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Author(s): Dominique Jullien

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Biography of an Immortal

“**E**L HACEDOR,” Jorge Luis Borges’s two-page story about Homer, is a biography paradoxically devoid of biographical data. Names and dates—the elements that make up an individual’s specificity—are missing. The Maker could be, and for that matter is, anyone. The reader identifies the character as Homer only when the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are mentioned at the end of the text: “el rumor de las Odiseas e Iliadas que era su destino cantar y dejar resonando cóncavamente en la memoria humana” (*Obras* 2:160). Quite appropriately, the author’s identity proceeds from his work.

Dispensing with the contingent flow of events, the Borgesian biography typically condenses a human life into one symbolic moment of truth, in which the character undergoes a radical change of fate. In “El hacedor,” the realization and acceptance of his blindness turn the anonymous character into Homer, the mortal man into the immortal author. He encounters mortality, he turns his gaze inward, and from his intimate memories he creates a universal work of art. He thus achieves immortality through a confrontation with death. In “El inmortal” a man embarks on a journey in search of immortality, finds it at a climactic turning point, and then seeks death. Both stories are about Homer, and one, therefore, can serve as a clue to the other. In “El Inmortal,” the fictional biography becomes a voyage through literature; in “El hacedor” it is a platonic myth of literary creation. Both protagonists appear to be allegories of the “author,” whom Homer has come to epitomize. To this quintessential author, the Romantics added Shakespeare, to whom a similar cult was attached. Borges’s own texts about Shakespeare, “De alguien a nadie” and “Everything and Nothing,” mirror his Homeric “biographies,” while they also address more explicitly the Romantics’ magnification of the

poet into a cult object.

Reading the two Homer stories together provides a starting point for an analysis of Borges's conception of the author as it appears in his stories about writers. The pages that follow, therefore, offer an interpretation of the stories as a "creative misreading" (to adopt Harold Bloom's phrase) and a fantastic rewriting of the Romantic cult of the author. My study opens with a discussion of the Wandering Jew as an allegory of the author, then traces Borges's biographies back to their Romantic roots—the Romantic notion of the all-encompassing Genius—to show how Borges's ironic rewriting of this tradition metamorphoses the "Genius" into the "Immortal," thereby leading to an uncanny subversion of the relation between individual existence and authorial essence. Ultimately, the stories aporetically link "man" and "author" in an endless, mirror-like conversion pattern.

Marcus Flaminius Rufus, the narrator of "El inmortal," is also identified as Joseph Cartaphilus, the (presumed) author of the manuscript found in Pope's translation of the *Iliad*. "Joseph Cartaphilus" is the original name of the Wandering Jew. According to the earliest written accounts of the legend, Cartaphilus was a Roman guard, Pilate's porter, condemned to walk until the end of time for having insulted Jesus Christ. Cartaphilus repented, converted to the Christian faith, and was baptized with the name "Joseph."¹ In Borges's story, the narrator, who meets and in some way becomes Homer, also bears the same name as the Wandering Jew and has the same characteristics: the gift of foreign languages;² the gift of prophecy;³ a face both old and timeless;⁴ sleeplessness⁵—and, of course, ubiquity and longevity.⁶

The question, therefore, can be posed in the following terms:

¹ On the early versions of the legend (Roger of Wendover's *Flores historiarum* of 1228 and Matthew Paris's *Chronica majora* of 1259, which refer to the protagonist as Joseph Cartaphilus), see George K. Anderson 18-21. Borges himself could find a brief but complete account of the legend in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the source of so many of his fictions. The article on the Wandering Jew points out several sources of the legend, summarizes the different versions, and surveys the major literary works to which it gave rise.

² "Se manejaba con fluidez e ignorancia en diversas lenguas" (*Obras* 1:533).

³ "En Bikanir he profesado la astrología y también en Bohemia" (542).

⁴ "Un hombre consumido y terroso, de ojos grises y barba gris, de rasgos singularmente vagos" (533).

⁵ The Immortals need only "la limosna de unas horas de sueño" (541). By contrast, when the narrator chances upon the river which restores him to a mortal condition, he sleeps "hasta el amanecer" (542).

⁶ On the many aliases of the Immortal, see 542.

what in the legendary figure of the Wandering Jew makes him an appropriate symbol of the author, in a story that, perhaps more than any of Borges's other works, is an allegory of literature?

The history of the legend is one of cultural syncretism and mythical contamination. In the seventeenth century, the story of the Roman guard Cartaphilus fuses with that of the Jewish shoemaker Ahasuerus, the immortal witness to the divinity of Jesus Christ,⁷ thus conflating the two dimensions of the myth: the wandering and the immortality. As modern authors endlessly reinterpret the legend, the figure of the Wandering Jew becomes increasingly composite, through contamination by other mythical wanderers, rebels, or exiles: Cain, Prometheus, Sisyphus, Faust, and even Don Juan. Romanticism universalizes the legend, taking it further and further away from its original Christian meaning, and making it a symbol of the human condition in general. All that remains is the sense of an unending quest (for the absolute, for knowledge, for justice, for progress, for truth, for art, or for death): a symbol both vague and compelling, perhaps all the more appealing, indeed, because of its vagueness.⁸

It now becomes clear why Borges's Immortal doubles as the Wandering Jew. The story is, like the myth, built on the amalgamation of diverse cultural elements. By conflating the Roman soldier and the antiquarian, the story mirrors the initial contamination (a Roman, Cartaphilus, and a Jew, Ahasuerus) which gave rise to the legend of the Wandering Jew. The Immortal is likewise a composite of several mythical wanderers and storytellers. Cartaphilus's many travels and aliases make him an avatar of Ulysses and Sinbad the Sailor, who also find their way into the story, since Cartaphilus recounts having copied, "en el siglo trece, las aventuras de Simbad, de otro Ulises" (*Obras* 1:543). Homer and the Immortal, Ulysses the Greek and Sinbad the Arab, the tribune of imperial Rome and the Wandering Jew all come together in a text that makes them one universal wanderer.

In Borges's version, the Christian lesson conveyed by the legend (the wandering as divine punishment) is left out.⁹ What interests Borges is solely the question of identity, which holds the potential

⁷ In the 1602 German version written by the Bishop of Schleswig, Paul von Eitzen, and rapidly spreading across Europe (Anderson 45-50).

⁸ For Marie-France Rouart, the legend ultimately becomes "un fourre-tout allégorique," lending itself to as many meanings as are written into it: see "Le mythe du Juif Errant" 864.

⁹ As a consequence, the antisemitic dimension of the legend is entirely eliminated.

for both the fantastic and the allegorical dimensions. He picks up a mythical figure that, as a result of gradual universalization, has become a form without a content; his version of the legend turns the Wandering Jew from a symbol of all humankind into an impersonal author of all literature.¹⁰

Like its protagonist, the legend is cosmopolitan and ubiquitous. The same story is told in many languages and versions; the same character appears under several aliases: Joseph Cartaphilus, Isaac Laquedem, Ahasuerus, Giovanni Buttadeus, Juan de Espera en Dios, et cetera. Multiple identities also define (or rather blur) the portrait of the Immortal; cosmopolitanism characterizes his autobiography, translated into Spanish from an original written in English (Borges's favorite literary language) but filled with Latinisms. The choice of English and of the name Cartaphilus (instead of the more common Ahasuerus) suggests that the legend was given its first written form in England: it is appropriate that an island people should be attracted by the story of an endless journey. This is highlighted in De Quincey's writings (one of the "intrusions and thefts" discovered by Dr. Cordovero in his *Coat of many Colours*). The Everlasting Jew, De Quincey writes, "is the German name for what we English call the Wandering Jew. The German imagination has been most struck by the duration of the man's life, and his unhappy sanctity from death: the English by the unrestingness of the man's life, his incapacity of repose."¹¹

The cosmopolitan nature of the legend, combined with the universality of the wandering motif, is what makes "El inmortal" a sort of compendium of Borgesian themes. It is also what makes it a counterpart to James Joyce's "odysseys."

Leopold Bloom, a modern, unheroic Ulysses, more Nobody than Everyman, is at the same time a parody of the Wandering Jew, a figure that haunts Joyce's later novels like a distant echo of Wagner's work, which Joyce knew and admired deeply.¹² The iden-

¹⁰ Ronald Christ identifies the role of the legend in the background of "El inmortal": "What Borges has done is apply the myth of the Everlasting Jew to literature, making the eternal figure the author himself" (209). However, he fails to acknowledge how direct and explicit the reference is.

¹¹ De Quincey, *Writings* 7:27, quoted in Christ 209. The article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* paraphrases this idea: "In most Teutonic languages the stress is laid on the perpetual character of his punishment and he is known as the "everlasting" or "eternal" Jew . . . In the lands speaking a Romance tongue, the usual form has reference to the wanderings . . . The English form follows the Romance analogy" (362).

¹² For Wagner, the Flying Dutchman (the Wandering Jew's seafaring cousin) is "a primal trait of human nature," and "a remarkable mixture, a blend . . . of the

tification of Leopold Bloom with Ulysses, like the identification of Joseph Cartaphilus with Marcus Flaminius Rufus, conflates ancient and biblical traditions, repeating the cultural amalgamation that produced Western civilization. Both Joyce and Borges emphasize cosmopolitanism.¹³ Both *Ulysses* and “El inmortal” are a repetition of the *Odyssey* and a voyage through literature. Thus the story of the Immortal can also be read as Borges’s response to Joyce’s odyssey of a Dublin Jew.¹⁴

For Joyce, the curse of wandering and rootlessness is what makes the Wandering Jew a symbol of the artist. Bloom, Murphy, the Norwegian Captain, Stephen Daedalus are all to some extent portraits of the artist as a metaphoric Jew in self-imposed exile. Thus the Wandering Jew occupies the center of the symbolic Borgesian labyrinth, a confused but nonetheless powerful symbol in which authors and metaphors converge.

Borges’s image of the Wandering Jew is at the very heart of his poetics. The ambiguity of the myth (which lost its simplicity and univocal meaning through a series of contaminations) makes it ideal material for Borges. As a symbol of the artist’s marginality, the Wandering Jew echoes the theory Borges expounds in “El escritor Argentino y la tradición.” The marginal position of South American writers with regard to the European literary tradition, comparable to the position of Jews within Western culture and the Irish within English culture, is viewed as a privilege that allows them greater freedom: “Creo que los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general, estamos en una situación análoga; podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene,

character of Ulysses with that of the Wandering Jew” (quoted in Timothy P. Martin 53). Here as in Borges, the universality of a mythical motif is inseparable from the syncretic amalgamation of diverse cultural traditions.

¹³Joyce believed in Victor Bérard’s theories about the Semitic origins of the *Odyssey*: see Martin 65. Borges, whose protagonist is a Jewish Homer, could find a reference to these same theories in his beloved *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1911 edition). The entry “Odysseus” quotes Bérard’s definition of the *Odyssey* in *Les Phéniciens et l’Odyssée* (1902-1903) as “the integration in a Greek NOSTOS of a Semitic periplus.” The importance of cultural syncretism as the basis for civilization is a recurring idea in Borges: “If we belong to Western civilization then all of us, despite the many adventures of the blood, all of us are Greeks and Jews” (see *Borges at 80: Conversations* 75).

¹⁴Joseph Rosenblum argues that “El inmortal” can be read as a prose equivalent of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (183-86). The demonstration is compelling, but only if one does not limit intertextuality to Eliot’s poem: “El inmortal” rewrites all those texts (like “The Waste Land” or *Ulysses*) that both thematize and theorize the syncretic—and often chaotic—amalgamation of cultural fragments.

consecuencias afortunadas" ("El escritor argentino y la tradición"; *Obras* 1:273). As a cultural outsider, the artist, whether Jew or Argentine, can be universal in a way that a member of a dominant culture cannot. Marginality becomes a prerequisite for universality. In Borges's view, only what is common to all men is worthy of literary survival.¹⁵ The two rivers that structure the events in "El inmortal"—the river of immortality, which flows not inside but outside the City of the Immortals, and the river of death, which flows on the outskirts of the unnamed Eritrean port—may symbolize this universal marginality. Borges replaces the Romantic literary ideal (nationalism and originality) with the classical one (universality and impersonality); yet he achieves an ironic spin by embodying this classic theory in a Romantic character, the Wandering Jew. "Nuestro patrimonio es el universo," Borges proudly claims at the end of "El escritor argentino y la tradición": the portrait of the artist as Wandering Jew—cosmopolitan, outsider, marginal—is also an intimate self-portrait.¹⁶

The legend of the Wandering Jew consists of an ever-growing body of versions that tend to blur and dilute the individuality of its protagonist; likewise, "El inmortal" tends to incorporate other texts in order to represent the essence of all literature. As marginality is a prerequisite for universality, so impersonality is a prerequisite for intimacy. In "El inmortal," the most impersonal elements—quotation and plagiarism, "the words of others"—coincide with the most personal. The core of the narrator's experience (the accidental discovery of the river of immortality) is described with words borrowed, or stolen, from others. After the Roman drinks from the river, Greek words come to his lips: "Antes de perderme otra vez en el sueño y en los delirios, inexplicablemente repetí unas palabras griegas: *Los ricos teucros de Zelea que beben el agua negra del Esepo . . .*" (*Obras* 1:535). These words are later identified by Cartaphilus as a quotation from the *Iliad*: "Esas palabras son homéricas y pueden buscarse en el fin del famoso catálogo de las naves" (1:543).¹⁷ The "error" in the quotation (the substitution of the Virgilian term "teucros," Trojans) has been convincingly

¹⁵ Compare Borges's vindication of banality: "Ver en la muerte un sueño, en el ocaso / Un triste oro, tal es la poesía / Que es inmortal y pobre. La poesía / Vuelve como la aurora y el ocaso" ("Arte poética"; *Obras* 2:221).

¹⁶ The implicit identification between Borges and Joseph Cartaphilus the Wandering Jew raises another question which I can only indicate here: the subject of Borges's imaginary Jewishness. See Edna Aizenberg and Jaime Alazraki.

¹⁷ "They who lived in Zeleia below the foot of Mount Ida, / men of wealth, who drank the dark water of the Aisepos, / Trojans . . ." (Book 2, lines 824-26).

analyzed by Michael Evans as an example of Borges's complex intertextual layering. The narrator not only quotes another man's words, but quotes them in a version that is a rewriting of the original.¹⁸ Even the most physical sensations (thirst, fever, sleep, pain) are permeated with words.

Individuality crumbles into a chaos of literary fragments. And yet the "Homeric" quotation also points to an earlier essay by Borges himself ("Las versiones homéricas"; *Obras* 1:240), in which he gives as an example of Homeric epithet precisely this line (quoted accurately, of course) from the catalog of ships. Obviously, these multiple layers of intertextual complexity are only appropriate to the instant in which the protagonist, accidentally drinking the water of immortality, becomes an Immortal, i.e. Nobody, Everyman, Homer, Borges himself. By having the story quote the essay, Borges inserts his own self-portrait in the long chain of immortals. The impersonal and the intimate are no longer distinct; they are two sides of one coin.

In becoming an Immortal, the protagonist loses his identity: in becoming a writer, he forsakes his individuality as a man to embrace an impersonal destiny as an author. Cartaphilus's self-doubting, indeed self-defeating, autobiographical manuscript is a case in point: riddled with intertextual fragments and increasingly insecure about the very foundation of autobiographical discourse (the I), it exemplifies the "coat of many colours" that despite Doctor Nahum Cordovero's outrage, forms for Borges the very essence of literature.¹⁹

"Yo he sido Homero; en breve, seré Nadie, como Ulises; en breve, seré todos; estaré muerto" (*Obras* 1: 543-44). The Wandering Jew is now no more than the chaotic accumulation of his literary incarnations. His name and figure are no more or less symbolic than those of Homer, with whom he merges in "El inmortal." The story is an allegory of writing; the Wandering Jew, symbol of the universal author, meets Homer, the archetypal author. By questioning the individual existence of Homer, the analysts have emp-

¹⁸ Evans 278. The City of the Immortals is also the second one built from the ruins of the first one, and Joyce's hero is not Odysseus but Ulysses. This Homeric-Virgilian reminiscence is immediately followed—confirmed—by another, unacknowledged plagiarism of Virgil, for in the image of the delirious man "desnudo en la ignorada arena" (1:536), the reader familiar with Virgil's own earlier rewriting of the *Odyssey* will easily recognize the unfortunate Palinurus, "nudus in ignota . . . harena" (*Aeneid*, Book 5, line 871). See María Rosa Lida de Malkiel.

¹⁹ On the impersonal, anonymous essence of literature, see my article "L'erudition", particularly 388-92.

tied the name of its human content and reduced it to a convention that designates the collective work of anonymous rhapsodes patching together pieces of different epics. By blending the legend of the Wandering Jew with elements of the scholarly debate, Borges turns “Homer” into a legendary figure in the etymological sense of the word. The Homer of “El inmortal” is the one analyzed to death by philologists: what is uncanny is that this non-individual is paradoxically provided with a “biography.” The story does not so much invent its material as exploit the fictional potential of erudition. The episode in which the Roman narrator, having found his way out of the City of the Immortals, discovers the troglodyte tracing incomprehensible letters in the sand, can therefore be read as a fictionalization of the issue of Homer’s literacy, crucial to the Homeric debate. Demonstrating Borges’s characteristic indifference to the truth of intellectual constructs, the little scene presents both the theory and its refutation. The troglodyte, soon to be identified as Homer, appears to be writing, but his letters seem to have no meaning:

Estaba tirado en la arena, donde trazaba torpemente y borraba una hilera de signos, que eran como las letras de los sueños, que uno está a punto de entender y luego se juntan. Al principio, creí que se trataba de una escritura bárbara; después vi que es absurdo imaginar que hombres que no llegaron a la palabra lleguen a la escritura. Además, ninguna de las formas era igual a la otra, lo cual excluía o alejaba la posibilidad de que fueran simbólicas. El hombre las trazaba, las miraba y las corregía. De golpe, como si le fastidiara ese juego, las borró con la palma y el antebrazo. (*Obras* 1:538)²⁰

In the same manner, Giambattista Vico, who preceded F.A. Wolf in seeing the *Iliad* as an amalgamation of composite fragments, appears as a character in the story. A subtle irony, as well as a fantastic variation on the theme of the encounter between the poet and his critic, is achieved by having “Homer” in person discuss the origin of the *Iliad* with Vico and mildly acquiesce to the scholar’s “irrefutable” proofs that Homer did not exist (*Obras* 1:542). Vico’s theory, condensed in one unattributable footnote (*Obras* 1:543), de-individualizes Homer, making him a “symbolic character” of the Greek people. This may begin to explain why Borges chose Vico, rather than the much more relevant Wolf, to represent the

²⁰ This allusion to the scholarly debate on Homer’s literacy in turn contains a Biblical allusion: in John 8:6, Jesus is seen writing for the only time, tracing letters in the dust which no one ever read. See Borges’s essay “Del culto de los libros” (*Obras inquisiciones*; *Obras* 2:92). Moreover, the ambiguous words of Jesus in John 21:20-23 are the primary source of the legend of the Wandering Jew (see Anderson 12-14).

Homeric question.²¹ The idea of the author as symbol would appeal to Borges both because it has a direct bearing on the Romantic cult of the author, and because it implies the identification of author and character,²² an essential trait of Borgesian biography as I shall show later.

The pedantic postscript by Doctor Nahum Cordovero is a parody of the Homeric question: to invalidate Cataphilus's manuscript, he uses the same philological arguments of interpolation, anachronism, et cetera, used to contest the individual authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.²³ It is also a self-destructing argument. Like the Wandering Jew, Borges's Homer is not one but many men: "Nadie es alguien, un solo hombre inmortal es todos los hombres" (1:541). In fact, what those "intrusions or thefts" prove, if anything, is the authenticity of the text.

Doctor Cordovero, lost in the labyrinth of the Immortal's manuscript, is himself a Wandering Jew. The wandering is a metaphor for the (re) interpretation of the text. The repetition of the same idea and figure by different writers, cultures, and periods, both serves and doubles the story's meaning: literature is a single text written by a universal author. Conflating Homer with the Wandering Jew, "El inmortal" moves from a contested figure to a legendary one, from a Greek to a Jew, from an epic poet to a universal writer.²⁴ Thus the symbol of the Wandering Jew leads us now to interpret Borges's "writer stories" in the light of the Romantic theories — or fantasies — about the author. The Romantic genius is recreated as an Immortal: the Romantic cult of the genius un-

²¹ Another explanation lies in Borges's characteristic practice of partially identifying his sources: the text discloses a minor aspect of the reference, while a more fundamental dimension remains unrevealed. On this "art of allusion," see Christ, particularly 218. Vico's philosophy of history played an important part in the Romantic revival of the legend of the Wandering Jew (see M.-F. Rouart, *Le Mythe du Juif Errant* 27-28), and *Scienza Nuova* became a vital influence on James Joyce.

²² Victor Hugo, whose theory of the genius I will discuss shortly, discovered Vico's *Scienza nuova* through Michelet's translation. See Pierre Albouy, *La Création mythologique chez Victor Hugo* 37.

²³ Furthermore, Wolf's philological methods were soon used against him, as a critical tradition developed of hunting for stolen ideas and unacknowledged quotations in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, in order to prove that he wasn't the author of his theory.

²⁴ The Wandering Jew is no more than the accumulation of his literary incarnations: likewise, for the vast majority of his readers, including Borges, who can read only translations, Homer is nothing else than the ever-growing mass of "Homeric versions." This idea opens the essay "Las versiones homéricas" (*Discusión; Obras* 1:240). The same is true, of course, of the Arabian Nights, in which the Immortal also has a hand (1:542).

dergoes an uncanny rewriting.

Borges's debt to nineteenth-century English and American writers is well documented and has been well analyzed by Ronald Christ in the context of "El inmortal."²⁵ What has failed to attract critics' attention, however, is Borges's relation to Victor Hugo's esthetics, particularly concerning Hugo's theory of the Genius.²⁶

Saint Paul appears in Hugo's *William Shakespeare* as one of the geniuses who make up the history of humanity. He embodies the transition from antiquity to modern times, the point of contact between pagan and biblical traditions, Homer and Shakespeare, Judaism and Christianity, the passage from literal to spiritual, from particular to universal. Thrown from his horse on the road to Damascus, he is blinded and converted from a persecutor of Christians into a Christian martyr, into a Borgesian mirror image of his old self. The road to Damascus witnesses his rebirth as an immortal. By changing his name from Saul to Paulus, he claims a cosmopolitan identity. "I have become all things to all men" (1 Cor 9:19),²⁷ he writes: a Jew, but also a Roman citizen, endlessly wandering throughout the Roman empire, assuming a Greek name to rewrite the Bible for the Gentiles.

Hugo's portrait of Saint Paul reads like a text by Borges. The Damascus conversion is stressed as an archetype of human destiny:

Le chemin de Damas est nécessaire à la marche du progrès. Tomber dans la vérité et se relever homme juste, une chute transfiguration, cela est sublime. C'est l'histoire de saint Paul. A partir de saint Paul, ce sera l'histoire de l'humanité. Le coup de lumière est plus que le coup de foudre. Le progrès se fera par une série d'éblouissements (12:182).

While the authenticity of some of the Pauline epistles is contested, Hugo conversely attributes various apocryphal or imaginary texts to Saint Paul, in a very Borgesian style: "Plusieurs des œuvres de Paul sont rejetées canoniquement; ce sont les plus belles; et entre autres son épître aux laodicéens" (12:183). Of this epistle not one word has yet been found. More uncanny yet, Saint Paul is described like the Wandering Jew: "Une fois remis sur pied, le voici en marche, il ne s'arrête plus. En avant! c'est là son cri. Il est cos-

²⁵ See particularly Christ 194 and 225-26, on Emerson's theory of the anonymous essence of all literature and the Borgesian reinterpretation of the Over-Soul.

²⁶ Borges quotes Hugo's *William Shakespeare* on several occasions, demonstrating considerable familiarity with Victor Hugo's ideas and works. Borges's parents and Borges himself had the deepest admiration for Hugo. On this family cult, see Michel Berveiller 219-20. On Borges's knowledge of French literature, see Emir Rodríguez Monegal 114-24.

²⁷ This sentence is often quoted by Borges.

mopolite . . .” (12:182) A convert, a wanderer, a symbol of Progress, a man halfway between life and death (“cette demi-possession de la mort,” 12:182) following his epiphany, which sets him apart from other humans: the major themes of the Wandering Jew legend also form the implicit background for Hugo’s portrait of Paul. Hugo’s text should be read as a precursor of Borges’s conception of the author, in the retrospective definition of the notion of “precursor,” first elaborated in his essay, “Kafka y sus precursores.” Hugo portrays Paul not only as a convert and perpetual wanderer, but also as a highly unorthodox writer. “Cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores” (*Obras* 2:90): for us, Hugo’s Paul is now a Borgesian character.

Two essential features make Paul the symbolic center of the Borgesian web of allusions: his cosmopolitanism, which assimilates him to the Wandering Jew, and his exemplary conversion, which makes him a model for all Borgesian biography, as I shall show.

Borges radicalizes—and slyly misreads—Hugo’s statements and metaphors of literary creation, and rewrites them as the substance of his own fantastic speculations. The City of the Immortals—a narrative literalization and reactivation of the dead metaphor “literary monument”—repeats Hugo’s recurring architectural metaphors, the most famous of which is the cathedral-book simile in *Notre-Dame de Paris*: “Ainsi, jusqu’à Guttemberg, l’architecture est l’écriture principale, l’écriture universelle. Ce livre granitique commencé par l’Orient, continué par l’antiquité grecque et romaine, le moyen-âge en a écrit la dernière page” (*Notre-Dame de Paris* 5. 2, “Ceci tuera cela”; *Oeuvres complètes* 4:139). These monumental texts written in stone are characterized by heterogeneity and lack of unity, for they are the work not of one man but of an entire people. They predate the Genius: their collective essence is precisely the sign of their primitiveness. As “constructions hybrides” (*Notre-Dame de Paris* 3. 1, “Notre-Dame”, 4:95), they are explicitly compared to anonymous epics, the poetry of primitive mankind: they are the “œuvre colossale d’un homme et d’un peuple, tout ensemble une et complexe comme les Iliades et les Romanceros dont elle est sœur” (4:92). Indeed, “sous le règne de l’architecture,” one found “des iliades et des romanceros, des Mahabâhrata et des Nibelungen, faits par tout un peuple avec des rhapsodies amoncelées et fondues” (*Notre-Dame de Paris*, “Ceci tuera cela”; 4:143). Thus the evolution from architecture to literature, from “Ceci” to “Cela,” follows the upward straight line of Progress; anonymous and collective works are inferior to the

works of a single individual genius.

The same idea is developed in *William Shakespeare*, where the anonymous Indian epics are seen as inferior because they are the work of a “moi multiple” (*Oeuvres* 12:190), of many different authors: “A beauté égale, le Ramayana nous touche moins que Shakespeare. Le moi d’un homme est plus vaste et plus profond encore que le moi d’un peuple” (12:190). These composite and heterogeneous epics are described as a chaos that bears an uncanny resemblance to Borges’s City of the Immortals:

Leurs proéminences ont la ligne divine et hideuse du chaos. Ils font masse à l’horizon comme l’Himalaya . . . Cette Ecriture sainte de l’Asie . . . est de toutes parts réfractaire à l’unité . . . Toutes sortes de traces s’amalgament et s’entr’effacent sur ces poèmes. On y voit le piétinement mystérieux d’un peuple d’esprits qui y a travaillé dans la nuit des siècles. Ici l’orteil démesuré du géant; ici la griffe de la chimère. Ces poèmes sont la pyramide d’une fourmilière disparue. (12:189-90).

In Borges’s text the vocabulary of the monstrous—the hybrid, according to classical tradition—becomes even more nightmarish, as the chaotic amalgamation of architectural fragments borrows organic metaphors and blurs the limit between the animate and the inanimate: “No quiero describirla; un caos de palabras heterogéneas, un cuerpo de tigre o de toro, en el que pulularan monstruosamente, conjugados y odiándose, dientes, órganos y cabezas, pueden (tal vez) ser imágenes aproximativas” (“El inmortal”; *Obras* 1:538). However, the lack of unity that leads Hugo to place the anonymous epics at the bottom of the hierarchy of great works, is, according to Borges, a feature of all great texts. Anonymity is not a flaw but the very essence of literature; individual authorship is subverted entirely.

Hugo’s geniuses are superhuman individuals; all share a capacity for universality, yet each is unmistakably individualized. It is this *bella scola*, which Hugo borrowed from Dante (*Inferno* 4:94), that Borges perverts. Instead of Hugo’s divine geniuses, Borges has bestial immortals—a degenerate tribe of snake-eating troglodytes, who live in squalor and have forgotten language. Instead of Hugo’s orderly roll-call of geniuses leading, in a straight line, up to the nineteenth century and the implicit portrait of the ultimate genius—presumably Hugo himself—Borges ironically substitutes a tangle of confused identities. His immortals are not equal to Homer, like the geniuses; they literally *are* Homer, who is at once No One and Everyman.

Where Hugo speaks of the realm of geniuses as “la région des

Égaux" (170), Borges goes one step further, substituting equality with identity. Hugo's "région des Égaux" closely parallels Dante's *nobile castello*²⁸ (although in Hugo's text the initiatory voyage is missing since it has already been accomplished). In "El inmortal," however, the Dantean model has gone awry, as the narrator enters the City of the Immortals without the help of a guide, not to find his identity consecrated by the immortals, as Dante does, but rather to lose it to them. What takes place in the City of the Immortals is a reverse, or perverted, initiation: the underground labyrinth leads up to the palace, which is even more confusing. The upward progression is contradicted by an intellectual regression into chaos: "Un laberinto es una casa labrada para confundir a los hombres; su arquitectura, pródiga en simetrías, está subordinada a ese fin. En el palacio que imperfectamente exploré, la arquitectura carecía de fin" (1:537). Instead of taking his place confidently among his peers, like Dante, "que se sabía no inferior a esos grandes" (3:350), Marcus Flaminius Rufus forsakes his identity, his name, his selfhood, the ownership of his own words. He becomes Homer, which is to say no one.

The same irony undermines Borges's rewriting of Hugo's optimistic faith in progress. In Hugo's prophetic vision, humanity marches triumphantly upward, led by the geniuses who alone make history (excluding warriors, who are doomed to disappear as future generations devote themselves entirely to the development of thought): "Il est temps que les hommes de l'action prennent leur place derrière et les hommes de l'idée devant . . . Il est temps que les génies passent devant les héros" (*William Shakespeare*, "L'histoire réelle"; *Oeuvres* 12:320).²⁹ In the preface to *La Légende des siècles*, Hugo compares history to a labyrinth, not the Borgesian labyrinth of repetitive and gratuitous symmetries but one to which a providential thread gives direction and meaning. The successive poems are linked by "le grand fil mystérieux du labyrinthe

²⁸ *Inferno*, 4, 106. The episode is the subject of the first of Borges's *Nueve ensayos dantescos*: "El noble castillo del canto cuarto" (3:347).

²⁹ On the myth of Progress in *William Shakespeare*, see V. Brombert, "Hugo's *William Shakespeare*," 253 f. Borges has evoked with tender irony that same optimistic belief of his father, who was convinced that wars were a feature of primitive humanity which would disappear in future societies: "My mather was very intelligent and, like all intelligent men, very kind. Once, he told me that I should take a good look at soldiers, uniforms, barracks, flags, churches, priests, and butcher shops, since all these things were about to disappear, and I could tell my children that I had actually seen them. The prophecy has not yet come true, unfortunately" (quoted in Rogriguez Monegal 9).

humain, le Progrès.” This mysterious but ultimately intelligible order of things is perverted in “El inmortal.” The reverse initiation, the negative epiphany of the Roman soldier who discovers a city more chaotic than the labyrinth, can be interpreted as a nightmarish inversion of the scene in *Notre Dame de Paris* where Claude Frollo deciphers the symbolic porch of the cathedral; and the horror of the Borgesian symbol of chaotic despair is the reverse of the love Frollo feels for the church, “pour le sens qu’elle renferme, pour le symbole épars sous les sculptures de sa façade comme le premier texte sous le second dans un palimpseste, en un mot, pour l’énigme qu’elle propose éternellement à l’intelligence” (*Oeuvres* 4:5).³⁰

The immortal is an inversion of the genius: the absolute individuality of Hugo’s genius is reversed into the radical impersonality of Borges’s Immortal. Homer goes from being “un homme cyclique,” “un total” (*William Shakespeare; Oeuvres* 12:188) to being “Nadie, como Ulises” (“El inmortal”). The same is true of Shakespeare, who goes from being everything in Hugo to being nothing in Borges. Thus Borges’s portrait of Shakespeare is the mirror image of Hugo’s: a negative rather than positive universality. For Hugo, Shakespeare is “Tout dans Un” (*William Shakespeare; Oeuvres* 12:159); for Borges, he is “Everything and Nothing”—the title of his biography of Shakespeare, which mirrors Homer’s biography in “El hacedor.” Like Homer’s identity in “El hacedor,” Shakespeare’s identity is not revealed until the end of the text, when God calls him by name: “*Yo tampoco soy; yo soñé el mundo como tú soñaste tu obra, mi Shakespeare, y entre las formas de mi sueño estás tú, que como yo eres muchos y nadie*” (2:182). For Hugo, Shakespeare did everything in his life: he was a butcher and a schoolteacher, a clerk and a thief, a stableman and a fugitive, a poacher and a poet, a husband and a drunk (12:160). For Borges, Shakespeare chose the theater because it allowed him to conceal the fact that he was no one, and fill his emptiness with imaginary identities: “Instintivamente, ya se había adiestrado en el hábito de simular que era alguien, para que no se descubriera su condición de nadie; en Londres encontró la profesión a la que estaba predestinado, la del actor, que en un escenario, juega a ser otro, ante un concurso de personas que juegan a tomarlo por aquel otro” (2:181). In Hugo’s portrayal Shakespeare is “Le globe, la terre, la vie” (188); he overflows with substance:

³⁰ See Brombert, “Hugo: l’édifice du livre” 51-54.

Dans Shakespeare, les oiseaux chantent, les buissons verdissent, les cœurs aiment, les âmes souffrent, le nuage erre, il fait chaud, il fait froid, la nuit tombe, le temps passe, les forêts et les foules parlent, le vaste songe éternel flotte. La sève et le sang, toutes les formes du fait multiple, les actions et les idées, l'homme et l'humanité, les vivants et la vie, les solitudes, les villes, les religions, les diamants, les perles, les fumiers, les charniers, le flux et le reflux des êtres, le pas des allants et venants, tout cela est sur Shakespeare et dans Shakespeare, et, ce génie étant la terre, les morts en sortent. (*William Shakespeare*; 12:188)

But in Borges this profusion becomes illusory: "Nadie fue tantos hombres como aquel hombre, que a semejanza del egipcio Proteo pudo agotar todas las apariencias del ser" ("Everything and Nothing"; 2:181).

Why this inversion of the Romantic myth of Shakespeare? Why does Shakespeare go from being everything to being nothing? In another essay on Shakespeare, "De alguien a nadie," Borges takes matters from the other end. A meditation on the consequences of worship, the essay deals successively with God and with Shakespeare: "La magnificación hasta la nada sucede o tiende a suceder en todos los cultos; inequívocamente la observamos en el caso de Shakespeare" (2:116). The transformation of God (or Shakespeare) into no one is the culmination of a process that leaves its object with no human attributes. Such was the fate of Shakespeare at the hands of the Romantics.³¹ For Victor Hugo, Shakespeare becomes an element: "Comme Homère, Shakespeare est élément . . . l'esprit de Shakespeare est un total" (*William Shakespeare*; 12:188). For Borges, the desire to express infinity leads to a negative definition, since, conversely, "ser una cosa es inexorablemente no ser todas las otras cosas" (2:117). Thus being everything becomes in some way synonymous with being nothing. To identify Shakespeare (or Homer) with nature, to say of him that he is an ocean ("Hugo, después, lo equipara con el océano, que es un almacigo de formas posibles," 2:116),³² is ultimately to say that he is nothing in himself. However, this process is brought about by centuries of reading and worshipping: this "nothingness" applies to the author, "Shakespeare," not to the man Shakespeare, of whom so little is known.

Borges gives the Romantic theory about Shakespeare an uncanny twist by picking up where Hugo leaves off: what is said about

³¹ On the attempts by the Romantics (and Hugo in particular) to remake Shakespeare in their own (tormented) image, see Borges's preface to *Macbeth*, in *Prólogos, con un prólogo de prólogos* 144.

³² Borges is alluding to the famous metaphor at the beginning of *William Shakespeare*: "Il y a des hommes océans en effet" (12:159).

the author (not about the man, since almost nothing can be said about the man) becomes, in Borges's "biography" of Shakespeare ("Everything and Nothing") the stuff of biography itself. (This, of course, he also does with Homer.) As a result of fame and time, "Shakespeare" is now Nothing and No One: Borges achieves an ironic and fantastic effect by taking this point of arrival as a point of departure, and constructing a biography on these data as though they were biographical realities. He attributes to the person what belongs to the persona. Strictly speaking, he does not build his biography on the void of an undocumented life (Shakespeare's sudden and unexplained decision to give up the theater, for example, or his mysterious will); more paradoxically, he builds it on the theological and teleological interpretation that generations of worshipping readers (particularly the Romantics) have built on this void.

"Leer, por lo pronto, es una actividad posterior a la de escribir: más resignada, más civil, más intelectual," wrote Borges in the prologue to the first edition of his early volume of tales, *Historia universal de la infamia* (1:289). The statement could apply to his entire relation with the Romantic genius. Borges's paradoxical "biography" of Shakespeare is derived not simply from his works but from the history of their reception. Borges's entire work relentlessly establishes the absolute primacy of reading over writing.³³

Seen in this perspective, Hugo's universal Ego and Borges's impersonal Maker are opposite sides of the same coin. Both writers insist on the impersonality and universality of the author. Some of Hugo's most famous statements (their emphatic rhetoric notwithstanding) could be attributed to Borges:

Est-ce donc la vie d'un homme? Oui, et la vie des autres hommes aussi. Nul de nous n'a l'honneur d'avoir une vie qui soit à lui. Ma vie est la vôtre, votre vie est la mienne, vous vivez ce que je vis... Ah! insensé, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi!

Ce livre contient, nous le répétons, autant l'individualité du lecteur que celle de l'auteur. *Homo sum*. (Preface to *Les Contemplations*; 9:60)

But if they meet on key conclusions, they have taken opposite routes. Hugo's universal author is first and foremost a writer. His ego expands until it includes the whole universe; it is universal, therefore impersonal, because it is all-encompassing. It is an overflowing of the individual.³⁴ Borges's Immortal, on the other hand,

³³ Raphaël Lellouche defines the Borgesian process of reading as an "œuvre invisible" (188).

³⁴ On Hugo's universal Ego, see P. Albouy's two essays in *Mythographies*; Brombert, "Victor Hugo: l'auteur effacé ou le moi de l'infini"; and George Poulet.

is a reader, a symbolic individual, a layered and impersonal “I,” composed not only of all the writers who have said the same things, but of all the readers who have read them.³⁵

The Borgesian life story, in the Western tradition of conversion narratives, is built around a climactic turning point.³⁶ Its teleological nature brings it very close to hagiography. This is explicitly stated in “Biografía de Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)”: “Cualquier destino, por largo y complicado que sea, consta en realidad *de un solo momento*: el momento en que el hombre sabe para siempre quién es” (*El aleph*; 1:562). The protagonist of this story, a soldier sent to arrest the legendary Martín Fierro, suddenly realizes that his destiny lies with the rebel: he turns against his own soldiers and sides with the man he was supposed to fight. The turning point is also the end of the narrative: in Borges’s view, nothing more needs to be said. “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva” follows the same conversion pattern. The barbarian attacking Ravenna is suddenly blinded by the beauty of the city and turns against the invaders in order to defend the civilization he had set out to destroy: “Bruscamente lo ciega y lo renueva esa revelación, la Ciudad . . . Droctulft abandona a los suyos y pelea por Ravena” (1:558). Time and again, in Borges’s stories, life is reduced to an instant of truth, marked by blindness and tears. Both signs repeat—and merge, in a pattern that by now looks suspiciously familiar—the two textual models that have helped shape the Western notion of identity: the tears of Ulysses at the court of the Phaeacians, and the blindness of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus.

Tears: upon hearing the bard Demodocus singing the exploits of Ulysses at the court of the Phaeacians, the protagonist, who has kept his identity a secret, weeps and reveals himself (*Odyssey* 8:521). After years of hiding under different aliases, he now identifies himself with the man he once was, whose fame has become the subject of song. He not only recovers his own past but also becomes a poet, narrating his wanderings in the form of a flashback (Books 9-12). Blindness: Saul is blinded by the revelation of Christ (Acts 9:1-9). This pattern—a climactic turning-point marked by blindness or tears—is clearly recognizable in Borges’s two Homer

³⁵ A pervasive theme of the essays collected in *Otras inquisiciones* is the definition of history as the repetition of events, ideas, and images.

³⁶ On Paul’s conversion as a model for Borges’s biographies, see Juan José Barrientos 63 ff.

stories, “El hacedor” and “El inmortal.”

“El hacedor” is built around a revelation. Blindness is the turning-point in the unnamed character’s fate: “Cuando supo que se estaba quedando ciego, gritó” (2:159). The tragic acceptance of blindness, in time, brings about a new identity, or rather the revelation of his true identity—his destiny as a maker. The first paragraph gives a highly stylized account of the events preceding his metamorphosis from man into author. Fragments of events, impressions, and deeds, are chosen because of their relevance to the future literary work: the shadow of a lance, terror, rage and courage, the attack on an enemy city will eventually find their way into the *Iliad*, while the taste of meat and wine, “la cercanía del mar o de las mujeres” (2:159), the wonder of foreign lands and cities, the incredible centaurs, and “complicadas historias” (2:159) will become part of the *Odyssey*. But these fragmented images of the ancient Greek world belong to every man; they do not individualize the character, nor does he heed them: “Nunca se había demorado en los goces de la memoria. Las impresiones resbalaban sobre él, momentáneas y vívidas” (2:159). In order to become an author, to become Homer, he must yet experience a double and contradictory epiphany. He must first retrieve intimate memories from the depths of his past: the first fight, in which he kills another child who had insulted him, and the first night of love with a woman.³⁷ Then he must abstract from these individual memories their universal essence—distilling an impersonal work of art from his personal life, and transforming “el amor y el riesgo” (2:160) into “Ares y Afrodita” (2:160).

“The Muse robbed him of his eyes but gave him sweet song” (*Odyssey* 8:64): like Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, Borges’s Homer exchanges sight for song. In effect, blindness is a figure of death; he exchanges life for work. In accepting the loss of the brilliant world that once surrounded him, he gives up his individuality, the ephemeral nature of impressions and sensations, receiving in exchange the universal, abstract essence of all experience:

La noche cegaba los caminos; abrazado al puñal, en el que presentía una fuerza mágica, descendió la brusca ladera que rodeaba la casa y corrió a la orilla del mar, soñándose Ajax y Perseo y poblando de heridas y de batallas la oscuridad salobre. El sabor preciso de aquel momento era lo que ahora buscaba; no le importaba lo demás: las afrentas del desafío, el torpe combate, el regreso con la hoja sangrienta. (“El hacedor”; 2:160)

³⁷ On the inversion of the Oedipus myth and its role in Borges’s conception of literary creation, see my article “Jorge Luis et la gloire des Borges” 238-40.

The conversion of man into author requires the replacement of existence by essence. He “descends” into his memory as into a metaphoric grave: not unexpectedly, the text concludes with the mystery of literal death: “Sabemos estas cosas, pero no las que sintió al descender a las últimas sombras” (2:160). In becoming a maker, he goes from a living (mortal) man to one of the living dead—an immortal, a Wandering Jew.

“De nuevo soy mortal, me repetí, de nuevo me parezco a todos los hombres” (1:542). The conversion pattern, univocal in “El hacedor,” becomes equivocal in “El inmortal.” The aporetic logic of the entire story is contained in this statement, which the narrator utters upon drinking from the river of death. Mortality, while making him a man like all other men, also guarantees his precious, precarious, inimitable singularity. Immortality, conversely, singles him out from the multitude, but robs him of his individuality. Thus both mortality and immortality confer, and take away, individuality.

This confusion of the conversion pattern appears in nightmarish complexity in the conversion, or rain, scene of “El inmortal.” The climactic center of the Immortal’s journey is the revelation of Homer’s identity. The turning point occurs on the morning of the rain, which brings the troglodytes (not yet known to be the Immortals) “una especie de éxtasis” (1:539). The narrator notices tears mixed with the rain streaming down the face of the troglodyte whom he has named Argos, after Ulysses’s dog. “Argos,” at that moment, reveals that he is Homer but that he has long forgotten his epic: “Le pregunté qué sabía de la Odisea. La práctica del griego le era penosa; tuve que repetir la pregunta. *Muy poco*, dijo. *Menos que el rapsoda más pobre. Ya habrán pasado mil cien años desde que la inventé*” (1:540).³⁸ Thus, the self-discovery is twofold.³⁹ “Argos” remembers that he is, or has been, Homer (quoting a line from the *Odyssey*),⁴⁰ while the Roman understands that the troglodytes are the Immortals. In place of a single conversion, the story has several, a prefiguration of the generalized confusion of identi-

³⁸This allusion to the Thousand and One Nights anticipates the confusion later to take place between the author of the *Odyssey* and the transcriber of Sinbad’s adventures (1:542).

³⁹In reality, manifold, since there is another, smaller, epiphany when the narrator discovers the passage from the underground labyrinth to the palace; a moment marked by blindness and sobs (1:537).

⁴⁰“Este perro tirado en el estiércol” (1:539); “This dog lying in the manure” (*Odyssey* 17:306).

ties that will later take place. Any immortal, any author, is no one and everyone. No sooner has the Immortal recovered his identity as Homer than he loses it to the narrator: “*La historia que he narrado parece irreal porque en ella se mezclan los sucesos de dos hombres distintos*” (1:543). The aporetic nature of the relationship between the two characters, on the one hand, and between the story and its intertext, on the other hand, is appropriately concentrated in a name: Argos. By giving to a man the name of a dog, the narrator symbolizes the apparent degeneration which has brought the Immortals down to the level of troglodytes. But more importantly, the name mirrors the aporia of identity. The dog Argos is the Homeric character linked by definition to the two major themes of the Borgesian story, identity and death, since his sole function in the *Odyssey* is to identify Ulysses (then disguised as an old and disgusting beggar, a sort of troglodyte), after which, having greatly outlived the ordinary lifespan of dogs, he dies (*Odyssey* 17:290-327). In a vertiginous series of reversals, the narrator (another “Ulysses”) gives to the troglodyte (whom he fails to recognize as “Homer”) the name of “Argos,” the dog who recognized Ulysses. The conversion pattern has gone awry: if Homer’s Argos dies upon identifying Ulysses, Borges’s troglodyte “dies” when he is called Argos and is transformed into Homer, thereby establishing the narrator’s identity as “Ulysses” (in effect recognizing him), but also—by virtue of the identification between author and character—as Homer, and so forth.

Borges’s biographies are built on a radical postulate of identification. The simpler identification takes place between author and character, while the more complex and paradoxical one (albeit a logical consequence of the former one) occurs between writer and reader. First, the author is equated with his character: the epic poet is identified with the epic hero. Homer’s biography in “El hacedor” is modeled on the scene involving Ulysses and Demodocus. The substance of (the future) Homer’s biography is epic and heroic: deeds of war and tales of love make up the man. The Immortal, like Ulysses, tells of battles and journeys, but these epic activities are increasingly subordinate to the quieter and vicarious ones of the scholar: reading the *Iliad*, transcribing the voyages of Sinbad, discussing Homer’s identity (1:542).

Borges does not just reverse the technique and logic of biographical criticism by deriving the life from the work.⁴¹ He has re-

⁴¹ This is John Sturrock’s thesis: “Normally, an author is seen as the derivative of the man, and whatever he writes as being in high degree determined by the sort of

discovered—consciously or not—the logic of ancient criticism, which also derived the man from his work.⁴² Thus Homer is said to have been blind because he features a blind poet (Demodocus) in the *Odyssey*. In the same way Borges attributes to Homer some of the circumstances and acts of his heroes. But he goes one step further, reversing and generalizing the process of identification between author and character. Instead of a one-way derivation (from character to author, as in ancient criticism; or from author to character, as in biographical criticism) Borges establishes a mirror-like relation and equivalence between these two opposite logics. From author to character and back, the mirroring is endless; there is no world behind the mirror.

In this way, Borges finds an imaginary solution to the conflict between arms and letters. It is imaginary because it must be confined within the boundaries of literature. “Pocas cosas me han ocurrido y muchas he leído. Mejor dicho: pocas cosas me han ocurrido más dignas de memoria que el pensamiento de Schopenhauer o la música verbal de Inglaterra” (*El hacedor, Epílogo*; 2:232). The opposition no longer holds if living and reading are equated. The passage from one to the other is achieved by a conversion that turns different into same. Thus the equivalency between living and reading, between reading and writing, becomes literal: “¿Los fervorosos que se entregan a una línea de Shakespeare no son, literalmente, Shakespeare?” (“Nueva refutación del tiempo,” 2:141). The story of “El inmortal” could be read as a commentary on this sentence. The traditional “life is a dream” (“la vida es sueño”) undergoes a reversal into the fantastic “to dream is to live.” The refutation of identity, the universalization of substitutions, establishes the vicarious essence of all experience, thus releasing a vertiginous and endless series of identifications, by which (as in Borges’s many “coin stories”) the other and the same are made one.⁴³

Doctor Nahum Cordovero, the pedantic critic, is Joseph

man he is . . . It is this common, deterministic mode of argument which Borges upends by according the precedence to the author and seeing the man, if at all, as the derivative form” (197). However, Sturrock fails to see that Borges is not reacting to a “normal,” “orthodox” or “common” process of derivation (from life to work) but rather to a modern, post-romantic process (which Proust had attacked in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*): biographical criticism.

⁴² On Homer’s biographies, see Mary Lefkowitz, particularly 12-25 and 139—55.

⁴³ Cf. “Los teólogos,” “Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva,” “La muralla y los libros,” etc. The *Antología Personal*, compiled by Borges himself, extends this “coin principle” to pairs of stories that, once juxtaposed, become identical.

Cartaphilus's degraded double, the other side of the coin. Cartaphilus is also a reader and critic, since he analyzes and criticizes his own "autobiography" with stern lucidity. The title of Cordovero's study, *A Coat of Many Colours*, alludes to Cartaphilus's Biblical homonym Joseph; thus it establishes yet another secret analogy between author and critic.⁴⁴ Once again, however, there is more in a name than meets the eye. The title chosen by Cordovero, on the one hand, reactivates the etymological meaning of "rhapsode" as one who sews pieces together; on the other hand, it alludes to the patchwork coat worn by the Wandering Jew in certain versions of the legend.⁴⁵ In this way, it patches together, as it were, the two sides of the story, the Wandering Jew and the Homeric question.

But more ironically, the name Cordovero establishes the text as a mirror image of the intertext. Just as Moses Cordovero, the sixteenth-century Safed kabbalist, based his interpretation of the Zohar on the assumption of textual unity,⁴⁶ so, conversely, Nahum Cordovero champions textual heterogeneity. Cordovero the analyst is the other side of Cordovero the unitarian. The two fundamentally opposite ethics of reading (which have polarized the history of reading and interpretation from early Homeric criticism on) are, for Borges, two sides of one coin.⁴⁷

Borges's "writer stories" are paradoxical biographies, emptied of circumstantial—i.e. individual—substance. They recount the birth of a mythical author: the common starting point is death. In this sense, Borges is very close to Hugo, whose poetic ego also undergoes rebirth after death, a destiny summarized in the famous statement: "Ce livre doit être lu comme on lirait le livre d'un mort."⁴⁸ However, Borges's revisited version opens on the fantastic

⁴⁴ See Christ 212.

⁴⁵ The nineteenth-century German anthropologist Karl Blind, one of the major exponents of the recurring "Wodan theory," which thrived at the turn of the century, points out that the Wandering Jew and the Teutonic god Wodan share several attributes, in particular a motley many-colored coat. Blind claims that the legend of the Wandering Jew is a Christian misreading and appropriation of a pagan myth. On the "Wodan theory," see Anderson 405 f.

⁴⁶ See Gershom Scholem, particularly 401.

⁴⁷ I borrow the term "ethics" from Borges's 1949 Epilogue to *El aleph*, where he describes "El inmortal" as an attempt to sketch "una ética para inmortales" (1:629). As it applies to the realm of action, the term "ethics" would seem to be inappropriate to the act of reading, which applies to the realm of knowledge, were it not for the fact that Borges equates reading and living.

⁴⁸ Preface to *Les Contemplations*. On the poet's "impersonal ego" as an "allegory of the creative process," see Brombert, "Victor Hugo" 421.

by literalizing the Romantic myth of the author. The culmination of this process would couple a dead author with an invisible œuvre: our critical exploration of “El inmortal” ultimately runs into “Pierre Menard, autor del Quixote,” as the founding myth of Borges’s fiction. The story serves as a mythic autobiography, not just because Menard is the first of many fictional self-portraits, but also because Borges has repeatedly dated the true beginning of his writing to this fateful story—the first text written after his brush with death in 1938—thereby dismissing or outright negating all his previous literary production.⁴⁹ Thus Pierre Menard, the dead author whose *magnum opus* remains invisible, goes through a long chain of reincarnations in Borges’s “writer stories,” haunting them, like the Wandering Jew, with his elusive shadow. Indeed, the repetition of this process of self-effacement to the point of weariness is an inherent part of Borges’s myth of literature, which endlessly reenacts the birth of the author as Nobody.⁵⁰

Columbia University

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⁴⁹ According to the version Borges gave in the “Autobiographical Essay,” fearing for his mental integrity after his septicemia, he decided to try his hand at a new type of literary exercise: fiction. The result was “Pierre Menard, autor del *Quixote*” (quoted in Rodríguez Monegal 323).

⁵⁰ An early version of some sections of this essay appears in the Proceedings of the 1991 Tokyo meeting of the International Comparative Literature Association.

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