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“Blanco,” “Wind from all compass points,” and “The effects of baptism,” from Eliot Weinberger, ed. and trans., *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957-1987*. © 1986 by Octavio Paz and Eliot Weinberger. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

“A fable of two gardens” translation © Jack Hill and Enrique Caracciolo.

Ladera Este © Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1979.

To my husband and my parents

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I.

*Laughter and
the Radical Utopia:*
The Orient of Borges

The Orient, presented ironically, with familiarity, and at times inverted and parodied, is a metaphor in Borges's works for infinite time, fantasy, and utopia. This practice in itself does not differ drastically from other representations of Hispanic Orientalism. What distinguishes Borges in his creativity is the polyglot nature of his representations through which the language of utopia (the Orient) is in dialogue with the language of Western reality. The purpose of dialogue is to go beyond limits of time and space to attract the reader into yet one more labyrinth, or to see the reader's image of the Orient reflected again in the infinitely shifting mirrors, or to examine metaphysically another ordered image of wholeness. The purpose of the exercise is to question a sadly fixed and unreasonably complete view of reality and arrive unquestionably at a reality that holds, like the Aleph, the totality of all things. For Borges meaning is subjective, which calls into question causality and stagnant interpretations. As his stance is ironic, Borges is not searching for the essence of life extrapolated from the ultimate metaphor, the metaphor of metaphor. Rather, he assembles a series of objects—the tiger, globe, coin, and labyrinth, for example—for the purpose of their systematic identification with the Orient. The design of the identification is to redirect speech, upset the basis for comparison, and dissolve reality before reinvesting it with new qualities. Reality is not weakened by this premise. It is shown, rather, in its complexity

through a “concatenation of unprocessable elements” that, because of their proximity on the page, produce laughter.

Borges reinvents laughter, making it a universal philosophic form again. Borges employs laughter for much the same reason he praises philosophy—because it “dissolves reality,” making it a “kind of haziness” that he ultimately sees as good. It is, therefore, not judicious to be confident about reality and yourself, nor is it too wise to be an intolerantly serious or unreasonable thinker. While Hegel believed the East to be “unreflected consciousness,” Borges inverts the relationship of obedient faith in the Other and invests it with laughter, in a form that looks into the future because it is directed at the whole world at the same time, and because it looks toward creation or new birth. The single meaning of reality is shaken so that the virtues and vices of all are theorized in relation to each other, while remaining independent of the other. Borges’s Orient is textual, a creation of the mind, which comes as no surprise; most of his being-in-the-world experience is derived from literary excursions, even though he traveled to Japan in his later years.¹ Through cultural displacement, slipping irreverently at times between Buddhist philosophy and German hegemony, for example, Borges orders the chaotic universe, giving freedom to personal desires for a more active existence like that of his pirates, military heroes, and tigers.

The Orient for Borges always goes beyond its perceived reality. Borges went so far as to read Buddhist philosophy through an understanding of Schopenhauer, with the intention of entertaining while elaborating on his theory of the fantastic. The entertaining and fantastic aspects of this approach distanced Borges from his collaborator, Alicia Jurado, who held different aspirations for their mutual effort, *Qué es el budismo* (What is Buddhism) (1976). Borges acknowledges that Alicia Jurado was interested in relating an ethical approach to Buddhism with hopes of converting the readers to that philosophy, while he wanted to expose the strangeness, the fantastic images that Westerners hold of Buddhist philosophy. This study on Buddhism, in addition to many short stories, sketches, and essays of Oriental theme, discloses Borges’s literary intention, which is that through Orientalism opposites may be joined momentarily and the underlying void made evident. From this he reveals the desire to name while showing the meaninglessness of categorization, to reflect infinity until it is meaningless, and to establish the void through the disconcerting language of the utopia

that overturns the established codes. Borges’s intellectual approach to the Orient rivals that of medieval scholars in its reverence of Eastern cultures.² His approach is grounded in a parody of the Orient that is at times heterotopian in that it undermines language, but is at other times utopian in that it holds things together, according to the spatial and symbolic divisions determined by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*.

To understand these divisions, consider first Foucault’s explanation of the origin of his text in its preface—that it came out of a reading of a passage in Borges and out of laughter.³ We shall return to the element of laughter at a later point, but let us begin by isolating Foucault’s theory of this passage on “a certain Chinese encyclopedia,” which is taken from Borges’s essay on the analytical language of John Wilkins. Quoting from the encyclopedia, Borges tells us that animals are divided into categories in the following manner: “(a) pertenecientes al Emperador, (b) embalsamados, (c) amaestrados, (d) lechones, (e) sirenas, (f) fabulosos, (g) perros sueltos, (h) incluidos en esta clasificación, (i) que se agitan como locos, (j) innumerables, (k) dibujados con un pincel finísimo de pelo de camello, (l) etcétera, (m) que acaban de romper el jarrón, (n) que de lejos parecen moscas” (“[a] belonging to the Emperor, [b] embalmed, [c] tame, [d] suckling pigs, [e] sirens, [f] fabulous, [g] stray dogs, [h] included in the present classification, [i] frenzied, [j] innumerable, [k] drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, [l] *et cetera*, [m] having just broken the water pitcher, [n] that from a long way off look like flies”).⁴

According to Foucault, these categories are unprocessable in our field of thought, and laughter results out of the stark impossibility of it all. Foucault then reasons why China is selected as site of the “mythical homeland,” concluding that the answer resides in its name, a name that in itself constitutes utopia in the West. The emphasis in this argument is placed on China as a “privileged site of space.” Foucault draws a distinction here between utopia and heterotopia, concluding that utopias afford consolation because they unfold in a fantastic, untroubled region, while heterotopias are disturbing because they make it impossible to name and because they destroy syntax in advance, causing words and things not to hold together. While not distinguishing which ones they may be, Foucault points out that heterotopias are often found in Borges. Returning to his example of the Chinese encyclopedia, Foucault argues that China represents a “vast reservoir of utopias,” but the concluding sentence of that

paragraph leaves us in the no-place of language of his argument: "There would appear to be, then, at the other extremity of the earth we inhabit, a culture entirely devoted to the ordering of space, but one that does not distribute the multiplicity of existing things into any of the categories that make it possible for us to name, speak, and think."⁶

How is it that in the utopian space of China there can exist a culture that, devoted to the ordering of space on the one hand, will, in contradiction, *not* categorize so that we may "name, speak, and think"? Julio Ortega responds to Foucault's criticism of utopias, resolving this dilemma by pointing to the error of formulating distinctions between utopias and heterotopias. According to Ortega, "utopias are not comforting; instead, they introduce a critical and dissolving activity within the order of the signification that language projects. They do not imply an improbable place and time but a virtual language, one that reformulates the norms and subverts the codes. . . . This is why utopias are, par excellence, heterotopias."⁷ Ortega's lucid theory, that utopias are not comforting, aims to introduce a mechanism through which by displacement the one becomes the other momentarily, allowing China (utopia) to order and destroy order simultaneously. Another step could be added to this process.

Let us examine Borges's use of Orientalism in the passage on the Chinese encyclopedia. Is the focus of the passage placed, as in Foucault's argument, on China as a "privileged site of space"? In effect, no, because this focus occasions regional and linguistic distinctions that simply are not made by Borges. Is the focus, then, purely textual, as Julio Ortega conjectures? This is appropriate insofar as the specific text is concerned, because we note that Borges has selected as the work to be quoted an encyclopedia, a text whose very taxonomic nature implies a certain lack of life found in that eternal, "changeless" Orient, rather than selecting an active narrative of tales, adventures, or fables. But the unencumbered textual approach tends to remove the locus for identification and comparison. When codes are destroyed and language is undermined, how do we create new myths through which to examine ourselves vis-à-vis the Other? This is accomplished through culture, through a dialogue between cultures that brings about a grouping and its resulting disorder indefinitely.⁸ The dialogue that ensues reveals truth because it opposes the authoritarian word. It allows for other possibilities, deviations, and creations even if they are mirrored images, that is, distorted and reversed.⁹

In the Orient Borges has located a culture that is radically different from our own, and he describes it in the sharper language of fantasy, which requires more precision than does reality.¹⁰ Therefore, while the other culture is distinctive, it does identify itself as we do. In other words, its categories are our own, it is as we want it to be. As John T. Irwin reminds us in an article on mysteries in Borges, "our ideas of another's mind are still *our* ideas, a projection that we make of another mind's otherness to one's own based on the only immediate experience that one's mind has of psychic otherness, the self's original otherness to itself, that difference that constitutes personal identity."¹¹ That difference reinforces the gap made evident by the identification first with the Other and then with the self. The self is always conscious of the Other and itself so it can never arrive at an even, detached view of either one. The Other is fundamentally that projection we make of it based on a view of ourselves. Yet, it is in this detachment that Orientalism takes shape in Borges. If in the West we would like to live eternally in the mind, we project this image of eternal life onto the East as Oriental reality. We are as different from the Other as we are from ourselves and we prove this in a continuous colliding of metaphors.¹²

Indeed, an example of a colliding of metaphors is found in the Orient as a metaphor for memory, equal to the West's projection of that image. Where one ends and the other begins is not always easily distinguishable: mnemonic devices, English translations of classics, pirates, spies, and dyers, mix in on each other, blending opposites momentarily in a dialogue of cultures in Borges. This interpretation could be understood as duplicitous because the reflected image moves further and further away from the original by virtue of its reflection, or it could be viewed as introducing an indeterminacy, an openendedness into contemporary reality that liberates us from a petrified image. However we view it, the step that is added by Borges to the formula is an openness in the form of a dialogue with the other culture.

Borges was introduced in childhood to memory as a metaphor for the Orient. The author's father encouraged this fascination with the East, producing a copy of the *Arabian Nights* for his son's amusement when Borges was very young.¹³ Borges's absorption in this work was so complete that he dedicated an article solely to comparing the approach of its various translators ("Los traductores de las 1001 noches," in *Historia de la eternidad*

[1936]) (The translators of the *Arabian Nights*, in History of eternity). This circular labyrinth, which begins with a story told or a history recounted, advances to the point (night 602) at which Shahrazad tells the king his own story, so that the telling is begun anew. The stories shared each nightfall to prolong life are not in the spontaneous mode of invention but rather belong to the concept of memory. In the retelling of what appears to be an infinite number of stories, one element of the telling of one story will trigger the memory of another the following evening. From ancient literature comes the concept of memory rather than knowledge as an impetus for the creative impulse. This apparent use of mnemonic devices liberates Shahrazad from an otherwise desperate predicament, while keeping her captor captivated (perhaps unwittingly) by her brilliant mind as well as her charm. She is fortunately able to generalize, which makes all histories one universal, general history. The perspicuity of Shahrazad's logic as related to a detailed and systematic form of memory reinforces in Borges the correlation of the Orient with one long memory.

In addition to his essays, there is a series of short stories by Borges that explore the concept of memory and relate it to the Orient: "El Inmortal" (The Immortal), "La busca de Averroes" (Averroes's search), "El Zahir" (The Zahir), "Abenjacán el bojarí, muerto en su laberinto" (Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, dead in his labyrinth), "El Aleph" (The Aleph), "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" (The garden of forking paths), and "Funes el memorioso" (Funes the memorious).¹⁴ While this grouping of stories may seem curious because all but one takes its theme from the Orient, the extent to which the Orient is identified with memory moves from almost complete (as complete an idea as we may have of the Other's mind), in "Abenjacán" and "El jardín," to no direct identification, in "Funes el memorioso." In the dialogue between Borges's perception of Eastern and Western realities, Borges removes, through generalizations, the object of substitution so far from the original comparison that it appears lost. This is possible because Borges, weighing the attributes and the destructive qualities of memory, shifts between the spheres of influence (Eastern and Western), allowing one momentarily to represent the other. In "Abenjacán" and "El jardín" memory represents the solution to the mysteries. "Abenjacán" is the story of a king of a Nilotic tribe who dies, curiously, in the center chamber of his house. Abenjacán, a brutal and treacherous leader, after attacking and plundering the tribes he led, escapes

with the treasure he has pilfered from them. His cousin Zaid and a slave escape with him, stealing off to a tomb to rest for the night. Fearing that Zaid may claim a portion of the gold coins, Abenjacán, who is awakened in the middle of the night by a bad dream about snakes that have entrapped him, cuts the throat of his cousin Zaid. Still in fear that his dead cousin may rise and follow him, Abenjacán orders the slave to destroy the dead man's face by obliterating it with a rock. Believing that the dead cannot walk on water, Abenjacán then travels to England and builds there his labyrinthine house, feeling safe in its interior chamber. Years later, though, the circumstances of his death remain a mystery, according to the voices of the Western protagonists who narrate the story, Unwin and Dunraven. The challenge to the mathematician and the poet is to discover how Abenjacán died while protected by his own labyrinth and guarded by a lion and a slave. The question is whether it was Abenjacán who built the labyrinthine house to protect himself against the ghost of his murdered cousin, Zaid, and was later murdered there himself, or whether Zaid masqueraded as Abenjacán, built the labyrinth, and lured Abenjacán, who was seeking the stolen treasure, to his death there. Unwin and Dunraven enter the house to pursue the answer, "doblando siempre a la izquierda"¹⁵ (turning always to the left) in order to arrive at the center of the labyrinth and the answer,¹⁶ thereby reinforcing the fact that the essential clue to the discovery of the solution is found in memory. Memory serves to guide them at the forks in the path, to the left, and in this manner facilitates their arrival at the center of the labyrinth.

Consider next the story of the protagonist in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," who resolves the enigma of the labyrinth created by his great-grandfather Ts'ui Pên. Yu Tsun, an agent of the German Reich, pursued by Richard Madden, an Irishman in the service of England, vows to communicate a secret name to his chief in Germany even though he must die in the act.¹⁷ He boards a train en route to Ashgrove, pursued by Madden who misses the train and thereby supplies Yu Tsun with forty extra minutes in which to complete his mission. Once in Ashgrove, Yu Tsun proceeds to the home of Dr. Stephen Albert, turning left at every crossroad. Mistaking Yu Tsun for the consul Hsi P'êng, Albert invites him in to see the garden of forking paths, which, Yu Tsun acknowledges, is the garden of his great-grandfather. Albert, a Sinologist, had resolved the enigma of the labyrinth created by Ts'ui Pên; the solution was that the

book and the garden he created were one and the same labyrinth. Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth has many alternatives, forks in time and space, because he believed in infinite series of times that are divergent, converging, and parallel, breaking with the traditional imagery of order and stillness of Oriental thought. Ts'ui Pên was an excellent novelist whose interests went beyond literature to the metaphysical and mystical. Yu Tsun asks to see a letter written by his great-grandfather that speaks of the various futures and the garden of the forking paths, and when Albert turns to retrieve the letter, Yu Tsun kills him instantly. Yu Tsun is arrested by Madden and sentenced to death, but he has successfully communicated to Germany the name of the city his employers must bomb—Albert. The solution of the labyrinth is found in the center, the center that is synonymous with death to the discoverer despite its purported reason for creation, which is ultimate protection from all harm. The great-grandson of Ts'ui Pên informs the reader of what he understands about labyrinths: "El consejo de siempre doblar a la izquierda me recordó que tal era el procedimiento común para descubrir el patio central de ciertos laberintos"¹⁸ ("The instructions to turn always to the left reminded me that such was the common procedure for discovering the central point of certain labyrinths").¹⁹ Yet in the end, in order to communicate a message to his boss in Germany, the center is discovered and Yu Tsun and Stephen Albert are both dead.

"El jardín" is recounted from the perspective of the Orient, while "Abenjacán" is narrated from a Western perspective, but the virtues and disadvantages of memory unite in the narrative voice. This union within the narrative voice occurs because of the polyglot nature of Hispanic Orientalism. The two languages exist simultaneously and interact within the same text. One language does not parody the other in an exclusionary process, that is, the East does not become the West for the life of the narrative, or vice versa. Where parody exists, it is used to break the barriers of stagnancy in language, to go beyond the limits of perceived reality through the creative consciousness of the author. Bakhtin states that languages are philosophies, not abstract but concrete, social philosophies, penetrated by a system of values inseparable from living practices and class struggle.²⁰ The purpose of the two languages existing independently but maintaining a continuous dialogue is to liberate the limited rhetoric of contrast and comparison so as to create one long, infinite text that is always being written.

This process is conceivable because the absent referent, which is what the metaphor represents, is an object that the author believes is universally found in both cultures. The absent referent in the example of the two stories examined above is utopia, because it leads to the void of perfection in either culture. Abenjacán either seeks the labyrinth or is lured to his death there precisely because he believes it is a utopia, a site that affords consolation and security. But the center of the labyrinth is a simulacrum—it hides its true meaning, which can be discovered only by arriving at the true center, point zero, the void. Memory can effect a powerful, creative impulse if one remembers that the solution to the center of the labyrinth is revealed by uniformly turning left at every juncture, but memory does not produce knowledge. Time and again, Borges's heroes, seeking safety at the center of the labyrinth, have perished there. Stephen Albert, for example, having discovered the solution to the enigma of the book and the garden misguidedly reveals it to Ts'ui Pên's great-grandson, giving the solution a temporal quality that when voiced brings one of the "various porvenires" (many futures) to its conclusion. The intensity of the many possibilities points to an apparent conjunction of opposites.²¹ Unfortunately for Stephen Albert, one possibility occurs during a series of time in which he meets his end, even though the superb garden of a utopia in which Albert finds himself also exists in another dimension of time. That is to say, the void once established does not preclude the search for utopia in another dimension of time and space in the infinite text where the languages of Newton, Schopenhauer, Chinese cosmography, and Buddhist philosophy meet.

The third story, "Funes el memorioso," is curiously related to "Abenjacán" and "El jardín." Funes, after a fall from a horse, is left paralyzed, but his perception of reality and his memory become infallible. Before the fall Funes had an exact perception of time, that is, he was able to tell time without aid of a clock or the sun, and he had an extraordinary ability to remember names, but he considered himself one who saw without seeing and heard without hearing. After the fall Funes is unable to forget anything he has ever heard or seen: "Más recuerdos tengo yo solo que los que habrán tenido todos los hombres desde que el mundo es mundo"²² ("I have more memories in myself alone than all men have had since the world was a world").²³ The possible curse of this newly acquired skill of remembering, not only every leaf on every tree on every mountain ever seen but

also each one of the times that he had perceived or imagined each one, is that, according to the narrator, Funes (unlike Borges) is incapable of thinking of general, Platonic ideas.²⁴ His mind functions on details, not thoughts. His memory is not generative in that ideas are not connected, producing generalizations or thought in the abstract. His memory is more a function of the mnemonic system invented by Simonides, a diagnosis Funes deduces in Latin from Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*.

Funes, the master of a prodigious memory that thrives on details, is the ideal artist because, as he cannot generalize, he cannot destroy the individual. Funes has reached utopia in that he possesses the perfect, interminable memory, which by virtue of its perfection relentlessly presses upon him. The only possible relief is found in sleep because, as Borges concludes, "Dormir es distraerse del mundo"²⁵ ("To sleep is to turn one's mind from the world"),²⁶ allowing one to forget the images that make the connections possible and necessary. But Funes is only able to induce sleep by one of two methods, and one is to face toward the east where new houses unknown to him had been built on land that was not yet divided into blocks. Funes imagines the houses to be black, compact, and homogeneously dark. The other method is to imagine himself at the bottom of a river, rocked and made "null" by the current (while both methods are related metaphorically to a dialogue with the Orient, the second one will be made more obvious in Chapter 2 on Octavio Paz).

The first method, however, reinforces the fact that the world of memory, like the world of objects, painstakingly categorizes and reduces the world to that which is homogeneous, with carefully distributed images spaced equidistantly on the plane. The metaphor of the East allows those black houses, perhaps Chinese boxes, to have a relationship to each other and to Funes, letting them stand scattered and independent or be stacked one inside the other. The darkness of the squares suggests chambers of the mind that are filled with information. The dialogue created among the chambers can be used to pick up information that casts aside previous knowledge in order to rush to the next image, or it can be used to generalize and build on a more unified view of the universe. Bakhtin reduces the equation to the unique conclusion that to be means to communicate dialogically. When the dialogue is finished, all is finished, so the dialogue in essence, cannot end.²⁷ The languages and cultural images created within each one remain independent but related in the search for a utopian view

of the world. Funes becomes for the first time, through dialogue, that which he is, involved in a process of becoming that is revealed through communication.

While "Funes el memorioso" appears to be engaged in a more immediate dialogue with the Orient through memory, "El Inmortal" represents a more superficial ensemble of images from the Orient. Joseph Cartaphilus, an antiquarian from Smyrna, is selling to a princess Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, which contains a mysterious manuscript in the last tome. While a mysterious manuscript in itself is not the domain of Oriental storytelling, it is a technique that is employed frequently in Oriental literature and is ultimately for the West an Eastern literary contrivance.²⁸ We remember the mysterious manuscript purported to belong to Cide Hamete Benengeli, which supposedly relates the life of Don Quijote. The manuscript found in the *Iliad* tells, from the point of view of a Roman military commander, of military expeditions in Egypt. Borges exploits this association with the Orient, making the inclusion of Eastern philosophical theories plausible.

Consider first the presentation of the Immortals' concept of world, time, and space. We are told that because of the compensations that accompany an existence without fear of death, the Immortals do not have to be concerned with mercy or pity for others or fear for one's physical well-being. Borges elaborates:

*La muerte (o su alusión) hace preciosos y patéticos a los hombres. . . . Todo, entre los mortales, tiene el valor de lo irrecuperable y de lo azaroso. Entre los Inmortales, en cambio, cada acto (y cada pensamiento) es el eco de otros que en el pasado lo antecedieron, sin principio visible, o el fiel presagio de otros que en el futuro lo repetirán hasta el vértigo. No hay cosa que no esté como perdida entre infatigables espejos. Nada puede ocurrir una sola vez, nada es preciosamente precario*²⁹

(Death [or its allusion] makes men precious and pathetic. . . . Everything among the mortals has the value of the irretrievable and the perilous. Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act [and every thought] is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, or that faithful presage of others that in the future will repeat it to a vertiginous degree. There is nothing that is not as if lost in a maze of indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can happen only once, nothing is precisely precarious).³⁰

The reference to echoes, to a series of actions that repeat and foretell other actions, recalls the Buddhist concept of the being as an endless series. The rebirth of the individual is an announcement or remembrance of its past existence in addition to a prophecy of its future, but at no time does it register what would be an inexplicable end to the series. Curiously enough, Borges refers to this philosophical approach to the being earlier, in section 4 of "El Inmortal." There he contrasts the faulty concept of immortality that the Israelites, Christians, and Muslims hold, that centers their existence on the first century (to which everything else is compared), with the "more reasonable concept of certain religions of Hindustan." Borges rationalizes this approach to immortality: "Más razonable me parece la rueda de ciertas religiones del Indostán; en esa rueda, que no tiene principio ni fin, cada vida es efecto de la anterior y engendra la siguiente, pero ninguna determina el conjunto"³⁵ ("The wheel of certain Hindustani religions seems more reasonable to me; on this wheel, which has neither beginning nor end, each life is the effect of the preceding and engenders the following, but none determines the totality").³⁵ "More reasonable" is understated praise of Oriental philosophical theory by an author who is committed to a world of mirrors, reflections, and infinity for the revelation of culture. Borges sees in philosophy a usefulness in creating fiction in addition to an ability continually to astonish. In the Western experience, the medieval carnival celebration also conveyed the sensation of being historically immortal. The body of people experienced the flow of time by being a part of a crowd in the marketplace. A sense of renewal grew out of an awareness of continuity within time occurring at the point of parody and laughter. They were able to leave one life behind for another, to abandon routine that according to Borges makes men "precious and pathetic" only because it leads to an end, a final solution. For Borges Hispanic Orientalism demonstrates this character of immortality in literary terms of openendedness, which renovates the literary possibilities linking reality with the unreality of the material world, and the past to the present and future, as well as the reverse.

Returning to the story line of "El Inmortal," a wounded cavalryman arrives dramatically and tells of the existence of a river that he is pursuing, which keeps men from their death, and hosts on its banks the superhuman city of the Immortals. The soldier dies before reaching the river, but the military commander of one of the Roman legions in Egypt, Marco Flami-

nio Rufo, decides to continue the journey in search of the city of the Immortals. Once in the city, the commander stumbles upon a labyrinth and establishes his first contact with another being, a troglodyte whom he names Argos after Ulysses' moribund old dog in the *Odyssey*. He futilely attempts to teach Argos to pronounce his given name and then conjectures:

Pensé que Argos y yo participábamos de universos distintos; pensé que nuestras percepciones eran iguales, pero que Argos las combinaba de otra manera y construía con ellas otros objetos; pensé que acaso no había objetos para él, sino un vertiginoso y continuo juego de impresiones brevísimas. Pensé en un mundo sin memoria, sin tiempo; consideré la posibilidad de un lenguaje que ignorara los sustantivos, un lenguaje de verbos impersonales o de indeclinables epítetos"

(I thought that Argos and I participated in different universes; I thought that our perceptions were the same, but that he combined them in another way and made other objects of them; I thought that perhaps there were no objects for him, only a vertiginous and continuous play of extremely brief impressions. I thought of a world without memory, without time; I considered the possibility of a language without nouns, a language of impersonal verbs or indeclinable epithets).³⁶

The perception that Argos does not structure reality in terms of objects but rather in terms of brief impressions supports an interpretation of the use of mnemonic devices to aid memory in the perception of the world. A. R. Luria's account of the retention of memory reveals that one essential device for retention is the perception of objects not as objects themselves in their natural setting, but rather as impressions (regardless of any possible connection with the materiality of the object) placed in well-lit areas of the street on which one lived as a child. The recollection of memory is accomplished through a mental stroll down this street, picking up impressions as one goes.³⁶ It is, in essence, a creation of another universe that did not exist before and will be altered with the next play of impressions to be remembered. Borges engages this theory of memory with another reflection of a world without memory.

What, we may ask, is the difference between Argos and Funes, as they both perceive reality through images or impressions? Indeed, how different is the description of Argos the primitive being (up to the end of section 3) from the categories of animals described in the Chinese encyclopedia?

The thought of Argos's tracing symbols in the sand and then erasing them with his palm and forearm seems strangely absurd—his tribe is unable to speak, so how could they have writing? Mocking laughter is the result of this mental picture because, once again, of the juxtaposition of unprocessable elements on the same plane. What is the purpose of life in the world of a troglodyte? Is it to trace signs whose symbolic meanings are waiting to be deciphered by others, or is it simply to turn to the sky and groan like an animal into space? We are disturbed but not surprised by the statement that Argos makes at the end of section 3, responding slowly in Greek that it had been a thousand and one hundred years since he had invented the Greek language. We are not surprised because in the preceding paragraph Borges has prepared us for this inevitability: "Fácilmente aceptamos la realidad, acaso porque intuimos que nada es real" ("We accept reality easily, perhaps because we intuit that nothing is real").³⁸ If nothing is real, as Borges claims, then we can only laugh at being in the no-place of language.³⁹ This laughter does not convey fear but rather strength because it is linked to birth and renewal. It is related to our earthly immortality through the renewing process of life and death that continually fertilizes and prepares new life along the historic path of progress, pointing toward a cycle of future things. It can as easily be brought on by the macabre, mockery, and madness as by the procreating act, abundance, and nature. Laughter purifies and gives us a new outlook on life because, as Bakhtin has reasoned, for brief moments in parody (which produces laughter) another unofficial truth emerges, truth about the world and man.⁴⁰ Perhaps the truth is that nothing is real, or that we laugh uneasily because of our insecurity in the no-place of language.

In his essay "Magias parciales del 'Quijote,'" Borges discerningly asks: "¿Por qué nos inquieta que Don Quijote sea lector del *Quijote*, y Hamlet, espectador de *Hamlet*? Creo haber dado con la causa: tales inversiones sugieren que si los caracteres de una ficción pueden ser lectores o espectadores, nosotros, sus lectores o espectadores, podemos ser ficticios"⁴¹ ("Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of the *Quixote*, and Hamlet is a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious").⁴² Being fictitious is a strength because it reflects that quality of openedness, of reconciling the distance between the self and its other-

ness and the self and the Other. It also reflects that positive quality of haziness of which Borges spoke, because it purifies an intolerant, serious view of the world. Borges's text, then, approximates the topological projection of the Möbius strip or Klein bottle (which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3) because there is no outside or inside but rather a continuous dialogue or bumping-up-against of opposites.⁴³ At this point, laughter, the great leveler, is directed at everyone. It is ambivalent because it tears down and builds up, and asserts and denies at the same time.

While categories are not exceedingly practical in the study of Borges's narrative, as his categorization of animals from "a certain Chinese encyclopedia" demonstrates, it is intriguing to note that a number of stories exhibit influence from specific areas of the East: from Islam and the Arab world come "El Zahir" and "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos" (The two kings and their two labyrinths), for example. Others demonstrate influence from Japan: "El incivil maestro de ceremonias Kotsuké no Suké" (The insulting master of etiquette Kotsuké no Suké); from China: "La viuda Ching, pirata" (The Widow Ching, pirate); from ancient Persia: "El tintorero enmascarado Hákim de Merv" (The masked dyer of Merv); and from India: "El hombre en el umbral" (The man on the threshold). Certain themes, like the tiger, unite countries such as China and Vietnam as in the sketch "Los tigres del Annam" (The tigers of Annam). The house as metaphor for the Orient also appears in a variety of stories with Oriental philosophical or sociological content. These stories include "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," "Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto," and "Funes el memorioso," which were discussed earlier, and "La casa de Asterión" (The house of Asterion) and "El hombre en el umbral." And finally, the coin is a curiosity that is evident in many of Borges's narratives inspired by the Orient. The coin has a haunting effect in such stories as "El Zahir," "El tintorero enmascarado Hákim de Merv," "La lotería de Babilonia" (The lottery in Babylon), and "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan."

"El Zahir" is an example of a story based on an ordinary object, in this case a coin, the Zahir, that in Buenos Aires was worth twenty centavos. Borges tells us that the belief in the superstition about the Zahir is of Islamic origin: "*Zahir*, en árabe, quiere decir notorio, visible; en tal sentido, es uno de los noventa y nueve nombres de Dios; la plebe, en tierras

musulmanas, lo dice de 'los seres o cosas que tienen la terrible virtud de ser inolvidables y cuya imagen acaba por enloquecer a la gente'"⁴⁴ ("Zahir in Arabic means 'notorious,' 'visible'; in this sense it is one of the ninety-nine names of God, and the people [in Muslim territories] use it to signify 'beings or things which possess the terrible property of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drives one mad'").⁴⁵

The resonance of the unforgettable property of the Zahir with Funes's memory, which seizes and holds images in the mind forever, is remarkable. If the fact that the image that ultimately drives one mad or to one's death, or both, as in the story of Funes, seems macabre and terrible, consider the fact that relatively all of Borges's images of the fantastic and utopia are just that grim. Paul de Man, in his extraordinary essay on Borges, "A Modern Master," suggests that Borges's ironically sinister world is perhaps close to the atmosphere of his native Argentina.⁴⁶ But the singular reality of his world is not of interest to Borges because being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask, as he explains in his essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición" (The Argentine writer and tradition). Borges's literary world is more universal. He does not attempt to redefine Argentine local color, in fact he is not interested in reproducing a stark reality of any one nature. The terror and dark nature of many of his stories, fantastic and exotic, spring from the uncertainty of the dialogue that takes place between cultures, between the languages of the East and West, of fantasy and reality, reaching unknown territory that frightens at some times because of its unfamiliarity and at others because of its familiarity.

Indeed, in Borges's prose the mirrored image has been known to frighten as much as the unknown center of the labyrinth, which purportedly provides solace. Irène Bessière attributes this to the playful quality of fantastic literature, because it is based on an intelligence, obsessed with the incongruous, that is concerned with establishing relations among, and combinations of, imaginary elements. Bessière concludes: "Cet arbitraire et cette gratuité de la réflexion et de l'écriture renvoient à la conviction que la cohérence du moi est douteuse, et que, hors de ce moi, la réalité est inconsistante"⁴⁷ (This arbitrariness and this gratuitousness of the reflection of thought and of writing go back to the conviction that the coherence of the self is doubtful, and that outside of this self, reality has no consistency). This explains the dissolution of Western codes in Borges's radical utopia of the East, which is infinitely reorganized through dialogue.

For example, time, explains Borges, generally weakens memory, but because of its connection with a coin, the Zahir, and the East, memory is arbitrarily intensified in a manner that is confrontational, demanding recognition. The interpretation of reality is opened. Underscoring the image of memory in "Funes," the Zahir produces memories that are viewed simultaneously and can indicate future time. The coin represents free will, and Borges goes so far as to conjecture that behind it may reside God.

The coin, a felicitous symbol, recalls the discussion of the coin and its obverse in the essay "White Mythology" by Jacques Derrida. In this essay Derrida first related a dialogue between Aristos and Polyphilos from *The Garden of Epicurus*, in which Polyphilos concluded that metaphysicians, when they make a language for themselves, should be like knife grinders who should put coins and medals (instead of knives) to the grindstone to efface the exergue, the value, and the head. As this action is continued, and more and more is erased, the pieces will have nothing distinguishable about them and will be of inestimable value, while forming part of an exchange system that is extended indefinitely. This effacement of the coin is akin to the distancing of the metaphor from its original figure. As we efface more and more from the coin, we lose precision and the original value of the concept. The metaphor is less precise when the categories become systematically more and more general, as they do in Borges when he removes Hindustan to discover the Orient, and then removes the Orient to discover utopia, and so on. Borges tells us in "El Zahir" that he imagines himself to be the obverse and the reverse of the coin at the same time, thereby effacing distinctions between the two sides. The question raised, therefore, is whether the "original meaning" of the metaphor can be restored to it linguistically after it has been effaced like the coin, displaced from its primitive figure many times over.

According to Derrida, "the inscription on a coin is most often the point of crossover, the scene of interchange between linguistics and economics."⁴⁸ We could envision this scene of interchange as a table of values, which in Saussurian terms would be used to judge terms in light of their similarity or their dissimilarity to other things. But if we trace this back in the classification of all metaphorical possibilities, we will discover that we are left with a reversal of categories, the extra metaphor being at the same time the metaphor the less. What traditionally is seen as gain is now

seen as loss, as in loss of meaning in meaning, but this is then reinscribed as gain, since there is always an extra metaphor, a definition before the definition. The gain looks beyond what you have, it is something that cannot be defined but can always be added. The loss is that you cannot assume what you know, because you cannot know its origin. The metaphor does not gain what it claims to gain—precision or its origin—and we are left in a sense with this negative knowledge, knowing what it is that we have lost. This is the sense we have after reading Borges. It is what makes us uneasy. We are given the Orient, a metaphor for paradise or utopia, but then we are thwarted in categorizing, naming, and understanding it. The comparison is established and its existence frustrated at once, necessitating a continuing dialogue with the Other.

In addition to the story "El Zahir," which makes reference to God who may be behind the coin, "El hombre en el umbral" recalls God in the Orient in a more linguistic and cultural framework. The narrative voice relates a story told to him that previous evening and promises the reader: "Mi texto será fiel: libreme Alá de la tentación de añadir breves rasgos circunstanciales o de agravar, con interpolaciones de Kipling, el cariz exótico del relato. Este, por lo demás, tiene un antiguo y simple sabor que sería una lástima perder, acaso el de las *Mil y una noches*"³⁹ ("My account will be faithful; may Allah deliver me from the temptation of adding any circumstantial details or of weighing down the tale's Oriental character with interpolations from Kipling. It should be remarked that the story has a certain ancient simplicity that it would be a pity to lose—something perhaps straight out of the *Arabian Nights*").⁴⁰ While Borges rejects the stagnancy of the Islamic interpretation of time, he does appeal to the Supreme Being of the Islamic faith to keep him from committing two literary "sins" as deemed by our author, that of adding superfluous information and that of adding elements of local color to the story. Those two unforgivable offenses, personally odious to Borges, make the prayerful plea that much more intimate and astonishing when one realizes the openness of the dialogue between the cultures. The complete faith in Allah's ability and concern to control potential personal disaster, as exhibited in the plea, illuminates an openness to the Other that is respectful and determined in nature.

Curiously, Borges at times appears to reject any and all interpretations that do not uphold a dreamlike, majestic quality of the Orient. In "La

cámara de las estatuas" (The chamber of statues) we are made to feel only the purely blissful existence of the Arabs in Andalusia: "Así se fueron dilatando los árabes por el reino de Andalucía, con sus higueras y praderas regadas en las que no se sufre de sed"⁴¹ ("So it was that the Arabs spread over the kingdom of Andalusia, with its fig trees and watered meadows in which no thirst is suffered").⁴² The utopialike description of Andalusia is fundamentally an impetus for openness to the Other. The thirst that is quenched through openness is knowledge, and this indeed is evident in another story through the interpolated narrative in "Historia de los dos que soñaron" (Tale of the two dreamers): "Cuentan los hombres dignos de fe (pero sólo Alá es omnisciente y poderoso y misericordioso y no duerme)"⁴³ ("Men worthy of trust have recorded [but Allah alone is All-Knowing and All-Powerful and All-Merciful and does not sleep]").⁴⁴ Through this voice Borges reconstructs a belief in Allah, emphasizing the fact that the Supreme Being does not sleep, and therefore does not dream and become distracted from the world and reality. Knowledge enhances reality and makes it more tolerable; it does not distract from reality, including that reality outside the self. Borges conceives of the Orient as elusive, enigmatic, and intellectually stimulating because it encourages differences that would not be tolerated elsewhere.

In Borges, Paul de Man has concluded, God appears on the scene as the power of reality itself, on the side of chaotic reality.⁴⁵ Borges can switch his reference to God from Western to Eastern realities effortlessly, as in the examples given from "El Zahir" and the other stories discussed above. The virtues and vices of the Other are mirrored back and reversed but are curiously tolerable, if frightening, because this chaotic reality is the utopia for which we have been searching. Causality is suspended because, unlike the divisions—attributed by James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, to primitive tribes—that speak to the influence of gods that control people and the influence of magic that controls impersonal forces, magic is comprehended by Borges as an intricate part of causality. In his essay "El arte narrativo y la magia" (Narrative art and magic) Borges concludes that "la magia es la coronación o pesadilla de lo causal, no su contradicción. El milagro no es menos forastero en ese universo que en el de los astrónomos. Todas las leyes naturales lo rigen, y otras imaginarias"⁴⁶ ("magic is not the contradiction of the law of cause and effect but its crown, or nightmare. The miraculous is no less strange in that world than it is in the world of

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astronomers. All of the laws of nature as well as those of imagination govern it").⁵⁷ This theory on causality that informs his conceptualization of the fantastic allies itself to Hispanic Orientalism in its openness to incorporating opposites, to accepting the virtues and vices of the Other. Sylvia Molloy alludes discerningly to this inclusive act when she states: "La causalidad textual, para Borges, implica la posibilidad de incluir, de encadenar, de *nivelar*, en un mismo discurso literario, la simpatía y la distancia, el conjuro y la confianza; de emitir, con coherencia y sucesivamente, el nombre tautológico y su lejano simulacro, el libro y el contralibro que aquél supone. La distancia—el placer de la distancia—es constante en la obra de Borges"⁵⁸ (Textual causality, for Borges, implies that possibility of including, of chaining, of *leveling*, within the same literary discourse, sympathy and distance, conjuration and faith; of sending out, coherently and successively, the tautological name and its distant simulacrum, the book and the counterbook that the former supposes. Distance—the pleasure of distance—is constant in the work of Borges).

At times the Orient advances Borges's singular view of causality. In a postscript to the 1949 version of *El Aleph*, Borges speaks of his story "El hombre en el umbral": "La situé en la India para que su inverosimilitud fuera tolerable"⁵⁹ (The story took place in India so that its improbability would be tolerable). Causality is duplicitous owing to an inherent improbable quality in its reflection of reality; it is and it is not what it appears to be.⁶⁰ I believe Borges was making reference to causality in "El tintorero enmascarado Hákim de Merv" when he spoke of the world we live in as being a mistake. Any repetition (e.g., mirrors and fatherhood) of this is an abomination. Escape from the cycle of cause and effect is found in "revulsion," that is, in the rejection of the cycle, an act that establishes itself as a prime virtue. Curiously, Borges confirms that there are two ways that will lead us to that virtue: "la abstinencia y el desenfreno, el ejercicio de la carne o su castidad"⁶¹ ("abstinence or the orgy, excesses of the flesh or its denial").⁶² While "the Prophet" has left the choice of the path selected up to the individual believer, it is evident that a presenting, blending, and leveling of opposites takes place within this exercise that leads to the essence of the universe.

As Borges's stories unfold we notice the repetition of the figure of the tiger to the point of intellectual obsession. While a very young man, Borges was introduced to the tiger; his mother explained in an interview

her son's love of the exotic animal: "When he was very young, he would draw animals. Lying down on his stomach on the floor, he would always begin at the end, drawing the feet first. He would draw tigers, which were his favorite animals. Later, from tigers and other savage beasts, he moved to prehistoric animals, about which for two years he read all he could get hold of. Then he became enthusiastic about Egyptian things, and he read about them—read with no end in sight—until he threw himself into Chinese literature; he has a lot of books on the subject. In short, he loves everything that is mysterious."⁶³

Tigers impressed Borges for their mysterious qualities and their strength. Borges's confession of his love of the tiger is detailed in his story "Dream-tigers" where he explains: "En la infancia yo ejercí con fervor la adoración del tigre: no el tigre overo de los camalotes del Paraná y de la confusión amazónica, sino el tigre rayado, asiático, real, que sólo pueden afrontar los hombres de guerra, sobre un castillo encima de un elefante. . . . Pasó la infancia, caducaron los tigres y su pasión, pero todavía están en mis sueños"⁶⁴ ("In my childhood I was a fervent worshiper of the tiger: not the jaguar, the spotted 'tiger' of the Amazonian tangles and the isles of vegetation that float down the Paraná, but that striped, Asiatic, royal tiger, that can be faced only by a man of war, on a castle atop an elephant. I used to linger endlessly before one of the cages at the zoo; I judged vast encyclopedias and books of natural history by the splendor of their tigers. . . . Childhood passed away, and the tigers and my passion for them grew old, but still they are in my dreams").⁶⁵

Borges went as far as trying to "cause" a tiger in his dreams (the sleeping and waking variety), but he was unsuccessful in this attempt: "¡Oh, incompetencia! Nunca mis sueños saben engendrar la apetecida fiera. Aparece el tigre, eso sí, pero disecado, o endeble, o con impuras variaciones de forma, o de un tamaño inadmisibles, o harto fugaz, o tirando a perro o a pájaro"⁶⁶ ("Oh, incompetence! Never can my dreams engender the wild beast I long for. The tiger indeed appears, but stuffed or flimsy, or with impure variations of shape, or of an implausible size, or all too fleeting, or with a touch of the dog or the bird").⁶⁷ Borges conveys that he is unable to give life to the creature that fascinates him the most, and that never in his writing, although he dedicates poetry and prose to the tiger, will he be able to convey the mystique of the real animal. Through Borges we see the majesty and power of the tiger when, in one of his

most personal writings, "Borges y yo" (Borges and I), he relates: "Spinoza entendió que todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser; la piedra eternamente quiere ser piedra y el tigre un tigre"⁶⁸ ("Spinoza held that all things long to preserve their own nature: the rock wants to be rock forever and the tiger, a tiger").⁶⁹

The cosmological strength of the tiger is the subject of the sketch "Los tigres del Annam," in which China and Vietnam are addressed:

Para los annamitas, tigres o genios personificados por tigres rigen los rumbos del espacio.

El Tigre Rojo preside el sur (que está en lo alto de los mapas); le corresponden el estío y el fuego.

El Tigre Negro preside el norte; le corresponden el invierno y el agua.

El Tigre Azul preside el oriente; le corresponden la primavera y las plantas.

El Tigre Blanco preside el occidente; le corresponden el otoño y los metales.⁷⁰

(To the Annamese, tigers or spirits that dwell in tigers govern the four corners of space.

The Red Tiger rules over the South [which is located at the top of maps]; summer and fire belong to him.

The Black Tiger rules over the North; winter and water belong to him.

The Blue Tiger rules over the East; spring and plants belong to him.

The White Tiger rules over the West; autumn and metals belong to him).

Borges employs the tiger because of its positive association with governance, strength in battle, and imposition of rule. We are advised that certain societies attribute to the tiger human and at times superhuman qualities. Borges has selected this historical and anthropological material for its ability to convey a seemingly insatiable love of the tiger (that is, until it was so imitated by other writers that Borges tired of the repetitive image).

John Sturrock sees a somewhat contradictory approach to the tiger in Borges, bordering somewhere between ambivalence and obsession; the tiger is desirable but not sufficient:

Borges's tigers are the equivalent of the "Ancient African appetites" of Ebe-

nezer Bogle, or of the virile, martial strain in other of his fictional lineages. They symbolize whatever energy it is that keeps Borges writing, that obscure inspiration but for which he would never be able to practise his civilized skills in the making of rigorous, unemotional fictions. We do not believe, any more than he does, that his real inspiration is the superstitious belief that ultimately words will become the things themselves. The satisfactions of writing are the exact opposite: of making words suffice for the things themselves. The dream tigers symbolize, therefore, obsession."

Borges's obsession with the tiger of the imagination is logical when we consider the qualities Borges admires most in this one creature—strength, intelligence, exotic beauty. We must not forget the tiger's piercing eyes, a strength that will always be Borges's weakness. The open dialogue with the Other not only permits an outlet for his obsession with the tiger but also encourages an active identification with the Other (even though in the end nothing physically has changed). The Orient provides the space for the dissolution of the self so that there might be, as in Borges's case, one more step taken toward artistic creation.

The presentation of the Orient in Borges is often disquieting because at times the Orient is made to seem a place of great consolation and exotic definition (e.g., memory, tigers), and at other times it has the power to console and stop speech, as in the essay "La muralla y los libros" (The wall and the books), where we are told it was decreed by the first emperor of China, Shih Huang Ti, that all books prior to him be burned. The abolition of past history is as forcefully complete an act as is its counterpart of erecting an almost infinite wall to safeguard the present and the future. The narrative voice in the story informs us that the fact that these two vast operations originate in one person inexplicably satisfies and disturbs the narrator in its combination.⁷¹ The very essence of perpetual memory establishes China in this example as a utopia that at once strengthens and desiccates speech, continuously combining possibilities of elements in opposition. When examined in detail, it will be noted that, curiously, Borges generally attaches to the fantastic utopia certain adjectives that we normally associate with a demonstration of reality, such as "lucid" and "primitive," while he associates "fictitious" and "artificial" with that literature that duplicates reality. This arbitrariness relates back to the concept that reality outside the self has no consistency. Ana María Barrenechea discerningly

concludes that Borges contaminates the reader with his own uneasiness over the principal ambiguity he senses in an event and with the dark attraction he feels for it.³ Borges questions causality and artificiality in literature and attracts the reader through the utopia found in Hispanic Orientalism, which permits a sustaining of suspense through an imaginative dialogue with the East.

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*Flowing Rivers and
Contiguous Shores:
The Poetics of Paz*

Few would deny Octavio Paz's principal role in the advancement and preservation of Orientalism in Hispanic letters. Paz's interest in the Orient is both historical and anthropological, as he confirms that the Native American is of Asiatic origin, and that this Asiatic origin perhaps explains the numerous similarities between Chinese and American civilizations.¹ His interest is also sociopolitical in nature, as Octavio Paz was ambassador to India for six years beginning in 1962 and resided during his service in New Delhi. It is, in addition, literary, as Paz began to read about the Orient in books obtained in France and continued his scholarly research of philosophies, religions, and literatures of the East (in translation) throughout his career. The result of this intellectual engagement with the East and a defining of his own culture vis-à-vis the Other is a series of critical essays, in addition to numerous collections of poetry.²

There arises from the works of Octavio Paz a dialectic that complements and at times subtracts from the other source, be it poetry or essay. Paz's theory of Orientalism, then, is maintained in a constant state of flux. Let us remember Paz's analogy between movement and immobility within the relationship: "Lo esencial es que la relación no sea tranquila: el diálogo entre oscilación e inmovilidad es lo que infunde *vida* a la cultura y da *forma* a la vida" ("The essential thing is for the relationship not to be a tranquil one: the dialogue between oscillation and immobility is what gives a culture *life* and *life form*").⁴ This movement and combination of elements