

## BORGES, IMMORTALITY AND THE CIRCULAR RUINS<sup>1</sup>

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*The author explores ideas surrounding immortality and death focusing on the interplay between their development in two stories by Borges ('The circular ruins' and 'The immortal') and their manifestation in a patient. With the help of Borges's stories, the author addresses the desperate necessity experienced by some individuals to search for immortality. This is not just an expression of the universal wish to live forever but, at a deeper level, arises from the impossibility of bearing the mental pain of experiencing ordinary human vulnerability and loss—death being the ultimate expression of such vulnerability. It is suggested that the relentless pursuit of immortality in such individuals expresses an omnipotent phantasy of ridding the self of the emotional pain and fear that arises through being alive. It leads to a denial of the emotional significance of passage of time, of separation and sexual differences. In actuality, the individual's state of not feeling approximates to a complete loss of human identity and emotional death, with no place for any meaningful others. The individual him/herself becomes a 'mere image', living in a delusional world peopled by him/herself and his/her projections, and ending up trapped inside the circular ruins he/she has generated. The horror experienced at the stark awareness of the individual's emotional death and the wish to re-establish contact with the good internal objects that have been attacked sets in motion the long process of searching for the recovery of a sense of temporality (that would still include the wish for immortality) and, with it, a sense of identity.*

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### BORGES

Jorge Luis Borges was born just over a century ago, on 24 August 1899 in Buenos Aires. He died in Geneva on 14 August 1986. The Borgeses were sons and grandsons of officers who served in the War of Independence against Spain, in the campaigns against the

Indians, in nineteenth-century wars against Argentina's neighbours, as well as in Argentinian civil wars. Borges's grandfather was a colonel who is said to have died heroically in one of the civil wars. His paternal grandmother was English and Borges was raised bilingually. This combined upbringing, where English authors mingled with Spanish

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culture, as well as the cultural changes following the massive immigration of Italians at the beginning of the century, together with the historical influence of the building of Argentina, produced the rich blend of experiences from which Borges would draw.

When Borges was 14, his family moved to Geneva searching for treatment for his father's eye problems; these were hereditary and had left several members of his family blind. His father died blind, as did Borges. Borges finished his secondary education in Switzerland and spent time in Spain before returning to Buenos Aires (Bell-Villada, 1981). Borges regarded himself primarily as a poet until 1938, when two very painful episodes in his life seemed to come together to produce a vital change in his writings: first, his father died and, some months later, Borges suffered an accident on a dark stairway. He had gone to fetch a young woman who he was going to take out and he did not see an open window. His serious head-injury developed into a septicaemia that kept him between life and death for fifteen days. It was after recovering from this delirious ordeal that Borges wrote what became his first work of metaphysical fiction, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote' (Bell-Villada, 1981; Woscoboinik, 1991; Salas, 1994; Barnatan, 1995). It is not difficult to speculate on the importance that these very painful events may have had on his writing, though it is not the aim of this paper to undertake a psychoanalytic study of Borges as a person or to search for possible unconscious motives for his ideas.

Borges's stories are surrounded by a magical aura that seems to be created by the 'fiction-within-a-fiction'. In a study on Borges, Bell-Villada suggests that this 'derives from the possibility that we, the readers of outer fiction, may be in turn fictional characters being read about, at the very same time, by someone else!' (Bell-Villada, 1981). Borges plays with fact and fiction, the real and unreal, illusion, time and death. This is appropriately described by one of the char-

acters in his story 'Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', who states that 'metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature' (1944a).

#### 'THE CIRCULAR RUINS'

'The circular ruins' (1944b) is a short, strangely elusive and highly poetic story about the struggle of an individual's determination to generate a man. In this story, an old man, a magician, gets off a boat, kisses the 'sacred mud' and installs himself in the ruins of an ancient circular temple. He is moved, compelled by the 'invincible', 'not impossible', but supernatural purpose 'to dream a man: he wanted to dream him with minute integrity and insert him into reality'. We are told that this man probably does not feel any physical pain: 'This magical project had exhausted the entire content of his soul; if someone had asked him his own name or any trait of his previous life, he would not have been able to answer'.

The Old Man dedicated himself to dreaming and he dreamed 'that he was in the centre of a circular amphitheatre which in some way was the burned temple ...'. He chose a boy from among others in his dreams. This boy had 'sharp features which reproduced those of the dreamer'. Borges continues, stating that 'nevertheless, catastrophe ensued', as the man could no longer go to sleep. Eventually, and after worshipping the planetary gods and uttering the syllables of a 'powerful name', he slept. He finally dreamed a complete man; one afternoon, he almost destroyed his work, but then repented. Borges writes, 'It would have been better for him had he destroyed it'. Finally, the Old Man makes a pact with the God of Fire (who presides over the temple), who 'would magically give life to the sleeping phantom, in such a way that all creatures except fire itself and the dreamer would believe him to be a man of flesh and blood'. Each day, the Old Man prolonged the hours he dedicated to his dreams as it 'pained him to be separated from his boy'. But the boy

was now ready to be sent to the other circular temple. 'But first (so that he would never know he was a phantom, so that he would be thought a man like others) he instilled into him a *complete oblivion* of his years of apprenticeship' (my italics).

Borges tells us that this man went on living, imagining that his unreal child was practising the same rites as him in other circular ruins. 'His life purpose was complete; the man persisted in a kind of ecstasy.' Some undetermined time later, the dreamer was awakened by two men who told him of a magic man who could walk on fire and not be burned. This tormented the Old Man who feared his son would discover 'that his condition was that of a mere image . . . Not to be a man, to be the projection of another man's dream, what a feeling of humiliation, of vertigo!'

Suddenly fire begun to ravage the old man's own temple. And Borges writes,

For what was happening had happened many centuries ago. The ruins of the fire god's sanctuary were destroyed by fire. In a birdless dawn the magician saw the concentric blaze close round the walls. For a moment, he thought of taking refuge in the river, but then he knew that death was coming to crown his old age and absolve him of his labours. He walked into the shreds of flame. But they did not bite into his flesh, they caressed him and engulfed him without heat or combustion. With *relief*, with *humiliation*, with *terror*, he understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another (my italics).

The illusion we are under in this story is the idea that the Old Man makes a voluntary choice and that he can actually make a decision "to destroy his work, to stop the dreaming. What Borges shows us is this Old Man locked, encircled by and inside the ruins of his own making. How can he step outside his dream of dreaming a man, if he himself is the product of somebody else's dream? Is it just an act of volition to accept reality or is it that, at times, somebody might be unable even to see that he is the product of a dream; not just somebody else's dreams but also his

own dream about how he was dreamed or wanted to be dreamed by somebody else? And couldn't this be a way of avoiding the painful knowledge of his mortality?

The story's epigraph is taken from *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll: 'And if he let off dreaming about you . . .' It is from a scene in which Tweedledum and Tweedledee tell Alice about the Red King. They explain that the King is actually dreaming of her and, were he to awaken, Alice would simply vanish. Tweedledee asks Alice:

'And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?'

'Where I am now, of course,' said Alice.

'Not you!' Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. 'You'd be nowhere. Why, you are only a sort of thing in his dream!' (Carroll, 1911).

Alice is thus denied a real existence, a real identity, and becomes someone else's dream. Maybe Alice herself was creating a dream of being somebody else's dream. In Borges's story, were the dreamer to awaken, his son would vanish, but it is quite likely *he* would then also vanish, being himself just a dream and therefore also lacking a real identity.

With the help of the gods he invokes, the Old Man reproduces himself and creates a man in his own image. The son should be the same as the father and is created with the help of another father, God. It is a major narcissistic endeavour that defies gender differences, time, history and human change.

This same subject is brought up again in another beautiful and quite complicated story called 'The immortal' (1949), from his book *The Aleph*.

#### 'THE IMMORTAL'

The story opens with a note on Joseph Cartaphilus, an aged antique dealer who recently sold a princess an original edition of Pope's translation of the *Iliad*. Inside the book

she discovers a manuscript, which is the story one then reads. In this story, an army officer called Marcus Flaminius Rufus, who had served in a legion where the men were consumed by 'fever and magic', precipitously decided to seek out the famous City of Immortals and the River of Immortality, 'the secret river which cleanses men of death'. The reasons behind his action are vaguely described as a possible sense of privation for being unable to have a proper look at the face of Mars. After enduring much hardship, Rufus found himself lying with his hands tied, close to the River of Immortality and to the City of Immortals. He was amidst 'naked, grey-skinned, scraggly bearded men who could not speak and who ate serpents: the troglodytes' (cave dwellers). He finally reaches the City, followed by one of these troglodytes who remains outside.

Rufus has difficulties in finding the way to the centre of this City. He has to work his way out of a vast circular chamber with nine doors, eight of which lead to labyrinths that return to the same chamber. He finally emerges into the courtyard of an empty, 'interminable', 'atrocious' and 'completely senseless' building, older than mankind. The architecture lacks any finality: 'It abounded in dead-end corridors, high unattainable windows, portentous doors which led to a cell or pit, incredible inverted stairways whose steps and balustrades hung downwards'.

Rufus thinks to himself: This palace is a fabrication of the gods. Then he corrects himself: The Gods who built it have died. He then continues to say: The Gods who built it were mad.

Rufus leaves the place and tries to teach language to the troglodyte who waited for him, and whom he had called 'Argos' because of his hang-dog quality. He fails over and over again. Borges writes,

I thought that Argos and I participated in different universes ... I thought that perhaps there were *no objects* for him, only a vertiginous and continuous play of extremely brief impressions. I thought of a

world without memory, without time ... Thus the days went on dying and with them the years, but something akin to happiness happened one morning. It rained, with powerful deliberation' (my italics).

Rufus dreams that a river (to whose waters he has returned a goldfish) has come to rescue him.

Argos, his eyes turned towards the sky, groaned; torrents ran down his face, not only of water but also (I later learned) of tears. Argos, I cried, Argos.

Suddenly Argos stammers a line out of the *Odyssey*, 'Argos, Ulysses's dog'. When Rufus asks him how well he knows the *Odyssey*, the once mute troglodyte says, 'It must be a thousand years since I invented it'. He was Homer himself. The mad city was the 'last symbol to which the Immortals condescended; it marks a stage at which, judging that all undertakings are in vain, they determined to live in thought, in pure speculation ... Absorbed in thought, they hardly perceived the physical world'. '*Except for man, all creatures are immortal, for they are ignorant of death; what is divine, terrible, incomprehensible, is to know that one is immortal*' (my italics).

Borges also tells us in the words of Rufus:

Homer composed the *Odyssey*; if we postulate an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to compose the *Odyssey*, at least once. No one is anyone, one single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a tedious way of saying that I do not exist.

Immortality '*made them invulnerable to pity ... neither were they interested in their own fate*' (my italics). 'Among the immortals ... every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past ...'; 'Death (or its allusion) makes men precious and pathetic'.

Rufus decides to search for the river whose waters remove immortality. After many more

years Rufus sees a spring of clear water, which he tastes. Some time later, a spiny bush lacerates the back of his hand. The unusual pain seems very acute and makes Rufus say, '*Incredulous, speechless and happy, I contemplated the precious formation of a slow drop of blood. Once again I am like all men*' (my italics).

But the end brings in an ironic negation of this same statement. Mortality seems to be best, but Borges goes back to stress how, when the end draws near, there are no longer 'any remembered images; only words remain'.

Borges presents us with two very imaginative stories, the product of a highly creative enterprise. Amongst many other possible interpretations, we can understand his narrative as a metaphor for the psychic struggle experienced by some individuals when they are confronted with feelings of pain and loss and their subsequent compulsive search for an omnipotent solution through the phantasy of becoming immortal. In a masterly way, Borges describes the mixed feelings experienced by the two men in the stories when they become aware of the omnipotent but deadly consequences of becoming immortal: 'Relief, humiliation and terror' in 'The circular ruins', and a 'sense of the divine, incomprehension and madness', as well as the loss of language as meaning, as communication and as vehicle for individuation, in 'The immortal'.

Both stories deal with the omnipotent phantasy of cancelling chronological, linear time. Differences are cancelled; there is no identity to separate the individual from anybody else, no different identity to make the son different from the father. Procreation can happen without sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. There is no physical body to get anxious about and attend to. Basically, no other objects are allowed to exist in the mind, just echoes of oneself. In 'The immortal' Borges brilliantly describes the result when he says, 'There is nothing that is not as if lost in a maze of indefatigable mirrors'.

Anzieu stresses that the child enters into chronological time only through the acceptance of the 'forbidden oedipal other'. For him, the 'circular time' in Borges is a symbolic figure of the circle inside which mother and child fuse. It is a time of the indefinite repetition of pleasure (Anzieu, 1971). I agree with Anzieu in that the circularity symbolises a closed system where there is no room for any separate objects. There is certainly no room for a primal scene. These are ruins that I think represent the Old Man's compulsion to repeat 'this magical project [that] had exhausted the entire content of his soul' (Borges, 1944b). However, neither the Old Man nor Rufus seem to be seeking pleasure alone. They seem possessed by a need, which they do not feel they have much choice over.

#### MR A

I would like now to describe a patient, Mr A, who, like the Old Man, is locked in a circular temple and for whom coming to analysis seems to be equivalent to Rufus's conflict about recovering his own mortality.

We can think of Mr A, a man in his 30s, as somebody who, like Rufus, is searching for a miraculous river that would cancel reality. Mr A had a very difficult childhood with both parents chronic alcoholics who drank themselves into comas and finally died debilitated by drink and liver failure. However, Mr A was left with the image of a grandiose father whom all his friends admired and who came alive through drinking. His father used to talk about his numerous sexual conquests, even though the boy had to hear him confessing later that he was impotent. His mother was felt by him to be somebody who renounced everything and drank herself to death in her need to follow an idealised and feared husband.

As a child, Mr A got involved in dangerous playing which prompted his numerous accidents, with several hospitalisations for broken

bones. He was not aware that he might have wanted to die or that he could have died. He walked into a lake without knowing how to swim and had to be rescued. He fell from swings, trying to get higher and higher, walked on the edge of dangerously high walls, and so on. As an adult he gambles with alcohol and feels terribly surprised when he urinates in his sleep, and when, the day after drinking heavily, his mind and body do not feel quite right. He cannot believe that they have suffered from the impact of drinking.

After his father's death, which occurred during the first year of his analysis, Mr A turned to drinking more heavily than before. He frequently fell asleep in the sessions and he missed a number of these after having gone drinking the night before. His associations invited interpretations about loss, but I was often left feeling that I had been seduced into talking about pain and loss when he could not feel either of them. At this time I felt that there was a demand coming from him that I should carry the anxiety and pain about the loss of his father, and about his own self-destructive behaviour, while he observed my impotent struggle to help him get in touch with an emotional experience that he had magically made disappear while drifting into a world without time, without memory. He often spent his sessions organising geometrical pictures in his mind, controlling, and mostly cancelling, any impact that my words provoked in him.

Three months after his father's death, he said, 'Yesterday was a strange day. I just wanted to sleep. I remember being at the tube station wishing that I could go and get into bed, but I went to work instead. I went back home early and got into bed. I set the alarm at six and I was slightly panicky when it went off because I did not know whether it was six in the evening or six in the morning but then I went back to bed and went on dozing. I cannot remember what we talked about yesterday. I remember I said something about trousers and about my boss but cannot remember what you said, although I felt

surprised by it. I think I was expecting you to say something and you said something else'.

This was said in an affect-less way and it seemed like a precursor to his going to sleep. I took up his wanting me to keep the session alive and remember for him what he had forgotten. My bringing up his father's death yesterday alarmed him so he cancelled the memory of the session by going to sleep, as he was about to do now as well.

'It is strange you say that because I have completely forgotten that my father died. I now remember thinking a bit about it while I was outside . . . I am aware when I meet people that they are aware that he died and that they say things like how much they sympathise with me. When he died I was with my brother and sister and they both had red eyes and they both said that they had cried their eyes out and then felt better and I felt robbed of my tears. Yesterday, before going to sleep, I decided to masturbate and looked for a fantasy but nothing turned me on. I thought, Am I turning asexual?'

He yawned. He said he has been struggling, trying not to fall asleep. After a silence he said, 'I have been looking at that picture on the wall. In the picture it is dawn. Maybe that has to do with goodbyes. That word strikes a chord. I have been playing one of my games just now, imagining that all the angles in the picture were changed'.

His 'game' seems to be about changing the chords of an emotional experience so as to produce meaningless pictures, which he then watches from a distance, only to feel that he has been robbed of his tears. Thus, awareness of anxiety at his attack on his capacity to perceive time (which would have inevitably led to an experience of loss and pain) was cancelled out.

In his second year of analysis I learned that Mr A leads a secret mental life of day-dreams. In these day-dreams he is a hero saving people from disasters. His friends, his analysis, his work, all seem to be just minor necessary undertakings which never feel as gratifying as his day-dreams. In these day-

dreams Mr A gives birth, like the Old Man, to a him who is invulnerable; to a him who is immortal as well as superior to all other human beings. This him does not suffer pain or fear, is ready to risk giving up his life to rescue others, but without ever losing it. He is a real Superman, morally and physical superior to all of us. Being deeply religious, Mr A feels at times at one with God and he has intense sensuous experiences in which he feels a 'call' from God.

As soon as he leaves the session, even before the door closes, Mr A is off saving a child from some possible terrible disaster. He is not consciously aware that he is the child who needs to be saved, as he has the proof that he can be harmed, hurt, almost dead and yet he never dies. He feels powerful and, in the brief moments he looks around and sees other people going to work, he feels sorry for them. Mr A lives somehow like the troglodyte. There are no real objects that seem to matter. He could not really mourn his parents' death; he cannot enjoy human intercourse. He does not know whether he is homosexual or heterosexual. Ordinary women are felt to be interesting and desirable as long as they are unreachable, and he has a number of idealised women whom he keeps at a distance, away from any possible development of a real relationship (this being also enacted in the analysis).

When Mr A gets in touch with his reality he feels terrified that he will be 'found out' and, in his mind, the ordinary human him would then be despised by others in the same way as it is despised by him. In fact, Mr A is terrified that *he* will 'find out' about his attacks on the real human him and of his compelling need to repeat a story in his mind that leaves him feeling empty, lonely and despairing and that could eventually lead to his actual death. At the same time, in his coming to analysis, he seems to be searching for a safe place where he could allow himself to be 'found out'. Mr A sought analysis out of anxiety that he was going mad. He was in five-times-a-week analysis for ten years.

Though from his point of view Mr A feels no desires but is aware of others who seem to need things from him, it is clear that at a deeper level he projects his own desires and needs into other people who then seem to represent to him these aspects of himself. Therefore, like the Old Man, he does not feel he is living his own life. He is always the product of his own dreams and of what he phantasises were his father's dreams. He is seldom aware of any feelings, or that *he* is the one doing the dreaming. During the first years of analysis the transference was imbued with a demand for me to follow him and get lost with him in the labyrinths he created. At the same time I was exposed to the anxiety that he could not feel about his self-destructive behaviour. I was placed in the position of a spectator, probably similar to how he must have felt as a child, an impotent witness to his parents' suicidal behaviour. It seemed vital that I should not become part of his fiction and that the analysis could help him discover 'death *within* himself, not death wishes or anxiety, but "deathwork"', as it has been described by Pontalis (1977), and offer him an alternative to his belief that only his omnipotence could save him.

In the fifth year of his analysis, Mr A brought the following dream to one of his sessions: *'I dreamed I was on a boat. The captain ordered one of the men on board to do something and then told him he would not be able to be part of the crew any longer. I thought this was unfair. He was talking to me and I could see his face, like that of a drunken man with red blood vessels. Then I was in a large vessel, a liner, and I was under deck and the boat first rolled on to one side and then turned round completely. It did the same to the other side. I felt everything was going round and round. I realised we were sinking. I thought I should get a bucket to put over my head so I could breathe when I got to the bottom of the sea and I would then survive. I looked for a bucket and there was a pile of buckets, champagne buckets that you see in pubs. I put one over my head and went down.'*

*I could therefore breathe so I stayed there and then I came up. I saw people trying to get hold of things and there was a couple that had a baby who had died. Then I thought of Louise and I remembered that I was with her and I started looking for her. I started crying and crying, until I woke up.* I will return to this dream later.

#### DEATH AND DELUSION

Borges's description of both the Old Man's and Rufus's world is one which reminds us of Freud's description of the workings of the primary process in the System Unconscious: mainly wishful impulses, 'impulses existing side by side exempt from mutual contradictions', 'no negation, no doubt, no degrees of uncertainty', no reference to time and therefore timelessness, no regard for reality (Freud, 1915a).

In 'Thoughts for the times on war and death', Freud states that it is impossible to imagine our own death and that 'at bottom no one believes in his own death . . . and that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality' (1915b). But he says,

Man could no longer keep death at a distance, for he had tested it in his pain about the dead; but he was nevertheless unwilling to acknowledge it, for he could not conceive of himself as dead. So he devised a compromise: he conceded the fact of his own death as well as *denied it the significance of annihilation* (1915b, my italics).

He adds that man needed religions to present a possibility of an after-life in order to deprive 'death of its meaning as the termination of life'. We can speculate that in both stories, as well as in Mr A, the fear of death might have been the trigger for the denial of chronological time and for the search for immortality. However, I think that this is an insufficient explanation.

In 1914 Freud developed the concept of narcissism as a withdrawal of libido from the external world and directed to the ego.

Rosenfeld (1971) explored this subject further, focusing on the central role played by the over-valuation of the self, based mainly on the idealisation of the self. As he sees it, there are omnipotent parts of the self, which may be split off from the rest of the personality and become like a 'delusional world or object into which parts of the self tend to withdraw'. He stresses that this omnipotent and omniscient part of the self 'creates the notion that within the delusional object there is complete painlessness' and sees it as a 'power which manages to pull the whole of the self away from life into a deathlike condition by false promises of a Nirvana-like state' (1971, p. 175). He adds that in this process the saner self enters the delusional object through projective identification and loses its identity, becoming completely dominated by this omnipotent destructive process.

This delusional object that carries the omnipotent aspects of the self seems to fulfil a parental role on which the subject later feels dependent in order to survive, like the Old Man in 'The circular ruins', who turned to 'the planetary gods, uttered the lawful syllables of a powerful name and slept' (1944b). The real parents are denied existence in the same way as the real and vulnerable aspects of the self; they have been killed and replaced by a delusional system. What is left of them is just circular ruins. The Old Man in 'The circular ruins' disembarked in what was the remains of a temple 'long ago devoured by fire'.

Attacks on the awareness of a human non-ideal mother, whom the infant does not own, can lead, according to Brenman, to an identification with the 'ideal breast' which would satisfy the demands to *have* the ideal and *be* the ideal. The outcome can be the development of a superego which is cruel and narrow and which the individual feels forced to worship and satisfy for the rest of his life. The individual would therefore be 'confined to his narrow loveless narcissistic demands, governed by narrow loveless narcissistic



gods' that are loved more than humanity (Brenman, 1985).

The triumph experienced towards the vulnerable and fallible human parental objects as well as towards the vulnerable aspects of the self, and the rejection and attack on both of them, brings about an inner sense of persecution and fear of retaliation. This fear of retaliation is often at the basis of the fear of death, as was stated by Freud: 'The fear of death . . . is usually the outcome of a sense of guilt' (1915b, p. 297). Thus, the delusional narcissistic withdrawal that has led to triumph over the parts of the self aware of pain and vulnerability generates persecutory guilt and fear of death, which needs to be dealt with by further withdrawal into this omnipotent state of mind. These are the *circular ruins* that cannot be abandoned. The 'painless world' that has been created has to be maintained at all costs as the experience of psychic pain is equated to death.

In 'The circular ruins' the Old Man created the gods he needed to invoke in order to pursue his quest for immortality. He was also dependent on the gods' will. These gods protected his narcissism but also enslaved him to it. He had to submit to the fate of seeing the destruction of the temple but could not completely abandon it, as he was trapped inside its ruins and could not die. He was left without any real resources and, as Borges says (in relation to the Old Man), his project had 'exhausted the entire content of his soul' and 'if someone had asked him his own name or any trait of his previous life, he would not have been able to answer' (1944b). The individual is left impoverished, with no external or internal separate objects to relate to except his godlike omnipotent double.

The actual ruins would symbolise in this way the remains of his dead objects as well as his own identity and his feeling of being trapped by the repetitive compulsion to go on recreating the same scenario. This reminds us of Freud's development of his theory of the death drive (1920) as opposed to a life drive. A death drive that would explain situations

where the individual tends to repeat unpleasant and traumatic experiences, which might induce suffering but which he cannot avoid repeating. A death drive which 'pushed the organism to die only in its own fashion' and that is linked by him to destructiveness and repetition compulsion, thus entering into a conflict with the wish to live, to love and to create. Zilboorg ventured the possibility that 'the death instinct projected outward might not only become the instinct of eternal aggression but also the drive towards immortality' (1938). In the case of the Old Man, as well as in Mr A, it seems to lead to the cancellation of psychic pain inherent in the knowledge of time, change and differences; more akin to how Aulagnier describes her conception of the death drive "the desire for not having to entertain any desire" (1975). In Mr A this amounts to his belief that he could actually achieve such a state of mind and freeze his internal world forever.

We could therefore say that the 'circular ruins' were caused by the compelling unconscious choice of narcissistic omnipotence as against awareness of psychic reality. It is in the vicissitudes of the preservation or renunciation of omnipotence where the narcissistic dilemma of man confronted by time lies (Boschan, 1990). Mr A denied any awareness of passage of time in between sessions by diving into day-dreaming even before he closed the door, and perhaps only partially emerging from it when he arrived to his next session. In Borges's story, there is only a brief moment of conflict when the Old Man could have stopped dreaming but he did not appear to have had the possibility of making a choice given that he was already the product of a (*his*) dream. However, at the end, there is also some awareness of psychic conflict, and I would like to stress the words used by Borges to describe the Old Man's feelings when he realises that he himself is also a dream and therefore cannot die: *relief, humiliation and terror*. These three words brilliantly describe the conflict we all sustain between the wish to submerge ourselves in an idealised painless

universe, with the horror that this possibility brings out in us. The *terror* I think expresses the Old Man's fear at the recognition of his self-destructiveness, of having given up on his human condition.

In everyday life Mr A's own needs, emotional and physical vulnerability, dependency and fears are denied. He feels taken over by his omnipotent phantasies expressed through day-dreams, which he can recognise as the only things that gives him pleasure and a sense of well being. Mr A lives, as Borges says, 'lost in a maze of indefatigable mirrors'. He became the dreamed son of another man's dream. But this other man is not the real father but the father he creates for himself, an idealised, omnipotent and all-powerful immortal God into whom he projects himself. For most of the time, the *real* parents as well as the *real* him become non-existent figures. Mr A has come to believe he only exists while he day-dreams and if he stops day-dreaming of his immortality he would die" he is his own Red King, in a fashion similar to what Sodore calls 'death by day-dreaming' (1999). Winnicott (1971) described day-dreaming as an isolated phenomena that can remain static over the whole of the patient's life, absorbing energy but not contributing either to dreaming or to living, and very different to an imaginative process that is life-enriching. It seems to me that it is this 'static quality' that is compulsively searched for, as it provides confirmation that it is possible to cancel time, change and differences.

#### THE DREAM AND THE SEARCH TO RECOVER MORTALITY

In Mr A's dream the narcissistic withdrawal into an immortal Godlike him, who survives through being inside a drunken mother-vessel, seems to have been triggered by a feeling of exclusion and hatred of the father who actually throws him out of the boat; conveying through the ship and sea imagery how it must have felt to be the child

of such a crew, of parents who, in their drunkenness, throw him out with only his omnipotence to save him. In the same way that he cancels all feelings at the end of his sessions and switches on his heroic day-dreams, he now submerges himself into the idealised alcoholic maternal waters, though there is some awareness of the restricted 'bucket' into which he puts his mind. When he attempts to come out what faces him is a couple of possible adrift parents and a dead child. This dead child is the one who lacks a real identity, who has been drowned, whose humanity died like Homer's in 'The city of immortals'.

The anguish evoked in Mr A by the awareness of the dead baby-him, of the suicidal consequences of his identification with God, does for Mr A what the rain does for Homer. It is the awareness of this specular him that brings him back to the psychic reality of his attacks on life. In Mr A's dream *the anguish encountered when seeing the dead child, held by this adrift couple, makes him desperately search for a woman*. But, following his associations, this woman represented by Louise is an idealised woman" she is somebody who is associated with bringing back the lost illusion of re-establishing his balance when he fears a narcissistic loss. Mr A's sense of panic in the dream also stems from the feeling that he cannot resort to idealisation as effectively as before when confronted with an internalised parental couple struggling for its psychic survival. However, at the time he brought this dream, I could also perceive a gradual movement in Mr A towards psychic change. There is some awareness of the restricted world of day-dreaming and a representation of the possibility of there being parents who could save their child, an implication that in his internal world such parents could be brought to life, probably through the experience in the transference of my concern for this dying child-him. Louise also represents me, and his wish for me to help him. I think that bringing this dream is his way of expressing his horror at

what he is doing to himself and his objects, as well as his wish for recovery.

In contrast to the deadly circular self-contained world of day-dreaming, Mr A's dream could be seen as an expression of a desire to promote thinking, enquiry and conjecture, of reaching a listener who is a separate object and not just the result of his own projections. Crying makes Mr A human again; it brings the lack, the difference, the absence. It also symbolises his wish and hope to be helped by me not to go on killing himself. It opens the way to the process of mourning, to the possibility of coming alive without having to follow his parents and kill himself.

Mr A's dream conveys the powerful unconscious struggle he was going through, unlike his need to omnipotently control reality, in an 'effort to get away from inner reality' (Winnicott, 1935, p. 130) via his repetitive, mindless omnipotent day-dreams. The discrepancy between his day-dreaming and this dream is similar to the difference noted by Britton between escapist and serious fiction. According to Britton, escapist fiction resembles obvious day-dreaming, while serious fiction expresses psychic reality, resonating with something unconscious and profoundly evocative (1995, 1998). Mr A's dream is a creative enterprise that stands in relation to his day-dreams, as Borges's stories stand in relation to his characters' dreams; in that both Mr A's dream and Borges's stories represent a desire to be in contact with internal reality.

These two stories by Borges amply resonate with our own unconscious wishes and beliefs, bringing together the in-depth unconscious workings of the dreamer and the aesthetic capacity to create thoughtfulness, mystery and a sense of openness to the unexpected. But, as in 'The circular ruins', the unconscious drama may well be compulsively repeated all over again and the inside of the day-dream bucket could be reinvested with life-giving qualities when it is a near suicidal place to live in.

I see the story 'The circular ruins' as

equivalent to Rufus's search for the City of Immortals. In 'The circular ruins' the Old Man is trapped in the ruins that his narcissistic endeavour brings about. He cannot come alive. Though he has a conflict about that and he is terrified of his discovery, he is also relieved that the fire does not destroy him. He is relieved that he *himself* is a dream. In 'The immortal' we can see Rufus's satisfaction at the possibility of being Homer and composing the *Odyssey* ('at least once'), of being a god, a hero, a philosopher, a demon, of being the world; it feels 'divine' but also 'terrible' and 'incomprehensible'. There seems to be some awareness that the destruction of his real identity and the creation of a world in which 'all undertakings are in vain' is worse than real death.

It is only when Rufus sees what I think is his specular image of quasi-dead Homer that he recovers a sense of himself. He also recovers the wish to repair what he feels he has done to his internal objects (he returns the goldfish and hopes for a river to come and rescue him). Argos has torrents of tears running down his face and finally mutters, 'Argos, Ulysses's dog'. It is then that 'being the dog of' (equivalent to being in relation to an object, such as being the brother or son of) can have some meaning. And, in the acceptance of the existence of a meaningful separate loved object, death becomes a necessary reality that can be mourned, allowing for language and identity to be re-established" as it is through language that our finitude is most radically revealed (Dastur, 1996). I think it is significant that in the *Odyssey* (Homer, 1980: 209), Argos is described as the dog brought up by Odysseus before he left. Argos waited for twenty years, lying unwanted on a pile of manure, only dying after seeing his old master again.

It is only now that Rufus can leave the mad gods. He gives up the search for immortality and struggles to recover his mortality, to own a specific, particular destiny, different to that of others and specific to himself. Awareness

of transience, as was described by Freud (1916), increases the value of life. It makes Rufus recover his peace of mind: 'That night, I slept until dawn'. In a paper on the fear of death, Segal describes that preparation for death involves a relinquishing of omnipotent control and the need to allow the objects to live on without one (1981b). The realisation of the attacks on the good objects and the wish to repair the damage done to them give rise to a sense of loss and guilt. But this guilt is one that can now lead to reparation and to a way out from the circular ruins. Segal links this to the wish to 'restore and re-create the lost loved object outside and within the ego', which she sees as the basis for sublimation and creativity (1981a).

Rufus is now able to abandon his compulsive quest for immortality, to find the 'spring of clear water' that makes him become aware of pain and finitude, of the differences between himself and others, of real death and the wish to live forever. He recovers his identity and is now able to write his own story, and leave behind a manuscript for others to read, possibly in the hope of achieving literary immortality.

The following poem by Borges (1923: 35/1972: 20), I think, beautifully describes the subject of this paper:

*Inscription on any tomb*

Let not the rash marble risk  
garrulous breaches of oblivion's omnipotence,  
in many words recalling  
name, renown events, birthplace.  
All those glass jewels are best left in the dark.  
Let not the marble say what men do not.  
The essentials of the dead man's life'  
the trembling hope,  
the implacable miracle of pain, the wonder of sensual  
delight''  
will abide forever.  
Blindly the wilful soul asks for length of days  
when its survival is assured by the lives of others,  
when you yourself are the embodied continuance  
of those who did not live into your time  
and others will be (and are) your immortality on  
earth.

TRANSLATIONS OF SUMMARY

L'auteur explore les idées associées à l'immortalité et la mort en s'attachant au jeu réciproque entre leur développement dans deux histoires de Borges, 'The Circular Ruins' et 'The Immortal', et leur manifestation chez un patient. L'auteur traite, à l'aide des histoires de Borges, du besoin désespéré qu'ont certaines personnes à rechercher l'immortalité. Ce n'est pas une simple expression du désir universel de vivre éternellement mais, à un niveau plus profond, il provient qu'il est impossible de supporter la douleur mentale du vécu de la vulnérabilité et de la perte humaine ordinaire" la mort étant l'expression ultime d'une telle vulnérabilité. L'auteur suggère que chez de telles personnes, la poursuite sans répit de l'immortalité exprime le phantasme omnipotent de délivrer le self de la douleur et de la peur émotionnelles surgissant à travers le fait d'être vivant. Ceci mène à un déni de l'importance émotionnelle du passage du temps, de la séparation et des différences sexuelles. En fait, l'état individuelle de ne pas ressentir, est proche d'une perte complète de l'identité humaine et de la mort émotionnelle, ne laissant aucune place à tout autre individu d'importance. L'individu devient lui-même une 'simple image', vivant dans un monde d'illusion peuplé par lui-même et ses projections, et demeurant piégé dans les ruines circulaires qu'il a lui-même générées. L'horreur vécu à la réalisation rigide de mort émotionnel de l'individu et le désir de reprendre contact avec les bons objets internes qui ont été attaqués, met en marche le long processus d'une quête pour retrouver un sens de la temporalité (qui inclurait toujours le désir de la mortalité) et avec lui, un sens de l'identité.

Die Autorin exploriert Ideen, die Immortalität und Tod umgeben, und bezieht sich dabei vor allen auf das Zwischenspiel in ihrer Entwicklung in zwei Geschichten von Borges, *Die zirkulären Ruinen* und *Der Unsterbliche*, und ihre Manifestation in einem Patienten. Mithilfe der Geschichten von Borges adressiert die Autorin das verzweifelte Bedürfnis einiger Individuen, nach Unsterblichkeit zu suchen. Dies ist nicht nur ein Ausdruck des allgemeinen Wunschs, für immer zu leben, sondern auf einer tieferen Ebene entsteht es aus der Unmöglichkeit, den mentalen Schmerz auszuhalten, gewöhnliche menschliche Verletzlichkeit und Verlust. Tod ist der letztendliche Ausdruck dieser Verletzlichkeit zu erleben. Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass das unnachgiebige Streben nach Unsterblichkeit in solchen Individuen eine Allmachtsphantasie ausdrückt, das Selbst von emotionalem Schmerz und Angst, die durch das Lebendigsein entstehen, zu befreien. Dies führt zu einem Verleugnen der emotionalen Bedeutung vom Vergehen der Zeit, von Trennung und sexueller Differenzierung. Tatsächlich nähert sich der Zustand des Nicht-Fühlens des Individuums einem völligen

Verlust von menschlicher Identität und emotionalem Tod, in dem es keinen Platz für bedeutende Andere gibt. Das Individuum wird selbst ein 'blosses Bild', das in einer Wahnwelt lebt, die von ihm und seinen Projektionen bevölkert wird und es endet gefangen in zirkulären Ruinen, die es selbst geschaffen hat. Der Schrecken, der bei dem krassen Bewusstwerden des emotionalen Todes des Individuums und dem Wunsch, Kontakt mit den guten inneren Objekten wiederherzustellen, die angegriffen worden waren, erlebt wird, setzt den langen Prozess des Suchens nach einem Wiederentdecken eines Gefühls von Weltlichkeit, (das immer noch den Wunsch nach Unsterblichkeit beinhalten kann) und damit eines Identitätsgefühls in Gang.

El autor explica las ideas que rondan la inmortalidad y la muerte, mirando de cerca como se desarrollan en dos cuentos de Borges, 'El Inmortal' y 'Las Ruinas Circulares', y su manifestación en un paciente. El autor se refiere, con la ayuda de los cuentos de Borges, a la necesidad desesperada de algunos individuos de buscar la inmortalidad. No se trata sólo de una expresión del deseo universal de vivir para siempre sino que, en un nivel más profundo, surge de

la imposibilidad de soportar el dolor mental de vivenciar la vulnerabilidad humana y la pérdida comunes" con la muerte como expresión más extrema de tal vulnerabilidad. Se sugiere que la persecución sin cuartel de la inmortalidad en tales individuos, expresa una fantasma omnipotente de liberar el ser del dolor emocional y el miedo que provienen de estar vivos. Esta persecución lleva a la negación del significado emocional del paso del tiempo, de la separación y de las diferencias sexuales. En realidad, el estado de insensibilidad del individuo se aproxima a una pérdida completa de identidad humana y muerte emocional, sin que hubiera lugar para ningunos otros seres significativos. El individuo mismo se convierte en 'mera imagen', viviendo en un mundo ilusorio poblado por él mismo y sus proyecciones, y acaba atrapado dentro de las ruinas circulares que él mismo generó. El horror experimentado ante la súbita evidencia de la muerte emocional del individuo, y el deseo de restablecer el contacto con los objetos internos que fueron atacados, pone en marcha el largo proceso de búsqueda de recuperación de un sentido de la temporalidad (que aun incluía el deseo de inmortalidad); y con éste, un sentido de identidad.

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