poco, tal vez nada, para Beatriz; todos nosotros propendemos, por piedad, por veneración a olvidar esa lastimosa discordia inolvidable para Dante. Leo y releo los azares de su ilusorio encuentro y pienso en dos amantes que el Alighieri soñó en el huracán del segundo círculo y que son emblemas oscuros, aunque él no lo entendiera o no lo quisiera, de esa dicha que no logró. Pienso en Francesca y en Paolo, unidos para siempre en su Infierno (*Questi, che mai da me non fia diviso...*). Con espantoso amor, con ansiedad, con admiración, con envidia. (OC 3: 369)<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, Borges writes with passion of the abiding love and respect that Dante bore for Virgil, and for Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan, and the deep sadness and regret that Dante experienced in acknowledging their banishment to the *nobile castello*.

Dante knows that Virgil is a damned soul, and the very moment that Virgil tells him that he will not be able to accompany him beyond purgatory, Dante feels that Virgil will always be an inhabitant of that "*nobile castello*" where the great shadows of the great men of antiquity dwell, those that through unavoidable ignorance did not accept or could not reach the word of Christ [...] Dante salutes him with the highest epithets and speaks of the great love and the long study to which Virgil's writings have led him, and of their relationship which has always been constant. But Virgil is sad since he knows that he is condemned to the "*nobile castello*," far from salvation and full of God's absence; Dante, on the other hand, will see God, he will be *allowed* to, and he will also be allowed to understand the universe. (Alifano 97)<sup>19</sup>

18 He also reiterates this in *Siete noches*: "esos dos réprobos están juntos, no pueden hablarse, giran en el negro remolino sin ninguna esperanza, ni siquiera nos dice Dante la esperanza de que los sufrimientos cesen, pero están juntos. Cuando ella habla, usa el *nosotros*: habla por los dos, otra forma de estar juntos. Están juntos para la eternidad, comparten el Infierno y eso para Dante tiene que haber sido una suerte de Paraíso" (OC 3: 216).

19 "En el caso de Dante, el procedimiento es más delicado. No es exactamente un contraste, aunque tenemos la actitud filial: Dante viene a ser un hijo de Virgilio y al mismo tiempo es superior a Virgilio porque se cree salvado. Cree que merecerá la gracia o que la ha merecido, ya que le ha sido dada la visión. En cambio, desde el comienzo del Infierno sabe que Virgilio es un alma perdida, un réprobo; cuando Virgilio le dice que

Fourthly, in composing the cycle, and thus acting as judge in condemning Virgil to the absence of God, Dante, in Borges's eyes, was deeply unsettled at his own god-like status.

Otra razón, de tipo técnico, explica la dureza y la crueldad de que Dante ha sido acusado. La noción panteísta de un Dios que también es el universo, de un Dios que es cada una de sus criaturas y el destino de esas criaturas, es quizá una herejía y un error si la aplicamos a la realidad, pero es indiscutible en su aplicación al poeta y a su obra. El poeta es cada uno de los hombres de su mundo ficticio, es cada soplo y cada pormenor. Una de sus tareas, no la más fácil, es ocultar o disimular esa omnipresencia. El problema era singularmente arduo en el caso de Dante, obligado por el carácter de su poema a adjudicar la gloria o la perdición, sin que pudieran advertir los lectores que la Justicia que emitía los fallos era, en último término, él mismo. Para conseguir ese fin, se incluyó como personaje de la *Comedia*, e hizo que sus reacciones no coincidieran, o sólo coincidieran alguna vez en el caso de Filippo Argenti, o en el de Judas, con las decisiones divinas. (OC 3: 344)

Lastly, Borges acknowledges with great respect that Dante himself was torn between the need (and desire) to adhere to orthodoxy, and the desire to operate with poetic, aesthetic and, indeed, metaphysical freedom. In almost all the nine Dantesque essays, and in *Siete noches*, Borges describes the tension apparent in Dante between adhering to doctrine and expressing his own artistic vision. He talks of Dante's "own invention" of the limbo for the pre-Christian elevated souls (the Classical poets):

Para mitigar el horror de una época adversa, el poeta buscó refugio en la gran memoria romana. Quiso honrarla en su libro, pero no pudo entender —la observación pertenece a Guido Vitali— que insistir demasiado sobre el mundo clásico no convenía a sus propósitos doctrinales. Dante no podía, contra la Fe, salvar a sus héroes; los pensó en un Infierno negativo, privados de la vista y posesión de Dios en el cielo, y se apiadó de su miste-

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no podrá acompañarlo más allá del Purgatorio, siente que el latino será para siempre un habitante del terrible *nobile castello* donde están las grandes sombras de los grandes muertos de la Antigüedad, los que por ignorancia invencible no alcanzaron la palabra de Cristo. En ese mismo momento, Dante dice: *Tu, duca; tu, signore; tu, maestro...* Para cubrir ese momento, Dante lo saluda con palabras magníficas y habla del largo estudio y del gran amor que le han hecho buscar su volumen y siempre se mantiene esa relación entre los dos. Esa figura esencialmente triste de Virgilio, que se sabe condenado a habitar para siempre en el *nobile castello* lleno de la ausencia de Dios... En cambio, a Dante le será permitido ver a Dios, le será permitido comprender el universo" (OC 3: 213).

rioso destino [...] En la invención y ejecución de este canto IV Dante urdió una serie de circunstancias, alguna de índole teológica. Devoto lector de la *Eneida*, imaginó a los muertos en el Elíseo, o en una variación medieval de esos campos dichosos [...] *Urgido por razones dogmáticas*, debió situar en el Infierno a su noble castillo. (OC 3: 346-47 italics added)

These central arguments of Borges's appreciation of Dante reveal a similar element of disdain for the doctrinal that we see manifest in his dismissal of the visions of St. John of the Cross and of the eschatology of Weatherhead. Beyond the beauty of the couplets, Borges's aesthetic appreciation of Dante lay, precisely, in this tension between doctrine and originality. We can see, therefore, that while originality is a quality rarely prized elsewhere in Borges, *viz.* his inclusion of other authors's tales in his tales, his recognition that the "Las ruinas circulares" is a rewriting of "El Golem," his admission in the prologue to *El informe de Brodie* that "unos pocos argumentos me han hostigado a lo largo del tiempo; soy decididamente monótono" (2: 399), and his assertion that all great literature is merely the repetition of certain perennial symbols within shifting cultural contexts; nevertheless, in matters of metaphysics and mysticism, originality is a treasured value due to its resistance to doctrine and dogma.

The presence of Dante in Borges has been widely acknowledged. The presence of Swedenborg has not. It is striking, however, to notice the depth of influence of Swedenborg's thought upon Borges.<sup>20</sup> This influence is vis-

20 Rodríguez Risquete enumerates 95 references to Dante in Borges's work, dividing his bibliography into five sections. For my own part, I have identified the following appearances of Swedenborg in Borges, some as critical assessments or biographical studies, others as mere references. The list is doubtless incomplete: *Testigo a lo invisible*, the poem "Emmanuel Swedenborg" (*El otro, el mismo*), the poem "Doomsday" (*Los conjurados*), the poem "Otro poema de los dones" (*El otro, el mismo*), four separate tales of *El libro de los seres imaginarios*, "El espejo de los enigmas" (*Otras inquisiciones*), "Nueva refutación del tiempo" (*Otras inquisiciones*), "La duración del infierno" (*Discusión*), "Historia de la Eternidad" (*Historia de la eternidad*), review "Leslie Weatherhead, *After Death*" (*Discusión*), review "Sir William Barrett's *Personality survives death*" (*Total Library non-fiction*), "La memoria de Shakespeare" (*La memoria de Shakespeare*), "Veinticinco de agosto, 1983" (*La memoria de Shakespeare*), "Un teólogo en la muerte" (*Historia universal de la infamia*), "Un doble de Mahoma" (*Historia universal de la infamia*), "Laprida 1214" (*Atlas*), "Sobre Oscar Wilde" (*Otras inquisiciones*), "Pascal" (*Otras inquisiciones*), "Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw" (*Otras inquisiciones*), "Sobre el *Vathek* de William Beckford" (*Otras inquisiciones*), "Dos interpretaciones de Arthur Rimbaud" (*Textos cautivos*), Prologue to *Xul Solar, Catálogo de obras del Museo* (Borges 1990). For the following

ible not least the inclusion of extracts of Swedenborg's texts in *Historia universal de la infamia* and in *El libro de los seres imaginarios*, but through the adumbration of Swedenborg's visions in so many of Borges's tales, and the manifest affinity to Swedenborg. There is much to elucidate on this, but it falls outside of the remit of this study. Similarly, such considerations must be accompanied with an assessment of Borges's own considerations of the landscape of death. While again here is not the space to elaborate, it is worth explaining that throughout his work, in many facets of his writing, Borges appears pulled by two polarities: the inevitability of oblivion or annihilation and the possibility of continuity. In countless interviews, especially in his later years, he expresses a firm wish for annihilation:

I look forward to being blotted out. But if I thought that my death was a mere illusion, that after death I would go on, then I would feel very, very unhappy. For really, I'm sick and tired of myself. Now, of course if I go on and I have no personal memory of having ever been Borges, then in that case, it won't matter to me; because I may have been hundreds of odd people before I was born, but those things won't worry me, since I will have forgotten them. When I think of mortality, of death, I think of those things in a hopeful way, in an expectant way. I should say I am greedy for death, that I want to stop waking up every morning, finding: "Well, here I am, I have to go back to Borges." (Barnstone 17)

His reading, however, of Plato and other philosophers reveals a curiosity about the soul's persistence after corporeal death, and even the transmigration of souls.<sup>21</sup> The Borges-protagonist of "Delia Elena San Marco", for example, lamenting Delia's loss, declares: "Añoche no salí después de comer y releí, para comprender estas cosas, la última enseñanza que Platón

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interviews, please consult bibliography for full details: Bourne, Salas, Sábado, Barili, Christ, Yates, et al. He tells Miguel Enguidanos at Indiana University in March 1976 that "I also intend to write a book on Swedenborg" (Barnstone 97); and he tells Barnstone: "I would like to write a book on Swedenborg" (109).

21 Of the ill-defined canon of mystical writers, Borges discusses in different texts: Ezekiel (c.622 BCE), Plato (428/427-348/347 BCE), Alexander the Great, Alexander of Macedon (356-323 BCE), Diodorus Siculus (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), Plotinus (c.204-270), St. Paul (c.5-c.67), Alanus de Insulis (also Alain de Lille) (1128-1202), Ramón Llull (1234-1316), Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Teresa de Ávila (1515-1582), Robert Fludd (1574-1637), Jacob Böhme (1575-1624), Angelus Silesius (1624-1677), Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), William Blake (1757-1827), Novalis (1772-1801), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Léon Bloy (1846-1917), G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), Xul Solar (1887-1963), J. W. Dunne (1866-1949).

pone en boca de su maestro. Leí que el alma puede huir cuando muere la carne" (2: 168). There are many tales and poems that demonstrate this tension between "olvido" and afterlife, expressed most succinctly in a brief comment in interview:

In spite of oneself, one thinks. I am almost sure to be blotted out by death, but sometimes I think it is not impossible that I may continue to live in some other manner after my physical death. I feel every suicide has that doubt: Is what I am going to do worthwhile? Will I be blotted out, or will I continue to live on another world? Or as Hamlet wonders, what dreams will come when we leave this body? It could be a nightmare. And then we would be in hell. Christians believe that one continues after death to be who he has been and that he is punished or rewarded forever, according to what he has done in this brief time that was given to him. I would prefer to continue living after death if I have to but to forget the life I lived. (Burgin 240)

The question of faith here arises. Borges's position as agnostic is of crucial concern for us, and it is important to note that for Borges agnosticism was not apathy to spiritual matters; on the contrary, it leads to a greater opening to the numinous: "Being an agnostic means all things are possible, even God, even the Holy Trinity. This world is so strange that anything may happen, or may not happen. Being an agnostic makes me live in a larger, a more fantastic kind of world, almost uncanny. It makes me more tolerant" (qtd. in Shenker).<sup>22</sup>

Faith, in Borges's worldview, is an indication of belief in matters about which we have no knowledge, and thus betrays a limitation of one's imagination. It would seem restrictive, he maintains, to limit oneself to a particular doctrine of life after death unless, as in the case of Swedenborg, one has visited such a realm. His statement that "I have never been worthy of such an experience" is the acknowledgment that in matters metaphysical, he must rely on his reading and his imagination. In both cases, though, no firm conviction can be reached. "There are many speculations about life after death. Swedenborg describes in detail hells and paradises. Dante's

22 Ever mercurial, Borges also recognizes that "agnostic" and "gnostic" are mere user-dependent words. He humorously deflects the somber tone of Barnstone's question: "Returning to the question of a personal god, are you a gnostic? Borges: I am an agnostic. Barnstone: No, a *gnostic*. Borges: Ah yes, I may be. Why not be Gnostics today and agnostics tomorrow? It's all the same thing" (Barnstone 103).

poem is also about hell, purgatory, paradise. Where does this tendency of man come from, to try to imagine and describe something that he cannot possibly know?" (Burgin 247).

In the absence of empirical, experiential evidence, how can we judge Borges's criteria for appraising authenticity to such metaphysical matters of heaven or eschatology? Logic, for example, cannot be employed in such matters. An example of this is that Borges, as mentioned, quotes Flaubert and Claudel in suggesting that Dante would be horrified to see, when dying, that the Otherworld has no resemblance to his poetic vision. Borges also quotes Swedenborg in stating that the dead project a vision of their bidding around them. According to this logic, Dante would justifiably have been able, upon death, to be surrounded by the landscape of his poetic cycle, in the presence of Virgil. Logic is an inappropriate system in such matters. James Lawrence, editor of *Testimony to the Invisible*, seizes this question of credibility, and suggests that for Borges the criteria for judging authenticity lie within a certain aesthetic integrity. So convinced is Lawrence that Borges is convinced by Swedenborg, he goes so far as to claim Borges as one of their own—a Swedenborgian:

Borges professes his profound admiration of Swedenborg's mode of knowing in this essay, and one quickly discerns that he also feels a kindred spirit to the Swedish mystic. Borges declares that he himself is not a mystic, but that mysticism is an important and fascinating subject for him. When the epistemology of the knower is of solid pedigree, he believed, then the ensuing perceptions are the most sublime humanity has known. Borges felt that he shared with Swedenborg the same fundamental objectives; they simply traversed the same terrain in somewhat different ways... Borges believed in Swedenborg's spiritual journeys more profoundly than many artists and poets who have expressed perhaps some admiration or inspiration but who have not been so deeply inclined to explore the same realities with as much conviction and daring as Borges. It is in this sense that Borges is most deeply Swedenborgian. (x-xi)<sup>23</sup>

23 "Swedenborgian" need not mean being a member of any Swedenborgian church. Eugene Taylor, a scholar of Swedenborg and his influence on Emerson and his companions, writes: "Swedenborgianism... refers to a Christian demonination that follows the biblical interpretation of Emanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century scientist and interpreter of religious experience. It can also refer more generally to avid readers of Swedenborg's works, such as the New England transcendentalists, who were not members of the religious movement, but who used Swedenborg's ideas to corroborate their own interior journey toward self-realization" (xvii).

This is a powerful assessment of Borges, and while readers familiar with Borges would smirk at Lawrence's naïveté in assuming that Borges was a *believer* in a particular theological tradition (albeit heterodox), such a reading is nevertheless fully borne out both in the language of Borges and, as mentioned, in the strong presence of Swedenborg in Borges. So what is the nature of this belief? Clearly, as this article has elucidated, there is a paradoxical question at the heart of Borges's reading of mystics. Reality and artifice are indistinguishable. The text and the meta-text are both text. Hamlet is as real as Bioy Casares. This, as established, is an abiding element of Borges. Upon this basis, therefore, an *invented* text of Heaven is as real as a *genuinely experienced* text of Heaven. And upon this basis, despite Borges's acknowledgment that the mystical passage in "The Aleph" was an imitation of mystical texts, it is nonetheless a mystical text.<sup>24</sup> Borges explains the artifice, or the invention, of this passage:

A man in Spain asked me whether the aleph actually existed. Of course it doesn't. He thought the whole thing was true. I gave him the name of the street and the number of the house. He was taken in very easily... That piece gave me great trouble, yes. I mean, I had to give a sensation of endless things in a single paragraph. Somehow, I got away with it.

*Q: Is that an invention, the aleph, or did you find it in some reference?*

No. I'll tell you, I was reading about time and eternity. Now eternity is supposed to be timeless. I mean, God or a mystic perceives in one moment all of our yesterdays, Shakespeare says, all the past, all the present, all the future. And I said, why not apply that, well, that invention to another category, not to time, but to space? Why not imagine a point in space wherein the observer may find all the rest. I mean, who invented space? And that was the central idea. Then I had to invent all the other things, to make it into a funny story, to make it into a pathetic story, that came afterwards. My first aim was this: in the same way that many mystics have talked of eternity... that's a big word, an eternity, an everness. And also neverness; that's an awful word. Since we have an idea of eternity, of foreverness in

24 Borges himself sidestepped the question of his own mystical nature by allying mysticism to philosophy, and therefore suggesting that his interests are "merely" artistic: "Many people have thought of me as a thinker, as a philosopher, or even as a mystic... People think that I've committed myself to idealism, to solipsism, or to doctrines of the cabala, because I've used them in my tales. But really I was only trying to see what could be done with them" (Burgin 79). Giskin, however, draws a more forthright line by suggesting that the four features of the mystical encounter as defined by William James are present in Borges, in particular in the Aleph; *ergo* Borges is a mystic.

time, why not apply the same idea to space, and think of a single point in space wherein the whole of space may be found? I began with that abstract idea, and then, somehow, I came to that quite enjoyable story. (Burgin *Jorge Luis Borges* 212)

If we follow the Borges who maintains that the London of Chesterton or Dickens is as real as the “real” London and that “there is no difference between fact and fiction” (Barnstone 117), then the Aleph, “the Spaniards”, Dante and Weatherhead are all as authentic as Swedenborg. But if we follow the Borges who maintains that John of the Cross is simply parodying the Song of Songs, and that Fray Luis de León is simply doctrinally-inspired, then we have a separate order of hermeneutics, and, despite its numinous glow, the Aleph is simply an imitation and is consequently inauthentic. The judgment, as Lawrence suggests, lies in the “solid pedigree” of the epistemology of the author and the text, not in the experience *qua* experience.<sup>25</sup>

To complete the circle of this argument, therefore, we can maintain that the appreciation of mimesis—of a *real* description of experience unbiased by artifice—is in essence an aesthetic judgment. Borges as reader of mystics does not require empirical proof of their experiences; what he requires is persuasion that the vision is genuine. If Swedenborg is convincing, it is because, for Borges, the texts are suitably persuasive, precisely through their lack of rhetorical features, artifice and doctrine. Ultimately it is a question of style. Borges sums this up succinctly in his description of the mimetic style of his friend and mystic Xul Solar: “I once asked Xul how he defined his own painting, and he told me that he considered himself a Realist painter, since the things he painted were what he saw in his visions” (Alifano 120). Thus the riddle unfolds. Realism, for Borges, is a fiction, and yet realism, for Borges, is fully operational in the peculiar and perplexing theory of mimesis of the imagination. Swedenborg, for Borges, is a Realist of the Fantastic.

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<sup>25</sup> A colleague of mine made this clear to me, stating that reading the paragraph in “The Aleph” in which the narrator attempts to vocalize the vision of the Aleph affected her in a profound and “spiritual” manner.



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