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INTIMATIONS OF TERROR IN BORGES' METAPHYSICS

THE PATHS to Borges' work through theology and philosophy, as implied by the title of this essay, are indicated by Borges himself: "I am merely a man who has tried to explore the literary possibilities of metaphysics and of religion."¹ My purpose here is to illuminate the concept of terror in Borges' work by referring to these cognate disciplines.

In the unlikely event that evidence other than Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" were not within reach, the evocation of this work alone would justify the claim, so often intimated by the writer, that theology and philosophy are branches of fantastic literature. Conversely, an equally justifiable claim could be ventured: theology and philosophy constitute an integral part of the epistemology of Borges' literature. His work furnishes ample justification for such a supposition. I refer to the "Epilogue" of *Otras inquisiciones* where, in retrospect, he discerns the first penchant of his work as a tendency "a estimar las ideas religiosas o filosóficas por su valor estético y aun por lo que encierran de singular y de maravilloso."² While the observation refers particularly to this collection of essays, these are the theoretical coordinates of his imaginative *œuvre*. There are no valid grounds for divorcing Borges' essays from his other imaginative writing. His work is unitary, knit by its author's intentional paucity, and composed of many facets which inform and elucidate each other.

In the same collection Borges reveals his own characterization of "aesthetic worth." That suggestive disclosure occurs at the conclusion of the first essay and reads: "esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es quizá, el hecho estético." With this description of the aesthetic experience, I believe, Borges furnishes a key to the nature of terror in his work.

The following discussion will treat metaphysics and theology in the light of their "aesthetic worth" and of "what is singular and marvelous about them." I use the term metaphysics in accord with its etymons: *meta* meaning *beyond* and *physics* meaning *natural*. By theology I mean

that constellation of experiences which gives the discipline its *raison d'être*: what the German theologian Rudolf Otto has delineated so succinctly as the *numinous*. "Terror," as the term appears in my title, forms an integral part of this constellation and its singularly marvelous quality.

Borges' observations on the nature of aesthetic experience and its "objective correlatives" (the forms into which these observations evolve within the author's work) have led to a number of critical studies through a sort of *via negationis*. Most notably, three such studies come to mind: Ana María Barrenechea's, Ronald Christ's, and Manuel Ferrer's.³ Each of these critical studies appears to be engendered by a literal metaphysics in Borges' work which suggests the existence of a world beyond, a "reality" that can only be alluded to, a perception which, in Kant's terms, is "not un-folded." Perhaps this metaphysical realm is none other than the one Goethe would have us surmise, the one he characterizes in *An den Mona* as:

What beyond our conscious knowing
Or our thought's extremest span
Threads by night the labyrinthine
Pathways of the breast of man.⁴

The potential aesthetic value of the ineffable, of that which lies on the fringes of apprehension, has been recognized as one of the most powerful elements in art. Its requirements border on a religiosity which would have each of us become *homo vates*, visionaries engaged in divination, seers exercising what Coleridge explicitly asked of the reader: "poetic faith." There is a crossroads where literature and metaphysics converge. That point, I believe, rests where we must surmise or divine a reality out of vacuity and silence, and, where the metaphysician comprehends that the boundaries of metaphysics lie within the abstract, noumenal, ideal limits of apprehension. Borges' work would appear to emanate from this point of convergence: "Hay una hora de la tarde en que la llanura está por decir algo; nunca lo dice o tal vez lo dice infinitamente y no lo entendemos, o lo entendemos pero es intraducible como una música."⁵ On another occasion, Borges offers the following self-description: "I am . . . simply a man of letters who turns his own perplexities and the respected system of perplexities we call philosophy into forms of literature."⁶ In the "Prologue" to his *Obra poética 1923-1966* he indicates the spirit in which his poems should be read: "Este prólogo podría denominarse la estética de Berkeley, no porque la haya profesado el metafísico irlandés . . . , sino porque aplica a las letras el argumento que éste aplicó a la realidad."⁷ Borges' understanding of metaphysics bespeaks a comprehension tainted with mystery ("vague," "perplexities"),

and an element of fear, a fear of the abstract, of irreality, of a silence which, like the reality of Berkeley and the Idealists, must find its articulation in us: "Me sentí muerto, me sentí percibidor abstracto del mundo; indefinido temor imbuído de ciencia que es la mejor claridad de la metafísica. No creí, no, haber remontado las presuntivas aguas del Tiempo; más bien me sospeché poseedor del sentido reticente o ausente de la inconcebible palabra *eternidad*."⁸

Such states of apprehension and awareness, which have also found articulation in aestheticians like Edmund Burke, writes like Ann Radcliffe, and theologians like Rudolf Otto, emerge as constants in Borges' work. I should like to proceed by interrelating those constants that structure Borges' literature with these articulations which would appear to be the theoretical correlatives to his praxis as poet, essayist, and author of stories. I do not mean to imply that Borges uses the postulates articulated by these writers as blueprint for his work. My intention is far from converting Borges into an ephebe or establishing positive *rappports de fait*. Such attempts would not only prove unfruitful, they would contradict the spirit of authorship so frequently depicted by Borges as nonindividualistic and timeless. The purview of this study is not influence but *confluence*, a congruous simultaneity not necessarily in time but in ideas and forms of expression.⁹

Epistemologically Borges' works reveal him to be a gnostic. His occasional assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, Borges distrusts material reality. Ronald Christ's assertion on this point is more categorical: "the primary tenet of Borges' metaphysic: a denial of objective, external reality."¹⁰ Knowledge for the Argentine author emerges as the object of abstract, ideational apprehension—the Platonic apprehension of Schopenhauer and the Idealists who inexorably permeate his work. In a 1967 interview Borges asserted: "I think I'm Aristotelian, *but I wish it were the other way*. I think it's the English strain that makes me think of particular things and persons being real rather than general ideas being real."¹¹ It would appear that Borges' statement belies itself. In view of his often cited claim that, like Joseph Conrad, he believes reality to be more fantastic than literature,¹² there appears to be an ironic quality to his confession. The irony, however, does not remain an insoluble paradox. Borges the intellectual and Borges the imaginative author have been in disagreement before, as the short vignette "Borges y yo" attests. Harold Bloom phrases the apparent duality thus: "Borges is imaginatively a gnostic, but intellectually a skeptical humanist."¹³ The *œuvre* of the imaginative Borges would indicate that he has acceded to his wish to be, as he put it, "the other way." By traditional criteria Borges

is as much a Platonist, for whom "particular things and persons" emerge as less than perfect incarnations of forms and ideas that vaguely persist in recollection, as he is an Aristotelian, but an Aristotelian who qualifies the reticent generality of the particular by affirming, "si no es verdadera como hecho, lo será como símbolo."¹⁴

Borges' gnosticism and its ambivalences, the tendency of the particular and of the individual to disintegrate in time and space (the propensity of the concrete for dissolution) in his work provide a link between Borges and the metaphysical terror delineated by Edmund Burke, Ann Radcliffe, and Rudolf Otto. It is the suggestion of a greater order than individual instance and personality, the intimation that a covert cosmos may coexist with our reality, infusing it with awe, that confer upon Borges an affinity with the work and ideas of these writers.

In formulating an aesthetic theory of the sublime, Edmund Burke relied on an implied metaphysics of space and time that attenuates the individual in the face of grandeur. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) is an empirical treatise, Burke claimed, attempting to establish common principles in making aesthetic judgments and is based on sensation and induction. Burke followed closely the empirical tradition of Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, English thinkers whom the Anglophile Borges frequently evokes so that, more often than not, he may refute them. As for Burke's idea of sublimity, however, there are clear indications that its principles are operative in the Argentine's work.

"The passions which belong to self-preservation," Burke tells us, "turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances."¹⁵ Aesthetic distance seems to be the key to this "delight," as Burke terms it. "Whatever excites this delight, I call *sublime*" (p. 95). Burke goes on to delineate certain instances which produce sublimity. Perhaps the most significant source of the sublime for subsequent aesthetic theories lies in what Burke calls "All general privations." These privations, he tells us, "are great, because they are terrible: *vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence*" (p. 10). Burke considers the highest degree of sublimity to be astonishment, which he defines as "that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (p 100). Other causes of the sublime are magnificence, greatness of dimension, and infinity. "However, it may not be amiss to add to these remarks upon

magnitude," Burke continues, "that as the great extreme of dimension is sublime, so the last extreme of littleness is in some measure sublime likewise; when we attend to the infinite divisibility of matter . . . ; for division must be infinite as well as addition" (p. 102).

In 1802 Ann Radcliffe began the composition of her final Gothic romance, *Gaston de Blondville*, which was not to appear for nearly a quarter of a century. The "Introduction" to that work has attained greater notoreity than the novel itself. The work's publisher, Colburn, is chiefly responsible for this. In 1826 he excerpted Mrs. Radcliffe's "Introduction" and published the passages in his *New Monthly Magazine* under the title "On the Supernatural in Poetry. By the Late Mrs. Radcliffe."¹⁶ The "essay" has been read and misread ever since. More than the formulation of an aesthetic theory, Ann Radcliffe's motive appears to have been an *apologia* for Gothic romances and the conferral of respectability upon that genre through the establishment of a link to the most respectable of all bulwarks, William Shakespeare. Accordingly, Mrs. Radcliffe presented the reader with two wayfarers in Shakespeare country on a journey from Coventry to Warwick, deeply engaged in a discussion of things terrible and supernatural in the words of Warwickshire's famous native son.

For the purposes of this study, the most interesting part of the dialogue deals with the idea of *terror*. Edmund Burke and the sublime form part of Radcliffe's discussion and in formulating a definition of terror there is a reference to the sublimity of what Burke called "general privations," (vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence). Terror, according to Mrs. Radcliffe, "expands the soul," and "awakens the faculties to a high degree." To use Thompson's succinct paraphrase, "Terror . . . may be seen as coming upon us from without, engulfing us with an awful sense of the sublime in which sense of self is swallowed in immensity."¹⁷

From his earlier works on, Borges describes experiences of aesthetic value analogous to Burke's sublime and its terrible grandeur of vacuity, astonishment, and delightful horror. In the 1954 "Prologue" to his *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935) he writes, "Los doctores del Gran Vehículo enseñan que lo esencial del universo es la vacuidad. Tienen plena razón en lo referente a esa mínima parte del universo que es este libro."¹⁸ The scaffolds, pirates, and their infamy as indicated by the word in the book's title may perturb or horrify ("la palabra infamia aturde en el título"), observes Borges, but, he continues, behind it all there is nothing; "for that very reason perchance it can delight" the reader. Recalling the amusement of the unhappy man who wrote the book, Borges expresses the wish that some of that pleasure may reach the reader. However cavalierly and ironically as Borges may refer to the vacuity and "delightful horror" underlying his work, his perhaps un-

knowing nod to the principles of sublimity is clearly evident. Nor is this to be the only instance of coincidence.

Grandeur, so basic to the sublime, Burke asserts, derives from greatness of dimension. However, the other extreme, that of attenuated magnitude, "the infinite divisibility of matter," is equally evocative of sublime grandeur. Ana María Barrenechea perceptively has observed this dimensional oxymoron in Borges' work. The immensities that exalt in Borges are mentioned by Barrenechea in her second chapter on "The Infinite," as are Borges' unique Eleatic professions of infinite multiplication and divisibility in the venerable tradition of Zeno of Elea and his mathematical paradoxes. Reviewing a number of Borges' stories, essays, and poems, Barrenechea accumulates an adjectival lexicon of terms that heighten and expand our sense of time and space: "vast, remote, infinite, enormous, outrageous, perpetuated, immortal, grandiose, dilapidated, dilated, incessant, inexhaustable, insatiable, interminable, deep, concave, aggravated, intense, final, farthest, penultimate, lateral, lost, banished, misplaced, tired, exhausted, vertiginous, everlasting."¹⁹ As for the vertigo of infinite subdivisibility and Borges' Eleatic professions, the reader may refer to stories like "El jardín de sonderos que se bifurcan," "La muerte y la brújula," "Funes el memorioso," "El milagro secreto," "La Biblioteca de Babel," "La lotería de Babilonia;" to essays like "Avatares de la tortuga," "Magias parciales del *Quijote*," "Del culto de los libros," "Formas de una leyenda," and "Sobre el *Vathek* de William Beckford."

The idea of the sublime delineated by Burke, and its attendant terror as defined by Ann Radcliffe refer to aesthetic experience. In his study on *The Idea of the Holy*²⁰ Rudolf Otto presents a category of consciousness correlative to aesthetic sensibility. The field of precognition put forth by Otto may very well underlie the affective discernment in aesthetic experience, particularly in the type of experience articulated by Burke and Radcliffe, and evoked by the work of Borges.²¹

The sensibility posited by Otto, like the aesthetic experience described by Borges, is fundamentally "not-unfolded." It remains, to use Kant's terminology once again, an "unexplicated concept," to be apprehended through nonrational faculties. As the title of Otto's work indicates, its concern is with religious experience, with the divination of the holy. To avoid the moral and ethical overtones of "holy" Otto uses the Roman term *numen* (the power ascribed to objects or beings regarded with awe). From *numen* he derives *numinous* and *numinosity*. This, he tells us, refers to the holy *minus* its moral and rational aspects. Otto uses the Hebrew term *qadôsh*, the Greek *ἅγιος*, and the Latin *sanctus* (*sacer*) to illustrate this particular nuance of holy. The subtitle of Otto's book makes the meaning of his terminology, as well as his objectives, clearer: "An Inquiry

Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational." The import of "rationality" for Otto is closely aligned with the work of Immanuel Kant, one of the most significant junctures of confluence where Otto and Borges converge. By "rational" then, Otto means "analytic," or "conceptual." Through the careful choice of "non-rational" over "irrational," Otto has circumvented the charge of being labeled *dialectical* by the Kantians, in whose technical terminology the charge amounts to the accusation of professing vain and empty knowledge. The term Otto opts for, "non-rational," alludes to another type of knowledge which in itself may rightfully be termed a metaphysics, for its object is supersensible, noumenal reality—the "old metaphysics" that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), with its "metaphysics of science" and systematic concepts, aimed to destroy. Nonetheless, Rudolf Otto seeks (and finds) reinforcement in the very heart of the opposition—the opening words of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: "That all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt. For how is it possible that the faculty of cognition should be awakened into exercise otherwise than by means of objects which affect our senses? . . . But, though all our knowledge begins *with* experience, it by no means follows that all arises out of experience."²² In his qualification of empirical knowledge Kant aligns himself with a Platonic metaphysics of *a priori* cognition from which cognitive elements surface so that, on the occasion of empirical experience, we may "know." According to Otto, the *numinous* belongs to this *a priori* category, which also would appear to define the aesthetic reality as described by Borges. These elements of *a priori* cognition could be said to stand for those Platonic forms so eminently present in Borges' world of irreality, ideas, and transpersonal (supra-individual) dreams.

To suggest the meaning of the irreducible datum he calls *numen* or *numinous*, Otto employs a triadic ideogram: *Mysterium, tremendum, et fascinans*. The various principles of aesthetic experience cited thus far seem to converge in a meaningful way within Otto's Latin phrase.

Mysterium is a negative concept. It connotes absence, abstractness, and inscrutibility. "But," says Otto, "though what is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is something absolutely and intensely positive" (p. 13). Otto's use of the term suggests something fundamental to aesthetic experience which, I believe, can be related to the prescience of "poetic faith" demanded by Coleridge and characterized by Borges as "La momentánea fe que exige de nosotros el arte."²³ It can be likened also to the "general privations" of "vacuity, darkness, solitude, and silence," that is to say, the sources of sublimity. More specifically for our purposes, however, the concept of *mysterium* manifests a kinship to Borges definition of aesthetic reality and its *via negationis*: the perpetual futurity of a

revelation that retains the quality of unending promise by continually postponing its fulfillment.

"The qualitative *content* of the numinous experience, to which 'the mysterium' stands as *form*, is in one of its aspects the element of daunting 'awefulness' and 'majesty,'" says Otto (p. 31). This aspect stands for *tremendum*, the second element in his triad. *Tremendum*, he says, is more than the "fear proper" implied by *tremor*. It comprises three inter-related moments: awefulness, majesty, and energy. Otto attempts to define his term of analogy. Some languages have special expressions which denote this "fear." He offers the Hebrew term *higdish* (hallow) and the Greek *δέσμα πανικόν* as examples: "Here we have a terror fraught with inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instil. It has something spectral in it" (p. 14). This sense of *awe* or "ineffable something which holds the mind" is intensified by "absolute overpoweringness" or *majestas*, characterized by a cowering of the individual which borders on total self-nullification—a displacement of individual existence by a "plenitude of power" which "becomes transmuted into 'plenitude of being'" (p. 21). An urgency or "energy" in the numinous object lends this awful majesty added impetus. This "charge" can be perceived vividly, according to Otto, in *ὄργη* or "wrath," a force which ranges from the "daemoniac level up to the idea of the 'living God'" (p. 23).

Tremendum, then, emerges as homologous to the daunting grandeur of Burke's sublime which attenuates the self, suspends all motions of the soul with some degree of horror, and fills the mind entirely with its object. It would certainly appear that *terror* as depicted by Ann Radcliffe, that sense of the sublime in which sense of self is swallowed in immensity, falls within the category of *tremendum*. These homologues bring to mind Borges' rabbi of Prague, Judá León, who gazed fondly on his creature "Y con algún horror" in that cabalistic poem called "El Golem"²⁴; and the fey, gnostic dreamer-creator of "The Circular Ruins" who, in the hour of his demise, with terror and humiliation, suddenly comprehends that he, too, is a projection of someone else's dream. Of the many other appropriate instances in Borges work that Otto's *tremendum* brings to mind I cite one more: the awful terror which the King of Babylonia must have experienced as he found himself lost in the intricate and quint-essentially metaphysical labyrinth of infinite desert, without galleries or walls, with which the Arab King compensated the hospitality of his Babylonian counterpart ("Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos").

There are moments in the work of Borges when the *homo vates* yields to the *homo ludens*, when, utterly cowed before the presence of the "*omnipotentia dei*," the waning seer gives way to the player, to the

decipherer. These are the instances in which dread gives way to fascination, when overwhelming circumstances are suddenly perceived as aesthetic symmetries which attain perfection by virtue of the characters' participation and our own; as, for example, when a Faustian hero about to be executed requests a more perfect stratagem of his antagonist in a future incarnation—the labyrinth of the Eleatic straight line, rather than the cabalistic Tetragramaton (“La muerte y la brújula”), or when Borges the poet reveals in “Ajedrez” that

También el jugador es prisionero
(La sentencia es de Omar) de otro tablero
De negras noches y de blancos días.²⁵

This captivation, while a contrast to the daunting awe in the numinous, in fact completes Otto's triadic ideogram and is designated as *fascinans*—“something that allures with potent charm” (p. 31).

The result of this simultaneity of dread and fascination is a “harmony of contrasts,” says Otto, who notes the parallel between the *fascinans* of the numinous and the delight so crucial to sublimity. Otto views Burke's sublime as “an authentic schema of the holy” (p. 46). Accordingly, he observes, “the sublime exhibits the same peculiar dual character as the numinous; it is at once daunting, and yet again singularly attracting in its impress upon the mind. It humbles and at the same time exalts us, circumscribes and extends us beyond ourselves” (p. 42).

Like the concepts of the numinous and the sublime, Borges' aesthetics is predicated on a metaphysics of denial. Burke's sublime is founded on “general privations.” Otto's numinous finds its consummate representation in sublimity: “In the arts nearly everywhere the most effective means of representing the numinous is ‘the sublime’” (p. 65). Aesthetic reality, presented by Borges as the imminence of a revelation which never occurs, bears a striking resemblance to the manifestation of the numinous in the arts. The coincidence between Borges' aesthetics of abnegation and Otto's view that in Western art the most direct methods of representing the numinous “are in a noteworthy way *negative*, viz. *darkness* and *silence*” (p. 68) speaks for itself. Oriental art, argues Otto, has taught us another way to express numinosity: “emptiness; empty distances” which he calls “the sublime of the horizontal” (p. 69). These are undeniably methods most frequently articulated in Borges' discursive affirmations, postulates which serve as theoretical coordinates to his praxis as artist. It might be observed parenthetically that while Oriental influences are clearly present in Borges, “the sublime of the horizontal,” the magical

quality of the empty, boundless plain is something Borges' own Argentine literary tradition has richly endowed upon him through writers like José Hernández, Leopoldo Lugones, and Ricardo Güiraldes.

As for the vacuities of darkness and silence, their *prima facie* existence in Borges' work is readily apparent. He has written a book of verses to the first (*Elogio de la sombra*, [1969]) and the vacuity of the second permeates in his stories and poems, from the still, poignant contemplation of the Southern plain or the Buenos Aires sunset, to the anonymous silence of a malarial jungle in the East, punctuated by "the disconsolate cry of a bird" at midnight ("Las ruinas circulares"), to the muteness of "the troglodytes, who devour serpents and are ignorant of verbal commerce" ("El inmortal"), and the taciturnity of his heroes—the Dreamer of "Las ruinas circulares," Funes, Jaromir Hladik, Alejandro Villari, Ts'ui Pên, Pedro Salvadores.

More haunting than these readily observable instances of "general privations" in Borges, however, are the generic, the infinitely grander, more awesome, and more "marvelous" correlatives of vacuity which the Argentine has elaborated: the silence, darkness, solitude, vast emptiness which span cosmic space and eternity. Mary Kinzie in her essay on Borges has articulated well the cosmic void which emanates from a symbolic elaboration of the absence of voices, lucidity, and communion that no longer fill the ominous vacuities in Borges' works.²⁶ The "latency" of thought (and, therefore, of the cosmos, for Borges the Idealist and student of Schopenhauer the world is nothing more than will and idea) ceases, she writes, "to be an implement with Borges and becomes an enigma, a force, a grail. It is as if the idea of thought had been lost or culturally vitiated, while the recollection of its value still persisted in some genetic trace" (p. 7). When one considers works like "El inmortal" and its nefarious city of troglodytes, "El informe de Brodie" and its Yahoos, who for all their backwardness, are not primitive but a degenerate nation no longer capable of deciphering the inscriptions of its past, the true meaning of Kinzie's observation becomes apparent: latency which equals vacuity by its forgotten or unrealized "potentiality" transcends its value as aesthetic "implement," as in Burke's sublime, and becomes a normative, substantiated attribute of a spectral race: "La certidumbre de que todo está escrito nos anula o nos afantasma. Yo conozco distritos en que los jóvenes se prosternan ante los libros y besan con barbarie las páginas, pero no saben descifrar una sola letra." And,

Y, hecho de consonantes y vocales,
Habrà un terrible Nombre, que la esencia
Cifre de Dios y que la Omnipotencia
Guarde en letras y sílabas cabaes.

Adán y las estrellas lo supieron
En el Jardín. La herrumbre del pecado
(Dicen los cabalistas) lo ha borrado
Y las generaciones lo perdieron.

(“El Golem”)

In his “Prologue” to *Antología personal* Borges alludes to the paucity of his work which, he says, does not dishearten him since it provides an illusion of continuity. The “continuity” he refers to consists of a lyric compression from short story to the intensified terseness of poetry—from “Las ruinas circulares” to “El Golem” or to “Ajedrez.” Concision is a function of a program in Borges’ literary aesthetics to reduce “expression” to a *cipher*, to a type of “aleph” whose transparency has somehow been tarnished but whose perturbing and vague intensity cryptically heightens.

“Croce,” Borges continues, “juzgó que el arte es expresión; a esta exigencia, o a una deformación de esta exigencia, debemos la peor literatura de nuestro tiempo.” He then concludes: “Alguna vez yo también busque la expresión; ahora sé que mis dioses no me conceden más que la alusión o mención.” And, Borges no doubt, would consider them to be benevolent gods for *their* “paucity” and concision. He observes in an essay on “El primer Wells” that “el escritor no debe invalidar con razones humanas la momentánea fe que exige de nosotros el arte.”²⁷ This reaffirmation of the primacy of the suggestive force in literature has led some observers to articulate Borges’ kinship to Imagist poets like Wallace Stevens whose “song / That will not declare itself” bespeaks so clearly the “imminence of a revelation that does not take place.”²⁸

Metaphysics refers to a realm of the abstract, ideal, and the noumenal. Our apprehension of aesthetic reality in literature consists of such an ideational, metaphysical apperception. From this plane, Borges’ definition of aesthetic reality as the imminence and unfulfilled promise of a revelation transforms the metaphysical reality of aesthetic experience to yet a second degree of ideal abstraction, not conceived or apprehended, but eternally awaited. At this meta-metaphysical plane, since no potential has cancelled out any possibilities through its own realization, the most perfect totality exists unperturbed. Since nothing is as yet anything, it is everything (see the author’s prose poem entitled “The Unending Gift”).²⁹

A large segment of Borges’ literary *œuvre* constantly and unremittingly strives to transform all realized and, therefore, finite entities to this pristine state of perfection. All that has been delineated must be returned to eternal mystery (the intimated *content* of the suggestive *form* we call literature): differentiated time, space, individuality, and all delimiting attributes. Yeats’s famed Platonic proclamation, which serves Borges as

epigraph for his story "Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)," bespeaks the return Borges seeks to accomplish: "I am looking for the face I had before the world was made."

Borges' metaphysics of denial contains within it a duality which I do not think can properly be called a dialectic or a paradox. These terms would imply antinomies or antagonistic counterpostures. More appropriately, Otto's phrase "harmony of contrasts" could be applied to this contiguity. Like the twofold character of the sublime and the numinous, the duality in Borges' metaphysics exalts the individual through the promise of integration with a cosmic fountainhead on the one hand, while, on the other, the individual and individuality become consumed and nullified: Exaltation is coupled with terror—the terror in which "sense of self is swallowed in immensity." Beyond the energy and urgency of this binary animation which emanates from sublimity and numinosity, Borges interjects a "profane" gesture which takes on various forms and serves to intensify the intimated feeling of dread. These aberrants emerge as doubt, vertigo, Faustian obsession with gnosis, violence, heresy, atrocious deed. The result of these gestures, whose psychological implications Borges never elaborates (through a conscious effort),³⁰ could be seen as a series of predicaments or, more accurately, "statements of predicament" in the face of devouring immensity and its inexorable plenitude. These "statements" find their correlative characterization in a number of protagonists who reflect the varied types of fated, archetypal heroes: Prometheus, Faust, Frankenstein, Cain, Ahab, Judas, the Wandering Jew, and, Borges would add, the being whose variously differentiated manifestations result in each of these protagonists as momentary facets of a grand and timeless scheme.

Borges approaches numinosity and sublimity in the aesthetic experience with ambivalence—the ambivalence so inherent to all gnosticism. The feeling of awe or "hallow" quality of *mysterium* becomes contaminated by an intellectual interrogatory containing an intrinsic element of doubt and skepticism. Thus, Borges' naturalistic humanism reduces the numinosity of vatic experience to a conceptual scheme. The result is a transgression of faith intimating a devastating nihilism in the perpetually promised revelation and its mystery. While Borges refines differentiated reality into pre-existence, simultaneously, he suggests an awful suspicion of nullity. What furnishes the greatest terror in Borges' work, then, may not necessarily be what Otto called "plenitude of being," but the intimation of a contiguous "plenitude of nothingness."

Another work of literature may help explain this intimated terror, immanent in the trials and travails of gnosis, Friedrich Schiller's poem "The Veiled Image of Sais" (1795). Schiller's hero is a young man, dissatisfied with truths that provide no more than fragmentary knowledge.

He travels to Sais in Egypt, the ancient seat of priestly learning, in search of wisdom and comprehension of *the* truth. Before the image of Isis, he is told he must not lift the Goddess' veil behind which truth lies concealed. Whoever lifts the veil, he is warned, will *see* the *truth*. The fervor of his pursuit keeps him from heeding the warning. The next day he is found unconscious before the image. He finally manages to warn others not to let their search lead them into iniquity. He never reveals what he saw. Unable to live with the dread of his experience, he soon dies.

Schiller's poem offers a literary analogy to Borges' suspicion about the unknowable. In the realm of metaphysics the Argentine furnishes a more discursive key to his skepticism—a key which may also explain the nature of his claim to be an Aristotelian. The following passage appears in two different essays of *Otras inquisiciones*, "El ruseñor de Keats" and "De las alegorías a las novelas":

Observa Coleridge que todos los hombres nacen aristotélicos o platónicos. Los últimos sienten que las clases, los órdenes y los géneros son realidades; los primeros, que son generalizaciones; para éstos, el lenguaje no es otra cosa que un aproximativo juego de símbolos; para aquéllos es el mapa del universo. El platónico sabe que el universo es de algún modo un cosmos, un orden; ese orden, para el aristotélico, puede ser un error o una ficción de nuestro conocimiento parcial. A través de las latitudes y de las épocas, los dos antagonistas inmortales cambian de dialecto y de nombre: uno es Parménides, Platón, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Bradley; el otro, Heráclito, Aristóteles, Locke, Hume, William James. En las arduas escuelas de la Edad Media, todos invocan a Aristóteles, maestro de la humana razón (*Convivio*, IV, 2), pero los nominalistas son Aristóteles; los realistas, Platón.³¹

Borges' conclusion gives an unusual twist to philosophy's classical confrontation. His rendition of the two antithetical threads in the history of metaphysics, more accurately, the conclusion of this rendition, controverts the traditional representation of Plato and Aristotle. We are taught that Plato's syllogistic idealism is anything but "realist" and that the empiricist, inductive scientism of the Aristotelians one would only consign to outright "nominalism" out of reductionist ebullience, a tendency that ensues from the aftermath of Thomist Scholasticism. While, by traditional criteria, Borges would fall into Platonist ranks, we cannot deny that the Argentine is no less an Aristotelian, if we accept his exegesis of the timeless dialectic. Since Borges operates under the principles of his own rendition, we are obliged to view his work accordingly.

In the light of this philosophical posture, that binary quality, the "harmony of contrasts," the coexistence of cosmic exaltation and of nihilism

in the Argentine's work acquires added significance. This duality cannot be called paradoxical, for its existence does not imply antinomy or paradox. Nor can it be called prattic for the duality involves more than parallel contiguity. More properly, the elements of this twofold relationship should be considered hypotactic by virtue of their interdependence, by virtue of the fact that they acquire added significance through mutual allusion. Thus, the hypotaxis of cosmic totality and nothingness (of exaltation and the implicit terror of nullity) resides in the mutual intensification each of the parts of this duality bestows upon the other. The end result is a literary *œuvre* whose vatic content is thrown into doubt. At the heart of this ontological skepticism is Borges' own unique synthesis of the epistemological problems implied by Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics. This synthesis furnishes the *form* to an allusive, suggestive, and intimating world whose *contents* remains ineffable, immaterial, unexplicated, unknowable, or irretrievably lost to generic memory. Thus, for the Platonist in Borges "language is nothing but an approximative set of symbols." For the Aristotelian in him language "is the map of the universe." Nonetheless, while this universe is "an order, a cosmos" for the Platonist, for the Aristotelian it "can be an error or a fiction of our partial knowledge." Since Borges aligns himself so closely with the nineteenth century English Idealists (who, by the way, derive from Aristotle and not from Plato, according to Borges), the universe and its order are none other than the contents of "our partial knowledge;" *esse rerum est percipi*, as Bishop Berkeley's familiar thesis, so vital to Borges, would have it.³² The implication, of course, is that the universe, the cosmos, may very well be "an error or a fiction." In that case the ineffable content, the *mysterium* of the numinous and the sublime, the contents of the cipher, the promised revelation of aesthetic reality may very well be equally erroneous, fictive, illusory, and inexistent. In the possible likelihood of this eventuality, the differentiated time, space and personality that suffer attenuation and denial so they may become reintegrated with a pre-existent Order may be subjected to nullification literally for nought. It becomes quite clear that Borges' interpretation of Plato and Aristotle makes both equally patrilineal to his metaphysics of denial.

The "aesthetic worth" or "what is singular and marvelous" in this metaphysics has infused Borges' work with a certain disquietude not unlike the immanent terror of the sublime and the numinous. Ronald Christ's discernment of a fundamentally disturbing vision in Borges which he describes as a "metaphysical vision antagonistic to our very selves" (p. 200) seems to allude to this very immanence and its "vague fear infused with knowledge." Behind such a conclusion, which more than one devout observer has gleaned from Borges' *œuvre*, lies a radical dualism endemic to all Gnostic literature: the synchrony of Genesis and Apocalypse in

gnosis, the supreme act of knowing that simultaneously is unity and nullity, actualization and dissolution. Borges' gnosticism and affinity with the concepts of sublimity and numinosity may be explained in part through one of his unmistakable precursors, Edgar Allen Poe—the American beneficiary and embodiment of the dark Romanticism that was Edmund Burke's and Ann Radcliffe's inadvertent bequest to the Nineteenth Century. In his "Prose Poem," *Eureka*, Poe illuminates the ominous duality that besets all gnostic endeavors and infuses Borges' "aesthetic reality" with terror. He describes an "Absolute Unity" not unlike the pristine state of perfection and eternal mystery whose imminent revelation in Borges' work promises cosmic plenitude and *nihilum* at the same time: "a novel Universe swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine." With an "irreverence" more evocative of the sectarians of the *Agnostos Theos* (the Alien God of the Gnostics) than of the Christian mystics, Poe concludes, "And now—this Heart Divine—what is it? *It is our own.*"³³

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1. "Foreword" to his *Selected Poems 1923–1967*, Norman Thomas diGiovanni, ed. (New York: Delacourt Press, 1972), p. xv.
2. *Otras inquisiciones*, (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1960), p. 259.
3. Ana María Barrenechea, *La expresión de irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (México: El Colegio de México, 1957); Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York: New York University Press, 1969); Manuel Ferrer, *Borges y la nada* (London: Tamesis Books, 1971).
4. Cited by Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 148.
5. "El fin," in *Ficciones*, (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1956), p. 186–87.
6. "Foreword" to Ronald Christ's *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion*, p. ix.
7. *Obra poética 1923–1966* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1966), p. i.
8. This key passage is referred to and appears three times in the author's *œuvre*: "Sentirse en muerte," in his *El idioma de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Manuel Gleizer, Editor [Colección Índice], 1928); in the title essay of his *Historia de la eternidad* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Vial y Zona, 1936); in his 1947 essay "Nueva refutación del tiempo," *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1952). I cite from the last of these works, p. 247.
9. In an informal conversation I had with Borges on March 13, 1976 in Bloomington, Indiana the author denied having any acquaintance with the works of Ann Radcliffe or Rudolph Otto. His familiarity with Edmund Burke's work, on the other hand, was evident.
10. Christ, p. 19.
11. Ronald Christ, "Interview," *Paris Review* (Winter–Spring, 1967), p. 62.
12. See Christ, "Interview," *Paris Review*, p. 40, and Borges' *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 65.

13. Harold Bloom, "Poetic Misprision: Three Cases," in his *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 211.

14. "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva," in *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1957), p. 49.

15. I am citing from Peyton E. Richter, ed., *Perspectives in Aesthetics* (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1967), p. 95.

16. For a more complete account of the vicissitudes of Mrs. Radcliffe's "essay" see Alan D. McKillop, "Mrs. Radcliffe on the Supernatural in Poetry," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 31 (1932), 352-59.

17. G. Richard Thompson, ed., *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1974), pp. 3-4.

18. *Historia universal de la infamia* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1954), p. 10.

19. Barrenechea, *Borges The Labyrinth Maker*, pp. 24-25.

20. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923). The work first appeared in German as *Das Heilige*, in 1917.

21. There is some precedent for the use of Otto's work and terminology in elucidating literary problems. See, for instance, Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 223, 241; Walter Kaufman, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), p. 37; G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life* (London: Methuen, 1947), p. 128; S. L. Varnado, "The Idea of the Numinous in Gothic Literature," in *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, G. R. Thompson, ed., pp. 11-21.

22. Cited by Otto, pp. 113-114.

23. *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 127.

24. In *El otro, el mismo* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1969), p. 47.

25. *El otro, y el mismo*, p. 62.

26. Mary Kinzie, "Recursive Prose," *TriQuarterly* 25. *Prose for Borges*, C. Newman and M. Kinzie, editors (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 5-45.

27. *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 127.

28. For an interesting study of Borges and Wallace Stevens, particularly a discussion of the latter's "Metaphors of a Magnifico" with reference to Borges, see Robert Alter, "Borges and Stevens: a note on post-Symbolist writing," in *TriQuarterly* 25. *Prose for Borges*, 275-85.

29. In *Elogio de la sombra* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1969), p. 39.

30. See Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion*, Chapter 3, particularly pp. 122 and ff.

31. *Otras inquisiciones*, pp. 167-68 and 213-14.

32. See Borges' "La encrucijada de Berkeley," in his first book of essays, *Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proa, 1925).

33. For a discussion of Poe and Gnosticism see Barton Levi St. Armand, "Usher Unveiled: Poe and the Metaphysic of Gnosticism," *Poe Studies*, 5 (1972), 1-8.