

## BORGES ON IMMORTALITY

by JON STEWART

THE VARIOUS CONCEPTIONS OF immortality in most every culture evince at once the basic human fear of death and at the same time the equally basic hope for a more congenial future beyond mundane existence. The Greek and Christian views of immortality, which have been so influential in Western philosophy and theology, represent two different, yet generally quite positive, visions of eternal life. Although for the Greeks immortality in Hades was not, as Achilles' lament indicates, a thing to be eagerly anticipated, nevertheless the Olympian gods with their immense power and influence represented a positive picture of perennial existence. The Christian account presents another perhaps even more optimistic view of immortality since it teaches that eternal existence is possible for humans who live righteous lives and hold correct beliefs. The Christian promise of an everlasting life in heaven in the state of perfect bliss has long been held up by theologians as representing the apex of human happiness and fulfillment.

"The Immortal,"<sup>1</sup> by Jorge Luis Borges, hints at something fundamentally wrong about the very concept of immortality. Most philosophical criticisms of this concept concentrate on attacking the notion of a separable soul which survives the death of the human body, thus approaching the question of immortality essentially as a mind-body problem. Borges's story, on the other hand, focuses on the concept of immortality itself and on what we might call its internal consistency. Reflecting on "The Immortal," Borges says that the story shows us "the effect that immortality would have on men," and he explains that the

story offers "a sketch of an ethic for immortals."<sup>2</sup> "The Immortal" can be seen as a thought experiment: Borges proposes that we imagine that we are immortal,<sup>3</sup> and he then calls on us to examine our conception of that imagined existence to see if it can be thought consistently. We shall see that in the end our traditional views of immortality are contradictory and that the consistent conception represents something quite different from our preconceptions and—surprisingly—something far from desirable. Although the most obvious target of criticism in Borges's story is the Greek conception of immortality, on closer inspection he is, I would like to argue, also concerned to criticize the Christian view. This reading has, in my opinion, been neglected by many commentators,<sup>4</sup> the majority of whom would see in this work an affirmation of the power of literature over death and finitude.<sup>5</sup>

According to Augustine and Aquinas, the immortality of the blessed souls in the supernal state consists essentially in participating in the *visio beatifica*. To behold God in this vision is to take part in eternal life. Aquinas claims that only by viewing God can one obtain "perfect bliss"<sup>6</sup> and immortality. In an argument largely appropriated from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas contends that man, who naturally desires to know, is never perfectly satisfied provided that there remains something unexplained. In his terrestrial condition, always seeking and desiring, man is in a tragic situation since he can never unravel the ultimate causes and thus attain perfect beatitude. In heaven, however, man obtains ultimate bliss since in beholding God, who is the first cause of all things, man thus sees and understands the workings of all things. With the comprehension of the first cause, all the other causes become apparent as well. Aquinas also argues that when we behold the workings of the entire universe in the *visio beatifica*, in fact, we are merely beholding God himself or more exactly the omnipresent *divina substantia*. Augustine describes the vision as follows: "Similarly, in the future life, wherever we turn the spiritual eyes . . . we shall discern . . . the incorporeal God directing the whole universe."<sup>7</sup> Observing how God governs the universe, our intellect gains ultimate satisfaction, and there remains nothing more to be known. But yet God does not exist in time as do finite things. This means that our vision of God is not a temporal one but rather an eternal one. Likewise, since the universe is nothing other than the divine substance which is God, we behold the entire workings of the universe simultaneously as if in one moment, just as we behold God in one eternal moment. Therefore, in the participation in the *visio beatifica* one entirely loses the mundane temporal perspective. Insofar as one participates in this vision, one is immortal since the *visio* is extratemporal.

The *visio* is the pivotal concept of the Christian theory of immortality since it is through the atemporal nature of the *visio* that eternal life is established.

One natural corollary of the Christian view of immortality with complete knowledge of God is that in heaven there will be nothing that resembles human activity as we know it on earth. Augustine characterizes this state as one of perfect rest: "But now restored by him and perfected by his greater grace we shall be still and at leisure for eternity, seeing that he is God. . . . this we shall then know perfectly, when we are perfectly at rest and in stillness see that he is God" (pp. 1090–91). Since there will no longer be anything to see or to desire, for we will know everything there is to know in beholding God and the workings of the universe, there will be no difficulties or mysteries remaining. We can thus rest contented in this state of perfect leisure for all eternity.

The point of Borges's story is to demonstrate the internal contradictions in this Christian picture of immortality and to provide us with a view which, if not attractive, is at least internally consistent. On Borges's vision of immortality we are presented with a picture of neither gods nor saints but rather a loathsome and placid barbarian tribe called troglodytes, who lie in the sand consuming lizards. The Roman military tribune Marcus Flaminius Rufus, both narrator and protagonist of the story, determines to set out in search of the River of Immortality and the City of the Immortals. After several trying adventures, he arrives tired and ailing at the labyrinthine City of the Immortals and displays great repugnance toward the abject and quiescent creatures who are the inhabitants there. At first sight, the troglodytes seem entirely to lack the benefits of reason and culture. They have no speech and possess no visible means of communication. Moreover, although they do not seem to sleep, the troglodytes are entirely docile and listless creatures who neither farm, nor hunt, nor provide themselves with shelter. They appear almost comatose, entirely oblivious to their surroundings, neither helping the feverish tribune nor heeding him when he speaks. As the tribune surprisingly discovers on one rainy morning, this miserable assemblage of troglodytes, which he so condescendingly regards, is the remnant of the Olympian gods, and their pathetic condition is the logical and inevitable result of their immortality. The infinity of time, he learns, has stultified them and rendered them reticent and base creatures. The astonishment of this discovery simultaneously moves both the reader and the tribune who had imagined immortality quite differently, and herein lies the irony of the work.<sup>8</sup>

Through the passage of the centuries the lives of the immortals had

degenerated into an apathetic condition in which they did nothing. The infinity of time involved in the life of immortality had deprived the lives of the gods of meaning, and thus they had fallen into their wretched condition. Borges's tribune observes, death "makes men precious and pathetic. . . . every act they execute may be their last. . . . Everything among the mortals has the value of the irretrievable and the perilous" (p. 146). In contrast, for the immortals, "every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, or the faithful presage of others that in the future will repeat it to a vertiginous degree" (p. 146). Borges's point is the fundamental existentialist claim that it is only in the finitude of human existence that actions and life have their meaning. Only because we know that our lifespans are limited are we concerned and motivated to accomplish our projects. There are, of course, other motivations both noble and base, but these lose their value when a finite existence is expanded to an infinite one. In an eternity our lives become tedious and banal. Our individuality and personal identity are lost in an infinity of time since in an eternity we would have the opportunity to play the roles of all human beings and to accomplish all things. Since one can do all things, one could not define one's life by the continuity of the specific deeds done or the projects accomplished. Thus, the main characters of Borges's story, the antiquary Cartaphilus and the Roman tribune Marcus Flaminius Rufus, are not two different individuals but rather one universal person who spans the ages.<sup>9</sup>

For the immortals there is no challenge or difficulty great enough which cannot be accomplished in an eternity. The construction of the city of labyrinths was the ultimate desperate project undertaken by the immortals before they drifted off into the grey eternity of indifference: "This establishment was the last symbol to which the Immortals condescended; it marks a stage at which, judging that all undertakings are in vain, they determined to live in thought, in pure speculation" (p. 144). The creation of the labyrinth represents a pointless task whose accomplishment is more of a fatuous game than a meaningful project. The gods erected the labyrinthine city in a manner modeled after their own absurd and meaningless lives. The architectural irregularities and asymmetries that form the city represent a world of chaos lacking meaning and order.<sup>10</sup> While lost in the labyrinth prior to discovering the truth of the troglodytes, the tribune concludes, "The gods who built it were mad" (p. 140). Although at the time he could not know, the tribune's ironic words captured the truth of the immortals' dilemma

since their lives, busied only with Sisyphean projects and having become wholly indifferent to the usual tasks of life, indeed represent a kind of madness.

Borges makes the comparison of such a life of immortality with that of animals or subhuman creatures: "To be immortal is commonplace; except for man, all creatures are immortal, for they are ignorant of death; what is divine, terrible, incomprehensible, is to know that one is immortal" (p. 144). Animals, lacking the faculty of reflection and thus not knowing of their inevitable deaths, live, like the troglodytes, everyday like every other day. Their lives cannot be said to be meaningful in the way human lives are. Only humans have history, culture, and language, all of which would gradually disappear, as they did for the immortals, were we to live forever. Borges constantly uses the pejorative simile of a dog to describe the troglodytes (pp. 139, 141). The tribune disdainfully names one of them "Argos" after Odysseus' faithful old hound in the *Odyssey*. This deprecatory appellation, which seems to us so unbecoming of immortals, gives evidence for the interpretation that Borges issues here a criticism of the notion of immortality itself. The tribune says in his ignorance that the troglodytes, i.e., the gods, "did not inspire fear but rather repulsion" (p. 139). The juxtaposition of the words "fear" and "repulsion" is the key here. We would expect to feel terror before the gods, but instead our sensation is one of disgust. The repulsion that we feel towards the troglodytes indicates that there is something repellent about our notion of immortality if it were carried to its logical conclusion. This kind of life strikes us as an insult to the integrity of human existence.

The conclusion of "The Immortal" confirms the criticism of the very notion of immortality. The immortals reason that if there is a river whose waters grant immortality, there must also be a river that renders one mortal once again. They thus decide to set out in search of the river that will cure them of their immortal condition. We see here an ironical mirror image of the story of the Fall in which mankind was exiled from his happy immortal state to one of pain and death. The immortals embark on a quest for the river of death which will liberate them from the onus of immortality and which will again invest their lives with meaning by rendering them finite. When at last the former tribune drinks from the waters that efface immortality and for the first time in almost two thousand years becomes finite and vulnerable, he receives the first wound and feels the first tinge of pain after so many centuries. Borges uses the peculiar adjective "precious" (p. 147) to de-

scribe the formation of the drop of blood from the wound. This word is used throughout the story to indicate the meaning bound up with a finite life; something which can be infinitely repeated cannot *ipso facto* be precious. Only in a life threatened by death are individual events meaningful. Despite all that he has seen and done through so many years, the protagonist, the former tribune, is happy only by regaining death and finitude.

Although Borges's story seems at face value to be a criticism solely of the Greeks' conception of immortality, since after all it is the Olympian gods that the tribune finds in such a base state, nevertheless Borges clearly intends for this criticism also to be valid for the Christian view. He refers directly to the Christian doctrine once (p. 144), but in addition to this direct reference, there are other subtler bits of evidence that single out specifically the Christian doctrine of immortality.<sup>11</sup> The state of the immortals is described as one of "pure speculation" (p. 144), which is precisely the description of the *visio beatifica* given by Augustine and Aquinas, in which one contemplates God and the workings of the universe for all eternity. The immortals are described as being so lost in the realm of thought that they gradually lose touch with the mundane: "Absorbed in thought, they hardly perceived the physical world" (p. 144). This accords with Aquinas's analysis that in the *visio beatifica* we behold only *divina substantia*. The blessed perceive the universe only in terms of divine substance and thus do not see the physical world or mundane substance *per se*. The blessed state of the immortals is also alluded to when the tribune observes that "the Immortals were capable of perfect quietude" (p. 145). This then echoes the claim of Aquinas that in the *visio beatifica* we will enjoy perfect bliss as well as Augustine's claim that we will be perfectly at leisure. The tribune, having become immortal, explains how the greatest pleasure was pure thought: "There is no pleasure more complex than that of thought and we surrendered ourselves to it" (p. 145). Here we see the claim of Augustine and Aquinas that pure speculation in the *visio beatifica* is the greatest bliss that man can experience.

The problem that "The Immortal" presents is how to reconcile the optimistic account of immortality that Christianity offers with the fact, which Borges so poignantly illustrates, that such a life of immortality would be meaningless, bovine, and undesirable. Not accidentally the *visio beatifica* reduces the life of immortality to a troglodyte condition insofar as it precludes meaningful activity by removing obstacles and by introducing an infinite time frame. The sort of difficulties and challenges

that render our mundane existence meaningful are precisely what makes heaven appear at first glance attractive. If, indeed, it is true that at the termination of our mundane existence, we will become immortal, then as Borges shows, we will not become holy saints living blissfully in heaven beholding God and the universe for an eternity but rather base and indifferent troglodytes eating lizards and tracing inchoate figures in the sands of unknown deserts.

WESTFÄLISCHE WILHELMS-UNIVERSITÄT, MÜNSTER

1. "The Immortal" is quoted from Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: Penguin, 1981).
2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras Completas* (Barcelona: Emecé Editores S.A., 1989), p. 629, my translation.
3. See Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Borges and His Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), p. 230.
4. See L. A. Murillo, *The Cyclical Night: Irony in James Joyce and Jorge L. Borges* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 215.
5. E.g., Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 211.
6. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 16, trans. Thomas Gilby, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 83.
7. Augustine, *City of God* (New York: Penguin, 1976), pp. 1086-87.
8. See Jacques Réda, "Commentaire de 'L'Immortal' de J.-L. Borges," *Cahiers du Sud* 49 (1962-63): 439.
9. See Gene H. Bell-Villada, p. 230; Jaime Alazraki, *La Prosa narrativa de Borges* (Madrid: Biblioteca Románica Hispánica, 1968), p. 71.
10. See L. A. Murillo, p. 226.
11. It seems to me that the commentators on "The Immortal" have fully missed this point. See, for example, Estela Cédola, *Borges o la coincidencia de los opuestos* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1987), p. 144. Adelheid Schaefer, *Phantastische Elemente und ästhetische Konzepte im Erzählwerk von J. L. Borges* (Frankfurt am Main: Humanitas Verlag, 1973), pp. 64ff.