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## Towards the finite a case against infinity in Jorge Luis Borges

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TOWARDS THE FINITE: A CASE  
AGAINST INFINITY IN JORGE LUIS  
BORGES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in English  
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## ABSTRACT

The role of infinity as an antagonist in Jorge Luis Borges's *oeuvre* is undeniable. His stories in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1941), *Ficciones* (1944), and *El Aleph* (1949) exhibit Borges's tendency to evoke dreams, labyrinths, mirrors, and libraries as both conduits for infinity and sources of conflict. Oftentimes, Borges's characters experience discomfort upon encountering the limitations of secular temporal succession. This discomfort is rooted in Borges's pessimism about the subject which is explored in Borges's most comprehensive essay on the issue of time: "A New Refutation of Time." Consequently, this thesis considers Borges's attitude towards the issue of time as postulated in "A New Refutation of Time" and exhibited in his early fiction, continues to acknowledge infinity as a fundamental conflict in Borges's work, and proceeds to search for a solution to this conflict.

The analysis in this thesis relies heavily on a comparative study of the themes and symbols in Borges's fiction in order to establish a pattern wherein infinity is portrayed negatively. More importantly, the use of interviews, biographies, and Borges's own fiction, facilitates the construction of cohesive conception of time in his work. Subsequently, this study looks to establish a solution to the problem of infinity and establish a new pattern wherein there is a positive resolution to the narrative.

Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to acknowledge the problem of infinity in Borges's work and then propose a way to escape it.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## INTRODUCTION

On January 8, 1938, Jorge Luis Borges became an employee at the Miguel Cané Library in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His inconsequential duties, which at the time consisted of cataloging a meager collection of books, afforded him the luxury of finishing his job “in an hour [and] spend[ing] the rest of his time reading or writing either in the basement or up on the roof in the warm summer weather” (Williamson 230-31). During these covert writing sojourns Borges began to explore a new type of fiction. An indicator of Borges’s new direction is his review of Paul Valéry’s *Introduction à la poétique*, which was published in *El Hogar*—where Borges worked as the editor of a fortnightly book page—on June 10, 1938 (236). In said review, Borges addresses two of Valéry’s views: that “the history of literature was not to be found in an account of the life and works of individual authors” (236); and that “literary creation ... [is] the combination of the potentialities of a particular language according to forms established for all time” (236). According to Borges, these views are contradictory because the first argument establishes a system of finite texts waiting to be discovered whereas the second advocates a system of evolving interpretations with the passing of time. In the subsequent months, Borges realized that “if time changed the meaning of the texts so that every reader derived a different meaning from the same set of words, then a

reader, in a sense, could be said to invent the meaning of any given text" (236-37). Thus, he begins to flirt with the idea of time as a break from the finite, as well as redefining the relationship between reader and text.

Nevertheless, these ideas are not manifested in Borges's fiction until an unfortunate accident drove him to explore these new themes in his work. On Christmas Eve, 1938, Borges grazed his head against "a newly painted casement window that had been left open to dry" (Williamson 238). Subsequently, Borges was bedridden and suffered from high fever, hallucinations, and insomnia. He soon developed septicemia and had to fight for his life. Edwin Williamson explains that, upon his recovery, Borges "feared he might have been mentally impaired and might never write again" (238). In an attempt to discover whether he still possessed his creative faculties, Borges began to write "something he had never done before so that he would not feel so bad if he failed" (238). The result was "Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*," which was published in Victoria Ocampo's *Sur*. Although "Pierre Menard" was a success, Borges was still concerned with his mental state after the accident. To make matters worse, by July 1939, Borges had lost his job with *El Hogar* and was left with nothing but his lackluster job at the Miguel Cané Library. In response to his discomfort, Borges published "The Total Library" (238). In this essay, Borges explores the concept of a



library that, with the passing of time, would house every book known to humanity. Once again, he explores the idea of the passing of time as a break from the finite. Yet, it is at this point that Borges begins to acknowledge the indefinite as something absurd, as in “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,” and discomfiting, as in “The Total Library.” Apropos, Borges continues to explore the passing of time in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” published in *Sur* in 1940, and, as a result, establishes the tone for his writing in the 1940s.

Thus, it is in the early 40s that Borges plays with the idea of transcending temporal succession—of reaching a point where limits are no longer applicable, as seen in “Pierre Menard” and “The Total Library,” and later exposed in *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1941), *Ficciones* (1944), and *El Aleph* (1949). Clearly, time acts in several ways in Borges’s work: sometimes it signals orthodox temporal succession and other times it is deconstructed to underscore the infinite. Therefore, the most important aspect of time in Borges’s work, as established in the early 40s, is the idea of infinity as the harbinger of the sublime. According to Edmund Burke’s 1757’s “On the Sublime and the Beautiful:”

[The sublime is] [w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is terrible, or in conversant about

terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (9)

In Borges's work, infinity is a gateway into the sublime. Throughout his fiction he constantly explores the anguish that is associated with boundless repetition. This is exhibited in his fiction and then fully explained in "A New Refutation of Time," an essay published in 1947 that delves into Borges's own conception of time and infinity. Whenever Borges's protagonists encounter infinity they realize a terrible sense of mortality and terror. It is precisely for this reason that Burke also arrives at the same conclusion:

Another source of the sublime is infinity ... Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime. There are scarce any things which can become the object of our sense, that are really and in their own nature infinite. But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were

really so. We are deceived in the like manner, if the parts of some large object are so continued to any indefinite number, that the imagination meets no check which may hinder its extending them at pleasure. (22)

Despite being published in 1757, Burke prefigures Borges's relationship with the idea of infinity and accurately outlines the concept of infinity as a puzzle found in certain objects. These objects deceive the mind and plunge the observer into moments of perceived infinity. These moments cause inner turmoil and foster the sublime.

In accordance to Burke, Borges fiction during the 1940s advocates a strong relationship between the mind and the concept of infinity. Yet, Borges is also influenced by an era of scientific reform; he is writing during a shift from Newton's concept of uniform time to the theory of relativity. Thus, Borges approaches time as also being relative to the individual. This allows him to reconcile his views concerning the relativity of texts—as literature having multiple interpretations—with the idea of relative times. Hence, Borges's fiction, specifically his short stories written in the 1940s, reinforces the idea of infinity and the sublime as being contingent on perception and exclusive to individuals.

On the one hand, this thesis acknowledges Borges's concept of infinity during the 1940s and analyzes the ways in which Borges evokes this theme. On the other hand,

this thesis understands that the 1940s were an ambivalent epoch in Borges's life: it begins with a near death experience, continues with Borges's surge of creativity as a means to rediscover his genius. Then there is the success of his stories followed by his anguish and humiliation at the hands of Argentina's president, Juan Domingo Perón—it is said that Perón offered Borges a job as a chicken inspector, a blatant insult to Borges. Although Borges's stories underscore the idea of the sublime, there is also another side to them. The vicissitudes of the 1940s are expressed in his work and, as a result, this thesis looks to offer a way to escape the sublime; to escape infinity and find the success and happiness that was also present during this time.

## CHAPTER 1: TIME AND BORGES

In order to understand infinity and the sublime in Borges's work, it is imperative to comprehend Borges's ideas concerning the nature of time. In a 1966 interview with Richard Stern, Borges addresses those "certain philosophic filings" that are drawn to him, specifically the problem of time:

... I've spent most of my life puzzling over time, the problem of time and of course my own identity. At least, they go together, because I feel that time is the stuff that I'm made of. But really, I have no particular theory about time. I have only felt it. (8)

Borges conveys the same message in an interview at N.Y.U. in 1971. In that conversation, Borges affirms that he is unfazed by space, instead he is concerned with "the real problem, the problem we have to grapple with, and ... the problem whose solution we'll never find," the problem of time ("Borges at New York University" 123). He continues to claim that the "problem of successive time" is also a problem of "personal identity" (124).

In an interview with Amelia Barili in 1985, the year before his death in 1986, Borges tackles the issue of time and space as such:

I am naturally idealistic. Almost everyone, thinking about reality, thinks of space, and their cosmologies start with space. I think about time. I think everything happens in time. I feel we could easily do without space but not without time. (243)

Subsequently, upon being asked about the origins of the cosmos, Borges postulates that “[t]o create the world is to create time,” although “[t]o think that time began is impossible. And to think that [time] doesn’t have a start ... is also not possible” (243-44). These interviews reveal that in the latter part of Borges’s life the issue of time was still relevant and puzzling to him. They demonstrate that Borges continually saw time as an essential part of human experience and identity. Furthermore, these interviews also allude to a sense of bewilderment and the sublime.

In “The South,” published in *Ficciones*, the character, Dahlmann encounters a sleeping feline; he orders a cup of coffee, and proceeds to stroke the cat’s black fur. All the while, he imagines that “[the] contact [is] illusory, that he and the cat [are] separated as though by a pane of glass, because man lives in time, in successiveness” and the cat “lives in the present, in the eternity of the instant” (176). This excerpt is testament of Borges’s predilection for a cohesive relationship between identity and time. Nevertheless, this is an ambivalent juxtaposition. Although the protagonist envies the

cat, it is also important to note that the cat is blissfully unaware of temporal succession. Unlike Dahlmann, the animal is incapable of thinking connecting the past, present, and future. Hence, Dahlmann does not envy the eternal moment; instead he envies the cat's lack of awareness. This is evidenced in another one of Borges's stories, "Funes the Memorious."

In "Jorge Luis Borges's 'Funes the Memorious': A Philosophical Narrative," Edmond Wright acknowledges that "that [Funes] has the ability to select from the stream of his sensory experience any percept he wishes and hold it forever in memory" (93). In the story, the narrator notes that Funes is secluded in "the back room ... in the dark, because he [knows] how to pass the idle hours without lighting a candle" ("Funes the Memorious" 62). One can see that Funes "finds the remembering of such precise and infinitesimally detailed sensory experiences oppressive" (Wright 93). Funes is the antithesis of the cat because he is affected by the burden of living in a system of fixed events, or in "the eternity of the moment," and has to suppress his sense in order to stop himself from living in these events. In direct contrast, the cat Dahlmann encounters inhabits a space of pure unawareness. The cat is not a creature of successive time like Dahlmann, and it is not susceptible to the oppressiveness of having to remember every eternal moment as Funes does. Instead, this cat represents the end of infinity because it

resides comfortably in one single moment, as opposed to individuals who inhabit past, present, and future simultaneously.

The following excerpt from Borges's "A History of Eternity" (1936) illuminates Borges's thoughts towards the issue of time and personhood:

We gather up all the delights of a given past in a single image; the diversely red sunsets I watch every evening will in memory be a single sunset. The same is true of foresight: nothing prevents the most incompatible hopes from peacefully coexisting. To put it differently: eternity is the style of desire. (Borges qtd. in O'Connell 226).

Evidently, Borges does not think that a person can ever live in a single moment. Instead, individuals are composed of different moments in time that are eventually synthesized to create identity and memory. This alludes to Borges's claim that time is one of the fundamental building blocks of humanity. Since Funes is incapable of abstract thinking and generalizing, he does not represent the human condition. It is far more likely that Funes' inability to "gather up all the delights of a given past" is analogous with the clash between Borges's protagonists and infinity. In other words, when Borges's characters find themselves in what may appear to be an endless situation, they are



oftentimes rendered useless and continue to meet their demise; in other words, they come closer to the sublime.

The reason Dahlmann does not envy the eternal moment is because as an individual, he could never live in eternity. Although Borges's characters, in this case Dahlmann, would be better off as the cat, alas they cannot ignore their place in time and oftentimes collide with the infinite. This also alludes to the influence that the scientific discourse had on Borges during the 1940s. This idea is elaborated in Borges's fiction and is clearly explained in his own treatise on time: "A New Refutation of Time."

In this essay, Borges confirms the importance of perception by evoking Berkley's idea of time as "a succession of ideas in [the] mind, which flows uniformly" (qtd. in Borges 64), and proceeds to incorporate David Hume's skepticism of "an absolute space, in which each thing has its place" (222). Consequently, Borges affirms that he denies "the existence of one single time, in which all events are linked. [Because] to deny coexistence is no less difficult than to deny succession" (222). After denying succession, Borges explains that any lover who ponders: "[w]hile I was so happy, thinking about the faithfulness of my beloved, she was busy deceiving me," is a complete fool. His reasoning is as follows, "if every state in which we live is absolute that happiness was not concurrent with that betrayal" (222). Every moment resembles

an independent water molecule in a sea of other water molecules: overall, these molecules come together to form a body of water but Borges is only concerned with one molecule. Not only is every moment independent, it is also exclusive to the individual. Thus, Borges's approach of time is a solitary moment waiting to be perceived. In addition, by denying succession Borges also begins to deconstruct orthodox time.

Hereafter, Borges includes a poignant example that illustrates his refutation: an essay entitled "Feeling in Death" which was originally published in 1928. In "Feeling in Death" Borges recalls his emotional response upon encountering a street that remained the same throughout the years; when he acknowledges the sameness of the panorama he then transcends temporal succession:

I kept looking at this simplicity. I thought, sure out loud: This is the same as thirty years ago ... I conjectured a date: a recent time in other countries but now quite remote in this changeable part of the world. Perhaps a bird was singing and for it I felt a tiny affection, the same size as the bird: but the most certain thing was that in this now vertiginous silence there was no other sound than the intemporal one of the crickets. The easy thought 'I am in the eighteen-nineties' ceased to be a few approximate words and was deepened into a reality. I felt dead, I felt as an abstract spectator of the

world; an indefinite fear imbued with science, which is the best clarity of metaphysics. I did not think that I had returned upstream on the supposed waters of Time; rather I suspected that I was the possessor of a reticent or absent sense of the inconceivable word eternity. ("A New Refutation of Time" 226)

Before he exclaims that he "felt dead," Borges entrusts human perception with the ability to conjure infinity—Borges saw the unchanging façade of the street, he heard a small bird singing and heard the solitary chirps of the crickets, he felt affection and felt the silence, and, through his perceptions, evoked the eighteen-nineties. This example outlines the basic format for many of Borges's stories that deal with the issue of infinity. This is true of "The Garden of Forking Paths," "Funes the Memorious," "Death and the Compass," "The Aleph," and many others. Indeed, the main idea of "A New Refutation of Time" is that reality is *a posteriori* and, for this reason, time is also contingent on experience. More importantly, it reinforces Borges's attitude towards infinity as utterly pessimistic.

Hence, Borges's idealism allows for the deconstruction of linear time by giving the observer the ability to feel, at the present, those moments suspended in the past—according to Borges's refutation, temporal succession does not exist and, therefore, it is

possible to revisit a past moment. Unfortunately, the closer the observer comes to these moments, the more susceptible he is of becoming aware of his own mortality and chaos: the sublime. Although this is not as evident in Funes, Dahlmann (and Borges) talk about eternity with an existential tone. Moreover, as the vast majority of Borges's early characters, including Borges himself, gain awareness of their place in infinity, they are fazed by their own demise. A standard reading of "Feeling in Death" implies that once he transcends temporal succession and becomes "the possessor of a...sense of the inconceivable word eternity," Borges is forced to acknowledge that despite the possibility of returning to an infinite number of past, present, and future moments, he will always have to face his death.

"A New Refutation of Time" asserts the indisputable relationship between time and death in Borges. The conclusion strengthens this theme by proclaiming that time "is the substance of which [Borges is] made. Time is a river that sweeps [him] along, but [he is] the river; it is a tiger which destroys [him], but [he is] the tiger; it is a fire which consumes [him], but [he is] the fire" (234). This proclamation alludes to Borges's belief that time is of pivotal importance to identity and hints at the chaos that is associated with infinity. Borges is describing time as the infinite macrocosm of life and death, a cycle of suicides and resurrections *ad infinitum*. His use of water, fire, and the tiger,

demonstrates his penchant for destructive, yet beautiful, forces. Ana María Barrenechea explains that “para Borges, el infinito es un concepto corruptor ... más universal y temible que el concepto del mal. Al mismo tiempo se siente tan atraído por el que alguna vez planeo escribir su historia” (21). Barrenechea asserts that time is corrupt and malignant and even more frightful than evil itself. This proclamation coincides with Borges’s own use of water and fire because these forces are associated with both life (water nourishes and fire can be seen as fuel for life) and death (imagining burning or drowning). Nevertheless, Borges is captivated by the issue and is constantly flirting with the idea of eternity. In sum, the previous interviews, Borges’s fiction during the 40s, and the final lines of “A New Refutation of Time,” allude to Borges’s depiction of infinity as a bridge to the sublime. Borges cannot escape this interest and constantly exploits it in his fiction. Not surprisingly, Borges concludes “A New Refutation of Time” with an air of regret: “[t]he world, unfortunately, is real; [he], unfortunately, [is] Borges” (234).

## CHAPTER 2: INFINITY

As demonstrated in “A New Refutation of Time,” Borges understands time as a relative experience that can lead to moments of infinity. These moments lead to a horrific awareness of mortality and the sublime. Furthermore, by introducing infinity Borges is also eradicating orthodox temporal succession. In Borges’s fiction, time seems to have no beginning or end. Ultimately, the characters that experience lapses of infinity are forced to acknowledge the possibility of having to die *ad infinitum*. The conclusion of “Death and the Compass” is a perfect example of Borges’s predilection for thought-provoking theories concerning the mechanics of time:

[Erik] Lönnrot avoided Scharlach’s eyes ... For the last time, Lönnrot considered the problem of the symmetrical, periodic murders.

“There are three lines too many in your labyrinth,” he said at last. “I know of a Greek labyrinth that is but one straight line. So many philosophers have been lost upon that line that a mere detective might be pardoned if he became lost as well. When you hunt me down in another avatar of our lives, Scharlach, I suggest that you fake (or commit) one crime at A, a second at B, eight kilometers from A, then a third crime at C, four kilometers from A and B and halfway between them. Then wait for

me at D, two kilometers from A and C, once again halfway between them.

Kill me at D, as you are about to kill me at Triste-le-Roy."

"The next time I kill you," Scharlach replied, "I promise you the labyrinth that consists of a single straight line that invisible and endless."

He stepped back a few steps. Then, very carefully, he fired. (156)

Floyd Merrell asserts that after reading this exchange between Erik Lönnrot and his nemesis, Scharlach, "it becomes immediately apparent that we have one of Zeno's paradoxes" (98). Merrell considers Zeno's argument concerning Achilles and the tortoise which contends that the tortoise "will never be overtaken by the swifter, for the pursuer [Achilles] must first reach the point whence the fugitive is departed, so that the slower must always necessarily remain ahead" (Russell 239). Hence, as Merrell postulates, Lönnrot's allusion to that "Greek labyrinth that is but one straight line," is an attempt to stop the bullet because it would have to travel "half way between A and B, to C, then half way between C and B, to D, and so on. [The bullet] would never reach Lönnrot's breast. He would live on" (Merrell 98). Unfortunately, "[i]n spite of his vague allusion to Zeno, Lönnrot could by no stretch of the imagination have prevented the bullet from reaching him" (99). Ultimately, it seems that Scharlach refutes Zeno—as well as Lönnrot—and proceeds to shoot the detective.

Nonetheless, the possibility of timelessness is not completely eradicated by debunking Zeno's Achilles and the tortoise, instead, Borges implies that there will be another death; both Scharlach and Lönnrot acknowledge that Lönnrot 's death shall repeat itself and when that happens, Lönnrot is going to die as requested. "Death and the Compass" incorporates the chaos of constantly dying, sometimes in different ways in what some critics consider different universes. This idea is exhibited in Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths." Mark O' Connell provides a thorough summary of "one of Borges'[s] most celebrated stories:"

Time as the fundamental but mysterious component of the universe's makeup is once again the theme of one of Borges' most celebrated stories, 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. The story concerns Dr Yu Tsun, a Chinese professor of English literature working as a spy for German intelligence during the First World War. He is the sole possessor of a valuable piece of information – the location of a secret British artillery park at a place called Albert. With capture imminent, Yu Tsun decides that his only course of action is to find, with the aid of the phonebook, the home of the nearest man with the surname Albert and to shoot him dead, thus transmitting to Germany the name of the place to be bombed. Arriving at Albert's home,



he discovers that his intended victim is a Sinologist whose object of study happens to be a sprawling, chaotic novel written by Yu Tsun's great grandfather, Ts'ui Pen. (227)

Subsequently, Yu Tsun discovers that the novel "is [a] kind of fantastic experiment" that attempts "to forge an image of infinity, to commit a god-like act of creation" (O'Connell 227). Once again, Borges's fiction combines death and infinity as the central conflict in the story. It is not too difficult to draw a connection between "Death and The Compass" and "The Garden of Forking Paths" if the reader notes what Albert claims to have uncovered about the novel in question in Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths:"

"In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only word that must not be used?"

I thought for a moment.

"The word 'chess,' " I replied

"Exactly," Albert said. "*The Garden of Forking Paths* [the fictional novel in the story] is a huge riddle, or parable, whose subject is time; that secret purpose forbids Ts'ui Pen the merest mention of its name. To *always* omit one word, to employ awkward metaphors and obvious circumlocutions, is perhaps the most empathetic way of calling attention to that word. It is, at

any rate, the tortuous path chosen by the devious Ts'ui Pen at each and every one of the turnings of his inexhaustible novel. I have compared hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected the errors introduced through the negligence of copyists, I have reached a hypothesis for the plan of that chaos, I have reestablished, or believe I've reestablished, its fundamental order—I have translated the entire work; and I know that not once does the word 'time' appear. The explanation is obvious: *The Garden of Forking Paths* is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as conceived by Ts'ui Pen. Unlike Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestors did not believe in a uniform and absolute time: he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times" (127).

In order to draw a connection between "Death and the Compass," it is imperative to further understand how Borges treats infinity. An interesting way to understand Borges's concept is through rudimentary quantum theory.

Regarding quantum theory, "one of the most hopeful lines of explanation is to assume that an electron does not continuously traverse its path in space. The alternative notion as to its mode of existence is that it appears at a series of discreet positions in

space which occupies for successive durations of time" (Whitehead 535). At this level, electrons are uninhibited by orthodox laws of time and space—instead they seem to disappear for miniscule intervals and reappear at random locations. Borges's short stories could be said to operate at the quantum level—if only figuratively. From *The Garden of Forking Paths* [novel in the story] Albert discovers infinite series of parallel times; both Erik Lönnrot and Dr. Yu Tsun could be said to traverse between parallel universes. Moreover, both characters learn to occupy different times. It is not until detective Lönnrot learns of Scharlach's plans that he begins to consider the possibility of another time and place for his death; a time and place that both characters anticipate. In "The Garden of Forking Paths," Yu Tsun, minutes before assassinating Albert, "sensed that the dew-drenched garden that surrounded the house was saturated, infinitely, with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and myself ... in other dimensions of time. [Yu Tsun] raised [his] eyes and the gossamer nightmare faded" (127). Ultimately, these characters are both enlightened and tortured by infinity. Lönnrot realizes that he will continue to die and Yu Tsun perceives another universe and proceeds to accept his "endless [i.e. infinite] contrition" ("The Garden of Forking Paths" 128).

### CHAPTER 3: LABYRINTHS

As stated, Borges's stories in the 1940s underscore his pessimism towards the relationship between personhood and infinity. In fact, Borges associates the idea of infinity as a nightmare; recall Yu Tsun's description of infinity as a gossamer nightmare in "The Garden of Forking Paths." Ana María Barrenechea states that "[l]os sueños son otra forma de sugerir la indeterminación de los límites entre mundo real y mundo ficticio" (139). In other words, dreams are discomfoting because they illuminate the weak distinction between the real world and the fictitious. More often than not, Borges's stories are nightmares because they deal with infinity and, in turn, approximate the sublime. Barrenechea continues to explain that wakefulness "[e]s también el salir de una pesadilla a otra sin saber cuándo se a llegado a la vigilia ... y el mezclar los recuerdos, los sueños y la realidad sin saber que' es cierto y que' es inventado" (139). Once again, the dream acts as a symbol in Borges's fiction and is both perplexing and dangerous because it constantly blurs the lines between assumed reality and the dream itself. More importantly, the dream also advocates the idea of different universes: the dream itself, the real world, and the space in-between wherein the protagonists do not know whether they are still in the dream or not: this disconcerting situation is what Borges calls nightmares.

Apropos, In a 1980s interview, “Thirteen Questions: A Dialogue with Jorge Luis Borges,” Borges addresses his reoccurring nightmares: one concerns a labyrinth and the other involves mirrors (Barnstone 181-82). In regards to the labyrinth, Victor Bravo notes:

[E]l laberinto es el modo borgiano de desplegar una consciencia crítica sobre lo real y de representar el enigma y el infinito ... El laberinto en Borges, como la aporía de Zenón de Elea, es el surco de la paradoja y la repetición del infinito.” (“Jorge Luis Borges y la nueva era del mundo”) *(The labyrinth is the Borgesian way to expand critical consciousness over what is real and to represent enigmas and the infinite ... The labyrinth in Borges, like that in Zenon of Elea’s aporia, is the conduit for the paradox and the repetition of the infinite).*<sup>1</sup>

The labyrinth, as proposed by Bravo, is the conduit for the paradox and the catalyst for infinity. In “Death and the Compass” Lönnrot’s allusion to Zeno of Elea builds a bridge between Borges’s literary labyrinths and the Greek labyrinth, whether it is a paradox or the labyrinth of Crete. According to Emir Rodriguez Monegal:

[T]he labyrinth was not built to confuse and mislead people. It was built both to protect the Minotaur and to imprison him. If it is difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> Translation is my own

find a way into the labyrinth, it is equally difficult to find the way out. A paradoxical place, the labyrinth fixes forever the symbolical movement from the exterior into the interior, from the form to the contemplation, from time to the absence of time.

... Labyrinths thus become, according to tradition, the representation of ordered chaos, a chaos submitted to human intelligence, a deliberate disorder that contains its own code. (42)

Borges's fiction, like the labyrinth, is ordered chaos. Unfortunately, this chaos is a source of despair. For Borges, the labyrinth is a nightmare because he is lost inside the maze—Borges is not confused by the maze, instead he is imprisoned. In "Thirteen Questions: A Dialogue with Jorge Luis Borges," Borges also describes one of his recent nightmares, the subject of which is a maze:

I found myself in a very large building. It was a brick building. Many empty rooms ... Then I went from one to the other, and there seemed to be no doors. I was always finding my way into courtyards. Then after a time I was going up and down, I was calling out, and there was nobody. ... and I said to myself, why, of course, this is the dream of the maze. So I won't find any door, so I'll just have to sit down in one of the rooms and

then wait: and sometimes I wake up. And that actually happened. When I realized it and said, this is the nightmare of the maze, and since I knew all about it, I wasn't taken in by the maze. I merely sat down on the floor.

(Barnstone 181)

Borges's conflict with the maze is based on the infinite search for a door, an exit that simply does not exist— not to mention the solitude of being suspended in a labyrinth. His solution is to sit down and wait until dawn. Unfortunately, Borges's characters do not have the privilege of sitting down and waiting. Instead, his characters are susceptible to the Sisyphean task of searching for an exit in an infinite corridor. In addition, even if the characters were in a nightmare, there is still the possibility of being incapable of distinguishing nightmare from reality. This is one of the reasons "The South" is so popular.

In the published version of "The South," as Edwin Williamson explains, "Dalhmann [the protagonist] sustains an injury to his head that puts him in the hospital, an accident identical to the one Borges himself suffered in 1938" (320). Subsequently, Dalhmann embarks on a train ride to visit "an old mansion in the pampas to the south of Buenos Aires" (318). The train stops midway to the mansion and while waiting Dalhmann decides to eat in a country store, i.e. a bar. A group of thugs

accost him and an old gaucho challenges him to a knife fight. Dalhmann accepts the dual, “firmly grips the knife ... and steps out into the plains” (“The South 177-79; Williamson 318-20).

Borges understands that “The South” is a story that can be read in multiple ways: it either “takes place in reality or it is just a dream of Dalhmann’s as he is dying in a Buenos Aires hospital” (Williamson 320). Borges himself mentioned to Richard Stern in 1966 that one “may read ‘The South’ in a straightforward way ... But there’s another possibility, the possibility of the second half of the story which is hallucination” (8). Dalhmann’s accident is lethal and moments before dying he dreams of another death. Yet, it is implied that Dalhmann is incapable of distinguishing fact from fiction. Borges exploits this theme and encourages the reader to ponder over the possibility of alternative endings. Once again, Borges creates a maze for the reader and the protagonist. Ultimately, Dalhmann will either die in a hospital bed or he will die in a knife fight. Despite what is considered reality, “The South” is about a man who is constantly dying in various interpretations and that is what makes the labyrinth a nightmare.



## CHAPTER 4: MIRRORS AND LIBRARIES

There are two other nightmares that Borges introduces and associates with infinity: the mirror and the library. These nightmares are also labyrinths but deserve special attention because of their relevance to Borges's life. Edwin Williamson reminds us that Borges, as a child, was terrified by "his own image when he saw it reflected on the polished mahogany of the furniture in his bedroom; at times [Borges] imagined he could see someone else's face staring back at him (38). The idea of the double not only terrified Borges, but also enthralled him. Throughout his fiction Borges refers to "doubles, reproductions, copies, facsimiles, translations" and uncovers the horror of multiplicity. Didier Anzieu suggests, "the specular reflection only confirms the fact that [Borges's] body has been torn apart from the body of his mother" (qtd. in Monegal 31). This separation highlights incompleteness and is also a source of the sublime. Hence, it is implied that in his youth Borges discovers his own fragmentation and the "intolerable awareness of being another" (31). Whether Borges's mother had any influence upon Borges's fear of mirrors is up for discussion, yet what is true is that Borges saw mirrors as an antagonistic universe.

In an interview with Donald Yates in 1982, Borges addresses his relationship with the mirror as such:

... Mirrors give you the sense of the double. They give you the Scottish wraith. When a man sees himself, according to Scottish superstition, he is about to die. His real self comes to fetch him back. Then you have in German the Doppelgänger, the man who walks at our side and with ourselves. Those things, of course, are given to us by the mirror ... There is something strange in the fact of the visual world being reproduced in every detail in a piece of glass, in a crystal. When I was a child I was amazed at it. I find it very strange that there should be in the world such things as mirrors. (197)

As an adult, Borges seems to have educated himself with various views on the detrimental value of the double. His reference to the Doppelgänger also alludes to the deadly encounter between doubles: this idea is evident in Borges's work. "The Death and the Compass," "The Garden of Forking Paths," "The Other Death," "The Shape of the Sword," and even "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" all introduce a struggle between opposites and underscore the imminent success of one version—or being—over the other. In Borges's fiction, the double signals conflict and death, like infinity, it is a destructive force. In fact, the idea of a double also allows for the possibility of other

universes. As stated before, these parallel universes in Borges's fiction are part of an endless maze—a nightmare that does not end for Borges's protagonists.

Borges himself reveals to Amelia Barili in 1985 his fear of mirrors by revisiting a reoccurring nightmare:

Yes. I dream of a mirror. I see myself with a mask, or I see in the mirror somebody who is me but whom I do not recognize as myself. I arrive at a place, and I have the sense of being lost and that all is horrible. The place itself is like any other. It is a room, with furniture, and its appearance is not horrible. What is atrocious is the feeling, not the images. (Barili 241)

Borges acknowledges the feeling of being lost in an illusory reality: the reality of the mirror. The nightmare is the uncanny feeling of not knowing whether one is the original or the other. Furthermore, Borges alludes to the labyrinth that haunts him. He is caught in the infinity of the dream, in the continuous fear of not knowing where he is.

Borges's "The Aleph" exemplifies the discomfort that Borges associates with mirrors. In the story, the narrator is informed that "an Aleph is one of the points in space that contains all points" (280). The narrator is lured down to a cellar to die in what seems to be a play on Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." Nevertheless, the narrator is wrong to assume that he has been lured under false promises; instead he encounters

the Aleph (282). Unfortunately, his words are rendered useless because he cannot “transmit to others the infinite Aleph.” Despite his insecurities, the narrator does proceed to relate what he saw:

I saw millions of delights and horrible acts; none amazed me so much as the fact that all occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency. What my eyes saw was *simultaneous*; what I shall write is *successive*, because language is successive. Something of it, though, I will capture.

The idea that everything can be captured in one single location and that everything, including language, becomes simultaneous, exemplifies Borges’s view of what infinity is. He constantly advocates the deconstruction of time from the orthodox successive river to the unorthodox simultaneous ocean of time. Figuratively speaking, Borges admonishes the currents of time and, instead, drowns his protagonists in a pool that withholds every moment imaginable. These individual moments are suspended in infinity and do not rely on temporal succession—it is far more likely that they rely on perception. Borges himself reinforces this idea by allowing the narrator of “The Aleph” a chance to try and explain what he actually saw:

The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos. I saw the populous sea, saw dawn and dusk, saw the multitudes of the Americas ... saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), saw endless eyes, all very close, studying themselves in me as though in a mirror, saw all the mirrors on the planet (and none of them reflecting me ... saw every letter of every page at once ... saw simultaneous night and day, saw a sunset in Queretaro that seemed to reflect the color of a rose in Bengal ... saw in a study of Alkmaar a globe of terraqueous world placed between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly ... saw the circulation of my dark blood, saw the coils and springs of love and the alterations of death, saw the Aleph from everywhere at once, saw the earth in the Aleph, and the Aleph once more in the earth and the earth in the Aleph, saw my face and my viscera, saw your face, and I felt dizzy, and I wept, because my eyes had seen that secret, hypothetical object whose name has been usurped by

men but which no man has ever truly looked upon: the inconceivable universe. (284)

Borges's diction in this passage is replete with allusions to mirrors: he constantly uses words such as: mirror, reflection, labyrinth, endlessly, and infinity. These words also hint to the discomfort of being caught in infinity. In addition, the parallel structure of the passage evokes the feeling that the sentences are mirroring one another. More importantly, Borges's use of words such as: dark, blood, death, dizzy, wept, inconceivable, and broken, also hint toward Borges's fear of mirrors and their potential to usurp reality. The Aleph is an enormous mirror and tension arises when the narrator witnesses the Aleph and, subsequently, is rendered incapable of retelling his experience without shame. Tension arises because the narrator becomes fixated by the infinite but does not know how to handle this state of mind. Elizabeth Romanow asserts that, in general, individuals are not meant to comprehend infinity and (68), precisely for this reason, the characters in Borges's fiction are dumbfounded and disturbed by the infinite—regardless of whether it comes in the form of a labyrinth or a mirror of endless reflections. More importantly, the mirror is a symbol of otherness and, consequently, the symbol of isolation.

The image of the library is not only present in many of Borges's stories; it is also present in Borges's life. Williamson remarks that the library symbolizes the "Platonic form of father's library in Palermo where [Borges] had been raised, or of the Miguel Cané Library in the late 1930s, or even the National library" (238-39), or his position at the National Library in Argentina after Perón's defeat in the mid-1950s (328). Borges's opposition to Perón hindered his career in Argentina and, subsequently in the 50s, Borges lost his sight completely. Yet, the library becomes a metaphor of "solipsism for Borges, an idealist counterworld, a prisonhouse of 'unreality' so pervasive that it was as if the living universe itself had been transformed into a hell of endless books" (239).

Although Borges did not mention it alongside his reoccurring nightmares, the idea of an infinite library is a source of discomfort and quite possibly a nightmare that afflicted Borges during the 1940s through the 50s. Edwin Williamson describes the idea of the "total library" as such:

The "total library" was based on the idea, given a sufficiently extensive period of time, a limited number of letters or symbols would generate a finite number of combinations and, consequently, of books. This library, therefore, would contain all the books that could conceivably be written .... In such a library, all writers would be reduced to the condition of

Pierre Menard ... they could ask themselves not "What book shall I write?" but only "Which book shall I write?" ... [A] "total library" immersed in the appalling immensity of infinite time, where for every "tangible line" of text there would be "millions of senseless cacophonies, verbal farragoes and incoherencies," where it was conceivable that "the generations of man might pass away altogether" without the shelves of the monstrous library yielding up "a single tolerable page" (238).

This idea of the total library is reminiscent of Borges's "The Library of Babel" which is regarded as satire of the concept of the total library. The library of Babel is "composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries" ("The Library of Babel" 112). Furthermore, the library contains all books—for this reason, many pilgrims flocked to the library with "hope that the fundamental mysteries of mankind—the origin of the Library and of time—might be revealed" (115). The library holds all of human knowledge and, for this reason, enthralls people. Yet, it becomes apparent in the story that the Library is impossible to fully comprehend. Individuals fall to despair because of the infinite library. According to Didier Anzieu the infinite library "is a symbol of the unconscious: 'It has all the characteristics of the unconscious, not only according to Freud, but also according to Lacan; it is universal, eternal and, also, it is



structured like a language” (qtd. in Monegal 25). The infinite library represents the limits of human knowledge. Frustration arises in Borges’s characters from the urge to understand infinity.

## CHAPTER 5: A WAY TO THE FINITE

Maria Kodama, Borges's widow, begins her introduction to *Jorge Luis Borges: on Mysticism* by claiming that, for her, "attempting to define mysticism is like trying to explain the inexplicable" (vii). This proclamation is both reminiscent of Borges's own fiction and alludes to another theme in Borges's work: the positive. Kodama defines the mystic state as being ineffable: "it is more a way of perceiving or feeling than a path deliberately taken by the intellect" (viii). This idea closely relates to Borges's own experience in "A New Refutation of Time;" let us recall the "Feeling in Death" passage that was quoted earlier in this thesis. This passage highlights the importance of perception in Borges's work. Take for example the various labyrinths that Borges incorporates in his fiction: the mirror and the library. These symbols usually affect the protagonists' mind: this is the importance of the dream—a mechanism that takes place exclusively in the mind. In lieu of Kodama's definition of the mystic experience, it seems that Borges's concept of infinity as a nightmare could be read as a moment of salvation. This type of reading allows for the extrapolation of a positive reading of Borges and a way to escape the sublime.

Kodama continues to specify when a mystical experience occurs, "it has a passive quality to it, as if something is being given up or relinquished ... All creation is

perceived as a unified entity...but perhaps the strangest quality of the mystical experience is the feeling of independence concerning time" (viii). Consequently, Kodama considers Borges's "Feeling in Death" as a mystical experience.

It has been said that upon encountering a Buddhist monk in the late 1970s. "Borges described to the monk an experience he had undergone one night in the 1920s while roaming the outskirts of Buenos Aires ... Might such an episode qualify as a mystical illumination? That was possible," replied the monk (Williamson 443). Indeed, "Feeling in Death" becomes, at least from what has been said about Borges's last years, evidence of a mystical experience. Because Borges's affinity for knowledge "it would appear "only natural that Borges [was] attracted to the Sufis, given that Sufism not only produced great mystics, but also great poets" (Kodama x). In *Jorge Luis Borges: Sources and Illuminations*, Giovanna de Garayalde explores in the issue of time in Borges's work through Sufism:

Time, as we have seen, is described as being closely bound to the infinite but at the same time it forms a subject of its own. Both Sufi literature and Borges' writing refer, in various tales, to a time that has characteristics and dimension that are different from ours and which is beyond our reach.

(43-44)

This observation not only complicates the issue of time but also alludes to the need of a mystical experience to approximate some sense of knowledge. Therefore, it would be necessary to view time as a catalyst for understanding, as opposed to a malignant entity that leads the individual to the sublime. Kodama's views (and the Sufi literature) create a space for spiritual discussion that deconstructs the pessimism in Borges's stories. Suddenly, it is possible to look at other symbols in Borges's work and search for other ways to escape the sublime. For example, Borges's fear of the mirror, according to Annette U. Flynn, "can also be related to Adam and Eve whose fear of God came through an ill-conceived search for knowledge. So afraid were they of being seen that they hid their bodies" (158). Hence, Borges's nightmare becomes a tool for self-discovery.

The merit behind these analyses is in that they offer a solution to a puzzle: Jorge Luis Borges and the complexity of his short stories as games with negative and positive messages. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that one can answer with certainty if Borges was searching for spirituality or simply appropriating certain ideas that were interesting to him. However, such an approach is inherently more optimistic because it implies moments of self-awareness and resolution without the existential angst associated with the sublime. Therefore, some of Borges's characters benefit from a reading that forces

them to escape infinity, two perfect examples being: "The Other Death" and "The Secret Miracle." In both of these stories Borges employs a god figure to enlighten the protagonists and lead them to what appears to be salvation away from infinity.

"The Other death" is the peculiar story of an unnamed narrator and Pedro Damián, an old soldier of "few words and little learning" ("The Other Death" 223). In a 1967 interview with Richard Burgin, Borges described the story as such:

Ah! That's one of my best stories, I think... I felt that I had read about a theologian called Damian, or some such name, and that he thought that all things were possible to God except to undo the past... In my story, you have an Argentine gaucho, among Uruguayan a gaucho, who's a coward and feels he should redeem himself, and then he goes back to the Argentine, he lives in a lonely way and he becomes a brave man to himself. And in the end he has undone the past. Instead of running away from the earlier battle in one of the civil wars in Uruguay, he undoes the past, and the people who knew him after the battle, after he had been a coward, forget all about his cowardice, and the teller of the story meets a colonel who had fought in that war and remembers him dying as a brave man should. (26)

In the interview, Borges ascribes Pedro with the power to change the past, but in the story god is responsible for granting Pedro with a second chance. This is a perfect example of the ambivalence between Borges's stories and his attitude towards time. In an earlier interview Borges was asked if he believed in god. His reply was that "if by god we imply a single personality or a trinity... I don't believe in that being." He then continues to explain, "there is an order in the universe, a system of periodic recurrences and general evolution" (Levine 105). Borges expounds on the idea of evolution and expresses that he believes in "Him... as an evolving passage toward perfectibility" (106). The relationship between god and time is irrefutable; it is almost as if, for Borges, the passing of time as both proof of the existence of god and a tool. God in "The Other death" employs time to grant Pedro salvation. Pedro discerns the manipulation of time and then achieves his own salvation. Although Borges ascribes Pedro with the power to liberate himself, he also ensures that Pedro's liberation is through the help of god. The fact that Borges offers two possible ways in which god manipulated time to help Pedro is indicative of the important relationship that time has in Borges's fiction. One of the narrator's acquaintances, Ulrike von Kuhlmann, offers the first way in which god interfered:

Pedro Damián... in the battle at the hour of his death prayed to God to return him to Entre Ríos. God hesitated a second before granting that favor, and the man who had asked was already dead, and some men had seen him killed. God who cannot change the past although He can change the images of the past, changed the image of death into one of unconsciousness, and the shade of the man from Entry Ríos returned to his native land. Returned, but we should recall that he was a shade, a ghost. He lived in solitude. ("The Other Death" 227)

This god that hesitates and cannot change the past is capable of manipulating time to answer Pedro's prayers. Unfortunately, this god does not lead Pedro to Salvation. Instead, he accidentally condemns him to live as a shadow of his former cowardly self. Pedro does not acknowledge his salvation and is forced to constantly remember his ineptitude. Consequently, this cannot be the god that saved Pedro because this god does not follow the rules outlined in "A New Refutation of Time." Thus, the narrator offers an alternative solution: for "forty years [Damián] awaited that battle with vague hopefulness, and fate at last brought it to him at the hour of his death" (227). Before dying, god allows Damián to die in battle, in 1904, and die, simultaneously, in 1946 (227). This god gives Damián the satisfaction of dying as a brave man in both instances

and thus helps him achieve an escape from infinity in the form of an appropriate death—symbolically this type of death represents resolution and, therefore, an end to the infinite. Furthermore, Pedro’s deaths are also examples of the conflict found in many of Borges’s tales. The first time he dies, Pedro dies as a coward and feels the sublime, feels the eternal damnation of being a coward. The second time he dies he feels pleasure in being redeemed.

“The Secret Miracle” is similar in that god grants the protagonist, Jaromir Hladik, enough time to finish his work before being executed by the Gestapo—thus dying as a worthy man. Borges explains that the story is a “personal pact between god and the man” and also about “the idea of something lasting a very short while on earth and a long time in heaven, or in a man’s mind” (Burgin and Borges 25). Prior to dying, Jaromir prays that god grant him enough time to “complete that play, which can justify [him] and justify thee [god] as well” (“The Secret Miracle” 88). The following morning Jaromir is scheduled to die at 9:00 a.m., but god answers his prayers and “in His omnipotence granted him a year. God... performed for him a secret miracle: the German bullet would kill him, at the determined hour” (93-94), but for Jaromir a year would pass, giving him enough time to finish his masterpiece. Once again, god manipulates time in order to give nothingness in the form of a peaceful death. If Jaromir



had died without finishing his play, it would have remained incomplete for eternity and would have functioned as a symbol of his failure. More importantly, Jaromir is the only one that can perceive the elongation of time. Therefore, he is the only one that can overcome temporal succession and attain salvation.

These stories constantly connect to “A New Refutation of Time” in that god follows the same principals outlined in the essay. Perception of god’s time allows for the peaceful sojourn into nothingness and then salvation. Unbeknownst to Borges, “A New Refutation of Time” depicts god as being able to manipulate time in order to overcome mundane temporal restrictions and introduce god’s time. God’s time allows Borges’s characters the possibility to overcome the sublime. Saint Augustine thought that “[i]n the Beginning... [God] knew heaven and earth, and there was no change in [god’s] knowledge” (qtd. in Coleman 689). God’s time is an objective timeline that has a definite beginning and an end. Schopenhauer’s nothingness, or *nirvana* in Buddhist terms, is the definite end to a cycle of infinite perceptions. In both stories, the protagonists are able to transcend eternal death—in the form of perpetual failure and cowardice—by consciously accepting the end, as god would see it.

The question of time and god in Borges’s work has become relevant in the years following his death. This thesis explores this idea because it affords a solution to the

problem of infinity in his fiction during the 1940s and also alludes to a theme that Borges explores later in his life. More importantly, it also demonstrates that during the 1940s, Borges was not completely pessimistic about his fiction. Indeed, Borges experiences success because of the new themes he was exploring and for laying the foundation for postmodernism.

## CONCLUSION

In Jorge Luis Borges's work, time is a fundamental antagonist. Oftentimes it pins the protagonists against an incomprehensible nemesis: infinity. Infinity is the integral part of Borges's labyrinths, mirrors, and libraries, and plunges Borges's characters into the sublime. Not surprisingly, these symbols have become pivotal characteristics of Borges's work—it is up to the critics to be aware of these symbols and to interpret them as important themes in his fiction. Oftentimes, Borges creates discomfort by constructing endless labyrinths that not only trap the protagonists but also drives the characters towards their eternal demise. The mirror represents the infinite multiplicity of universes and the constant battle against the double. The library is the personification of a mind captured by eternity. This study shows that the Borgesian characters must overcome infinity in order to reach a resolution.

If this resolution does not occur, the reader encounters situations like that of detective Lönnrot anticipating his perpetual death in "The Death and the Compass;" or perhaps Yu Tsun in "The Garden of Forking Paths," who not only acknowledges his endless shame but also experiences the pangs of another parallel universe; there is also the example of the narrator in "the Aleph" whose encounter with infinity not only perplexes him but renders him incapable of ever trusting his own words and judgment.

The cycle repeats itself until a force breaks the repetition. Some critics have searched for a spiritual lesson in Borges's work, one that would somehow turn Borges's solipsism into a space for learning. Although there is some merit behind such an approach, it is difficult to judge Borges's views considering the fact that he was a very curious man whose mind was involved in many subjects.

Consequently, it is easier to speculate on certain patterns than it is to speculate on Borges's spiritual beliefs. For this reason, it is beneficial to look at those stories that exhibit an escape from eternity—a happy ending of sorts. Such endings are not only more accessible but also reveal the author's ultimate optimism towards the finite. The perfect example is that of Dahlmann and the cat. Although Borges's characters are constantly filling Dahlmann's role, there are those times that his protagonist can embrace a fixed moment, escape infinity, and embrace resolution.

## **AFTERWARD: BORGES AND POPULAR CULTURE**

Although a vast majority of Borges's most well-known stories were written in the 1940s, his influence is still felt today. Not only is Borges gaining more popularity in the United States, his stories have also impacted popular culture. In a succinct commentary dedicated to Borges's influence on filmmaker Christopher Nolan, Jaime Contreras captures the essence to what makes Jorge Luis Borges one of the most intriguing and important authors of the twentieth century. The commentary was published in *Américas* magazine, a publication whose goal is to foster mutual understanding across the borders of North and South America. Not surprisingly, in the article, Contreras opens a window for a new generation of readers—a window into the fantastic world of Jorge Luis Borges. He cites *Inception* (2010) and *The Matrix* (1999) to lure a new audience for the late Argentinean author. Thus, Contreras introduces a new discussion for those readers who are unaware of Borges's influence on popular culture:

What does Leonardo Di Caprio have in common with the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges? You are probably right: nothing, zero, nil, zilch, nada. Nonetheless, Christopher Nolan's last film *Inception* (2010) does establish a certain link.

Jorge Luis Borges' influence on the movie *Inception* is unmistakable. In the opening scene and at the conclusion of the film, we see, for example, a physically young Leo Di Caprio having a bizarre conversation with his decrepit old alter ego. As it turns out, Borges' short story "The Other," is remarkably similar.

Christopher Nolan, the 39-year-old director of *Memento* (2000), has publicly confirmed his admiration for Borges. According to Nolan, his recent work was inspired by two of Jorge Luis Borges' most celebrated works of fiction: "The Circular Ruins" and "The Secret Miracle."

*Inception* was not the first science fiction movie influenced by Borges' writings, either. The Wachowski brother's [sic] film *The Matrix* (1999) is another example of the peculiar world imagined by the famous Latin American writer. The real world conceived as an "illusion" (the conceptual idea behind of this movie), was inspired by one of Borges' short stories called "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius."

... Nolan's *Inception* also confuses the audience deliberately. The film can be interpreted as a kind of homage for two of Borges' most famous

literary topics: the dream and the labyrinth. (“*Inception* and Jorge Luis Borges”)

In this concise analysis, Contreras alludes to a number of Borgesian themes, such as: mirrors, dreams, and labyrinths. In addition, he illustrates how a number of Borges’s early short stories have influenced some of the most popular films of the twenty-first century. Yet, Contreras overlooks one of Borges’s overarching themes: time. If we analyze the two proposed examples, *Inception* and *The Matrix*, it becomes evident that time plays a pivotal role in both films. Nolan’s *Inception* bestows the protagonists with the ability to dive into a person’s mind via their dreams. The film gains complexity by introducing the idea of a dream within a dream—as the protagonists jump from dream to dream they jump into the abyss of the psyche. The further they go into the abyss the more negligible time becomes—what would be a few seconds on the surface become a few minutes in the dream. As the process gains more layers, time is inevitably expanded such that a few seconds become a few years. This convoluted idea is reminiscent of both “The Circular Ruins” (1941) and “The Secret Miracle,” (1944) as Contreras points out. “The Circular Ruins” evokes the power of dreams as a creative, yet gradual, force capable of bringing new life into the world, whereas “The Secret Miracle” is about the bending of time as a means to overcome a conflict.

*The Matrix* is also a fantastic example because it deals with the mind, multiplicity of dreams, and time. “*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*” (1941) is about a conspiracy to birth an illusionary nation into existence through the use of altered texts and history. *The Matrix* expounds on the idea of an illusory world that takes place on a machine-induced dream. Yet, in *The Matrix* we also find Borges’s idea of parallel universes, different timelines, and, of course, the difficult distinction between dream and reality.

*Inception* underscores how being caught in an infinite universe—a universe where a second is equivalent to years—is a mental labyrinth that distorts the consciousness and destroys the individual. Also consider 2009’s *Watchmen* and the character of Dr. Manhattan. This character can see past, present, and future but is incapable of changing it: he is caught in infinity and does not have freewill. Such a predicament is similar to Billy Pilgrim’s problem in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-five* whereby Pilgrim knows exactly what will happen but, unfortunately, cannot change the future.

Two other popular culture examples, *50 First Dates* (2004) and *Groundhog Day* (1993), also elaborate on the problem of being caught in infinity. The protagonists have to deal with the idea of being caught in the same day indefinitely and this happens to be the main conflict. Consequently, in all of these films, and novel, the protagonists experience a sense of discomfort that is closely related to their struggle against the



clock. Overall, the fact that Borges's influence is still relevant in the early twenty first century demonstrates that Borges, like his fiction, is timeless.

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