

the protagonist is twisting through a labyrinthine set of circumstances in an attempt to arrive at his destination—or destiny.

In three of these stories, however, there are rather peculiar additions to the main body of material. In “El Zahir,” the end of the search is the mystical object capable of absorbing totally the individual consciousness. “La escritura del Dios” gives a more obvious clue. The imprisoned priest Tzinacán experiences a mystical communion: “Ocurrió la unión con la divinidad, con el universo (no sé si estas palabras difieren).”³ In this communion, he learns the infinite sentence written in the labyrinthine spots of the jaguar, the sentence which is the key to the universe. But the priest Tzinacán renounces this absolute power: “Que muera conmigo el misterio que está escrito en los tigres. Quien ha entrevisto el universo, quien ha entrevisto los ardientes designios del universo, no puede pensar en un hombre, en sus triviales dichas o desventuras, aunque ese hombre sea él.”⁴ Tzinacán has found the center of the labyrinth, has understood the hidden meaning of existence, and chooses to die, resigned to his own annihilation. It is significant that he hints at the identity of God and the universe; it is more significant that he sees the meaning of the universe (God is not mentioned in this context) and *chooses to die*.⁵ This ambiguous choice—there is nothing in the story to indicate that the “ardientes designios del universo” are either good or evil—may be the resignation of understanding: it may also be the resignation of total horror.

A third clue is provided by the Aleph. The “. . . lugar donde están, sin confundirse, todos los lugares del orbe, vistos desde todos los ángulos . . . ,”⁶ is identical with both the secret sentence written in the jaguar’s spots, and the all-absorbing Zahir; it is analogous to the mystical experience in providing a simultaneous panorama of all space and all time. The comment is significant: “Sentí infinita veneración, infinita lástima.”⁷

³ *El Aleph*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1952, p. 120.

⁴ P. 121.

⁵ It may be enlightening in this context to quote Borges’ words from *Historia de la eternidad* concerning his “. . . teoría personal de la eternidad. Es una pobre eternidad ya sin Dios, y aun sin otro poseedor y sin arquetipos.” (BA, Emecé, 1953, p. 37.)

⁶ *El Aleph*, p. 161.

⁷ P. 166.

NOTES ON BORGES' LABYRINTHS

IN a very interesting recent article,¹ Professor L. A. Murillo analyzes the role of the labyrinth in several of Borges' short stories. He comes to the following conclusion, which seems, in major part, justified: "In the stories of Borges the labyrinth, with all its multiple associations, symbolizes the consciousness of man in our time: his fears, which for all their dreadfulness do not seem to differ much from the ancient fears of primordial man; his frustrated will to power, that more than ever resembles the frustrated conjurations of magical formulas; his helplessness, his anxiety, his dread of death, and, above all, his despair."² The purpose of the present note is to pursue further in some of Borges' other works various of the implications of Professor Murillo's findings.

Of the seventeen stories included in the 1952 edition of *El Aleph*, a tangible labyrinth plays a part in four: "El inmortal," "La casa de Asterión," "Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto," "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos." However, as Professor Murillo points out, in almost all the stories of the collection there exists a spiritual labyrinth corresponding to the individual existence, and this existence is really a search for the center of the labyrinth. Cartaphilus' search, first for immortality, then for mortality, in "El inmortal"; Benjamín Otálora's search for power in "El muerto," twisting perpetually and leading eventually to the startling truth; both are labyrinths of human existence. In "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz," "Emma Zunz," "La casa de Asterión," "Historia del guerrero y la cautiva," "La otra muerte," and "El hombre en el umbral," we have a series of individuals who are seeking, essentially, the center of their individual labyrinths. In "La busca de Averroes" the labyrinth is psychological and metaphysical; in "Los teólogos" it is theological. In every case,

¹ "The Labyrinths of Jorge Luis Borges: An Introductory to the Stories of *The Aleph*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, XX (1959), 259-266.

² P. 266. This writer would take exception to Prof. Murillo's inclusion of the will to power as an important aspect of Borges' stories. Although it is true that this drive plays a considerable part in those stories analyzed by Prof. Murillo in his article, in the bulk of Borges' work it appears not at all or as a very minor element.

Thus far, we have seen that the narrations contained in *El Aleph* repeat a predominant theme: man's hallucinated search for the center of the labyrinth of his existence. We have also seen a suggestion that at the center lies something closely akin to the mystics' communion with the infinite, an experience which reveals the fundamental truths of existence, and which awakens a feeling of resignation and a willingness to accept death, possibly because the alternative, once perceived, is too horrible to accept.

In "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz," there is a remarkable paragraph which reads, in part, as follows: "Había corregido el pasado; en aquel tiempo debió de considerarse feliz, aunque profundamente no lo era. (Lo esperaba, secreta en el porvenir, una lúcida noche fundamental: la noche en que por fin escuchó su nombre. Bien entendida, esa noche agota su historia; mejor dicho, un instante de esa noche, un acto de esa noche, porque los actos son nuestro símbolo.) Cualquier destino, por largo y complicado que sea, consta en realidad *de un solo momento*: el momento en que el hombre sabe para siempre quién es."⁸ The italics are Borges'.

This is about as close to straightforward exposition as Borges ever comes; its presence and the fact of the author's having italicized a section, would seem to indicate that he regards it as of central importance. Furthermore, there is a series of very similar expressions in other works. In "Poema conjetural," which is, significantly, an attempt to recreate the thoughts which pass through the mind of Dr. Francisco Laprida just before his death, Borges finishes the poem with the following lines:

Al fin me encuentro
con mi destino sudamericano.
A esta ruinosa tarde me llevaba
el laberinto múltiple de pasos
que mis días tejieron desde un día
de la niñez. Al fin he descubierto
la recóndita clave de mis años,
la suerte de Francisco de Laprida,
la letra que faltaba, la perfecta
forma que supo Dios desde el principio.

⁸ P. 55.

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En el espejo de esta noche alcanzo
mi insospechado rostro eterno. El círculo
se va a cerrar. Yo aguardo que así sea.
Pisan mis pies la sombra de las lanzas
que me buscan. Las befas de mi muerte,
los jinetes, las crines, los caballos,
se ciernen sobre mí . . . Ya el primer golpe,
ya el duro hierro que me raja el pecho,
el íntimo cuchillo en la garganta.⁹

It seems to this writer that the similarity between these two fragments is undeniable. As examples of the extent to which this theme is characteristic of Borges' work, we shall quote from three other sources which would appear on the surface to be remote from either his poetry or his short stories. The first quotation is from the prologue by Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares to their collection of the two film scripts *Los orilleros* and *El paraíso de los creyentes*: "El tema de la busca se repite en las dos películas. Quizá no huelgue señalar que en los libros antiguos, las buscas eran siempre afortunadas; los argonautas conquistaban el Vellochino y Galahad, el santo Grial. Ahora, en cambio, agrada misteriosamente el concepto de una busca infinita o de la busca de una cosa que, hallada, tiene consecuencias funestas."¹⁰

The second quotation is from the essay on Beowulf in *Antiguas literaturas germánicas*; speaking of W. P. Ker's writings on Beowulf, Borges says, "Ker ha negado la unidad de la Gesta de Beowulf; para intuirlo bastaría considerar al dragón, a Grendel y a la madre de Grendel símbolos o formas del mal. La historia de Beowulf sería en tal caso la de un hombre que cree haber sido vencedor en una batalla y que, después de muchos años, tiene que librarla otra vez y no es vencedor. Sería la fábula de un hombre a quien alcanza finalmente el destino y de una batalla que vuelve."¹¹ Aside from the fact that this is the nucleus of Borges' own "El fin," it demonstrates how he sees the same themes and utilizes them in the most wide-ranging literary manifestations. On the same page, he adds, "Hay pocos argumentos posibles; uno de ellos es el del hombre que da con su destino; Beowulf sería una forma rudimentaria de ese argumento eterno." Finally, in his study of the poet Evaristo Carriego, Borges reiterates this obsessive theme: "Yo

⁹ *Poemas 1923-1953*, BA, Emecé, 1954, p. 156.

¹⁰ BA, Losada, 1955, p. 8.

¹¹ México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, p. 24.

he sospechado alguna vez que cualquier vida humana, por intrincada y populosa que sea, consta en realidad de un momento: el momento en que el hombre sabe para siempre quién es."¹²

It can be seen that this concept of human life as being explained and justified by one moment pervades the various types of Borges' writing. What is this moment, really, but the center of the labyrinth? If human existence is justified and explained by one moment, this moment is the center of the labyrinth, the moment which virtually all Borges' characters seek. Examined in this light, the stories of *El Aleph* take on new meaning. Cartaphilus, perhaps more than any other, has come to understand the meaning of human existence and of his own life; he desperately seeks the mortality which will permit him to die. Otálora comprehends the enormous treachery which surrounds him and, by extension, all men; the Lombard warrior Droctulf abandons his people and dies fighting for a Ravenna which is alien to him because he has seen this civilization and ". . . sabe también que ella vale más que sus dioses y que la fe jurada y que todas las ciénagas de Alemania."¹³ In his realization of his destiny, he prefigures the destiny of all his people. Cruz abandons civilization and fights beside Martín Fierro because this is the act which crystallizes his life; Emma Zunz goes so far as to deny truth and create a higher, a more exact truth. "La historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta. Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero también era el ultraje que había padecido; sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios."¹⁴ Which is another way of saying that the contributory factors are in themselves of little or no importance; the overwhelming fact of Emma Zunz, the meaning of the existence of Emma Zunz, is her murder of Loewenthal to avenge her father. The sacred bull Asterión exists only to find his redeemer, and the arrival of Theseus seals Asterión's fate. Pedro Damián goes much farther; in his determination to achieve a destiny of which he knew himself to be worthy, he succeeded in changing history and imposing, much as did Emma Zunz, the true meaning of his existence. The defeated Nazi Otto Dietrich zur Linde has, in fact, won; the significance of

¹² Evaristo Carriego, BA, Emecé, 1955, p. 139.

¹³ *El Aleph*, p. 49.

¹⁴ Pp. 65-66.

his existence, which he comprehends before dying, is that he and his like have brought to the world the reign of violence.

It is noteworthy that those who reach the center of the labyrinth, i.e., who perceive the meaning of their own existence, almost invariably die. Furthermore, they die resigned, recognizing that their existence no longer has significance. There is more than a hint that this recognition is caused, at least in part, by the realization of the horror of the universe.

If we examine in this light the stories in the volume *Ficciones*, we find the same preoccupations, the same insistence on the labyrinth, the search, and recognition leading to death. However, there is an additional element, not readily visible in *El Aleph*, an element which is especially marked in "La lotería en Babilonia," "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," and "La biblioteca de Babel." The lottery is analogous to the other labyrinths we have seen, with this startling addition: "Si la lotería es una intensificación del azar, una periódica infusión del caos en el cosmos, ¿no convendría que el azar interviniera en todas las etapas del sorteo y no en una sola?"¹⁵ And again: "Bajo el influjo bienhechor de la Compañía, nuestras costumbres están saturadas de azar."¹⁶ In other words, this particular labyrinth is not logical but chaotic. This idea is carried to its extreme in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in which the causal relationship does not exist. "La percepción de una humareda en el horizonte y después del campo incendiado y después del cigarro a medio apagar que produjo la quemazón es considerada un ejemplo de asociación de ideas."¹⁷ Borges proceeds to develop from the principle a series of extraordinary consequences, but underlying the whole story is the totally chaotic nature of this invented world. Ana María Barrenechea and Emma Susana Speratti Piñero have pointed out that "Muchos de sus cuentos . . . insisten en la visión del mundo como un caos sin sentido ni ordenación posible."¹⁸ "Los laberintos sin salida donde el hombre vaga perdido se convierten en el doble emblema del infinito y el caos."¹⁹

¹⁵ *Ficciones*, BA, Emecé, 1956, p. 72.

¹⁶ P. 74.

¹⁷ P. 22.

¹⁸ *La literatura fantástica en Argentina, México*, Imp. Universitaria, 1957, p. 61.

¹⁹ P. 70. Where the present note differs from these conclusions, of course, is in the phrase *sin salida*. We propose that Borges believes there is indeed a *salida*.

In her excellent study of Borges, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges*, Ana María Barrenechea suggests that Borges creates a fictitious coherent world as a protest against a real but incoherent world.²⁰

What we propose at this point is that, in fact, the multiple labyrinths which Borges constructs throughout his multifaceted writings, are in the overwhelming majority intellectual constructions imposed by man on an incoherent and chaotic existence. In "La muerte y la brújula," for instance, one of Borges' most elaborately labyrinthine stories, the whole complex construction is pure fable, the invention of Red Scharlach to lead Lönnrot on his mad search for his own death. Repeatedly we find in Borges' stories the theme of a novel which is really a labyrinth, an attempt to introduce some order into chaotic formless reality. There are very few concrete tangible labyrinths in these stories, and even these are human constructions. In other words, they are all imposed by man. In *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, there is a comment which describes nearly all the fictional labyrinths created by Borges' characters: "El tiempo se bifurca perpetuamente hacia innumerables futuros. . . ." ²¹ But innumerable or infinite possibilities present a panorama of sheer chaos.

In sum, what is proposed in the present note is that the vision underlying Borges' works is that of a chaotic universe, formless and without natural laws, within which man wanders in search of his destiny. In this search, man imposes intellectual constructions designed to aid him in the search by ordering reality. But upon penetrating to the center of his own creation, man realizes the falsity of this construction, penetrates the meaning of existence, and is left with no recourse but to die, resigned to the implacable fact of the universe: its total pointlessness. Nothing in this conclusion is radically new; rather, we have attempted to relate a series of critical comments which have heretofore been regarded as relatively separate and distinct. This does not, of course, exhaust the material of Borges' themes: his insistence on the identity of opposites, for example. It does attempt to place in proper perspective the fundamental nature of the work of one of Latin America's most remarkable creative artists.

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²⁰ México, El Colegio de México, 1957, p. 15.

²¹ *Ficciones*, p. 110.