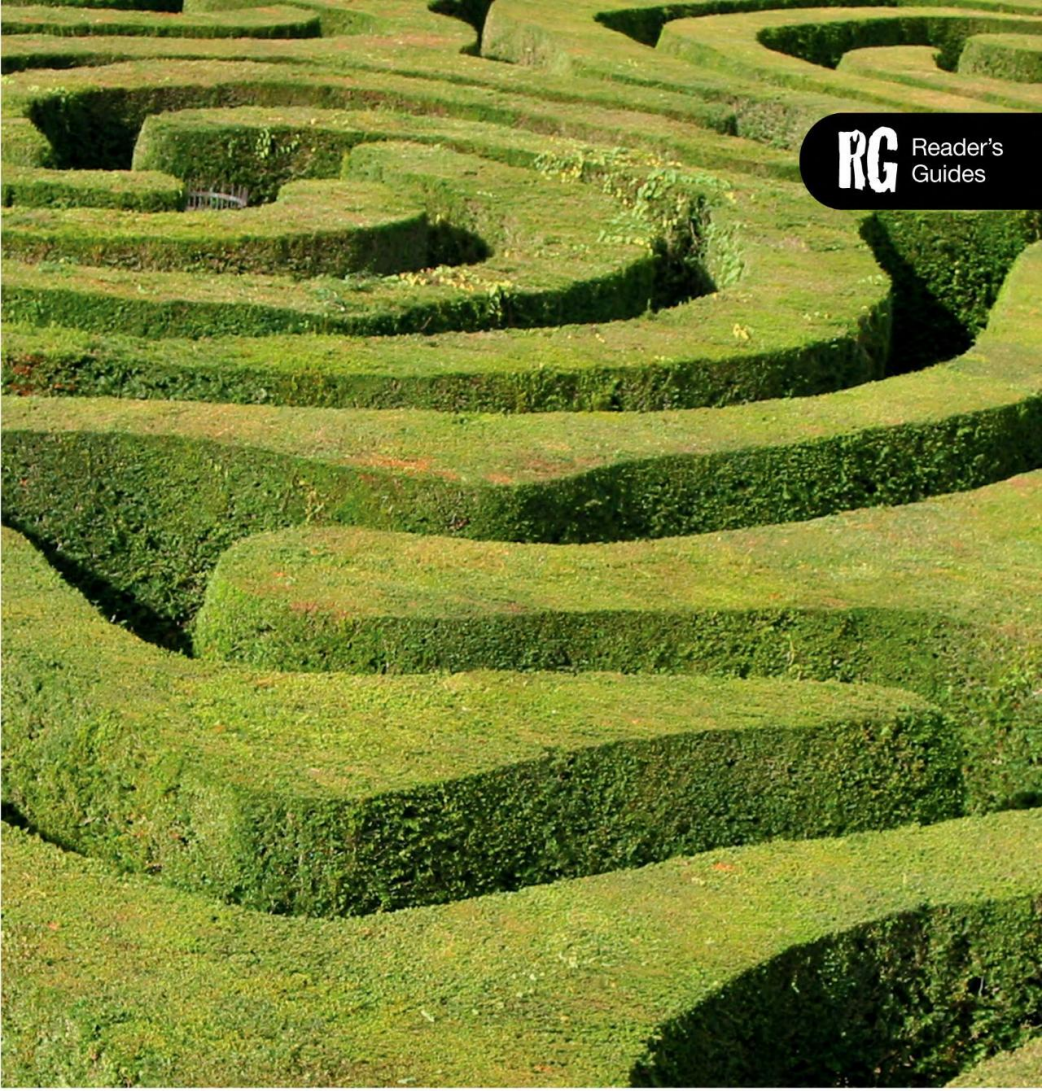

Borges' Short Stories

Rex Butler

BORGES' SHORT STORIES

A Reader's Guide

REX BUTLER

Continuum International Publishing Group

The Tower Building
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CONTENTS

LIST OF QUOTATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

The following texts are indicated by initials:

A 'An Autobiographical Essay', in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–69*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Picador, London, 1973.

OC Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (4 vols.), Emecé, Barcelona, 1989.

CF Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, Penguin Books, New York, 1998.

SP Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, Alexander Coleman (ed.), Penguin Books, New York, 2000.

TL Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922–86*, Eliot Weinberger (ed.), Penguin Books, London, 1999.

Many of the references in the main text will be found in the Annotated Bibliography, which contains the various books and articles relevant to each chapter.

Consistent with the format of the *Reader's Guide* series, a number of Study Questions for students have been appended to the end of each chapter.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTS

In March 1957, the subject of this book wrote a short text, 'Borges and I', for *La Biblioteca*, the journal of the National Library of Argentina. By this time, he was already well known to a large Argentine audience, and increasingly so overseas through a series of prestigious translations. He could no longer see, and was unable to write the intricately wrought fictions, often involving philosophical problems, for which he had become recognized. This short text 'Borges and I' would subsequently be included in the 1960 collection *El hacedor* (*The Maker*, but translated into English as *Dreamtigers* in 1963). It is in this collection that Borges first reshapes his public persona into that of a blind Homeric bard; a genial, if occasionally distracted, old man who somehow embodies the entire history of literature. 'Borges and I' is a text that at once is part of this refashioning and comments on it. It begins with a warning against the attempt to biographize the writer, to identify the maker of the work of art with the person behind them. In 'Borges and I', these two selves are shown not to be the same. Though maintaining a cordial relationship, they are not simply identical to each other. As Borges writes:

> It's Borges, the other one, that things happen to. I walk through Buenos Aires and I pause – mechanically now, perhaps – to gaze through the arch of an entryway and its inner door; news of Borges reaches me by mail, or I see his name on a list of academics or in some biographical dictionary. My taste runs to hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, etymologies, the taste of coffee, and the prose of Robert Louis Stevenson; Borges shares those preferences, but in a vain sort of way that turns them into the accoutrements of an actor. (*CF*, 324)

The first comedy here is that Borges literalizes the impersonality required for the work of art: Borges the writer becomes another

person with whom the narrator (the flesh-and-blood Borges) can have a relationship. But the deeper comedy lies in the fact that, far from Borges the person controlling Borges the writer, it is the writer who controls the person. This ordinary Borges with his everyday interests and obsession is a creation of the writer Borges, one of the masks he uses to disguise himself. (If there is a Robert Louis Stevenson text that Borges has a preference for, it is surely *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.) Thus Borges is telling us, exactly at that moment in his career when his work appears to lend itself to an autobiographical explanation, that even this confession is not to be trusted. It is a creation of Borges the writer, whom we also find described in the story and his preferences given. And yet the question must be asked: from where is the writer described? Who sees the relation between Borges the man and Borges the writer? Who is the Borges who writes about 'Borges' as opposed to the 'I'? It is *this* impossible position – and of course the infinite regress it opens up – that we would say is the real 'Borges', the one for whom both the man and the writer are fictions. It is the Borges for whom all biographies are inadequate, and who is not to be identified with anything in his texts either. It is Borges as a pure space or speaking position, and who is only the permanent doubt: 'I am not sure which of us it is that's writing this page' (*CF*, 324).

* * *

The great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges was born on 24 August 1899 in downtown Buenos Aires. His family on his mother's side had been Argentine for several generations, and included amongst it several members who were said to have died defending an early version of Argentine democracy against the tyrant Juan Manuel de Rosas. His family on his father's side was in part made up of recent arrivals, with his father's mother coming from Staffordshire with her father, who was to edit Argentina's first English-language newspaper. Borges' mother was said to have permanently resented her family's loss of status and fortune thanks to Rosas, and to have been obsessed with her family's *criollo* (Spanish Argentine) heritage. She was a devoted wife to her husband, looking after him when he was no longer able to work due to a degenerative eye condition, which Borges

also was to inherit, and a loving mother to Borges and his younger sister Norah. Borges' father was a far more intellectual and forward-looking figure, who was interested, before he went blind, in literature and ideas. He worked as a lawyer and part-time psychology lecturer, and described himself as a follower of the nineteenth-century English anarchist Herbert Spencer. Borges for much of his life moved between these two conflicting sets of values: the nationalism and nostalgia of his mother and the cosmopolitanism and anti-authoritarianism of his father. Indeed, this split could be seen to correspond to the two languages Borges spoke at home: his mother's Spanish and his father's (through his paternal grandmother's) English. Spanish for Borges was always 'long and cumbersome' (*A*, 135), and he was constantly seeking to move away from it. English, on the other hand, was the language of literature and the world, a language that he often 'wished had been my birthright', but that he felt 'unworthy to handle' (*A*, 165). In fact, Borges frequently described his father's library of English books, which he read voraciously as a young man, as the 'chief event in my life' (*A*, 129); and the provincial and slightly out-of-date taste of his father was indelibly to shape Borges' own literary universe and was, to some extent, the basis of his literary revolution: Kipling, Stevenson, Wells, Shaw, the English translation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Sir Richard Burton's translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* . . .

For much of his early life, Borges stayed at home with his sister, privately educated by an English governess. Both his mother's snobbishness and his father's distaste for such institutions as state education were satisfied by this solution. When Borges did finally go to school at the advanced age of eleven, he was a shy, myopic boy, who was unused to the company of other children and was subsequently bullied. He was soon taken out of class and was not to return to school for several years. It was an unhappy, fragmented introduction to learning that was undoubtedly to lead to Borges' lifelong distrust of pedagogy and all official curricula. In 1914, partly to undergo a series of operations to try to save his sight and partly to give his children a European education, Borges' father took his family off to Europe. Argentina at the time was one of the world's most prosperous countries, riding high on the beef exports that refrigerated shipping had

recently made possible, and Europe was comparatively cheap. The family, however, was forced to stay longer than originally intended due to the outbreak of the First World War; and, after visiting London and Paris, Borges was sent to the exclusive and strictly Protestant Collège Calvin in Geneva, where the family settled down for the duration. During his time there, Borges received a rigorous education, learning to read and speak French and Latin, which was part of the school curriculum. It was also around this time, at the relatively precocious age of seventeen, that Borges undertook his first literary steps. He had always been encouraged to write by his father, who had himself unrealized literary ambitions. Indeed, at the tender age of ten, Borges had made a translation of Oscar Wilde's short story 'The Happy Prince', which appeared in the Buenos Aires daily *El país*. In Geneva, he began to read French and German literature seriously and in great quantities: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Nietzsche Schopenhauer. He became infatuated with the poetry of Walt Whitman, and fell in with a group of adolescents sharing similar tastes and ambitions. This involvement in literature continued when the family moved to Spain in 1919. Here Borges began to participate fully in the adult literary life, getting his first poem published ('Himno del mar' or 'Hymn to the Sea') and joining up with one of the *tertulias* or weekly literary gatherings held in a pub or bar and presided over by a real poet or writer.

Borges carried on this literary activity when the family returned finally to Buenos Aires in March 1921. Somewhat unusually from our perspective, there was no expectation that he would finish his education and go to university – he had not completed his baccalauréat while in Switzerland – or even find a job. His father by this point was unable to work because of his poor eyesight, so the family lived off savings and the income produced by renting their house. Borges engaged himself in an endless whirl of literary activity, agitating on behalf of the avant-garde literary movement that he had brought back with him from Spain. *Ultraísmo* was a word originally coined by the Sevillian poet Rafael Cansinos-Asséns, who spoke in an interview of the necessity for poets to be 'ultra-Romantic'. The movement was notable for its Futurist-like obsession with modern technology and its coining of surprising and far-fetched metaphors. In 1921, Borges joined up with his cousin Guillermo, his sister Norah, a

'The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim', 'The Library of Babel' and the title story were published in a small volume entitled *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* [*The Garden of Forking Paths*], which came out on 30 December 1941. It is a volume that has been described by Borges biographer Emir Rodríguez Monegal as the 'single most important book of prose fiction written in Spanish in this century'.[1] The book, however, conspicuously failed to win a prize in the National Award for Literature, due at least in part to Borges' publicly stated political sympathies. From 1930 on, Argentina had been ruled by a succession of generals who assumed power after the economic downturn following the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The generals justified their rule, amidst a rising tide of fascism in Europe, through the appeal to 'Argentine' values. Borges, by this time, was thoroughly critical of his earlier aesthetics of *criollismo urbano* or urban realism. By 1931 he had already written the essay 'Our Inabilities', which was a sour look at the emerging nationalism in the arts. And, as the nationalist hysteria grew, he penned the powerful polemical text 'Yo, judío [I, A Jew]' (1934), in which he proudly claims a hypothetical Jewish heritage exactly against those nationalist anti-Semites who had accused him of hiding it.

The war years and those immediately following were difficult ones for Borges. On 4 June 1943, a group of right-wing and pro-Axis military officers masterminded the overthrow of the government of Ramón Castillo, on a platform of anti-British economic populism and the establishment of authentic *criollo* values. Under the generals, political parties were banned, trade unions were attacked and the press increasingly censored. Borges could only watch in horror as one of the young officers involved in the coup, the handsome and charismatic Juan Domingo Perón, proceeded to build himself a huge popular base among the workers and *descamidos* (the unemployed), undoubtedly in preparation for a future Hitler- or Mussolini-style Fascist Party. As well, Borges continued to grieve over the end of his relationship with the bohemian poet Norah Lange, which had finished as long ago as 1934, leaving him once again alone. Biographers even speak of two half-hearted suicide attempts in 1934 and 1940. It was a suffering accentuated by Borges witnessing the slow decline of his father, who had finally died blind and completely dependent on his wife in 1938. Borges himself was not yet

blind, but his eyes had been getting steadily worse, and he knew very well the difficulties of life as a blind man without someone to help him. And yet it was also during these years that Borges would write some of the enduring masterpieces of his fiction: 'Death and the Compass' in May 1942, 'Funes, His Memory' in June 1942, 'The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' in February 1944 and 'Three Versions of Judas' in August 1944. These stories and four others were gathered together under the title 'Artificios' and were then joined with the stories of *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* to become *Ficciones*, which was published on 4 December 1944. This time, both as a form of political protest against the government and as a way of making up for the embarrassment of snubbing *El jardín*, the members of the Argentine Society of Writers decided to give it a special award and to honour it with a celebratory dinner.

The European war ended in May 1945. Although Argentina was officially neutral, there was great sympathy for the Axis Powers within the government, and the country only belatedly came out for the Allies in March 1945, when victory was already assured. Borges, who followed developments overseas closely, wrote several fictions during the period dramatizing various aspects of the war. In 'The Secret Miracle' (1944), he takes up the story of a playwright who is arrested and sentenced to death, but is miraculously granted a year to complete his work. In 'Deutsches Requiem' (1946), he tells the story of a German camp commandant who seeks to drive mad a Jewish poet whose work he loves because it speaks to a part of himself he can no longer tolerate. In fact, immediately upon the conclusion of the War Borges was to write a defence of those British 'liberal' values to which he felt so close, applauding England for being the only country that was not 'fascinated with itself, that does not believe itself to be Paradise or Utopia' (*TL*, 213). It was a scepticism and self-questioning that always remained part of Borges' own personal ethos. In a much-quoted aphorism, he was once to declare of politics: 'Es una de las formas de tédio [It is one of the forms of tedium]'.[2] And later, when he briefly joined the Conservative Party in the early 1960s as a form of protest against Argentine politics at the time, he was to declare: 'If you are a conservative, you cannot be a fanatic, because one can't feel any enthusiasm about conservatism, any more than you can

conceive of a fanatical conservative.'[3] It was an equanimity Borges was to need when Péron finally took power in a landslide victory in the elections held after the War in 1946 and just two months later Borges was sacked from his job as a shelver at the Miguel Cané Library, which had been the main source of income for him and his mother since the death of his father. Nevertheless, Borges continued to write his stories, according to many critics his greatest of all. Indeed, another important relationship, this time with the beautiful and communist-leaning writer Estela Canto, which had begun in late 1944, was now coming to an end, leaving Borges once again heart-broken; and two of his greatest stories of all – 'The Aleph' (1946) and 'The Zahir' (1947) – can be understood to be speaking of it in some way. The stories from this period – 'The Aleph', 'The Zahir', 'Emma Zunz' and 'The Immortal', amongst others – were collected in the volume *El Aleph*, which appeared on 26 June 1949. It was to be the last of Borges' undoubtedly major fictional texts.

It was during the 1950s that Borges' literary reputation really began to grow, both at home and abroad. Borges had first appeared in translation in 1939, thanks to his bilingual friend Néstor Ibarra, who published a translation of 'The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim' in the magazine *Mesures*. However, it was the French sociologist Roger Caillois, having heard of Borges through his lover Victoria Ocampo while stuck in Argentina during the War, whose recommendation got *Ficciones* accepted for the prestigious publishing house Gallimard in Paris in 1951. This and a selection from *El Aleph* entitled *Labyrinthes*, translated by Caillois himself in 1953, was soon to draw the attention of that generation of post-war French intellectuals who were to exert such an influence over not only the Francophone but also the English-speaking world just a few years later. As well, in Argentina itself the first book on Borges appeared in 1954, *Borges y la nueva generacíon* by Adolfo Prieto, and between 1957 and 1959 four more books on him were to appear. Ironically, though, it was around this time, when Borges began to receive his first serious critical attention in Argentina and his first recognition overseas, that his eyesight, which for a long time had not been good, suffered its final blow. By 1954 Borges had already undergone eight operations on his eyes; but during his annual holidays at Mar del Plata, where he was staying with his good

friend and occasional literary collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares and his wife Silvina Ocampo, he slipped on some rocks at the beach, and when he got up he realized that he could no longer see even through his remaining good eye. Thereafter, Borges' eyesight would be confined to only the roughest outlines of things, and he could no longer read or write in any sustained way. Those intricately composed stories for which he had become famous, in which he managed to conjure up an entire world in a few pages, would no longer be possible for him. Soon after *El Aleph*, Borges stopped writing fiction – he would not publish a new book of stories for some twenty-one years – and returned to writing poetry, which was easier to remember and could be dictated to a secretary. The last piece of writing by Borges that is truly essential to his reputation is his book of critical essays, *Otras inquisiciones*, which appeared in 1952 and is a collection of some 39 non-fiction pieces written over a period of 15 years, covering all manner of subjects, from small studies of favourite writers like Hawthorne, Wells, Whitman, Valéry, Chesterton and Shaw, to major pieces of literary criticism like 'Kafka and His Precursors' and innovative reworkings of the philosophical tradition like 'A New Refutation of Time'. The volume reveals not only the extraordinary range of Borges' reading, both literary and philosophical, but also the profound relationship between his fictional and non-fictional writings. In fact, reversing the usual priority between a great writer's fictions and his occasional essays, Borges biographer James Woodall argues that Borges' fictions must be understood as 'mirror images' of the essays.[4]

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of continued military intervention in the government in Argentina. After the eventual overthrow and exile of Péron in 1955, a series of army and army-backed governments was unable to restore order, and by the 1970s the country was effectively in a state of collapse. The ruling junta was continuously assailed by strikes and riots, and in 1970 the Péronist-inspired Montoneros guerillas kidnapped and executed the general who had orchestrated Péron's removal. At the same time, death squads, secretly authorized by the military, were conducting their own campaign of terror and torture. Altogether it is estimated that during the so-called Dirty War of the 1970s some 30,000 trade unionists and other left-wingers 'disappeared'. In 1973 Péron himself even returned from exile in Franco's Spain to

attempt to restore stability, before the military in turn ousted his widow's government in 1976. During this time, Borges, although in principle supporting the same 'democratic regeneration' he had advocated when Péron was originally overthrown, gradually began to despair of the chances of democracy in Argentina. After all, it was democracy that had first elected and then re-elected Péron, his lifelong political enemy. In a subtle form of protest, Borges spent much of the two decades overseas, in a new career of picking up awards and honorary degrees and giving lectures to selected audiences. In 1961, he had shared the inaugural International Publishers' Prize with Samuel Beckett, as a result of which, as he said, 'my books mushroomed overnight throughout the western world' (*A*, 162). He travelled to and gave talks in Texas in 1961, London and Madrid in 1963, Berlin and Paris in 1964, Peru in 1965 and Italy and the east coast of America in 1967, just to mention the first few years of this incessant journeying. It was a period of truly world-wide celebrity for Borges, in which he cultivated his persona of a serene but slightly unworldly old man and offered elegant, slightly simplified versions of the themes of his stories in endless interviews. But it was also during this period that Borges could be said to have fallen out of favour with his original Latin American audience. He was never particularly encouraging towards that generation of writers from the region who came up after him, who saw their work as part of a wider Latin American social and political movement. He had always remained sceptical both of Castro's Cuba and of that great Argentine revolutionary icon Che Guevara. As well, in response to the ongoing Argentine political crisis, he made a series of ill-considered public statements to the effect that he would be prepared to countenance an 'enlightened dictatorship', if he could be sure that nothing like the Péron mistake would ever be repeated.[5] Most inexcusably, in 1976 he accepted a trumped-up award, the ludicrously named Grand Cross of the Order of Merit, from Chile, and even had lunch with its resident dictator Augusto Pinochet. It has been suggested that, because of this political error, the Nobel Prize was forever to be denied to Borges.

In 1975 Borges' mother, with whom he had lived virtually all of his seventy-six years, died. Borges was by now a frail blind man, who needed practical assistance in all aspects of his everyday life. During his many trips overseas, he had relied upon the

internal resources that allow us to read them and that allow them to tell us how to read them.

Accordingly, then, we seek to do something here that has only rarely been attempted in all of the vast literature on Borges: simply to read a number of his stories with as much care and in as much detail as possible. Our readings here are not virtuosic, erudite or conceptually complex, but – qualities that Borges himself aimed at – sober, subtractive, exhibiting almost the absence of qualities. As early as 1926, Borges wrote in 'A Profession of Literary Faith': 'I have now conquered my poverty, recognizing among thousands the nine or ten words that get along with my soul' (*TL*, 27); and in perhaps the ultimate paradox of what we seek to do here what we discover, when we read each story singularly, is that each is saying the same thing. For what is finally at stake in Borges' stories is not a style or even a series of literary themes but a *logic* or *system*. What we see played out in the great Borges stories – in some more than others, but this is what makes some greater than others – is the coincidence of *the one and the many*. It is a logic that, according to Borges, is both literary and philosophical, or we could say that it represents the philosophical in literature and the literary in philosophy. Borges often speaks (or has often been understood to speak) of 'metaphysics as a branch of the literature of fantasy' (*CF*, 74), but what he properly means by this is the subjecting of philosophy to this 'literary' logic. It is a logic that we try to elaborate here in general terms, but it is also never to be seen outside of the stories. It is only to be played out 'fictionally', just as it is what takes Borges' stories beyond fiction towards something like philosophy. At once it is only to be found in the specific details of each story and it is a general template that allows us to read these details. In our emphasis on the great or canonical Borges stories here, and on the wider 'logic' or 'philosophical' basis of his text, there is undoubtedly something of a return to an 'original' Borges against all recent social-historical or post-colonial readings of him. It is possible, we claim, to read him again beyond all context, all biography, all literary and philosophical influence, just at that point when we might have thought this was a little passé, old-fashioned, even politically regressive or conservative. This, at least, is the hope of this *Reader's Guide*, which as much as possible simply wants to read ten of Borges' greatest stories,

believing that they contain in themselves all of the astonishment, instruction and entertainment that we need.

STUDY QUESTION 1

Critics have often argued that Borges' 'first' official story, 'The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim', creates the template for Borges' mature fiction. They particularly note that the equivalence spoken of at the end between 'the seeker and the sought' (*CF*, 87) is the key not only to the story but to Borges' work in general. We might note, however, that this equivalence, if implied at the beginning of the story, is deferred, never takes place by the end. In what ways is this impossible but necessary equivalence between the seeker and the sought – or, let us say, between the reader and what they read – the key to Borges' fiction? If the real subject to Borges' work is the *relationship between* the reader and the work, how does this relationship at once precede and come after any attempt to represent it?

CHAPTER 2

READING THE SHORT STORIES: THE LABYRINTHINE

Of the 'nine of ten words' that got along with Borges' soul, the word 'labyrinth' is undoubtedly the one with which he is most closely identified. It is an association that first begins, for English speakers at least, with the publication in 1964 of *Labyrinths*, which was a selection of stories and essays from *Ficciones*, *El Aleph* and *Otras Inquisiciones*. *Labyrinthe* was also the title chosen for the first German translation of Borges' writings, which appeared in 1959. In fact, as we know, *Labyrinthes* was the name originally given by Roger Caillois to his translation of Borges' writings into French in 1952. It was undoubtedly Caillois' decision that the English and German publishers of Borges followed, and that accounts for the emphasis on the notion of the labyrinth in at least the French- and English-language receptions of Borges' work. Interestingly enough, not only do none of the stories in the English-language edition of *Labyrinths* contain the word 'labyrinth' in its title, but the two stories from *El Aleph* that actually do were excluded. Indeed, 'labyrinth' does not enter Borges' lexicon in any serious way until the 1930s. The word is infrequently, if at all, used in the early poetry, and it is only by the time of the stories of *Historia universal de la infamia* and the critical essays of *Discusíon* that 'labyrinth' is to be found consistently. By the end of Borges' career, however, the word is used almost continuously, no longer strictly necessary to the meaning of the text but more a verbal trademark or signature, as though to assure the reader that what they had before them was written by Borges. It is certainly possible to argue that the international reception of Borges in terms of the labyrinth retrospectively began to affect his work, and in his later years even Borges himself could declare that he was 'weary of labyrinths'.[1]

The word or concept 'labyrinth' is employed in a variety of ways throughout Borges' work. It is used to refer to a really existing

object, as in the poem 'The Labyrinth' or the short story 'The House of Asterion'. It is used to describe objects that do actually appear to have labyrinth-like qualities, as in the poem 'Browning Resolves to Be a Poet', where Borges writes of 'red London labyrinths' (*SP*, 351), or the story 'The Other Death', where he writes of 'weaving labyrinths of marches' (*CF*, 224). Finally, it is used metaphorically to transfer labyrinthine qualities on to objects that are not usually thought of as labyrinth-like, as in the poem 'Alexandria, A.D. 641', where Borges writes of the 'solitary labyrinth of God' (*SP*, 393), or the story 'The End', where he writes of the strumming of a guitar as an 'inconsequential labyrinth, infinitely tangling and untangling' (*CF*, 168). And, of course, Borges' employment of the 'labyrinth', both as the subject of his poem and stories and as a narrative and stylistic device within them, has been much analysed. Critics have looked for the origins of Borges' fascination with the labyrinth, from his coming across an engraving of a labyrinth as a young boy to his later acquaintance with the artist Xul Solar, who painted de Chirico-like scenes of imaginary cities. They have searched for the cultural precedents Borges drew on when he took up the labyrinth in his own work, from the classical myth of Theseus and the Minotaur to Giovanni Battista Piranesi's famous *Carceri d'invenzione*, etchings of made-up gaols whose vistas appear to recede into infinity. Critics have even in a psychoanalytic vein interpreted Borges' obsession with the labyrinth in terms of an ongoing child-like fear of being separated from his mother.[2] Undoubtedly, the most sophisticated analysis of Borges' use of the labyrinth is Ana María Barrenechea's *Borges, the Labyrinth Maker* (1965), which compiles a list of the words with which labyrinth is most often associated in Borges (weave, intertwine, confuse), and thus the meanings the word accumulates throughout his work (drawing, representation, narratives with a key).[3] It is, of course, an approach carried on in more detail by the various dictionaries and concordances now devoted to Borges' work, which systematically list the various mentions of the word labyrinth in his writings and the range of purposes to which it is put.

But, before pursuing these researches, we must first ask another question. It is: what exactly *is* a labyrinth? In one sense, the question is easy to answer. When we speak of a labyrinth, we inevitably mean to refer either to the prison Daedalus built for King Minos

on the island of Crete or to those topiaried hedges popular in European gardens throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (In fact, scholars make a distinction between the maze, in which there are dead ends and misleading alternatives, as with hedges, and the labyrinth, in which we follow the twists and turns of a single path, as with the prison Daedalus built.[4]) But the question gets more difficult to answer when Borges can write of an 'infinite labyrinth' (*CF*, 124) or an 'inexhaustible labyrinth' (*CF*, 253), or can describe as 'labyrinthine' such things as time, space, human destiny and even the world itself. In the very ubiquity of the notion, it begins to lose its outlines, its ability to be defined. Perhaps, as Borges once suggested in an interview, in its omnipresence we are no longer able to say whether it exists or not. 'If we were positively sure that the universe is a labyrinth, we would feel secure. But it may not be a labyrinth.'[5] We would argue, however, that it is just this uncertainty as to whether it exists or not that *is* the labyrinth. At its deepest level, it is not simply that we are inside a labyrinth or that the labyrinth is equivalent to the world. It is rather that *we cannot know* whether we are inside a labyrinth, whether the labyrinth is the world. More than any physical object or qualifying characteristic, the labyrinth is a kind of *hypothesis* about the world. And the real split it introduces is not that between two paths within the labyrinth but that between the labyrinth and the world. It is this strange logic of the labyrinth that we take up here through a reading of two of Borges' stories: 'The Garden of Forking Paths' and 'The Immortal'.

'THE GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS'

'The Garden of Forking Paths', unlike many of Borges' stories, did not originally appear in a magazine, but was published for the first time in the collection of the same name in December 1941. It takes its place as the last story there, and we can say that Borges means to suggest by this not only that it was the last piece written for the volume, but that the idea of the end or finality is somehow at stake in it. More particularly, the story must be read as the continuation of another that appears before it in the collection, 'An Examination of the Works of Herbert Quain'. 'The Garden of Forking Paths' is undoubtedly one of Borges' most discussed and critically elaborated stories. Its central conceit of

the structure of his book. As Albert explains to Yu, in a famous passage:

> 'Almost instantly, I saw it – the garden of forking paths was the chaotic novel; the phrases "several futures (not all)" suggested to me the image of a forking in *time*, rather than in space. A full re-reading of the book confirmed my theory. In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses – simultaneously – all of them. He *creates*, thereby, "several futures", several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork. That is the explanation for the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger knocks at his door; Fang decides to kill him. Naturally, there are various possible outcomes – Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they can both live, they can both be killed, and so on.' (*CF*, 125)

Albert goes on to say that what Yu's grandfather sought to construct was a labyrinth that was 'literally infinite', in which the choices between competing possibilities went on forever, and 'all the outcomes in fact occur' (*CF*, 125). And, as Albert explains all of this to Yu, Yu begins to feel within himself the 'pullulation' (*CF*, 126) of all these different times or possibilities of which Albert speaks. And yet, as Albert completes his explanation, this vision fades, and Yu sees coming down the path outside the house the relentless figure of Madden, who has finally caught up with him. For all of Albert's postulation of different times in which anything might happen, Yu resolves to complete the mission for which he had originally come. As Albert rises and turns, Yu shoots him in the back, killing him instantly. Madden bursts into the room, arresting Yu, but it is too late. Yu has calculated that news of the murder of the eminent sinologist will reach his chief back in Germany, and he will realize that the new British artillery park is in the town of Albert. Yu concludes his confession with the following satisfied thought:

> I have communicated to Berlin the secret name of the city to be attacked. Yesterday it was bombed – I read about it in the

> same newspapers that posed to all of England the enigma of the murder of the eminent sinologist Stephen Albert. (*CF*, 127–128)

At the beginning of the story, the editor of what we read offers us a summary of what purports to be a passage from Liddell Hart's authoritative history of the First World War, in which Hart recounts the fact that an Allied offensive against the Serre-Montauban line, which had originally been planned for the 24 July, was postponed until the 29 July because of rain.

The suggestion for which 'The Garden of Forking Paths' is best known is that it is not only Ts'ui's book that can be seen to take the form of a labyrinth but also the wider world. At every moment of our lives we are moving through something like a labyrinth, in which we are confronted by a series of alternatives between which we have to choose, with each choice leading us further away from our starting point. What the story is said to remind us of is the way that a series of small decisions in the present, seemingly insignificant at the time, can produce wildly varying outcomes in the future. This is the brilliance of Borges employing the spy or detective genre for the outward form of his fiction. As opposed to the usual generic requirement that the spy or detective be an unthinking man of action, at several points in the narrative we become aware of the *lack* of necessity in the events we follow, the way they could easily have turned out otherwise. This can be seen, for example, in those moments in the text where the action slows down and Yu has the chance to observe things in their isolation and absence of meaning. We might think here of Yu's description of the 'usual rooftops' and of the fact that the day to come lacks 'all omens and premonitions' (*CF*, 120). Or we might think of his detailed enumeration of the contents of Albert's study, in which the narrative seems to come to a halt in an atmosphere of *symboliste* timelessness: 'The disk on the gramophone revolved near a bronze phoenix. I also recall a vase of *famille rose* and another, earlier by several hundred years, of that blue colour our artificers copied from the potters of ancient Persia' (*CF*, 123). There are also the different times of the memories or recollections that overtake Yu as he approaches Albert's house, and the distension or drawing out of time during his conversation with Albert. Finally, there are those

several occasions of 'pullulation' (*CF*, 126, 127) that occur within Yu, in which he can literally feel those various possible futures competing within him.

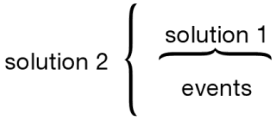
But for all of the story's emphasis on the possibility that things might be otherwise, there is another equally strong thread that runs throughout it, which would have it that things were always destined to turn out the same. To begin with, Yu's confession is made under the shadow of a death sentence that has already been passed. And, from the outset, Yu is already thinking that this particular day will be the day of his 'implacable death' (*CF*, 120). Indeed, as he advises, when contemplating a difficult or unpleasant task like the one he proposes, it is best to imagine it as 'already done', to impose upon oneself 'a future as irrevocable as the past' (*CF*, 121). And the entire story is structured around a series of such repetitions between past and present: a foreigner kills Albert, as a foreigner killed Ts'ui; the British defeat the Germans, as one army defeated another in Ts'ui's novel . . . In fact, beyond even the series of conscious decisions that Yu makes in order to carry out his plan, there is a whole realm of unconscious motivations that also determines the action: Yu wants to prove to his German bosses the worthiness of someone of his race; Madden wishes to demonstrate to his English superiors the patriotism of the Irish. Finally, for all of Yu's efforts to change the course of the war by killing Albert, Hart tells us in the prologue to the story not only that the delay to the Allied offensive was caused by rain and not the bombing of the artillery park at Albert, but that this delay had no effect either on the specific battle or on the overall outcome of the War. Most ironically, in the last sentences of his confession Yu inadvertently reveals that his German bosses did not need Albert's death to know where the artillery park was: the news of the bombing was published in the *same issue* of the papers that reported Albert's death.

How, then, to reconcile these two seemingly opposed readings of the story? How to put together the idea that the story is about chance and contingency and the idea that it is about choice and predetermination? How is it possible that things might have turned out differently, while at the same time things had to turn out the same? In order to answer these questions, we might begin with the following consideration. When Ts'ui writes his letter

announcing to the world his labyrinth, he does so in a way that leaves open the possibility that it might not be discovered: 'I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths.' It is a caution that Albert repeats when he passes Ts'ui's labyrinth on to Yu. 'In all [times]', Yu says to Albert, 'I am grateful for, and I venerate, your recreation of the garden of Ts'ui Pen.' 'Not in all' (*CF*, 127), Albert corrects him, which is to say that not only is it not certain that in all futures will Yu be grateful to Albert, but that in some futures he will not even have a chance to be grateful because the labyrinth will not be discovered. But this is more complex than at first appears, for of course Albert would not even be able to express his doubts about the labyrinth existing unless the labyrinth *had actually been discovered.* And this necessity extends to Yu as well. With Albert dead, Yu now becomes the only one who knows the secret of his grandfather's labyrinth. Not only must Albert have discovered the principle behind this labyrinth, but he must have passed it on to Yu; and, with his own impending death, Yu must have passed it on to us. Again, for all of the multiple, infinitely branching alternatives the labyrinth is said to introduce into the world, they must all end in one point: the discovery and passing on of the labyrinth.

But this is not the end of the principle of the labyrinth. Although it does not change anything and all of its pathways end up at the same point, it *does* still introduce an alternative into the world. Although there is necessarily something outside of it, its eventual discovery that cannot be contingent, we can still speak of it as 'infinite'. In order to explain how this is so, we might turn to the story that precedes 'The Garden of Forking Paths' by two in Borges' original volume, 'A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain'. In this story, Borges imagines a book by a fictitious author Herbert Quain entitled *April March*, in which a series of alternative scenarios all finish with the same conclusion. But *April March* must be understood as merely a literalization of the principle at stake in Quain's first book, *The God of the Labyrinth*, which is a detective novel. As the narrator explains, in this novel a first solution to a murder is given, but then just when we think everything is over a sentence is added at the end that forces us to re-read everything (*CF*, 108). All that we had thought had come about by accident we now see was a deliberate creation

by the criminal in order to deceive us. It is not as though that first, incorrect solution can simply be done away with, for we would not have got to that second, correct solution without it. But this second solution explains not only the crime but also that first solution, showing how it is not outside of the events it seeks to explain but is part of them. And a number of Borges' own stories also have this structure, from 'Death and the Compass', in which the criminal deliberately entraps the detective by creating a series of false clues for him to follow (*CF*, 156), to 'The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero', in which enough evidence is left behind to reveal to a subsequent researcher the terrible truth behind an apparent act of heroism, but with the further calculation that the researcher will continue to propagate the official lie (*CF*, 146). In all of these cases, it is not so much the facts that are different with the addition of this second solution as the meaning behind these facts. The same set of facts is now read from a different point of view, as though behind the original narrative there was another that explains how it came about. It is as though that original set of events is doubled by another virtual possibility, so that at the same time as we move forward through the narrative another is opening up, revealing the truth behind how we got there. It is not some actual series of alternatives that confronts us at any moment, for the narrative can move forward only by making decisions and determining events in the only way it can. It is rather that every moment must be understood as standing in for another completely different explanation of events, which it precisely does *not* choose. And in truly spectacular detective stories, this process of finding a different explanation for the same material can be repeated almost endlessly. For any explanation of events there always seems to be opened up another, which takes into account not just these events but also how that first explanation forms part of them, needs itself to be explained for a reason entirely other than its own.[6] We might attempt to represent this diagrammatically:



of Alexander Pope's six-volume translation of Homer's *Iliad*. Cartaphilus is described as an emaciated and grimy-looking man, with grey eyes, grey beard and 'singularly vague' (*CF*, 183) features, and speaking several languages fluently but poorly. Inside the last volume of the Princess' copy of the *Iliad*, she finds a manuscript, which purports to tell the adventures of a Roman centurion, Marcus Flaminius Rufus, who lived during the reign of the Emperor Diocletian in the third century. Rufus is a tribune in one of the Emperor's armies, and early one morning while his forces are stationed in Egypt, a bloodied man rides towards him from out of the distance and speaks just before dying of a river that 'purifies men of death' (*CF*, 184). Rufus resolves then to go in search of this legendary river, which is said to lie 'at the ends of the earth' (*CF*, 184). His commanding officer grants him some 200 soldiers to begin his expedition; but, made feverish by the desert moon and driven mad by drinking poisoned water, they soon start to desert him. Eventually, Rufus leaves his camp with only a few of his most trusted men, but in time he becomes separated even from them. Wandering though the desert alone, and in sight finally of the fabled City of the Immortals, he collapses. When he awakes, he finds himself lying in a makeshift grave with his arms tied behind his back. Burning with thirst, he drags himself with enormous effort down a slope towards a small, dirty stream he notices trickling though the mud and plunges his head down to drink. Just before passing out, he notices himself inexplicably reciting a few words of Greek: 'Those from Zeleia, wealthy Trojans, who drink the water of dark Aisepos.' (*CF*, 186).

Coming to again, with his hands still tied behind his back, Rufus spends days and nights on the blazing sands unable to move. The strange dog-like creatures, who live in the surrounding caves and whom he had seen earlier on his journey, neither attack him nor come to his aid, despite his pleas for help. Eventually, Rufus frees himself and crosses the stream to enter the City of the Immortals, accompanied by two or three of these Troglodytes. When he crosses the City walls, he has then to negotiate an almost endless series of underground rooms, in which all but one of nine doors leads back to the same room. After a journey that seems to him interminable, Rufus reaches a final room, where a ladder takes him up to the City itself. The City in turn reveals itself to be another labyrinth, laid out seemingly randomly, with

corridors that lead nowhere and staircases that peter out after two or three levels. There appears to be no consistent plan or design, with the most heterogeneous styles and functions yoked together without any thought. Almost in horror, Rufus flees the City, once again having to negotiate the series of underground chambers. There to greet him when he finally emerges is one of the Troglodytes who had earlier followed him. This particular Troglodyte accompanies Rufus on his subsequent journeys; and Rufus calls him Argus, after the dog in Homer's *Odyssey*. Rufus, as he gets to know him, is led to remark on how different their respective experiences must be. But one day, as a heavy rain falls on both of them, Rufus is astonished to see Argos lift his face to the sky and utter the words: 'Argos, Ulysses' dog' (*CF*, 190). When Rufus then asks him how much of the *Odyssey* he knows, Argos replies to Rufus' further amazement: 'Very little. Less than the meagerest rhapsode. It has been eleven hundred years since last I wrote it' (*CF*, 190).

At this point, Rufus not only realizes that the lowly Troglodytes are in fact the legendary Immortals, but begins to think through, aided by Argos, the logical consequences of immortality. He understands now why the Troglodytes were so indifferent to his suffering when they saw him lying for days in the sun with his arms behind his back after he had drunk from the stream that conferred eternal life upon him. It was not merely because they knew he would not be hurt, but also because of a kind of moral indifference in which all acts become equivalent to each other. As Rufus explains:

> Taught by centuries of living, the republic of immortal men had achieved a perfection of tolerance, almost of disdain. They knew that over an infinitely long span of time, all things happen to all men. As a reward for his past and future virtues, every man merited every kindness – yet also every betrayal, as reward for his past and future iniquities. Much as the way in games of chance, heads and tails tend to even out, so cleverness and dullness cancel and correct each other. Perhaps the rude poem of *El Cid* is the counterweight demanded by a single epithet of the *Eclogues* or a maxim from Heraclitus. The most fleeting thought obeys an invisible plan, and may crown, or inaugurate, a secret design. I know of men who have done

> evil in order that good may come of it in future centuries, or may already have come of it in centuries past. (*CF*, 191)

Indeed, drawing the final consequence of this balancing out of opposites, some time in the tenth century the Immortals realize that, if there is a river whose waters confer immortality, there must also be a river whose waters restore *mortality*. Given that the number of rivers in the world is not infinite, it is certain that in the infinite amount of time available to them an Immortal will find that river. The Immortals then set out across the world in order to find the water that will bring an end to them.

The rest of the story details the wandering of Rufus, who like those other Immortals constantly searches for this second river. In 1066, he fights at the Battle of Hastings. In the thirteenth century, he translates the story of Sinbad in Egypt. In 1638, he is in Rumania and later in Germany. In 1714 in Aberdeen, he subscribes to the six-volume set of Pope's translation of the *Iliad*. In 1921, finally, a boat taking him to Bombay runs aground on the Eritrean coast. While ashore, he drinks water from an unidentified stream; and, upon pricking himself with a thorn, notices himself bleed and feel pain. He realizes with a sense of relief that he is once again mortal. Rufus' narrative then comes to a halt; and when he resumes a year later, he realizes, upon re-reading his manuscript, that what he has written seems unreal to him because 'the experiences of two different men are intermingled in it' (*CF*, 193). He notes that, while some of his statements would accord with a soldier like Rufus, much of what he has written seems as though written by a poet. In particular, he observes that sprinkled throughout the text are phrases and expressions taken from Homer. Not only do we as readers already suspect that the real author of the pages we have just read is Cartaphilus, but Rufus/Cartaphilus begin to suspect – although this is never explicitly spelled out – that not only have they once met Homer but that they actually *are* Homer. This accounts for the fact that the narrator expressly mentions that they once subscribed to Pope's *Iliad*. It would indeed be 'pathetic' (*CF*, 194), in the sense of moving, that Homer would find a version of his own tale in such a foreign place and in such a different tongue. It would also be appropriate that, insofar as he was Homer, Cartaphilus the bookseller ensured the perpetuation of Homer's *Iliad* by passing

on Pope's translation of it to another. It is perhaps no coincidence that Cartaphilus dies at sea while returning to his homeland of Smyrna and is buried on the island of Ios in the Aegean, because these places are said to be where Homer was born and where he was buried.

Critics have predominantly interpreted 'The Immortal' in terms of Borges' long-held fascination with the 'nothingness of personality'. It is the idea that, at certain moments in our lives, we are able to go beyond our own individuality and enter into a realm that is common to all.[8] We see this in Borges' argument that in the act of copulation we are all the same person, or that when we read Shakespeare we actually become Shakespeare (*TL*, 323). It is not unrelated to the notion, also discussed by Borges, that if we could but properly understand just one flower – but any object would do – we would understand everything, insofar as the flower contains or reflects like a mirror the entire universe (*TL*, 240). It is an impersonality or universality of experience that is understood to come variously from the doctrines of pantheism, Buddhism or even Spinoza, and has even been explained autobiographically in terms of a revelation Borges once had that he did not exist. And it is an impersonality that absolutely guides Borges' literary practice. As opposed to seeing literature as the expression of a singular individual, Borges understands it as an anonymous, corporate exercise, unimaginable without the collaboration of everyone who reads and writes. This is the point behind the series of literary quotations and allusions Borges weaves throughout 'The Immortal'. Beyond any particular meaning or source he wants to draw our attention to, he is also making the point that the story of immortality *is* immortal: that it originates with no one and lives on in being transmitted from one storyteller to the next. (If Homer's Ulysses is the original immortal, it must be remembered Homer himself was merely formalizing a literary tradition that had existed a long time before him.)

And yet for all of the compelling nature of this reading of 'The Immortal' as the expression of a philosophical doctrine or as the outcome of some autobiographical experience, it still does not go far enough in penetrating the inner logic of the story itself. In order to do so ourselves, let us begin with that passage in the text in which the narrator elaborates the consequences

of immortality. As opposed to the acts of a mortal, which are 'precious' and 'pathetic' insofar as they are selective, for an Immortal 'all things happen to all men'. It is a matter not of choosing to bring about any desired outcome, but of simply relying on the workings of chance. Over the infinite period of immortality, events 'cancel and correct' each other. For any particular thing that takes place, so too does its opposite. Thus an immortal might do evil so that 'good may come of it in future centuries, or may already have come of it in centuries past'. And, as the Immortals soon conclude, this also implies that, insofar as there is a stream in the world that confers immortality, there must be another that restores mortality. And, given that the number of streams in the world is not infinite and that immortals have an infinite amount of time to look, the Immortals are certain eventually to find this stream. Now, this might appear as though the immortal must do an infinite number of things, that everything must find its opposite, *before* the second stream can be found. It would be as though the search for this stream involves a literally endless journey, crossing all the countries in the known world, as it is depicted in the story. But, if we think about it, for an Immortal, who has an infinite amount of time on their hands, any *finite* period of time, no matter how long, would seem like only a brief moment. From an immortal perspective, at least, the finding of that second stream is almost instantaneous. It can occur at any time, whether 'all things' have already been done or not.

Indeed, we might even say not that there is an infinity of things that have to be done before that second stream is discovered, but that this infinity comes about only *after* that second stream is discovered. For, if we read the story closely, we notice that immortality exists only as a retrospective effect of being mortal, can be spoken of only *after* one has become mortal. This is what the narrator means when he says: 'There is nothing very remarkable about being immortal . . . What is divine, terrible and incomprehensible is *to know* oneself immortal' (*CF*, 191). It is to say that more than simply being known or not, immortality exists only *insofar as* it is known, and that this can be done only from the point of view of a mortal. We see this with the episode with Argo, where he realizes he is Homer only after the rain (his second stream) falls on his face. It also appears that Rufus'

> tortuous path chosen by the devious Ts'ui Pen at each and every one of the turnings of his inexhaustible novel. (*CF*, 127)

And, in a sense, time *is* this virtuality, that which cannot be grasped as such, although everything stands in for it. Time is labyrinthine, in exactly that sense we have tried to make clear. For let us think about time and how Ts'ui's novel resembles it. Our usual conception of time is that it is something like a series of points strung along a line, with one 'now' or moment succeeding another in unbroken succession. It is this succession that is or gives time. But we might ask: in what *time* does this succession take place? When does this substitution of one moment for another actually occur? If the second moment has to appear to allow the first to disappear, then we would end up having all moments at once, and time would come to a standstill. If the first has to disappear to allow the second to appear, then we would end up having a gap or hole in time, and we could never get from one moment to the next. In fact, for the linear unwinding of time to be possible, that first moment must disappear *as* the second moment appears. Running alongside actual time, in which one moment *succeeds* another, there must be another virtual time, in which two moments exist *at the same time*. Each moment takes the place of this virtual time, allowing it to become the second; but, in doing so, there is opened up another virtual time, which allows that second to appear. In this sense, we might say that the successive unwinding of time is just the perpetual falling short of an end that has already arrived. And we see the same thing in 'The Immortal', where we cannot get to the end, that is, drink from that second stream, because an infinity of actions must be completed before we get there. However, if in one way we cannot get to the end because an infinity of actions must first be completed, in another way this infinity arises only after we have already got to the end. As we saw with the idea of the same action being both good and evil, a repetition of what comes before and different from it, it is only because we are already at the end that we cannot get there; it is only within the same moment there is implied an infinite distance.[9]

This, to conclude, is how the question of narrative in 'The Immortal' must be understood. The logic of immortality is that we cannot die until everything has been 'cancelled and corrected',

matched up with its opposite and equal. It entails the finding of that second stream, which at once mortalizes and allows immortality to be realized. And it is precisely of this discovery that we read in 'The Immortal', which in each of its parts is the story of how its various characters finds that second stream: Homer in the rain, as told by Rufus; Rufus with a stream near the coast of Eritrea, as told by Cartaphilus; and Cartaphilus at sea on the way home to Smyrna, as told by the narrator . . . And yet each of the narratives that tells of the death of an Immortal lives on after it as a kind of excess or remainder. In other words, this narrative that cancels and corrects must itself be cancelled and corrected before its narrator can die. The logic here is exactly like the one we saw in 'The Garden of Forking Paths', in which the solution that reveals the labyrinth necessarily opens up the possibility of another coming along after it and showing how it is *part of* the labyrinth. Each successive narrator here in 'The Immortal' – Homer, Rufus, Cartaphilus, Borges – in a sense narrates the death of the narrator before, who in turn has narrated the death of the narrator before him. What we have in the various sections that make up the narrative is not merely a series of successive episodes in the same story, but a series of stories within stories. Each story tells the story of the Immortal before, showing how their narrative produces an excess that has to find its opposite before its narrator can die. Like the 'infinite labyrinth' of Scheherazade, in 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (*CF*, 126) immortality is always a certain narration of narration. There is no original immortality – not even Homer's – because immortality always begins with the narration of the death of a previous Immortal. Immortality, in other words, is not an infinity without end, but rather an endless series of mortalities, each of which proposes another end. It is not a set of narratives one after the other, but rather what we might call an endless series of post-scripts, each of which is *about* the other. Immortality is the very passing on of the story of immortality. It exists only in the very passage from one to another. This is why we might say, despite the title of Borges' story, there is never only one immortal, but always at least two. The 'experiences of two different men are intermingled in it', if we mean by that the experiences of both mortality and immortality.

STUDY QUESTION 1

As Barbara Alfano ('Fugitive Diegesis of the First Person Singular in Borges and Calvino', *Variaciones Borges* 11 (2001), pp. 103–119) and other critics have made clear, part of Borges' narrative strategy in 'The Immortal' is to render unclear who is speaking by shifting between the first person ('Que yo recuerde', *OC* I, 533; 'divisé', *OC* I, 534) and the third person ('ofremos', *OC* I, 533; 'Partimos', *OC* I, 534) in its mode of address. For Spanish-speaking students, identify other places in the original text where Borges does this. Then compare the relative success of Andrew Hurley in *Collected Fictions* and James Irby in *Labyrinths* in conveying this strategy in the English.

STUDY QUESTION 2

The critic Jaime Alazraki speaks of a certain 'oxymoronic structure' to Borges' essays (in Dunham and Ivask, *The Cardinal Points of Borges*). What are some of the examples of this 'oxymoronic structure' in the Borges stories we have looked at here? Why does Borges employ this oxymoronic structure? Does it lead to a general form of scepticism, a 'cancelling and correction' of opposites, or can it be read another way?

CHAPTER 3

READING THE SHORT STORIES: THE BORGESIAN

As with any great writer, it is tempting to try to say what makes Borges who he is. Why is he worth reading? What particular set of qualities does he bring to literature? How does he relate to other authors? Accordingly, in the vast literature on Borges, there have been many attempts to identify the distinguishing characteristics of Borges. Critics have sought, on the stylistic level, to analyse his peculiar vocabulary and mode of expression. They have complied lists of those 'nine or ten' words that accord with his soul: infinite, circular, universe, the colour red. They have spoken of his habit of choosing unexpected and etymologically precise adjectives: 'unanimous' to qualify 'night' (*CF*, 96); 'interminable' to qualify a 'brick wall' (*CF*, 256). Critics have sought to speak more generally of Borges' style, which is notable for bringing an English concision to the grandiosity of literary Spanish. Borges' most recent translator notes Borges' frequent use of the semi-colon to replace the 'ands', 'buts' and 'thens' that usually link sentences.[1] The Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes speaks of Borges' 'dazzling prose, so cold it burns one's lips'.[2] On a still more general level, critics have sought to elaborate Borges' particular narrative strategies and preferences. These range from Borges beginning a story as though it were a review of a book to treating his own text as though it were an entry in an encyclopaedia. Critics speak as well of a certain 'thinness' to Borges' style, in which only selected moments from the events in question are given and everything is directed towards the final narrative revelation, with none of that excess of detail that produces the effect of the 'real' in fiction.[3]

On a still larger scale, critics have attempted to identify the broader ideas that animate Borges' fiction. These are, in part, that series of words we find throughout Borges' texts; but they are also the more abstract, amorphous concepts that do not

always directly feature there: time, heroism, the reversal of fate, the unreality of the world. It is the interplay of these concepts that can be understood to form the 'cardinal points' of Borges' universe and to give his work its underlying force. There is then the wider culture that Borges' work both comes out of and is a response to. This is that staggeringly diverse group of writers and thinkers whose work Borges is said to have been influenced by or to have otherwise encountered at some point in his career. This would include not only those writers with whom Borges bears some affinity (Chesterton, Shaw, Wells, Stevenson), but also those who exert a pressure on his work in their difference from it (Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, James). This series would also include particular philosophers, scientists and mathematicians whose works Borges read, or at least read about, and frequently made the basis for his stories: Zeno, Berkeley, Hume, Cantor. And, alongside all of this, the focus of much of the last twenty or thirty years of Borges scholarship is the question of Borges' general cultural situation. This is before all else to ask how everything spoken of above is mediated through Borges being Argentine. How did the fact that Borges comes from a faraway, provincial culture affect how he responded to the various cultural influences he came into contact with? How is his work to be seen not as an imitation of the European canon, but as an active response to it? In what ways does Borges speak of location in his work, beyond any obvious geographical reference?

All of these efforts to analyse Borges stylistically and thematically, to identify his literary and philosophical sources, to situate him and his work within wider social and historical forces, are absolutely essential to any consideration of him. We could not imagine a proper response to Borges that did not attempt to say what his particular contribution to literature was, what he managed to achieve that no one else had previously. To look at the various attempts by critics to undertake this is important at least in understanding the history of the reception of Borges, the way he has successively been taken up over time. And yet, as we outline in Chapter 1, there is a *limit* to these approaches, insofar as Borges' work constitutes a questioning of the assumptions behind them. Not only Borges' literary criticism, but also his stories ask how we can speak of what is unique or distinctive about a particular author. What is the connection between an

seen as a veritable expedition to the North Pole' (*TL*, 364). The fourth is the poet Robert Browning and his poem 'Fears and Scruples', which tells the story of a man who believes he has a famous and noble friend and shows this friend's letters to others. When these others cast doubt on this friend's nobility and even on the genuineness of the letters, the man replies: 'What if this friend happened to be God?' (*TL*, 364). The fifth precursor is the late-nineteenth-century French novelist Léon Bloy and one of the stories from his *Histoires désobligeantes*, which concerns a group of would-be travellers, who accumulate atlases, train schedules and suitcases, but who die without ever leaving the town in which they were born. And the sixth precursor Borges adduces is the opposite of this. It is the twentieth-century English writer Lord Dunsany and his poem 'Carcassone', in which an army of warriors sets out from an enormous castle for Carcassone; but, despite crossing mountains and encountering monsters, they never reach their destination, although they do once glimpse it from afar.

In each case here, Borges selects an author who reveals to us something of Kafka's distinctive qualities. The implication, obviously, is that Kafka read and was influenced by these precursors and tried to incorporate them into his work. However, as we move through this various and far-flung list, featuring authors from such vastly different times and places, we become increasingly doubtful whether Kafka would have read all of them. As we gradually realize, it is not that Kafka actually read these authors, or at least we could never conclusively prove this, but rather that Kafka operates as an excuse allowing his interpreter to put together this erudite and heterogeneous list. It is not that these authors have an obviously Kafkaesque quality or can be seen as naturally belonging together, but rather that in the light of Kafka's work we are now able to find some Kafka-like quality to them and a commonality between them. As Borges writes in the famous and much-quoted conclusion to his essay:

> The word 'precursor' is indispensable to the vocabulary of criticism, but one must try to purify it from any connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. (*TL*, 365)