

ZOROASTRIAN AND ZURVANITE SYMBOLISM IN  
"LAS RUINAS CIRCULARES"

*Mac Williams*

*Mind, which is the keenest of all things incorporeal, has for its body fire, the keenest of all the material elements. Mind is the maker of things, and in making things it uses fire as its instrument.*

*Corpus Hermeticum, ca. 3rd-4th century AD*

Hans Georg Gadamer says "we can understand a text only when we've understood the question to which it is an answer" (370). Borges first published his short story, "Las ruinas circulares," in *Sur* (no. 75) in Buenos Aires in December, 1940. It was later included in *El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan* (1941) and finally in *Ficciones* (1944). "Las ruinas" tells the story of a magician who arrives at an abandoned temple and sets about the task of dreaming up a son. The story refers to the temple as belonging to a god that "no recibe honor de los hombres" (OC 1: 451). The fire God grants the magician's wish with the caveat that the magician's son be given to the fire God so that "alguna voz" will glorify him in another temple (453). The magician agrees to the fire God's terms, yet he worries that the son's apparent imperiousness to fire will be the key to the son's realization that he does not exist like other men, for no mother gave birth to him. He exists as the dream of another, and although he seemingly thinks and acts independently of his father the magician, his being depends on his father's dream and an investment in him by a long-forgotten deity. After the son's departure, the magician sees that fire approaches to consume the temple and him with it. Yet,

instead of fleeing from the fire, he does not move and is shocked to find that the flames do not devour him but caress him. At this moment he realizes that he too is the dream of another.

As a starting point from which to examine the historicity of the text, I open with the principal reference to Zoroastrianism:

[...] pero a los pocos días nadie ignoraba que el hombre taciturno venía del Sur y que su patria era una de las infinitas aldeas que están aguas arriba, en el flanco violento de la montaña, donde el idioma zend no está contaminado de griego y donde es infrecuente la lepra. (451)

The “idioma zend” spoken by the magician refers to the ancient Zend language of the Zoroastrians in which they recorded their religious beliefs about their creator God, Ahura Mazda (sometimes written, “Ormuzd”), in sacred texts known as the *Zend-Avesta*. The story takes its cues from the ancient Zoroastrian faith, particularly the predestination-tinged so-called Zurvanite Heresy, contextualizing Zoroastrian free will doctrines along with possible doubts about the nature of their existence as creations of their God, Ahura Mazda. The story constitutes a broad encapsulation of both faith in God and the nagging fear, doubt, and skepticism surrounding individual existence inherent in all mankind.

The presence of Zoroastrian symbolism in the text allows for (at least) two possible readings. One interpretation relies on the story’s Zoroastrian subtext to construct a deft parable of skepticism concerning the nature of human existence. It addresses the underlying existential dilemmas of the magician protagonist, which are the eternal questions of whether each individual owes his or her existence and actions to a higher power, of whether the independence of individual free will is illusory or not. The other interpretation offered herein will investigate how the story constitutes an epistle to the Zoroastrian faithful that there is more to life than acting out the capriciousness of a detached creator — that human life has meaning and purpose beyond biological imperatives for species survival, that faith in God (Ahura Mazda) is necessary to accomplish God’s will and find happiness in mortality and the afterlife. This analysis will not try to prove one interpretation over

another, nor will it privilege or upbraid either one. Rather, it will show that the text lends itself well to both readings, and that by virtue of its themes, the text is truly inexhaustible.

The only instances of scholars approximating a possible Zoroastrian subtext in "Las ruinas circulares" are in the "Notas" section of Emir Rodríguez Monegal's Borges anthology, *Ficcionario*, and in Didier Jaén's book, *Borges's Esoteric Library*. Jaén only makes reference to a Zend language in passing; he notes that its presence in the text "attests to its remoteness in northeast Persia or Old Iran" (56) and he takes pains to mention the many belief systems practiced by the inhabitants of these lands through the millennia, including fire worship, Dravidian, Vedic, and Zoroastrian beliefs. He concludes his examination of the text's religious symbolism by saying that these symbols give the story "a remote and ancient context" and he moves on to explore other symbolism which "all contribute to Borges's essential purpose of undermining the importance of the individual self or personality" (59).

Emir Rodríguez Monegal sees the story as being inspired by the same philosophical fiction that Nietzsche used in *Also Sprach Zarathushtra* (*Ficcionario* 449). Rodríguez Monegal hints at the Persian aspects of the story, but he never elaborates on how they might pertain to Zoroastrianism when he says:

Borges cuenta aquí la historia de un hombre que quiere inventar un hijo, y del horror con que descubre que él también fue inventado por un tercero. Al aprovechar un ambiente estilizadamente persa y la doctrina de la adoración del fuego, Borges crea una suerte de fantasía arqueológica que disimula un horror primordial a la paternidad que lo persigue desde su infancia. (449-50)

However, in another article titled "Symbols in Borges's Work," Rodríguez Monegal deemphasizes the Persian details of the story and writes, "a magician from India decides to dream a man in order to insert him into reality," and thereafter focuses on the relationship of this story to Borges's two poems "Ajedrez" and "El Golem" (138). The change from Persia to India invokes an entirely different pantheon of gods and completely changes the symbolism of the story when taken from a non-dualistic polytheistic point of view.

"Las ruinas" has been of particular interest to Borges scholars concerned with topics such as human nature, ontology, the golem legend, and the Cabbala. Stephen Soud, for example, claims "there is general scholarly agreement that 'The Circular Ruins' represents a recasting of the golem legend" (742). His view of the story is that the magician's creation of a son puts the magician in direct competition with the deity because it "re-enacts the primal moment of divine creation" (742). Donald Shaw views the story as a "parable of skepticism" and a further installment of the theme of the impossible task in Borges (26, 29). He writes that the story embraces the idea that reality is an illusion, yet unlike Calderón's *La vida es sueño* and Unamuno's *Niebla*, which "postulate ... a true reality (the divine mind) behind the illusion which we call the real, Borges leaves no such doorway open" (26). Finally Saúl Sosnowski sees the story as demonstrating that "el poder creativo que le es adjudicado al lenguaje, implica que su utilización entraña riesgos de vida o muerte," something that the magician finds out at the story's end (89).

Zoroastrianism, as a complex and ancient religion, may seem mysterious because of its unfamiliarity and relative obscurity to many contemporary readers. This strangeness may, in fact, be part of Borges's intent in choosing Zoroastrianism as a frame of reference instead of other, more familiar religious creeds and mythologies. However, to appreciate the parallels and to understand Borges's references to Zoroastrian mythology more fully demands some cursory knowledge of the history and tenets of the religion. The following section will touch upon the history and mythologies of Zoroastrianism in order to provide the context out of which the subsequent analysis of Borges's stories is derived.

#### ZOROASTRIANISM

Scholarly consensus suggests that Zoroastrianism originated on the Asian steppes between 1400-1200 BC among Indo-Iranian peoples and flourished for centuries in the lands surrounding the Caspian Sea region (Boyce 3). Previous to its founding, the Indo-Iranian peoples had long revered fire as a life giver. Zoroastrianism evolved from these cultic beliefs into a creed-based religion

that Zoroaster claimed to have received from Ahura Mazda, the supreme benevolent creator. Its adherents believe that fire represents the essence of Ahura Mazda, and they venerate it as his earthly symbol. As other cultures have come into contact with Zoroastrians, many have incorrectly assumed that this veneration signifies adoration. However, fire is not worshipped. Fire is not Ahura Mazda; fire is his proxy, his symbol, a representation of his power and goodness.

The ancestral homeland of Zoroastrians, especially the petroleum-rich Baku Springs region of modern Azerbaijan, has numerous combustible petroleum and natural gas deposits near the surface of the ground. Anciently, due to various causes (e.g., lightning) these springs could become ignited. When this happened, given the vast fuel reservoirs underground, the flames burned unquenchably. The ancients saw these fires as the reification of Ahura Mazda's qualities. It is not hard to imagine how people could marvel at and venerate an endless flame that needed no fuel. This veneration evolved into ritual, and fire temples, typically built in a circle, were constructed around these natural furnaces as a way to revere Ahura Mazda by protecting the sacred flame from impurities (Aliyev 22).

In the fourth century B.C. the Zoroastrian faith enjoyed power and spiritual authority in the Achaemenian Empire, but in 311 B.C. Alexander the Great invaded Asia Minor (Boyce 78). Alexander's armies looted the fire temples, killed many of their priests, and spread Hellenistic culture over the entire region. The narrator's mention that the Zend language was not contaminated by Greek implies that the story takes place during the Seleucid Empire. During this two and a half century foreign occupation, the fire temples fell into ruin, just like the one the magician finds when he exits his canoe and steps into the "fango sagrado." Obviously, the Macedonian conquerors brought with them the cultural contamination of their language and their gods. Yet, from clues in the text of "Las ruinas circulares" one may assume that the priest hails from a rugged isolated place where the invaders' pagan culture could not infect his faith.<sup>1</sup> While there was never any direct in-

<sup>1</sup> Thinking of the narrator's description of the mage's home as the "flanco violento

teraction between native Zend speakers and the Greeks, we may intuit that the reference to Greek contamination stems more from Greek cultural concepts and religion than from actual linguistic corruption. It is noteworthy that the story takes place in a space untainted by Greek influences, yet seems to mimic the concept of the Platonic—or Great—Year, a cyclical measurement of time constituting around 25,000 years, with even periods of ascending and descending civilization, light and dark ages (Cruttenden xix-xx). This corresponds with the decaying ruins (dark age) and the creation of the son (light age). The opening paragraph of the text references all of this information, thus engendering a rich historicity on which partly to base an interpretation.

The relationship between Fire, father, and son in “Las ruinas” parallels the doctrines of Zurvanite Zoroastrianism. The *Avesta* tells that Ahura Mazda (creator god) and Anra Mainyu (Ahriman, the god of evil) were twins. Sometime during the Achaemenian Empire (559 BC-330 BC) the magi (the Zoroastrian priestly class) began to speculate that if Ahura Mazda and Anra Mainyu were twins, this would necessitate a father. By the time the Sassanid Empire (226 AD-651 AD) came to power this belief had evolved into a hypostatized father of the twins called Zurvan (Duchesne 98). Zurvan, meaning “time” in Avestan, was Time personified and the Zurvanites believed that Zurvan “did not merely provide the framework for events but was actually in control of them, hence a sentient being” (Boyce 68). Mary Boyce, the foremost Western scholar of Zoroastrianism, explains the most common version of the procreation of the twins by Zurvan as follows:

Before Ahuramazda was born Zurvan began to doubt his own powers to beget a worthy son, and from this doubt Anra Mainyu (Ahriman) was engendered and came first into the world, a black and hideous creature who horrified his sire. Naturally this myth gave scope

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de la montaña” applied to the meaning of Zagros, the possible root of the name is the Greek word “*Zagreus*” meaning “stormy.” In the ancient Avestan language the name “Za-G’R” means “great land.” The present day Zoroastrian stronghold of Yazd in Iran is an example of the isolated mountain home that invading armies ignored.

for further elaboration (in whose womb, for instance, had the twins been conceived?). The heresy also opened the way for philosophical reflections on the power of time and hence on predestination. (68)

Other sources indicate that for one thousand years Zurvan offered sacrifices to have a son who would be the world's creator, and when he pondered whether he would be successful, he engendered both of the twins, meaning that merely thinking about them created them (Boyd and Crosby 569-70). Modern Zoroastrians call this belief a heresy because of the emphatic statements by Zoroaster that Ahura Mazda was the Supreme Deity, self-existent and eternal (Boyce, "Orthodoxy" 15). However great the extent and reach of this claim, it did not create a schism in the religion, because aside from the belief that Zurvan was the creator of Ahura Mazda, all other doctrines were similar, and believers on both sides of the debate would have used the same scriptures, worshipped in the same fire temples, and uttered the same oaths and prayers (15-16). Nevertheless, in Zoroastrianism the notions of free will (Ahura Mazda) and divine control (Zurvan) existed previous to the great Occidental debates, with both sides using scripture and reason to argue their sides.

Fire in the story is a spherical God, alluded to as "ese múltiple dios [que] le reveló que su nombre terrenal era Fuego" (OC 1: 453). Zoroastrians hold strict beliefs about keeping all fire pure; they keep one continuously burning in order to symbolize the eternal nature of Ahura Mazda (Writer 62; Carnoy 17).<sup>2</sup> Boyce explains that Ahura Mazda forms a heptad with six other Amesha Spentas ("Holy Immortals," including the God of fire, Asha Vahishta) and other lesser Yazata spirits ("Beings worthy of worship"). These he created so that they would in turn help him with the creation of the Earth—the Amesha Spentas' relationship with Ahura Mazda has been described as a torch lighting six other torches (Boyce 21).

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<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that fire itself is not worshipped, but it is merely an object of veneration much like a Catholic crucifix. It represents the thing being worshipped which cannot be seen, barring theophany, a visible manifestation of a deity.

Zoroastrians believe that “man himself with his intelligence and power of choice, belongs especially to Ahura Mazda” (Boyce 23-24). Zoroaster had his first vision of Ahura Mazda one spring morning as he went to fetch some water from a river for a ceremony. By wading into the river, he had made himself ritually pure, “emerging from the pure element water in the freshness of a spring dawn,” and therefore worthy to enter the presence of Ahura Mazda and lesser gods “before whom ‘he did not see his shadow upon the earth, owing to their great light’” (19). In an interesting parallel, at the beginning of “Las ruinas”, the magician emerges, we may assume purified, from a river next to a burned-out temple dedicated to the God of fire. Later on, the magician protagonist shares a similar experience with Zoroaster, when he is encircled by a fire which does not cause him pain, for he stands in the presence of the “great light” that is the fire God Asha Vahishta, who is in turn a symbol and creation of Ahura Mazda:

The doctrine of the six Holy Immortals is fundamental to Zoroaster’s teachings, and has far-reaching spiritual and ethical consequences, since these Beings hypostatize qualities or attributes of Ahura Mazda himself, and can in their turn (if rightly sought and venerated) bestow these upon men. (Boyce 22)

When the magician pays proper homage to the most frequently mentioned Amesha Spenta in the *Zend-Avesta*, Asha Vahishta, who “pervades the other creations, and through the sun, controls the seasons,” he is endowed with the power of Ahura Mazda to create life—a divine attribute accessible to him via Asha Vahishta and his reverence and respect of fire (23).

By nature of this transfer of divine power to a mortal, fire plays a pivotal role in the story, for the magician enlists the fire God’s help to quicken his son. His dreaming formulates the idea, but the fire God places the breath of life in the son. He now shares a hand in the creation of life and with this awesome power comes a further responsibility, for every Zoroastrian:

Has the duty not only to cherish the six lesser creations, but also to watch over his own physical and moral well-being, and to care for his fellow-men, since each of them is likewise the special creature



of God. He is the chief of the creations, but he is bound to the other six by the link of a shared purpose, for all Spenta creation is striving for a common goal, man consciously, the rest by instinct or nature, for all were brought into existence for this one end, namely the utter defeat of evil. (Boyce 24)

The most obvious way that man has been given the power to create life is through procreation, a practice given quotidian holiness through a very sarcastic filter in Borges's story "La secta del fénix." The reluctance of the magician in "Las ruinas" to employ his mortal power of procreation according to the rites of the Cult of the Phoenix strikes the reader as odd, for the magician apparently lacks this ability or refuses to use it. This reluctance only serves to further mark his doubtful free will and existence.

In "Las ruinas" procreation suffers from the absence of the female to such an extent that it exists without pleasure, merely as a procreative act, a means to an end. The mother, the woman, does not exist, and this absence addresses the religious view of sex as sinful; neither the woman, nor the magician, may enjoy sex, because to do so trivializes the sacred and divine nature of the creation of life—a seriousness that the story fully embraces (Woscoboinik 55).<sup>3</sup> The mother's absence echoes the Zurvanite problematic regarding who bore Ahura Mazda and Anra Mainyu if Zurvan were the only god in existence (Boyce 68).<sup>4</sup>

Holiness and purity of sacred things form a key aspect of Zoroastrian worship. Water, dirt, air and fire are pure and should be kept pure at all costs. In fact, water is so considered so pure that something unclean should first be thoroughly washed in cow urine before allowing any contact with regular water. Fire however is revered as the purest thing of all; it may not be used for burning trash or purifying any unclean thing. Rather, only clean

<sup>3</sup> In Borges's story "Ulrica" we find a sexual encounter between two people that occurs in a dream. "Sex is a worthy pursuit, Borges appears to be saying, so long as it occurs in a dream" (Carter 18).

<sup>4</sup> Even though many religions, especially Abrahamic ones, do not necessarily require a womb in order to accomplish divine creation, the Zurvanites often questioned in whose womb the twins gestated. For example, according to all three major branches of Abrahamic religions, Adam was born *ex pulvis*.

dry wood or tinder may be placed in flames (Boyce 43-46). These purity laws allow the believer to focus on striving towards the elimination of the unclean creations of Anra Mainyu from the world. The earth too is holy and the “fango sagrado” mentioned in the opening paragraph of the story conjures images of clay and dust present in the *menog*, or unorganized matter, of Zoroastrian and Jewish (chaos) creation myths. The veneration of dust and clay in these myths also manifests itself in the Zoroastrian practice of not allowing the corruptible dead flesh to come into contact with the holy creative substance of the earth. Herodotus wrote that the Persians (Zoroastrians) did not bury their dead, but exposed their bodies to the elements and eventually buried their bones in ossuaries; this they did in order to keep the earth pure for the procreation of future generations, a belief still practiced by the Zoroastrian Parsees of Mumbai, India, on their Towers of Silence (Boyce 63).

Circles in the text advert to a central tenet of Zoroastrianism, the “...doctrine of the Three Times—Creation, Mixture, Separation—[which] makes history in a sense cyclical...” (Boyce 26). When Ahura Mazda accomplished creation, he did it in two phases. The first time he brought all things into being in a disembodied state called “menog” or “spiritual, immaterial.” Then he gave it all physical or “getig” existence (25). The getig state gave a creation a solid and sentient form, but it also brought about hardship because a getig existence allowed attacks by Anra Mainyu. This is called the Mixture, when the perfect creation was sullied by evil. Zoroastrians believe that mankind is still in the Mixture, and only at the Separation will evil be utterly destroyed, restoring all to its perfect state. In a like manner, the circular shape of the temple parallels not only the actions and existence of the magician, but also the form and organization of the story. The narrator tells the story in a cyclical way, with different phases used to show the repeating hand of fate on the magician (Shaw 28).

“Las ruinas” mimes the Three Times doctrine via the narrator’s division of the story into three cyclical phases: Creation/youth, Mixture/maturity, and Separation/death. The opening phase consists of the magician’s attempts to create a son. He does

not know how to accomplish his goal, he only knows that he has the desire to do so. Initially, he fails in his task, a common occurrence in youth due to inexperience. Next, he dreams of a room full of students, but they are just vague faces that never challenge his teachings and have no true thoughts of their own; this again refers to youth and immaturity. This disappointment with his creations reminds one of Zurvan's disappointment after he sees Anra Mainyu instead of the son he had hoped to engender, Ahura Mazda. The story's beginning mimics the Creation division of the Three Times doctrine (Boyce 68).

The magician then forgets his failures through insomnia (for they are dreams) just as Zurvan destroys his initial failed creation. This marks the second phase of the story, Mixture/maturity. He decides to purify himself and devote himself anew after making offerings to planetary gods and by pronouncing "las sílabas lícitas de un nombre poderoso" and then going to sleep (453). His prayer to the "dioses planetarios" may have been the words to Yasna 16:4 from the *Avesta*:

Yea, we worship the Creator *Ahura Mazda* and the *Fire*, Ahura Mazda's son, and the good waters which are Mazda-made and holy, and the resplendent sun of the swift horses, and *the moon* with the seed of cattle (in his beams); and *we worship the star Tishtrya*, the lustrous and glorious. (Darmesteter 256) [my emphasis]

Tishtrya is the God of rain, agriculture, and victory over witches. Rain brings life and Tishtrya is a life giver (Boyce 73). Fire burns the steppes, opens seeds, rejuvenates the soil by releasing nutrients biologically locked in inedible plant life, and coupled with rain, makes the steppes green again. It would only be natural for a Zoroastrian to beseech both Fire and Rain's help because they work symbiotically. The irony in the invocation of various gods is that the magician would thereby depend on the involvement of multiple gods to accomplish his goal. He thus further dilutes his adoration of one deity and simultaneously depends on the interest in him and his son by all of them, making his task all the more logistically difficult. However, the God that answers his prayers is Fire, and apparently not the planetary gods.

Now wiser and more mature after having tried and failed, before starting his new project he purifies himself (again) in the river before getting down to the heart of the matter. Instead of focusing on the whole, the magician turns his attention to the parts. He spends a month visualizing every single atom of his son's heart. Once he achieves perfection, he sets about dreaming the other organs — with the individual hairs being the most daunting of all the body parts to flesh out. After finishing, he invokes the power of the God of fire to bring his son to life; the magician has fulfilled his procreative quest. Once the child awakens, the magician enters the third and final stage of life, the phase in which everything that he has believed and created begins to crumble before him. His son leaves, and he receives news that a man, impervious to fire, is gaining fame in a place to the North. Ultimately he realizes that he is being dreamed by someone else, and that his passage through the Three Times — creation, mixture, and separation — has already occurred.

#### FAITH AND DOUBT

Zoroastrianism has no salvation for someone without faith (Boyce 35-36). While the magician in "Las ruinas" might not possess the gnosis of how and why the universe functions, his faith in Ahura Mazda should be sufficient to merit a minimum of divine meddling or influence in his affairs. The magician keeps his son instead of destroying him, because the magician deems him to be a good creation, possessed of the divine spark, capable of faith. At work here is a commentary on the role of faith for a mortal creation, and the completion of divine promises. However, faith can be a stumbling block for it is unprovable and carries with it blessings, promises, problems, and doubts.

Filiberto, in Carlos Fuentes's short story "Chac Mool," purchases what he thinks is a statue of the Mayan god Chac, not realizing that he has purchased and brought home *the* Chac. That story would argue that any representation of Chac is part of Chac. On the contrary, striking a match and seeing a flame does not constitute a theophany to a Zoroastrian, but a way of invoking Ahura Mazda's power. In "Las ruinas" the God of fire never ap-

pears to the magician while he is awake, indicative of the rare occurrence of theophany and the faith requirement found in so many religions. Faith is the firm belief in something which is unproven, even unprovable. Because seeing God in the flesh would constitute actual knowledge of the existence of God, if one has knowledge, there can be no faith, which Zoroastrianism requires (Hinnells 63-65).

The magician creates a son through his faith in the fire God, and then later bequeaths him as a Nazarite-type child to convert others to glorify the power of Fire. Two things attest to the assertion that the magician has faith in the fire God and not knowledge: 1) the fire God only speaks to the magician in dreams, he never appears to him when he is awake; and 2) Zoroastrianism teaches of a life previous to this one in which all souls were spirits. Yasnas 44 & 45 of the *Zend-Avesta* hint that no soul would remember having been with Ahura Mazda previous to this life as a condition of coming to this world; therefore, the magician's knowledge of his own existence remains tenuous because his vision is clouded, just as he removed the knowledge of his two years tutelage from his son's memory.<sup>5</sup> The fire God is the one entity who knows the secret to the mystery of the son's life and only the fire God could reveal the true nature of the magician's thaumaturgical creation, and presumably of the magician's own creation. The mage would therefore be functioning off hope and faith in the fire God rather than any knowledge.

Worshippers who prostrate themselves before and sacrifice to an unseen deity epitomize faith in divinity. The faith requirement of religion can be problematic to a non-believer. Typically, a religion requires that practitioners offer sacrifices which produce few, if any, tangible benefits to the devotee. In return for their sacrifice, what they often receive are intangible spiritual gifts. Like any person of faith, the magician struggles between venerating the God

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<sup>5</sup> Yasna 44 contains a series of questions by Zarathustra to Ahura Mazda and Yasna 45 contains Ahura Mazda's answers. While the forgetting of the pre-earthly life is never explicitly mentioned, the questions that Zarathustra asks clearly indicate that he has forgotten any memory of his life previous to this one (Taraporewala).

that he never sees while awake, and doubting his own existence and relevance in reality. Sometimes the very faithful are blessed with miracles, but that still falls far short of theophany. Therefore, the stumbling block of faith is that the typical believer must wait until death to know if the effort was in vain.

Faith requires sacrifice, and the magician clearly shows great faith in the fire God, because his son was brought to life. His sacrifice is sending his son far off to proselytize for the fire God. He then sacrifices his life to the fire God when the flames come. This idea is reminiscent of the end of the one page story by Borges from *Elogio de la sombra* called "His End and His Beginning." The narrator briefly relates how the protagonist begins to perceive that people at his office seem to know that he is dead; slowly, the reality of his world begins to crumble:

Las voces que había oído eran ecos; los rostros, máscaras; los dedos de su mano eran sombras, vagas e insustanciales sin duda, pero también queridas y conocidas. (OC 2: 393)

Much like the magician's realization that he owes his existence to God, the man in "His End" comes to realize that all of the horror he feels is merely a reflection of the new state of his reality. Ultimately he realizes that "desde su muerte había estado siempre en el cielo" and in spite of his terror he realizes "con alivio" that someone else created him, that he can trust heaven more than mortality because he has awakened to the reality of his station and accepted it (393).

Another demonstration of the magician's sufficient faith in the fire God is when "el incendio concéntrico" comes to destroy the temple yet again; we read:

Las ruinas del santuario del dios del fuego fueron destruidas por el fuego. En un alba sin pájaros el mago vio cernirse contra los muros el incendio concéntrico. Por un instante, pensó refugiarse en las aguas, pero luego comprendió que la muerte venía a coronar su vejez y a absolverlo de sus trabajos. Caminó contra los jirones de fuego. Éstos no mordieron su carne, éstos lo acariciaron y lo inundaron sin calor y sin combustión. (454-55)

That the flames caress him without heat or burning him could be argued to evoke the salvation and eternal rest in the afterlife that awaits the Zoroastrian who seeks to be righteous in this life and abhors evil in all of its forms. Since fire symbolizes Ahura Mazda, some of the strictest Zoroastrian commandments concern showing reverence for and maintaining the purity of fire. Therefore, when the magician chooses not to run to the river when the flames come, he indicates that he finds himself pure enough to enter the fire; he shows his faith that his presence will not sully his God's essence. In short, he is pure, worthy, and righteous.

People who have faith in any creator God (in this case, Fire) have to come to terms with the belief that they too owe their existence to the work of another. However, the nature of this existential debt is the source of endless debate. For example, one could argue that just because the magician created his son by thinking of him, he does not need to think for his son. He has to teach him how to behave, but the son is still able to think for himself, especially since he leaves his father with all recollection of his two year pupillage wiped clean from his memory.

The magician learns that his son has achieved renown for his apparent imperviousness to fire, meaning that fire, an emanation of divinity, holds the key by which his son may learn the nature of his own vicarious creation and lack of independent existence. If Fire created the son, then the son is beholden to Fire for his existence, whether he realizes or even acknowledges that debt. The magician worries that his son will discover his true nature, all the while never supposing that he too suffers the same fate. The fire God destroys the ruins at the end of the story just as he had done at some unknown point previous to the magician's arrival, as evidenced in the quote "ese redondel es un templo que devoraron los incendios antiguos" (*OC* 1: 451). Thus, Fire is the means by which the magician becomes aware of his own lack of existence because the flames at the end do not consume him. Paradoxically then, the very God the magician adores, worships, and sacrifices to is also the selfsame annihilator of the magician.

Dio Chrysostom described a secret myth about Zoroaster taught to the magi:

This man [Zoroaster], according to the account of the Persians, through the zeal for wisdom and righteousness withdrew from the rest of men to live by himself in a certain mountain; a great fire then fell down from heaven and set the mountain on fire so that it burned continuously. Accordingly, the king accompanied by the most notable of the Persians, drew near to it prompted by a desire to pray to the God. The man came out of the fire unscathed and appeared before them and graciously bade them be of good cheer and to offer certain sacrifices since the God had come to that place. (qtd. in Rose 46)

This myth is suggestive of the final scene of the story when the magician is surrounded by the flames, but is not harmed because of his unexpressed faith in the fire God who had “come to that place.” The mage’s faith wavers for a brief moment when he thinks about seeking refuge in the water, but his faith conquers his fear, and he is taken into the embrace (the flames “lo acariciaron”) of his God (455). Although he owes his existence to Ahura Mazda dreaming him up, he does seem to control himself as a human entity with free agency over his own actions. He could have run to the water, yet he chooses not to do so. Whereas his free will appears to be illusory at the end of the story as he begins to realize the true nature of his existence, at the moment that the flames consume him, just prior to his realization, he seems able to make a choice. Whether that choice was made for him by an “otro” or of his own volition creates a perfect ending to the story, but not an end to the debate surrounding the nature of individual existence.

It would be appropriate to say that a human being is Ahura Mazda’s most potent weapon in the struggle against evil. By that standard, the magician’s efforts to create a son are righteous deeds. If he has free will, he chooses to create a son in dreams with supernatural help. However, in a Zurvanite reading, when he says, “Ese proyecto mágico había agotado el espacio entero de su alma; si alguien le hubiera preguntado su propio nombre o cualquier rasgo de su vida anterior, no habría acertado a responder,” he cannot explain why he feels compelled to “soñar un hombre” (451). As Zurvan controls him, he is an automaton, a *cogito vacío*, acting out a plan that his God Zurvan, in the style of Calvin’s conception of free will, has predetermined for him.



According to Zoroastrian theology, Ahura Mazda created mankind and gave us all free will and the ability to decide our own fate (Boyce 25-27). This belief contrasts starkly with the skeptics' view of the magician's apparently illusory free will. To the skeptic, since the mage exists only as the dream of another, his actions, thoughts, beliefs, and even dreams, are not his own, even if they actually take place in the magician's perceived reality. Similarly, Borges doubts his own free will in "Una oración" from *Elogio de la sombra* (1969) when he writes, "La libertad de mi libre albedrío es tal vez ilusoria, pero puedo dar o soñar que doy," alluding to the truth that he can give courage and hope to others, through his writing, when he doesn't necessarily possess those qualities himself (OC 2: 392).

The mage has no way of knowing whether or not his life would be preserved if he ran to the river, but he makes the decision to walk into the flames in which he has his horrific and alleviating epiphany that "otro estaba soñándolo" (455). Although the antecedent of "lo" is apparently the magician himself, a distinction can be made between "soñándolo" and for example, "soñándolo y todas sus acciones también." If he is being controlled by the person dreaming him, then his free will and faith are illusory and therefore do not exist.<sup>6</sup> The dreamer then has foreknowledge of his actions and as Ana María Barrenechea has said:

si todo está presente y simultáneo en la mente divina aun las cosas posibles e imposibles, no hay gesto por nimio que sea que no se halle previsto, lo cual nos convierte en autómatas y nos desrealiza. (122)

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<sup>6</sup>From the newspaper, *La Prensa*, Buenos Aires, August 3, 1986. In an interview with Amelia Barili, Borges says: "estaba relejendo la *Divina Comedia*, y usted recordará que en el Primer Canto, Dante se encuentra con dos o tres animales, y uno de ellos es un leopardo. Luego el editor hace notar que llevaron a Florencia un leopardo en tal fecha, y que Dante habría visto ese leopardo, como todo ciudadano de Florencia, y por eso puso un leopardo en el Primer Canto del *Infierno*. Entonces, yo imagino que a ese leopardo un sueño revela que él ha sido creado para que Dante lo vea y lo use en su poema. El leopardo en el sueño entiende eso, pero cuando despierta, naturalmente ¿cómo va a entender que él existe para que un hombre escriba un poema? Y luego yo digo que si a Dante le hubiera sido revelado por qué él ha escrito la *Comedia*, él podría entenderlo en un sueño, pero al despertar, no. Sería tan complicada la razón, como la otra para el leopardo". (*Textos recobrados* 378)

However, if his creation by the "otro" is limited to the mere act of his own physical creation, but his actions are his own decisions, much like those of the son that he creates, then he does have a nominal free agency and can choose to do as he wishes, independent of the dreamer's ideas.

The magician very well could be the same "otro" that dreams him up, and all of this could be his own dream about himself just as happens in Twain's "Mysterious Stranger" and Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall*, itself an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale." Individuals are capable of dreaming that they were themselves doing some grand thing in their dream not normally present in their waking moments. These dreams typically end with the dreamer realizing that they are dreaming and awaking with a vivid recollection of their other's accomplishments—though in this scenario, the dreamer could still be the creation of another.

If he has free will, his faith is absolute, proven by his choosing death over life when the temple is destroyed by the very deity that he worships. If he has no free will then his death is inconsequential to the entity dreaming him. According to the Avestan Scriptures, the magician is free to choose to follow Ahura Mazda in his attempt to create and promulgate good and in doing so becomes an ally and member of the cause of good:

If people choose rightly and strive to acquire Ahura Mazda's spiritual creations (Bounteous Immortals, *Amesha Spentas*), they both fulfill the purpose for which they were created and become his friends and co-workers, and thus strengthen both him and his cause. However, they do have free choice and may choose to become supporters of evil. Thus, as a result of their intellectual capacities, human beings have freedom to choose, 'man for man,' as it says in the *Gathas*, must make up his or her own mind and decide whether or not to support Ahura Mazda. (Hintze 148)

The Zoroastrian texts affirm that the magician was created by Ahura Mazda to aid him in his fight against evil and further affirm that the magician has free will to choose good or evil. However, the text of the story would seem to support more the Zurvanite conception of Zurvan creating the framework and being in con-

trol of all actions that take place, meaning that the magician only thought he was in control of his own deeds. The symbolism, when applied to the story, categorically indicts the magician's free will. On the one hand, if Zurvan is controlling him via Ahura Mazda and Asha Vahishta, even though he is on the side of good, he is a mere puppet of Zurvan. On the other hand, if Ahura Mazda is the Supreme Deity, then the magician's Scriptures promise that he has some form of free will and that he will take his place by Ahura Mazda's side after his life is over. The story does not choose sides, but masterfully takes the middle road between Zoroastrian orthodoxy and unorthodoxy and lets the reader decide for herself the true nature of the magician's existence.

The reader may come to this story perhaps more than a little vexed by the philosophical problems posed by the three stories that precede it in *Ficciones*: "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius," "El acercamiento a Almotásim," and "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*." The last page falls like a bombshell on the reader as any relationship to the previously solid Cartesian foundation of "cogito ergo sum" seems less sturdy in the light of this new problem. Noted skeptic Anthony Cascardi feels that:

There is no proof, no guarantee, that our most firmly held beliefs will correspond to the facts; there are no final assurances, even where our knowledge is underwritten by courageous convictions; nor is there "certainty" of the sort the skeptic denies or the epistemologist seeks to find. There are times when our knowledge cannot be described within rational bounds. (28)

Seemingly then, the skepticism inherent in the ending of the story stifles Gadamer's belief that all understanding of a text depends on understanding the question it answers. However, the references to Zoroastrianism and the inherent Zoroastrian faith in a supreme creator God that will redeem all humanity attempt to soften the sting of mortality. The magician's fate, inside of his text, hinges on his faith. If Ahura Mazda exists, he is saved, according to the promises of his Scriptures. If Ahura Mazda does not exist, then neither does he.

The narrator in "Las ruinas circulares" dazzles his readers with shocking claims about the magician and his son. The doubt that steeps in the mind of the reader mitigates the sensationalism of

the narrator and allows one to focus on the references in the text as a way to better understand those details about the magician that the narrator does not see fit to share. We may view "Las ruinas" as either a faith promoting missive or as a secular skeptical experiment. Either of these two options sufficiently demonstrates the universality of the existential dilemma of the magician: to whom (if anyone) does humanity owe its creation and existence? To be sure, the text tacitly uses the symbols of the Zoroastrian faith to quell the fears of this existential dilemma, but in so doing it references abstruse concepts which have gone unnoticed previously. In my opinion, "Las ruinas circulares" perfectly encapsulates all sides of the nagging doubt and skepticism surrounding individual existence that is inherent to humanity.

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