Modern Critical Views

JORGE LUIS BORGES

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"The Immortal"

The universal literary figure, the relationship to De Quincey, and the symbol of the labyrinth all come together in Borges' story "The Immortal" which is the perfection of his allusive method in a work that is more than ever a literature of literature. Beyond that, "The Immortal" is Borges' statement of themes which have preoccupied so many twentieth-century writers in a form which is comparable to that of Conrad, that of Joyce, that of Eliot, but is still personal, authentic. "The Immortal" is the culmination of Borges' art.

THE UNIVERSAL LITERARY FIGURE

The epigraph to "The Immortal" establishes the familiar theme in Borges' work and introduces the singleness of authorial mind which is the story's subject:

> Salomon saith. *There is no new thing upon the earth*. So that as Plato had an imagination, *that all knowledge was but remembrance*; so Salomon giveth his sentence, *that all novelty is but oblivion.*
>
> Francis Bacon: *Essays* LVIII

Four authors—Plato, Solomon, Bacon, and Borges himself—are here made to collaborate in expressing the Eternal Return in an intellectual or mental sense. This apparent plurality of minds and demonstrable unity of statement in an allusive tissue is at once the theme and the technique of the story, which uses the literary figure to reformulate definitively the principles of personality

From *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Illusion.* © 1984 by Ronald J. Christ. New York University Press, 1969.

and time found throughout Borges. It is the same theme he treats in "Everything and Nothing," but that is a commentary and a summary; "The Immortal" is a presentation and a demonstration.

In "Everything and Nothing" Borges writes of Shakespeare: "No one was so many men as that man, who, like the Egyptian Proteus, could exhaust all the appearances of being." The pun on "no one" divulges the removed, all-knowing approach Borges is taking in order to distill the essence of his subject. The distillation, however, is a little lifeless, droning; and the monotone is relieved only by the octave shift in the last sentences when God speaks. "Everything and Nothing," like so much in *El hacedor* [*Dreamtigers*], is a summation of previous work, but sapped of almost all energy, subdued by nostalgia. More varied, more complex is "The Immortal," which treats the same subject but from the inside so that the reader's understanding develops gradually and dramatically, along with that of the character. Furthermore, at the end of "Everything and Nothing," all is solved, resolved, while at the conclusion of "The Immortal" the sense of mystery, and complex mystery at that, still lingers. The one is a rapid disclosure, the other an intricate unfolding; and the intricacy comes not from the treatment alone but from the conception, because in "The Immortal" Borges takes the possibilities of both *everything* and *nothing* more seriously. The story shows that Homer's work is nothing—nothing extraordinary, that is—and that Homer is literally everything, *everyone* in the story.

The paradoxical everything and nothingness of Homer is indicated elsewhere by the expressly generic title of "El hacedor," "The Maker," which Borges bestows upon him; but in "The Immortal" the two exhaustive attributes are simultaneous modes of his work and personality. The story itself is a little Odyssey, and that, of course, is tribute to the universal, mythic proportions of Homer's work which nourishes subsequent writings, but the story in no way proposes the greatness or superiority of the Homeric epic, instead showing its mere inevitability in the scheme of things:

> Homer composed the *Odyssey*; given 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; a single immortal is all men.

The *Odyssey* belongs not to Homer but to History; it is nothing more or less than the story of the world. But it belongs to Language as well, for as Borges argues in "Versions of Homer," it is impossible "to know what belongs to the poet and what pertains to the idiom," and therefore the only certainty about Homer's style, his literary personality, "is the impossibility of separating what pertains to the writer from what pertains to the idiom." The logical deduction

from this is that not Homer but everyone has written, continues to write the *Odyssey*, and that, in the end, as Cartaphilus writes, "*only words remain*." The most exact indication of the universal composition of Homer is the phrase "Pope's *Iliad*" on the first page of "The Immortal," an indication supported by a reference to "Pope's Odyssey" which Emerson makes in the course of arguing that all literature has been written by one person. The logic is clear: if "a single man is all men," then a single author is all authors, all men ("The genius is all," says Emerson), and all men are immortal because Homer is immortal. We are all Homer. Thus this story which gives what we have always lacked and so often desired—a biography of Homer—takes away far more than it gives:

> Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a wearisome way of saying that I am not.

Amplitude is a trait of the cipher.

As so often in Borges, the confirmation of being is an obliteration. But notice the peculiar absence of definite and indefinite articles in the series quoted above, and also notice the constant present tense. The added complexity in "The Immortal," one characteristically indicated by a suppression, is that character is not only multiple and sequential as it is presented in "Theme of the Traitor and Hero," in "The Circular Ruins," and even in section V of "The Immortal"; character is single and simultaneous as well: the apparent multiplicity of Types or Ideas exists in the present tense. Homer is all men *now*. That bloody horseman who dies at Rufus' feet in Part I is the same Rufus who undertakes an identical journey and dies in similar circumstances at the end of Part I; the Rufus speaking to Argos is Homer, who has forgotten that he is Homer, speaking to Homer, who has nearly forgotten the *Odyssey* he composed 1,000 years ago. The Princess of Lucinge reads Homer; Pope and his employees write Homer; Joseph Cartaphilus sells Homer; Nahum Cordovero comments on Homer. All these are aspects of Homer in a literary, mental sense.

This simultaneous multiplicity is revealed by personal pronouns in "The Immortal." The story begins, unusually for Borges, not with "I" but with "we" ("ofrecemos"), shifts to Homer's first person ("Que yo recuerde"), moves naturally between the first person plural ("Partimos") and first person singular ("devisé") in the course of narration, and then in Part IV shifts subtly to another "we," one which includes the Immortals:

> Neither was his own destiny interesting. His body was a submissive domestic animal, and each month the alms of a few hours of sleep, a little water and a scrap of meat were enough for him. Let nobody

> wish to reduce us to ascetics. There is no more complex pleasure than thought and we gave ourselves over to it.

Finally the story ends with the first person ("A mi entender"). The confusion or expansion and contraction is partially clarified by Homer's statement: "The story I have narrated seems unreal because in it are mixed the incidents of two distinct men." But "distinct" is itself ambiguous and applies more to the grammar than to the psychology or history of the character. An analogous situation in Emerson is more illuminating. The same kind of shifts in person have been noted by Richard Poirier in Emerson's "Nature," and they show us, says Poirier, "the speaker's capacity to relinquish his particular identity and assume an ever more inclusively general one." In Borges, the grammatical shift re-enacts the myth of the Simurg, which begins with discrete "I's" and culminates in a "We," and in fact that myth, found at the end of "The Approach," with its difficult journey, its pilgrims falling by the wayside, its passage through Vertigo and Annihilation, its final revelation that all are one (The Immortal Simurg) informs Borges' later as well as his early story. The events in "The Immortal" are thus to be read in two ways: first, as the apparent particulars they are, of person, place, thing, and time: and second, as the manifestation of a single character, who writes the *entire* fiction (including preface, narrative, and postscript), but who is absent from the story as himself, except in so far as he is all and everywhere. Without giving his readers the benefit of an explanatory note, Borges has employed the same device Strindberg said he used in *Dream Play*:

> In this dream play,. . . the Author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist; on a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities, and improvisations.
>
> The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallise, scatter and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all—that of the dreamer. For him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law. He neither condemns nor acquits, but only relates, and since on the whole, there is more pain than pleasure in the dream, a tone of melancholy, and of compassion for all living things, runs through the swaying narrative.

In what it says both about characterization and about narrative procedure, Strindberg's note is the best description of the story. There is one immortal

who is all the rest: the story's title is pointedly singular; Homer is the universal author.

Men are immortal then, like the rest of the universe: "To be immortal matters very little; except for man, all creatures are immortal since they do not know about death." As Sir Thomas Browne writes in "Religio Medici":

> For as though there were a Metempsuchosis, and the soul of one man passed into another, Opinions do find, after certain Revolutions, men and minds like those that first begat them. To see our selves again, we need not look for Plato's year: every man is not only himself; there hath been many Diogenes, and as many Timons, though but few of that name: men are liv'd over again, the world is now as it was in Ages past; there was none then, but there hath been some one since that parallels him, and is, as it were, his revived self.

Emerson recognized that immortality and also stressed our suppression of it: "We hide this universality if we can, but it appears at all points." Man has repressed his immortality or he is moved to forget it, a wish Emerson also understood:

> But it is not the intention of Nature that we should live by general views. We fetch fire and water, run about all day among the shops and markets, and get our clothes and shoes made and mended, and are the victims of these details; and once in a fortnight we arrive perhaps at a rational moment. If we were not thus infatuated, if we saw the real from hour to hour, we should not be here to write and to read, but should have been burned or frozen long ago. She would never get anything done, if she suffered Admirable Crichtons and universal geniuses.

Our principal antidotes to universality and immortality are death and forgetting. Because they confirm our mortality and our individual identity, death and forgetting are what make the universe bearable, real for us. On this point of forgetting I have already noted [elsewhere] Borges' story "Funes the Memorious" and I would also want to point to De Quincey, who, like Borges, feels assured "that there is no such thing as ultimate *forgetting*," but who nevertheless describes forgetting as a gift and an art:

> that art which the great Athenian Themistocles noticed as amongst the *desiderata* of human life—that gift which, if in some rare cases it belongs only to the regal prerogatives of the grave, fortunately in many thousands of other cases is accorded by the treachery of

> the human brain. Heavens! what a curse it were, if every chaos, which is stamped upon the mind by fairs such as that London fair of St. Bartholomew in years long past, or by the records of battles and skirmishes through the monotonous pages of history, or by the catalogues of libraries stretching over a dozen measured miles, could not be erased, but arrayed itself in endless files incapable of obliteration, as often as the eyes of our human memory happened to throw back their gaze in that direction! Heaven be praised, I have forgotten everything.

Man lives by dying, that is, by forgetting; only God or an Immortal lives by remembering all. Thus "The Immortal" proceeds by a series of deaths or equivalent lapses of memory which give to the story its seemingly disjunctive form, the "disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream," as Strindberg says. On the other hand, these deaths and forgettings, as we shall see, are shams and illusions, and the inner reality, captured by the procedure of the story and described in the career of Homer, is one of eternal life and all encompassing memory.

Death makes men "precious and pathetic"; remove it or the knowledge of it and they are no longer precious *or* pathetic. Hence the curious description of "The Immortal" in the epilogue of *El Aleph* [*The Aleph*] as an "outline of an ethic for immortals." The story proposes a system of values, indeed a way of living or reading, which are much the same thing in Borges; an ethic of supreme equality in life (notice the phrase "The republic of immortal men" in Part IV), of sublime impersonality in literature. All claims to originality or invention—of experience or writing—as well as all accusations of plagiarism and influence are destroyed: "There is no new thing upon the earth." Books, like men, are no longer to be valued as either precious or pathetic: there is all eternity in which to write the Homeric epics, and it was inevitable that they should be written; there is all eternity to complete the ongoing work described in "The Dream of Coleridge," and a sentiment of loss about the missing lines of "Kubla Khan" is simply misguided and misplaced in time. Freed from the values death imposes, literature can at last be seen for what it is: "in the beginning of literature was myth, and also in the end." The ascendency of myth, of a literary collective consciousness, in "The Immortal" may be guessed when we realize how, in contrast to other stories about literary figures like Pierre Menard or Herbert Quain, how little there is about writing or planning of a book in "The Immortal"; how little, even of criticism, for this is a story whose intention is to question the basis of most criticism and appreciation of literature which develops from a notion of limits to man's life, from limits, which, the story argues, do not exist. It is the responsibility of literature, then, to deny

mortality, to deny oblivion by ignoring the sleep of death and the sleep of forgetting and by emphasizing in their place the eternal dream of life and memory. Literature must be timeless memory: to be true, to be archetypally real, literature based on such a belief must deny its own novelty, and the position of the author must be that of grand remembrancer. Ironically, then, Cordovero's attack in the Postscript on the integrity of Homer's text is our assurance of its universal validity. The more it is nothing in itself, the more the story is everything.

"The Immortal" thus realizes a great victory over time and space and personality, but it is finally despondent and futilitarian. As "A New Refutation of Time" ended with "*And yet, and yet . . .*," "The Immortal" leaves us with a feeling of loss rather than of gain. The implicit morality and political ethic of the story are at first noble, but then dispiriting: the "perfection of tolerance" which the Immortals have achieved leads inevitably to a perfection of disdain and inactivity. And while we can accept the eternity of literature, the necessity for seeing people as eternal shades instead of flitting realities is too much for us. We want to believe that we are, which is to say that we shall die. Therefore the story leaves us with the fundamental antinomy of Borges' work: the achievement of metaphysical vision antagonistic to our very selves. Even Homer cannot bear the strain of his discovery and he lapses into forgetfulness and apparent death: "Again I am mortal, I repeated, again I am like all men. That night I slept until dawn." Of course he is not mortal; all the signs contradict it: "I repeated" and the twice-repeated "Again" call upon the Eternal Return, and the ellipsis with which the succeeding paragraph begins as well as the sleep into which Homer falls signal a new beginning based on forgetting. "The Immortal," Borges' incarnation of the universal writer, ends by dissipating that same literary figure. And so Borges joins that great train of writers who confer immortality only to deride it and lament it, that train which includes Petronius, Swift, De Quincey, Tennyson, and Eliot.

DE QUINCEYAN IMAGERY

De Quincey is called upon to supply the scene-meaning at the very center of "The Immortal," and as we might guess, it is a picture of disorder and meaningless reiteration. But so that we shall not miss the point, the Postscript refers us directly to De Quincey's *Writings* where we read a recollection of some Piranesi etchings Coleridge once described:

> Many years ago, when I was looking over Piranesi's "Antiquities of Rome," Coleridge, then standing by, described to me a set of plates from that artist, called his "Dreams," and which record the

> scenery of his own visions during the delirium of a fever. Some of these (I describe only from memory of Coleridge's account) represented vast Gothic halls; on the floor of which stood mighty engines and machinery, wheels, cables, catapults, &c., expressive of enormous power put forth, or resistance overcome. Creeping along the sides of the walls, you perceived a staircase; and upon this, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself. Follow the stairs a little farther, and you perceive them reaching an abrupt termination, without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who should reach the extremity, except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, at least you suppose that his labours must now in some way terminate. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher, on which again Piranesi is perceived, by this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Once again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is descried; and there, again, is the delirious Piranesi, busy on his aspiring labours: and so on, until the unfinished stairs and the hopeless Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall. With the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in dreams.

This passage is definitive of what J. Hillis Miller calls "the Piranesi effect" in De Quincey, an effect we have all experienced apparently, but with less frightening overtones, in discovering a disquieting infinity on the label of a box of salt or can of cocoa. Borges' picture of the City of the Immortals is closely patterned on this passage, from the general impression of purposeless repetition to the details of the staircases which "died without reaching anywhere," and even to the conditional quality imposed because the scene is only recalled, and recalled from another's description, not actually witnessed. On this point, the reference is furtively expressive since no such Piranesi etching exists, and we do not even know who invented—De Quincey or Coleridge—the one described by De Quincey. The Postscript thus accuses the narrative of being false for plagiarizing De Quincey, who in turn is equally false. But more significantly De Quincey's image specifies the abomination at the core of life's labyrinth for Borges: at the center, or "cell" as De Quincey calls it there is no resting place, not even a destructive monster, but instead another labyrinth without plan or end. In effect, there is no center, but only "the Piranesi effect" of labyrinth within labyrinth, and "What we all dread most," Father Brown says, "is a maze with no centre." Both De Quincey and Borges collaborate in describing such a maze. The labyrinth of the Immortals should lead to death, to a termination, to eternal rest; instead it turns upon itself and centrifugally

flings the searchers out into newer and newer existences. De Quincey's visual "Piranesi effect" is here made to serve the office of a horrifying, distempered "Vision of Er."

The City of the Immortals is the symbolic center of Borges' universe, and from it emanates all the anxiety undermining that world. As in "The Approach [to Al-Mu'tasim]," Borges usually withholds the final vision and concentrates on the way to the center, leaving the character on the very door sill of revelation, but in "The Immortal" we are conducted to this center and enter into the absolute mythic reality which Eliade tells us is associated with such places:

> The center, then, is pre-eminently the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality. . . . The road leading to the center is a "difficult road". . . , and this is verified at every level of reality: difficult convolutions of a temple (as at Borobudur); pilgrimage to sacred places (Mecca, Hardwar, Jerusalem); danger-ridden voyages of the heroic expeditions in search of the Golden Fleece, the Golden Apples, the Herb of Life; wandering in labyrinths; difficulties of the seeker for the road to the self, to the "center" of his being, and so on. The road is arduous, fraught with perils, because it is, in fact, a rite of the passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to divinity.

The Library of Babel is one representation of this reality, and the City of the Immortals is a more terrifying one still. Of its sacred nature there can be no doubt—we are told that the gods have built it, and the Immortals do live there—but instead of giving rise "to a life that is real, enduring and effective," this perverse heaven gives rise to an existence that is nightmarish, eternal, and futile, for *"The gods who built it were mad."* This city

> *is so horrible that its mere existence and perpetuation, even in the center of a hidden desert, contaminates the past and the future and in some way compromises the heavenly bodies. While it lasts, no one in the world can be valiant or happy.*

The description goes beyond De Quincey's personal nightmares, and the word "horrible" can serve as our introduction to this loathsome realm, the Conradian heart of darkness. The odyssey of "The Immortal" is a Conradian journey to the center of the world, another journey to the center of Africa, where Rufus encounters the same reality as Mr. Kurtz: "The horror! The horror!" Once there, there is nothing for either Homer-Rufus or Marlow to do but to turn around and rethread the windings of their approach. The mythic structure

of "The Immortal" is thus supported by the mythological universe of Conrad, where to seek is to wander in a labyrinth—of adventure for the characters, of Marlow's style for the reader—and to find is to discover the abyss—Marlow says of Kurtz: "I saw . . . he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot." Conrad is actually worked into "The Immortal" by having Homer ship on the *Patna*, Jim's boat in *Lord Jim*, and the importance of Conrad to Eliot as well as to Borges serves to unite the three in their depiction of a world where, if all is not exactly desert, as in "The Immortal" and *The Waste Land*, everything wears "a vast and dismal aspect of disorder," a world where there is no meaning and no utterance beyond the cry for death.

The meeting of De Quincey, Chesterton, Conrad, and Borges in a common image is striking because they illuminate each other's thought. Chesterton, for example, serves to remind us that the labyrinth was originally a burying place. Looking at "a vast black bulk of the cyclopean building" in "The Point of a Pin," Father Brown says:

> It reminds one of Coppée's poem about the Pharaoh and the Pyramid. The house is supposed to be a hundred houses; and yet the whole mountain of buildings is only one man's tomb.

And Flambeau describes another labyrinth which also connects that structure with the grave:

> "Died," repeated Flambeau, "and that's about as much as we can say. You must understand that towards the end of his life he began to have those tricks of the nerves not uncommon with tyrants. He multiplied the ordinary daily and nightly guard around his castle till there seemed to more sentry-boxes than houses in the town, and doubtful characters were shot without mercy. He lived almost entirely in a little room that was in the very centre of the enormous labyrinth of all the other rooms, and even in this he erected another sort of central cabin or cupboard, lined with steel, like a safe or battleship. Some say that under the floor of this again was a secret hole in the earth no more than large enough to hold him, so that, in his anxiety to avoid the grave he was willing to go into a place pretty much like it."

In fact we should have guessed, on the basis of "The Cult of the Phoenix," that the City of Immortals would be a vast graveyard, a universal mausoleum. But if we did not guess, Borges puts the information in our way:

> On finally disentangling myself from that nightmare, I found myself manacled and thrown into an oblong niche, no bigger than an ordinary sepulcher, shallowly excavated in the sharp slope of a mountain. . . . About a hundred irregular niches, like mine, furrowed the mountain and the valley.

The nightmare is one labyrinth ("desen*red*arme") and the city is another. Between them lies the grave and rebirth. We might even have known from the beginning that the labyrinth, in its oldest, Egyptian form (the form invoked by the setting of "The Immortal") is precisely a symbol of life through death, as C. N. Deedes tells us:

> Above all, the Labyrinth was the centre of activities concerned with those greatest of mysteries, Life and Death. There men tried by every means known to them to overcome death and to renew life. The Labyrinth protected and concealed the dead king-god in order that his life in the after-world might be preserved. . . The Labyrinth, as tomb and temple, fostered the development of all art and literature, activities which in those days possessed a religious and life-giving significance.

It is the peculiar virtue of Borges' story, however, to have seen the potential horror in such a resurrection symbol and to have put De Quincey's famous passage so dramatically to work. Nevertheless, we might remind ourselves that Borges did not have to rely on De Quincey's Gothic nightmare, except as the singularly fine example it is. He could have drawn, and in some ultimate way does, on Chesterton's equally fantastic architecture:

> Immediately beneath and about them the lines of the Gothic building plunged outwards into the void with a sickening swiftness akin to suicide. There is that element of Titan energy in the architecture of the Middle Ages that, from whatever aspect it be seen, it always seems to be rushing away, like the strong back of some maddened horse. This church was hewn out of ancient and silent stone, bearded with old fungoids and stained with the nests of birds. And yet, when they saw it from below, it sprang like a fountain at the stars; and when they saw it, as now, from above, it poured like a cataract into a voiceless pit. For these two men on the tower were left alone with the most terrible aspect of the Gothic: the monstrous foreshortening and disproportion, the dizzy perspectives, the glimpses of great things small and small things great; a topsy-turvydom of

stone in the mid-air. Details of stone, enormous by their proximity, were relieved against a pattern of fields and farms, pygmy in their distance. A carved bird or beast at a corner seemed like some vast walking or flying dragon wasting the pastures and villages below. The whole atmosphere was dizzy and dangerous, as if men were upheld in air amid the gyrating wings of colossal genii; and the whole of that old church, as tall and rich as a cathedral, seemed to sit upon the sunlit country like a cloudburst.

y and dangerous" (Chesterton is always more jovial and buoyant, even detailing the hideous): the phrase applies to Piranesi climbing the fantastic ase in De Quincey's memory, and it applies to the City of the Immortals ll. That it comes from Chesterton may serve to remind us that Borges' ons, by putting us into a universal vein of imagery, direct us to vaster than the legend on the sign indicates.

What the reference in Borges' Postscript does not tell us is that much round information for "The Immortal" can be found in another of De cey's essays, "Homer and the Homeridae," and that while this essay, in on to Borges' story, fits into the category I call congenerous, it does present er image which is perhaps even more basic to this story than the labyrinth

n "The Immortal" we read of the multitudinous survival of Homer down r present time when he is discovered to be, in a typical Borges' pun, an uarian," whose form is understandably exhausted: "He was. . . a worn nd earthen man, with grey eyes and gray beard and singularly vague es." This is a comedown from the colorful existence he had even as a n whose name was brightly, perhaps doubly tinted: Marcus Flaminius . (*Rufus* is Latin for red and while *Flaminius* may evoke flame or red , it comes from the Latin *flamen*, meaning priest, in which case it may mind the grey priest in "The Circular Ruins," so notably associated with The waning of primordial fires into ash is a recurring pattern in Borges, adopting the everpresent of the Eternal Return, nevertheless describes if it were gradually burning out in each repetition, getting paler as it from the crimson life-blood of myth—"The Red Adam of Paradise"—paler rose color of the historical past—the wall in "Feeling in Death" ging to the 1890's—to the pale greyness of the contemporaneous. The n is pinpointed by one of the metaphysical schools of Tlön:

> Another school declares that *all time* has already transpired and that our life is scarcely the memory or twilight reflection, now undoubtedly falsified and mutilated, of an irrecoverable process.

The diminishing intensity of life veins Borges' work with melancholy and explains the backward urge of his mind, first to the time of childhood, and then to the mythic past. De Quincey felt such an urge too, and in a sense both writers are "escapists," but in particular, De Quincey's application of the aging, diminishing quality of the world to Homer, as he expressed it in "Homer and the Homeridae" seems to have caught Borges' fancy.

In that essay Borges could have read of a Homer who is "the general patriarch of Occidental Literature"; of a Homer who could not write, like the Argos who composed the Odyssey but cannot make intelligible signs in the sand; of a Homer born in Smyrna like "the antiquarian Joseph of Smyrna"; of a Homer who "at the islands of Ios, of Chios, and of Crete. . . had a standing invitation" like that same Cartaphilus who is buried at Ios, one of the traditionally ascribed burial places of Homer; of a Homer who never existed and whose poems were composed by many different men; and even of a Homer who was himself one and yet many like the Homer in Section V of Borges' story:

> Others, like our Jacob Bryant, have fancied that he was not merely coeval with those heroes, but actually was one of those heroes—viz. Ulysses; and that the "Odyssey," therefore, rehearses the personal adventures, the voyages, the calamities of Homer himself. It is our old friend the poet, but with a new face; he is now a soldier, a sailor, a king, and, in case of necessity, a very fair boxer.

Such correspondences, and the others like them, are curious, and it is quite possible that Borges first encountered them in De Quincey; but what is really striking in the De Quincey essay is a metaphysical equation of the survival of Homer's text to the survival of his body, and a consequent description of Homer as a monstrous ancient.

> Homer, they say, is an old—old—very old man, whose trembling limbs have borne him to your door; and, therefore—what? Why, he ought to look very old indeed. Well, good man, he *does* look very old indeed. He ought, they say, to be covered with lichens and ivy. Well, he *is* covered with lichens and ivy. And sure I am that few people will undertake to know how a man looks when he is five hundred years old by comparison with himself at four hundred. Suffice it here to say, for the benefit of the unlearned, that not one of our own earliest writers, hardly Tomas of Ercildoune, has more of the peculiar antique words in his vocabulary than Homer.

Here, as throughout De Quincey's essay, Homer is his poems, so that archaic

as in an already ancient text becomes lichens on the old man's body—an
nishing image, one that would please Borges and perhaps lead him to join
ith another of De Quincey's favorite figures, appropriate to this picture
lomer but not actually invoked in "Homer and the Homeridae."
The figure of Swift's Struldbrugg comes to De Quincey's mind whenever
'ants to image the decrepit survival of the ancient world into the modern.
ɔurse he does not think of Homer as decrepit (even though his imagination
him to picture Homer that way), so that Struldbruggs are not found in
ner and the Homeridae"; but the following passage shows De Quincey's
al use of the image:

> The Romans were essentially the leaders in civilisation, according to the possibilities then existing; for their earliest usages and social forms involved a high civilisation, whilst promising a higher: whereas all Moslem nations have described a petty arch of national civility—soon reaching its apex, and rapidly barbarising backwards. This fatal gravitation towards decay and decomposition in Mahometan institutions, which at this day exhibit to the gaze of mankind one uniform spectacle of Mahometan ruins,—all the great Moslem nations being already in the *Struldbrug** state, and held erect only by the colossal support of Christian powers,—could not . . . have been healed by the Arabian prophet.
>
> *(To any reader who happens to be illiterate, or not extensively informed, it may be proper to explain that *Struldbrugs* were a creation of Dean Swift. They were people in an imaginary world, who were afraid of dying, and who had the privilege of lingering on through centuries when they ought to have been dead and buried, but suffering all the evils of utter superannuation and decay; having a bare glimmering of semi-consciousness, but otherwise in the condition of mere vegetables.)

Mahometan institutions now in ruins cast good light on the horrendous
the Immortals in Borges' story, and Homer in that story certainly qualifies
ruldbrugg. The allusion, as De Quincey's charming condescension makes
is to Swift, and to the only part of Swift which has any meaningful
:tion with Borges—the Third Book of *Gulliver's Travels*. But just as quickly,
to mind Petronius' Sibyl, invoked by Eliot in the epigraph to *The Waste*
and Tennyson's "Tithonus" to name only two versions of the myth which
ɔly has its widest currency in English through Coleridge's "Ancient
er." As the "Everlasting Jew" the myth is noted by De Quincey:

> "*The Everlasting Jew*":—The German name for what we English call the Wandering Jew. The German imagination has been most struck by the duration of the man's life, and his unhappy sanctity from death: the English by the unrestingness of the man's life, his incapacity of repose.

Borges' story is another version of this myth; one which significantly differs from De Quincey's interpretation of Homer, but could, nonetheless, have been suggested by it:

> When you describe Homer, or when you hear him described, as a lively picturesque old boy (by the way, why does everybody speak of Homer as old?), full of life, and animation, and movement, then you say (or you hear say) what is true, and not much more than what is true.

De Quincey insists on Homer's liveliness, but he gives no images to that liveliness; Petronius, Swift, Tennyson, Eliot, and Borges all envision a weary immortal with a single desire: to die.

What Borges has done is apply the myth of the Everlasting Jew to literature, making the eternal figure the author himself. In doing so, Borges writes another entry in an old controversy and establishes himself with those who believe that *we* are the ancients. He mentions this argument in his preface to Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*: "The Renaissance had already observed, through the words of Giordano Bruno and Bacon, that we are the true ancients and not the Men of Genesis or of Homer." Bradbury looks to the future of 2004, and we feel, Borges notes, "the gravitation, the vast and vague accumulation of the past." Borges looks to the past, of course, but we feel the same thing. What distinguishes Borges in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns is that he sees no final superiority on either side—all the fight has been taken out of the Battle of the Books. The human brain for him, as for De Quincey, is a palimpsest, "A membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions." Patches of writing from various ages and in various languages show through, but he sees the writing getting ever weaker, ever vaguer as initial rubrics are gradually faded by consecutive forgettings and rewritings. Ancient or Modern, all is a reflection of an archetype, and therefore less than real.

ALLUSION

The truest thing about "The Approach" was myth, and one of the most nearly real things in "The Immortal" is a made-up book. "Real," that is, in that

of truth about the story and provides a thread for the labyrinth
refully built, so that reader, unlike character, will not be left with
onfusions at the core. This thread is given in the Postscript, which
rationale for the story, but one which is integral and dramatic,
notes to *The Waste Land*, in "The Immortal" there is no change
ice from introductory section to postscript which frame the nar-
Eliot tells us in his notes is demonstrably, authoritatively factual;
ator of "The Immortal" tells us is pure fiction; that is, invention
In this respect, Borges has gone a step beyond either Joyce or
ation to both text and reader, following a tendency which has
by Nabokov, as I indicated [elsewhere], in *Pale Fire* and apparent-
cted novel *The Texture of Time*. The device arises from one of
entions of fiction and is common to the novel from the time of
the reflecting diptych of critical fiction and fictional criticism in
npact, intellectual, literary format is characteristically Borgesean.
o one could astound or please in quite that way.
d, or solution to the story's form and meaning, is put into a
imaginary book entitled *A Coat of Many Colours*. As a whole
s the usual pattern of *presentation* (introduction, Parts I, II, III),
IV, V), and *solution* (Postscript); and the Postscript itself conforms
ital procedure of *proposition* (summary of *A Coat of Many Colours*)
ncluding paragraph), which we have seen at the end of "A New
Time" and the beginning of "The Approach," the same pattern
item from the bibliography of Pierre Menard's works:

> nical article on the possibility of enriching chess by
> g one of the rook's pawns. Menard proposes, recommends,
> and concludes by rejecting such an innovation.

dicates the degree to which Borges' work and his system are
ojections or constructions of the intellect; they are "pure" in
valid philosophical schemes, not "true" for Borges in the sense
uer's metaphysic, say, was true for Schopenhauer, but rather
lities. The pattern is also a measure of the degree to which
intellectual *play*, resting frequently on a jest. Few words in
ire more repeated than "game" or "play" ("juego"), and there
rd to describe the effect his work has on readers. Certainly
element of play in his summary of the nonexistent critical
Many Colours, a summary which is nothing more or less than
ke.

any Colours, like a Borges' essay, classifies "The Immortal" and places it in a literary tradition. The class is that of the cento and the tradition includes the centos of classical antiquity as well as works by Ben Jonson, Alexander Ross, George Moore, and T. S. Eliot, each of whom created works comprised of "retazos" or remnants of other works. Both the title, *A Coat of Many Colours*, and the author's name, Nahum Cordovero, however, disclose an artifice within artifice which is the hallmark of Borges. *A Coat of Many Colours* is an appropriate name for the book because it recalls the Biblical Joseph and his famous garment and thus invokes *Joseph* Cartaphilus, but also because *cento* is simply Latin for rag cushion or patchwork quilt, an etymological definition which gives new meaning to the word "retazo." The book's title is equally appropriate to the story; in fact, the briefly imagined book stands in exact relationship to the produced story as a picture within a picture: the one is the compressed, analytic reflection of the other, almost to the point of a one-to-one correspondence. For if Homer, that imaginary author, wrote "The Immortal," compiled the Postscript in fact, then a no less imaginary author, Nahum Cordovero, wrote the study. But once again, as with the title, we must read hieroglyphically. *Nahum*, the first name of this writer who provides a key to our perplexities about the text, means "comforter" or "source of comfort" in Hebrew, while *Cordovero* is similarly, Kabbalistically prophetic: Moses Cordovero is the name of a famous Kabbalist writer whom Scholem calls the greatest theoretician of Jewish mysticism. The word *cordovero* itself can be broken down into *string* (the Latin *chorda*, meaning catgut, derives from the Greek *khorde*, meaning yarn) and *true*: Nahum Cordovero is literally a latter-day Ariadne! The typically Borgesean twist in this word game is that the utterly false and fantastic source provides accurate information, pointing to the inner structure and outer reality of the story, for Cordovero concludes that "the whole document is apocryphal." The apocryphal naming the apocryphal: that is "the Piranesi effect," that is the true Borges. Also Borgesean is the sense of humor. There is only grim humor in *The Waste Land* and there is no deep laughter in "The Immortal," but Borges is seldom—*El hacedor* is a notable exception—without sly wit. We saw the beginnings of that wit in feebler form in *Universal History of Infamy*; now we see it as subordinated effect and still another way in which Borges' writing may properly be described as *juego* or "game."

The main body of the Postscript is a list, another of Borges' connective series, ranging from classical antiquity to the times of Bernard Shaw. The books alluded to fall into two fundamental categories—naturally overlapping—which are the paradigmatic of form and the paradigmatic of content. There are no artless referential allusions here—each item is expressive; in sum they are substantive. The first group needs little explanation: it establishes the precedent for creating literature from literature, and it is made up of works based on

ks, like Alexander Ross *Virgilius Evangelizans*, a poem in Vergilian
ling with the life of Christ, and George Moore's *The Brook Kerith*,
bly turgid historical novel about Christ in deliberately anachronistic
nguage. In both cases, what Borges is getting at, clearly, is a tendency
re to recapture old subjects in old language based on previous writing.
dency we have marked in Borges' own writing, and it is one the
f "The Immortal" calls to our attention in the introduction: "The
written in English and abounds in Latinisms" ("El original está redac-
glés y abunda en latinismo"). The word *redactado* (rather than *escrito*)
y important here, implying as it does that the manuscript is not so
:ten as rewritten, a fact substantiated by the Latinisms. But what
important is that each of the writers specifically referred to has a
ring on the theme of the Immortal as Borges develops it.
is literally the everlasting Jew, and therefore Ross's poem celebrates
tal in still another guise, while Moore's novel, like Lawrence's *The*
Died, shows that the Crucifixion was not fatal to Jesus, who merely
: the imitative death of coma and revived to live another life in his
ıe. (An appropriate subtitle for Moore's nearly forgotten novel could
om his completely forgotten play *The Making of an Immortal*, which
a writer.) Jonson, too, in his poem on Shakespeare contributes to
The Postscript cites "Ben Jonson, who defined his contemporaries
ants from Seneca," and Borges obviously has in mind, as a corollary
s universal immortality, the everything and nothingness of Jonson's
ary Shakespeare. Otherwise, Shakespeare, so appropriate to Borges'
uld be conspicuously absent from "The Immortal." Turning to the
ıson's poem, memorializing Shakespeare, we see that a particular
en further reinforces the theme and technique of Borges' story:

> And though thou hadst small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*,
> From thence to honour thee, I would not seeke
> For names; but call forth thund'ring *Aeschilus*,
> *Euripides*, and *Sophocles* to us,
> *Paccuvius*, *Accius*, him of *Cordova* dead
> To life againe. . . .

d of involving other authors is Borges', and the resurrection of Seneca,
rdova dead," is a re-enactment of "The Immortal." The procedure
contemporaries"—literature can make contemporaries of Vergil and
Ross; it can raise from the dead, as in the case of Jonson and Seneca.
rtal is Author; his immortality is Literature.
st precedent cited by Cordovero is the most important: *The Waste*

Land provides not only an analogous form but parallel content as well. In a word, both *The Waste Land* and "The Immortal" are centos which come to pretty much the same conclusion:

> These fragments I have shored against my ruins.

> *When the end approaches*, wrote Cartaphilus, *images of what is remembered no longer remain: only words remain*. Words, mutilated and displaced words, words of others, were the poor dole left him by the hours and the centuries.

The Tithonus-like weariness of Borges' Homer is reflected in Eliot's Tiresias, who, like De Quincey's Homer, is ancient in other than a personal sense. Moreover, both works are world visions, moving between the ancient and modern, the East and the West, presenting the world as a desert ruin; both employ the device of the narrator who is all the characters and whose memory is their medium of existence; both are self-consciously mythic and rely on the quest or search for their central action and employ the metaphor of thirst as the fundamental yearning, a thirst which is both for the River of Life and the River of Death; both are ostentatiously learned and employ literary allusion as matter and method. If there is a striking difference, it is the characterizing one that Eliot's poem is social, religious, irrationalistic, and concerned with the kinds of love, while Borges' story is abstracted from society, fantastic, intellectual, cogent, and unconcerned with human relations. Both works are modified monologues, though it is worthwhile noting that in Eliot's we sometimes (as in parts of "The Game of Chess") lose sight of the central figure, while in Borges' story the central figure is an almost constant focus. (In Borges there is a general tendency to limit narrative to one figure, and to one figure who is not in vital, emotional contact with others, to whom other people figure largely as ideas or stimuli to action. This is a condition of Borges' lonely world, and it is a severe limitation upon the possibilities of his fiction; but on the other hand it is the condition which enables him to operate in an atmosphere that is almost purely speculative and imaginary. Then too, there is often a suggestion, never developed, sometimes censured, of political and moral implications in Borges. I have noted one example in "The Immortal" and I do not think it would be hard to derive a fairly cogent, if not satisfactory, ethic from his writings. But such an effort, so essential to an understanding of parts of Eliot, is foreign to Borges' writing, which presents morality, like murder, as one of the fine arts.) But how can two men who have such a similar vision, and a similar imagery, who rely on the same schemes, as of the Eternal Return (embodied in Eliot in the Tarot cards and the chess game, which symbols

are among Borges' favorites), how can two such men create such formally different works? The answer lies, again, in the vantage point. Eliot, at least in *The Waste Land*, is on the order of De Quincey, and Borges works more in the vein of Joyce, whose writings also function on the principle of the Eternal Return. I am speaking, of course, of esthetic dispositions which tend toward the open, aspiring, inevitably inconclusive and those which tend toward the closed, formulated, finished work. Specifically, Eliot's view in *The Waste Land*, as we can gather from the related "Gerontion," is from within the labyrinth:

> Think now
> History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
> And issues. . . ,

and he shows a character, who like De Quincey, "can connect/Nothing with nothing," even though he does exist in a work which, like De Quincey's, is busy making parallels. Borges, in contrast, leads his character to the moment of awareness: "Everything became clear to me that day." Joyce, Eliot, Borges are all labyrinthine; all employ the image and symbol of the labyrinth; but only Joyce and Borges, by their use of "magic" correlation, which is an ordering expression of the Eternal Return, create labyrinths which are complete and decipherable; all three aim at mystification, but Eliot chooses that mystification as a final intention. One advantage which emerges from such a comparison is the possibility of uniting our views of Borges, Joyce, Eliot (and Yeats too, of whom Borges writes: "like so many others, he conceived a cyclical doctrine of history") in the study of a common theme—the Eternal Return. Such a comparison is beyond the scope of my present interest, but it indicates once again the synthesizing quality of Borges' work, and, by association, implies its value.

The second group of allusions in the Postscript has less to do with the cento-technique and more with the substance of the story. In each instance something has been borrowed from the acknowledged source and interpolated into "The Immortal." But it is no case of literal theft or simple annexation. Pliny is a good example. On the surface it would seem that the allusion to *Natural History* is referential, an allusion to informative writing which is the source of the passage in question. In fact "source" seems to be the right word here, for Borges does take a description from Pliny and filter it into his own text. In Part I of "The Immortal," where Cordovero finds an interpolation from Pliny, we read:

> We left from Arisnoë and entered the scorched desert. We crossed the land of the troglodytes, who devour snakes and lack all verbal

communication; that of
in common and nourish
who worship only Tarta
sand is black, where th
because the fervor of da
of the mountain that gav
spurge, which neutralize
a nation of cruel, savage
regions, where the earth
their bosom a famous ci
continued our journey sin
A few rash men slept wi
burned them; in the dep
madness and death.

And in the section of Pliny C
framework for the descriptio

> In the middle of the de
> to them the half-anim
> Gamphasantes and Saty

> The Atlas tribe have f
> if we can believe what is
> by any names, and whe
> they utter awful curses ag
> and their fields, and whe
> like the rest of mankinc
> which are their dwelling
> have no voice, but only r
> of intercourse by speech
> but live with their wome
> the powers of the lowe
> not engage in battle, an
> The Blemmyae are repo
> eyes being attached to
> ordinary humanity abou
> the Goat-Pans is that whi
> The Strapfoots are peopl
> it is to crawl instead of

communication; that of the garamantes, who keep their females in common and nourish themselves on lions; that of the augyls, who worship only Tartarus. We wearied other deserts, where the sand is black, where the traveler must usurp the hours of night because the fervor of day is intolerable. From far off I caught sight of the mountain that gave its name to the Ocean: on its slopes grows spurge, which neutralizes poisons; on its summit live the satyrs, a nation of cruel, savage men, given to lust. That those barbarous regions, where the earth is mother of monsters, could shelter in their bosom a famous city, seemed inconceivable to all of us. We continued our journey since it would have been a dishonor to retreat. A few rash men slept with their faces exposed to the moon; fever burned them; in the depraved water of the cisterns others drank madness and death.

ıd in the section of Pliny Cordovero precisely directs us to we do find the mework for the description in Borges:

In the middle of the desert some place the Atlas tribe, and next to them the half-animal Goat-Pans and the Blemmyae and Gamphasantes and Satyrs and Strapfoots.

The Atlas tribe have fallen below the level of human civilization, if we can believe what is said; for they do not address one another by any names, and when they behold the rising and setting sun, they utter awful curses against it as the cause of disaster to themselves and their fields, and when they are asleep they do not have dreams like the rest of mankind. The Cave-dwellers hollow out caverns, which are their dwellings, they live on the flesh of snakes, and they have no voice, but only make squeaking noises, being entirely devoid of intercourse by speech. The Garamates do not practice marriage but live with their women promiscuously. The Augilae only worship the powers of the lower world. The Gamphasantes go naked, do not engage in battle, and hold no intercourse with any foreigner. The Blemmyae are reported to have no heads, their mouth and eyes being attached to their chests. The satyrs have nothing of ordinary humanity about them except human shape. The form of the Goat-Pans is that which is commonly shown in pictures of them. The Strapfoots are people with feet like leather thongs, whose nature it is to crawl instead of walking. The Pharusi, originally a Persian

> people, are said to have accompanied Hercules on his journey to the Ladies of the West. Nothing more occurs to us to record about Africa.

The borrowing, however, is neither exact nor artless. Of course Borges has condensed Pliny, but then he has also blended his sources, creating a pastiche of pastiches, as in the fragment about men being burned to death by the moon, which is not found in that part of Pliny and which may have come to Borges through De Quincey:

> In p. 50 of the "Annotations" upon Glanvill's *Lux Orientalis* the author. . . having occasion to quote from the Psalms "The sun shall not burn thee by day, neither the moon by night" in order to illustrate that class of cases where an ellipsis is to be suggested by the sense rather than directly indicated, says "The word *burn* cannot be repeated, but some other more suitable verb is to be supplied." A gentleman, however, who has lately returned from Upper Egypt, &c., assures me that the moon *does* produce an effect on the skin which may as accurately be expressed by the word "burn" as any solar effect.

Finally the most meaningful thing about the passage in Pliny is that fact, first, that the description of these monstrous peoples is fitted into a geographical sequence which suggests a journey and, second, that Homer himself is cited as an authority for the information:

> Eastward of all of these there are vast uninhabited regions spreading as far as the Garamantes and Augilae and the Cave-dweller—the most reliable opinion being that of those who place two Ethiopias beyond the African desert, and especially Homer, who tells us that the Ethiopians are divided into two sections, the eastward and the westward.

The clear implication is that Homer has made the trip, knows the land first-hand, an implication which reinforces Borges' identification of Homer as Rufus, the man who makes the trip to the City of the Immortals. The relationship between Borges and Pliny is active: if Borges borrows from Pliny, he enriches the Pliny text by eliciting a new meaning.

The other sources are used similarly. The actual reference is not exhaustive, and if we take the trouble to consult the passage in question, we find something new in the story and often in the source as well. Skipping over the De Quincey passage, which I have already discussed, we can compare "A letter from Descartes to the ambassador Pierre Chanut" with Borges' version:

> if I had been only as wise as they say savages persuade themselves monkeys are, I should never have been known by anyone as a maker of books: for it is said that they imagine that the monkeys would be able to speak if they wished, but that they refrain from doing it so that they will not be forced to work.
>
> I recalled that it is famous among the Ethiopians that the monkeys deliberately do not speak so that they will not be forced to work and I attributed Argus' silence to suspicion or fear.

This is the direct correspondence, but more interesting to the motto Descartes takes from Seneca's *Thyestes* at the end of the same letter:

> And so I think the best thing I can do from now on is to abstain from writing books; and having taken for my motto:
>
> > Death lies heavy upon that man who,
> > unusually well known to others, dies
> > unknown to himself.

In Descartes' allusion to antiquity, and to the same figure Jonson employs and Cordovero mentions, Borges shows the centrifugal force of literature; and by noting the sense of Seneca's lines we are directed to the pathos of the conversation between Rufus and Homer who has become a dog-like creature and forgotten his own nature: there is a worse death: to be famous to all, and to die unknown to oneself. Notice, however, that neither the allusion in the Postscript nor the passage about the monkeys in the narrative directly evokes this motto. The evocative quality of this allusion is only remotely present, almost silent, as is customary in Borges. Nevertheless, if the motto serves for Descartes, it likewise can serve for Borges' story, for each of us, having forgotten that we are Homer, dies famous throughout the world but unrecognized by ourselves.

As with the first group of allusions I considered from the Postscript, the last in the second group is the most important: Cordovero directs us to *Back to Methuselah*, Act V, but once again while he points in the right direction, his scope is not nearly broad enough. The parallels between the Shaw play and Borges' story are close and pervasive, even though the attitude taken toward immortality in each is different. Shaw's theme, as described by Borges, is optimistic, corrective, while the one we have seen in Borges is dejected and dispiriting:

> In *Man and Superman* he declares that heaven and hell are not places but conditions of the human spirit; in *Back to Methuselah* that man

> ought to resolve to live 300 years so as not to die at 80 in full immaturity with a golf club in his hand, and that the physical universe began by Spirit and shall return to Spirit.

Here then is another ethic for immortals and one that brings the world back to its originating spirit as well, but Borges' story is far from the joking argument for creative evolution that Shaw's play is. Nevertheless Borges found much to his use and liking in Shaw's "cerebral capers."

Shaw's play, as his preface states, shows that "human life is continuous and immortal," and it uses the mythic image of the Wandering Jew as well as the literary unity Borges hypothesizes: "An ancient writer whose name has come down to us in several forms, such as Shakespeare, Shelley, Sheridan, and Shoddy," and it even voices the fundamental notion of art as dream when Eve tells Adam of certain of their sons who

> borrow and never pay; but one gives them what they want, because they tell beautiful lies in beautiful words. They can remember their dreams. They can dream without sleeping. They have not will enough to create instead of dreaming; but the serpent said that every dream could be willed into creation by those strong enough to believe in it.

In the last act, which is commended to our attention by Cordovero, the time is A.D. 31,920, yet the matter is the same as that of Borges' antiquity, and the point is made that tomorrow is "The day that never comes." In this world beyond Bradbury, the most specific locus of comparison between the two texts is the Swiftian notion, complicated by the Emersonian doctrine of compensation, that the Immortals have grown completely indifferent because in the end all things balance out. In Borges we read:

> Instructed by centuries of practice, the republic of immortal men had achieved the perfection of tolerance and almost of disdain. It knew that in an infinite term all things happen to every man. On account of his past or future virtues, every man deserves all goodness, but also deserves all treachery because of his past or future infamies.

This is the intolerable ethic Borges extracts with all the irony of the defeated victor, while in *Back to Methuselah* we find that Shaw's immortals, like Borges', are indifferent to discomfort and pleasure, for, as they recognize: "Everything happens to everybody sooner or later if there is time enough. And with us there is eternity." But the passage we remember from Shaw's play as being most Borgesean of all is one in a completely different vein; one, nevertheless, where eras, texts, authors coalesce into one unified cultural senility:

> There is a prehistoric saying that has come down to us from a famous woman teacher. She said: "Leave women; and study mathematics." It is the only remaining fragment of a lost scripture called The Confessions of St. Augustin, the English Opium Eater. That primitive savage must have been a great woman, to say a thing that still lives after three hundred centuries.

Like the other allusions, the one to *Back to Methuselah* has its secret aspect too. In the third act, not the fifth, which Cordovero directs us to, we can find a solution for the apparent death of Homer which is related in the introduction of "The Immortal": "In October the princess heard from a passenger on the *Zeus* that Cartaphilus had died at sea on returning to Smyrna and that they had buried him on the island of Ios." Nowhere in the text does Borges offer an explanation for this apparent death, but if we turn to the third act of Shaw's play we find a character quoting a report which "points out that an extraordinary number of first-rate persons. . . have died by drowning during the last two centuries." The explanation for these drownings, which surely includes the death of Cartaphilus at sea, is given by a near-immortal archbishop who ran into bureaucratic problems trying to collect his pension at the age of ninety-seven because he looked so young. His solution was simple—pretend to die and start life all over again.

> I did kill myself. It was quite easy. I left a suit of clothes by the seashore during the bathing season, with documents in the pocket to identify me. I then turned up in a strange place, pretending that I had lost my memory, and did not know my name or my age or anything about myself. Under treatment I recovered my health, but not my memory. I have had several careers since I began this routine of life and death. I have been an archbishop three times. When I persuaded the authorities to knock down all our towns and rebuild them from the foundations, or move them, I went into the artillery, and became a general. I have been a President.

Even the question of Homer's burial is solved by this Archbishop, who, in his architectural plans, may even remind us of Borges' Homer. When asked how he can have been President Dickenson, whose body was cremated and whose ashes lie in St. Paul's, the Archbishop replies:

> They almost always found the body. During the bathing season there are plenty of bodies. I have been cremated again and again. At first I used to attend my own funeral in disguise, because I had read about a man doing that in an old romance by an author named

> Bennett, from whom I remember borrowing five pounds in 1912. But I got tired of that. I would not cross the street now to read my last epitaph.

Here then is the sham death practiced by the Immortals so as not to arouse suspicion, and here too is the necessary loss of memory to permit the renewal of life. This death-by-water motif is further suggested by Homer's explanation that "On the fourth of October, 1921, the *Patna*, which was carrying me to Bombay, had to cast anchor in a port on the Eritrean coast." The *Patna*, "a local steamer as old as the hills," carrying "eight hundred pilgrims (more or less)," is Jim's boat in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and we read there of a Captain Brierly who commits suicide by jumping overboard. Jim, on the other hand, also jumps ship in the crucial moment of his life, and Conrad has him explain: "It was as if I jumped into a well—into an everlasting deep hole." In light of Borges we read this passage somewhat differently, and are not surprised to find another character urging the following plan for Jim: "Let him creep twenty feet underground and stay there," and still another remarking, "Bury him in some sort." Of course this is what in effect happens and Jim, "the youngest human being now in existence," revives to lead a new life.

This last allusion to Conrad demands our recognition that "The Immortal" is immensely more allusive than Borges admits. The *Lord Jim* allusion really tells us nothing about "The Immortal" but it invokes the same theme from other writings, and thus establishes the mirror relationship in literature which the Immortals recognize in life:

> Among the Immortals. . . each act (and each thought) is the echo of others which preceded it in the past, without apparent principle, or the faithful omen of others which will repeat it, to the point of vertigo, in the future. There is no thing that is not lost, as it were, amidst indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can occur only once, nothing is preciously precarious.

Allusion is thus the device which reflects one work in another; and despite the lack of apparent principle in repetition which the Immortals describe, allusion repeats meaningfully, ordering the chaos which is at once literature and life. Thus we have in the story major themes alluded to, as in the case of "the nightingale of the Caesars," which invokes Keats'

> The voice I hear this passing night was heard
> In ancient days by emperor and clown.

And we have minor works, like the reference to a novel by Ellis Cornelia Knight

which Borges probably read of ir
novel's title tells us about all we
view of the military, political and so
a patrician to his friend; in the yea
year DCC.LXIX. There are no sig
except perhaps for one lamentin
the cavern of despair and only d
hope: your friend still lives; his y
once more snatched him from th
gathered magpie fashion by Bo
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which Borges probably read of in De Quincey's review of another book. The novel's title tells us about all we need to know of it: *Marcus Flaminius; or a view of the military, political and social life of the Romans: in a series of letters from a patrician to his friend; in the year DCC.LXII. from the foundation of Rome to year DCC.LXIX.* There are no significant parallels in the novel to Borges' story, except perhaps for one lamenting letter which reads in part: "death flies from the cavèrn of despair and only delights to overthrow the pompous fabrics of hope: your friend still lives; his youth and the strength of his constitution have once more snatched him from the arms of freedom." This last-minute reference, gathered magpie fashion by Borges in the course of his reading, establishes a pole, and an end, to the range of allusion I have been noting in "The Immortal." From the basic outline of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which supplies the form of Borges' story, and the specific material of Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, which supplies much of the content, to Miss Knight's *Marcus Flaminius*, which supplies at least a single item, we have the entire rank of allusion. One could spend more time filling in the degrees and undoubtedly Borges will give rise to his own academic "industry" just as Eliot and Joyce have, but what is more important, what concerns all readers of Borges and not just the detectives, is the purpose and meaning of these allusions.

Borges has taken care to see that all readers will know the allusive nature of "The Immortal" even if they do not grasp the extent of that allusiveness. Hence all readers are aware of the substantive as well as the secret quality in this work. Like *Ulysses*, like *The Waste Land*, "The Immortal" uses allusion not only as a means to an end but as an end itself. Each of the allusions contributes to our awareness of literature as universal memory, which, in not seeming to lose sight of anything, guarantees the survival of all, is, in a word, immortality. To break down the story into its constituent allusions is an inevitable desire of the inquiring mind, but to do so takes one no closer to the monistic meaning of the narrative which has as its purpose the fictional embodiment of the philosophy Borges reads in Emerson: "a faith which eliminates circumstances, and which declares that every man is all men and that there is no one who is not the universe." On the other hand to be at least aware of these borrowings is to be in touch with the secret meaning of the story, is to read it Kabbalistically, hieroglyphically, to solve its puzzle with the clues given.

In the use of allusion Borges has never pushed farther than "The Immortal." Nor has he ever written another story which so completely embodies his metaphysical and literary theories, for in this one narrative he actually creates a character of extraordinary implication and presents him a situation where we perceive a phase of his emergence and disintegration. The character, the only character, I think, in all of Borges, is the literary Over-Soul. Emerson,

in his notes to an essay on the Over-Soul, had jotted down the following observations:

> There is one soul.
> It is related to the world.
> Art is its action thereon.
> Science finds its methods.
> Literature is its record.

Borges takes the first of these jottings as his premise and the last as his method. Emerson said he liked to read "for the lustres, as if one should use a fine picture in a chromatic experiment, for its rich colours." Borges seems to read that way in preparation for his stories, and in reading him we do the same, noting the allusions—some of them—for the originals they are, and in this way we discover, with Emerson, that "It is a greater joy to see the author's author, than himself."

The author's author is first of all Borges, because of the involutions of his fictional worlds; but then the author's author is the figure Borges' essays define with tireless precision, whose spirit moves in and above Borges' work to bring it into line with all other works. It is toward an intimation of this spirit that all his works move, asking the same fantastic question we ask when, in different terms, we consider literary history and tradition:

> The player is also prisoner
> (the phrase is Omar's) of another table
> of black nights and white days.
>
> God moves the player, and he the piece.
> What god behind God begins the plot
> of dust and time and dream and agony?

Borges began by introducing his own imaginary passages into already existing books, then progressed to the fabrication of imaginary books with bits of real ones worked in, and finally created a single character who not only is responsible for this story, but for all literature: the author of authors: The Immortal. That creation represents a mastery by order and reason of infinite chaos; that it is, ironically, a destruction of all that is personal and real is only the character of his achievement and the dilemma of our irrational existence.

Borges' is the hand that points: his essence is a direction away from his own substance. To see beyond his work—really, to see through it to other writings—is the greatest necessity, and achievement, of his labor. He stands midway between the cataphysical characters of his stories and the metaphysical spirit of literature, reflecting primary light onto tertiary beings. He does this with intricate allusion, and if we are tempted to undervalue his genius because

he seems to borrow all that is his, let us remember what De Quincey wrote of Coleridge with generosity and accuracy, a statement which applies to each of these three men—Coleridge, De Quincey, Borges—in different ways, but which, in that minor variation of a perpetual gesture, constitutes their literary identity. De Quincey writes: "if he took—he gave. Constantly he fancied other men's thoughts his own; but such were the confusions of his memory that continually, and with even greater liberality, he ascribed his own thoughts to others."